



Our Bathing Suits, Ourselves

BY TRACEY KENNEDY

SUN, SAND, SURF and heavy woolen swimsuits. Sounds like a contradictory statement, but it wasn't in Victorian times. Swimming suits were more like sinking suits, with men's trunks weighing as much as 9 pounds (that's a baby) when wet and women's (we always have the heavier load, don't we?) weighing as much as 30 pounds, including lead weights sewn inside the bottom of the skirts to prevent the bathing costumes from riding up, giving onlookers and fellow — or feminine — bathers immodest peeks of flesh.

Thank *gawd*, today women only worry about dieting instead of dying before they don their suits.

Visitors to the *Life's a Beach* exhibit, which opened last week at The Mariners' Museum in Newport News, have the opportunity to literally walk down a wooden boardwalk and witness the evolution of the bathing suit — and our own cultural psyche — from complete cover-up (the above-mentioned costume) to a statement of undress (the thong). The more comfortable we have become with our bodies, nudity and showing naked flesh, whether it's the chest or calf, the less fabric our suits have had. Through all things swimwear (advertisements, quotes and the suits themselves), we see a visual history of beach culture — the "beach life" as a lifestyle.

"The design of the swimsuit traces the evolution of the beach from a place of healing to recreation," comments Tom Moore, Senior Curator of Photography at The Mariners' Museum.

This fun and bright show — a complete and welcome contrast to the museum's serious maritime exhibits (you walk through a dimly lit room with dark blue walls to get to the fun-in-the-sun *Life's a Beach*) — proves that exhibits can be light and still be packed with learning that appeals to both young and old.

Justin Lyons, Public Relations Director for museum, explains that they, "wanted to do something fun and different, providing something to an audience that doesn't usually

A new exhibit at the Mariner's Museum explores beach culture history — including that most mercurial fashion feature... the swimsuit.

come." (This thinking worked; the show opened on June 2 to much fanfare: 1,300 people, including about 500 to 600 members, attended, which Lyons points out, rarely happens for other exhibit openings.)

Fun and different is exactly what *Life's a Beach* is. You'll want to kick off your shoes, wiggle your toes in the sand (you can't have a boardwalk without sand, can you?) and dive right into the visually stimulating and interactive exhibit: see the tiny — and signed — piece of red Lycra that amazingly and defiantly fit Pamela Anderson's voluptuous assets (the suit is 75/100; bought from Startifacts); sit in a cabana (all the props were made in-house, including an

Life's a Beach
The Mariner's
Museum
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impressive wave wall) while watching clips from the '60s beach movie couple — teen idol Frankie Avalon and former Mouseketeer Annette Funicello; or touch the interactive screen at the wave wall to test your surfer speak.

And let's not forget the best part — the swimming suits. The admirable collection, largely on loan from Jantzen (the company who became known for their trademark slogan, "The suit that changed bathing to swimming" and whose red swimsuit clad diving girl became the eighth most widely recognized logo in the world), dots the walls, seemingly floating behind sheets of Plexiglass, that are — this is the best part — open on the sides so you can not only see the past, you can touch it (leaving no doubt those wool trunks would have been pretty itchy).

The swimsuit retrospective begins with the modest Victorian suits that Moore aptly puts were more for, "parading than paddling," and continues to modern-day suits, including the takini (hmmm...is modesty going to make a come-

back?). Fashion is a reflection of culture; it captures the world at a specific moment in time. You can see it in the 1920s boyishly designed swimsuits for women that mirrored men's. In this era of flappers and suffragettes, women's fashions followed a linear form, de-emphasizing curves, especially breasts. There are no bra-like, padded tops. The '40s saw new fabrics such as rayon, the addition of wires and

plastic to alter the shape of the suit and a departure from a linear figure to a woman's figure, albeit a torpedo-shaped chest with a "trimmed" waist and hips. The suits, especially the two-piece (not the bikini, though it was born in France in 1946) are cloth representations of innocent Varga girls. Meanwhile, youth culture pervaded the '60s (freedom for love, body, swimsuit) and the bikini rebellion began. The '60s also saw saccharine-

sweet beach culture invading movies and music — this was the decade of "Beach Blanket Bingo" and "Itsy Bitsy Teenie Weenie Yellow Polkadot Bikini."

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