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Jolie Clifford, 21, adopted the pinup look after she found a 1950s issue of Playboy with photos of Bettie Page.

## A Sly Wink to Pinups of the Past

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SHE is a child of the 1990s, that decade of Starbucks, Nirvana and heroin chic with its wraithlike queen Kate Moss. But Jolie Clifford is having none of it.

Ms. Clifford, 21, a recent college graduate and an art photographer, recalled that as far back as high school she was keen to trade the wan aesthetic that defined her crowd for something with a bit more ... oomph.

She found it one day while sifting through a trash container, where she unearthed a dog-eared 1950s Playboy. Inside were photographs of Bettie Page showing off the trademark cherry-tone lips and little-girl bangs that made her the most popular pinup of her day.

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"I know that back in the '50s, her images were porno material, but they're classy now," Ms. Clifford said. "I thought they were beautiful."

In deference to her new idol, she promptly trimmed her bangs and painted on winged eyeliner. She was quick to adopt the high-waist capri pants, swing skirts and halter tops that signaled her membership in a subculture composed mostly of women, mostly young, who like their cocktails sour, their music with rockabilly twang, and their personal contours on the shapely side.

More siren than sylph, those women derive a sense of chic, and an unexpected emotional comfort, from reinventing themselves as contemporary incarnations of Ms. Page, or as modern-day retro-vixens like Katy Perry or Lana Del Rey, who have elevated the all-American calendar girl to an emblem of hip femininity.

Once fodder for magazines with evocative titles like *Eyeful* and *Wink*, the pinup has evolved as "a woman-friendly adaptation of what was once not a woman-friendly thing," said Jim Linderman, a pop-culture writer whose blog, *Vintage Sleaze*, examines that culture's less savory side. Admirers, he said, "have taken a negative and made it a positive and built some kind of community around it."

Staples of the pinup wardrobe have gained a surprising cachet on college campuses. "Pinup-inspired style is a trend that's only growing," said Zephyr Basine, the editor of *Collegefashion.net*, a blog written by undergraduate women, which recently highlighted tie-front shirts, polka-dot bikinis and sailor pants. "To women who have grown up with the spray-tanned, skinny models as their beauty ideal, this look is new and refreshing, and even groundbreaking."

Nostalgia driven, they are drawing inspiration from a trend that is only now hitting its stride, gaining currency through a recent spate of television period dramas like "Pan Am" and "Magic City," movies ("My Week With Marilyn"), Web sites, photography shows, advertising campaigns and fashion features revisiting the era of tail-fin sedans and voluptuous babes in skimpy lingerie. Devotees of the trend can dip into a cultural well that includes coffee-table books showcasing illustrations by midcentury masters like Alberto Vargas or George Petty and photographs by Irving Klaw and Bunny Yeager, whose self-portraits and pictures of Ms. Page are now coveted collectibles.

"Campy interest in the soft-core photography of the '50s and '60s is on the rise," said Brian Wallis, the chief curator for the International Center of Photography in New York. It is evident, Mr. Wallis said, "not just in theoretical circles but in the culture at large. It's reflected in the headlines every day, and circulated on cellphones and iPads."

Pinup photographs like those by Lawrence Schiller of Marilyn Monroe in the June issue of *Vanity Fair* and a coming show at the Steven Kasher Gallery in Chelsea have become a common reference point for marketing campaigns by Guess, with its still shots and video clips of Monroe look-alikes, photographed by Ellen von Unwerth; by Louis Vuitton and Ugg, with its demiclad beauties on the

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beach; and by Coca-Cola, which has commissioned Jean Paul Gaultier to enhance the iconic curves of its Diet Coke bottle with a lacy corset design.

The fascination with calendar girls has spawned a handful of workshops instructing members in the art of the steamy pose. Bettina May, a burlesque performer who offers one such course in Brooklyn, said her classes tend to attract young mothers who want to pamper themselves, as well as female professionals: lawyers, fund managers and the like. They regard posing for cheesecake photographs as a form of role play, Ms. May said, typically telling themselves: "Look at me in these cute pictures. I may be playing a submissive role, but the joke's on you, because really I'm the boss."

The same infatuation has given rise to a proliferation of Web retailers selling vintage photos, vinyl records and midcentury fashions with a modern spin. PinupLifestyle, an online aggregator of cheesecake-inspired apparel stores, claims some 14,000 monthly subscribers, many in their late teens and early 20s.

Bettie Page Clothing, a Web-based retailer with brick and mortar outlets from Miami to Santa Barbara, Calif., generated \$15 million this year selling va-voom cocktail frocks, shorts and swimwear mainly to women under 35, said Jan Glaser, an owner. "It's a niche, but it's a good-sized niche," Mr. Glaser said. "If it becomes too mainstream, it will turn off a lot of people. These young ladies want to think of themselves as free spirits."

Obsessed with achieving centerfold curves, some young women are wearing the faja, a girdle used by liposuction patients.

Natasha Vargas-Cooper, a cultural critic and the author of "Mad Men Unbuttoned: A Romp Through 1960s America," suggests that in reasserting their femininity, albeit with a wink, devotees of the bombshell look may wear wasp-waist dresses and elevator pumps to signal "I'm sexy" in quotation marks. Emulating the archetypal calendar girl, Ms. Vargas-Cooper said, "is a way of being feminine without looking like a little girl in pigtails and ruffles. Wearing stockings and high heels, there's something fundamentally adult about that."

Or fundamentally demure, at least by contemporary standards. On their spring runways, Jason Wu, Anna Sui and Dolce & Gabbana paraded high-waist swimsuits, tap pants and sundresses so modestly cut that they seemed prim. Recent issues of Vogue, Allure and W highlighted similar looks: sunnily updated, hypercolorized pinup shots that are the fashion equivalent of comfort food. They draw on a pervasive nostalgia for "more innocent days when sexuality wasn't portrayed as so hard core and in your face," said Edward Enninful, the fashion and style director of W. "People kind of miss that today."

Mr. Enninful, who helped conceive the brooding, faintly lurid Bettie Page homage in the March W, followed that fashion feature the next month with another devoted to Jessica Biel looking buxom as

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she emerged from a pool or lounged, legs apart, on a chaise. “She wanted to show her curves and not be retouched,” he said. “She was saying to readers, ‘It’s all right for a woman to be shapely.’ ”

To some ears, that message seems subversive, indeed bracingly so. Emulating the pinup, “has more to do with rebelling against today’s version of man bait,” said Ms. Basine, the college blogger. “The pinup looks of the ’40s and ’50s are tame and quite glamorous when compared with the spray tans, breast implants and emaciated figures of today’s lingerie models.”

To say nothing of the blowup-doll look popular in girlie magazines and on Web pornography sites. “Playboy is so gross now,” said Nicole Aiello, 23, an artist in New York. “Everything is airbrushed,” she said, and everyone is super-skinny with large breasts.

“I prefer a Rita Hayworth look now,” added Ms. Aiello, who has a predilection for leopard prints, darkened eyebrows and deeply red lips. She views such touches as “classy, not super-sexualized.”

“They make you look mature,” she said, “and that’s the look I’m going for.”

Luring men, she added, has never been her aim. “I dress this way for myself,” she said, “because it makes me feel pretty.”

Ms. Clifford, the Bettie Page enthusiast, has long been obsessed with the fashions of film stars and old-time burlesque queens, partly because of their feel-good sensibility. The hot rods, the music, the pinups: they are, she said, “part of a therapy culture.”

“For me those things are like a baby blanket.”

Not that she is ignoring their obvious cosmetic charms. “A high-waisted skirt makes you seem a little thinner,” she said. “A halter top makes your bust a little bigger, and being propped on high heels — well, that just makes everything pop.”

[http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/17/fashion/a-sly-wink-to-pinups-of-the-past.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=2&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1338301115-figaHODfdhO8lmOrFGTclQ](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/17/fashion/a-sly-wink-to-pinups-of-the-past.html?pagewanted=1&_r=2&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1338301115-figaHODfdhO8lmOrFGTclQ)