

Number 50 Introduction

Welcome to the Fashion Museum, one of the world's greatest museum collections of fashionable dress. The museum has been here, in the Assembly Rooms, since 1963, and has a collection of over sixty thousand objects. We'll be presenting a selection of these to you today: fashions from the eighteenth century right through to the present day.

And we start, in this first gallery, with our special exhibition. Inspired by the royal weddings in 2011, we're celebrating the enduring romance of the wedding dress, by showcasing thirty-five of our finest examples. We're also displaying a group of previously unseen photographs from the 1930s: they're drawn from the archives of the great French couturier, the House of Worth, part of the collection here at the Fashion Museum.

The dresses in the two cases are not arranged chronologically: they're arranged so you can browse and compare. As you explore, our next commentary – number 52 – will tell you a little bit about the history of the wedding dress.

Number 52 History of the Wedding Dress

No one knows quite where the white wedding dress came from. As so often in fashion, things just seem to evolve. We do know that, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was becoming usual for brides to wear white or cream

for their weddings. The earliest example we have is in the first case. It's dated 1829 – a tiered, shimmery lace dress with long puffed sleeves.

Brides are still choosing lace for their weddings almost two hundred years later. The most recent dress in the exhibition is in the second case, dated 2010, and was designed by Alexander McQueen. By using antique lace and an eighteenth century style 'pannier' skirt, McQueen acknowledges the historical tradition, whilst creating a very contemporary dress.

One intriguing element of the displays is the way they highlight the evolution of the wedding dress *style*. Throughout most of the nineteenth century, weddings took place in the morning; so a bride chose a day dress style, which she could then wear again for other occasions. Look, for example, in the first case, at the smooth silk satin dress from the 1860s: with a full skirt and tight fitting long-sleeved bodice. We know it was worn at a wedding, but it was quite in line with the fashionable day wear of the time.

But by the beginning of the 20th century, it was more usual for weddings to take place later in the day, and styles started to change to look more like evening dress. Take one of the first dresses in the main part of the first case, worn by Miss Prankard in 1910. It shows the fashionable column-like shape, and is heavily decorated with whirls of roses made from silk chiffon and metal braid.

Another influence, from around this time, was the Court dress. When women were presented at court, etiquette demanded they wear a train. Look, for example, at the dress in the first case, worn by Joan Martin-White at her wedding in March 1928. It's a short, 1920s style dress, with a long train of cream silk velvet, edged with silver metal lace and fastened at the shoulders. In the report of the wedding, *The Times* mentioned that the train was "of full Court length".

By the 1930s, wedding dresses were still looking like evening dresses – look at the slender, figure-hugging examples in the photo archives; but by now the train had become incorporated into the dress. Something was happening. From this period on, the wedding dress stops looking like day wear, stops looking like evening wear, stops looking like a Court dress, and becomes a style all of its own. You can still see general stylistic trends: the mini dress in the second case could only come from the 1960s. But, from the Second World War onwards, all the dresses on display are indisputably wedding dresses.

You'll notice that we've been able to name some of the brides who've worn these thirty-five dresses. To hear more about the real brides behind the displays, key in 520 and Play.

LAYER: Number 520 Real Brides

Often with objects in the collection we don't know who wore or made a dress; but, with this exhibition, we do know some of the real romances behind the dresses.

Take the display of photographs: these are all real brides, and we know both their married and their maiden names. One even ties in with our royal wedding theme: the first photograph on the second wall – Princess Isabelle of Orleans Braganza, who married Henri d'Orleans in 1931. The couple married in Sicily rather than France as there were fears that the marriage would prove a rallying point to French monarchists - who saw Isabelle's husband as the rightful heir to the French throne. The couple had a long and happy marriage, and eleven children. Isabelle died in Paris in 2003.

We also have stories behind some of the dresses in the display cases. Let's take two examples. The first, in the first case, is Dorothy Foden, from 1911. Her wedding to Captain Charlie Pike was reported in the *Blackburn Weekly Telegraph* as "an exceedingly pretty marriage". The bride's dress was described in minute detail, from its "skirt of cream duchesse mousseline" to its satin bodice with tiny yoke, and its court train of rich broché silk, caught with orange blossom and a large satin bow. We even know that, at the altar, the bride knelt on a cushion embroidered with matching orange blossom.

In the second case, we have a bride from seventy years later: she's Diane Morris, who married Gary Zitcer in 1981, at the West London Synagogue. According to *Brides* magazine, they emerged to a Guard of Honour formed by the British National Fencing Team, before being driven – by vintage car – to a reception at the House of Lords. Diane described how she and designer David Fielden "chose and adapted an Edwardian style dress to which we

added a short train, the train that I had always wanted. All the lace in the dress is antique”.