

The History of Sex Toys from 25,000 B.C. to Today

By Michael Castleman

c. 25,000 B.C. Prehistoric carvings of clearly sexual figurines of women. First discovered in Willendorf, Germany, in the 19th century, and dubbed the “Venus of Willendorf,” these faceless stone female nude sculptures boasted greatly oversized breasts, bellies, hips, buttocks, and vaginal lips. Similar prehistoric sculptures have been discovered throughout Europe from France to the Ukraine. Most experts consider them fertility goddesses. However, it’s also possible that they were the porn of their day, used to sexually excite men.

c 2500 B.C. First documented dancing. Depicted in Egyptian art, female dancers gyrated nearly naked carrying a sculpture of an oversized erect penis to honor the god Osiris. Possibly an agricultural fertility ritual. Possibly something else.

c. 600 B.C. Debut of theater, as an offshoot of the ancient Greeks’ Festival of Dionysus, god of fertility, wine, and the arts. Dionysian festivals lasted several days and featured public intoxication and public sex. Basically, they were drunken orgies. Ever since, sex has been closely associated with the arts, wine, and other drugs.

c. 500 B.C. Invention of the dildo. This momentous event took place in Miletus, a Greek port on the western shore of today’s Turkey. Miletan traders sold what the Greeks called *olisbos* around the Mediterranean as sexual refuges for lonely ladies. A Greek literary fragment from the third century B.C. tells of a young woman, Metro, whose husband is away. She visits her friend, Coritto, to borrow her *olisbo*, only to learn that Coritto has lent it to another lonely maiden. Metro departs crestfallen.

c. 350 B.C. First mention of olive oil as a sexual accessory. Actually, it was touted for contraception. But ever since, couples have used vegetable oils as lubricants.

c. 300 A.D. Invention of penis extenders, sex toys now known as prosthetic penis attachments (PPAs). First mentioned in the classic Indian sex manual, the *Kama Sutra*, these cylindrical toys fit over men’s erections to make them look larger. The

Kama Sutra suggested crafting penis extenders from wood, leather, buffalo horn, copper, silver, ivory, or gold.

c. 500. Invention of ben-wa balls. Single balls, usually made from silver, were mentioned in Asian sex writings from Burma to Japan. Some were solid, others hollow with clappers that make a ringing sound as they roll around in the vagina (Burmese bells). Originally used to increase men's pleasure during intercourse, ben wa balls eventually became paired, and were used by women to increase the strength of their pelvic floor muscles, the ones involved in orgasm. When these muscles are weak, the balls drop out when women stand or walk. As the pelvic floor muscles become stronger, women can hold the balls inside their vaginas—and enjoy more intense orgasms. Today, the pelvic floor muscles are usually strengthened through Kegel exercises. But ben wa balls also work.

c 655. Introduction of mirrors as sexual accessories. Lady Wu Chao, consort to the Chinese Emperor Tai Tsung ordered large sheets of reflecting glass arranged around their bed. When other courtiers insisted that the mirrors were a bad omen, the Emperor ordered them removed. After Tai Tsung's death, Wu Chao seized control of the throne and reinstalled the mirrors to enhance trysts with her subsequent lovers.

c 1200. Invention of the proto-cock ring. The first documented rings were made in China from the eyelids of goats (with eyelashes intact). The eyelids were processed to keep them flexible, while the lashes were processed to harden them. The flexible eyelids were tied around men's erections, and the hardened lashes were said to increase the pleasure of intercourse.

c. 1400. Coining of the term “dildo.” In Renaissance Italy, the Greek *olisbo* became “dildo,” possibly from the Latin *dilatare*, to open wide, or perhaps from the Italian *diletto*, to delight. Renaissance Italian dildos were made of wood or leather, and required liberal lubrication with olive oil for comfortable use.

c. 1600. Invention of the modern cock ring, and clitoral stimulator. Chinese men slipped ivory rings over their erections to help maintain them. The rings were ornately carved, usually depicting dragons. Over time, the carved dragons' tongues extended to form a nub that protruded from one side of the rings. The nub was placed against the woman's clitoris to enhance her pleasure during intercourse, the forerunner of today's clitoral stimulators.

c. 1700. First mention of water-jet massage. Some European heath spas installed gravity-fed systems that sent powerful jets of water into bathing pools. These devices were the forerunners of the jets incorporated into today's jacuzzis. While not specifically developed for female genital massage, surviving accounts hint that some women spent considerable time leaning into water-jet spouts.

c. 1750. Appearance of modern BDSM. The *Kama Sutra* mentions sexual spanking and other SM practices. References to SM also appear in European sex writings dating from the 15th century. But BDSM came into its own during the mid-18th century, when some European brothels began specializing in flagellation and other SM-style "punishments" that dominant prostitutes meted out to willingly submissive men.

1791. Publication of the SM novel, *Justine* by Donatien Alphonse Francoise, comte de Sade, better known as the Marquis de Sade (1740-1814). De Sade's name became the source of the term "sadism." His highly controversial writings helped popularize BDSM—and the many toys used in sexual power play, among them: riding crops, whips, nipple clips, and restraints. (In 1870, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, published the novel, *Venus in Furs*, about male sexual submission. His name inspired the term "masochism.")

c. 1830. Debut of the can-can. Parisian dancers inaugurated modern sexual dancing by lifting their skirts on stage and showing off their fishnet stockings, filly petticoats, and lace panties. Soon after, the panties disappeared, which made the can-can much more popular with French men. The dance quickly spreads to the U.S.

1844. The vulcanization of rubber. Invented by Charles Goodyear, vulcanization made rubber stronger and more elastic. Goodyear went on to found the tire company that bears his name. Other nameless inventors used vulcanized rubber to develop rubber condoms, dildos, and other sex toys.

c. 1850. Debut of vaudeville. This earthy theatrical form combed burlesque with comedians telling jokes ranging from off-color to overtly sexual.

1869. Debut of the first vibrator. Developed by an American physician, George Taylor, M.D., it was a large, cumbersome, steam-powered apparatus. Taylor recommended it for treatment of an illness known at the time as "female hysteria." Hysteria, from the Greek for "suffering uterus," involved anxiety, irritability, sexual fantasies, "pelvic heaviness," and "excessive" vaginal lubrication—in other words, *sexual arousal* during the Victorian era, a time when women were not considered to

be at all sexual. Physicians of that era treated hysteria by massaging sufferers' vulvas until they experienced dramatic relief through "paroxysm" (orgasm). Unfortunately, hysteria was a recurrent condition. After a few months, weeks, or in serious cases, days, repeat treatment was necessary. Physicians who became known for their skill in vulvar massage had women lined up for treatment of hysteria and earned large incomes. They also suffered sore hands and arms. Taylor touted his steam-driven massage device as speeding treatment while reducing physician fatigue.

1882. Debut of the first electromechanical vibrator. Forerunner of today's vibrators, electromechanical vibrators were smaller and less cumbersome than Taylor's steam-powered device. The original electromechanical vibe was a battery-powered massager designed by British physician Joseph Mortimer Granville. It featured attachments similar to those in today's vibrator kits, which allowed the physician treating hysteria to vary the vibratory sensations the device produced. However, Granville, was firmly opposed to using his device as a treatment for female hysteria. He considered it useful only for massage of men's skeletal muscles to treat injuries caused by overexertion.

1890s. Invention of the motion picture. Almost immediately, early filmmakers began producing pornography, some of which featured women playing with dildos, including strap-ons, and vibrators.

1899. Publication of America's first advertisement for a home electric vibrator, the Vibratile, in *McClure's* magazine, as a cure for headache, wrinkles, and "neuralgia," or nerve pain, a term that included hysteria.

1900. At the Paris Exposition, physician-inventors displayed more than a dozen electric vibrators. Medical journals and textbooks of that era extolled the devices as effective treatment for many medical conditions, notably female hysteria.

1903. American physician Samuel Howell Monell, M.D., reported "wonderful results" for vibrator treatment of female hysteria. In Monell's view, compared with vibrators, vulvar massage by hand offered "no value for the majority."

1900-1920. Popularization of the vibrator. As electricity became widely available around the U.S., plug-in home vibrators were one of the first electrified home appliances. They were advertised in many consumer magazines, including: *Needlcraft*, *Modern Women*, *Home Needlework Journal*, and *Woman's Home Companion*. Marketed to women as health and relaxation aids, vibrator advertising

copy was filled with double-entendres, for example, “all the pleasure of youth...will throb within you.” The popular Sears & Roebuck catalogue offered a vibrator, it touted as “very satisfactory...[an] aid every woman appreciates.”

1907. The Penis Stiffener wins a U.S. patent. This device, the first American PPA was developed by Louis Hawley. It was a hollow, metal cylinder. It had a wide opening at one end for insertion of the penis, and a small opening at the other to allow sperm into the vagina. It was designed for use by men with erection problems.

1921. The first vibrator advertisement aimed at men. Published in a 1921 issue of *Hearst's* magazine, it exhorted men to buy vibrators for their wives as Christmas gifts to keep them “young and pretty” and free from the scourge of hysteria.

c. 1925. Vaudeville shows morph into strip-tease. Starring the likes of Gypsy Rose Lee, strippers combined can-can moves with sexual bump and grind. Until the 1960s, strippers don't strip naked. They slowly peeled down to nipple covers (pasties) and crotch covers (G-strings), both of which eventually become sex toys. They also incorporated many props into their acts, among them: fans, furs, capes, and feather boas, which eventually were incorporated into lingerie and sex toys.

1927. Debut of KY Jelly. Originally marketed only to physicians to improve women's comfort during pelvic exams, KY went over the counter as a sexual lubricant in 1980. Since then, many other lubricants have been introduced.

Late-1920s. Vibrators appear more prominently in porn, not as “massagers,” but as masturbation aids. One movie, *The Widow's Delight*, showed a well-dressed matron at her front door bidding good night to her equally dashing suitor. He attempts to kiss her. She dodges him, then trots off to her bedroom, where she strips down to her underwear, grabs her vibrator, and presses it between her legs.

c. 1930. Vibrator advertisements are banished from magazines and catalogues. As more pornographic films showed women using vibrators for sexual self-stimulation, it became impossible for manufacturers to defend the polite fiction that they were simply innocent “massagers.” Self-appointed guardians of rectitude branded them immoral, and very quickly, vibrators virtually disappeared.

c. 1930. Development of latex rubber. Lighter, softer, and more pliable than vulcanized rubber, latex revolutionized contraception, allowing production of better condoms and diaphragms. It also led to the development of latex sex toys.

1948. Debut of amateur erotic photography for the masses. Pornographic images had been available ever since the invention of photography in the 1850s—but not widely because they were difficult to develop and reproduce. But in 1948, the Polaroid-Land camera arrived. It produced black and white photographs in just one minute without a third-party developer. It allowed anyone to become an erotic photographer.

1953. Debut of *Playboy* magazine. Hugh Hefner pasted up the premier issue on his kitchen table in Chicago,. It featuring Marilyn Monroe topless. Extremely tame by today's standards, *Playboy* was attacked as “pornography.”

1964. Debut of topless dancing. Carol Doda pulled off her pasties and showed her nipples at the Condor Club in San Francisco. Bottomless dancing followed not long after.

c. 1965. Re-emergence of the vibrator. You just can't keep a good sex toy down.

1970. Debut of the water bed. Inventor Charles P. Hall designed it for sleep comfort, but water beds quickly came to be considered sex enhancing. Hugh Hefner installed one in his bedroom at the Playboy mansion. Many hotels added them to their honeymoon suites.

1972. Release of *Deep Throat*. This porn film about a woman (Linda Lovelace) whose clitoris was located in the back of her throat, became the first—and only—X-rated movie to break out of the porn ghetto and play to mainstream audiences. Produced for less than \$100,000, it grossed \$600 million, and helped porn go mainstream.

1975. Debut of the videocassette recorder (VCR). Within a few years, porn was widely available in video stores nationwide.

Late-1970s. Debut of the home video camera. Forget Polaroids. With a camcorder, anyone could produce porn videos.

1995. Debut of the Internet. Almost immediately, pornography becomes available online.

2009. A Google search of “sex toys” yields 33 million sites. A search of “porn” finds 248 million sites.