

An American Swimwear Brand in Worthing: Jantzen swimwear style catalogues 1932-1938

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Set of Jantzen Swimwear catalogues 1932-1937, 1997/334, Worthing Museum.

Photographs by Emmy Sale.

In May 1931, the *Worthing Herald* reported that 'all the female world is knitting its own bathing dress or swimming costume.'¹ For those who were not able to knit their own and could afford shop-bought swimwear, there was a growing industry of woollen swimwear manufacturers. A homemade bathing suit was accessible through knitting patterns in women's magazines, wool and the skill of knitting, whereas shop-bought bathing suits were

¹ "Down to the sea in Stripes," *The Worthing Herald*, 9th May. 1931: 10.

disseminated through newspaper and magazine advertisements and sold in department stores.²

Worthing Museum's costume collection holds a rare set of Jantzen swimwear style catalogues, dating from 1932 through to 1938. They show the swimwear styles produced by Jantzen each year as well as the prices, colour options and technical details of both the styles and materials. This essay explores the catalogues as advertising ephemera for the Jantzen brand, showing how they evolved each year to make their swimwear into fashionable garments, as well as reflecting on the retailing of Jantzen Swimwear in Worthing during the 1930s.

From Oregon, USA to Hubbard's Department Store in Worthing, UK

Jantzen was originally founded in 1910 as the Portland Knitting Company in Oregon, USA, as a clothing manufacturer producing knitted underwear and jumpers. However, by the early 1920s they launched swimwear lines under Jantzen alongside Cole and Catalina who became the 'Ford, Chrysler and General Motors of the swimwear trade'.³ I was intrigued by how an American swimwear brand's catalogues ended up in the English seaside town of Worthing, West Sussex. Browsing the *Worthing Herald*, it became clear that Hubbard's department store on 14-20 South Street (where Debenhams is now located) was an agent for Jantzen swimwear. In 1937 they boasted that their first floor was dedicated to a bathing and beach wear outfits department.⁴ They annually promoted their retailing of these swimsuits in the newspaper through large informative, illustrated advertisements, such as this 1934 example [figure 1]. The advertisement showcased four of the 1934 swimwear models sold by the store with the Jantzen logo as the central focus. There is no colour, however, due to the monochrome newspaper medium. It is likely that Hubbard's, as a local supplier of Jantzen swimwear, were the source of the catalogues now in the Worthing collection. The department store might have distributed similar catalogues themselves.

² Emmy Sale, "It Is Not Impossible to Look Nice Sitting about on the Beach:" The Influence of Magazines in the Making and Wearing of Hand-Knitted Bathing Suits by Young Working Women in England during the 1930s." *The Journal of Dress History* 2.2 (2018): 47-72.

³ Lena Lenček and Gideon Bosker, *Making Waves: Swimsuits and the Undressing of America* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1989) 44.

⁴ "Hubbards for Bathing and Beach Wear," *The Worthing Herald*, 15th May. 1937: 2.

Swimming Suits, 1934

Jantzen Costumes are more "chic" and more alluring than ever for the coming season. HUBBARDS have a wide selection of these Swimming Suits, in all the new shades, including: LIDO RIFF RED GREY ISLAND

Below are illustrated just a few of Jantzen 1934 models:

New Adjustable "Tansaire" 24/6

New Adjustable "Sunnaire" 27/6

Jantzen

"Shouldaire" 19/6

New Two-piece Sun Suit 19/6

Hubbard's
SOUTH STREET, WORTHING
Telephone 1320 and 1321

Figure 1. "Swimming Suits, 1934," *The Worthing Herald*, 23rd June. 1934: 21.

Trade Catalogues and Museum Collections

These Jantzen swimwear style catalogues can be classified as trade catalogues from their printed booklet design and the way in which they show the product options offered by a particular manufacturer in order to stimulate business between retailers and consumers.⁵ Their form as a trade catalogue makes them ephemeral objects. They are frequently updated and reprinted yearly with the rapidly evolving Jantzen swimwear styles, meaning

⁵ Linda Seckelson, et al, "Trade Catalogs: Opportunities and Challenges," *Art Documentations: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 34.2 (2015): 267- 268.

that the old “out-of-date” catalogues would be discarded or used in other ways. The Australian National Maritime Museum Collection and the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC both hold collections of Jantzen ephemera, but no duplications or similar catalogues to those in Worthing Museum. This suggests that they are a rare and helpful source to the dress historian of 1930s swimwear and Jantzen marketing.⁶

Jantzen Swimwear Catalogues

The 1932 to 1938 set of Jantzen swimwear catalogues highlight the rapidly evolving changes in swimwear technologies and Jantzen’s graphic aesthetic. The catalogues incorporate a strong use of colour on the covers and inside, converting basic products into fashionable swimwear alongside stylistic motifs. This combination contributed to Jantzen’s overall aim to provide a new style of swimwear adorned with the iconic Red Diving Girl logo that represented the fantasy of the athletic swimmer as a fashionable statement for the ordinary American woman.⁷

1932 and 1933

The earliest catalogues in the set, for the years 1932 and 1933, are almost identical with very minor differences, notably the background colour updated from black to blue with white markings to represent moving water. They both feature the 1928 update to the “Red Diving Girl” logo that replaced stockings and a beanie hat with a bathing cap.⁸ This change in the logo represented the increasing acceptability of swimming as a leisure activity for women, but also as a fashionable look. Jantzen was innovating through its logo and its swimwear designs [Figure 2].

⁶ “Trade Literature 1880-1940,” Collection Guides, [n.d], *British Library*.

⁷ Marilyn Morgan, “Aesthetic Athletics,” *Consuming Modernity: Gendered Behaviour and Consumerism before the Baby Boom*, ed. Cheryl Krasnick Warsh and Dan Malleck (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013) 143.

⁸ Amber Butchart, “Lost in the Closet: Jantzen Swimsuit and the Cult of the Mermaid,” *Amber Butchart Blog*, Wordpress, 10th April 2012.



Figure 2. Jantzen Swimwear catalogues 1932 and 1933, 1997/334, Worthing Museum.

1934

The 1934 catalogue design contrasts with the previous catalogues that were recognisably Jantzen, as the cover does not feature the Red Diving Girl or even a design that nods to the Jantzen motif [Figure 3]. Instead, this cover is a highly stylised silhouette design of a man wearing a grey racerback swimsuit holding a white towel in front of a woman wearing white heeled shoes. The colours blue, black, white and grey have been utilised to produce the abstracted design of silhouettes that denotes mixed bathing and beach leisure. This catalogue also opens with a cut-out edge that is decorative and a novelty detail for the consumer.

The inside of the catalogue features illustrations of peach-coloured bodies with implied facial features wearing the coloured swimsuit styles. In this edition, however, the women have fashionable bobbed hairstyles and heeled shoes matching in colour to the swimsuits they are wearing. This highlights a development in the way Jantzen was using their catalogues. By demonstrating to the consumer how the swimsuits should be accessorised and worn, they were shaping the idealised aspirations of wearing a Jantzen bathing suit.

Film historian Ellen Wright argues that that images that showed the wearing of heels with the modelling of swimsuits transformed this garment into a symbol of glamour rather than a practical garment.⁹ The evolving changes Jantzen made in their advertising, including the addition of heeled shoes worn by models, contributes to their overall aim to make the athletic swimsuit into a fashionable garment for the ordinary woman. Figure 4 shows a amateur photograph of a young woman, sat on a garden fence, wearing a modestly skirted bathing suit, white heeled shoes and a cigarette in hand. It highlights the wide dissemination of the fashionable aspirations around wearing swimwear that Jantzen and the press circulated amongst their potential consumers and readership.

⁹ Ellen Wright, "Spectacular Bodies: The Swimsuit, Sexuality and Hollywood," *Sport in History* 35.4 (2015): 457-458.



Figure 3. Left. Jantzen Swimwear catalogue 1934, 1997/334, Worthing Museum.



Figure 4. Right. Photograph of Olive Kennedy wearing a bathing suit and white heeled shoes sat on garden fence. C.1931. Shared with author by Sue West.

1935

The 1935 catalogue featured a painted interpretation of the Red Diving Girl motif with the caption 'Jantzen fit as though painted on you' [Figure 5]. It depicts a man, with artist's easel and brushes, painting a portrait of a woman wearing the iconic red Jantzen swimsuit. This alludes to the idea that Jantzen are master creators of swimwear.



Figure 5. Left, cover. Right, inside. Jantzen Swimwear catalogue 1935, 1997/334, Worthing Museum.

A new aspect of this edition of the yearly catalogue is the inclusion of technical diagrams of Jantzen fabrics. A description of one of the new fabrics reads:

These new fabrics do not replace the regular Jantzen fabric, which remains the finest swimming suit material yet developed. They are additional to it and now that most people have at least two suits, afford a wider choice.

This element seems to talk less to the consumer and more to the retailer or salesmen of the swimsuits as it refers to ‘people’ rather than ‘you’ as in previous catalogues. Furthermore, it explains behind-the-scenes decisions of the Jantzen company and the swimsuit materials they are developing and choosing for the production of their styles. Figure 6 shows the laboratory at the Portland factory and highlights how Jantzen tested their designs to create high-quality swimwear, while anticipating new styles shown by the mood board of newspaper and magazine cuttings. This exemplifies how important swimsuit design testing and innovating was to the Jantzen brand.

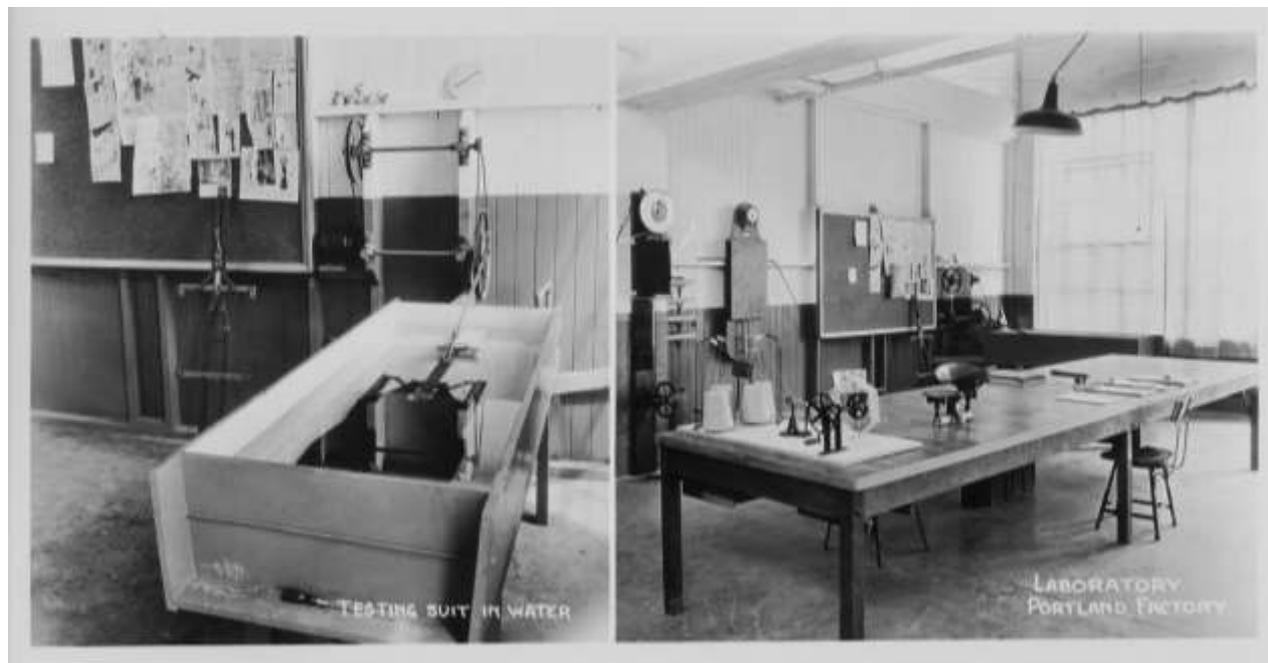


Figure 6. ‘Portland factory laboratory.’ Photographs, c1920s-1930s, The Jantzen Knitting Mills Collection, 1925- 1977, box number 9, folder number 3, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

1936

The 1936 catalogue continues the use of realistic representations of models wearing Jantzen swimsuit rather than the highly stylised and abstracted graphics of the early catalogues. In the 1920s and 1930s Jantzen's marketing department hired leading illustrators to create advertisement materials [Figure 7]. This included the employment of George Petty, who brought a pin-up girl aesthetic to the Jantzen portfolio of the evolving Red Diving Girl. Petty used an airbrush style in the illustrations, which was distinct from the other illustrations seen in Jantzen advertisements so far.¹⁰ This version of the Red Diving Girl was so successful that Jantzen created a Petty Girl swimming suit in 1940.¹¹ The longer legs and smaller head proportions of the Petty Girl published in the 1936 catalogue indicate another way that Jantzen evolved feminine ideals around women wearing swimsuits; it signals a move away from the athletic ideal in the 1920 original version of the Red Diving Girl.



Figure 7. Jantzen Swimwear catalogue 1936, 1997/334, Worthing Museum.

¹⁰ Andrea Degener, "It's Swimsuit Season with Jantzen," Dowd Modern Graphic History Library, *Special Collections at Washington University Libraries*, 26th June 2014.

¹¹ Degener, "It's Swimsuit Season with Jantzen."

1937

The 1937 edition was the first to use coloured backgrounds for the inside of the Jantzen catalogue. It has illustrations of the swimsuit styles posed on models against a blue and yellow abstracted background, representing sand and sea, demonstrating swimsuit designs in their intended use at the beach [Figure 8]. Additionally, this catalogue talks directly to the consumer, indicated by statements such as ‘Your weight in ordinary clothes determines your correct size in a Jantzen.’ This catalogue emphasises decorative design and features text that speaks to the consumer rather than listing technical details, making a convincing case that this edition was produced for the consumer rather than retailer. Marks and Spencer also produced a comparable swimwear leaflet in the same period [Figure 9].



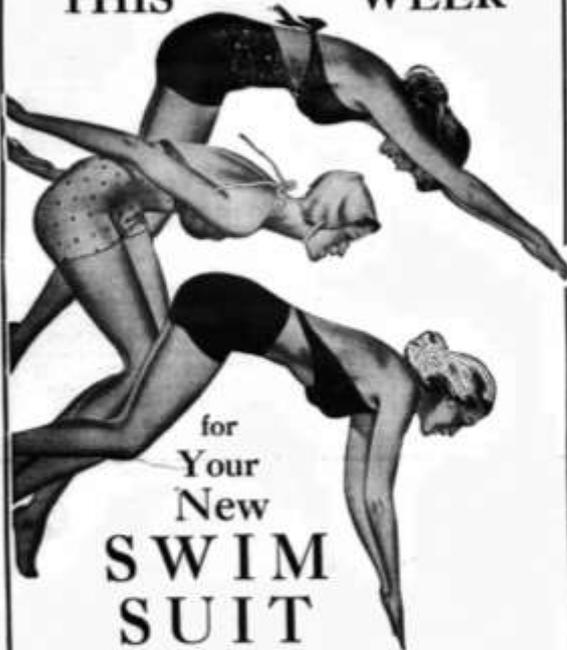
Figure 8. Jantzen Swimwear catalogue 1937, 1997/334, Worthing Museum.



Figure 9. Marketing leaflet for swimsuits. C.1930. Marks and Spencer. Reference number: HO/11/1/5/27.

The changes in Jantzen's marketing aesthetics were also reflected in Hubbard's 1937 summer advertisement in the *Worthing Herald* [Figure 10]. It shows models, in an airbrush illustrated style, in diving action poses whilst wearing swimwear. The swimwear styles are not explicitly labelled as Jantzen and the iconic logo is not seen, although this is usually on the right-hand side and the image only shows us the left side of the bodies. They are, however, comparable to Jantzen 'Bra-Zip' styles that attached high-waisted trunks to a halter neck brassiere top with a metal zip [Figure 11]. This was a style that was a move towards the fashion for the two-piece bikini style.

Dive into
Hubbard's
 THIS WEEK



for
 Your
 New
**SWIM
 SUIT**
 - AT -

Clearance Prices

Special Reductions in all our
 stocks of BATHING WRAPS,
 CAPS, SHOES & SWIM SUITS

Agents for:
 JANTZEN, SMEDLEYS, WOLSEY, RIBBOLASTIC & MINSTER

HUBBARD'S of WORTHING

Figure 10. Left. "Dive into Hubbard's," The Worthing Herald, 31st July. 1937:10.

Figure 11. Right. Jantzen Swimwear catalogue 1936, 1997/334, Worthing Museum

Retail prices shown herein are effective only in Great Britain.
 Elsewhere, duty must be added.



"BRA-ZIP"

Style 311 (Skirtless). Style 341 (Half Skirt).

Here is a delightfully novel, yet entirely practical, suit in a new Jantzen novelty fabric. It comprises tailored high-waisted trunks and an uplift brassiere. The feature of the suit is the metal fastener, attaching the upper to the trunks, which permits the height of the brassiere to be adjusted over 3 inches. This, with neckband tying at the front and the straps from the brassiere tying at the back, ensures a perfect fit over the bust. The suit is made in pleasing colour contrasts, with half skirt (at front) or skirtless. Style 341 half skirt; Style 311 skirtless.

Colours: BAHAMA/WHITE, LIDO/WHITE, RIFF RED/WHITE,
 ORANGE/AFRICAN, WHITE/LONDON ROSE,
 WHITE/ORANGE.

Sizes: 32 to 40.

Prices: Style 341, 29/6. Style 311, 25/-.

1938

The 1938 catalogue was the first to include photographic images of models wearing the swimsuit styles [Figure 12]. The front cover is a posed black and white photograph of models wearing swimsuits that have been coloured in red, thus referring to the “Red Diving Girl” logo. The showcasing of the yearly swimsuit styles were also photographic images. This change was not unusual for advertising in the 1930s. Design historian Marie-Louise Bowallius explains that ‘photography became more attractive to advertising agencies and increasingly out-rivalled colour and modern art as a means of arresting attention.’ This was because the photographs were cheaper than illustrations or paintings and it was found that they were more effective as an advertising medium.¹²



Figure 12. Jantzen Swimwear catalogue 1938, 1997/334, Worthing Museum.

To conclude, this set of Jantzen swimwear catalogues document the retail prices, colours and design details of specific swimsuits manufactured by the company between 1932 and 1938. Where garments have not survived, these catalogues provide the only evidence of Jantzen’s swimwear styles. As graphic objects, they illuminate how Jantzen used their advertisements to put themselves at the forefront of innovative swimwear design as well as how they communicating changing attitudes towards athletic female leisure and ideals in feminine appearance during the 1930s.

¹² Marie-Louise Bowallius, “Advertising and the use of colour in *Woman’s Home Companion*, 1923–33,” *Design and Modern Magazine*, ed. Jeremy Aynsley and Kate Forde (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2008) 31.

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