

The Wedding Dress

200 Years of Wedding Fashion from the Victoria and Albert Museum, London

By Chung May Khuen

This August, visitors to the National Museum of Singapore will be treated for the very first time to a superb collection of wedding costumes and accessories from London's Victoria and Albert Museum. The exhibition tells the history of the wedding dress and its enduring popularity from the early 1800s to the present day, through fascinating accounts about the lives of its wearers, their fashion choices and the economic and social conditions of the time.

Today, the white wedding dress is the universal symbol of the bride. It is worn by brides of different faiths and nationalities on their wedding day, even in countries where it was not a tradition. However, in 18th century Britain, white



Embroidered silk wedding dress designed by Charles Frederick Worth, Paris, 1880. Worn by Clara Mathews for her marriage to Colonel Hugh Stafford on 19 February 1880 in London. Given by Mrs. G. T. Morton V&A:T.62, B-1976 ©Victoria and Albert Museum / V&A Images

was just one of several colours worn by brides. Most women preferred other colours and fabrics with motifs on them. This meant that women could wear their dresses again after their wedding day. White became the dominant colour for wedding dresses only in the 19th century when Queen Victoria (1819-1901) wore white when she married Prince Albert in 1840.

By the early 20th century, historical costumes and evening wear

began to exert their influence on the designs of bridal dresses. Two decades later, British high society weddings became events of great importance for the public because of the intense media coverage. These weddings were often captured on film and distributed as newsreels, which gave the designer of the bride's dress invaluable exposure. At the same time, a group of young designers such as Norman Hartnell (1901-79) began to establish couture houses in Britain and were sought after by prominent families for their creations.

When war broke out in Europe in 1939, women had to cope with a shortage of fabrics when clothing rationing was introduced in Britain in 1941. Resourceful brides began to make their gowns from un-rationed materials such as upholstery fabric, net curtaining and even parachute silk. In 1945, after the Second World War, Paris continued to dominate the fashion scene with the introduction of the feminine and luxurious style of the 'New Look'. It was only in the 1960s that the style of bridal dresses in Britain became



Embroidered silk satin wedding dress designed by Norman Hartnell, London, 1933. Commissioned by Margaret Whigham for her marriage to Charles Sweeny on 21 February 1933. Given and worn by Margaret, Duchess of Argyll V&A: T.836-1974 ©Victoria and Albert Museum / V&A Images

more youthful and innovative because of the emergence of younger and more affluent consumers from the 1950s baby boom. Hemlines changed according to the fashions of the period and many women began to invest in ready-to-wear dresses from their favourite designers, such as John Bates, Zandra Rhodes and Jean Muir.



Wedding dress and coat designed by John Bates for his Jean Varon label, London, 1966. Cotton gabardine trimmed with sileroed PVC. Worn by Marit Allen for her marriage to Sandy Lieberon in London on 10 June 1966. V&A: T.26-1,2-2009

Between the 1970s and the 1980s, bridal fashion went from the romantic to the exaggerated. One of the most iconic wedding dresses from this period was the late Lady Diana Spencer's fairy tale wedding gown designed by David and Elizabeth Emanuel in 1981 for her marriage to the Prince of Wales. It was only in the 1990s that mainstream bridal wear and fashion reconnected and emerged out of its fossilised era, revitalised by designers such as Vera Wang. These days, the bridal industry is flourishing, encouraged by the media's coverage of celebrity weddings and women who are willing to spend lavish sums on their wedding.



Shot taffeta wedding dress, Vivienne Westwood Couture. Velvet and shot taffeta tricorne hat with dyed mink pom-poms, Stephen Jones, London, 2005. Lent by and designed for Dita Von Teese

In *The Wedding Dress* exhibition, gowns by celebrated designers including Charles Frederick Worth, Charles James, Christian Lacroix, John Galiano, Norman Hartnell, Vivienne Westwood and Zandra Rhodes, will be on display together with sumptuous wedding dresses worn by celebrities such as Dita Von Teese and Gwen Stefani. In addition, a short film containing scenes from royal and society weddings and also other weddings will be screened to enhance the visitor's experience.

In conjunction with the exhibition, the National Museum will also present its own collection of western and traditional wedding costumes from the Malay, Indian, Chinese and Peranakan communities in Singapore. It is hoped that this display will allow visitors to discover how the western bridal dress was integrated into the wedding customs and attire of multi-racial Singapore.



Silk brocade shoes purchased from Peter Robinson, London, 1914. Worn by Phyllis Blaiberg for her marriage to Bertie Mayer Stone at the Bayswater Synagogue, London on 9 September 1914. Given by Mrs B. Rackow V&A: T.856 to C-1974 ©Victoria and Albert Museum / V&A Images



A sarong kebaya in songket worn by a Malay bride, 1960s to 1970s, Singapore. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore



This 1953 traditional Chinese qun gua comprises a black blouse and red skirt embroidered with auspicious symbols such as the dragon and phoenix using gold thread. Such outfits are still worn by brides during the traditional tea ceremony today. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore.

Chung May Khuen is the curator of the Fashion Gallery (Singapore Living Galleries) and the recent exhibition *In the Mood for Cheongsam* at the National Museum of Singapore. She specialises in the fashion history of Singapore women from the 1950s to the 1970s.
