



The bride wore
VINTAGE

YOUR ESSENTIAL BUYER'S BIBLE

Slip into a timeless vintage dress and up your Hollywood glam factor by 10. From Chantilly laces to gorgeous delicate silks, suddenly everything old is new again

With some of the world's most stylish women regularly wearing vintage – think Kate Moss, Sarah Jessica Parker, Sienna Miller – it was only a matter of time before brides-to-be embraced the trend. Same goes for auction websites such as eBay, where designer junkies get their fashion fixes at a fraction of the price. Of course, a wedding gown is hardly an everyday purchase, but that doesn't mean the usual rules of style don't apply – or that a "new-to-you" gown can't be as perfect as one that's fresh off the rack.

Choosing new-to-you

A year before she got married – and eight months before she was even engaged – Lisa, 24, found her dream dress in a Salvation Army store. A vintage, Jackie Kennedy-style gown, it was "one in a million". "It fit perfectly, and I fell in love with it as soon as I tried it on," says Lisa. Even better, the dress only cost \$50.

For Lisa, buying a second-hand dress made sense for many reasons. As a young bride-in-waiting, she was on a tight budget. She'd also been collecting vintage clothes for a while, so she "knew how to spot something". And, being a regular vintage wearer, the dress suited her style perfectly – her wedding and engagement rings are also antique. But Lisa knows she also got lucky. "I've been looking since the wedding, just out of curiosity, and I haven't found anything like it," she says.

If you have a vintage fetish, you need to start early, like Lisa did, and be vigilant in your search for the perfect dress; you never know when you might find it hiding at the back of an op shop. It also helps to do plenty of research, so that you have an idea of what style will suit you; wading through racks of mothball-scented satin can be off-putting for even the most determined shopper. Also, to be sure you're seeing the best of what's on offer, phone stores before you visit and tell them what you're looking for (often there is a bigger selection in storage).

Vintage not your style? If you're after a big-label gown with a not-so-big price tag, thousands of brides are selling designer gowns over the Internet. Phil Wharton, who runs specialist dry-cleaning business, weddingdress.com.au, estimates one quarter

of gowns he cleans will be on-sold, meaning there's a huge amount of choice available.

Just a mouse click away

"[Buying a dress over the Internet] surpasses the somewhat outdated concept of endless expeditions to cluttered second-hand outlets," says Trisha Savva, editor and art director of The Wedding Salon, a website that promotes second-hand wedding gowns and accessories. Brides living in regional or country areas can also get much more choice than they would from their local bridal store – and often at a much better price.

As with any Internet purchase, there are risks involved, but there are also certain precautions you can take to make sure your dress looks as good on you as it did on your computer screen. "Make sure that all your questions about the item have been clearly answered," suggests Savva. And while you can always request more photos from the seller, nothing beats seeing the dress in the flesh. "The Wedding Salon strongly advises potential buyers to personally inspect the items before any payment is made," says Savva.

Unfortunately, when Naomi, 29, bought her wedding gown on eBay early last year, she wasn't able to follow that advice. After beating another bride in a 2am bidding battle, Naomi was very disappointed when her dress arrived. "When I got it, I realised it just wasn't what I had expected – even though there were eight or 10 pictures on the website," she recalls. Naomi puts her disappointment down to lack of research. "I had an idea in my head of what I wanted to wear, but I had no idea of what that was going to look like on me," says Naomi. She also recommends researching fabric, as her satin gown was much heavier than she expected. "I thought the satin would be nice and flowing, but it wasn't like that at all."

Compounding Naomi's lack of bridal gown knowledge was a problem with sizing. "The description said it was a size 10, but it was probably about a 14," she says. In the end – and with only weeks to go till her wedding – Naomi bought a second dress.

Alterationist Joana Lichi, from Sew Special in Sydney, suggests taking some serious measures before buying a second-hand gown. "Have your measurements taken by a professional dressmaker, then ask the vendor for as many measurements as possible and compare them," recommends Lichi.

The not-so-little extras

Don't be discouraged if your perfect pre-loved designer or vintage gown doesn't quite match up to your own measurements. Lichi frequently makes simple changes to bridal gowns, such as shortening hems, taking in bodices and lifting shoulders. Even if the dress is slightly too small, she is often able to let out seams – assuming the seam allowance is big enough and there are no damages on the original sewing line. "You can also add panels of the same type of fabric, ribbons or laces," adds Lichi.

Another danger with buying a pre-worn dress, whether vintage or contemporary, is that it may need repairs or special cleaning. But if your dream designer frock has a visible stain, all is not lost. If possible, find out what has caused the stain, and even show or email photos to a specialist dry-cleaner before you make the purchase. This is even more important if you're considering a vintage dress, as a lot of the cleaning fluids used now were not around when those dresses were made. "You need to find out a few key details," suggests Wharton. "What is the fibre? Is it beaded? What sort of stains are they? And then speak to someone in the wedding dress-cleaning business."

"There's nothing wrong with buying something pre-worn – it's probably only been worn for a couple of hours," says Naomi.

What is important, though, is that you have the right information. This means researching the styles that suit you, and knowing what needs to be – and what can be – done with the dress you've found.

Michelle Bateman **COSMO**

Point, click and buy

Find gorgeous new and pre-worn dresses at these websites:

www.weddingsalon.com.au

Gowns and accessories for brides, bridesmaids and flower girls.

Some designer sample gowns can also be found.

www.tradingpost.com.au

The online version of the popular newspaper allows you to search in your state or around the country.

www.weddingcentral.com.au

Head to "Bridal Classifieds" for dresses and accessories (warning: not all of them have pictures).

www.ebay.com

This international auction site has everything you need in a multitude of styles and sizes.