

An Intimate Affair: Women, Lingerie, and Sexuality.* Jill Fields. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. 392 pp.

Reviewed by Leigh Summers

An Intimate Affair: Women, Lingerie, and Sexuality is a well-titled book. Like any good affair it is not encumbered with too much detail and it is laced with enough theory to assure readers that a meaningful relationship is at least implied. The book has its flaws, principally involving missed opportunities by the author to read and interrogate her rich illustrations, and a tendency to avoid linking her fascinating research back to its central topic. The book is also marred a little by the author's tendency to jump back and forth across decades where a more straightforward chronological approach to the material would have lent more clarity to her arguments.

Consequently *An Intimate Affair* is a broad and sometimes sweeping interrogation of the intimate apparel favored by women in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Occasional diversions into areas not particularly relevant to the subject weaken the book, but it still has much to offer curators of costume, fashion historians, and those readers whose interests lie in the construction and articulation of sexual desire as it is expressed in material and popular culture. Readers who are interested in trade union history and female activism will enjoy Jill Fields work, particularly her chapter titled "The Production of Glamour." This chapter reveals the early 20th century battles (frequently led by women) to reform an industry remarkable in the early 20th century for its 60-hour working week, abysmal wages and child labor. It also unpacks the differences between the "white goods" industry, being corsetry and allied garments, and the more glamorous fashion industry.

An Intimate Affair is certainly worth reading. Fields' chapter "Corsets and Girdles" is patient, detailed, and well researched. The chapter diligently unpacks the changing styles of corsetry from 1900 to the mid 20th century using good illustrations. The impact of changing dress codes and the influence of the tango on corset design are explained. However, it is Fields' research and analysis of early 20th century trade journals that stands out in this chapter. Using these journals Fields unearths the discourses devised and propelled by manufacturers and retailers to promote corset sales at a time when it was thought (erroneously) that women were eschewing the garment. These discourses were strategically and cleverly devised to appeal to a broad section of women and founded on flimsy socio-scientific theories that played on female body image anxieties; imbued with subtle and overt threats that racial degeneration might occur without sufficient corsetry. As Fields correctly points out these discourses were infused by ideologies of domination reflecting broader existing structures of control. As the author also points out, women were not uninformed naive consumers. Retailers and manufacturers recognized that their customers were sentient human beings and invested trade literature with quasi medico-scientific jargon in an attempt to quell the "corsetless evil." Fields' discussion regarding the training of

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corsetieres, the establishment of figure classification schemes, and the impressive profits that corsetry generated for department stores also makes for fascinating reading.

Fields' chapter on brassieres is just as convincing; however, she asserts that the brassiere was a 20th century device. This is not strictly the case. Patents logged in the late 19th century indicate several designers were refining the garment although it did not find popularity until the 20th century. While the chapter on brassieres is interesting the author missed a valuable opportunity to interrogate issues of race, class and sexuality in her examination of an advertisement for Exquisite Form brassieres (p. 96). The advertisement, originally published in *Ebony* (a mid 20th century magazine targeting a black readership), featured four photographic subjects in portrait format. Underneath each portrait was a photograph of an individual bra type, implying at first glance that the subjects depicted above preferred the bra positioned below. Of these four subjects three were black women, the forth, curiously, was a black man.

The advertisement is made even more puzzling because (historically) men generally appear in advertisements for women's underwear as either obvious voyeurs or supposedly "refined" arbiters of good taste. The African American male subject in the Exquisite Form advertisement is inserted into the "line up" of portraits as if he too wore a brassiere. Text within the advertisement is too small to read and thus the relationship between the male subject and the brassiere below him is unclear. Significantly, the brassiere beneath the black male subject is jet black while those below the female subjects are white. The black brassiere glistens and shines. Is this a reference to the presumed hyper sexuality of the black male? Fields has disappointingly not questioned the use of the black male subject preferring to comment on the number of styles and the promises of "wonderful support" and "smart lines" used in the advertising copy (p. 96).

A similar lack of interrogation of an important image occurs in the chapter titled "The Meaning of Black Lingerie." The photograph of a scantily clad Marlene Dietrich in a wide open-legged pose next to a large (meter high) "primitive" mask with gaping mouth and jagged teeth (p. 121), immediately brings notions of vagina dentata to the fore, but this most obvious connection between female genitalia and the construction of a deadly female erotic is not made. The film *Blond Venus* from which this still is taken was made in 1932. Fields asserts convincingly that the 1920s and 1930s were critical years in the establishment of the eroticism of blackness and its commodification by white women via black lingerie. This is a rich chapter but it is flawed by Fields' partial use of work by key theorists including Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Georges Bataille to substantiate her own ideas. She does not integrate these theories sufficiently into her own material.

I would also dispute Fields' discussion of John Singer Sargent's controversial painting *Madame X*, which was painted in 1884 and hung in the Paris Salon of that year. Fields claims that critics were outraged by both the amount of flesh revealed in the painting and the morbid skin tones used by the artist. This is only very partially true. The portrait of *Madam X* was deemed scandalous because the artist originally painted one of the evening gown's slender, bejeweled straps not on the sitter's shoulder, but dangling provocatively over her upper arm. This small but socially devastating wardrobe malfunction transformed readings of the sitter from elegant society beauty to fallen woman or outright prostitute. The painting was withdrawn because the shoulder strap, not the color of the garment (or sitter's skin tone), offended moral sensibilities. Implored

by the distraught sitter's mother (who was deeply concerned for her daughter's damaged reputation) Singer Sargent repainted the work restoring the offending shoulder strap to its "correct" and decorous position. The shoulder strap is not mentioned by the author. (See Gibson 1997 for this history.)

An Intimate Affair is a composite of history and theory that does not always meld. However the author's wide-ranging approach has enabled her to encompass material that will be of interest to many readers. The text stands as a useful addition to the increasing body of work that uses fashion in general and underwear in particular as a useful optic on the position of women in the 20th century.

Reference Cited

Gibson, Clare

1997 Sargent. London: Saturn Books.

Historian Leigh Summers is currently Director of Coffs Harbour Regional Gallery and Museum in NSW, Australia. She has worked across the museum and gallery sector for over a decade. She is author of Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset (New York: Berg, 2001) and articles focussing on the body, dress and sexuality. Her current research involves the crinoline in Australia and the Pacific.