

History Corsets, Inter-war Australian Femininity and the National Film and Sound Archive's Remarkable Collection of Berlei Lantern Slides

The National Film and Sound Archive holds an extensive lantern slide collection ranging from cinema slides, used in theatre advertising, song slides, employed in public recitals, and some of Australia's first locally manufactured slides, such as [Soldiers of the Cross](#). Elisa deCourcy spoke with curator, Jenny Gall and paper conservator, Shingo Ishikawa about the processes involved in lantern slide restoration. We also discussed a multi-set collection of Berlei instructional slides that fit rather uniquely in their archive.



759879: [BERLEI : GLASS SLIDE : FIVE WOMEN WEARING DIFFERENT TYPES OF PINK CORSETS], National Film and Sound Archive Collection.

In 1910 Fred (Frederick) Berley bought the controlling share of E. Gover & Co., a small lingerie manufacturer in the Sydney CBD. Over the next decade along with his brother, Frank, he grew the business rebadging it in 1919 with the Frenchified and feminised iteration of his own surname: Berlei. Berlei grew from its boutique origins to be a powerhouse of Australian manufacturing in the interwar period by promoting its corset as a physically and morally essential item of every Australian woman's daily apparel. In 1919 the company collaborated with physiologists from The University of Sydney to measure 6000 Australian women's bodies. The outcome of the survey was to standardise Australian women in 5 figure types: 'Average', 'Big Abdomen', 'Sway Back', 'Big Hip', 'Short Below [the] Waist'.

In 1921 Berlei employed 280 fitters and manufacturers who were trained via lantern slide shows about their obligation to recommend corsets according to the Berlei typologies. By the 1930s the company had stores in all the Australian state capitals and were breaching overseas markets.

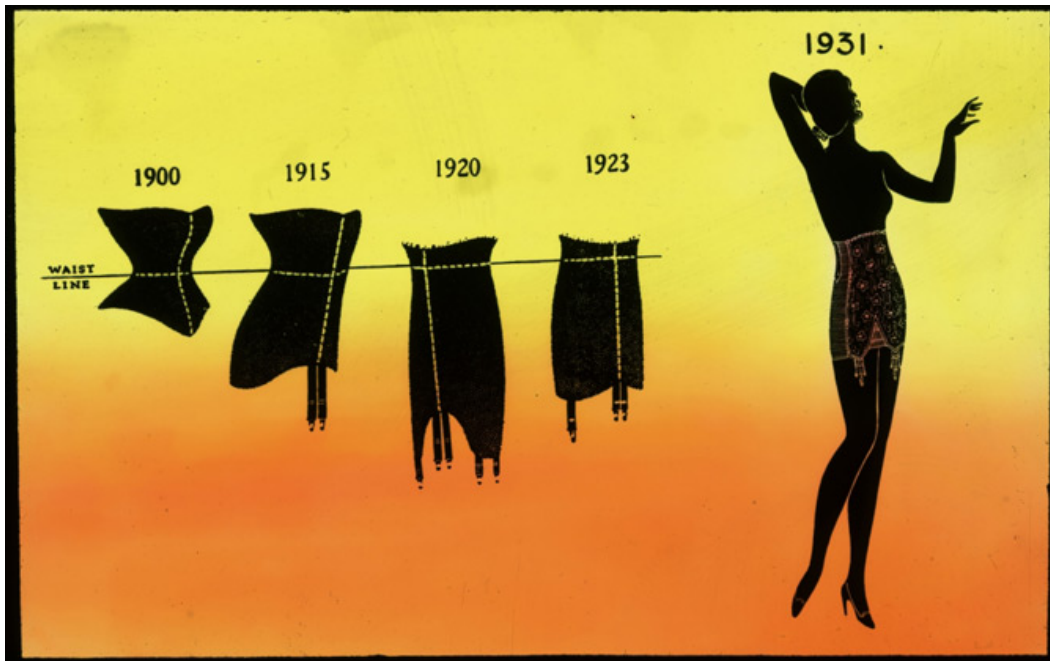


Dr Jenny Gall and Shingo Ishikawa at the National Film and Sound Archive's Research Library, Canberra. Photo credit Elisa deCourcy.

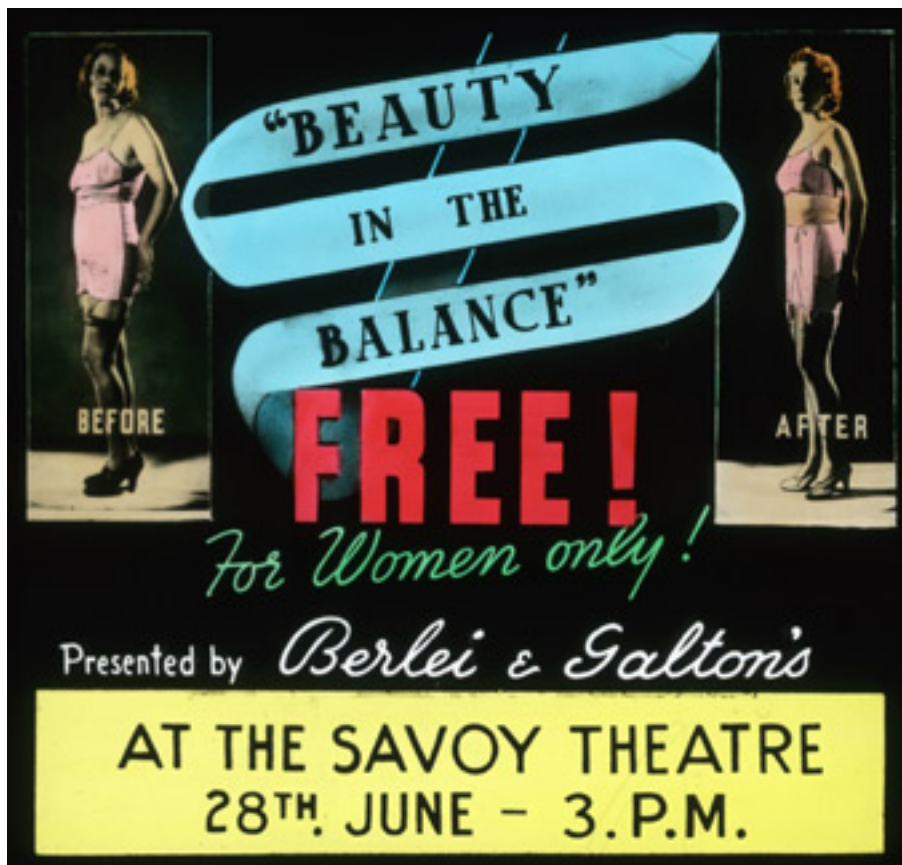
The Berlei slides are fascinating for how they gesture to social and political concerns about women's sexuality and dress in the 1920s. Berlei's massive profits and exponential expansion was not derived from a superficial overhaul of women's lingerie styles. Rather, Berlei tracked a fundamental continuum between its corsets and the piety and respectability of Edwardian femininity. Certainly, the company conceived of itself as retailing a more flexible and adept undergarment than the boned and restrictive turn-of-the-century corsets. As Jenny Gall pointed out in our conversation, their instructional lantern presentations began with slides about wellness and healthy eating habits, void of reference to lingerie.

The NFSA collection is carefully numbered and sequenced into sets of instructional lectures. Opening slides in many of the lectures have a specifically Australian flavour linking sunshine and fresh foods to ideas about fitness. In a period where eugenic social discourses equated physical health and vitality with moral countenance and national character, it was vital that women's couture allowed for them to be outdoors and active. Each instructional series then progresses to detailing how the corset associated with each feminine type aided and

promoted the health of its wearer. Berlei distanced itself from the 'risqué', liberal and boyish sartorial trends of flappers. Its slides educated employees about the supposed damage inflicted on women's digestion and reproductive capacity by going corset-less. The Berlei instructional slides provide an intriguing spotlight on how an Australian lingerie company carved out a marketplace for itself around retailing a product — or five core products — that codified and concealed women's bodies.



759898: [BERLEI : GLASS SLIDE : NO. 09, CHANGING WAISTLINE], National Film and Sound Archive Collection.



759995: [BERLEI : GLASS SLIDE : INVITATION TO A FREE PRESENTATION OF 'BEAUTY IN THE BALANCE' AT THE SAVOY THEATRE : ADVERTISEMENT], National Film and Sound Archive Collection.

The Berlei instructional slides were manufactured by a relatively small photography studio, Linton Brothers, at 61 Market St, Sydney. Berlei also used hand-coloured slides for advertising, partitioned the middle of the glass plate to show 'before' and 'after' views of corseted and corset-less models. The NFSA are not the only institution to hold Berlei slides, with others appearing in the catalogue records of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (formerly the Powerhouse Museum). Nevertheless, the instructional sets entered the NFSA in the 1980s, in the first years of the institution's existence. They add another important dimension to other theatrical, musical and early cinematic material in the NFSA's collection. Some of the Berlei 'before' and 'after' advertising slides were probably

used in theatre halls before shows and film screenings. Nevertheless, Shingo Ishiwaka pointed out the

pristine condition of the slides. As a conservator he had only to extensively clean the cover glass or replace the binding tape on a few of the Berlei slides, suggesting that they were likely sent straight from Berlei's own archives to the NFSA.

Further references:

Susan Best, 'Foundations of femininity: Berlei Corsets and the (un)making of the modern body', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 5 (1) 1991: 191-214

Anthea Hyslop, 'Burley, Frederick Richard (1885-1954)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/burley-frederick-richard-9977>, accessed online 5 February 2017.

Shingo Isikawa and Darren Weinert, 'Preserving Glass Slides – History and Manufacture', The National Film and Sound Archive online at: <https://www.nfsa.gov.au/latest/glass-cinema-slides-1>

Undercover (1984), dir. David Stevens. See: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0086511/> NB: this is a fictional recreation, set on a true story, of Berlei's rise to a manufacturing powerhouse in 1920s Australia.

