



A BRIEF HISTORY

Charles Beyer unstitches the thong



Courtesy: Whitney Museum of American Art

• E. V. Day *Study for G-Force* 2001

A squadron of thongs resembling jet fighters swoops across the Whitney Museum's sculpture court at Philip Morris Headquarters. E. V. Day's *G-Force* (2001) is carrying out a 'tactical deployment of avionic assets'. As this G-string detachment takes New York, let's sneak a look at the origins of this diminutive attention-grabber.

Frederick's, the Hollywood lingerie purveyor, tells us that the first thong walked out of its boutique on to Hollywood Boulevard in 1981. The new look, it was claimed, was inspired by Euro-

pean' swimwear. Already, though, in 1974 the designer Rudi Gernreich, perhaps best known for his topless bathing suit, had created thong bikinis for men and women, which were given their debut in Los Angeles. The models also sported wedge-shaped 'thong' hairstyles, created by Vidal Sassoon specially for Gernreich's new, eyebrow-raising look.

The past quarter of a century has securely entrenched the thong in popular culture, with a few major milestones marking the way: a barely pubescent Brooke Shields, in the notorious television advertisements for Calvin Klein, declared her aversion to underpants; Jane Fonda's strip of Lycra, buffered by only a thin veneer of pantyhose, stretched the imagination in her ubiquitous workout videos; Madonna, with a little gumption and a lot of assistance from Jean Paul Gaultier, made underwear outerwear; the girl band L7 sported labial-quilted hot pants while performing as the rock group Camel Toe in

John Waters' film *Cry-Baby* (1990); Brazilian waxing; *Baywatch*; Monica Lewinsky snapped her thong in the Oval Office. The sound reverberates around the world until eventually, in a Darwinist tale of natural selection, the feminine hygiene industry takes notice and bulky sanitary napkins become 'panty liners with wings', which in turn evolve into the inevitable 'thong liners'.

To find where it all began, we probably need to turn the clock back to 3168 BC, to that iconic artefact from the canon of Egyptian art history: King Namer. Carved in relief, this granddaddy of all Pharaohs is shown in the act of clubbing a thong-sporting foe, who lies crumpled at his feet, defeated. It is an enduring piece of evidence, affirming that humanity has been held captive by this small strip of cloth since the dawn of civilization, unmitigated proof that the thong has been firmly wedged in our collective unconscious ever since.