



The White Wedding Dress in Australia

CHLOE BORICH
Curatorial Assistant

For generations, heavenly shades of white have illuminated the poignant desires, hopes and expectations of brides. The wedding dress is renowned for its transformative power and ability to turn young girls into women through ceremonious lengths of satin, lace and tulle. The allure of the wedding dress is universal and has long reflected the ever-changing lexicon of fashion. Its potent legacy has signified shifting attitudes towards femininity and the body, and towards women overall. The romantic, fairytale-like quality of the wedding dress, loaded with symbolism and embodying the memories of that special day, has led to it being not only a treasured personal object, but more broadly, an artefact of immense social, cultural and aesthetic value, often kept long after its short debut.

Considering this beguiling reputation, it is unsurprising that the majority of museum collections and exhibitions devoted to wedding fashion tend to favour a prestigious portrayal of it; biased towards opulent and

high-fashion gowns worn by celebrities and financial elitists. However, it is important to remember and reflect on the plentiful, everyday narratives and social histories of Australian wedding fashion that could otherwise be at risk of falling to the wayside. So, what is it about *that* dress? How did it become so influential? And what can wedding dresses tell us about the lives of Australian brides?

EARLY BEGINNINGS:
THE INFLUENCE OF QUEEN VICTORIA.

Histories of the white wedding dress routinely begin with Queen Victoria, who is widely believed to have single-handedly popularised the tradition of wearing white on her wedding day in 1840. This is actually a common misconception; several royal women around Europe preceded Victoria in this trend, including Mary, Queen of Scots, in 1558. The French first popularised the colour white during the early nineteenth century, prescribing it to their informal

day and evening wear, and subsequently to bridal clothes, as a sign of status and affluence. Nevertheless, Victoria was a bridal pioneer for a number of reasons. While her decision to wear white was not groundbreaking, her white wedding dress signalled a move away from the marriage ceremony being undertaken as a simple legal agreement towards the extravagant, romantic ceremonies we are familiar with today. By choosing to wear white, Victoria broke with royal convention by not wearing her coronation robes and crown, which was the custom. She opted for a dress in accordance with the intimate occasion and fashion of the day: white silk-satin trimmed with lace, a low wide neckline, and puffed sleeves.¹ For the nuptial occasion, a court train was attached at the waist and a veil held in place atop her head by a garland of dainty orange blossoms. Victoria's ascension to the throne coincided with the emerging archetype of woman as a virtuous, domestic angel, and her ethereal-like appearance on her wedding day was the embodiment of this fashionable ideal. This ideal was one widely circulated through the pages of women's magazines, which, by the mid-nineteenth century, had become affordable and therefore increasingly popular. In August 1849, Godey's *Lady's Book* declared in its fashion commentary on 'The Bride's Dress' that "custom has decided ... white is the most fitting hue, whatever may be the material. It is an emblem of the purity and innocence of girlhood, and the unsullied heart she now yields to the chosen one."² Thus, Victoria had come to epitomise the ideal woman, and her dress was the ideal gown. Victoria's choice to dress as a bride of the times had not only presented her as a relatable feminine figure to the everyday woman, but significantly promoted discussion around bridal fashion and the work of local British dressmakers more widely.

THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT: DRESSMAKERS AND THE BURGEONING FASHION INDUSTRY.

Owing to the geographical proximity of London and Paris, fashion trends generally

and new ideas towards wedding fashion in particular flowed constantly between these fashion capitals. Much slower was the transmission of these fashion styles to Australian shores. Albeit delayed, fashion from London and Paris became and remained the most appealing here. This international influence was transported through illustrated magazines and periodicals, pattern books, catalogues, and in photographs, newspapers and letters, which outlined relevant changes of fabrics, lengths of skirts, position of waistlines, and favoured cuts or drapes of fabric. Australia remained highly conscious of the sartorial authority of London and Paris, and ensured clothing followed their lead as closely as possible, in order to keep up with international expectations of social status and prestige.³

Throughout the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century, sewing was a big part of domestic life, with most women making and mending their own and their family's clothing. For many women, it was more than a domestic skill but a means to make a living. The skilled self-employed dressmaker, largely working out of their own home, would expertly make, mend, alter, and repurpose garments while remaining conscious of the cost and original purpose of the item. This economic and accessible nature of the dressmaker appealed to the needs and wants of middle-class society by making fashionable dress more economically accessible. By contrast, Sydney and Melbourne's high streets were home to exclusive boutiques, where high-end dressmakers skillfully mediated the gap between European and off-the-rack-wear for the city's elite. Australian dress historian Margaret Maynard states, "society dressmakers, milliners and their 'hands' attracted the top echelon of rich and fashionable clients".⁴ The most prestigious Australian boutiques sold Parisian couture imports alongside their own elegant reproductions, hand-sewn by talented seamstresses back of house. Dressmakers were routinely overwhelmed by wedding dress commissions, which were often

daunting and time-consuming tasks. Largely governed by the influence of European fashion, this demand arguably gave way to an area of specialisation and some creative freedom, enabling dressmakers to establish burgeoning Australian aesthetic and stylistic choices.

By 1900, however, the retail industry was changing this landscape and presented the public with a new way to consume through the introduction of major department stores. Sydney and Melbourne welcomed Anthony Hordern & Sons (1823), David Jones (1838), and Grace Brothers (1885),⁵ while Queensland saw the emergence of family-run department stores throughout the state, including Cribb & Foote Ltd (1855) in Ipswich, Stewarts (1864) in Rockhampton, and McDonnell & East (1901) in Brisbane.⁶ Department stores presented well-to-do clientele with accessible fine fashion, and, despite presenting an imposing threat to independent dressmakers, ultimately strengthened Australia's burgeoning fashion industry. While the majority of goods and services sold in department stores were imported, including desirable collections of European fashion and fabrics, in-house dressmaking departments and onshore clothing factories were soon established, which promoted local production and employment opportunities for many women. Regional clientele were also looked after by department stores' delivery vehicle services and through fashion-focussed mail-order catalogues, which were posted to all corners of the country. Because of these catalogues, women in the country were provided with access and insight into the latest fashions emanating from Europe and inspiration they could take to their local dressmaker. While delayed, over time, the best and most exclusive European fashion styles, filtered through to emerging cities and out to rural towns, and acted as integral points of design reference for locally made garments.

While dressmakers and department stores co-existed for a number of decades, the economic boom of the 1950s saw a dramatic

increase in mass-produced clothing and, in turn, the decline in numbers of independent dressmakers. However, the one special garment that women continued to rely on dressmakers for, and that kept dressmakers solvent, was the wedding dress.

WEDDING DRESS REALITIES.

For most Australian women in the nineteenth century, employing a high-end dressmaker to design a single-use gown was no doubt a luxury. Naturally, only women who could afford the grandeur of a custom-made wedding dress, modelled after European designers such as Charles Worth, could wear one. For the greater proportion of brides, affordability and practicality were paramount in selecting the dress for their wedding day. If the bride herself, family member, or local dressmaker did not alter a dress passed down from their mother or other family member for the occasion, then many early brides wore their best dress to their wedding. Whether made especially or adorned for the day, the 'best dress' served as a functional, multipurpose garment that could be worn to a variety of special occasions and be altered in line with the changing needs of its wearer. This versatile approach continued well into the twentieth century.

Fashion magazines of the 1930s advised brides on styles of dresses that could later be adapted for other uses. Women altered, dyed, and changed decorative elements of the dress so that they could wear it for other occasions. Coloured dresses appear frequently throughout *The Bowerbird* and *The Bride* collection—not only in the form of bridal gowns but also bridesmaid dresses—from the 1930s and 1940s, when access to fabrics was limited due to impact of the worldwide economic depression and war-time rationing. The increased economic prosperity of the post-war period saw the re-appearance of coloured dresses during the 1950s, though not for brides but for the older members of the bridal party. White, ivory, and cream persisted as the *de rigueur*

for brides, promoted by popular women's periodicals and international mail-order catalogues. In these prosperous times, the practice of repurposing wedding dresses declined and gave rise to the new custom of seeing wedding dresses as sacred heirlooms to be passed down to future generations.

WEDDING DRESSES OF THE BRIDE
AND THE BOWERBIRD COLLECTION:
SHIFTING SILHOUETTES AND
CHANGING TIMES.

This mentality of collecting and preserving wedding dresses, and the tangible evidence of this practice, provides us with insights into the evolution and rich history of Australian wedding fashion, though skewed towards the gowns of upper- and middle-class women. In most cases, surviving wedding dresses belonged to the wealthy, who could afford one-off gowns and the cost to store and preserve them. While the significance of the wedding dress has maintained its unwavering appeal, its silhouette has represented a woman's standing in society and shifted with the changing winds of fashion as well as attitudes towards femininity and the body. During the nineteenth century, a woman's body was considered 'weak', thought to need constant support from rigid structures beneath their clothing. Thus, from Europe to Australia, tightly boned corsets and stays were essential undergarments, which trained the waist to draw in, along with wire petticoats called 'crinolines', which inflated billowing full skirts from the waist down. Towards the end of the century, the focus shifted to the back of the hips and waist: gathered fabric, tiered lace, padding, and elaborate decoration created protruding 'bustles' to exaggerate an idealised feminine shape. These augmented feminine figures are distinctly reminiscent of Victorian era dress and represent the ambiguity that surrounded the female body at the time.

The beginning of the twentieth century saw some relief from the highly structured female custom of dressing. Although

Victorian ideals remained favourable, the appearance of wedding dresses became less ornate. Tea dresses were a popular choice for Australian brides due to their unstructured and fluid form, which was suited to the tradition of morning wedding ceremonies. Not to be fooled by the façade of lightweight cotton normally reserved for women's downtime, when donned for a wedding, tea dresses were worn in conjunction with the traditional undergarments of the time, including corsets, petticoats, and camisoles. Arguably, the appearance of bridal tea gowns during this era points to the gradual move away from the cumbersome layers of Victorian gowns.

The 1920s saw a rapid move away from the strictures of Victorian dress and etiquette after the First World War and the beginning of the 'Roaring Twenties' in Paris. Social and cultural changes in response to the devastation of war saw social attitudes relax, economic and creative industries flourish, greater freedoms arise for women, and overall, society's turn towards modernity. Flapper culture was at the heart of dramatic changes to the ideal female figure. Inspired by the jazz age, flappers were fashionable young women who flouted conventional expectations of behaviour in favour of enjoying themselves; they wore their hair bobbed, their shoulders bare, their skirts short, and their waistlines low—perfect for late night dancing at speakeasy bars. This risqué and rather androgynous physique quickly influenced bridal wear. In keeping with this modern sensibility and the emergence of the Art Deco design movement, fabrics such as cotton, fine muslin, and voile were replaced by luxurious silks and rayon, as well as lavish beading detail.⁷ The focus on new genres of art and design, as well as the growing entertainment industry, facilitated an abandonment of tradition in favour of Paris-fuelled decadence and ornamentation.

The 1930s saw a return to the romantic feminine image and the female figure become increasingly sleek and svelte during the Great



PAGE 116

Valmai Cecilia Crump arriving at the church with her Father. Valmai married Douglas Hamilton in Middle Brighton, Victoria. 20 December 1948

DRESS 22. PAGE 134

LEFT - I

Angela O'Brien wearing a dusky-pink velvet bridal gown with the chapel train, for her marriage to Harold Pentreath at Sacred Heart Cathedral in Bendigo, Victoria. Her sister wears a matching bridesmaids gown in purple velvet. 2 May 1942

DRESSES 18A AND B. PAGE 133

Depression and Second World War. Despite the faltering economy, fashion progressed rapidly along with technological and aesthetic advancements, such as synthetic fabrics. The strong influence of Paris couture was temporarily replaced by the captivating rise of the 'Golden Age of Film' and the glamour of Hollywood. Renowned French couturier Madeleine Vionnet drew a distinction between movement, the body, and dress, and introduced the bias cut: the diagonal cutting of fabric against the grain to create draping, figure-hugging gowns. Australian wedding dresses also embraced this new design technique, as well as elegant lace veils and silk buttoned sleeves.

The 1940s were punctuated by the Second World War, which saw the repurposing and recycling of garments become integral to wedding fashion due to war-time fabric shortages and rationing. Ration coupons were administered in order to limit consumer spending and limit impending shortages of goods, aiming to balance the distribution

of food and clothing across the country.⁸ Maynard identifies that women's clothing came to strike a delicate balance between utility dressing and popular feminine styles, but functionality was imperative.⁹ Overall, restricted access to materials and resources meant dress patterns had to be simplified: focus returned to narrow waists; skirts were slimmed down and shortened; squared shoulders emulated a masculine silhouette; and outfits were finished with minimal embellishment. The mood of the time is exemplified by two extraordinary dresses in the collection that belonged to Angela O'Brien and her sister, who were bride and bridesmaid (DRESSES 18A & B, see IMAGE I). Travelling from Bendigo, the sisters purchased material for their dresses in Melbourne: pink velvet for the bride and purple velvet for the bridesmaid. Whether or not this unusual choice of fabric was intentional, it was most likely their only option due to the limited selection of fabrics available at the time. Bearing a striking resemblance to one another, the dresses

were ultimately destined to be worn for ballroom dancing, with Angela removing the train of her dress for this purpose following the wedding. In contrast to these upbeat intentions, the facial expressions of the four pictured in the image is in keeping with the photographic style of the time. It is stories like Angela's that encapsulate the persistence of marital tradition, and, the enduring history of the wedding dress during times of suffering.

The 1950s silhouette was defined by Dior's 'new look', which boasted a return to traditionally feminine Victorian-esque waists and flouncy skirts. This reflected not only the newly boosted economy, but also the woman's renewed relationship with the domestic realm and role as 'homemaker'. Simultaneously, the 1950s saw innovation in textiles production and the decline of home-made clothing, enabling dresses to be showy and decorative, synonymous with this newfound prosperity. The collection showcases a number of dreamy 1950s gowns that emulate the vigour that permeated post-war life. The influence of Dior's new look can be seen in [DRESS 23 & 26](#) (pictured in [IMAGES IV & II](#)) in the form of sweetheart necklines, exaggerated waistlines, and peplum detail. Examining the images further, one can see that the brides are each wearing lipstick and a classic pearl necklace; a sign these smaller details were now affordable to the everyday woman. Also in this instance, the older age of the brides and the sophisticated appeal of their dresses signal a dignified move away from the ideal of the blushing virginal bride previously perpetuated in women's media.

The end of the 1960s signposted a progression to a more streamlined silhouette across Europe and the United States. This responded to the rise of the women's rights movement and a rebellion against conservative taste. Although this development transitioned into wedding attire, the looks in this collection demonstrate a relatively restrained take on 1960s' style. For instance, [DRESS 26 & 27](#) (see [IMAGE II & III](#)) are floor-length bridal gowns,

defined by simplified lines and details, long sleeves, and gently tapered waistlines, overall upholding a more conservative feel in comparison to dresses from the previous era. The dresses of *The Bowerbird and The Bride* collection suggest it was not until the 1970s that carefree ideals were to become associated with wedding fashion in Australia.

The 1970s witnessed many social, political, and cultural changes that reshaped the expectations of women. This led to a collision of aesthetics within modern fashion. Historical references were mixed together; for instance, sleeve styles from the turn of the century were mixed with a contemporary mini-skirt hemline. Many wedding dresses became equally laid-back as they were graceful. In a move away from traditional bridal attire, wide-brimmed hats were a fashionable accessory for spring time weddings and often replaced veils, allowing a bride to transition seamlessly into the social atmosphere of her afternoon reception. Wedding photography of the time also welcomed this newfound informality.

[DRESS 34](#) is pictured in [IMAGE V](#), worn by a bride relaxing with her bridesmaids before her wedding. An air of nonchalance seems to have diffused any formality or seriousness usually synonymous with the approaching main event. The bride herself appears completely at ease in her dress: a fluid, loose-fitting chiffon gown, paired with a waterfall cape that falls naturally around her shoulders. This look epitomises the effortless though elegant style that underpinned 1970s' wedding fashion.

The vast array of popular fashion shapes and styles from previous decades have become somewhat of a bible for wedding fashions to come. From the 1980s onward, different eras were revisited and reinterpreted religiously through bridal wear, coinciding with an increasingly mass-produced and mass-marketed approach to wedding fashion. It was for this reason that *The Bowerbird and The Bride* concludes its journey of Australian bridal wear at this turning point.



ABOVE LEFT - II

Barbara Weymouth in her Duchess satin and ivory guipure lace wedding gown. 21 October 1961

[DRESS 26, PAGE 136](#)

ABOVE RIGHT - III

An unknown bride wearing a delustered cream silk satin bridal gown. 1962

[DRESS 27, PAGE 136](#)

LEFT - IV

Valmai Celia Crump in her full-length cream faille gown.

[DRESS 22, PAGE 134](#)





THE WEDDING DRESS TODAY.

Over time, wedding dresses have reflected the shifting winds of fashion and evolving attitudes towards women. The various silhouettes featured in *The Bowerbird and The Bride* collection spotlight the eras they come from and the imperative technological, social, and cultural changes of their time.

Today, weddings are as celebrated as ever. Wedding dresses have become a mainstay for haute couture collections in Paris and for multiple contemporary ready-to-wear designers. They have become, for many brides, a reflection of one's own style, culture, and identity. Despite this sense of individuality, bridal wear has become incredibly commercial. Whether the dress is custom made or 'added to basket' online, contemporary wedding dresses still retain a palpable sense of wonderment. The intricate, delicate beauty that exists between the folds of a gown such as these exhibited in *The Bowerbird and The Bride* has inspired the aesthetic of contemporary Australian wedding fashion today. Moreover, these garments illuminate the otherwise forgotten stories of Australian brides, and through them we can understand and celebrate our unique fashion history.

References:

- ¹ Cynthia Amnéus, *Wedded Perfection: Two Centuries of Wedding Gowns* (London: D. Giles Ltd, (2010), 34.
- ² "Etiquette of Trousseau," *Godey's Lady's Book*, August 1849, http://godeysladybook.com/white_wedding_dress_origins.htm.
- ³ Jennifer Craik, "Is Australian Fashion and Dress Distinctively Australian?," *Fashion Theory* 13, no. 4 (2009): 409–441.
- ⁴ Margaret Maynard, *Out of Line: Australian Women and Style* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2001), 76.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.
- ⁶ Nadia Buick & Madeleine King, The Fashion Archives, <http://thefashionarchives.org/?cat=36>.
- ⁷ Anni Turnbull, "Inside the Collection: Flappers, Frocks and Fashioning the Modern Woman, Tales from the Australian Dress Register," MAAS, 27 February 2013, <https://maas.museum/inside-the-collection/2013/02/27/flappers-frocks-and-fashioning-the-modern-woman-tales-from-the-australian-dress-register/>
- ⁸ "Rationing of Food and Clothing during the Second World War," Australian War Memorial, <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/homefront/rationing>.
- ⁹ Jenny-Lynn Potter & Kerreen Reiger, "Suits and Frocks: Dressmakers and Making of Feminine Identity in postwar Australian Society," *Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 41:1 (2017): 113-130.



ABOVE - V

A 1970s bride relaxes with her bridesmaids wearing a white chiffon gown with waterfall cape.

DRESS 34, PAGE 139

LEFT

Anne Catherine Grace, married Paul Connellan, in a 'ballerina' length gown with voluminous skirt in Birchip, Victoria. 27 April 1957

DRESS 24, PAGE 135