If all our women were to become as beautiful as the Venus de' Medici, we should for a time be charmed; but we should soon wish for variety; and as soon as we had obtained variety, we should wish to see certain characteristics a little exaggerated beyond the then existing standards.

—Darwin, The Descent of Man

As we approached the anniversary of the publication of Kinsey’s Sexual Behavior in the Human Female, I began to muse on the question of the identity of the women who participated in this groundbreaking survey. How was the woman of 1953 perceived and how did she perceive herself? What were the evolving visions of the “perfect” woman and how did real women try to achieve those goals? Where did her ideal come from and how did that journey inform the manner in which she wanted to be perceived physically and socially in the 1940s and 1950s when she was interviewed by Dr. Kinsey and his staff? Interviewees ranged in age from 16 to 90. Since the research began as early as 1938 and continued into 1951, the participants could have been born between 1848 and 1935 and would have been influenced by society’s stereotypes of womanhood, femininity, and beauty during their formative years throughout the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries. I decided to consider how the women who were interviewed were ideally supposed to look and what they may have done to achieve this ideal as a consequence of the era in which they grew up. And it seemed reasonable to posit that ideals of appearance and ideals of behavior relate significantly to one another.

My investigation revealed that although the particulars have changed over the past 500 years, the underlying goals and desires regarding the ideal and alluring female have not. Most women across the centuries have aspired to be desirable and have been willing to work and suffer toward that end. Men, in a complex fusion of biology and
sociology, have exhibited a preference for “whatever features are linked with status” (Buss 1994, 55), whether it is plumpness in times of scarcity or thinness in times of affluence. Buss believes these are evolutionarily informed preferences, but whether they have or haven’t emerged from our biology does not make the impact of these preferences less powerful.

The ideal Western woman’s appearance has been determined by the public presentation of her secondary sexual characteristics, primarily the bust, the waist, the hips and buttocks—not until the early twentieth

Called the “Girl with the Perfect Figure,” Bettie Page was one of the most popular pinup models of the 1950s. Although she retired from modeling in 1957, her appeal has continued to this day.

**ANONYMOUS,**
**UNITED STATES**

*Betttie Page, 1950s*
Gelatin silver print
4 1/8" x 3 1/2"
KI-DC: 26645
Donated in 1961

Ideal Images and Kinsey’s Women

century, and particularly the 1920s, did the focus alight on women’s legs. Breasts, being the most obvious feminine characteristic that could be seen (or not) in a clothed woman, have received the lion’s share of interest and attention. Corsets, invented in the early fourteenth century, which supported women’s breasts and confined their torsos, would alter the female shape from this time well into the twentieth century. The “Body,” invented by the Spanish in the fifteenth century, was a truly formidable corset that sandwiched a woman’s torso between two stiff leather or metal body-squeezing forms fortified by wooden or whalebone slats attached by hinges at each side. This fashion traveled from the Spanish court to France and England during the 1500s. There were variations in design from country to country, but the pain and restriction of aristocratic women’s movement and breathing resulting from these undergarments was universal (Yalom 1997).

By 1670, corsets were de rigueur for both the bourgeois and the nobility and were a sign of the affluent classes. Working and peasant women wore a corselet, which was shorter and less stiff, permitting physical work and, since it fastened in the front, a woman could dress herself. During Napoleon’s reign (1804–1815), the Empire style of dress came into fashion all over Europe, with the waistline rising to just under the bust, thus emphasizing the breasts. Following the restoration of the French monarchy and the return to political conservatism, the waistline descended back to its natural position (ibid.). Ever seeking the stimulation of variety, as Darwin later noted, by 1816 breasts were considered best when separated, for which a padded triangle of metal was inserted, point up, into the center front of the corset. Although this was a fashion rage on both sides of the channel, the English went back to the shelf-like bosom within a few years. The waistline descended below the natural region in the 1840s and then back again to its normal position in the 1850s with the increased popularity of the crinoline and hoop skirt. The hourglass figure with a tiny waist was now favored and, in order to achieve the ideal 17- to 20-inch wasp waist (which, not incidentally, increased the appearance of one’s bust size), women wore corsets that could be very tightly laced. Reportedly, some women died as a result of the restrictions of their undergarments.

As the nineteenth century progressed, American-made “French” corsets were manufactured and their use proliferated throughout the United States. The Sears, Roebuck and Co. catalog of 1897 advertised, among more than twenty other corset options, a “Corset Waist” for girls from eight to twelve years of age and a “Young Ladies’ Corset,” described as “just the corset for growing girls” (172). Breast size was also a focus
for change during this period. Falsies or “bust improvers” in Europe, or “Bust Pads” (Sears, Roebuck and Co. catalog, 1897) in the United States, were inserted in one’s undergarment to enhance the size of the bosom. Above the corset, cup-shaped structures within which the pads were placed were made from wire, flexible celluloid, or fabric pockets (Yalom 1997). During the nineteenth century, the ideal American silhouette changed significantly from the frail, willowy type before the Civil War to the voluptuous, buxom hourglass figure and then to the “athletic,” swaybacked, S-shaped profile of the Belle Époque.

Thus, the image of the ideal woman was not defined by the breasts alone, as the derriere and the entire female silhouette were remolded through changing fashion. By the mid-1800s, petticoats had reached a peak of excess. “In 1856 the underclothing of a lady of fashion consisted of long drawers trimmed with lace, a flannel petticoat, an under-petticoat three and one half yards wide, a petticoat wadded to the knees, and stiffened on the upper part with whale bones inserted a handbreadth from one another, a white starched petticoat with three stiffly starched flounces, two muslin petticoats, and finally the dress” (Ewing 1978, 69). The great width of skirts made the cinched-in waist, which was the current focus, look smaller in contrast.

In the mid-1860s, when the oldest members of the Kinsey cohort were reaching puberty, the cage-crinoline, a lighter, structured underskirt that replaced heavy, layered-on petticoats, was being mass-produced. In an age when class distinction was increasing, the upper classes altered this fashion by flattening the front of their skirts, which then began to flare in the back, presaging the bustle. The new style “accentuated the bust, defined the waist very closely and then showed every curve of the hips” (Ewing 1978, 78). Corsets became stiffer and tighter as dresses were drawn more tightly over the front of women’s figures. During the early 1870s, the bustle reached down to the back of the knees. Artificial enhancements of the bosom became more important as women’s bodies were constricted more and more by tighter and tighter lacings. The ideal woman was now stout but with a tiny waist, a combination that hardly exists in nature. The beauty of the delicate ladies of earlier in the century was being challenged by a much more amply padded, voluptuous woman with heavier breasts, hips, and legs. Actresses such as Lillian Russell, whose figures were appreciated as reflecting those presented in high European art, were copied even by bourgeois and upper-class women. At the height of this fashion in the 1880s, “young U.S. women worried about being too thin. They used
padding and they ate” (Mazur 1986, 285). A contemporary observer reported: “They are constantly having themselves weighed and every ounce of increase is hailed with delight” (quoted in Banner 1983, 106).

By this time, the bustle had grown to a size large enough to hold a tea tray. Dresses were pulled tightly back from waist to knee. As an indication of the male interest in the bustle’s simulated steatopygia, Darwin wrote admiringly of the naturally endowed African women he observed on his travels: “[W]ith many Hottentot women, the posterior part of the body projects in a wonderful manner” (cited in Rudofsky 1972, 100). In England during this period it was thought by some that the “possession of a slender waist is a question of race,” and that a corset offered the promise of a “refined” figure (Steele 1985, 202). During the last three decades of the nineteenth century, the ideal figure was that of the mature woman: “[A] well-developed bust, a tapering waist and large hips are the combination of points recognized as a good figure” (Ewing 1978, 86). The mono-bosom reigned supreme: a rounded pillow-like form with no cleavage nor any indication that two breasts dwelt therein.

Protests against the constraining corset, which had begun in the mid-eighteenth century, increased. Criticism came not only from the medical profession, philosophers, and clergy, but also from leaders of the business community. American economist Thorstein Veblen suggested in The Theory of the Leisure Class (1899) that wearing a corset resulted in a woman who was weak and unfit for work. She was dependent on her husband and the servants he provided and was perceived as an emblem of her husband’s financial success. He wrote: “The corset is, in economic theory, substantially a mutilation, undergone for the purpose of lowering the subject’s vitality and rendering her permanently and obviously unfit for work. It is true, the corset impairs the personal attractiveness of the wearer [referring here to the naked figure], but the loss suffered on that score is offset by the gain in reputability which comes of her visibly increased expensiveness and infirmity” (172). In other words, this made her a nineteenth-century version of the late-twentieth-century trophy wife.

Between 1890 and 1910, women’s magazines began to address the erotic elements of feminine beauty. Although there was no reference to sex appeal, as there would be in the 1920s, the importance of personal magnetism, fascination, and charm were emphasized, denoting the ability to attract others, particularly eligible men. As the Edwardian period began to fade, the former distinction between “true’ inner beauty
This photograph was retouched at some point to make the woman’s waist appear even smaller than the corset could make it.

ANONYMOUS, NATIONALITY UNKNOWN

Woman in evening gown, c. 1910
Gelatin silver print
5 7/16" x 3 1/4"
KI-AA: 220
Donated in 1982

and its ‘false’ and artificial counterpart” (Steele 1985, 213) became fainter and fainter. The seduction of one’s husband, the wearing of revealing and dainty lingerie, and even the potential for sexual satisfaction within marriage were being gently addressed. Nonetheless, the
remnants of Edwardian fashion still demanded a restricted and unnatural shape. The desire for a tiny waist was maintained and women continued lacing up their new corsets as tightly as they had their hourglass-shaped ones. The result was a new distortion of women’s figures, since the new straight and rigid front support projected the breasts forward and threw the hips and buttocks far back, producing the S-curved, swayback profile seen on the “Gibson Girl,” who represented the ideal type of this era. The discreet use of face powder, rouge, and lip color, as well as hair dyes and false hairpieces built up over padding, creating a luxurious crown of abundant hair, added to the Gibson Girl look. In 1900, New York’s curvaceous Floradora chorus girls, who were chosen for their closeness to the beauty ideal of that era, averaged 64 inches in height and weighed 130 pounds (Banner 1983). For the last time between then and now, fashion was focused on the voluptuous mature woman who displayed a lavish bust that hung low over a small waist and ample hips. Youth was seen as skinny, bony, and without curves.

By 1907, the era of mature, even matronly, beauty as an ideal was almost over and the century of the idealization of feminine youth had truly begun. Within a few years the distorted S-shape disappeared in favor of the straight figure in which the hips came back into natural alignment, the waist was not as restricted, and the bust was less prominent. Petticoats disappeared and the skirt narrowed. “For the first time the fashionable woman stood upright and stood free” (Ewing 1978, 114). The leg was declared fashionable, as it was outlined for the first time by a very narrow skirt, which by 1911 actually prevented the wearer from taking a full stride. Women’s legs and, in general, the torso below the waist had essentially been hidden throughout past history by layers and layers of fabric. As a result, unlike the breasts and the waist, no consensus had been formed as to what the standards of leg beauty should be, since comparisons among women were not possible. The Gibson Girl had occasionally revealed her long legs, with curved calves and slender ankles, when wearing a bathing costume or sportswear, but it wasn’t until the leg-revealing short dresses of the late-1920s flapper that this body part became the focus of fashion and femininity.

As always, behavior followed fashion and fashion followed behavior. Although the corset remained a must until after World War I, by this time it had begun to follow a more natural shape. Women’s lives were changing. The image of the leisured trophy wife was losing ground to the busy middle-class woman, active within her home and even beginning to work in the outside world. Another major factor was the arrival in America of the “Tango” dance in 1911. It became the rage everywhere
and demanded freedom of movement and therefore the loosening and shortening of corsets and the end to the very narrow “hobble” skirt. Soon, other dances, including the “Turkey Trot” and the “Bunny Hug,” influenced fashion on both sides of the Atlantic.

The dictatorship of the corset also waned as a new undergarment—the brassiere—was developed, which, instead of holding the breasts up from below, lifted them with straps from above. Originally designed for home wear only, a model that has a modern appearance was being sold in France by 1907. By the 1920s, bras could be found that were devoid of boning and other constrictions and left the midriff free. During this same period, the high Edwardian neckline gave way to a more relaxed round one followed by the appearance of the Peter Pan collar and a shallow V-neck for daytime dress. In Europe, women actively joining the war effort hastened the change toward more comfortable and looser attire. The tight, straight skirt was abandoned for fuller lines without crinolines, which permitted easier movement; and a less constricted bodice accompanied the wearing of brassieres instead of long corsets. Soon, French magazines suggested a new ideal of beauty that contrasted sharply with the plump woman of the past. She was young and thin: “At present the thin woman seduces us with her disquieting and alert glamour. . . . Nothing rejuvenates like thinness, and . . . youth is a priori thin” (Steele 1985, 230).

The ideal of the twenties was as far from the earlier matronly ideal as a woman could get. She was young, thin, and childlike, with a shape that minimized the maternal bosom and dresses that exposed the legs just like little girls. “The twenties represent one of those historical anomalies when women sought to minimize their chests. Flappers strove for plank figures that would allow their long pearls to fall perfectly straight over their tunic-like dresses” (Yalom 1997, 176). Although the look has been characterized as boyish, it was really more youthful or girlish (Steele 1985). The silhouette was flat: no breasts, no waist, no hips. It was also a time when legs became a major fashion statement for the first time, with skirt lengths regularly rising and falling every few years. Slim was in. The fashionable ideal was designed for and reflective of youth. The evaluation of physical attractiveness now concentrated upon a woman’s face (on which she used a multitude of cosmetics), and her exposed legs, while the torso was presented as a more or less smooth cylinder. Some have suggested that as women got the vote and entered first the war and then the workplace in ever-greater numbers, fashion dictated a more androgynous look that instead of exaggerating secondary sexual characteristics suppressed them.
In the 1920s, corsets were replaced by lingerie that disguised the curves of the female form.

**ANONYMOUS, FRANCE**

Woman wearing lingerie, 1922
Gelatin silver print
5⅞" x 3⅛"
KI-PC: 186
Donated in 1959

But not all women were comfortable either physically or aesthetically with the flat girlish look and, as early as 1925, the first brassiere with the suggestion of natural curves and a separation of the breasts was produced. Breasts started their return to visibility before the end of the 1920s, and bras that shaped, separated, and lifted the breasts were
developed as this garment evolved from a flattener to a controller. By the 1930s, fashionable women embraced the underwear that has continued into the twenty-first century: the bra and panties. Natural curves were fashionable, and comfort and ease were important. Movie stars were sleek and sexy like Marlene Dietrich and Jean Harlow. In 1933, Esquire magazine introduced illustrations of the new ideal type drawn by George Petty. In addition to her slender flapper shape, the Petty Girl had firm rounded breasts with an absolutely flat stomach. But the real focus was her long, muscular, and shapely legs with calves flexed by high heels or pointed toes (Mazur 1986). Legs, which became clearly visible in the 1920s, didn’t disappear entirely beneath the calf-length skirts that characterized the 1930s. Short skirts for tennis and ice-skating, short shorts for cycling and other sports, and abbreviated swimsuits became more and more fashionable and acceptable. Flesh-colored stockings were seen on whatever length of leg was revealed by fluctuating hemlines. New fabrics caused a revolution in “control underwear,” while contours softened and figures became more natural. And after centuries of the worship of alabaster skin—emblem of the woman who didn’t have to work in the fields—sunbathing and the consequent tan became the sign of the person who did not have to work in a factory all day. The affluent could even have a tan in winter. The cult for open-air, sun-seeking activities encouraged the baring of skin as never before, with sleeveless dresses and clothing sporting necklines that revealed the throat, shoulders, and upper chest during warm-weather holidays.

The primary beauty focus of the 1940s was the leg. One of the most popular World War II pinups was Betty Grable, featured in a one-piece bathing suit exhibiting her “million dollar legs” for the camera, with her back turned as she looks over her shoulder. The re-emergence and steady increase of the bust also began in the early 1940s, as reflected in the drawings of Esquire’s new illustrator Alberto Vargas. He essentially enhanced the Petty silhouette with larger and larger breasts as the 1940s turned into the 1950s. Movie stars with idealized busts included Jane Russell, Rita Hayworth, and “sweater girls” like Lana Turner. Newly developed stitching techniques made possible the creation of the cone-shaped bra cup, and brassieres molded the modern breast into the shape of a torpedo- or bullet-head—separated, raised, and pointed. Since the ideal shape of this era was based on the “Hollywood rule, which requires that the bust measurement be one inch greater than that of the hips” (Yalom 1997, 177), padded bras first introduced in the mid-1930s, inset foam pads introduced in 1940, and even pneumatic inflatable bras became very popular.
While during the first half of the 1940s women took over much of the work of men who were overseas, and the wearing of trousers became acceptable, they were simultaneously wearing heavier makeup than had been the practice of "nice" women of earlier generations. Post-war, the curvaceous sweater girl remained the ideal of most Americans. Although the normally proportioned Marilyn Monroe (see pl. 19) was
to become the ascendant sex icon of mid-century, it was in the 1950s that the enormous bust was enthusiastically celebrated, as exemplified by women of extreme proportions, including Jane Mansfield and Anita Ekberg and the increasingly top-heavy Playboy models. At a British meeting of the Corset Guild, it was reported that three out of every four women were using something to enhance the size of their breasts. The unprecedented interest in large breasts may have been a reflection of society’s desire that women return to home and maternalism, as men returned to the job market.

The middle-class woman of the late 1940s and early 1950s was pushed out of the workplace and seduced back into the home by every available cultural force, from Doris Day movies and women’s magazines to the full energy of the advertising industry. In order to make room for the returning soldier, the marketing of marriage, motherhood, and homemaking to fill women’s lives was in full force when Sexual Behavior in the Human Female was published. The book’s information threatened the foundations of contemporary America’s societal demand for women to be married and to stay in the home. Conformity was the emphasis of the 1950s and “fashion images . . . were sharply age- and gender specific, such as the wife, the teen-ager, and the man in the gray flannel suit” (Steele 1985, 213). The overriding attitude of the media, and those with access to it, including politicians and celebrities, reflected the prevalent cultural belief in the naturally muted sexuality of the American woman at mid-century and the reimposed centrality of her traditional role in the home and society.

“Authorities” intoned their indignation by declaring that the “bold and brazen” who participated in the survey could hardly be representative of the “reticent, well behaved” (Palmer, Catholic News, 18 July 1953)—or in other words, the “average”—American woman. “Believe me, Dr. Kinsey,” lectured the prominent writer Kathleen Norris, “the women who told you of such girlhood and postmarital experiences were of an easily recognizable sort; the sort who wrote themselves letters from imaginary lovers in high school days and have gone right along into womanhood fabricating sensational affairs” (Life magazine, 24 August 1953).

The message of Kinsey’s critics, whether real, like anthropologist Margaret Mead or the actress Joan Blondell or a fictitious character like
GEORGE PLATT LYNES,
UNITED STATES

Woman in a wedding gown, for
Modern Bride, 1951
Gelatin silver print
9" x 7/";
KI-GPL: 374
Donated in 1954
Copyright © 2003
George Platt Lynes.
All rights reserved.

Lorelei Lee (“An imperturbable blonde partisan of soft lights and soft touches addresses a letter to the doctor and asks a few questions of her own” [New York Times, 30 August 1953]), in cartoons, or in Congress (the congressional record eventually included the comment of a congressman that Kinsey’s study of American sexual behavior was “paving the way for a communist take-over of the United States”), was usually the same—whomever were the subjects Kinsey reported on, these dreadful things couldn’t be true of the women we know and certainly not of us. Of course there were those, even in the popular culture, who recog-
nized the positive watershed of enlightenment regarding female sexuality that Kinsey’s book represented. Noted author Fannie Hurst (Life magazine, 24 August 1953) suggested that the female volume would lead to better understanding among the sexes. But as Hurst went on to report, “America still rocks with the novelty of it.”

By the time the youngest of the women included in the Kinsey volume were passing through adolescence, much of the artificial distortion of women's bodies into preferred but unnatural shapes—for the first time in 500 years—was largely at an end. However, what had been the responsibility of control undergarments was now replaced by the demand that women diet and exercise. It is important to remember that while the ideal woman's body shape changed dramatically between the 1840s and the 1950s—from fragile, delicate, and even sickly, with sloping shoulders; to a robust, heavy, curvaceous hourglass; to an S-shaped form with overhanging bosom; to one with a flat chest, no curves, and slender legs; and finally in the 1940s and 1950s, to one with a bosom that grew ever larger and legs that stretched longer—the bio-
logical woman underneath was essentially the same. With her body hidden or exposed, portions pushed forward or pressed back, enhanced or minimized, made rigid or released, the generations of women included in the Kinsey report were bombarded with imposed images, which could not fail to tempt women to see themselves accordingly.

As we consider the Kinsey volume and view the artworks exhibited in *Feminine Persuasion*, it behooves us to remember that what is judged sexy and beautiful, how women are perceived by artists, scientists, men, and the culture at large, and how they view themselves, is reflected in the mirror of contemporaneous fashion. When attempting to decipher the cultural forces that shaped the women who answered Kinsey’s questions, understanding how the ideal woman was envisioned in each era can be enormously revealing and helpful. Saintly or naughty, matronly or girlish, the visible outside likely affected the feelings inside, as the image in public likely influenced behavior in private. Exploring the ideals of perceived womanhood in the one hundred years during which the subjects in *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* lived enriches and deepens our understanding of Kinsey’s revolutionary findings.

**Readings and References**
