



# BIKINI STORY

Patrik Alac



Author:  
Patrik Alac

Layout:  
Baseline Co. Ltd  
61A-63A Vo Van Tan Street  
4<sup>th</sup> Floor  
District 3, Ho Chi Minh City  
Vietnam

© Confidential Concepts, worldwide, USA  
© Parkstone Press International, New York, USA  
**ImageBar** [www.image-bar.com](http://www.image-bar.com)

All rights reserved.  
No part of this publication may be reproduced or adapted without the permission of the copyright holder, throughout the world. Unless otherwise specified, copyright on the works reproduced lies with the respective photographers, artists, heirs or estates. Despite intensive research, it has not always been possible to establish copyright ownership. Where this is the case, we would appreciate notification.

ISBN: 978-1-78042-951-9

Patrik Alac

# BIKINI STORY

### Acknowledgments:

The brands: diNeila, Lenny Swimwear, RiodeSol and Pain de sucre.

Special thanks to Neila Granzoti Rudden for her postscript, and her extensive advice concerning the selection of photos.

# CONTENTS

Introduction	7
The Birth of the Bikini	19
From Scandal to Scandal	47
The Frontiers of Imagination	71
The Bikini and the Cinema	109
The Conditioning of the Body	169
The New Freedom	197
Epilogue: The Beach as an Arena for Social Liberty	229
Postscript	244
Bibliography	254
Credits	255





# INTRODUCTION



The beginning of a new millennium – let alone a new century – simply demands a quick but thorough look back at the past hundred years. Different outline sketches of the history of the twentieth century might all too quickly resort to headline-style formulae about “a century of war and terrorism”, “a century of barbarism”, and omit any mention of a great number of events and triumphs that should be rightfully regarded as entirely positive. These might seem to have been of secondary significance in relation to more sombre events, but they certainly cannot be

---

Photo of Coney Island at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The holiday resort regarded by some as “Sodom by the Sea” seems to be living up to its reputation as these five ladies lift their skirts in the style of a dubious rendition of the French can-can. They are wearing swimming costumes that cover the entire body with the exception of the arms. It is interesting to note how many layers of material are involved. Over a woollen body-stocking a short pair of trunks is held in place by straps at the thighs; on top of which is the bathing costume proper. The Rubenesque proportions of the carefree dancing girls are typical of their time.

excluded if our historical round-up of a hundred years is to retain its proper balance, if it is to be truly historical, and not be reduced to checklists of damage and destruction, of wars and disasters alike and their cost of lives and property, of the numbers of casualties, and of the people, places, and things that are now as if they had never been.

Made possible by the decline of prudish Christianity, the return of the human body to a status in which it could once more be looked at and admired is surely one of these positive events. The process of liberalisation began at the end of World War II and eventually extended across the entire Western world. It was paralleled by moralising court judgments and injunctions against it, many of them relying on ancient laws well overdue for repeal – and was decisively assisted by the invention of the bikini.

Measurement of the effect of this new culture of the body has, itself, become a basis of scientific theory. It is often a level of “dress formality” that represents a means of establishing precisely where on the equivalent scale of personal liberties a given society has reached. In another sense, dress formality (or the lack of it) is no more than a very old – and very elementary – method of communication between people.





Jenna Pietersen on the beach with a *Canail* bikini of **Pain de sucre**. Photo: Éric Deniset, 2009.

Golden orange bikini of **Pain de sucre**, 1990. Model: Sonia, Fam agency, Paris. Photo: Delavigne.

Besides indicating class, rank, and social status, clothes since the 1960s have also had ideological implications. It is interesting in this regard that even something that bears no resemblance at all to an official uniform may, nonetheless, become the equivalent of a uniform for one group or another. At the head of such revolutionary sartorial tendencies – with one or two scandals to celebrate its birth, and one or two outbursts of moral outrage to celebrate its coming of age – proudly stands the bikini.

Another aspect of the upheavals since 1945 may be grasped all the better in the light of the words “consumer demand and mass communications” used to betoken the totality of social activities. A history lesson on the bikini would at once point out the importance of the combination of saleable goods and the benefits of advertising following World War II. It should perhaps be recalled that it was during a time of economic depression that the bikini was launched and the cinema re-launched. At the beginning of the 1950s, film directors made a lot of the “almost nude” look of the itty-bitty bathing costume in the hope of attracting ever more customers to their auditoriums. The popularity of the films they produced was, in turn, utilized by the designers of bikinis as a showroom to display their latest creations. It was possible to foresee the day of the publicity film-clip which had everything: goods that people wanted, described with attractive enthusiasm, all done artistically.

All the same, the spread of “the smallest swimsuit in the world” did not follow solely from the newly liberalized social perception of the human body but relied on the application of that perception to the realm of women’s fashions. Anorexia and other eating disorders, the fanatical pursuit of sport and of bodybuilding, are only the latest manifestations of the changed vision of the human body that began in the 1950s – first as a new freedom, and then, for some, as a new norm that required discipline or constraint.

All those aspects that might be included in the traditional history books are equally and demonstrably allied to the evolution of the bikini.

This book tells the story of the bikini – its birth in a Parisian swimming-pool in the course of a stiflingly hot July afternoon in 1946, the scandal that followed (which relegated the bikini for ten years to the pages of illustrated magazines for men), its astounding breakthrough onto the cinema screen, the interest that it suddenly aroused in the fashion-houses, and finally its triumphant and eventually universal appearance on beaches the world over. For, from Brazil to the Mediterranean via the sandy stretches all along the Californian coast, the bikini has become an irreplaceable part of our aquatic recreational landscape.

It may be brightly coloured, multi-coloured, or a simple single colour; it may be made of expensive material, of cotton or Lycra; it may spread across the hips or leave them largely bare with just a thong or string at the back; or it may consist of no more than brief triangles, like leaves that have somehow gotten stuck on the skin. Alternatively, it may be designed strictly for effect and present a veritable barricade over the breasts. All of these forms are known and seen on a daily basis everywhere we go.

Comprising two pieces of fairly thin material, generally following a double-triangular design, it does not seem to hold much promise when seen dangling from a hanger. But on a woman, it undergoes an incredible transformation to behold! Those two pathetic bits of cloth you might have thought were only accidentally on the shop’s swimwear



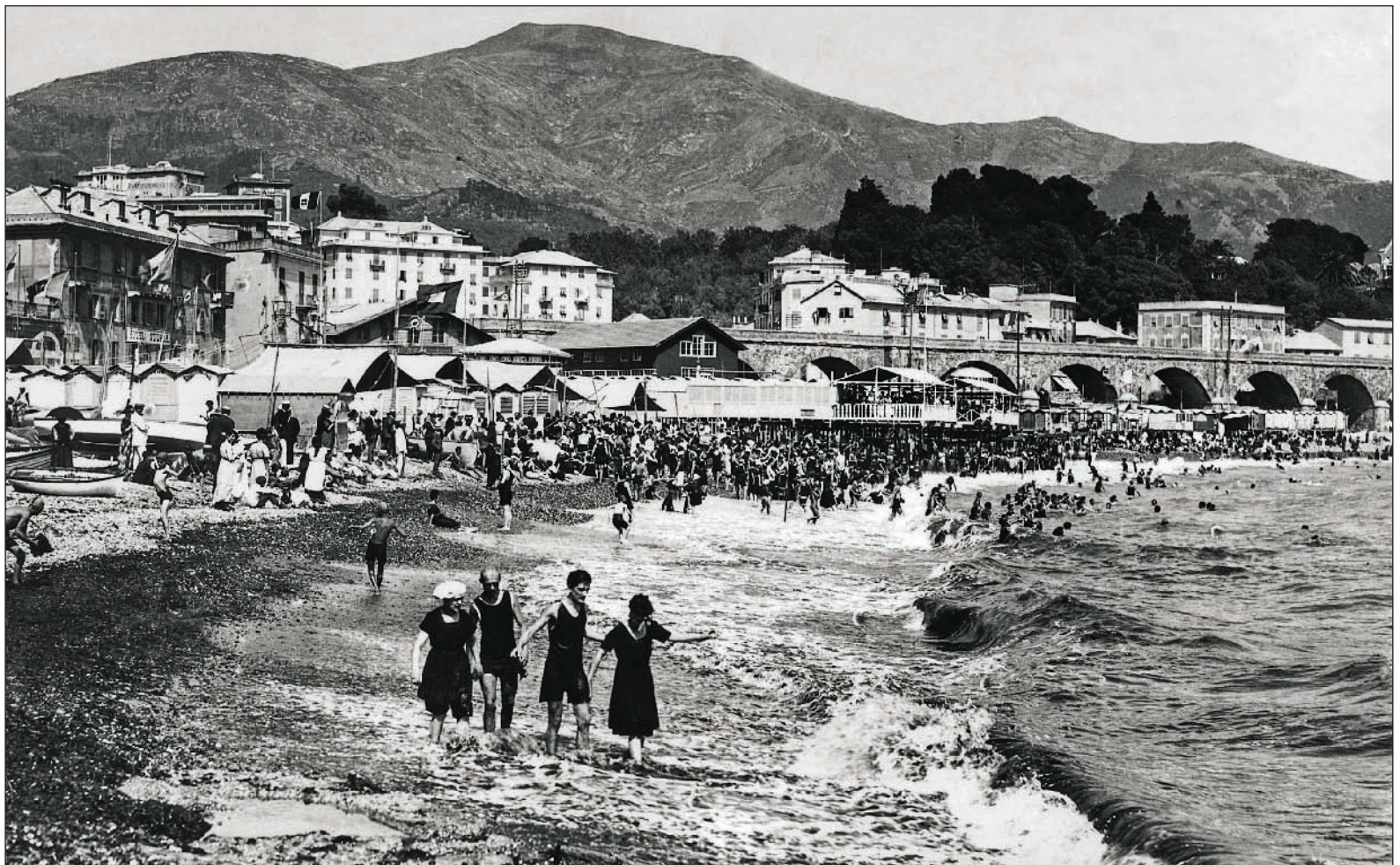






Another photo from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century shows the American holiday resort of Coney Island and a group of happy bathers. The women are wearing swimsuits that resemble nightshirts. Most often deep blue with white stripes (a colour scheme that was widely used, especially in beach costumes for boys) in spirals, vertical lines or horizontal hoops. Such costumes extended down to the calves of the legs.





A beach in northern Italy between Genoa and Santa Margherita Ligure around 1900. In the foreground are two couples walking at the water's edge. The men are wearing dark-coloured costumes not unlike sportswear, while the women's swimsuits are longish, reaching down to the knees. In the background are the crowds who have thronged to the semicircular beach of the bay – a scene that remains much the same today. To the right are the heads of a few swimmers, and to the left at the back is a complex of beach huts and entertainment tents.





shelf suddenly change in form and dimension as if someone has breathed life into them. These patches of material on the skin are all at once points of interest, ornaments, even statements. The bikini reveals as much as it clothes, an image which fills many male observers with enthusiasm at the sight of such a transformation.

There is virtually no other item of clothing linked with so many ideas, images, and preconceived impressions. For the bikini belongs to the mythology of today that shapes our concept of reality. In much the same way as the speed of a motorcar bestows on its driver an intoxicating sense of power, and indeed just as a gold credit card has the power to avail its possessor of infinite possibilities, the bikini represents a blank screen open to a person's imagination. When we acquire such things or begin to use them, some of the magic they have, the scope for imagination that we credit them with, rubs off on us and can change our lives forever.

---

Retouched photo dating from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century showing a temporary changing-cubicle. The lady in the middle has already changed, and now waits within the shelter of a shell-shaped structure for her lady-friend to change behind a curtain. A third woman, perhaps the mother, is still fully dressed on the right. She wears a hat and a neckerchief, and stands erect behind a chair holding a parasol. In the distant background, two other women are walking on the beach. The whole scene is undoubtedly staged very carefully to present a somewhat risqué view of the state of undress of the young lady who is changing. This could be classed as an erotic picture.

So when a woman wears a bikini, she is not simply dressed in any old bathing costume. On the contrary, she is wearing a magical thing, something that will transform her and turn her into someone else – like the magic wand in fairy tales. She becomes, you might say, an actress acting out her own life. For those new virtues bestowed on her by the bikini will take her into a world of new and hitherto unseen possibilities, nothing like the ordinary everyday world – a new world in which everything that should happen does happen, and happens as if destined to happen.

But for a bather in a bikini to be able to reach that world of new possibilities, she must find herself enough space to enable the metamorphosis to take place. Only then does the full range of possibilities become fully available to her. This special kind of space is to be found in what have already been described as “aquatic recreational landscapes” – the sands and beaches along the coasts of the continents: a strip of “space” consisting of an almost infinite number of shorelines and banks, where the rules and regulations that normally govern our lives may be put aside, their authority ignored.

Indeed, we all know this aquatic recreational landscape very well. It forms an irreplaceable part of all our lives. Yet, even for a swimsuit as dazzlingly wonderful as the bikini, the process of reaching that landscape and then becoming established in it was neither short nor straightforward.

The first bathers to compete for space on our beaches made their appearance at the end of the nineteenth century. Until that time the sea had been regarded as disturbingly dark and mysterious. So often extolled





by classical authors and poets, the sea had become almost entirely hidden in the murky and morbid world that was the medieval experience of human life. It represented the unknown and the perilous. Even to be near the sea was hazardous and unhealthy. People who lived on the coasts kept well clear of the edge, especially when building their houses, in order to be protected from “dangerous currents”, not to mention evil spirits.

This belief, that certain areas were injurious to health, lasted right up until the beginning of the twentieth century. It was always said, for example, that the Coliseum in Rome gave off “unwholesome vapours” – of which much was written by Stendhal in his *Promenades dans Rome*. Henry James’ *Daisy Miller* contained something similar: the eponymous heroine dies after a night of madness spent in an ancient amphitheatre.

The seaside was prescribed as treatment only for those suffering from incurable illnesses. On the periphery of the unknown, beyond what had long been presumed as the Edge of the World, the Abyss and the Void, it was not so much a seaside resort as a last resort. In much the same vein, during the seventeenth century to plunge head-first into the sea three times was held to be an efficacious remedy for rabies.

But during the nineteenth century, the genuine medical advantages of residence beside the sea began to be extolled. Salt water, well shaken until foamy, was declared to have health-giving qualities and prescribed for anaemia, nervous conditions, convalescence after fractures or sprains, asthma, and skin diseases. Such “cures”, however, were strictly science-based (as indeed was just about everything during the nineteenth

century), and a patient was required to follow very precise instructions as listed. You might thus be required, with your feet in water that was neither too shallow nor too deep and reasonably close to the beach, to practise lithe movements for precisely five minutes, and then to stride forward boldly until the water reached the level of your ears, and to remain in that position for as long as possible without moving. Having finally left the water, it would then be imperative to restore your badly slowed circulation by means of stretching exercises on the beach.

It is rather like what happened when public services began on the trains. Passengers were advised to protect themselves from being thrown around by the high speeds by strapping cushions on the stomach and back. Again it was a matter of protecting the body from the terrors of a new and unknown environment.

Costumes for bathing were first designed for practical use on the beach and in the sea. Initially, there was a great difference between

---

A group of ladies around 1910. They wear longish bathing costumes down to the knees – but these are costumes worthy of some outlandish festival with the evident variety of their colours and imagination. In the middle is a Santa Claus with white trimmings. On the left are two characters who might well be jesters at some medieval royal court. And further left is a striped dress meant to be a swimming costume. That there is a close connection between swimwear fashion and lingerie could hardly be made plainer. All the women are wearing shoes (the one fourth from the left seems even to be wearing boxing trainers) and tights.









beachwear and costumes for the swimming-pool or inland lake. The latter was modelled virtually precisely on items of clothing that were stitched together layer upon layer as worn by women at the end of the nineteenth century in a town or village.

Therefore, at that time, trips to the seaside were by no means necessarily associated with swimming. In any case, to enter the water at all usually meant no more than a headlong plunge before coming out again – literally a “quick dip”. This is why the first “bathing costumes” were as full and as ornate as everyday clothing, and designed to cover as much as possible. Another function was to keep the bather warm, whether on the beach or in the water, for which reason most

were made of thick material with insulating properties, such as cotton. Bathing costumes were certainly not meant for ogling.

Until World War I, the distance across the beach and into the water might be traversed in a “bathing machine”, a sort of changing-cubicle on wheels that was pushed into the water; the bather might then jump from it straight into “the sea”.

These photos clearly demonstrate how beach-wear fashion has changed since the early days. The need not to offend contemporary views on modesty, the difficulties of making bathing costumes in which it was actually possible to swim – these were the great problems that real creativity had to solve. At the same time it should be noted – in light

---

Bathers on the beach at Deauville around 1925. The swimming costume that looks like a long shirt reaching down to the hips is close-fitting and emphasizes the form of the body. The woman with the rather anxious air about her is slim and obviously quite different from the bathers of 1900. In the distant background it is possible to discern the sheets that had replaced wicker beach-chairs and voluminous beach tents. This is the beginning of the assault by the masses on beaches all over the world.

Beachwear fashion at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Six women gracefully adopt a uniform pose aboard a boat. They wear swimming-caps (one of

which is decorated with a feather) and one-piece costumes inspired by sportswear that was particularly fashionable at the time. With the right leg crossed over the left, they bring their hands together over their right knees. The costumes, which only just cover the thighs, clearly show the new minimalist tendency in swimwear fashion that was hereafter also to be seen in various sports. All six are wearing makeup – notably using lipstick to alter the shape of their mouths – including whitening their facial skin to contrast with their darkened lips, giving a doll-like look that is enhanced by the hair jammed under the swimming-caps and the rather fixed smiles. This is evidently a time when innocence had begun to be taken less seriously as the body might be revealed more and more openly.

miracles. Oakridge usine  
 le prépare aussi à devenir  
 le en fournissant à tous  
 d'Amérique, les nou-  
 des créés en masse pour  
 de maladies réputées

nération artificielle de la  
 A, que l'on réalisait autre-  
 ven des cyclotrons, porte  
 telles promesses que l'on  
 quelle est aussi capitale  
 roscope pour les recher-  
 ques et médicales, que la  
 ar la chimie et le spec-  
 ur la physique. La radio-  
 ificelle prendra autant  
 dans le monde de l'in-  
 dustrie des plastiques,  
 oue synthétique ou des  
 allages métalliques légers.

ations d'Hiroshima, les  
 neutrons et de rayons,  
 té un si grand nombre  
 de la ville et qui dans  
 Oakridge sont omis en  
 olusses servent à ce  
 substances qui deviennent  
 fenêtres poliques dans  
 le "protecteur" qui con-  
 sible, on introduit très  
 ent une petite boîte con-  
 tains à irradier. Il est alors  
 un bombardement si in-  
 tenses qu'il devient émet-  
 à leur. Transformé alors  
 une transportable de pa-  
 il a des utilisations en  
 chimie industrielles  
 haute importance ou en  
 applications médicales ex-  
 versées. Certains types de  
 guérissent soit par des  
 it par des neutrons. Du  
 devenu radioactif souve-  
 nant. De l'onde radioacti-  
 fier des affections de la  
 prostate et le strontium ra-  
 duit les tumeurs osseuses.

**ons bienfaisants**  
**cèlent nos maux**  
**us cachés**

pile est également em-  
 préparati des « tra-  
 il on mélange des corps  
 ec un corps auquel on a  
 pouvoir d'émission. Il lui  
 de sulfure sa trace avec  
 ur de Geiger. On peut  
 le cheminement d'un  
 n liquides dans un trajet  
 de pipes et de tuyaux  
 s et, dans une réaction  
 dans la métallurgie, dans  
 des métaux, la trace  
 composant auquel on a  
 omme une identification,  
 de rayonner son signal.

une véritable révolution, qui  
 onde de demain sur de nou-  
 La sensibilité du comp-  
 teur

La sentence de mort qui avait été  
 prononcée contre deux intellectuels juifs,  
 a été commuée et les Britanniques espé-  
 rent ainsi que les trois officiers allemands  
 pris et gardés comme otages seront libé-  
 rés en échange.

Cependant l'immigration clandestine  
 continue : quatre bateaux ont été aper-  
 çus au large des eaux territoriales espa-  
 gnolles, faisant route vers la Palestine.  
 Ce sont le R.R. « Atid » (Palestiniens),  
 le S.B. « Mont-Liban » (Français), le R.R.  
 « Amal » (Palestiniens) et le R.R. « Rich-  
 Point », d'origine inconnue, qui sont  
 officiellement surveillés par les autorités  
 maritimes.

**PISCINE MOLITOR**  
 VENDREDI 3 JUILLET, À 15 h. 30  
**GRANDE FETE**  
**FEMININE de L'EAU**  
 organisée par  
**LE SPORTING CLUB FEMININ**  
 sous le patronage de  
**« CINÉMONDE »**

**GRANDES COMPÉTITIONS**  
**SPORTIVES ET NAUTIQUES**

**FINALE DU CONCOURS**  
 de  
**LA PLUS JOLIE**  
**BAGNEUSE 1946**  
 pour l'attribution de la  
**COUPE REARD**

**GRANDE PRÉSENTATION PAR**  
**Les Vedettes du Théâtre**  
 et du Cinéma  
 avec l'autorisation de M. André  
**Les Maud Mansfield Girls**  
 du Casino de Paris  
**L'orch. Aimé COURTOUX**  
 du Casino de Paris

Places 100 et 200 fr. Locat. à Molitor,  
 à « Cinémonde », chez Reard, 47, r. Cléchy

**POUR TOUT DÉMÉNAGEMENT**  
**PARIS, PROVINCE, les tarifs**  
**CONFORT - TRANSPORT**  
 sont imbattables  
 42, rue d'Avron ROUILF  
 Paris, 20<sup>e</sup>, DOR. 71-00

**GEORGE**

1	451	8.000
	2.811	50.000
	3.731	50.000
	173.251	200.000
	180.041	300.000
2	003.192	400.000
	056.482	200.000
	052.162	300.000
	236.762	600.000
	297.312	200.000
3	23	300
	39.633	100.000
	215.673	600.000
	291.933	200.000
4	734	2.000
	60.604	100.000
	106.384	400.000
5	15	500
	33	300
	45	200
	6.945	30.000
	125.415	1.000.000
6	26	300
	04.026	100.000
	240.786	400.000
7	867	5.000
	25.187	100.000
8	8	300
	124.518	8.000.000
9	078.429	1.000.000
0	90	1.000
	052.460	300.000
	286.640	3.000.000

Prochain tirage : 10 juillet

**Un rôle en or**  
 Grande agitation ces jours derniers  
 les milieux du cinéma : on cherche  
 l'interprète d'une superproduction  
 de plus de dix millions. Le rôle  
 vedette féminin sera joué, fatale-  
 ment de toutes les convulsions. Qui va  
 l'être encore un secret, mais il n'est  
 pas facile de le cacher pas à pas  
 pour Vademeum.

Vademeum, le merveilleux an-  
 tiseptique, recommandé par un prix Nobel  
 de chimie, Vademeum est non toxique,  
 cosmétique, il tue les microbes, fr-  
 agoriques et parfums. Il agit  
 toutes résolutions dans un ver-  
 après brosseuse des dents : Vadem-  
 prodigieusement économique. F-  
 dans toutes les pharmacies et par  
 tous les grossistes.

**EXPOSITION A VISI**  
 Beaux  
**MOBILIERS**  
 OCCASIONS PAR MILLIE  
**SALLES DE VENT**  
 MONTMA

of these photos of an era now long gone - that it was at this point that the space of the beach began to be appreciated. The somewhat vaude-  
 villian elements of dress shown in the last of these pictures imply an  
 atmosphere of popular festivity appropriate to summer at the seaside.

Originally, the beach made no allowance for the separation of  
 people by class or type: its supposedly bracing virtues thus also  
 made it a place of unusual civil liberty. In time too, and equally  
 noticeable, the leisure industry - from which the tourist industry would  
 later stem - began to gain a foothold along the shoreline. The great  
 constructions several floors high on Coney Island, which dominate  
 the coastline like a sort of maritime Champs-Élysées on stilts, and the  
 masses of sun-seekers on the beach near Genoa behind which a  
 wild forest of tents has been erected, afford us an idea of what it  
 must have been like at the fumblingly improvised beginnings of our  
 aquatic recreational landscape.

But it is on the faces of those early bathers that the true purpose of  
 this newly constituted space is shown still more clearly. These are  
 smilingly joyful faces that might have been working for some publicity  
 agency. They are the extraordinarily striking evidence of the total

freedom of the beach as a place of pleasure and fun. They are proof  
 to us of the successful inauguration of a world in which only tranquillity  
 and the pleasures of relaxation reign.

Once World War I was over, all the conditions were set in place  
 for beach life as we know it today. A picture from 1925 shows a  
 woman in a fairly rudimentary one-piece costume sitting between two  
 lounge chairs at Deauville. The costume, which resembles a nightgown  
 raised to the level of the thigh, is designed for straightness of line in trim  
 following the contours of the body. But it does not yet reveal those contours.  
 The woman, who peers out at us somewhat anxiously, is slender and  
 looks quite different from the bathers of around 1900. In the  
 background it is possible to make out the slope of the beach on which  
 reclined chairs and beach-towels have replaced the crammed baskets  
 and tents. The invasion of the world's beaches by the masses has now  
 begun. The scene shown could very well - apart from the style of  
 clothing - be seen taking place at a coastal bathing-site (of any kind  
 at all) today. The accessories left unattended in the background - the  
 sandals and, a bit farther back, a bag, a towel, and a sunshade -  
 bear witness to a family excursion to the beach.

In no more than twenty years, going to the beach in this way was  
 to become a truly global phenomenon in which men and women of  
 every country and every language shared their passion for sea-bathing  
 and disporting themselves on the sands. It was also exactly twenty  
 years before the bikini would be born.

Public announcement of the contest of "Most Beautiful Swimmer", 1946.  
 At the time, readers could not have imagined how the bikini was going to  
 appear and alter mindsets.





The jam-packed Deligny Pool in Paris on July 2, 1958. Evidently, most of the people there are men. The few women present are wearing one-piece or two-piece costumes indiscriminately.



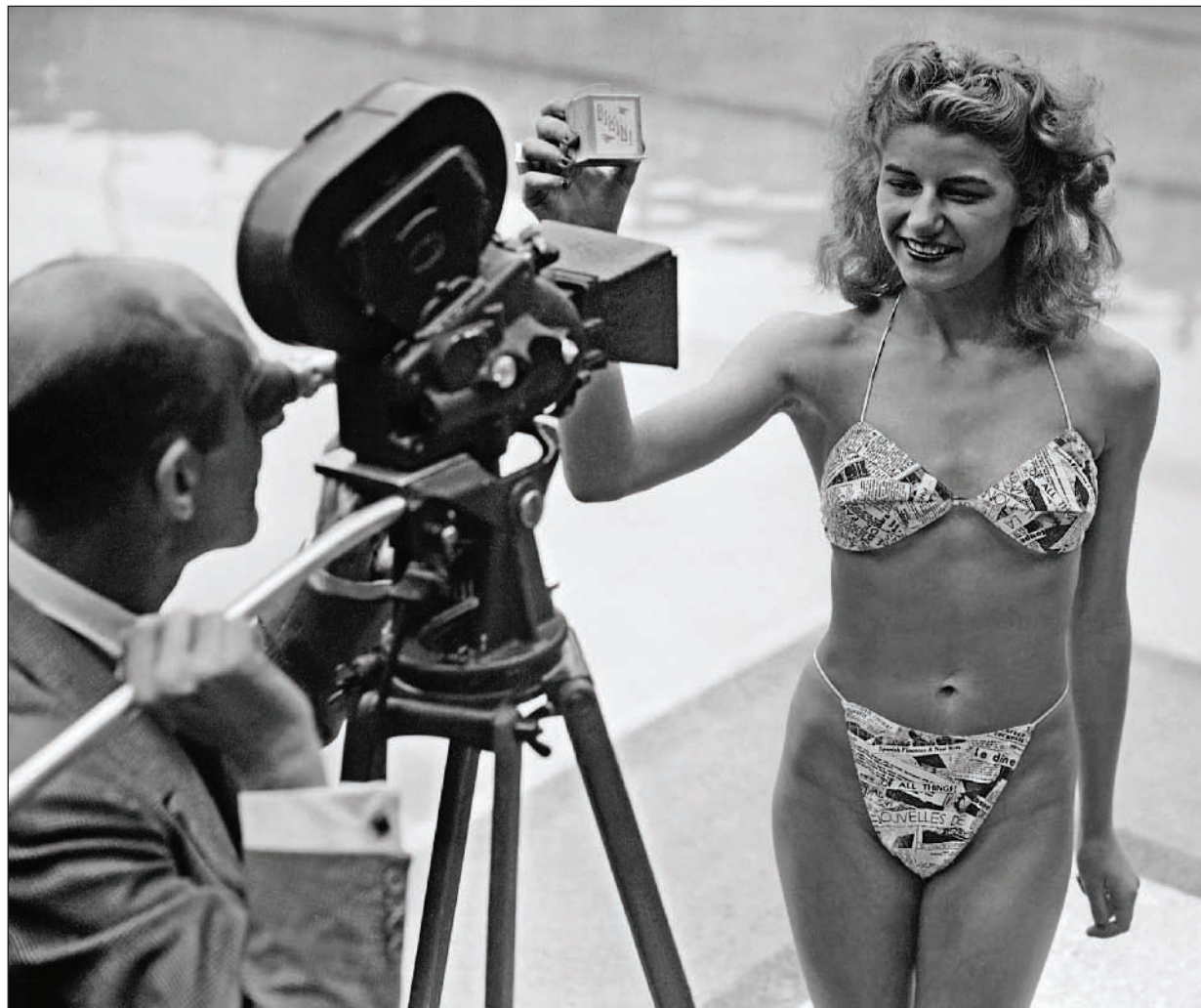
### **The Bikini**

The bikini is a bathing costume that is narrow and in two parts, of a maximum area of 45 square centimetres (8 square inches), and not specifically intended for bathing. It can be sold in a matchbox, or folded easily into a handbag compact. It represents clothing for a woman such that she does not feel completely naked, yet leaves her sufficiently undressed to be irresistibly attractive to men.





# THE BIRTH OF THE BIKINI



On July 1, 1946, at 9 o'clock in the morning, an atomic bomb exploded with a force of 23,000 tons above Bikini, a coral atoll in the South Pacific hitherto virtually unheard of. More than six disarmed warships of the Japanese and American fleets were sunk and more than twice that number were seriously damaged.

Weather conditions were ideal for the test; the sky was clear and there was no wind at all. All at once, an enormous column of smoke towered above the archipelago. At the foot of it was what seemed like a ball of fire. At first blindingly white, it then turned orange, wine-red, and finally greyish green. The cloud of smoke – some 33,000 feet (10,000 metres) high, according to onlooking aircraft pilots' estimates – was regularly

penetrated by radio-controlled planes containing live guinea-pigs and banks of highly sensitive scientific measuring apparatus.

This was the first "official" nuclear experiment since the end of World War II, in which the bombs dropped so devastatingly on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. All the major newspapers made much of its effects on the paradise that had been the Southern Seas, their reports motivated, at least partially, by propaganda. The United States, the sole atomic power of the age, was demonstrating to its Soviet adversaries the terrifying extent of that power.

Incorporated into that propaganda were rumours about the bomb's potentially destructive effect on the planet. These were rumours spread at informal levels that kept circulating due to genuine fears and concerns. Yet the world continued on as it always had, and humanity very soon felt confident enough to declare in a French newspaper that, "the Earth has not been turned to liquid, the sky not become streaked with flames, the oceans not dried up into rocky deserts."

---

July 5, 1946: Réard's line-up with Micheline Bernardini at the Molitor Pool in Paris for the title of "Most Beautiful Swimmer".



The Deligny Pool in Paris on July 1, 1946. The two-piece models were hardly economical with cloth, as would have been appropriate for that era.

All the same, from a military point of view, the outcome – apart from finding out what the atomic bomb was capable of when exploded over water – was nothing less than a complete fiasco. By no means all of the target ships, painted bright yellow and orange for the occasion, had been sunk, and the primary target vessel, the battleship Nevada, had mostly escaped damage altogether. The Soviet Russian observers, admitted to the atoll by the Americans, left smirking. Grudgingly, a US admiral conceded that the bomb should only be used against maritime targets in combination with some other more detonative weapon, a torpedo, perhaps.

American hopes for the test results were thus frustrated, and accordingly, the name “Bikini” became familiar all over the world shorn of any of its potentially frightening connotations.

Only four days later, on July 5, in a public swimming pool in Paris where a beauty contest was in process, there was a minor sensation. Of only slightly scandalous value, it was nonetheless enough to make the term bikini famous forever. The promoter of the beauty contest, a certain Louis Réard, a clothing designer, used the opportunity to introduce his own latest creation. Even before the contest judges’ final verdict, a number of spectators around the edge of the pool had been remarking on how one of the girls (who had been particularly careful to remain facing the audience, as if rapt in thought) had extraordinarily little on. When this girl was then summoned up to the podium as one of the finalists selected by the jury, a murmur of appreciation ran like lightning through the assembly. It was a

reaction not to the girl’s own beauty or her personality, but to the costume she was wearing.

Like her companions, she had on a two-piece swimsuit – but hers was of such diminutive dimensions that she seemed more naked than clothed. Her breasts were modestly concealed behind two triangles of cloth held up by a halter strap tied around the neck. The base of the costume was also cut in the shape of a triangle, the widest spread of which was across the abdomen, leaving most of the hips and all of the thighs entirely bare. Only a thin strip of material connected the points of the triangle around the back, well below the level of the navel.

It was a costume that has since become a standard on our beaches today. But to those present at the Molitor Pool on that hot summer afternoon, it was the height of shamelessness and close to obscene.

Thus the bikini was born. It was the first event of a scandal that continued for twenty years. But for the little-known clothing designer specializing in bathing costumes, it was an event that represented the peak of his endeavours. Born at the very end of the nineteenth century, Louis Réard had restricted his activities to beachwear since the 1930s. His avowed ambition was to dress the celebrities of the time in his costumes, Réard costumes. He did make some contact with Maurice Chevalier, among others.

The bombshell that exploded the bikini onto the scene had been set up a long time beforehand, with meticulous preparation. At first, Réard tried to persuade his usual models to take part in his pool-side show.





18 May 1940: A model wears one of the summer's new bikinis, a fringed toweling affair with a beaded sunhat. Original Publication: *Picture Post* Cover – 607, 1940. Photo by IPC Magazines/Picture Post/Getty Images.

They all refused point-blank, scandalized in particular by the back of the bikini bottom, which left almost all the buttocks uncovered. So Réard was well aware in advance of the outraged reaction likely to follow the pleasure he would gain by presenting his latest collection.

But he soon found a suitable model in Micheline Bernardini, a nude dancer at the Casino de Paris. She would certainly feel dressed, even in the skimpiest bikini. All that was left was for Réard to find an appropriate location in which to present his new costume – and that was not so easy. But on July 2 he read a report in *France Soir* about a fashion parade held on the plane right between Paris and Moscow, during which “stewardesses” walked up and down the aisle dressed in two-piece outfits in different colours, under the astounded gaze of the passengers.

It was in light of this that Réard decided to put on his own show during a beauty contest. The midday edition of *France Soir* on July 5 accordingly invited the public to attend the Molitor Pool that very afternoon, where the title of “most beautiful swimmer” would be competed for by gorgeous models and shapely sporting stars under the eyes of a select panel of judges. The prize was to be the Réard Cup – which makes it clear to us now what the real object of the whole exercise at the pool was.

Réard was also obliged to cast around for a memorable name to call his revolutionary two-piece swimsuits. Recent world events, specifically the nuclear tests at the Bikini Atoll – the paradisaic isles of the Southern Seas – gave him an excellent pretext.

Several fashion-design historians have suggested that Réard’s bikini was, in fact, named in the light of another recent creation. The celebrated couturier Jacques Heim had the temerity to present – in that same summer of 1946 – a two-piece outfit he called *Atome*. The base of the outfit, different from the customary style for such two-pieces, substituted a rectangular piece of cloth across the hips. Unusual as it was, though, it was nothing like Réard’s provocative bikini. It covered the navel (the modesty boundary of the 1940s) and thus required quite a lot more cloth in its manufacture. The only “daring” thing about it was that Heim, as a celebrated designer, had put his own name to it in front of the world. Yet by doing so, he was genuinely associating himself with the more scandalous and rebellious elements in society: those prepared to undermine the accepted rules without openly flouting them.

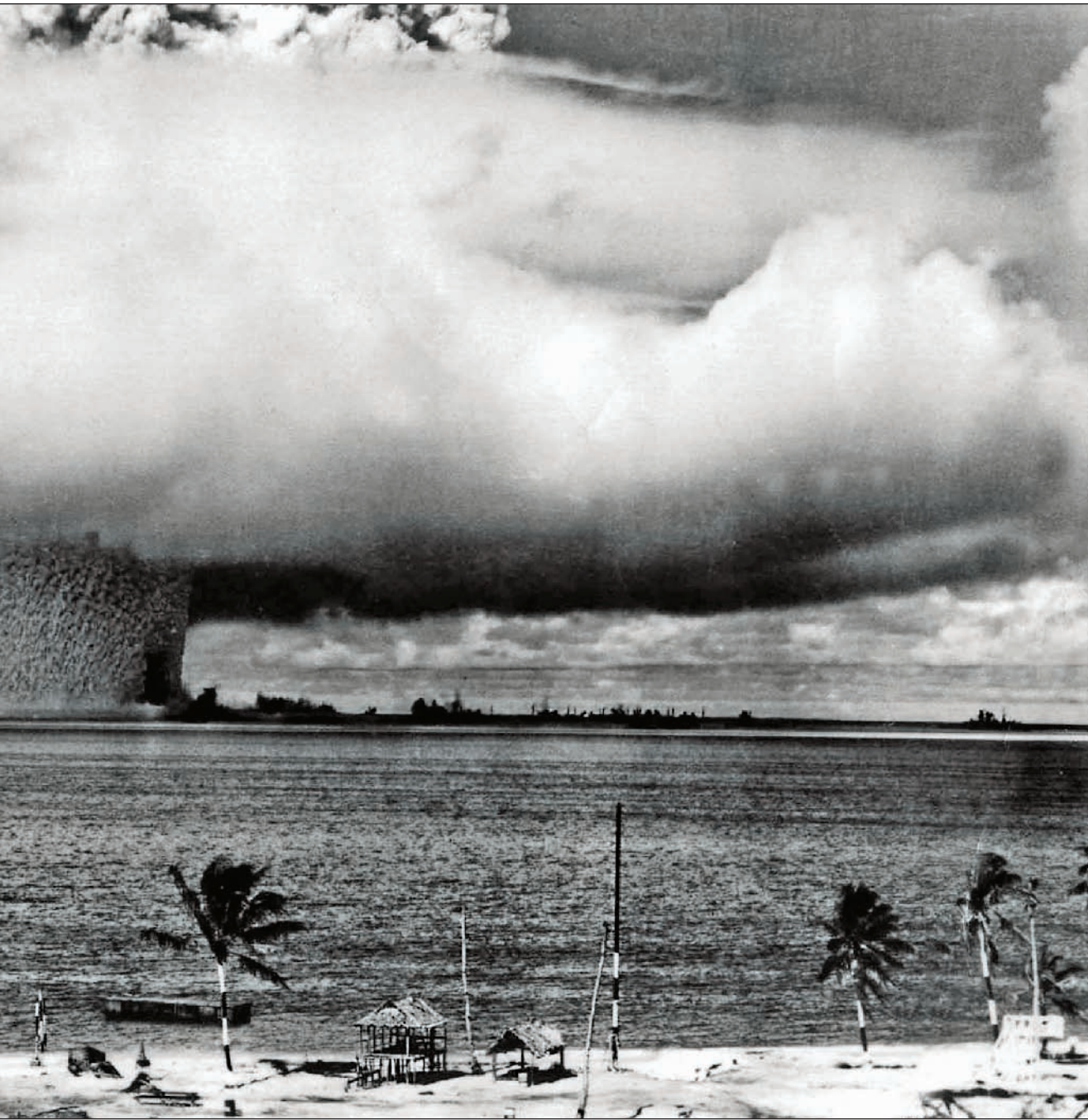
And it does seem that Heim’s *Atome* was designed before Réard’s bikini. The French fashion magazine *Fémina* reported in its special July-August holiday edition: “Every now and then Jacques Heim shows us what a special talent he has for swimwear. It was he who, a long time ago now, brought the Tahitian-style pareo to our beaches. Now, in harmony with the mood of the times, he presents his latest... his latest... (What can we call it? The word ‘costume’ is surely too much for it.) His latest beachwear, which he calls the *Atome* – see the picture below...”.

Both Heim and Réard took their inspiration from political history of the era, for during the first days of the year 1946 the newspapers



Atomic bomb explosion over the Bikini Atoll in 1946.







Il faut, en somme, de savoir à la fois à l'assurance sociale et à la sécurité d'un régime économique...  
 Les sociétés d'assurance, elles, ont un rôle à jouer...  
 L'AURORÉ.

par trois fois, il a forcé la Chambre tout entière...  
 Respecter la légalité  
 La première attaque de M. Paul

### ce que la France attend de lui ?

UNE déception de son...  
 M. Paul n'a pas été...  
 Les interventions qu'il a faites...  
 Ce n'est pas tout...  
 M. Paul n'a pas été...  
 Les interventions qu'il a faites...  
 Ce n'est pas tout...

### Et puis finalement...

« Bah... s'écrient les...  
 On n'en peut plus...  
 Pour lui, les mesures à prendre...  
 Gouverner, c'est prévoir...  
 Quelques nous parlons de l'œuvre de M. Paul...  
 Nous ne pouvons pas...  
 Ne peut-on...  
 Les autres...

## LA PLUS BELLE Baigneuse de 1946

a été choisie à la fête féminine de l'eau

Le premier Molitor avait...  
 Malade le ciel gris...  
 Mais il a déjà disparu...  
 Une vieille raquette...  
 Mais toujours d'actualité.

## AURORÉ actualités

**Concerts consules!**  
**Un démenti inutile**  
**Trop peu**  
**La multiplication des astres...**



Le maillot le plus original de la fête s'appelait « Bikini ». De n'est pas son nom, d'ailleurs, qui fit son charme.

were full of the most detailed reports of the atomic tests at Bikini Atoll. It was almost as if a sort of madness had taken over, in which everything that was somehow linked with the bomb and its explosive power. Seductive actresses and movie stars were suddenly (and from then on) described as "blonde bombshells on an atomic scale", suggesting that they exuded the torrid heat of sexuality with nuclear force. The word "atomic" was used as an intensifying adjective in virtually every context.

And to some extent Heim could not but be affected by this – although it is also true that his first thoughts for names for his two-piece outfits focused on the themes of reduction and division anyhow.

Réard reinforced this idea, supporting it by christening his creation after the islands so fully and emotively described in the newspapers: the tropical archipelago in the Southern Seas. The name Bikini presented Réard with many possibilities, for it held within it many different connotations. It referred to a particular time and date, and yet was modern and ongoing; it evoked notions of swimming in a tropical paradise; and it came to represent a costume for a seductive beauty who revealed much of her skin with all the supposed innocence of a native Pacific islander.

Later, the name of this bathing costume of considerably reduced dimensions would be credited with even further linguistic meaning. Tongue-in-cheek, designers equated the initial syllable bi- with the Latin prefix bi- "twice over, two" (which was certainly not the meaning in the atolls name) in order to derive (with execrable etymological inconsistency) such models as the monokini (which has a Greek prefix) and the trikini.

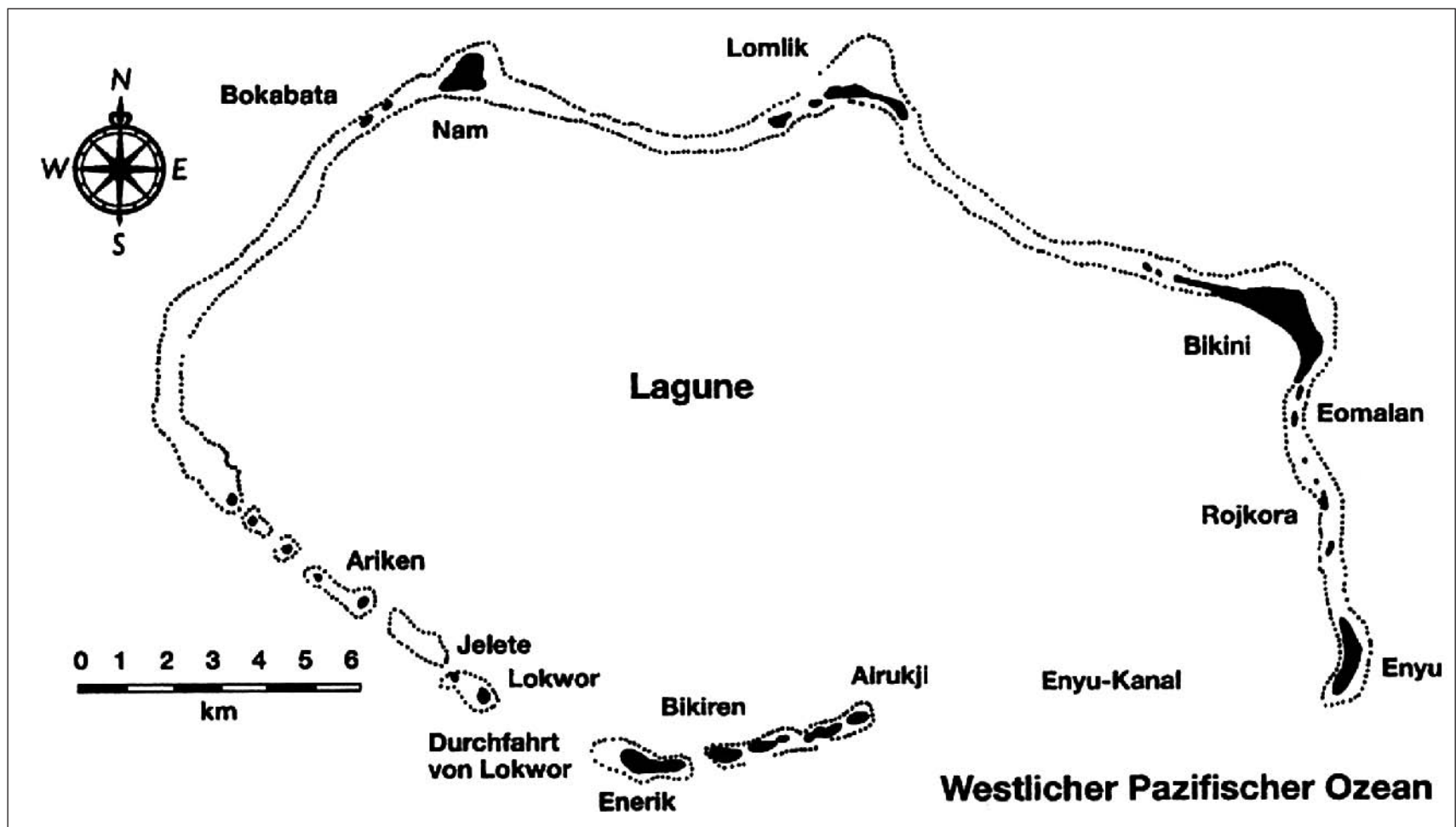
The name also took on something of a sexual connotation which, in a very real way, became implicit in the cultural behaviour of a stratum of society, a metaphor for the improvement of life in general. During the entire second half of the twentieth century the word "bikini" was associated with a particular attitude, a particular image, a particular lifestyle.

It would surely be possible, in a convoluted pseudo-psychological thesis, to prove the existence of a strange link between, on the one hand, a murderous weapon and, on the other, a girl wearing a sexy bathing costume. The apparent confusion between a symbol of death and an image of love might perhaps have added to the fascinations that we already enjoy in literature, where a name or a title can change all or reveal all.

But that afternoon of July 5, 1946 only marks the beginning of our story about the bikini. Not one of the protagonists in the events of that day had any notion of what was to follow. The temperature at the Molitor Pool reached 35°C (96°F). The roguishly profane Micheline Bernardini in her sensational two-piece swimsuit winked at the photographers as their cameras flashed incontinently. And at length the beauty contest came to an end.

That evening, the girl's photo showing her with the Réard Cup (actually a silver bowl) in her hand, would appear in *France Soir*. Thereafter, she would disappear back into oblivion. But with no concern at all for the girl or her victory, Micheline Bernardini was





Map of the Bikini Atoll.

posing for the same photographers at the same time. Smiling brightly, one leg carefully in front of the other, she had climbed onto an upturned crate and had assumed the stance of the celebrated *Statue of Liberty* that welcomes new arrivals across the Atlantic in the New York harbour.

That first bikini had an astonishing impact in terms of the material. What seemed from a distance to be cloth with a pattern on it – flowers perhaps – turned out on closer inspection to be a collage of newspaper cuttings and headlines. The bikini, thus, took every advantage of the media uproar it was bound to provoke, using every means it had in hand.

This light-hearted, yet explicitly knowing gesture by the designer could not emphasize more perfectly the complexity of ways in which this tiny costume would be important. Fashionable and contemporary, shocking by being the least it could possibly be, the bikini, nonetheless – from the very first photo shoot, and in the most public way – set itself up as being far more than it truly was: a scrap of cloth in which a person could go swimming. It embodied fashion's ideals to be more than just an item of clothing, to tell a story, to emanate an aura of imagination and mystique around itself and around the person wearing it.

Fashion, after all, is nothing without a human body on which to display it. It achieves significance only because the human body lends it life and purpose – although the reaction is reciprocal, for the

fashionable object also lends the body some of its own qualities. Without clothing, the body is virtually without expression: the body has to rely on movement, on physical activity to be given any attention. Clothing without the body, meanwhile, is a skin that has been sloughed off, an empty envelope.

It was precisely in this that Réard showed his genius, for he imbued his bikini with importance right from the start, integrating publicity for his creation within the creation itself. The creation thus promoted itself too. It was not simply an item of clothing but a dream, and the stuff of dreams besides.

And so, on July 5, 1946, at the very beginning of the Cold War, when an atoll was reduced to ashes and humanity debated the consequences of the coming atomic age, all these considerations were for an instant concentrated in the lens of the camera that took the photo of Micheline Bernardini. The beautiful girl paraded once more in front of the astonished throng, hesitating as it was between applause and loud indignation, and then coquettishly made her exit – but not without one last smile from the back of a changing-room.

On the following day nothing happened. A scandal was brewing in the city of Paris, still sweltering in its 35°C (96°F), where the inhabitants crowded in amazing numbers around the edges of the swimming pools. Yet in the press there was no mention whatsoever of the incipient scandal of the previous day, neither in the newspapers nor in the fashion magazines.



