

THE  
WEDDING DRESS



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THE 50 DESIGNS THAT CHANGED THE COURSE OF BRIDAL FASHION

Eleanor Thompson

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#### **ON THE COVER**

Catherine Middleton wore an Alexander McQueen wedding  
dress designed by Sarah Burton for her 2011 wedding to  
Prince William, Duke of Cambridge.

#### **OPPOSITE THE TITLE PAGE**

Vivienne Westwood's Wake Up, Cave Girl! collection  
gown of 2007.

# Contents

Introduction **6**

---

**Dresses 01:** 1840

William Dyce **10**

---

**Dresses 02-03:** 1890s

Charles Frederick Worth **14**

House of Worth **16**

---

**Dresses 04-07:** 1920s

William Wallace Terry **18**

Paul Poiret **20**

Jeanne Lanvin **22**

Madeleine Vionnet **24**

---

**Dresses 08-10:** 1930s

Charles James **28**

Mainbocher **32**

Elsa Schiaparelli **36**

---

**Dresses 11-12:** 1940s

Norman Hartnell **38**

Charles James **42**

---

**Dresses 13-16:** 1950s

Hardy Amies **44**

Ann Lowe **46**

Pierre Balmain **50**

Helen Rose **54**

---

**Dresses 17-22:** 1960s

Yves Saint Laurent **60**

John Bates **64**

Jean Patou **66**

Cristóbal Balenciaga **68**

Valentino Garavani **72**

Jean Muir **74**

---

**Dresses 23-25:** 1970s

Yves Saint Laurent **78**

Valentino Garavani **80**

Zandra Rhodes **82**

---

**Dresses 26-27:** 1980s

David and Elizabeth Emanuel **86**

Carolina Herrera **92**

---

**Dresses 28-33:** 1990s

Joe Casely-Hayford **96**

Catherine Walker **98**

Christian Lacroix **102**

Gianni Versace **106**

Yohji Yamamoto **108**

Vera Wang **112**

---

**Dresses 34-44:** 2000s

Yohji Yamamoto **116**

John Galliano **120**

Viktor & Rolf **124**

Alexander McQueen **128**

Vivienne Westwood **132**

Viktor & Rolf **136**

Alexander McQueen **138**

John Galliano **142**

Vivienne Westwood **144**

Olivier Theyskens **146**

Jean Paul Gaultier **150**

---

**Dresses 45-50:** 2010s

Giambattista Valli **154**

Sarah Burton **158**

John Galliano **164**

Rei Kawakubo **168**

Vera Wang **172**

Karl Lagerfeld **176**

Designers Brides

Should Know **180**

Glossary **186**

Resources **188**

Index **190**

Acknowledgments **192**

# Introduction

**T**wenty-first century brides have a dizzying array of wedding dresses to choose from. Magazines, blogs, and books abound with inspirational images to suit every style of wedding, running the gamut from traditional to avant-garde, bohemian and vintage to classic. Yet, so often, the press returns to the same dresses that have stood the test of time: the regal glamour of Grace Kelly's dress, Princess Diana's fairy-tale-princess confection, and the classic elegance of Wallis Warfield Simpson's two-piece suit, to name but a few. These traditional archetypes have been recently joined by the striking creations of contemporary designers, worn by celebrities like Gwen Stefani, who wed in a white and hot-pink dress created by British designer John Galliano. But why is it that certain wedding dresses stand above the crowd and, decade after decade, captivate brides-to-be? This book uncovers what it takes for a wedding dress to become an icon, revealing the stories behind its conception and the details that make it magical.

## The romantic tradition

One of the most important dresses a woman will ever wear, the wedding gown is invested with emotions and dreams. Many designers understand that their role in creating an iconic wedding dress is wish-fulfillment, materializing the hopes and fantasies of a bride. As a ceremonial garment associated with an important rite of passage, the wedding dress is ingrained with symbolism and traditions dating back over the centuries. All the dresses in this book have been chosen because, in some way, they reflect the most valued traits, ideals, and aspirations of bridalwear. The white wedding dress is the ubiquitous standard-bearer. Without a doubt, the first iconic wedding dress was the one that instigated the mass trend for white. In 1840, Queen Victoria unwittingly set an international custom for romantic white wedding dresses.

To this day, white wedding gowns like Olivier Theyskens's magnificent 2008 design for Lauren Davis are created as symbols of romantic love.

## A sign of the times

Some white wedding dresses have achieved their iconic status by rebelling against tradition and playing with the associations and qualities of this symbolic color. Until the latter part of the twentieth century, the white wedding dress drew upon Christianity's association of white with purity and innocence—values many contemporary designers recognize are incongruous with twenty-first century life. Produced in 1965, Yves Saint Laurent's curious take on the white wedding dress—a knitted cocoon-like garment—is an emblem of the changing attitudes toward marriage in the twentieth century. With one dress, Saint Laurent began a new tradition in bridal design: to question the meaning of the white wedding dress to contemporary society. As time passed, Saint Laurent's statement was picked up by Christian Lacroix, Joe Casely-Hayford, Yohji Yamamoto, Jean Paul Gaultier, Rei Kawakubo, Viktor & Rolf, and Karl Lagerfeld, all of whom have made poignant political and cultural comments about the spectacle of white weddings. Designers have also chosen to comment on the associations of a traditional white wedding dress by departing from it altogether. Gowns of deep purple, rich red, and bright pink embody the dynamism of twenty-first century wedding culture, embracing multi-faith, same-sex, and countercultural marriage ceremonies.

## The future of fashion

Stripped of religious and out-dated cultural meanings, white—pure and dramatic—is the perfect canvas to showcase the intense craftsmanship of couture. In Cristóbal Balenciaga's skillful hands

the white wedding dress was distilled to its most essential form. His breathtaking sculptural dresses of the late 1960s, with no surface embellishment and few joining seams, are testament to the technical agility of the couturier.

The perfect wedding dress is not only a dream for a bride but often for designers, too—a chance to realize their conceptual objectives and express the highest levels of their craft. Gianni Versace’s provocative silver micro-mini that closed his Fall/Winter Atelier collection in 1997; Catherine Walker’s impeccably tailored gown made for Lady Helen Windsor in 1992; and Alexander McQueen’s sensuous body-skimming dress, created for Plum Sykes in 2005, are all prime exemplars of their designers’ unique technical and creative achievements. These three dresses, like their historical counterparts, have come to stand as monuments to craftsmanship, skill, and artistic vision following their designers’ premature deaths.

Gowns such as Versace’s, designed for the runway rather than the church aisle, frequently serve as a marker of new artistic tendencies. Often created to form the dramatic centerpiece of a couture collection, a wedding dress is usually the final design to be revealed by a designer during a catwalk show. Drawing the themes of the collection together in one extraordinary ensemble, these showstopping dresses demonstrate the highest fulfillment of the designer’s vision in a uniquely compelling way. These one-off ensembles can be hugely important in the history of fashion.

### The craft of couture

The skill, labor, and time required to produce a couture gown sets it above the average wedding dress design. Custom-made creations for individual clients can take up to six months and many fittings to design and create, involving specialist seamstresses, dyers, beadworkers, and embroiderers.



#### PICTURING THE DETAILS

Illustrations can be a rich source of design inspiration, offering a clear guide to details that may be missed by archive photography. Queen Victoria’s dress (page 12) wasn’t clearly photographed before the lace flounce on the skirt was removed. This illustration indicates it was attached to the lower half of the skirt.



#### THE BRIDE AND THE DRESS

The adaptation and accessorizing of Vivienne Westwood's 2007 Wake Up, Cave Girl! couture collection gown (see page 144) emphasizes how a bride's individual style can make a dress iconic.

Every last detail of a couture wedding gown, from intricate surface embellishments to hidden internal seams, are refined to perfection before they can be debuted—usually just for a few hours of wear at a one-off event.

Yamamoto intentionally revealed the process of creating an iconic gown in the deconstructed wedding dress he showcased in 2000. The design literally turned the wedding dress inside out, exposing the normally hidden marks of couture construction. Unsurprisingly, the cost of luxurious wedding gowns can run into hundreds of thousands of dollars. That said, the value of an iconic wedding dress need not necessarily be reflected in its price tag, nor must it be handcrafted. Viktor & Rolf's sell-out, limited-edition wedding dress, created for retail chain H&M in 2006, was priced at just \$349. For a fraction of the price of a couture dress, brides were able to buy the exclusivity and status of limited, avant-garde design.

#### Iconic gowns for iconic women

Many of the gowns in this book were designed for celebrity brides. Ever since Consuelo Vanderbilt's spectacular marriage ceremony to the ninth Duke of Marlborough in 1895, the press have slavishly reported on high-profile weddings. The continued profuse coverage of royal and celebrity brides has embedded certain wedding dresses in the public's imagination and evoked millions of bridal fantasies.

From gowns designed for Queen Victoria to Victoria Adams, the future Mrs. Beckham, the dresses that most often capture the popular imagination are those that manage both to meet the public's expectations and make a personal statement at the same time. On Catherine Middleton's wedding day, over two billion people watched as the future queen unveiled her much-anticipated wedding gown, taking her place alongside Princess Diana and Grace Kelly as a model princess bride. Sometimes, the expectation is that a bride will break from tradition rather than follow it. In these cases, more eclectic and unusual dresses can capture the limelight. Like their traditional counterparts, these emblems of counterculture remain a combination of public expectation and private statement, brilliantly captured by the designer of the dress. The dark, gothic romance of Dita Von Teese's purple Vivienne



Westwood wedding dress is just as compelling and relevant to many brides-to-be as the more traditional wedding dresses of her mainstream counterparts.

Von Teese and Westwood were a perfect match; the British designer's signature corsetry and draped fabric accentuated the star's sensuous pin-up glamour. Likewise, in the pairing of Sarah Burton and Catherine Middleton, John Bates and Marit Allen, and John Galliano and Kate Moss, the designer was able to channel the bride's personality into a unique ensemble that would be celebrated by both the popular and fashion press as a result.

### What does it mean to be iconic?

Sometimes just small changes to a designer's standard catwalk model can elevate a dress from beautiful to iconic. Von Teese's purple wedding dress originally featured on Westwood's runway show in a muted gold color; the same designer's 2007 *Wake Up, Cave Girl!* wedding dress was adapted with a sparkling trim and an ever-so-slightly more fitted bodice to suit the fictional but still highly influential desires of *Sex and the City*'s Carrie Bradshaw; Giambattista Valli's tulle ruffled skirts were given a surprising, hidden feature just for one special bride, the shoe designer Charlotte Dellal.

While it is true to say that celebrity wedding dresses become iconic after being taken to the public's heart, not all iconic dresses have met with universal admiration. Editor of *Vogue* magazine Edna Woolman Chase wrote of Wallis Warfield Simpson's hugely popular wedding ensemble that "[Simpson] and Mainbocher might have done better than they did." While others thought it enduringly elegant, the *Vogue* editor dismissed it as "dull ... to look at."

Selecting just fifty iconic wedding dresses out of the many hundreds of beautiful and famous examples is no easy task, nor is pinning down the slippery definition of iconic. In this book, it signifies designs that have broken new ground, set trends, inspired multiple imitations, or represented the wedding dress in its most sublime form. This selectivity has ruled out many wonderful and well-known gowns. In the 1920s Chanel, Patou, and Lelong all championed revolutionary knee-length designs, but Poiret's dress has been selected for the book since it is one of the earliest known surviving wedding dresses of this style. In the 1930s Alix, Callot

Soeurs, Vionnet, and Charles James produced bias-cut wedding gowns of breathtaking beauty. However, of these designers it is widely recognized that Vionnet was the pioneer of the bias-cutting technique, while James, also featured, harnessed it in 1934 to make a surprising and unconventional gown for Barbara Beaton. In a similar way, although the house of Alexander McQueen has undertaken many commissions for one-off bridal gowns for celebrities, actresses, fashionistas, and socialites—all designs unsurpassed in their originality—none of these gowns have had as great an impact as the one McQueen personally designed for his friend Victoria "Plum" Sykes.

### Inspiration for brides-to-be

For most brides, their wedding is a chance to wear a dress that has been designed and custom-fitted using couture techniques. Even if the dress is bought ready-to-wear, it can be embellished or accessorized in a unique way. From the range of dresses in this book, spanning the romantic to the revolutionary, there is inspiration for every bride-to-be. These gowns can't be found in a bridal store, but each and every one has something unique to offer. Some, like Christian Lacroix's black bejeweled gown, shout their statements loudly. Others, such as Jean Muir's discreetly top-stitched dress, whisper of their quality and individuality. Elements of all these gowns can be translated into styles to suit all personalities and budgets. Even the most avant-garde creations offer up surprising sparks of inspiration. For undiluted femininity, look no further than Lagerfeld's distressed Miss Havisham-inspired gown. Pared down, its allover frou-frou feathers could become a pretty, soft-focus embellishment. With some obvious modification, the outré sexuality of Gaultier's transparent lingerie dress could transform into a sensual corseted dress perfect for an empowered bride. The avant-garde dresses in this book offer silhouettes, garment shapes, and fabrics and textures to inspire new directions. The best advice for choosing bridalwear, the most important dress of any bride's life, is to take your time and reflect on your options—so be drawn deeper into the secrets of these iconic wedding dresses and let them reveal your own dream style.

# William Dyce

1840 For Queen Victoria

Queen Victoria's white gown broke with centuries of royal bridal customs, sparking the most enduring bridal tradition of all time.

**W**hen Britain's Queen Victoria wed her cousin, Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, in 1840, the bride wore a crinoline-style court dress of heavy ivory silk satin. Trimmed with white lace, this simple yet elegant gown was a powerful personal statement that instigated the paradigm of the white wedding dress.

Contrary to popular belief, white had been used for bridal gowns prior to Queen Victoria's wedding, in particular for the dresses of wealthy nobility. White was a difficult color to create and maintain and sent a clear message of affluence (women of lesser means wore their "best dress" of any color). However, before Queen Victoria's marriage, centuries of English princesses married in shimmering gowns woven with threads of silver and gold. These were topped with velvet and ermine robes paired with formal, jeweled tiaras and crowns. A most unusual royal bride, Queen Victoria deliberately broke with these traditions.

## Personal and romantic

Politics usually prevailed over romance in royal marriages of the nineteenth century. Acts of foreign policy, marriages forged alliances

between nations. In these circumstances, opulent wedding dresses were used to show off the wealth and power of the bride's nation. Surprisingly, in an era of arranged marriages, Queen Victoria's was a true love match. In addition, unlike other royal brides, she held a huge amount of power and influence. She entered the marriage as queen in her own right—her future would be actively leading the nation, not acting as a decorative royal consort. Queen Victoria was aware of the political message of royal weddings and it seems she was determined to make hers a personal moment for herself and her husband. So she eschewed a grand display of wealth in favor of a prettily romantic dress made by her personal dressmaker, Mary Bettans.

Following the fashionable 1840s silhouette, Queen Victoria's gown was distinguished by a décolleté bodice with a Bertha collar that drew attention to the sweeping lines of her bare neck and shoulders. Although low across her chest, this neckline would have been considered appropriate for formal attire. The sharply pointed, dropped V-waist, surrounded by deep pleats sewn into the waistband of the dome-shaped skirt, emphasized the queen's slender waist. Queen Victoria's choice of accessories touchingly acknowledged the romance of her nuptials: her veil was fastened to her head with a wreath of orange blossom, a symbol of fertility and purity, and myrtle, representing love and domestic happiness.

## TRENDSSETTER IN WHITE

Though not the first white wedding ensemble in history, Queen Victoria's white dress and veil have influenced the choices of Western brides for nearly two centuries.





Eleanor Thompson

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