

NAILS: MARIAN NEWMAN. DIGITAL ARTWORK: CHRIS ROOME AT METRO IMAGING, LONDON. LATEX SKIRT, BY DIOR BY JOHN GALLIANO, £1,460. AT CHRISTIAN DIOR BOUTIQUE. BELT, FROM £58. AT RELLIK



# the year of the rear

It's been hard not to notice – bums are everywhere. From Kylie to catwalk, it's clear they have become the new focus of our attention. Forget boobs, even the cleavage we're now after is below the waistline.

Christa D'Souza looks at what's behind this obsession and asks why the bottom is a top priority in 2003.  
Photograph by Robin Derrick

It's funny how body parts come in and out of fashion. Towards the end of the last century, for example, it was the bosom. At the beginning of this one, it was the midriff. A little bit later it became the hip bones. Moving downwards, it's now the actual bottom that has become the erogenous zone *du jour*. Bottoms, in other words, have become the new bosoms. Jennifer Lopez is the new Pamela Anderson. We don't want to be lollipops, we want to be guitars. And you peers out there are far healthier than us apples. Although if you didn't know

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that already, where on earth have you been for the past 12 months or so?

Everywhere one looks, there's a rear end angling for attention, jostling to polish the camera lens. If it's not J-Lo's, then it's Kylie's. And if it's not Kylie's, then it's Christina's; and if it's not Christina's, it's Melanie Blatt's, whose whole career, arguably, may have been revived by that cheeky Virgin ad where she photocopies her *derrière* and then shows it to the world at large.

Note, too, the rows of bottom-lifting creams and anti-cellulite treatments now available on the market; the sea of exotic pants, as opposed to bras, you can buy in the lingerie section of even the most provincial department store; the way the prominent, constantly gyrating rear end (*à la* new dancehall star Sean Paul), dominates dancefloors from inner London to Padstow; the way "batty riders" and "bogling" (like bling-bling) ain't, as it were, such a black thing no more...

Then there are the acres of newsprint devoted to bottom trivia. Did you know that the bushmen of the Kalahari (like the Khoikhoi) store water in their bottoms for times of severe drought? That Botticelli's real name was Alessandro di Mariano Filipepi? Or that Liz Hurley used to stuff her jeans with loo paper in order to make her bottom look more like Serena Williams? (Me neither, until I read it in the *News Of The World*.)

And what about the swathes of bottom (as opposed to bosom) cleavage always on show at any televised red-carpet do? All held in place, no doubt, by bum- rather than tit-tape, contoured by Geri and Kylie's bottom-make-up artist Hamilton, and showcased to perfection by the current favourite celebrity pose of looking backward over a shoulder instead of facing the camera front-on.

"Well, there's something tacky about showing off one's boobs," Givenchy's Julien Macdonald, the man behind Joely and Geri's famous butt cleavages, explains. "It seems like something a stripper or Page Three girl would do. Whereas there's something quite sweet about a woman showing off her bottom, especially if it's covered."

"There is nothing so vulgar as bosom cleavage," agrees underwear designer Damaris Evans, whose pure-silk undies with peek-a-boo cutouts, corseted behinds and back bows are

the *dernier cri* in smalls. "Especially if it's not a very nice bosom. Whereas nobody really has bad bottom cleavage, do they? Especially if it's surrounded by silk."

"Bottoms are definitely sexier than bosoms," declares Jemima French of Frost French, which always includes a bottom on the invitations to its shows (the very first one showed a photograph of Rosemary Ferguson's bare behind with a pair of pants drawn round it in black eyeliner). "It's just a very sexy part of a woman's body. By the way, have you ever tried rubber pants?" she adds naughtily. "You ought to... They feel great."

We Brits, with our puerile sense of humour and long tradition of sexual and lavatorial innuendo, have always had a thing about bums. As one suave American expat wearily murmured to me the other night, it doesn't matter how high-powered the company – if you're having dinner with people in this country they'd far rather talk about bottoms than politics. The Scandinavians are the same, although to them the bottom is not so much a joke as the repository of all our pent-up emotions. They think that tension gets stored in the bottom, rather than in the shoulders (the reason, perhaps, for all that birching in the sauna? Maybe I'm just being British...).

It's no particular secret that black and Latin cultures put the prominent butt on a pedestal. As Jennifer Lopez herself recently pronounced, "Latinos have a certain body type. We're curvy." Plenty of people before me have pussy-footed around this issue – as I read in a very grown-up essay by Magdalena Barrera entitled *Hottentot 2000: Jennifer Lopez and Her Butt*, "We cannot afford to ignore class and race in our understanding of buttocks." Whatever the case, it's clear that the bottom, the *culo*, the "booty" or even the "ga dunk a

dunk" (as it is referred to on the slang dictionary website [UrbanDictionary.com](http://UrbanDictionary.com)) means a lot of different things to a lot of different cultures. And has done for thousands of years.

Indeed, ever since we started walking on two feet as opposed to all fours – stopped being, as it were, in a state of permanent presentation – the buttocks have been a source of aesthetic and erotic fascination: a semaphore for fertility, sensuality and, in some cases, moral strength. Look at the huge cauliflowerish back-sides painter Théodore Géricault gave all his heroic male figures, or the Churchillian habit of calling untrustworthy characters "without bottom". (As a male friend with a behind reminiscent of the *Venus of Willendorf's* once breezily rationalised to me, "Well, you need a large hammer to drive a large nail, don't you?")

Since time immemorial, women have used their bottoms to titillate the opposite sex, right up to the S-bend lovelies PG Wodehouse wrote about in the Thirties, or the walking-on-ball-bearings bottom wiggle perfected by Marilyn Monroe (achieved, according to Jean-Luc Hennig in his fascinating book *The Rear View*, by shaving the heel of one stiletto so that it was slightly lower than the other).

To be sure, the bottom had its ups and downs. The Twenties and the Sixties, when every woman wanted to look like a *garçonne*, were real wilderness periods. The Seventies, when we all wore our Falmers way up to our belly buttons and almost celebrated the flat butt, weren't much better.

But that doesn't mean it has ever been completely sidelined. Plenty of contemporary designers have had a bit of a love affair with this part of our anatomy – for example, Diane Von Furstenberg, whose slithery wrap-around dresses, as we apples know only too well, have always been tailor-made for pears; bottom-meister Azzedine Alaïa, whose panelled ultra-tailored pencil skirts were just perfect for the baby who "got back"; and what about Vivienne Westwood, whose steatopygic padded tartan bustles caused such a fuss in the Nineties?

But the person most recently responsible for putting the bottom back on fashion's centre stage is Alexander McQueen. The ubiquitous uniform of low-rise jeans with a thong poking out the back, in which every female from 10 to 40 has been chilling her kidneys for the past two years, can be traced back to his infamous bumsters of 1998, although the attention designers are paying to our posteriors now has far less to do with elongating the torso (McQueen's rationale) than with re-fixating on the bottom itself.

Take Julien Macdonald's cheek-separating black leather catsuit for Givenchy, or what he calls his "explosive arse" dress for his own collection (featuring a pink cashmere skirt with huge gold zips front and back, left open so the

top part of the bottom cheeks can peep out). Or the fetishistic backsides presented by Tom Ford at Gucci, trussed to within an inch of their lives in black satin ribbon. Nicolas Ghesquière created clingfilm-tight minis for Balenciaga – worn, so one didn't miss what was being accentuated, with jackets that barely skimmed the ribs and thigh-high boots as tight as latex. Or the way Narciso Rodriguez gave the bottom definition by covering it in black and white geometric shapes and pairing it with needle-thin stilettos; or even how Hamish Morrow panelled it with different strips of fabric. And what about the fact that spray-on jeans have made such a comeback? Phoebe Philo emblazoned the back pockets of Chloé's with giant poppies, and Ferre dangled keys from the pockets of theirs, borrowing from the gay culture of the mid-Seventies. Bottoms were such a focal point of the autumn 2003 catwalks that it was all one could do, as one female fashion editor admitted to me, not to run to a gym and do an hour of hardcore squats. That, or go out and buy a "butt bra" – an ingenious device involving control-top panties with cups sewn into the back, which I once spotted in a Cuban lingerie store in South Beach, Miami.

But then there are all sorts of ways to make one's rear end more bootylicious, to get that outboard-motor look which is, for the moment, so in fashion. The most radical, of course, is to have bottom implants (the second most popular cosmetic-surgery procedure in Brazil), but don't even think about it unless you're very, very brave. "Just because it *can* be done doesn't mean it should," as Daniel Goldberg MD, owner of the Hurlingham Clinic in London's Parsons Green, puts it. "Technically, sub-muscular gluteal implants are not hard to insert, but because it's a relatively dirty area, there's a much higher chance of infection. It's

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also incredibly painful and it takes months to recover. Let's put it this way, I wouldn't do it on my wife. What I would do, however, is fat-transfer injections and a bit of liposuction. It's amazing what results you can get by shaping everything around the area as opposed to working on the area itself."

The exercise route is also one that's well worth taking. Melanie Griffith is supposed to have raised her bottom three inches after spending a season snowshoeing in Vail; while Kylie, allegedly, learnt to crack walnuts with

her cheeks after a series of workouts with action man Jean-Claude Van Damme. An old Pilates trick – sitting on one's front bottom, as it were, rather than one's back bottom or coccyx – is also supposed to work wonders if you haven't got four hours a day to spend in the gym. As is, rather boringly, paying constant attention to one's posture and the way one moves in general. As French designer Roland Mouret puts it: "It's the whole 'hip bone connected to the thigh bone, thigh bone connected

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to the knee bone' thing – you can't isolate a bottom without talking about the way it interacts with everything else. For example, I know Kylie and, let me tell you, it's nothing to do with her actual butt. It's the way she moves it."

A quicker alternative (and easier to obtain than a butt bra) is a great pair of jeans. As Tim Kaeding of cult jeans label Seven For All Mankind claims, "Our jeans are specifically designed for the woman who needs a bit of a butt-lift. Of course, if I told you the secret of how we did it I'd have to kill you, but let's just say it's all about old-school tailoring."

Where the back pocket goes can also make a magical difference, as anyone who has ever worn jeans by Joie Rucker, the Malibu-based designer behind super-cool label Joie, will tell you. "A longer pocket that extends right below the fold between the butt and the thigh somehow makes a backside look more pert,"

offers Rucker, whose loyal following includes Cameron Diaz, Gisele, Gwyneth Paltrow and Gwen Stefani. "But it takes a lot of road-testing and a lot of time. I have 12 fitting models and I always ask each of them over and over again whether they like the way their butt looks in each style. It starts and ends with the bottom. If that's not right, it's just not going to work."

There are all sorts of other things one can supposedly do to a bottom to smooth away the cellulite and lift it a couple of millimetres, like deep-tissue massage (which I had administered

in my own home by a nice lady called Sheina), the application of certain bottom creams (there's one that Kylie uses called Rodial Body Sculpture Gel, which contains pomegranate seeds and green tea and feels fab), and light therapy – a strange but not unpleasant process that involves having an infra-red probe run over one's bare backside and legs to stimulate lymphatic drainage (I had it performed on me in a clinic on Wimpole Street by another nice lady called Malvina). Who knows what, if any,

effect all this had. Certainly, after the light therapy, I was a lot less grumpy with the kids.

However, if there is one thing that emerges out of all this, it's that it's a case of what feels right at this particular moment in time. In other words, if everyone else has got their bottom out there, why shouldn't mine be out there, too?

Bearing this in mind, I decide to road-test a pair of Damaris silk corset pants. They are, as they sound, a pair of pink and black silk pants which lace up, giving your cheeks a lift and a cleavage in the same way a bustier does your boobs. They also come all wrapped in tissue paper in a very saucy pale-blue box, and when the kids' father sees it lying on the bed, he immediately assumes I have a secret lover.

Taking Damaris' advice, I wear them under my Seven For All Mankind jeans (with the corset strings hanging out) and a sports bra – after all, who cares about tits any more? I'm slightly worried in case someone, for a laugh, pulls the dangly string. I'm so tightly trussed up, I've got this horrible feeling that if they do, it'll be like the little Dutch boy who pulled his finger out of the dyke... But nothing of the sort happens, and the kids' father, finally convinced I haven't got a secret lover, and having always been a bot rather than a tit man, loves the new look.

Flushed with my success, I head to Heidi Klein on a sunny afternoon, and walk out with a pair of fuchsia micro-shorts by Amanda ♥♥♥ling. It doesn't really hit me until I get home and start walking around the house in them. What on earth has happened to me? A 43-year-old with a bottom that failed the pencil test before the laptop was invented, a 43-year-old who spent a good part of her adolescence walking out of rooms backwards like a geisha girl – in *hot pants*? If that isn't a measure of how bottom-centric the world has become, I don't know what is. ■