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How a daring designer left a mark on fashion with his topless bikini

By Beverly Gray

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Austrian-born American fashion designer Rudi Gernreich with models in 1967. (Ben Martin/Getty Images)

Featured in the National Museum of American History's exhibit "[Girlhood \(It's Complicated\)](#)" is a bright yellow micro-miniskirt from 1970, belted in orange and a mere nine inches long. The Smithsonian has two of these Rudi Gernreich skirts in its collection. They seem identical but differ in their attached undergarments. Why? Because one of these minis is meant to be worn by a man.

Gernreich, an award-winning fashion designer who would have celebrated his 100th birthday this year, always knew how to court controversy. In 1964 his breast-baring topless bathing suit for women was publicized, praised and damned the world over. Even the pope got involved, condemning the swimwear. So did beach-area police forces from Santa Monica to St. Tropez, who swooped in to arrest any woman sporting a Gernreich "monokini" on the sand or in the surf. (In my own California hometown, I remember local TV news programs pledging that the suit would be modeled on camera by an actual female, then trotting out a small child or a chimpanzee.)

Gernreich's later experiments with unisex garments, allowing wearers full freedom of movement and choice, also made headlines. Equally controversial was his 1974 introduction of thong swimsuits and underwear that exposed both male and female buttocks.

At the same time, Gernreich was designing bold but highly wearable fashion (distinguished by strong colors, prominent zippers, thigh-high hemlines and space-age fabrics) adored by the young and the hip. Fashion leaders in his own era praised him as a futurist. Beth Dincuff Charleston, fashion historian at Parsons School of Design, told me: "His legacy lies in his understanding that genderless clothing was the path that fashion would inevitably take, and that body acceptance and its interwoven relationship with fashion would be a critical issue that the fashion world would need to address."

Rudolf [Gernreich](#) was born in Vienna on Aug. 8, 1922, into a close-knit Jewish family with strong ties to the clothing industry. His father died young; in 1938, when Rudi was 16, he and his mother immigrated to California six months after the Nazi Anschluss. He studied art at Los Angeles City College, then entered the world of modern dance, performing challenging roles with Lester Horton's Dance Theater while also starting to explore costume design. Gernreich's fashion career had its roots in the eye-catching, flexible costumes he created for such future dance stars as [Kennedy Center honoree Carmen de Lavallade](#). Later he collaborated with Horton alumna Bella Lewitzky to build dances around his outrageously stretchy leotards that were sometimes shared onstage by more than one performer. Throughout his life, Gernreich's work was invariably prized for being comfortable as well as audacious, and collectors still treasure his easy-to-wear separates.

But despite his reputation for bravado within the fashion industry, Gernreich was far from brave about revealing his sexual orientation to his fellow designers. In 1950 he had joined his then-partner Harry Hay in founding the Mattachine Society, a clandestine L.A. organization dedicated to promoting the legal rights of gay men, nearly 20 years before the [Stonewall uprising](#). Yet when Gernreich decided to move to New York to try his luck in the nation's fashion capital, he told Hay they would have to maintain separate residences. As he confided to a close friend, journalist Stuart Timmons, Seventh Avenue didn't want to acknowledge deviations from the social norm. In a 1985 article published after Gernreich's death, Timmons recalled the designer saying, "There is a freedom for homosexuals in the fashion industry, and there are a lot of them there, but it is taboo to discuss it."

When attending swanky New York awards events, Gernreich would arrive with female companions, such as the 17-year-old Brooke Shields. Years later, when he died of lung cancer at age 62, his [New York Times obituary](#) stated that he lived alone in the Hollywood Hills and had no survivors. This despite the fact that he had enjoyed a 31-year intimate relationship with Oreste Pucciani, a UCLA professor who was a noted expert in French existentialism. Though the couple had a large and lively Southern California

social circle, Gernreich never succumbed to his partner's urging to "out" himself in any public forum. Pucciani, post-retirement, had given a frank interview to Ten Percent, a UCLA gay student paper. Gernreich contemplated doing the same but could never bring himself to shine a spotlight on his personal life. As Timmons put it in a 1990 article in the Advocate: "This rule breaker of fashion summed up his reasons for not coming out with a simple phrase: 'It's bad for business.' "



Model Rose McWilliams, wearing the original topless bathing suit by Rudi Gernreich, in 1964. (Bettmann Archive/Getty Images)

Yet after his death in 1985 his allegiance became clear. A line in his [Los Angeles Times obituary](#), reflecting his and Pucciani's joint wishes, suggested that donations in his name be sent to the ACLU Gay and Lesbian Chapter. This evolved, under Pucciani's stewardship, into the establishment of the Rudi Gernreich-Oreste Pucciani Charitable Trust in support of the ACLU Foundation's Lesbian and Gay Rights Project. So the belief in personal autonomy that underpinned Gernreich's life finally led, after his death, to a public political stand. It was reinforced at the start of 1993, when Pucciani's gift of Gernreich's archives to UCLA Library's Special Collections was timed to coincide with a Gay and Lesbian Studies exhibit, "With Equal Pride." Back in 1977, Gernreich had reluctantly specified to an Arizona Star reporter what he felt to be his greatest achievement: "I've been able to contribute to freedom — not just of the body, but of the spirit." It took, though, the rest of his life to find the courage to publicly declare where he stood as a man.

Longtime Gernreich model Léon Bing, who'd once posed with Gernreich and fellow model Peggy Moffitt on the cover of Time, told me that on Aug. 8, 1972 — the day he turned 50 — Gernreich was uncharacteristically grumpy. Normally he was a jovial man, with an impish sense of humor, but on that red-letter day he was clearly bummed. When asked why, he mournfully explained to Bing: "I can never again be an enfant terrible."



Gernreich's creations include this black halter swimsuit-like evening gown, shown in 1966. (Associated Press)

True, he was getting older, and it would not be long before he seemed not quite so revolutionary as he once had been. In 2022, though, his sleek knits, riotous prints and body-embracing jumpsuits are showing up in museum exhibits and online. (For the past decade, a German entrepreneur named Matthias Kind has been promoting a revival of some of Gernreich's more provocative creations by way of his www.rudigernreich.com site.)

And the current availability of genuinely see-through bikini tops and bottoms from companies like Beach

Revolution Swimwear — whose

slogan is “Wear BR Swimwear or nothing at all” — suggests that today's fashionistas are catching up with Gernreich's radical concepts.

One day someone might even popularize his final creation.

Photographed by Helmut Newton one month before Gernreich's death, it was a tiny scrap of black fabric framing the model's pubic hair, shaped and dyed a poison green. A glimpse of the future? Maybe so.

In *Women's Wear Daily*, style writer Booth Moore recently noted Gernreich's influence on current ready-to-wear trends, hailing him as "L.A.'s great fashion liberator." Gernreich may no longer be an enfant terrible, but through both his designs and his personal example he has shown the way toward the liberation of body and soul.

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