





CHANGING TRENDS BEGET NEW TRADITIONS IN BRIDAL WEAR.

BY SARAH B. HOOD

When it comes to Canadian brides, sometimes the old saying holds true: the more things change, the more they stay the same. Although brides tend to be older, wiser and more well-travelled than their sisters of yesteryear, there are more constants than changes in this niche, where traditional values continue to be cherished above all.

Between 1973 and 2003, the average age of first-time Canadian brides rose from about 23 to 29, just one of several trends that's affecting the market for wedding wear. The bridal fashion industry is also beginning to feel the influence of traditions that have come to Canada from other countries, and the trend for "destination weddings" in foreign locales has created a new style of bridal gown.

The must-have gown of the moment is not white but off-white, ivory, champagne or "diamond". It's sleek and strapless, with a full, floor-length skirt. "Right now, white is not in style. Even for the first marriage, they like the natural white," says Michelle Kan, store manager for Toronto retail outlet Firenzia Bridal.

"Ivory has become very, very strong," says Howard Zweig of Montreal wholesaler Bridalane International. "The major change that has taken place in the last ten years is that before, every dress had sleeves and a neckline. Today, the bulk of the wedding gowns are strapless, with a shawl."

"The fall-winter bridal gown has disappeared, the gown with the long sleeves," affirms Vili Alevizos, president of Princess Bridals, a Montreal importer and distributor. "Now, whatever she likes, she can wear it all year round. And I think we're into a period of time where the bride doesn't just want to look good; she wants to feel comfortable."

This means "less heavy gowns, so satin is not as popular as it used to be," continues Alevizos, "Less heavy beading. Lace is very much in – it's both elegant and light – and the European look is very much in style. I would say it's very fresh-looking, but not too daring. It's very feminine, and it's draped around the waistline because it adds to their curves."

"The look in the last few years has changed drastically," says Zweig. "It's simple; it's not the beading and all that other type of stuff." However, he cautions, "Strapless dresses have been good, but I think it's going to change. Everything comes back sooner or later. We're introducing more of the traditional-type dresses for next season. We're still showing the strapless, but we're showing some of the other lines as well."

This thinking is in line with that of some demographers, who observe that the young people who make up the population bulge that has been called the "Echo Boom" are very tradition-minded, and may be expected to bring about a return to a more old-fashioned style of wedding. These Echo Boomers, who are now between the ages of 12 and 27, have just begun to walk down the aisle, but they will be determining wedding trends for the next 10 to 15 years.

This may be good news for the industry, because the current crop of brides seems to be showing a slight tendency towards economy. In some cases, green consciousness dictates that a couple should avoid waste on their wedding day, which may mean buying a less extravagant dress that can be worn on other occasions. In other cases, single women are putting new priorities ahead of wedding dreams. For instance, a 2007 Royal LePage survey found that 34% of Canadian women planning to buy homes in the next three years said they were very likely to go without a wedding reception in order to be able to put more money into a down payment.

When it comes to the gown, says Zweig, "The magic number is still the \$1,000 mark. A lot of the older brides say, rather than spend \$3,000 to \$4,000 on a dress they'll wear once, they'll spend it on a nice honeymoon or some furniture." In April and May of 2007, Nooro Online Inc. conducted a national Canadian survey of 1,592 engaged women who read *Weddingbells* magazine. They found that the average age of the respondents was 29, and that the average bride-to-be expected to spend \$17,300 on her wedding, of which \$975 would go towards her gown.

OLDER AND WISER?

"The dresses are becoming more sophisticated and it reflects the taste level of an older woman," says Ken Rose, general manager of Alfred Angelo Inc. in Toronto. "As the girl gets older, she gets more sophisticated in her tastes. If she marries at 21, she wants all the beads and lace on her dress because that's the Cinderella, little-girl style. But after she's been out in the workforce, she gets a little more sophisticated."

Statistics Canada tells us that "in 2003, in Canada (excluding Ontario), the average age of persons marrying for the first time (to someone of the opposite sex) was 30.6 years for men and 28.5 years for women." In 1973, by comparison, the average age was 25.2 for men and 22.8 for women. "This gradual rise in the average age at first marriage is largely due to couples cohabiting and delaying marriage."

However, Canadian brides – even those who marry later – are still fairly traditional; as of 2003, three-quarters of marriages in this country were still being performed in a religious ceremony, and "most Canadians marry once and only once." (Another Statistics Canada study reports that only 10% of married Canadians have married twice.)

The older bride will still wear white, will demand quality and can pay for it. "The younger generation, they don't have that much money to spend. Around 30 or mid-30s, they already have their job and they spend money," says Kan. "If they are older, but this is the first wedding, they will wear a big dress. A second wedding, they will spend money but on a simpler dress."

And the image of the second-time bride has changed, says Rose. "In the old days, for the second wedding you wore a suit and went to City Hall. It was considered a questionable thing to be remarried, so you slunk to the registry office. Now, they're more willing to make a splash the second time – maybe not as big a splash, but a splash."

THE LITTLE RED DRESS

With Canada's multicultural population, some wedding traditions from places like Hong Kong, Pakistan and India are taking root. In a Chinese wedding, for example, a bride will normally change her outfit several times. And in many Asian countries red, not white, is the bridal colour.

"I travel a lot to Hong Kong and China because we have factories there," says Rose. "I see a lot of bridal parties going to have their pictures taken, and they're all wearing the European white gown." Here in Canada, he says, "What we still tend to see is the girls will buy two outfits. There's the more traditional Chinese or Indian wedding outfit, and there's the old-fashioned white dress, and they'll have pictures taken in both."

In a few cases, cultural fusion means that the bride will order an all-red European-style wedding gown. In Vancouver, for example, wedding designer Chris Falcon shows examples of this new style, along with both white gowns and red cheongsams (the close-fitting Chinese traditional tunic dress, often made in silk brocade).

"There's definitely a demand, and everyone has responded to it," says Alevizos. "There are a lot of gowns with red in them, or completely red. South Asians are looking for some kind of red accessories or embroidery, and some go for all red. We didn't used to see them before; there's also dark blue, there's gold and there's sand for second weddings and people who want to make a statement."

However, this demand for European-style gowns in non-traditional colours is not being felt equally in all quarters. "Most of our customers, even though they're Chinese, were born in Canada. They don't really follow the Chinese traditions," says Kan. "They wear the traditional Western

wedding dress, but some of them change into three or four dresses. Some of them wear a red cheongsam, or they will buy red bridesmaid's dresses, but no one will buy a dress in all red."

"Once in a while, a girl will wear bordeaux or a light pink or a light blue if it's a Valentine's Day or Christmas wedding, but 95 percent of the wedding gowns are still white or ivory," Zweig reports.

"One of the big trends is that we're getting colour accents on the dress, so they tend to match with the bridesmaids' dresses," says Rose. "If she has a colour that she likes, she'll wear it regardless of what time of year. We have 55 colours in our bridesmaids' dresses, and we probably used every one of those as an accent colour for a wedding dress last year."

RUNAWAY BRIDES

A much more significant trend of the new millennium is the destination wedding, in which the bride and groom travel with a select group of close friends and immediate family members for an intimate wedding in an exotic setting. In February of 2006, The Condé Nast Bridal Group (which publishes *Brides*, *Modern Bride* and *Elegant Bride*) released the results of its survey of 1,619 US brides carried out through the Global Strategy Group. This "American Wedding Study 2006" found that about 16 percent of all American couples were planning a destination wedding, a fourfold increase in just the past 10 years.

The trend is also growing in Canada, and the popularity of this type of getaway wedding has created a market for the "destination gown", a lighter and generally less expensive version of a traditional bridal gown. "If they're going to the Bahamas, normally they're wearing something light, easier to carry than a big huge poufy dress," says Kan.

"Definitely there's a new thing called the destination gown," says Alevizos. "These are much simpler: you have a lot of chiffon and light materials, and many times they're gowns that can be worn again. Because of the materials being less expensive, there's less beading. They're looking for something light and fresh, so usually it's not an expensive gown."

"By its nature, it restricts the gown," says Rose. "In other words, it's not that big huge long train gown that tends to be worn for a destination wedding. Either no train or a chapel train, and it tends not to have a crinoline in it. And since most destination weddings tend to be in warmer climates, they tend to be off-the-shoulder, maybe with a jacket."

Some brides scale down completely, says Zweig. "A lot of girls who are going to [have a destination wedding] may buy the bridesmaid's dress, but in white or ivory; you're going to be much more comfortable," he says. "We're getting a lot of single orders in white or ivory from our bridesmaids' collection."

Meanwhile, the wedding party is also shrinking or even nonexistent. "They will have a reception in Canada, but they want to have a small

ACCORDING TO A RECENT STUDY, 16 PERCENT OF AMERICAN COUPLES WERE PLANNING A DESTINATION WEDDING, A FOURFOLD INCREASE IN THE PAST 10 YEARS.



wedding somewhere down south, and the bridesmaid is normally just a close friend or sister or sister-in-law to be, and they will just find a dress," says Kan.

"Most of the time they don't have women in the wedding party," says Alevizos. "They're not your traditional wedding, so usually you don't have bridesmaids." However, Zweig reports that some brides still "want the traditional thing with their friends as bridesmaids, but they may only have two or three, and it tends to be less money." Meanwhile, "we see a trend towards short as opposed to the full-length bridesmaids' dresses; it's not affecting the fabrics at all," comments Rose.

With ever-stricter airport baggage restrictions, the destination gown is only likely to become simpler and lighter, a trend that happens to match the prevailing taste for streamlined and sophisticated bridal wear.

Now that it's common for a first-time Canadian bride to be a woman over 30 who already lives with her husband-to-be, and when second weddings are becoming almost as festive as first ones, it's no surprise that a grownup aesthetic informs the bridal market. Or that (although some brides are willing to experiment with colour), the elegant ivory gown is preferred to girlish white. So until such time that those tradition-minded young Echo Boomers begin to dominate the market, expect this understated, classic elegance to be considered the epitome of bridal glamour.^[s]