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NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

FASHION DESIGN

FASHION AND DESIGN DEPARTMENT

***LINGERIE AND UNDERWEAR IN POST-WAR
IRELAND TO THE PRESENT***

BY

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INTRODUCTION

Since Eve, overcome by modesty plucked three fig leaves from a nearby bush, in an effort to cover her nudity (See Fig. 1), Lingerie has developed from merely a cover for the shame of the body or protection from the extremes or the elements to complex and skilfully designed garments. These garments have become the means with which we mould and shape the body to a desired silhouette, improving and enhancing areas that Mother Nature has neglected.

Every woman possesses several bras and briefs. Some are for mundane everyday wear and others for special occasions. Women realise that while lingerie provides a function by protecting between the clothing and the body, whilst giving support, it is a lot more than just an item of supportive protective clothing. Lingerie symbolises eroticism, intimacy and femininity. Lingerie is a personal statement about the wearer and how they wish to appear or not. Lingerie is arguably the most indispensable and intimate aspect of female clothing in any woman's wardrobe.

Women know that wearing a boned corset with suspenders and stockings makes a certain type of statement about the wearer. (Fig. 2). Throughout history women's role in society has been somewhat reflected in the underwear and lingerie they wore. In Victorian days women wore iron and whalebone corsets to achieve the image of a tiny frail waist which was a reflection of the way the ideal woman was perceived at that time (Fig. 3). During the 1960's

when the feminist movement was at its height women tossed aside their elastic and boned corsets and embraced Lycra or went bra-less as a statement of their emancipation (Fig. 4).

Irish women have always been regarded as reserved and somewhat conservative. Whilst history documents many strong and outstanding Irish women, they have never been portrayed in a sexual way, it has always been in the fields of the Arts and politics that they have excelled with women like Maud Gonne, Lady Gregory and more recently, our ex-President, Mary Robinson.

This thesis is an examination of the attitude of Irish women towards lingerie from the post-war years to the present. It is an investigation into the trends and market in Ireland in comparison with the more 'advanced' countries.

On embarking on this thesis my perception of post-war Ireland was one of a relatively young republic struggling with many economic and social problems and a large rural population. The country was dominated to a very large extent by the Catholic Church and its teachings. Women, while not quite being second class citizens definitely lacked the educational and employment opportunities enjoyed by men. Indeed up until the mid-1970's many women were required to terminate their employment by law once they married. This meant that in most households men were the sole breadwinners which meant most Irish women had no separate income, with which they could purchase personal and luxury items. The climate of the time seemed to be one of





Fig.4 1960s bra burning



Fig. 1. 1960s and 1970s

practical day to day survival in preparation for a better after life. Topics such as sex and the body were not openly discussed and many people were ignorant of the most basic facts. Sex, as the Church dictated, was a method of procreation, not an activity of pleasure or enjoyment.

To examine whether this perception was true I have looked at underwear produced since World War II to supply several different market levels, from everyday lingerie, through special occasion luxury lingerie, to exotic fetish wear.

The books published on the subject of underwear (Fig. 5) tend to be glossy and general, saucy or written from a collector's point of view. However, of the general histories, the 'Francois Boucher' history was most substantial. Nothing could be found that was written on the subject of Irish women and underwear so my sources for the thesis were primarily through interviews.

By talking to designers, manufacturers, retailers and wearers I have aimed to present a brief overview of the trends in Irish lingerie from the post-war years to the present. I have also aimed to capture and record some of the attitudes of women in Ireland to underwear from my grandmother's generation, through to my mother's, to my sister's generation.

CHAPTER I

The traditional image of Irish dress is one of woollen suits and Aran sweaters (Fig. 6). One does not naturally think of Irish women as defining consumers of lingerie. However, during the last five decades due to the women's movement and our increasing convergence with Europe, Irish women have become very aware of European and world trends whilst still retaining a certain unique identity.

Indeed the manufacture and retail of lingerie is very well established in Ireland. The manufacture of foundation wear and nightwear has played a large role in Ireland's clothing trade, with companies such as Ballet, Glenabbey and Mamselles exporting to countries all over the world during the seventies and the eighties. Unfortunately due to changes in the economic climate and the manufacturing process, Glenabbey's four manufacturing plants are no longer operational although the label still exists in a small range of nightwear and hospital wear.

Post-war Ireland was a country divided in two. The division between urban and rural lifestyles was becoming increasingly apparent. In the years following the end of World War II, the continuing decline in the population of rural Ireland was happening at an alarming rate.

The reasons listed were emigration, late marriages and the poor quality of rural life. The majority of these "vanishing Irish" were women. Many of these women emigrated to English cities while still more emigrated towards the country's larger towns and cities. By 1951 rural Ireland contained 868 women per 1,000 men, the lowest ratio since the famine. This female exodus has been explained as lack of job opportunities and an independence, which allowed them to reject traditional social restraints such as loveless marriages arranged by family or matchmakers. The material advantages of urban lifestyle also had obvious attractions. By 1946 the majority of urban homes had electricity, whereas very few rural homes had this source. Also approximately 95% of urban houses had running water and 35% had a fixed bath in comparison to rural houses where over 91% depended on pumps and nearby running streams for their water source.

By 1953, from seventeen rural areas connected to electricity it was found that over 77% of these households had electric radios whereas only one in five of these households had an electric cooker. The fact that leisure products were mainly associated with men while the use of household appliances is primarily associated with women proves an important factor in the migration of young Irish rural women to Dublin and Cork. Rural women were becoming increasingly aware of new and higher standards of housekeeping, which posed problems for women who did not even possess a running tap in the house.

Irish countrywomen would read articles in magazines about new washing machines and electric cookers, which promised better lifestyles. They were

increasingly conscious of the benefits of these amenities whilst being surrounded every day by the drudgery of rural life due to the lack of power, light, water and sanitation.

It is therefore obvious that Irish women fell into two completely different categories, indeed in the 40's and 50's urban and rural women lived in two completely separate worlds. It is, therefore, not surprising that the attitude to lingerie of urban women and rural women was somewhat different. Urban women had a higher disposable income that they could afford to spend on luxury items. They also had running water and washing machines to wash and maintain delicate fabrics. Rural women were primarily concerned with durable underwear, which could withstand being scrubbed and washed in a pot of boiling water on a solid fuelled cooker.

Most rural women made their own vests, petticoats, slips and knickers from easily available fabrics such as cotton, flannelette or used calico flour bags.

My grandmother, "Agnes Quinlan", was a rural housewife during the 1950's (Fig. 7). She lived in a remote area in Co. Tipperary. She recalls taking down her Singer sewing machine as her mother did before her, to make undergarments for herself and her daughter. The fabric she chose to use was practical, hardwearing, durable fabric. Summer undergarments were lightweight and constructed from bleached white calico; the fabric often having been obtained from used flour bags. Knickers were baggy and to the knee. They were elasticated at the waist. Matching petticoats were worn over these

knickers. They had wide shoulder straps, high necklines and were just below the knee in length. Whilst function was of primary concern, style was not forgotten. My grandmother trimmed petticoat hemlines and knickers with handmade lace, which her sister who was a "St. John of God" nun made in her spare time.

In winter knickers were made from warmer flannelette, and also came to the knee or just below it. Stockings were handknit and held in place by elasticated garters. It was extremely important that one's legs were adequately covered, as any excess of flesh would be considered disgraceful. In my grandmother's earlier days, bras were unheard of, all women wore bodices. Bodices for younger girls and women who did not need a lot of support were homemade. They were simple fitted tops. It was fastened at the back by three or four buttons. The bodice was usually constructed in white cotton and sometimes trimmed in lace. For very special occasions my grandmother remembers gifts of silk underwear. As with all underwear of that time white was the predominant colour. Silk underwear was purchased in the larger rural towns as were boned bodices and corsets. They were sold in draper's shops where all clothing from boots to bodices was available. Purchasing underwear and lingerie was a delicate operation and was undertaken as discreetly as possible. These shops were usually family owned businesses and the female members of the family dealt with that aspect of the business. There were no trained fitters and if a garment did not fit correctly it could easily be returned and exchanged for a different size.

My mother and aunt both remember receiving their first bras. It was a distinctly embarrassing moment as even the mention of the word "bra" was enough to start embarrassed giggles. Both my mum and aunt received their first bras from their mothers. They were both aged about fourteen at the time. They were going to boarding school at the time, so the acquirement of a bra was a part of their initiation into the adult world. Mum remembers hers as being pink while my Aunt Mary had a white one, both fastened by means of hook and eyes at the side of the bra. Structurally they were not very unlike bras of today. They were made of cotton and had plenty of lace detail. Matching bra and brief sets were unheard of in the early sixties for rural girls. Knickers and briefs were either still home made or purchased in the local draper's shop. Matching bras to briefs would have been considered too frivolous.

Nylon had also made its debut and because of its durable nature it became a popular fabric to use in many items of underwear. Corsets or corselettes of this time had boned bodices with front control panels and were worn by more mature women with a fuller figure. These panels had the effect of keeping everything firmly in place. Tights had not yet made their appearance so all corsets and girdles had suspender snaps (Fig. 8) attached in order to attach the stockings that all women and young girls wore. Many mature women wore longline bras (Fig. 9) which they accompanied with a "roll-on" which was a foundation garment with elastic panels across the stomach in order to flatten it. Young girls sometimes wore foundation wear of this type.



Fifty —the age when
womanly charm owes so much
to charm of figure, which in
turn can owe so much to the
scientific aid of . . .

THE
Gossard
LINE OF BEAUTY

Fig.8 Girdle and Suspenders



...the age when
...many things were so much
...of beauty, which is
...as much to the
...and of...

THE
LINE OF BEAUTY



Spirella



Fig.9 Typical 1950s Foundation wear



My mother, who was ten years old in 1958 remembers her older sister wearing longline bras and corselettes with boning and side fastening.

The purchase of bras and knickers was a bi-annual event for my mother and aunts, which coincided with the school year. Before the school term began in September, my grandmother would take my mother and aunt into the local town to the drapers. There they would purchase vests, slips, bras and knickers. My mother remembers the vests and knickers being made from heavy-duty cotton. They were usually blue or pink in colour and she would have at least two pairs for a term matching the vests. Bras and knickers were most definitely not a priority as these undergarments were required to be hard wearing and long lasting. This underwear lasted until the Easter or summer break, depending on the weather, when lighter cotton undergarments in similar shape and colour would be purchased for the warmer summer months. My mother also made her own lingerie whilst at school (Fig. 10). She ordered patterns from a local newsagent and made the garments in a fine cotton (Fig. 12). This enabled her to keep up with changing fashion trends. Mum admits that she never really considered underwear as fashionable or stylish until she finished school and moved to Dublin to work. She then became much more conscious of fashion when buying lingerie. The most popular places to purchase lingerie in Dublin during the early to mid 1960's were Cassidy's on Grafton Street, Macey's on Georges' Street and a lingerie shop called "Madame Nora's" on O'Connell Street. Lingerie was discreetly displayed in glass top counters, whilst stock was stored in labelled drawers underneath. The most popular and available brand names in the mid sixties lingerie and

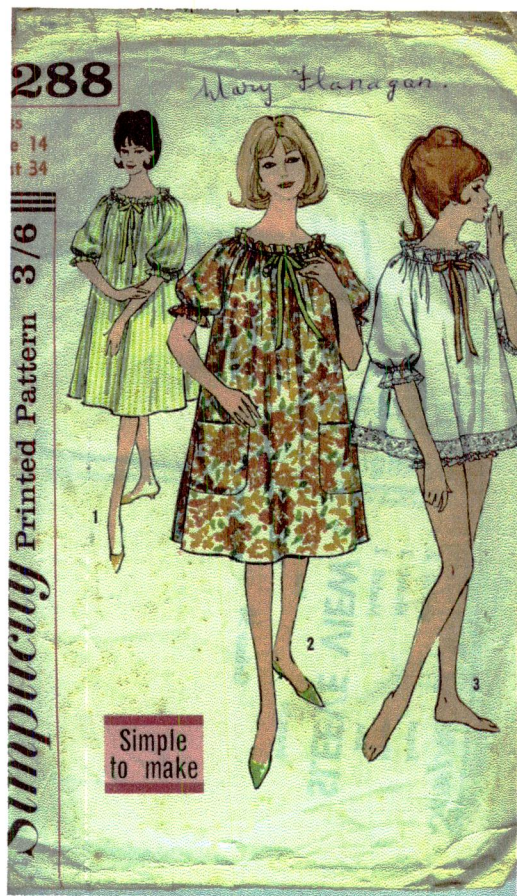


Fig.10



Fig.11

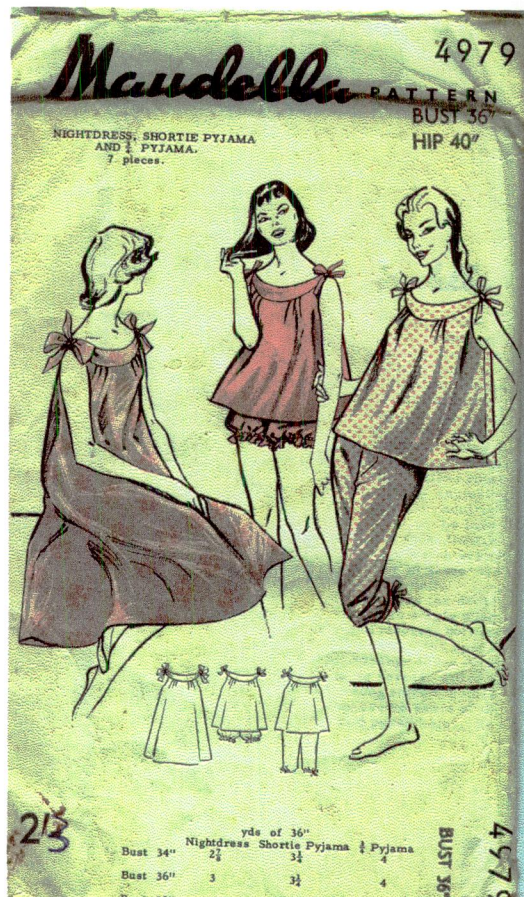


Fig.12

foundation wear, were Glenabbey and Ballet which were Irish labels. Also featuring strongly were Gossard and Berlei, which are multi-national organisations today. Lingerie was still purchased discreetly and although style and fashion did play a part in the design of lingerie, function and fit were still of primary concern. The biggest revolution in underwear came in the late sixties when tights or pantyhose as they were originally known as, came into vogue. Prior to that everyone wore nylon or silk stockings and suspenders. These were often very uncomfortable when sitting down, etc. With tights clothes could be comfortably worn shorter. This went hand in hand with the fashion revolution of the mini skirt at that time. Closer fitting and shorter clothes could be worn with confidence that there were no unsightly stocking tops visible, which would have been considered immoral. They were more expensive when they first became available and were somewhat of a luxury, but as the demand rose for tights and they became easier to mass produce, the sales of tights surpassed that of stockings marking the end of an era of suspenders and garters. The sixties was a revolutionary time for many aspects of lingerie due to the trend for mini skirts and hot pants and the Irish market was not very far behind trail-blazing countries such as England at that time.

The sixties also saw the appearance of a new hybrid garment called “the bra slip” (Fig. 13). This bra-slip saw petticoats disappearing fast as they had no place with thigh-high minis and barely-there hotpants. This bra-slip was available in pastel colours or with a floral print. The ‘psychedelic’ colours which were popular in cities like London never quite took off in Dublin where tastes were somewhat more conservative. The most important development in



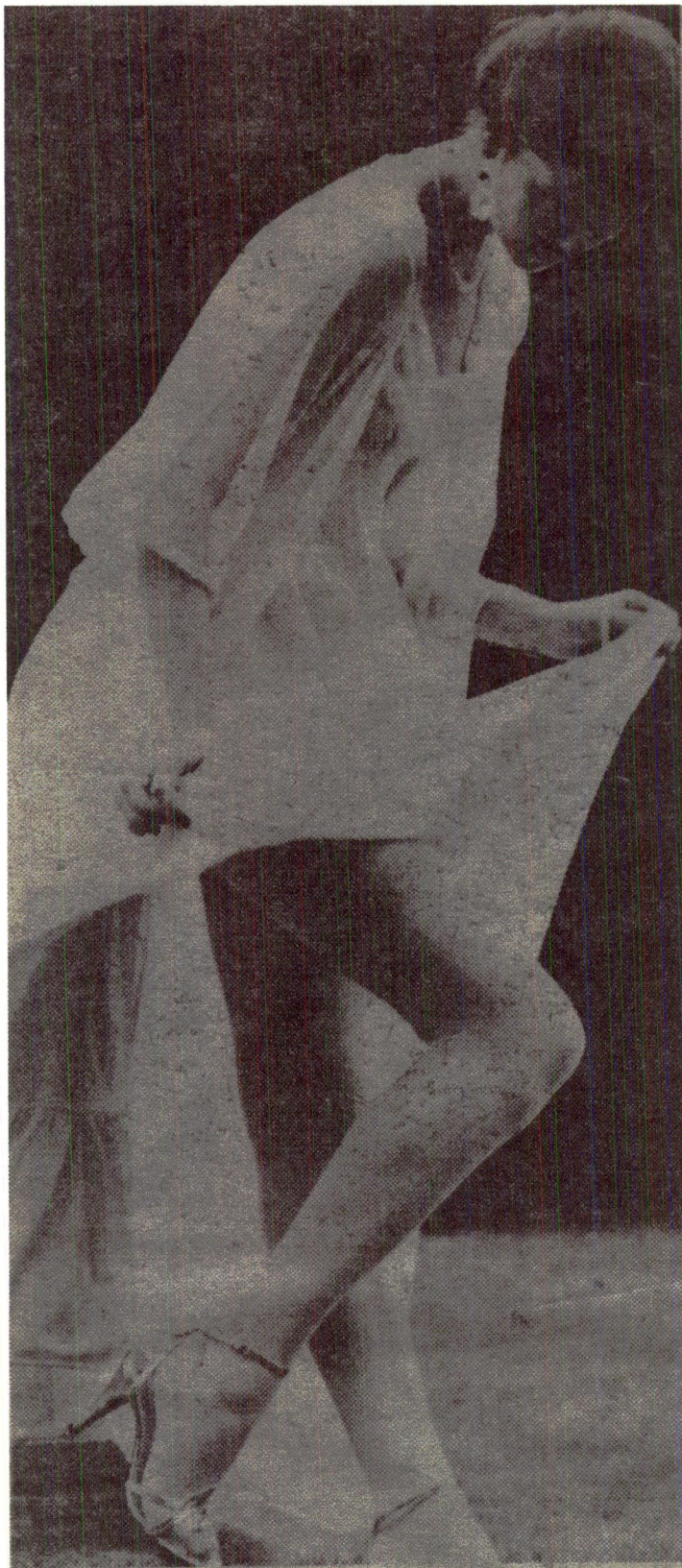
Fig 18 *The revolutionary bra-slip of the 1960s*

the sixties was the introduction of Lycra 'that magic fabric' that allowed comfort and support whilst still looking well. This fabric was developed in the United States by the American underwear company 'Du Pont'. It consisted of two man-made fabrics, nylon and spandex. Lycra revolutionised the underwear market. No more did women need to put up with uncomfortable boning. Corsets for everyday wear were fast becoming a memory. Ireland of the sixties was fast becoming a European country with a young population who no longer readily accepted the values of their parents or the Church. The availability of films, magazines and advertisements from other countries made Irish women more aware of the life styles of other races. The world was shrinking fast and individual cultural identity was becoming harder to define.

The seventies saw a rejection of pretty, feminine fashions. Lingerie was influenced by these fashion trends. Unisex blue jeans and v-necked t-shirts abounded everywhere and for all age groups. In many cases the fashion for men and women was startlingly alike. Bulky frilly bras had no place underneath these figure-hugging garments. Manufacturers developed seamless bras. These sheer nylon bras were undetectable underneath the lightest clothes. They were practical, comfortable and hard-wearing. There were no uncomfortable bra cups which cut into the skin and the new stretch straps did not slip. As women now had very active lifestyles and many people were into regular exercise this type of underwear suited them perfectly.

The 1980's heralded the return of the bosom. Padded bras (Fig. 14) and underwired cups made a reappearance as did lace and trimmings. White was

Feb. 14



DRESSED TO THRILL . . . Ireland's Miss World hopeful

Fig. 14

Fig. 14

still the predominant colour of lingerie but department stores such as Dunnes and Penneys offered a wide range of cheap and colourful lingerie.

My sister Marion Quinlan was a young child in the 1980's. She remembers wearing white cotton vests and briefs as a child. Her favourite vests had little flower or ribbon trims at the neckline. Her pet hate was wearing full slips underneath dresses and she remembers throwing temper tantrums and refusing completely to wear them. On one occasion she actually ran into her room after my mum had dressed her and removed her dress, took her slip off, hid it, put back on her dress and went smugly about her business.

She received her first bra in 1990 when she was twelve years old. There was great competition between her and her classmates to acquire their first bra and Marion being somewhat flat-chested began to panic when several of her closer friends arrived into school wearing bras. To her, wearing a bra was a statement of maturity and sophistication. When her best friend acquired her first bra, it was the final straw and she went to mum and demanded a bra. Luckily for mum, she had one tucked away in a press waiting until she felt that Marion needed one. She vividly remembers the pride with which she wore that bra. To her it was an introduction into the world of womanhood. She wore fitted tops and t-shirts so that it was obvious to everyone that she was a mature young woman who at last wore a bra.

She can remember to the smallest detail what that bra looked like. It was a white cotton teen bra with a lace trim which mum had bought in Pennys

department store. The size was 32A. she preferred white underwear when she was younger but soon developed a taste for floral and coloured lingerie.

The first bra and brief set she bought for herself was when she was thirteen years old. It was an underwired denim bra with matching denim briefs. The bra cost £4.99 and the briefs cost £2.99. She bought this set in Pennys. Marion always preferred buying matching sets and when she was sixteen she bought her first satin camisole and matching briefs. She bought them in "Knickerbox" in the Stephen's Green Shopping Centre. The camisole cost £7.99 and the briefs £3.99. She was in a school play at the time and she wanted something nice to wear underneath her costume. She still has that set as she remembers how sophisticated she felt during costume changes.

When she came up to Dublin to study in College she bought her first WonderBra (Fig. 15). She was 18 years old and Wonderbras were extremely fashionable at that time and 'Gossard' had undertaken a huge advertising campaign to promote an upthrust cleavage. She remembers buying a matching g-string which she found extremely uncomfortable to wear at first but soon got used to.

She is now 21 years old and she would buy a new item of lingerie at least every three months. She is aware of brand names and different labels but she finds that fit is more important when buying lingerie.

I 9 9 8



Fig.16

CHAPTER II

After World War II Ireland was still predominantly an agricultural country which was heavily dependent on our import market with Great Britain for textiles and clothes. This relationship was quite shaken during the Second world War when the Fianna Fail government slapped a huge tax on British exports into the country.

Garments such as silk bras and knickers were in short supply and virtually impossible to purchase beyond the Pale. As mentioned in the last chapter most Irish women designed and made their own garments by remodelling and converting lengths of cotton and calico into slips and longline baggy knickers.

This shortage of fabric and garments saw the birth of an Irish lingerie company that survives to this day. The founding of Ballet International or Ballet Foundations as it was originally known is shrouded in fable. The story goes that an Arnott's lingerie buyer, finding it impossible to buy undergarments due to this shortage of fabric decided to source her own fabric. The fable is that she sourced parachute silk from German and British paratroopers who had bailed out of planes over Ireland.

Most probably she actually managed to buy lengths of parachute silk on the black market. She then set up a sewing room in Dominic Street in Dublin and used the silk to manufacture bras and briefs. The company stayed in Dominic

Street from 1945 to 1973 when it then moved to the Glasnevin plant where it manufactures from today.

The company has now grown from that small workroom to a successful international company, which exports to many countries around the world. Although the Company has undergone many changes and is part of an international conglomerate, it is still an essentially Irish company and its headquarters remain based in Dublin. Ballet International caters for high quality, middle market, foundation wear. They pride themselves on the manufacture of pretty yet fashionable-looking control garments. Ballet's largest market is the 25 year old plus market. They have many loyal customers from the early days in Dominic Street.

Ballet have two seasons, Spring/summer and Autumn/Winter, similar to the rest of the fashion industry. They produce three core ranges for each collection. Each range consists of approximately six to eight pieces.

Gerard Broderick, the marketing manager, said the company has noticed a large change in the market over the past ten years. The market place is most definitely changing more quickly nowadays. When they launched their original "Fontaine" range (see Fig. 27) in 1990, the range lasted for five years without having to change it. The next range they followed "Fontaine" with lasted four seasons from 1995 to 1997. Since 1997 they have launched completely new ranges every year. This involves a lot more work for both the design and manufacturing teams. Time is a precious commodity in this

Fig. 18

company as delays cost money. Therefore each range is carefully planned. They have devised a working calendar with target dates for each stage in the design – development and production of the range (see Fig. 18). This calendar is given to every member of the team at the beginning of the design process and each team works towards the target date. The target date is often slightly idealistic and technical hitches can cause time delays. Beside each target date, there is a space where the actual date of achievement can be filled in. By monitoring these calendars, the management can assess what areas are more susceptible to delay and can be aware early on in the process if a range is going to be delayed slightly thereby having adequate time to advise their customers on the actual date of delivery. After the range has been launched the calendar is examined and problems are discussed and hopefully rectified before the next range, thereby improving efficiency.

The style is firstly designed in Manchester where the whole design team is located. This process involves designing the range on paper and then developing sample patterns and toiles. From these samples the initial costing is done. This is done by timing each operation in the garment, then the amount of fabric and additional trim. This gives a preliminary cost for each garment in a range. The range is then approved by the head of the design department. She may make some adjustments before the full range is sampled. To sample the range the marketing manager has to approve the costing before the head of the sampling department orders the sample fabric. All these procedures and dates are documented in the calendar. When the sales samples are ready they go to wearer trials. Wearer trials are a procedure that Ballet undertake with every

garment. They have a team of wearers who are usually employees of the company. Each wearer is given a garment from the range, which they wear for a week. This procedure is an excellent method of identifying any problems with the fit or shape of the style. The garments are subjected to the stresses of everyday life including washing, ironing etc. Ballet feel that these trials are a large part of the reason that they are renowned for comfortable, longwearing garments. The technician of the design team monitors all the garments when they are returned from the wearer trials. If there are any adjustments to be made, they are made at this stage. The patterns are then approved and sent from the design centre in Manchester. All the design work at Ballet is now done in Manchester as Ballet is part of an international company. All the manufacturing is done in Dublin so when the patterns arrive with the production package, which contain all the operational and technical details of each garment, the completion of the range is the responsibility of the Dublin plant. The range goes into the planning, purchasing stage where the sales team in Dublin produces initial sales forecasts. The bulk fabric is ordered from the textile suppliers in Europe once the shade is approved. The fabric is issued to the cutting room, and a pilot run is cut. This is a small number of garments which are cut, made up and approved. There are often teething problems in the pilot run stage. This happens because whereas it may be possible to make up a sample of a style without any problems, when it comes to production stage with large numbers, problems can arise, for example last season the production team in Dublin received patterns for a bra which needed to be reinforced with stayflex, however, when they tried to do this with large amounts of fabric it all bubbled and was impossible to do in mass production. When these types of

problems arise the head of the technical department in Manchester has to come over to Dublin to resolve the problem and offer alternative solutions. These types of problems are always a major headache as they can cause unacceptable time delays in production and inevitably also cause delays with deliveries to retailers. When all the problems have been ironed out in the pilot run stage, the range goes into main production.

This begins in the cutting room. The layout of the pattern pieces is very important as fabric wastage costs the company money. Therefore layout planners use computers to aid the process. Manufacturing plants use computer aided drafting to plot the layout. The computer is fed the initial information of the fabric such as length and width. Then the planner feeds in the information of the size, number and shape of the pattern pieces. The system then offers the most efficient options of the layout of the pieces. The use of Computer Aided Drafting (C.A.D.) saves time and is also a very efficient method of grading up or down the sizes of the garments. The tolerance of the grading is fed into the machine so it automatically can grade up or down the size of any garment efficiently. The sizing Ballet uses is universal for all the ranges that they produce for every country, therefore a 36C bra in Ireland is the exact same as a 36C bra in Portugal. However, they find that countries differ in the sizes that they require, e.g. the best selling sizes in Britain and Ireland are 36D-36E whereas in Germany the best selling sizes are 38B – 38C. This is because of racial differences in the size of women. German women are generally taller and broader than Irish women but they have smaller breasts, therefore they require a large width with a smaller cup size than British or Irish women. The

fit of lingerie is a very precise science. There is very little tolerance in the cutting and manufacturing of body fitting clothing. Because lingerie has to perform a function as well as look good, a perfect fit or as close as possible, is imperative. Therefore, the cutting of lingerie and foundation wear is a very precise and delicate operation. In Ballet the fabric is laid out in layers. The pattern pieces are placed on the fabric and are clipped or glued on with a special glue which allows it to be removed later. Each style is then cut out with special blades by automatic machines that are extremely sharp and precise. This cuts back on sizing errors.

The production line is operated on two different levels. The first method is the traditional line production. Each machinist is given the relevant page of the production plan which has a diagram of each operation. They are responsible for one particular operation. The garment starts at the beginning of the line and each machinist performs his/her operation and the garment is finished at the end of the line. Whilst this is an efficient method of production, problems arise if a mistake is made in the beginning of the line; it may not be noticed until the end of the line. This can result in a large part of the order needing to be remade, causing loss of time, fabric and money.

The second system Ballet operates is the modular system. This is a new method of production and Ballet are gradually moving all production lines to this system. It is a quick response system. The machinists are divided into teams of approximately four persons. Each team is fully responsible for the manufacture of the complete garment. This allows early detection of any

problem occurring. The modular system is more versatile and much more adaptable as each machinist is able to perform several operations. The performance of each team is higher as there is pressure within each team to increase production levels as each team receives a bonus once it exceeds the target number of garments. Time lost due to absenteeism is cut dramatically. However, the introduction of this method takes time and there is initial loss of production numbers as machinists come to terms with new machines and operations. It also takes time for machinists to get used to working as a member of a team. The production manager in Ballet has named the five stages that the introduction of this system has to undergo before it operates efficiently. It takes about six weeks for the machinists to adapt to this system. He summarises the stages as F.S.N.P. which stand for 'forming' which is the initial stage where the terms are put together, 'storming' when all the arguments and internal rows within the team and with the production manager take place, 'norming' is the next stage when the team starts to settle down and get used to the operations and working in a team with each other. The final stage is 'performing' and this is when the team begin to function efficiently as a unit and production begins to rise dramatically. Mr. Hughes feels that although there is an initial loss in production the end results far surpasses any of these losses.

Ballet's core market is the U.K. market, it constitutes 75% of their business. Therefore their customers profile predominantly caters for the English market with some adaptations for their U.S.A. and European markets. The U.S.A. market requires larger sizes as there is a large market in the U.S.A. for outsize

garments. The American customers tend to like the frilly and lacy garments which they produce. The American market is the newest market Ballet has launched into. They have had an amount of success, although it has been somewhat limited due to the fact that the American market is very large and requires a large amount of capital to make an impact in the market. Ballet's marketing team find that although they have had limited success in the U.S.A., opening up a new market takes a lot of resources and large short-term losses and they are unsure whether it is worth continuing to pour resources into this market or to cut their losses and pull out of the market. They have put a large amount of the company's resources into advertising and promotion.

Researching the market also takes time and money but is essential if the company intends to make any kind of impact on the market.

Ballet's core garment (see fig. 19) "Celebration Gold" is a control garment for the fuller figure. The size ranges from 32B to 44F. Their success lies in the fact that by organising customer focus group meetings, the marketing team realised that there was a niche in the market which the other leading lingerie manufacturers did not cater for. Ballet recognised that not all fuller figured women wanted traditional middle-aged underwear in traditional colours. They realised that there was a large market for pretty yet fashionable-looking control garments, in a wider range of colours. Women with a fuller figure, wanted the same sexy underwear as their less endowed sisters. Ballet is now well known in this area. (See Fig. 20).

celebration gold

A co-ordinated range of **control garments** that offer continuous all day support



Fig. 19

mist

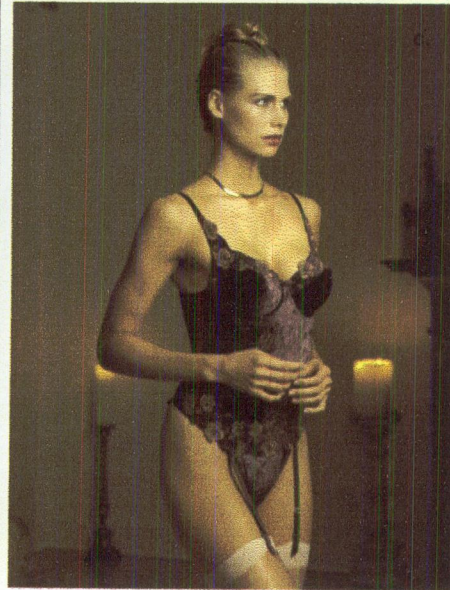
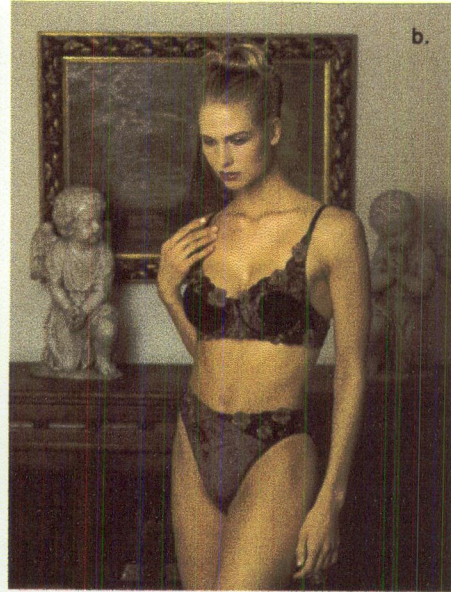
Combining the smoothness of the body fabric with a
microfibre lace for a very comfortable appeal



***Fig.20 Ballets' Foundation Garment
From The Mist Range***

extravaganza

Luxuriant in a microfibre velour with
exquisite french embroidery **creating a regal contrast** of colours



***Fig.21 Ballets' Christmas 1998
Range***

The sales and marketing team in Ballet have found that in the last ten years the consumer has become much more aware of what they want. This is in no small way due to the advertising of the big lingerie manufacturers such as Warners and Playtex. This helps the whole industry and results in higher brand recognition. Consumers now recognise quality and want different garments for different occasions. Ballet has catered for this market with its co-ordinates ranges which are available in three colours with interchangeable pieces such as bras, basques and different depths of briefs. These ranges, while only being a small section of the market, look attractive and are appealing to a younger age group of 20-25 year olds with a high disposable income. If Ballet attracts this younger age group they may acquire loyal customers who will buy their control garments as they get older. Surprisingly in every range manufacturers find that the best selling colours have always been the traditional colours of black, white and ivory and they write off the colour ranges as loss leaders which attract the consumer to the garments which they then purchase in black or white. This is not only true of Ballet, retailers find that this is the case for all companies and all ranges. Christmas and Valentine's Day are the times of the year when seasonal colours sell. (See Fig. 27).

CHAPTER III

Susan Hunter's lingerie shop in the Westbury Mall is a virtual treasure trove of beautiful luxury lingerie. She stocks a limited number of highly fashionable garments from the world's leading lingerie and nightwear manufacturers, (Fig. 22), such as Hanro of Switzerland and La Perla of Italy. The price of her stock is directly related to the quality of the garments. Her prices range from approximately £80 for a bra to approximately £400 for a limited edition chemise and wrap.

Susan Hunter opened her shop in 1984. She realised that there was a niche in the market in 1981 when she went to purchase underwear for her wedding. She found that lingerie shops were divided into two categories. The first type was perceived as being women's lingerie shops solely to satisfy men's fantasies. The atmosphere in this type of adult shop verged on being secretive and 'naughty'. The other alternative was the department stores such as Arnotts, where she could only find extremely functional and sensible foundation wear with a minimum of lace trim. Realising that there was no place which bridged the gap between red 'naughty' see-through underwear and 'Captain Sensible' impermeable control wear, she saw a niche in the market for special occasion, high quality underwear.

During the last fifteen years since she opened, Susan Hunter has noticed a trend with Irish women. She has found that Irish consumers have generally become



Fig.22 La Perla stock at Susan Hunters Lingerie shop
23

much more aware of what they want and expect. Italian and French women have always been aware of the quality of lingerie as it is part of their tradition, but Susan Hunter feels that there is now no difference between Irish consumers and their European counterparts.

Irish women now realise that they need different bras for different occasions. When Susan Hunter opened first, padded bras were not openly discussed. She kept them hidden in a drawer and discreetly produced them when required. There was a certain stigma attached to acquiring a padded bra. It was seen as unacceptable vanity, a quality which, by tradition was not encouraged in Irish women. Now in this age of upthrust and silicon implants over 50% of her bras are padded and underwired. Susan even stocks bust enhancers. They are made from a silicon material which are easily inserted into bras. Wearing bust enhancers and padded bras is now perceived as being the same as wearing high heels. By wearing high heels one is not pretending that one is taller, similarly by wearing a padded bra, one is not pretending to have a larger bust. It is simply to create a look and a better shape with what one is wearing.

Women used to only consider buying special underwear for new lovers or their husbands. They did not consider buying it solely for themselves. This has changed over the last six or seven years with women buying for themselves. When women buy lingerie for themselves they tend to buy more cutting edge styles. (Fig. 23). When buying for special occasions they tend to gravitate towards interesting colours and cuts. When men buy lingerie for women they tend to buy soft, beautiful floaty fabrics, and feminine garments.

The consumer age for luxury high quality has not changed dramatically over the last 15 years. There is a small increase in younger consumers in the 18-25 year old age group. She finds that Irish women know what to expect and now buy more than look. They appreciate the quality of the workmanship in the garments, whereas when she opened first, women expected seedy badly made garments with excesses of frills and bows.

She also has a type of customer who are lingerie connoisseurs. They have a passion for beautiful lingerie. They may not be passionate about clothes but will spare no expense when it comes to lingerie. They feel that beautiful lingerie makes them feel good about themselves and their inner core. Beautiful lingerie is like a foundation on top of which other garments sit and a good foundation enhances and complements what is built over it. Susan Hunter finds that women these days will often buy their lingerie for a special occasion before they purchase the outfit to ensure they enhance and complement each other and the wearer. Lingerie that does not complement an outfit can ruin the overall silhouette. Most bridal wear designers advise their customers to purchase their lingerie during preliminary fittings to ensure the overall silhouette is perfect as every bra creates a certain shape.

She disagrees with magazine articles that report a general increase in women's bust size. She feels as do many retailers that demand has forced manufacturers to realise that there is a market for sexy underwear for the fuller figure and that everyone over a size 36B is not a middle aged old spinster who wants armour plated lingerie. She is sure that there was always the same percentage of fuller

figured women but because there was no special or sexy lingerie available for them, they had to make do with sensible, white foundation wear designed for middle-aged matrons.

However, Susan Hunter feels that age is not a major determining factor in what type of lingerie Irish women buy. To a certain extent older women realising that their bodies may be relaxing slightly may tend sometimes to purchase slightly more controlling garments like bodices and all-in-ones which are slightly more flattering whilst young teenagers often opt for cotton vests and cropped tops. However, this is not a rule of thumb as fashion trends dictate and women in general tend to be more image and weight conscious nowadays and tend to work out and exercise, thereby maintaining better figures into later years. Therefore, there is no major difference between the generations and Irish women seem to be more style orientated than age orientated.

Customer care is of the utmost importance at Susan Hunters. She takes a lot of time advising and fitting underwear on customers, taking into consideration the occasion they want the garment for and what they intend wearing over it. She takes into account fashion and fabric. Lingerie consumerism is not influenced as much as outerwear by the fashion seasons. People buy lingerie all year round, for normal wear, anniversaries, birthdays, etc. Underwear is not primarily bought to impress and dazzle. Its main function is to fit well and enhance one's shape. During the last five years the colour trends of lingerie ranges has increasingly become influenced by the colours of mainstream fashion. It is more important that the colour of lingerie matches one's skin

tone as it is worn right next to the skin. Soft colours such as ivory and creams suit the typical pale Irish complexions best. Bright, strong colours make Irish complexions look washed out.

Surprisingly black is also a colour which is particularly harsh on skin tones despite it being a best seller. Because of our booming economy Susan Hunter finds that Irish women have a higher disposable income for luxury items such as high quality lingerie and she predicts an even larger market in the future for high quality luxury garments.

CHAPTER IV

Arnotts in Henry Street is one of the oldest department stores in the country. During the last few years it has undergone a face lift in order to appeal to a wider market.

The lingerie department in Arnotts offers the widest range of lingerie and accessories. They offer a choice of seventeen different brands with prices ranges to suit every pocket. They also offer a large range of accessories. They sell silicon implants which are fitted to an individual's bust and have to be ordered. Each pair of silicon implants costs £89. They also offer a cheaper alternative in the form of sponge implants. These cost only £7.60 a pair and are inserted into the wearer's bra. For backless dresses they offer stock on supports up to a D cup which give a certain amount of support and a nice natural shape to the bust.

Arnotts' customers range from teenagers who come in with their mothers to acquire their first bra to older women who come in for corsets and girdles. All teenagers who come in for their first bra are fitted to ensure they purchase the correct size as this is very important when the bust is developing. The staff at Arnotts' lingerie department find that most teenagers opt for white cotton bras. They are not interested in lacy trims. They find that bras and briefs from the "Sloggi" range are very popular among this age group as they are lightweight and comfortable while still offering a reasonable amount of support. Most

older teenagers on the other hand, opt for "Wonder Bras" and other 'push up' styles.

On average eight out of ten of Arnotts' customers are fitted every time they purchase a bra. All the staff are fully trained in fitting and regularly go away for refresher courses provided by the lingerie companies. They find women are increasingly aware of the importance of fitting and many customers will get fitted every three months, especially if they have gained or lost weight. The staff always advise fitting as there can be a difference in sizing between the brands. Sometimes the staff find there is even a difference in size between styles in one brand.

Support and fit is not as important an issue for them. In general Irish women are not very wide but require a larger cup size. This is also true of the British market. Triumph which is a German/Austrian company produces DD, E and F cup bras exclusively for the British and Irish market. German and Austrian women are broader across the back as they are a tall race but they have smaller busts.

Some people actually come home from Germany and America to purchase their lingerie as they cannot find bras that fit comfortably in these countries. In America, women seem to be very broad but again with smaller busts, its impossible to find larger cup sizes which is surprising when one considers the amount of women with silicon implants in America.

Arnotts supply two Irish labels, Ballet and a small range of corsetry by a company called 'Irene'. These corsets and girdles are aimed at middle-aged to elderly women, who require extra support.

In the last few years the staff have noticed that they sell more matching bra and brief sets. Women seem to prefer wearing sets than mismatched bras and brief. Although they do admit that they sell marginally more bras, especially in white. White is definitely the most popular colour they sell but they have noticed a trend towards coloured garments. At Christmas, 1998, their best sellers were navy, silver and red garments.

Many of the coloured garments are bought by men as gifts. Men seem to like to purchase something a little different. As with Susan Hunter, the staff noticed that men know exactly what size they want and have a very definite idea of the type of garments they want. It could be surmised that this is a result of getting it wrong before.

The average size Arnotts sell is a D cup and many customers require DD, E and even quite a few F cups. They sell very few B cups and feel that this is because many smaller busted women purchase cheaper lingerie in Dunnes or Pennys.

The Ballet range they offer has become extremely popular over the last few years. The staff find a greater number of women coming in looking for Ballet garments. Ballet is especially popular with brides. February is a busy month

for bridal lingerie as there are many weddings in March and April. All brides purchase their lingerie before the final fitting of their wedding dress to ensure that the lingerie complements the dress. Brides will buy all the accessories for example, briefs, suspenders and stockings. Ballet offer a great selection in this area with discreet control panels which smooth out any bumps and lumps and this season they have produced a clever little half-slip with inbuilt briefs which gives a smooth outline.

The staff noticed that many customers are brand loyal. Once they find a brand that fits well they tend to stick with that brand. A good fit is of utmost importance to customers. They do not come in solely for a particular colour, but a comfortable fit. The staff find that in general, Irish women are very aware of quality and are willing to purchase a well fitting bra, regardless of price. They find that Irish women are equally discerning as any foreign women who come into their department.

CHAPTER V

Erotic and specialised lingerie is a relatively new and fast-growing market in Ireland. Most of Ireland's major cities have at least one of these adult shops which offers a selection of erotic underwear and lingerie. The stock in these shops is a far cry from the longline bras and knee length petticoats of the fifties. These shops became established in Ireland during the late eighties. It was no accident that the introduction of adult shops coincided with the upturn in the economic climate of the country. There was a higher amount of disposable income in the country which resulted in an upturn in the consumption of luxury goods which were previously considered frivolous items for people who were somewhat deprived.

'Miss Fantasia' on South William Street offers the finest selection of erotic lingerie and fetish wear in Dublin (Fig. 29). It is a privately owned company which manufactures a percentage of the merchandise they sell in the shop.

Miss Fantasia was opened six years ago in Dublin. It pioneered this type of shop which sold high quality erotic lingerie. Until this time shops that sold "risqué" and erotic lingerie offered cheap and badly made garments. These shops were perceived as somewhat 'smutty' and the domain of middle-age, raincoat-clad men suffering from sexual frustration.

'Miss Fantasia' offers a wide selection of clothing from lacy peephole bras to heavy duty PVC and leather bondage wear. They also offer a range of

beautifully made corsets and basques (see figs. 25, 26, 27, 28). Because they offer such a large selection of stock which caters for such a wide range of tastes, there is no stereotypical customer. Customers vary from 20 to 50 years old and come from a large cross-section of the community. Many customers buy lingerie for special occasions and gifts. Many of the young customers buy lingerie and accessories for weekend clubbing. I met one such customer who swears by 'Miss Fantasia' as a source for original and unusual lingerie. She buys all her clubwear there, especially if she wants a unique look for a special night out. She possesses a whole wardrobe of exotic lingerie and fetish wear.

The trade in erotic lingerie and fetish wear is consistent all year round with a slight increase, as with other areas of the lingerie market, at Christmas and Valentine's Day. Business in erotic underwear has improved and grown during the past six years as people have become more open-minded and therefore "au fait" with the types of garments 'Miss Fantasia' offers. The selection available has grown considerably as a result of demand for a wider choice.

The selection in the shop varies from frilly bras, knickers and baby dolls, many which could be found in any high street department stores such as Brown Thomas, to leather and PVC wear which requires a reasonable amount of imagination to try to figure out how to wear it. The demand for new products and garments is increasing all the time and the proprietors of 'Miss Fantasia' have no doubt that adult shops have a permanent and sizeable quantity of the market in Ireland.



Fig.25



Fig.26,27

Fig.28 Miss Fantasia's range of corsets

CONCLUSION

From my examination of the Irish lingerie market from the post-war years to the present, I was surprised to find that my original perception, that Irish women were somewhat more conservative in their attitudes towards lingerie, due to religious beliefs and the economic climate was not, in fact, entirely true. In fact, it would seem we could be proud of Irish women's attitudes towards lingerie. Most of the women I spoke to had strong opinions of what they did and did not like. They were all 'au-fait' with the major brands and many were able to tell me the shapes and colours of the new seasonal ranges for many of the major brands. Most women also had a fond memory of a favourite bra that they had owned. It was interesting to note that almost all these women still kept this bra at the back of a press even though it was too ragged to be worn anymore. Bra and brief sets which matched were also much more popular than I had expected with most women expressing a preference for wearing matching sets when possible. All the women I spoke to had favourite brands and were fully aware of the fabric content of their underwear. I also discovered that it was impossible to tell a 'lingerie addict' from her appearance. Many women who were absolutely passionate about lingerie, had an outward mis-matched appearance and cared much more about their underwear than about their outerwear. Susan Hunter spoke of customers who would spend hundreds of pounds at a time on beautiful lingerie, when their outerwear came from Dunnes Stores.

Whilst Irish women were never overtly sexual, their tastes in lingerie have never differed greatly from what was happening in the developed world.

Indeed Ballet International confirmed that the Irish market does not differ greatly from the British market, the only difference being that they would sell slightly greater numbers of coloured garments in Britain due to the larger population of mixed and coloured races who live there, as brighter and stronger colours suit darker skin tones better than pale Irish skin tones. This is also true of their American and Mediterranean markets. With regards to cut and shape, the Irish consumer is on a par with the rest of the world. The average Irish woman is a discerning consumer of lingerie with all sources agreeing that Irish women are totally aware of quality and know exactly what they want.

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