



Somewhere between meringue and ivory: the White Wedding Dress

SUZANNE SPUNNER

It all started when I was a flowergirl at the age of four, imprinted like a Konrad Lorenz chick and destined to walk down the aisle in a frock of some note. Before the big day, I learnt the walk on a carpet runner carefully placed to give me the entire run of the kitchen and then up a step into the next room. My mother made my dress. It was white nylon, stippled, and almost transparent like a paper nautilus shell, with a ruffle around the neck and the hem. It had a petticoat of pale blue taffeta, the skirt stiffened with Vilene, and a sash faced with pink taffeta that tied in a bow at the back. The length of my dress, the straightness of my back, the disposition of my arms and the positioning of the tiny wicker basket I was to carry were all scrutinised. The basket was empty now. On the big day it was full of flowers and my purpose as a flowergirl realised. I managed the long aisle, the low steps, without faltering, I ignored the looks of the staring people. Then, when we came out of the church into the bright light, something terrible happened. People threw tiny coloured bits of cut-up paper all over us and it stuck to me and got caught in the ruffle of my frock, and I was appalled and felt my beautiful dress had been desecrated. No-one had told me about confetti.

So in all the photographs I am the small, serious flowergirl, a glowering *infanta*. Inducted into the lore of the white wedding, I learnt the rules: the bride must wear white

if it is her first time; divorcees and widows must choose another colour (Wallace Simpson wore blue); no female wedding guest wears white or black; the married sister is not allowed to be a bridesmaid but she can be a matron of honour; defactos or the visibly pregnant bride risk censure if they wear a bright shade of white. I learnt the language of white and its innumerable nuances.

It must never be referred to as 'off white', rather as alabaster, iceberg, ecru, oyster, ivory, magnolia, vanilla, parchment, swansdown, eggshell, champagne, cream. It must always be from special stuffs: duchess, slipper satin, shantung, chiffon, shot silk, organza, tulle, and trimmed in lace: guipure Chantilly, Brussels, encrusted in seed pearls, beaded with crystals, then ruched, draped, gathered, fitted, flowing and finally falling softly to the floor.

At a certain age I knew I wanted to be married, I wanted a wedding and I wanted a wedding dress. As a feminist, I tried to anthropologise my own wedding. I felt a desperate need to contextualise what I was doing. Helen Garner ('Arrayed for the Bridal', *The Feel of steel*, 2001) says she has been married three times but never as a bride, put off by 'the bigness and the whiteness!! What, me in a big white dress?', she says. I have been married once and my dress wasn't big or white. It was many muted shades of



cream and made from old lace table cloths and crocheted doilies, even further embellished by my mother. It didn't sweep the ground but landed mid-calf with a handkerchief hem. I wore a picture hat not a veil, and very high bright pink shoes. The very model of a liberated woman. I got my comeuppance when I hired a female photographer who I knew would not put Vaseline on the lens and she did not. I thought I was getting a woman for the job; I wasn't expecting her to make me the subject of her own feminist anthropology, but she did and I lived with it. See if you must:



Ruth Maddison, *When a girl marries*, 1979, series, photography collection, National Gallery of Australia; reproduced in part in Virginia Coventry, ed., *Critical Distance: Work with photography/politics/writing*, Hale & Ironmonger, Sydney 1986.

The White Wedding Dress: 200 years of wedding fashions, at The Bendigo Art Gallery, is a satellite preview of a larger exhibition covering 300 years of the wedding dress scheduled for 2013 at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. White wedding dresses have been commissioned from prominent Australian designers: Akira Isogawa, Material By Product, Romance was Born, and Toni Maticovski. Reading the extensive V&A catalogue in advance of the exhibition, I am struck by the commonality of the continuing tensions expressed by sensible women over the whole business of the frock and what it says about us. The spirit of Beatrice Webb and Fabian socialism still haunts the corridors of South Kensington; the catalogue writers constantly deny any hint of indulgent pleasure in adornment, love of beauty, and delight in sheer extravagance. They are ready with the chastening reminder that the cost of the seed pearls alone on this one dress would have fed a family of five for the winter in a freezing northern coal mining town. Certainly, we should never forget the social cost, it is an astringent corrective, but we still dream of the dress. It is most fitting that this exhibition comes from the V&A because if it were not for Victoria and Albert, there might not be the tradition of the white wedding dress.

During the 18th century and earlier, brides wore their best and most beautiful clothes and revealed their family status through rich fabrics, embroidery and jewellery. At that time, white was the colour of mourning, so brides usually wore bright colours signifying happiness. White was not popular because it was difficult to keep clean. However white had strong associations with purity and innocence and was favoured for winding sheets, christening robes, confirmation dresses and for 'coming out' or presentation at court; what we call doing your deb. Court presentation demanded a train on the dress to perfect the curtsy under difficulty. Royalty set the mark for formal dress and the combination of white silk and metallic thread, usually silver, became the *desideratum* because they were expensive and would only last for one wear so it was a conspicuous consumption par



excellence. Middleclass women were anxious to keep up and it was only the importation of fine Indian muslins into Britain that stemmed this sumptuous trend. Muslin came in many grades and was washable and it retained its whiteness relative to silk which not only did not wash well but yellowed with age. A muslin wedding dress was pretty and relatively practical. All of this the ladies of Cranford and Elizabeth Gaskell knew well.

By the end of the 19th century, white had become a fashionable colour for daywear and muslin, poplin and linen were favoured because of the fashion for simplicity and the Graeco-Roman virtues. Dresses were classical – high waisted and straight. The penchant for white carried over to weddings. Orange blossom, real or waxed, was popular; it smelt exquisite and suggested fruitfulness and virtue, and veils made of tulle or lace in the Spanish style and attached to the back of the head were fashionable. All of this might have been but a passing fad had it not been for Queen Victoria.

When the twenty-year-old Princess Victoria married in 1840, she married the man who had been chosen for her and the man she had fallen in with, Prince Albert. She knew she would soon be queen and to signify that she was to be Albert's wife before he was her consort, she carefully chose her dress to emphasise her ordinary girlishness rather than her incipient queenliness. Her dress considering her resources and position was ostentatiously simple. 'I wore a white satin dress, with a deep flounce of Honiton lace, an imitation of an old design', she wrote in her diary. The dress was made from creamy white silk satin woven in the East End of London by Spitalfields weavers who were Huguenot refugees from Lyons. It had a train embroidered with sprays of orange blossom and a wreath of artificial orange blossom held her veil of English-made lace in place. What is left of the dress is kept in the Kensington palace archives and rarely shown.



The exhibition catalogue is illustrated by contemporary paintings as photography was in its embryonic stage: John Hershel made the first glass plate negative in 1839. However lithographs and descriptions were widely circulated. British historian Eric Hobsbawm, who categorised the practice as 'the Invention of tradition', distinguishes between custom and tradition; it is the custom to get married but the white wedding dress is an invented tradition. White was divorced from its associations with mourning and now signified virginal purity and the beginning of the new wedded life. Subsequently the white wedding dress was regarded universally as traditional, and the trope developed: white satin, long train, lace, pearls, orange blossoms and a veil. The tradition





clothing coupons made do with what was not rationed: upholstery fabric, mosquito netting and parachute silk. My mother's elder sister married in 1943 and the whole wedding party was outfitted in mosquito netting – white for the bride and dyed in varying hues for the bridesmaids. Her *négligée* and trousseau were made from parachute silk. In advance of the V&A exhibition in 2013, a web-based project has been set up to collect wedding stories and create a database of photographs of clothes worn by people from all cultures since 1840. Looking at wedding photographs from my immediate family and relating them to the fashions of the day worn by royal brides, film stars and famous people, it is remarkable how consistent the themes are.

My maternal grandmother, Estella, married in Sydney in 1917, and my grandfather left the following month for the Western Front. He is in his AIF uniform and Estella's dress is a simpler reprise of the Victorian model: mid-calf length, waisted with full sleeves and a high neck, she wears seed pearls, her long hair is worn up, and her veil is attached to a coronet of orange blossom. Whereas Dorothie, my paternal grandmother who married in 1926, is the acme of jazz-age style; she was an 'art milliner and needlewoman' after all. Her dress has an overlay of embroidered lace but is shockingly knee-length exposing fine silk stockings and satin tango shoes; her veil however sweeps the floor. Her hair is clearly short and she has kiss curls peeping out from under the beaded kokoshnik that anchors the veil. In between these extremes, Elizabeth Bowes Lyon married the Duke of York in 1923 and her veil is similar to Dorothie's but more simply secured. The source of Dorothie's Russian-style headress is in the 1923 *Pathe Gazette* newsreel of Molyneux's London bridal fashions under the influence of the Ballets Russes.

My husband and I are babyboomers; his parents married in 1942 and mine married in 1949, and sandwiched between them was the marriage of Princess Elizabeth and Prince Phillip in 1947. The three young brides in vastly different social circumstances share some common features. All wear white dresses with full or voluminous skirts and fitted bodices. My mother, Gloria, and my mother-in-law, Marjorie, chose short cap sleeves while her HRH chose wrist-length. The bias cut skirt and the fabric, a figured brocaded silk satin in Marjorie's dress, and its sweeping length is similar to HRH, whereas Gloria's dress is floor-length and has a gathered tulle skirt with a lace bodice. Their hair is dressed similarly, medium length and curled, worn off the face, and their veils are attached at the same point on the head, by coronets of flowers or a diamond tiara in the case of the HRH.

In 1951 in Tehran, another royal bride and another dress; the famously ill-fated and tragic Princess Soraya. Her husband the Shah of Iran would divorce her five years later for her inability to provide an heir. Apparently he never forgot her and it is not difficult to see why. However it is clearly a case of the frock wearing the girl: she was only nineteen when she laboured under the weight of the dress by Dior; comprising thirty-seven yards of silver lamé, with 20,000 feathers and 6000 diamond pieces sewn to it. Apparently weak, shivering and still recovering from a bout of typhoid, the Shah draped her in a white mink Dior jacket. Look at Soraya in her vast exquisite dress and then at Princess Diana just twenty, in her enormous confection with its twenty-five foot train, and consider this calculus: divide the age of the bride by the volume of her dress and multiply by the

associated with the veil was further elaborated and encouraged by advances in photography; the bride entered the church veiled and after the ceremony when she exited, the veil was peeled back to expose the face of her new self *qua* wife to the waiting camera.

The tradition of the white wedding dress once invented did not fade away; it followed fashion, mutated and went underground when necessary. During the Second World War some brides were married in day clothes, usually suits to match their groom's military uniforms; others who had the time but not the



expectation of dynastic succession, then the greater chance of future tragedy. These are frocks that will be pursued by the furies. If dresses can be hubristic, then they can also propitiate. Princess Grace, who married in Monaco in 1956, and Princess Margaret, who married in Westminster Abbey in 1960, are studies in the necessity and capacity of the bride to reposition herself via a well chosen frock. Both Grace Kelly and Princess Margaret were women of the world with 'pasts' so they chose conspicuously modest dress in rich fabric but unadorned, with nun-like necklines in keeping with the expectations of the new roles they were taking on. Meanwhile in another freer universe not far away, Bridget Bardot married (for the second time) in 1959, wearing a scandalously short cotton country-style dress of pink gingham, trimmed with white broderie anglaise.

The sixties meant Mary Quant and the mini-dress, and brides teamed them with white patent leather boots, a simple posy of white daisies and instead of a veil, a kerchief scarf edged in appliqué lace daisies: daisies were very big in the sixties! The more extreme sixties wedding fashion was the maxi coat inspired by Julie Christie's Lara in *Dr Zhivago*. Its apotheosis was pop singer Lulu's marriage to Bee Gee Maurice Gibb in 1969. Pint-sized Lulu wore a white brocade mink-trimmed, hooded maxi coat with long white satin boots and a matching mini dress. No wonder we were all so relieved in 1971 when Bianca married Mick Jagger in an elegant, well-cut white linen ankle-length skirt suit by Yves St Laurent. She wore a picture hat with a tulle veil and went bra-less, as you did then. We are now perilously close to my own wedding in 1979, when even the V&A catalogue acknowledges: 'Fashion was confusing ... dresses were individualised with old lace and vintage trimmings were popular.'

I bought my dress off the rack from the Garb Shop in South Yarra because it was an outlet for the way-out wares made by theatrical and film costume designer Rose Chong. Later I learnt the shop was owned by Mariana Hardwick who realised back then: 'It was the era of liberated women discovering their own sense of individuality.' She promptly built a bridal empire, an emporium in Brunswick, boutiques in Sydney, the UK, the US and online. Rose was only an outworker! If I was writing for the V&A I would need to know how much she was paid.

Since the 1990s wedding fashion has gone from evening wear to glamour wear. The White Wedding Dresses (WWD) of today display bare shoulders and are built on boned corsets; either a full-skirted, strapless dress or a goddess sheath with a fishtail train. My son married recently: his bride, Katya, dazzled him in a ruched cream sheath with a swishy train. The WWD embraces social change. It includes the new must-have addition to the bridal party, your own children, ideally still small and pliant enough to be outfitted as mini versions of you and yours, the trend brilliantly announced by the finale of Jean Paul Gaultier's 2001 collection: an organza swathed bride with (apparently) naked babe in arms. The WWD welcomes the ironical comment; in 2002 Gwen Stefani's pink-and-white silk faille wedding dress by John Galiano for Dior was a witty deconstruction of the corset. Its ripped bodice and pink stained hem suggested virginal defilement. The WWD celebrates diversity: Portia De Rossi and Ellen DeGeneres married in 2008 in matching Zac Posen. Portia in a tulle frotherie ballerina inspired ball gown and bodice that referenced the 'lesbian

halter vest' while Ellen's 'usual faggy style' loose white tuxedo doubled the vest reference (LezStyle. Word press.com).

Finally Kate's dress ... The Princesses Mary and Kate can be compared with the Princesses Grace and Margaret. Both Mary and Kate have well documented pre-princess lives so the dress must reposition them; it cannot make them feel like virgins again but it must show them ready to produce heirs. Banished are The Slip Inn and the see-through frock. Their wedding dresses must be scandal proof; the stakes are high. Kate truncated her train and deployed lace as a foil, simultaneously revealing and concealing. Who among you would deny the power of a dress to transform? Long live the White Wedding Dress! ♡

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 The Victoria & Albert Museum's touring exhibition *The White Wedding Dress: 200 Years of Wedding Fashions* has its world premiere at Bendigo Art Gallery, Bendigo, 1 August to 6 November 2011. Wedding dresses by several Australian designers have been especially included for the Australian show, including those by Akira Isogawa, Material By Product, Romance was Born, and Toni Maticevski. www.bendigoartgallery.com.au

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 Suzanne Spinner is completing her PhD on Rover Thomas, which is why she is writing on wedding dresses. She wrote a play about mothers and daughters and sewing and has written on fashion for *Art Monthly* in the past.

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 P31: 1/ Silk wedding dress, over-sleeves and pelerine, trimmed with blond silk lace (detail), British, 1828.

Worn by Eliza Larken for her marriage to William (later 6th Baron) Monson. ©Victoria & Albert Museum / V&A Images.

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 2/ The author as a four-year-old 'infanta' flowergirl. Image courtesy Suzanne Spinner.

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 P32: 1/ Hardy Amies, Cotton organdie wedding dress, 1953, designed for the Cotton Board. Photograph by John French. ©Victoria & Albert Museum / V&A Images.

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 2/ Christian Dior, wedding dress for Princess Soraya for her 1951 wedding to the Shah of Iran, at the Hall of Mirrors, Golestan Palace, Tehran.

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 3/ Jean Paul Gaultier, finale of his 2001 collection, bride in organza dress with babe in arms. © Jean-Bernard Villereal.

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 33: 1/ Ian and Marcel dress, 1989, pleated silk wedding dress and coat, net veil decorated with silicone rubber. ©Victoria & Albert Museum / V&A Images.

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 2/ Norman Hartnell, silk satin wedding dress commissioned by London socialite Margaret Whigham for her 1933 wedding to Charles Sweeny.

The much publicised dress caused traffic in Knightsbridge to be blocked for over three hours as masses of people gathered just to get a glimpse of Hartnell's creation. Sadly, the marriage ended in a bitter divorce in 1947.

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 P34: 1/ Nina Ricci, lace peignoir, Paris, 2005, displayed with Dita Von Teese's wedding corset which was custom made for her by Mr Pearl, Paris, 2005. The peignoir formed part of Von Teese's trousseau for her wedding with Marilyn Manson. Lent by Dita Von Teese.

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 2/ Christian Lacroix, embroidered silk wedding dress (body, corset and skirt), Autumn/Winter 1993-94 *haute couture*.

The dress's name, *Qui a le droit?* (*Who has the right?*), questions whether a contemporary bride should wear a dress associated with purity. Gifted by Christian Lacroix. Photograph by Guy Marineau.