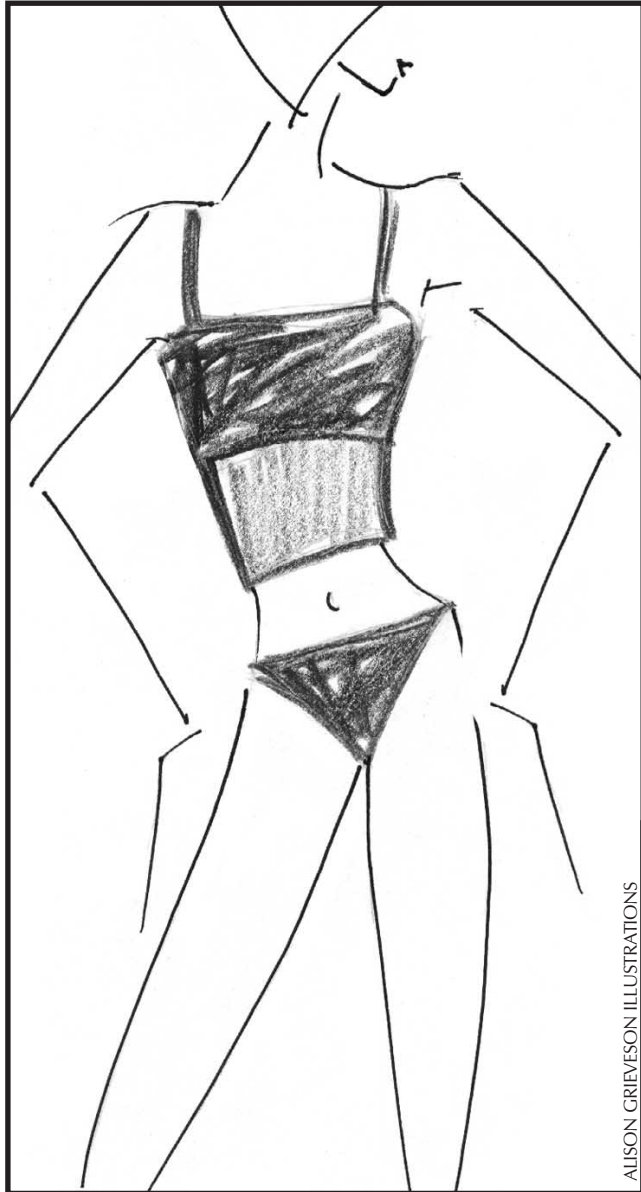


Lights, Dressing Room, Tears

Buying a bathing suit is an annual nightmare

By Christine Stuart



ALISON GRIEVESON ILLUSTRATIONS

This cool May has saved many women from the ordeal of shopping for a bathing suit, but the sun is beginning to peak through the clouds and that means we'll all have to show some skin sooner or later. While there isn't much anyone can say to ease the embarrassment of trying on lycra under the fluorescent lights in a dressing room—your image bounces back at you three unpleasant ways—there is hope.

That hope doesn't lie in the hands of fate or miracle weight loss. There are, instead, sane ways to approach the task.

This season interest in catering to women's many physiques is hitting a high point as designers have begun catering to the physique of the average woman in stores and on the Internet. The Internet is a good place to start, because you don't have to make a public spectacle of your self, and because some sites offer sympathetic advice on problem areas such as the bust, hips, waist and legs. The virtual goddesses of advice suggest suit cuts that flatter. For instance, to make hips look more trim, try to select a suit that's lighter from the waist up and darker below, and with a high leg. If excess cleavage is the issue, make sure to pick a suit with a built-in bra (a very popular addition this year) or underwire. Among the best Web sites for narrowing down those problem areas with the perfect cut are <www.landsend.com> and <www.swimwear-unlimited.com>.

Cynthia Raffa-Rickman, fashion stylist for the *Sally Jesse Raphael* show out of New York, says most of the women she has worked with on the show this season love Land's End because they could get the advice they needed and the suits

were cut to be flattering.

"The tankini and the racer back are the two most popular cuts this season," says Raffa-Rickman, before adding, "The women I worked with had never worn a two piece before the tankini."

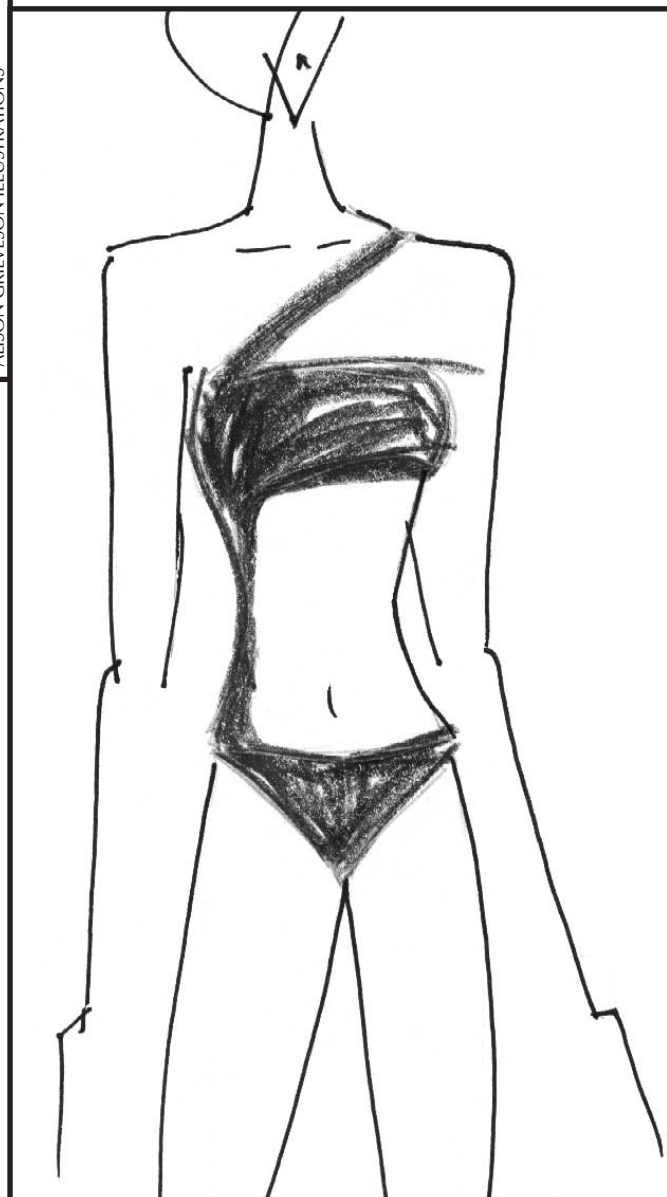
The tankini, which is a long tank-like shirt with spaghetti straps, let women feel sexy—showing a little bit of bellybutton—but cover up enough to let the wearer feel confident. The racer back, on the other hand, is a full piece suit with a zipper down the front.

"The racer back points attention to the back and hides the hips," she says.

Suits to avoid at all costs, if hips are an issue, are those without high legs. "I know women don't like when the leg cuts like maternity underwear. Women like the leg to go up high because when it cuts across the hip it makes you look bulky," Raffa-Rickman says.

Indeed, looking bulky is something most women spend a lifetime avoiding. Raffa-Rickman suggests that even if a woman is ten pounds overweight she can't get away with a two-piece. Another no-no for heavier women? This season's popular large flower prints. "They make you look heavier. Your safest bet would be a solid color. There are some great '70s colors like sea greens and sunshine yellows out there this season," she says. In fact the only embellishment to the more athletic style suits this year is color.

This year's designers have looked to the bathing suit's history for inspiration. The first bathing suit was created by an Australian woman named Annette Kellerman. Kellerman start-



**"I'd rather go to the dentist."
—Carol Dean Krute**

ed swimming at an early age because her legs were weak and bowed, and she used braces to walk. Her swim suit was a black woolen body suit (it was illegal in those days to show off any piece of your body from neck to ankles). In 1907 she swam the Thames River in London and got arrested for wearing a suit that was practically sleeveless and ended a good two inches above the knee.

After World War I, the clinging one-piece, similar to Kellerman's scandalous suit, became popular. This costume didn't last long and by 1946 the itsy-bitsy bikini made its first splash on Parisian runways. Designer Louis Reard used only 30 inches of fabric on the first bikini and named it after the Bikini Islands where a nuclear device went off four days before he unveiled it. Reard's bikini was so small that no Parisian models would wear it on the runway.

But the swimsuit owes the attention it enjoys to the Olympics. Historian Patricia Campell Warner argues in an article from *Dress* magazine, "Women's struggle to participate in sports of any kind has been linked to dress and appearance." If the women swimmers in the 1920 Olympics had worn the heavy dresses called "bathing costumes"—a black knee-length, puffy sleeved wool dress with bloomers, long black stockings and special lace-up footwear—no amount of training would have helped them excel.

After the 1920s, there was a swimming craze, with Hollywood embracing the bathing beauty. "Glamour photography and the aura of Hollywood confirmed the beauty of swimwear, even as it approached and became the pinup costume for the stars as likely or unlikely as Jean Harlow, Rita Hayworth, Barbara Stanwyck, Esther Williams and Marilyn Monroe," write Richard Martin and Harold Koda in *Splash! The History of Swimwear*.

So the purpose of the swimsuit changed. It wasn't just about swimming any more. It was about being seen. "To be sure, we all know of those who dress for the beach or pool and for the eyes of beholders, never intending to get wet. The division and hedonism of swimming is the individual's personal gratification; the spectatorship surrounding swimming is the reciprocal gratification of viewer and viewed," write Martin and Koda.

And that reciprocal gratification—the being looked at that is so much a part of the swimsuit—is what makes shopping for one so delicate. "I'd rather go to the dentist," says Carol Dean Krute, curator of costume and textiles at the Wadsworth Atheneum.

"There are like 50,000 body types out there and there is a suit for everyone," Raffa-Rickman promises.

But first and foremost be realistic, she cautions. Women—believe it or not—have the tendency to exaggerate when it comes to their body size. If you must, take an honest friend.

Decide how you will use the suit, whether it's for babysitting the kids poolside or swimming three times a day. And remember every year it's time for a new one. "I've been told by quality control people that bathing suits last for 16 wearings. After that, the fibers start to break down," said Katlean de Monchy, a New York fashion consultant in an interview with the *Tampa Tribune*.

The tankini Raffa-Rickman raved about is all over the place this year and can be matched with the traditional bikini bottoms or the boy-cut bottoms, that look a lot like hot pants. The boy-cut bottoms have been around for a few years now and have become popular with stores like J.Crew and Old Navy that allow customers to mix and match tops and bottoms. The mix-and-match approach is a little kinder to those women who are top heavy with skinny waists and hips and also those who don't have busts.

Just be careful picking the bottom. The boy-cut works best for those who are bottom heavy and not very hippy. Of course, the one-piece suits are both utilitarian and flattering to almost all shapes and sizes, so never rule them out.

The best tip, though, is to leave yourself plenty of time because there's no such thing as trying on just ONE suit. Happy hunting, beach babes. ■