

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE *female body*

If you graphed the ideal female shape over time, there'd be more ups and downs than the most volatile stock market. Laura Venuto traces the journey and discovers the ideal body is determined by much more than fashion trends and movie stars.



Curves made a brief comeback in the '50s with shapely icons such as Marilyn Monroe.

1500-1800 BUXOM BEAUTY

The ideal body: At 91 kilograms, Lillian Russell is the ideal beauty in the mid-1800s.

For the best part of four centuries, plump, voluptuous, downright buxom women reigned supreme. Extra flesh held only positive associations, according to Peter Stearns, author of *Fat History* (NYU Press, 2002). "In those days, slenderness may indicate malnutrition or disease, whereas plumpness was seen as a sign of affluence, health, good temperament and maternal function," he says. In an age when famine was widespread and it was considered a woman's duty to produce numerous offspring, a well-fed wife with wide childbearing hips was a good reflection on her husband. So much so that thinness was actually disparaged: skinny actresses were criticised as ugly, while an 1878 book by Dr T.C. Duncan titled, *How To Be Plump*, describes the lean as "irritable in mind". Dr Sophia Errey, senior lecturer in art history at RMIT University, says artists also reflected the preference for full figures. "Rembrandt shows us 'ordinary' women with imperfect but by no means overweight bodies, while Rubens' women were positively zaftig and would probably be judged as overweight now, but are very sexy," she says. Of course the fashion for much of this period relied on the corset – however Peter explains it was "intended to rearrange fat rather than minimise it". As such, it was common for women to pad their clothes to make their hips, bosoms and bottoms look more substantial – although ideally the padding was natural.

1890 THE TURNING POINT

The ideal body: The tall and athletic, but distinctly slimmer, Gibson Girl.

While rolls were still relished until the late 1800s, change was in the air and within a few short decades, fleshy flipped from desirable to despicable. As Peter Stearns writes: "Towards the latter end of the 19th century, the cultural perception of fat began to change from an indicator



Lillian Russell



Clara Bow



The Gibson Girl

of wealth and health into something to be detested." He explains fears of food shortages diminished at the turn of the new century, and with them, the idea of carrying extra fat in reserve for emergencies. Women started working outside the home while suffragettes were marching for the right to vote.

An interest in physical fitness emerged for women and saw them participating in everything from tennis to horseback riding. Fashion was changing, too, and by 1914, clothing was largely corset-free and increasingly form-fitting. Peter adds the introduction of standardised dress sizes also "undoubtedly encouraged weight consciousness" by drawing greater attention to not-so-standard body shapes. These changes had a ripple effect throughout society, leading to a growing belief that fat was bad. The previously revered Lillian Russell granted interviews about diets; audiences began to laugh at plump chorus girls; slimming salons and diet pills were promoted; and a diet book first hit the best-seller list in 1918.

A new aesthetic was emerging and a sketch of a woman by Charles Gibson captured the look. Peter says the Gibson Girl became the first mass-marketed ideal image in the US. She had an ample bosom and hips, but a thinner, more athletic figure than any other publicised images of the female form. "What was happening was the creation of a new, quickly powerful stigma, reaching deeply into self-image and reactions to others alike," says Peter.

1920s-1930s THIN IS IN

The ideal body: The thin, androgynous body of Clara Bow and Mary Pickford.

After World War I, active lifestyles were paramount and body fat came to be seen as a sign of self-indulgence. Added to this were women's increasing independence and the right to vote. To reflect the growing social freedom they were now enjoying, women wanted freedom of movement and comfort in the clothes they wore. Anne Bolin, an anthropologist at Elon College in North Carolina explains that, "during periods of liberation, such as the 1920s when women had just gotten the vote, the ideal shape for women de-emphasised their reproductive characteristics such as the nourishing breasts and wide, childbearing hips". The flapper look was born and a straight-up-and-down, plank-like silhouette was the new ideal. As such, dresses skimmed over hips, rather than emphasising the waist, and many women bound their breasts to create a more boyish, androgynous shape.

1950s CURVES ARE BACK

The ideal: The womanly curves of Marilyn Monroe and Lana Turner.

The late 1940s and '50s saw a temporary interruption of the trend towards thin. "There have been arguments that bad economic times in the 1930s led to some re-emphasis on fuller figures," says Peter. In 1947 Christian Dior's 'New Look' fashion collection hit the catwalk. Dior believed women were fed up with the uniforms and plain clothing of World War II. A new ladylike charm was emerging, and ultra-feminine screen idols such as Grace Kelly became the ideal for post-war women. Dior's collection featured full skirts with cinched waists and tailored blouses, creating a silhouette that placed emphasis on bosoms and hips. Push-up bras, girdles and padding helped women add fullness to the desired areas.

But more than faddish fashion trends, big social changes were occurring affecting the way women viewed themselves, and their bodies. In her book *Am I Thin Enough Yet?* (Oxford University Press, 1997) Sharlene Hesse-Biber writes, "Political and social reactions after World War II drove white middle-class women out of their war effort jobs and back to

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their kitchens. It was a time of economic expansion, the rise of suburbia and the spawning of the middle-class housewife." With the removal of the economic and social restraints that had been keeping people from starting families, there came a new valuation of motherhood and the baby boom generation was born. Consequently, feminine, maternal assets were celebrated, and women strived to achieve the womanly, hourglass-shaped bodies of silver-screen idols such as Marilyn Monroe and Lana Turner.



Lana Turner

1960s-1970s THIN IS IN

The ideal: The super-thin, androgynous body of British teen model, Twiggy.

A new wave of feminism, along with the introduction of the contraceptive pill, which gave women control over their own fertility, saw this generation throwing off the 'happy housewife' domesticity of the 1950s. "The 1960s signalled the end of the baby boom and the need to re-emphasise the non-maternal female image," says Peter. "Youth culture really kicked in and added to that, there was an increasing concern about factors leading to heart disease," he says. As women distanced themselves from the role of wife and mother, the thin, androgynous ideal of the 1920s resurfaced.

According to Sharlene Hesse-Biber, the media played a dominant role in this new influence, but rather than television or film, "the fashion industry and women's magazines became the arbiters of image". A 17-year-old British model called Twiggy embodied the new



Twiggy

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES



Cindy Crawford

look. She stood at five-foot six inches and weighed just 43 kilograms; her body shape of long skinny legs, a flat chest and tiny hips resembled that of a young boy. It is widely agreed that if you want to pinpoint the moment when thin became in and didn't look back, the late 1960s was it.

Twiggy became an icon for this generation as she was so uncharacteristic of the curvier actresses of her time. Her super-slim shape led the charge for the most enduring aesthetic yet. But, as Harold Koda points out in his book, *Extreme Beauty* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004), there was a major difference in real women's ability to emulate the ideal. Unlike previous generations, which relied on girdles, bustles and corsets to create the desired shape, women were relying solely on their natural body to achieve this look. "The refuge of wearing foundation garments to re-form the body was obsolete and the greater tyranny emerged of an ideal of beauty with the impossibility of recourse to artifice," he writes. Many researchers and doctors point to this decade as the era of a marked increase in eating disorders.

1980s-NOW THIN AND THINNER

The ideal: From thin but fit Cindy Crawford to waif-like Kate Moss.

With greater liberation and equality came the rise of power dressing in the late '80s and early '90s. More masculine fashions expressed women's increasing power in the corporate world, and to reflect this, the ideal body was still slim, but needed to be stronger, more toned and muscular. The original supermodels such as Naomi Campbell and Cindy Crawford personified this look, with thin but toned bodies.

They discovered the female body had changed considerably... our hips have become wider, our breasts, bottoms and feet, bigger.

Then, in 1993, a British model by the name of Kate Moss burst on to the scene and her pre-pubescent physique signalled the birth of the 'waif' look. Stephen Bayley, design guru and author of the upcoming book *Woman As Design* (Conran Octopus), has dubbed this aesthetic 'contrarian chic'. "In times of plenty, there's a contrarian chic to having an austere shape," he says. "Equally, in times of want there is an opposing taste for a voluptuous one." Other commentators suggest the new power women were using to define themselves was the power to resist, and the discipline to deprive oneself. While plumpness once signified you were wealthy enough to eat well, the modern expression of wealth is having the money to go to the gym and being able to say no to the abundance of fattening food. And, of course, you can always buy the ideal body in the form of plastic surgery.

Since Kate Moss there has been a steady slide towards an even slimmer ideal (think the 'lollipop chic' of celebrities such as Paris Hilton and Calista Flockhart). While 'plus-size models' such as Sophie Dahl made a brief appearance, heralding suggestions of a return to curves, they never had the staying power of the super-slim icons. Peter attributes this to the continuation of a largely anti-maternal, pro-youth culture, as well as increasing

health concerns in light of the obesity crisis. "On average, obesity has gone up in the past 30 years," says Peter, "even though the slim ideal burns bright, which has led to real body dissatisfaction."

It seems the gap between real and ideal has never been wider. In 1994 Professor Maciej Henneberg, head of anatomical sciences at Adelaide University, and Adelaide fashion designer Daisy Veitch collaborated on a national sizing survey in Australia after realising it hadn't been updated since 1926. They discovered the female body had changed considerably since then; our hips have become wider and our breasts, bottoms and feet, bigger.

Two years ago a group of biologists and anthropologists in the US also discovered, due to the world's population boom and consequent expansion in the gene pool, our bodies are becoming more different from one another, rather than more similar. This greater diversity in body shapes suggests an even greater difficulty for most women to achieve a singular ideal.

WHAT NEXT?

While some are predicting the return of 'recession curves' where we cushion the uncertainty of the economic downturn with a few extra kilos, others believe a truly full-figured ideal is still a long way off, largely due to the obesity crisis, which invariably carries with it negative health associations with fat. Perhaps one day in the future though, rather than only skinny or buxom being the ideal in any given generation, we'll be able to embrace the true diversity of the female body. After all, if you were to look around at the women in your office or consider your female friendship group there's likely to be a Marilyn, a Lillian, a Clara, a Cindy and even a Twiggy – all living in the same decade. No doubt that has always been the case throughout history, but perhaps it is finally time the ideal reflected the real, rather than the other way around. ■