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Bringing Sexy Back: Our Favorite Bombshells

A retrospective of 20 of the sexiest sirens ever to grace the small screen, big screen, and computer screen

By Suzanne Weinstock | November 16, 2010 1:00 p.m.



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THE BOMB SQUAD

A bombshell, above all, is jaw-droppingly sexy. But we're not talking about the waifs fashion often loves. No, no. You will not see Kate Moss or Twiggy in these slides. A bombshell is curvaceous in all the right places and not afraid to show it off. She takes pleasure in being provocative. She has a sparkle in her eye and a confidence in her step because she knows the effect she has. When a bombshell walks into a room, the reaction is, of course, explosive. Here are 20 prime examples of women who have worked their magic, from the golden age of Hollywood to today.

Photo: Getty



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MARILYN MONROE

Jean Harlow may have been the original bombshell but Marilyn Monroe is the most iconic. Her image was simultaneously sexy and childlike. Monroe's high-pitched voice and carefully curated dumb-blonde persona were paired with an intense sexuality and the most celebrated curves of any bombshell. Monroe started acting and modeling in 1946 but she didn't become a superstar until the 1950s for films like *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), *The Seven Year Itch* (1955)—including the famous scene in which her skirt is blown up while standing over a grate—and *Some Like It Hot* (1959) which is still widely considered one of the best films ever made. The entire nation lusted after her and Monroe married three times: James Dougherty, when she was only 16, baseball great Joe DiMaggio in 1954 and then playwright Arthur Miller in 1956. But her most famous affair was with President John F. Kennedy. Her last major public appearance was a sultry rendition of "Happy Birthday, Mr. President" for her lover in a clingy white dress by Jean Louis so famous that it sold for \$1.26 million in 1999. She met a tragic death suspected to be at her own hand at 36-years-old but her image and career is the most celebrated of all the bombshells.



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BLAKE LIVELY

Blake Lively is a golden girl in both Hollywood and the fashion industry. Professionally she's graduated from family-friendly good girl in *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2005) to being *Gossip Girl*'s resident sex kitten and on the red carpets she's become every designer's favorite mannequin. Discussion about her fashion choices as well as how they display her admirable physical assets (yes, we're talking about her always-on-display breasts) explode after every red carpet appearance.

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BETTIE PAGE

Bettie Page is the unchallenged queen of pin-up. She was a free spirit with an open, unabashed sexuality during the repressive 1950s. Her notorious curves caught the attention of S&M photographer Irving Klaw in 1951 who made her the "Queen of Bondage." She moved into more mainstream pin-up modeling but it's the fetish photographs that made her an underground star. Page was rarely seen without a cropped top or bikini revealing her tiny 23 inch waist and was always pictured with short, thick, black bangs and a sweet, inviting smile. After only six years in the public eye, Page disappeared, her whereabouts unknown until the 1990s. But her pin-up pictures have inspired aspiring bombshells ever since.

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DITA VON TEESE

Burlesque star Dita von Teese, born Heather Sweet, has brought pin-up glamour back with a vengeance. As an 18-year-old stripper she decided to develop a creative, retro act. She then transitioned into fetish modeling as a "tightlacer," someone who wears corsets for long periods of time to make their waist smaller. Von Teese can now get her 22-inch waist down to a minute 16 inches. As a burlesque dancer, Von Teese "puts the tease back in striptease," doing elaborate 1930s and 1940s inspired routines. The bombshell's most famous dance involves stripping down to a glittery thong and pasties before slipping into a giant martini glass.

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JEAN HARLOW

Jean Harlow was the original bombshell. She shot to fame in 1930 after a performance in the movie *Hell's Angels* so sexy that censors cut 30 minutes from the film in its original British release. Harlow uttered the famous line "Would you be shocked if I put on something more comfortable?" before entering her bedroom and dropping her robe to reveal a slinky backless dress. Three years later Harlow starred in the film *Bombshell*, loosely based on her life. Although she died tragically young at 26, Harlow's unapologetic sexuality and platinum blond locks became the prototype for bombshells to come, particularly a young girl named Norma Jeane Baker.

Photo: Getty



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SALMA HAYEK

Many modern bombshells are both beauties and businesswomen. Spicy Mexican actress Salma Hayek started out as a telenovela star who broke into the US market starring opposite Antonio Banderas in *Desperado* (1995) before taking sexy roles in blockbusters like *Dogma* (1999) and *Wild Wild West* (1999). The curvy Latina took control of her career the same year by founding her own production company and has put out passion projects like the critically acclaimed *Frida* (2002) as well as the successful prime time TV show *Ugly Betty*. After marrying billionaire Francois-Henri Pinault in 2009 and giving birth to her first child in 2008, Hayek has largely remained behind the scenes, although her occasional cleavage-heavy red carpet appearances still send out media shock waves.

Photo: Getty

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BRIGITTE BARDOT

French bombshell Brigitte Bardot is the great 1960s sex kitten. Her sensuality was mesmerizing. She was an instant sensation when she starred in then-husband Roger Vadim's film *...And God Created Woman* (1956). Bardot dancing wild and barefoot on a tabletop is one of the most erotic scenes in the history of cinema. And the bikinis she wore in her films are credited with popularizing the bathing-suit style. Even though her English was limited, she was a phenomenon in the US as well as France. Her image was so in demand that paparazzi documented her every move. Although common today, Bardot was the first celebrity to be hounded by photographers in her daily life. She retired from film shortly before turning 40 but went out with a bang by celebrating her birthday with a spread in Italian Playboy.

Photo: Getty

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SCARLETT JOHANSSON

Many bombshells have carefully crafted their look but part of Scarlett Johansson's appeal is that she's effortless. Woody Allen has called her "criminally sexy" but Johansson rejects diets and gyms and is usually casual and without make-up in her daily life. Her natural curves and sensuality make her in-demand to take on sexy, starring roles in *Lost in Translation* (2003), *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (2008), and *Match Point* (2005). Some bombshells are born not made.

Photo: Getty



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AVA GARDNER

Wild-child bombshell Ava Gardner built her career playing temptresses and seductive heroines like Spanish dancer Maria Vargas in *The Barefoot Contessa* (1954). It wasn't so different from her personal life, which was filled with endless parties and violent, rocky romances with men who couldn't resist her. She married Mickey Rooney and Artie Shaw before her third and final marriage to Frank Sinatra. *People* magazine called the stormy relationship between Gardner and Sinatra one of the "Romances of the Century." She was on and off with billionaire Howard Hughes for 20 years. Hughes once dislocated her jaw and she nearly killed him with an ashtray. Later in life she moved to Spain and took bullfighter Luis Miguel Dominguin as a lover. The ultimate femme fatale.

Photo: Getty



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MEGAN FOX

Megan Fox's look is all vixen. Her black hair and light eyes are reminiscent of Elizabeth Taylor but with a raw sexuality that has men tripping over their feet. Other than her role in the *Transformers* movies, Fox's films have been box-office flops but it hasn't dimmed her star one bit. Her mesmerizing looks and outrageously blunt comments to the media about sex assure this bombshell is here to stay.

Photo: Getty



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JOSEPHINE BAKER

Josephine Baker is the ultimate embodiment of bombshell brazenness. The American-born performer became an instant sensation in Paris, where she was known for her erotic dancing and appearing nearly naked onstage. Her iconic costume for the *Danse Banane* was little more than bananas strung around her waist and a bra. Later in her career she tended to be accompanied onstage by her pet cheetah Chiquita, who wore a diamond collar. During World War II she was an informant for the French Resistance and later fought segregation stateside, becoming the first African-American woman to star in a major movie and perform in a mixed concert hall. Baker was one of the sexiest women to ever break barriers.

Photo: Getty



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HALLE BERRY

Halle Berry's life as a bombshell began in the pageant world. In 1985 she won the Miss Teen All-American Pageant, then became runner up in Miss USA before being a Miss World contestant and coming in sixth. Her acting career is divided between films that show off her acting chops like her Oscar-winning role in *Morarter's Bell* (2001) and roles that show off her killer body. She emerged from the ocean in a bikini with a knife for the James Bond flick *Die Another Day* (2002), went topless in *Swordfish* (2001) and donned spandex for the X-Men flicks and *Catwoman* (2004).

Photo: Getty



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SOPHIA LOREN

Sophia Loren is the most famous Italian bombshell. The Rome-born actress broke out in the film *The Gold of Naples* (1954) and crossed over to the US in 1957. Her voluptuous figure became as famous as her films. Even at 76-years-old, she always appears with overflowing cleavage. "Everything you see I owe to spaghetti," Loren is famously quoted as saying. Loren withdrew from Hollywood around 1980 but reemerged as a sex symbol in 1995 in the movie *Grumpier Old Men*. In 2007, she took her clothes off for the famous Pirelli calendar proving that some bombshells are simply sexy forever.

Photo: Getty



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KIM KARDASHIAN

Kim Kardashian shot to fame based on little more than her sexy figure, particularly her enormous, gravity-defying rear end that she's shown off in *Playboy* and in the pages of numerous magazines. A leaked sex tape in 2007 that showed it off didn't hurt either. Today, the bombshell is a full-fledged superstar, leveraging her extraordinary looks into a career as a model, actress, producer and reality TV star.

Photo: Getty



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ELIZABETH TAYLOR

Elizabeth Taylor oozes glamour. She entered the public eye when she was 10 in the film *One Is Born Every Minute* (1942) and was a full-fledged star by 1951 when *A Place in the Sun* was released. With jet-black hair, violet eyes and a regal demeanor, the English-American actress was the opposite of Marilyn Monroe, but her beauty was just as highly in demand. In 1960, Taylor became the world's highest paid actress to date when she signed a \$1 million contract to star in *Cleopatra* as the famous beauty. Off-screen she famously married and discarded seven men including Richard Burton, her co-star in 11 movies, who she divorced not once but twice. Burton famously gave Taylor some of the world's most famous jewelry including the 33-carat Krupp Diamond and the famous 69-carat Burton-Cartier Diamond. Even at 78-years-old, her striking appearance creates a stir.

Photo: Getty



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CRYSTAL RENN

Crystal Renn has brought curves back to the runway. Sample size for runway models has dwindled to a size 0/2, but size-12 Renn has nonetheless crossed over from plus-size modeling into the mainstream. She walks runways and appears in campaigns for designers like Jean Paul Gaultier and Chanel and regularly appears in the world's most prestigious fashion magazines. Her curves are so highly prized by her public that weight loss from a new workout routine recently created an outcry for her to stay full-figured. Renn is proving that there's room for bombshells in the fashion industry, too.

Photo: Getty



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RAQUEL WELCH

The poster for *One Million Years B.C.* (1966) secured Raquel Welch's bombshell status. The image of Welch standing in an animal-skin bikini created an uproar. A year later she played lust itself in *Bedazzled*. *Playboy* named her the "Most Desired Woman" of the 1970s when she was on the cover in 1979. Welch became a major figure in the 1980s fitness craze and her figure was so fixated upon that she titled her autobiography *Beyond the Glavage*. Like Loren, her beauty has proved timeless. Welch became one of MAC cosmetics' beauty icons in 2007.

Photo: Getty



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CHRISTINA HENDRICKS

Christina Hendricks's bodacious curves on 60s-era TV show *Mad Men* have set off a mania in the fashion world for curvier bodies and the clothes that complement them. The va-va-va-voom redhead was shocked by the attention her body got not to mention the complimentary comparisons to Marilyn Monroe. Her obliviousness to how sexy she is adds to the charm. "It might sound silly," she said to *New York* magazine, "but I didn't realize I was so different." The poster child for sexy curves certainly realizes now!

Photo: Getty



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AISHWARYA RAI

Aishwarya Rai, known for her striking blue-green eyes, has often been called the most beautiful woman in the world. She rose to fame in 1994 as Miss World and then as a model for Pepsi. She became a huge star in Bollywood and is one of the only Indian stars to cross over to the U.S. In 2002, her film *Devdas* became the most successful film in Bollywood history, breaking box-office records in both India and the U.S., and it was the first Bollywood picture to ever receive a special screening at the Cannes Film Festival. She was the first choice to play Jane in *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, over Angelina Jolie, but turned down the role because of scheduling conflicts, something only a true bombshell could boast.

Photo: Getty



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ANNA NICOLE SMITH

When Anna Nicole Smith replaced Claudia Schiffer as in Guess's iconic jeans campaign in the early '90s, it was like the second coming of her idol Marilyn Monroe. The former *Playboy* Playmate of the Year's personal life became as sensational as her persona when, in 1994, she married ailing 69-year-old oil tycoon J. Howard Marshall. As the years went on, Smith's behavior became bizarre, but her role as a bombshell was already safely secured.

Photo: Goffy