

From follies to art

Helen Murray finds that the fight to show images of naked women in magazines wasn't easy

WOMEN in trousers might not be the stuff of fantasy these days but in the 1920s and '30s, the bifurcated form was considered enough reason for purchase alone. More recently, men's magazines feature women wearing considerably less than their trousers and according to a six-part book series by art publishers Taschen, the journey from bifurcated forms to bare breasts has been an uphill battle.

The History of Men's Magazines, by Dian Hanson, begins in 1880 with an image of a topless woman taken from the *French Follies*, and from here Hanson charts the development of men's publications across America and throughout Europe in six colourful volumes. In addition to reproducing the covers of the more popular titles sold in America and Europe, the Taschen book recounts the various legislative victories won by magazine publishers in their determination to illustrate and photograph the female form.

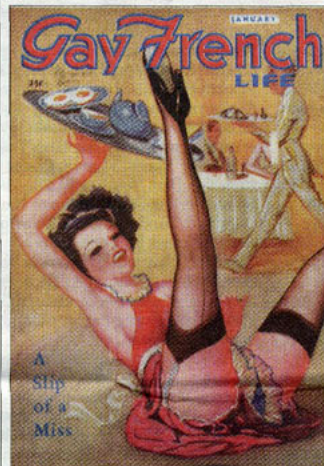
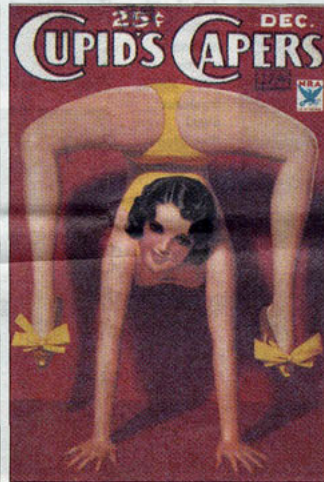
No sooner was the camera invented in 1830 than pictures of naked women entered circulation, and by the late 19th century New York was flooded with images of French models captured in indecent poses. The widespread availability of such material thrust decent society into a moral panic and before long the New York authorities had rounded up a band of entrepreneurial Irishmen believed to be importing the material.

Meanwhile in Europe, France had become fascinated by women's underwear particularly corsetry, which by the mid-1880s had become decorated with lace and satin. French magazines began picturing women in their undergarments and fetishised parts of the body, like the ankle and the hands.

In the years following World War One, the scantily dressed female had become a common feature in European publications, according to Hanson, who writes that, although titillation was the ultimate objective, the female form was disguised behind the non-sexual appreciation of naturalist vitality and art.

The Taschen volume illustrates how German publishers, in particular, championed the great outdoors and health through images of naked, lithe, young women. Many of these magazines were established under the government of the Weimar Republic and were interestingly also favoured by Hitler, following his election in 1933. The promotion of health and exercise fell in with his belief in Aryan supremacy. Instead of closing the publications, Hitler removed all Jewish members of staff and promoted non-Jewish workers.

In the United States, images of naked women were commonplace in specialist magazines such as *Sunshine and Health*, and after much public debate, legislation was



Loaded: early men's magazines

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passed permitting nudist magazines to publish pictures of male and female genitalia. Similarly, arts magazines such as *Art Group Quarterly* featured tasteful images of barely-clad beauties. The images were not overtly sexualised, the publications often featured Hollywood starlets such as Jean Harlow and Louise Brooks.

Although the more explicit 'girlie magazines' had established a foothold in the American market by the 1930s, the arts-based/health publications retained their popularity because they provided a certain degree of camouflage. Hanson quotes photo-grapher Edmund Leja as saying, "For the girlie magazines we had the girls look at the camera, for the arts we had them look away."

During the war, the tone of a large proportion of American men's magazines changed dramatically as thousands of GIs bade farewell to their sweethearts. Publications such as *Snap* and *Screwball* became less provocative and replaced illustrations of sensuous blondes with more modest brunettes. Tales of 'strippers' became accounts of brunette 'showgirls' so as not to fuel the young soldier's insecurity about his beloved's fidelity back home.

The introduction of pulp paper revolutionised the market, and by the mid-'50s there were scores of titles based on an array of subjects ranging from western adventure to crime and detective stories. Despite the divergent subject matter, the men's pulp magazines usually shared one common denominator - scantily-clad damsels at the mercy of cruel villains.

By the 1970s the genre had grown increasingly misogynistic, according to Hanson who makes reference to titles such as *Women in Crime*. The covers of these particular titles unfailingly featured a helpless woman cowering under a gun or stabbed and bleeding with headlines such as "Rape on the highway," or "Orgies by appointment."

Hanson makes reference to the observations made by Park Dietz, in the *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, in 1986, where he made a convincing case that detective magazines ought to be carefully monitored. He suggested the genre was the preferred pornography of sadists and that the material acted as a kind of training manual for their activities.

Although Hanson explores a selection of under-the-counter material, the focus is on more popular titles and the interesting development of men's magazines - from the imported *French Follies* at the turn of the 19th century to Gore Vidal's essay on President Nixon in a 1972 edition of *Penthouse* magazine.

The History of Men's Magazines, by Dian Hanson is published by Taschen
www.taschen.com