

SWIMSUITS ILLUSTRATED

by Anne Hollander

Like women's lives, women's swimsuits were repeatedly remodeled during the first half of this century. Unwilling to miss anything, photographers kept close watch, and a new pictorial genre came energetically and profitably to life. Although the female shape had been used in racy photographs since the beginning of photography, models were usually decked in stage trappings or else appeared in the artistic nude. Swimsuits were then so cumbersome that only stylized graphics could make them attractive, and wearing them made women look like heavily wrapped packages.

During the First World War women were urged to inspire and distract the boys as they marched off to battle or came home on leave. A new coquettishness began to affect female swimwear as daring exposures overtook everyday dress and corsets were abandoned. Collarbones and elbows, ankles and calves came into view on the street, and evening dresses, suspended by the thinnest of shoulder straps, bared even the armpit. On the beach, instead of fending off masculine attention with massive yardage, it now became entirely respectable, even a tinge patriotic, to begin cautiously to grat-

ify the searching male gaze, and with it the camera's greedy eye.

And so the bathing beauty was born, as American as apple pie and ultimately as remote from female active sport. The camera quickly shaped her and focused on her—in groups, in phalanxes, or most often piece by piece—and, along with the eager eyes of all the world, has not lost sight of her for a minute ever since.

Anne Hollander, an art historian, wrote about men's fashion in the December 1988 issue. She is the author of *Seeing through Clothes* (Viking Penguin) and *Moving Pictures* (Knopf).

Fashion disposes, the camera exposes. Here's what was new and exciting for half a century. It didn't seem quaint then.

1910s

Fashion muffled women's torsos in this first uncorseted decade. As waistlines thickened and breasts vanished, shoulders became more interesting, and legs a new sensation. Swimwear was designed for the public display of these liberties, not the free play of active bodies.

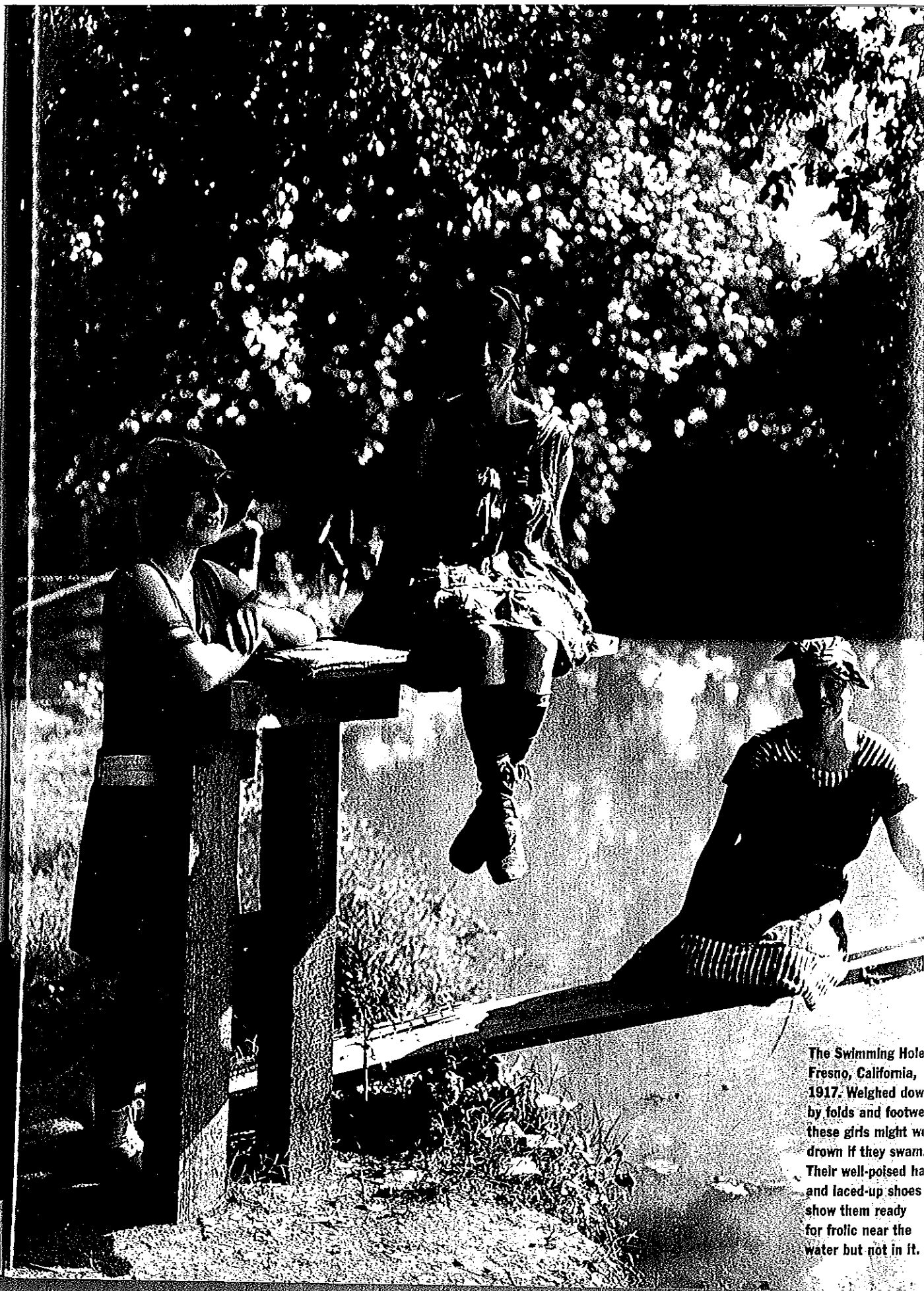
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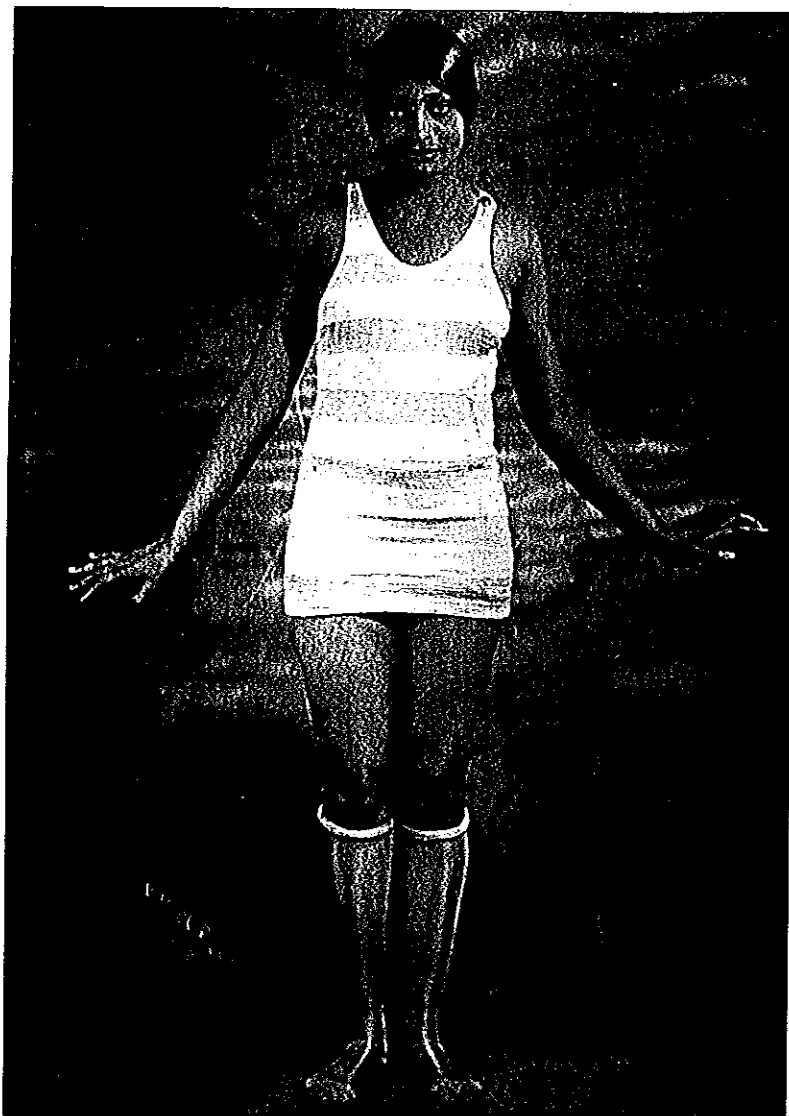
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This delicate beauty posed for the Harlem photographer James Van Der Zee in 1926. For all its modish brevity and cling, her swimsuit is the soul of modesty, and her

Image makes a striking foil to Josephine Baker's excesses of the same era. Only her glittering stockings suggest the hot beat of dance music, not the cool thunder of surf.

Skimpy dancing dresses set the tone for swimsuits. Women wore as little bulk as possible and really learned to move. Thighs came into view on the beach, and the natural lines of the body showed at last. A slim and unripe figure, stripped of both fat and fabric, now had the most appeal.



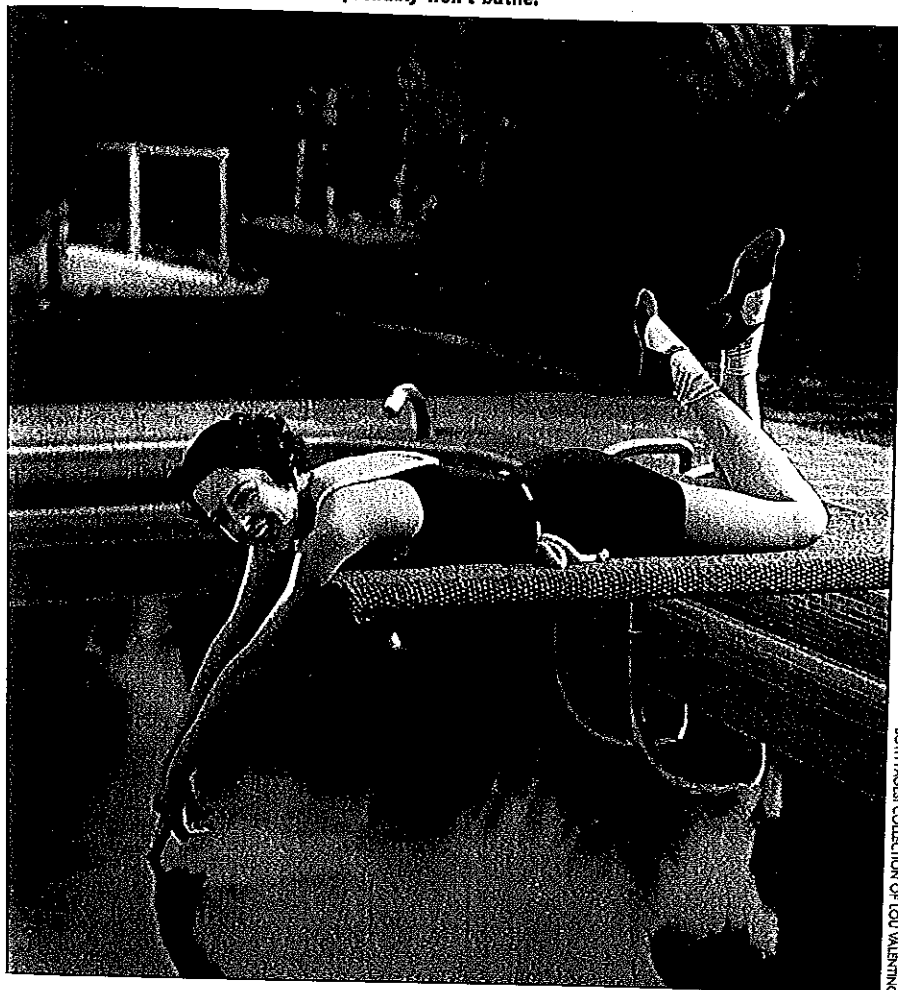
A redheaded stenographer named Virginia McRae was Miss Tampa for 1924. Although she takes a swimsuit pose on authentic sand, show-girl conventions

dictate her tinsel lace skirt and wired sequin hat. The rolled stockings, on the other hand, stand for real-life naughty exposure connected with neither the sea nor the stage.



The film star Colleen Moore shows a novel interest in actually entering the pool, two fingers at a time. Nautical rope at waist and neckline confirms

her watery purpose. Although sexy stockings have given way to jaunty socks, naked feet are still taboo, and the beauty probably won't bathe.



BOTH PAGES: COLLECTION OF LOU VALENTINO



1930s

Swimsuits finally suggested outdoor physical exertion and stopped imitating stage and ballroom styles. Close-fitting knits resembled athletic gear and permitted real swimming. The only theft from the evening dress was the daringly low-cut back, well adapted to the new fad for sun-bathing.



At last the swimsuit challenges the open sea. The actress Irene Rich and her two daughters coyly bare their backs for camera and spectators while bravely joining hands to breast the waves. Naked toes may grip the sand, but the water veils them.



Opposite: Both lips and breasts are lit for maximum shine in this early still of the young Rita Hayworth. Elastic satin for swimsuits ensured skintight fit and good highlights on every curve. One can see why "tomato" was an epithet then.

This *Life* magazine photo of the model Chili Williams was the hit of 1943 and, if demand is any indication, mightily inspired our fighting troops. Submitted by Williams's agent, Harry Conover, the picture

first ran small in the letters column. A deluge of requests brought it back several times, full-page size. A wholesome Venus rises smiling from the waves, hair damp and tousled, polka-dot top almost swept away.

1940s

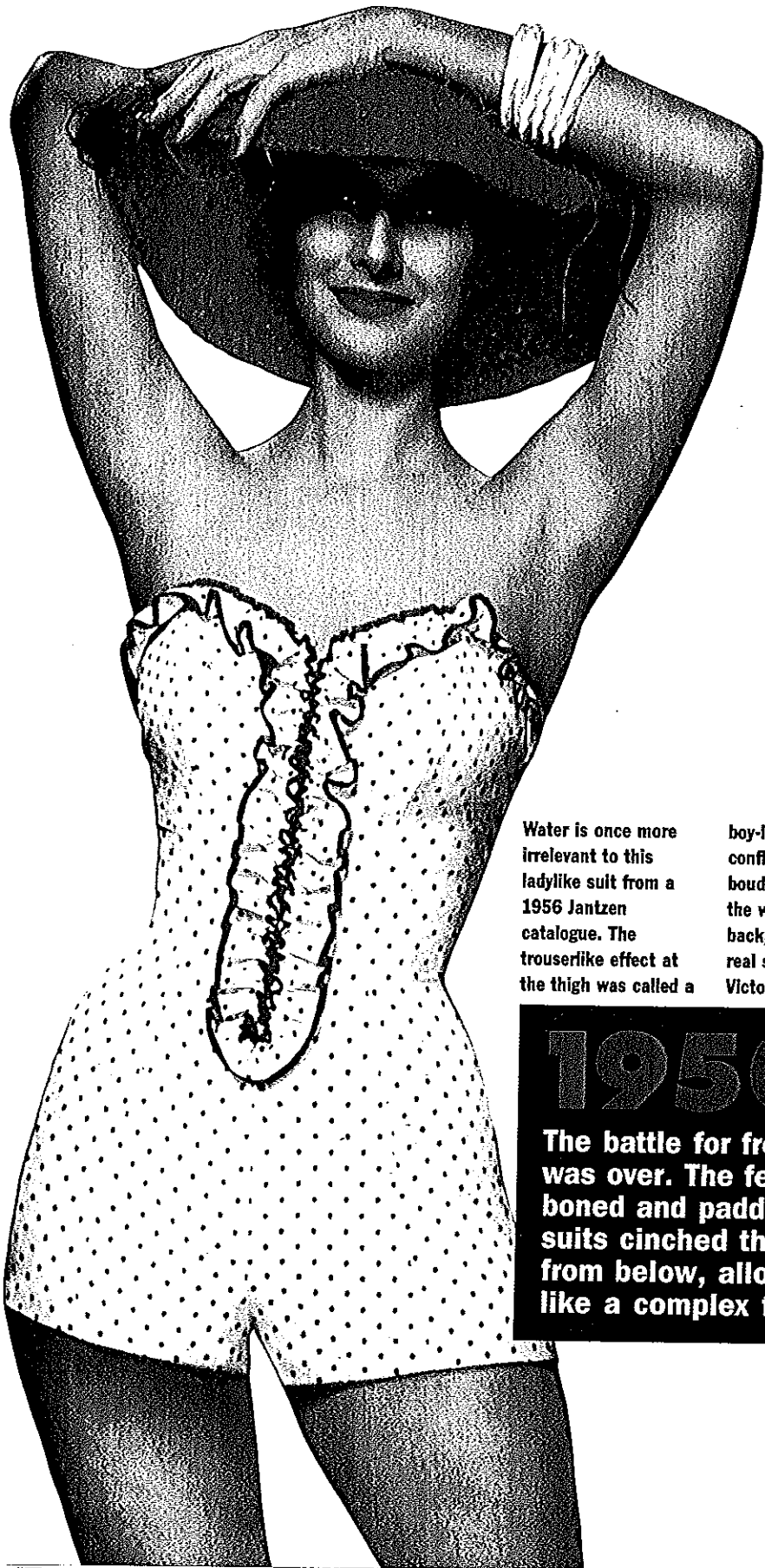
As the startling impact of visible legs began to diminish, the bosom reclaimed the center of attention. Swimwear designers molded the breasts with tucks and darts or clever shirring, while bathing beauties turned toward the camera and proudly arched their backs.

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Opposite: Marilyn Monroe posed for this publicity still in 1953, a triumphant American beauty swinging down to greet us from a rosy heaven. As in so many shots of her, tiny horizontal folds grip her in an embrace from which her bosom slithers up. The vestigial skirt and soaring heels suggest legs usually hidden by sweeping gauze, now unveiled for our delight. We can see that this nymph swims only in fire and air and never lies in the sun.

Water is once more irrelevant to this ladylike suit from a 1956 Jantzen catalogue. The trouserlike effect at the thigh was called a

boy-leg, in some conflict with the boudoir ruffles above the waist. Hats were back, too, this time for real shade, as in Victorian days.

1950s

The battle for freedom of movement and display was over. The female torso became a rigid icon, boned and padded as in the last century. Swimsuits cinched the waist and supported the bust from below, allowing the upper body to emerge like a complex fleshy flower from a stiff calyx.

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