

Brazilian Women's Lycra Clothing

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Encyclopedia entry

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Abstract

The synthetic fiber known as “Lycra” was commercialized in 1958 by the American chemical company DuPont, as an essential component of elasticated, abrasion-resistant underwear. It was incorporated into items such as girdles and roll-ons (a lightweight elastic corset without fastenings). During the 1970s Lycra was reinvented and blended with other fabrics such as cotton, silk, and nylon to produce pantyhose, swimwear, and exercise clothes, most notably those championed by Jane Fonda and her keep-fit enthusiasts throughout the 1980s. The unique stretch and recovery properties of Lycra provide comfort, durability, and freedom of movement for the wearer.

The burgeoning Brazilian fashion market demonstrates the worldwide popularity of Lycra, which has been manufactured by Dupont at a production facility in Paulinia (a municipality in the state of São Paulo) in Brazil since 1975. In 1999 a \$100 million state-of-the-art renovation that was introduced developed processing techniques and automation, which doubled the output of Lycra in order to meet intensified popular demand throughout Latin America. Since the 1990s an interesting use of Lycra has emerged in the less affluent suburbs of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Belo Horizonte, Belem do Para, and Salvador. Created and produced by anonymous low-end designers with limited materials and economic means, Lycra-blended fabrics have been used to create distinctively Brazilian designs. These designs are influenced by the tightly draped, figure-hugging aesthetic of the Tunisian-born, Paris-based designer Azzedine Alaïa and other international designers such as Giorgio Armani and Donna Karan, which was observed in secondhand European fashion magazines from the 1980s.

The synthetic fiber known as Lycra—more generically termed spandex—is derived from petroleum and was originally developed in the 1950s by the American chemical company DuPont. It was marketed in 1958 as an essential component of elasticated, abrasion-resistant underwear and incorporated into items such as girdles and roll-ons (a lightweight elastic corset without fastenings). As a fiber made of polymer chains (polyurethane polyurea copolymers) with interspersed rigid and elastic elements, Lycra can be stretched to up to six times its relaxed length yet retain its original shape. It is also very resistant to deterioration caused by lotions, cosmetics, and perspiration. Lycra is never used alone but always incorporated with other fabrics, whether directly knitted or laid into the knit of material, or spun with another fiber for weaving.

During the 1970s Lycra was reinvented and blended with fabrics such as cotton, silk, and nylon to produce pantyhose, swimwear, and exercise clothes, most notably the spandex leggings and leotards championed by Jane Fonda and her aerobics and dance enthusiasts throughout the 1980s. The unique stretch and recovery properties of Lycra provided comfort, durability, and freedom of movement for the wearer.

In the 1980s, Lycra came to be associated not solely with comfort and stretch, but with fashion. This was epitomized by the tightly draped, figure-hugging aesthetic of the Tunisian-born, Paris-based designer Azzedine Alaïa and other European and North American designers, such as Giorgio Armani, Donna Karan, and Karl Lagerfeld. Alaïa in particular became famous after the launch of his 1981 collection of body-conscious stretch garments, which featured leggings and the invention of a new garment, the one-piece “body” (a dancer’s leotard, fastened with poppers or buttons at the crotch). He was nicknamed the “king of cling” by *Women’s Wear Daily* in 1986 for his widespread use of Lycra, in combination with other materials that stretched and clung, to give a garment an inbuilt support system. Alaïa molded the female form through the use of elasticized cloth and his expert knowledge of corsetry, whether actual or alluded to, in order to elevate and support, to constrict and flatten, to give the illusion of curves, or to minimize unsightly bulges .



A young woman wears a green halter-neck top with a gold metal detail and built-in bra, fashioned from green Lycra and polyester lace. Lycra is never used alone but always incorporated with other fabrics, whether directly knitted or laid into the knit of material, as seen here, or spun with another fiber for weaving. This design was made by an anonymous designer in the suburb of Madueira, situated in the less affluent North Zone of Rio de Janeiro. Photograph by Mari Stockler.

Numerous manufacturers throughout the world have produced Lycra since the late 1980s, when DuPont underwent a shift in market focus and centered its production on four key regions: North America, Latin America, Europe, and Asia Pacific. This was an attempt to target niche markets with specialty fibers and challenge competitors in synthetic fiber production, both within the United States and abroad.

The burgeoning Brazilian production of Lycra demonstrates the global popularity of this high-tech stretch fabric, not least in Brazil, where over 90 percent of consumers recognize the brand name, with its instantly recognizable triangular wave that is used to convey movement.

Lycra manufacture has been centered at a DuPont production facility in Paulinia (a municipality in the state of São Paulo, Brazil) since 1975. Twenty percent of DuPont's annual revenue was generated by Brazil in 1998. In 1999 a \$100 million state-of-the-art renovation developed processing techniques and automation, which doubled the output of Lycra in order to meet intensified popular demand throughout Latin America. The decision made by DuPont to expand its operations in Brazil preempted a 1999 report by the International Monetary Fund, which stated that economic reforms in Brazil, such as the stabilizing of the Brazilian currency, the real, had forecast economic growth from a worldwide financial crisis for Latin America's largest economy. In 2012, Invista (an integrated fiber, resin, and intermediates company that was previously a subsidiary of DuPont, and sold privately to Koch Industries in 2004) invested to expand Lycra production in Brazil and strengthen the existing presence of the fiber throughout Latin America .



Beginning in the early 1990s, low-end anonymous Brazilian fashion designers used Lycra-blended fabrics to create tight spandex trousers, dresses, tops, shorts, and body suits, in a variety of colors, shapes, structures, and sizes. Photograph by Mari Stockler.

The most obvious association made between Lycra and Brazil might be the Brazilian bikini, epitomized by high-end swimwear brands such as Lenny Niemeyer and Rosa Chá, which utilize the fabric's superior technological qualities to produce sophisticated and high-performance swimsuits that appeal to a domestic and international audience. However, in the early 1990s an interesting localized use of Lycra emerged in Madureira, a less affluent suburb in the north zone of Rio de Janeiro. Lycra-blended fabrics were used by anonymous low-end Brazilian fashion designers to create tight spandex trousers, tops, shorts, and bodysuits, in a variety of colors, shapes, structures, and sizes, with different patterns, "holes" (small perforations in the material, sometimes studded with diamante), transparencies, and mesh details. The designers were heavily influenced by Alaïa's svelte, clinging Lycra creations, which they had observed in secondhand 1980s European fashion magazines such as *Vogue* and *Elle*. Although they had limited materials and economic means, the designers reinterpreted and customized Alaïa's designs—which had little in the way of decorative detail or fuss—with sophistication, in order to cater to the tastes of contemporary Brazilian consumers.

Alaïa always chose a clean and simple line, and preferred dark or muted colors such as black, brown, beige, navy, and soft pastels. In contrast, the Brazilian designers exploited the endless possibilities of color: whether an acid hue of green, a flash of silver woven into turquoise, or bold zebra print. Their creations can be seen to relate to the work of Brazilian photographer Anna Mariani (born in Rio de Janeiro in 1935), who is known principally for her photographs of the colorful facades and architectural details of housing in the interior of northeastern Brazil. Devoid of any human element or interference with the surrounding landscape, she published these images, which were always taken from a frontal angle, in her photobooks entitled *Pinturas e Platibanda* (Paintings and Platbands) (1976) and *Facades* (1988). Mariani's photographs stood out for the brilliance of their color, which picked out the elaborately decorated Platbands of the buildings' facades and revealed the presence of stylistic elements stemming from West Africa to China. It is in this sense that her work can be seen to relate to the anonymous Brazilian designers, who similarly thought about architecture, only this time of the body, through their use of Lycra-blended materials to build up variations of structure around the female form. They synthesized aspects from European and North American fashion trends, such as Karl Lagerfeld's high-necked, long-sleeve bodysuits in silver and gold for his fall/winter collection of 1991/1992, but added elements such as chains, zippers, lace fragments, and plastic elements to show off certain areas of the body, which then became a part of the overall aesthetic elaboration of the clothing. This was produced through the insertion of eyelets, incisions, cutout sections, rips, and shreds, all of which formed abstract and figurative motifs such as diamonds, stars, or rectangles, and exposed the wearer's skin through the cloth. Whereas Alaïa had used Lycra to skim the body like a second skin, making it look as smooth and streamlined as possible through the use of discreet corsetry, the Brazilian designers emphasized the sexual appeal of the wearer's body, irrespective of size or shape, and instead highlighted its voluptuousness .



A transvestite wears a structured white satin and Lycra bodice, complete with cut out elements, at a party in Rio de Janeiro. This photograph was taken by the Brazilian artist Mari Stockler in 1998 and published in 2002 in her photobook, *Meninas do Brasil* [Girls of Brazil]. “Even though he is a transvestite, he is also a ‘menina’ [girl] and has a romantic, girly way of viewing the world, demonstrated by his adoption of these tight spandex fashions,” explained the artist. Photograph by Mari Stockler.

As the Brazilian artist Mari Stockler (born in São Paulo, 1966), the first to document this fashion trend in Rio de Janeiro in 1995, explained in an interview with the author: “Brazilians are very sexy and this is independent of the size of their bodies. Fashion standards of beauty interfere little in the real life of the majority of Brazilians.” The distinctively “Brazilian sexuality” that Stockler refers to is conveyed more clearly in the situations in which the Lycra fashions were worn. The freedom of movement permitted by the outfits enabled Brazilian women to move in an unrestricted way. As a result the outfits were frequently worn at favela funk nights, samba parties, and discos (in addition to the more quotidian locations such as the street, shopping mall, and beach), where the spectacle of dress, body, and dance could bring alive the figure-hugging designs and attract the attention of admiring onlookers.

Stockler presented the photographs that she took of Brazilian women's Lycra clothing from 1995 to 2001 in a photo book entitled *Meninas do Brasil* (Girls of Brazil), which was circulated throughout the Brazilian fashion and art worlds as well as in anthropological and sociological discourse. Stockler enthused:

I went to visit the stores in Madureira, a poor quarter of the city, where something very interesting was happening. The presence of an infinite variety of tops, pants, shorts and bodysuits in every color, with lots of stripes, details, holes and transparencies was very powerful. The girls were wearing them day and night. All kinds of bodies with a funky second skin. A parallel world. So, I started photographing streets, balls, sambas and malls all over the country. It was very beautiful to see how colorful and "spandexed" life can be!

Dancing, chatting, and laughing with the women that she documented, Stockler understood her role as a recorder of their activities, but not a choreographer of their actions: "None of them saw me as a 'professional photographer' and this was a big condition for the image. I had no critical distance from them." The tilted camera angle and blur seen in the resulting images shows that Stockler worked unobtrusively. She is never represented in the photographs, but her presence is felt in the varied ways that the subjects react to her and her camera. Stockler developed a technique that she had been taught by the Brazilian artist Regina Case, whom she had previously worked with on *Brazil Legal*, a television program produced by the Brazilian media corporation TV Globo. Stockler described Case as "the master of intimacy," who enabled her to put aside the mindset of being an outsider in the world of these women, in order to get "very, very close to them in seconds."

Although in 1995 the Lycra fashions documented by Stockler were localized in Madureira, by 2000 they could be seen throughout Brazil, in the less affluent suburbs of São Paulo, Belo Horizonte, Belem do Para, Salvador, and other large cities. As Stockler explained in an interview with John Bowe for the New York Times blog: "There is a gigantic culture [in Rio de Janeiro, but also other large cities throughout Brazil] that comes from the periphery, the poorer areas around the city, which then informs the traditions of the central part of the city. There's a conversation between the two." The Lycra creations of anonymous low-end Brazilian designers cannot be understood as a straightforward "bubble-up" trajectory, to adopt a term used by Ted Polhemus in 1995 to describe the top end of the market emulating the bottom end, although their work did begin to influence that of high-end Brazilian designers such as Carlos Miele and Gloria Coelho. Equally, the Lycra creations of the anonymous Brazilian designers cannot be interpreted merely as a demonstration of the "trickle-down" effect, to cite a term used by George Simmel at the turn of the twentieth century to describe the bottom end of the market emulating the top end. This is because their work adapted and reinterpreted designs produced by Alaïa, Lagerfeld, and Karan, among others, to appeal to distinctively Brazilian sensibilities. Instead, the Lycra creations of the anonymous Brazilian designers at work during this period represented something altogether more complicated and messy. It fed into the avant-garde ideas of Brazilian literary scholar Silviano Santiago, who in the late 1970s first formulated the notion of "the space in-between." As Santiago explained, "the space in-between" is an area or zone in which the dynamics of Brazilian culture interacted, whether fleetingly and impulsively, or as part of a strategic and continued engagement, with the cultural expressions of Europe, North America, and elsewhere geographically farther afield. Viewed through the lens of Santiago, Brazilian women's Lycra clothing can be seen as the creative product of cultural exchange, which took place between Brazil and European and North American fashion design of the 1980s, and within different segments of Brazilian society throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.

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