



Ballymoney
Museum

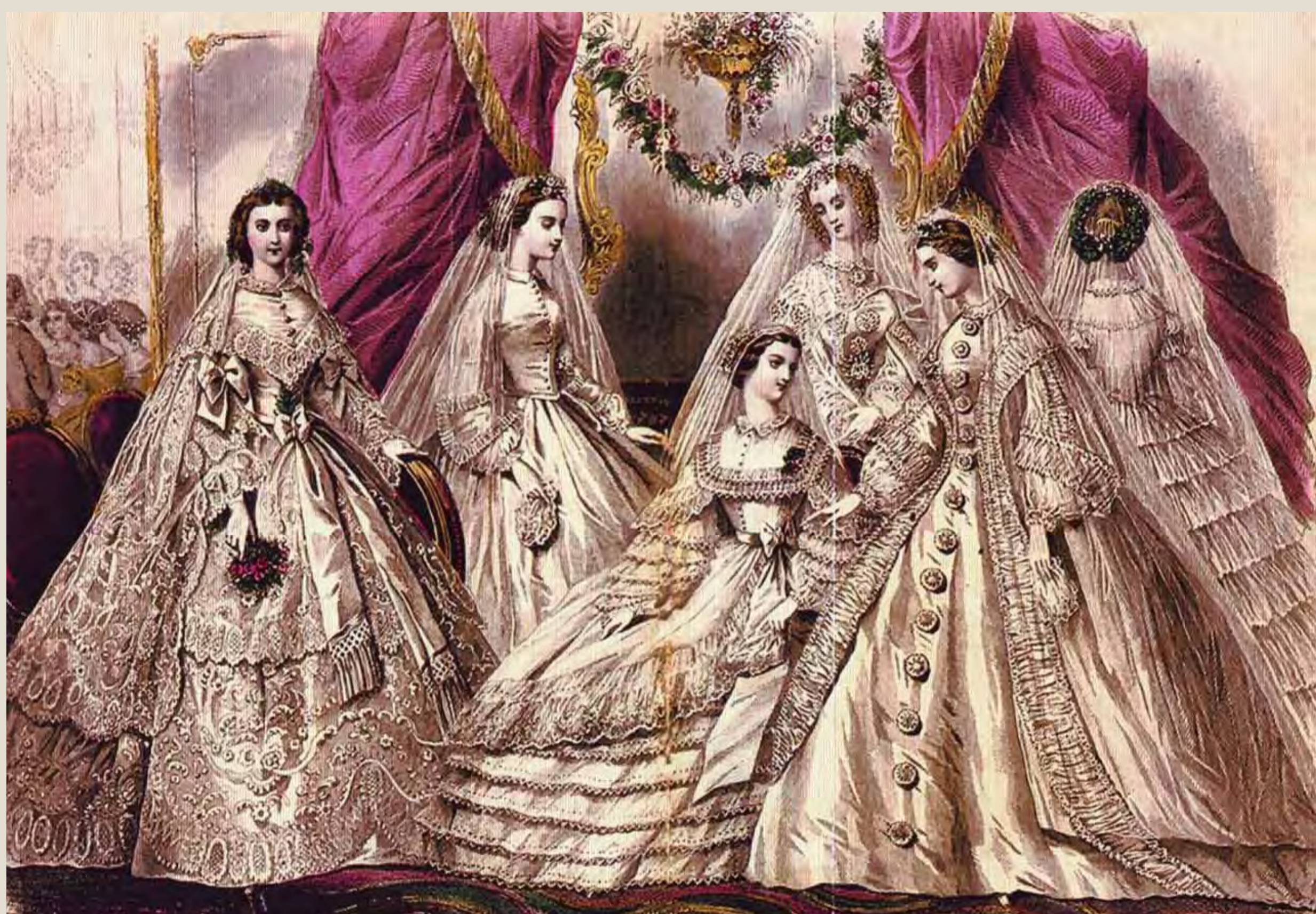


A Special Dress

“I chose my wife as she did her wedding gown,
for qualities that would wear well”

Oliver Goldsmith (1730–1774)

For centuries, women have worn a special dress on their wedding day. For many brides, a beautiful gown is one of the most important parts of the day. Even in times of hardship or austerity, a bride will expect gasps of admiration from the congregation when she appears in her dress.



Coloured engraving from 1861 of women's wedding fashion (Right)

The Royal Alliance

In Europe, the earliest wedding dresses can be traced back to the Medieval period.

Throughout history, Royal marriages have had great political importance. Monarchs, noblemen and other rulers frequently used a marriage to form an alliance, enrich their kingdom or prevent a conflict.

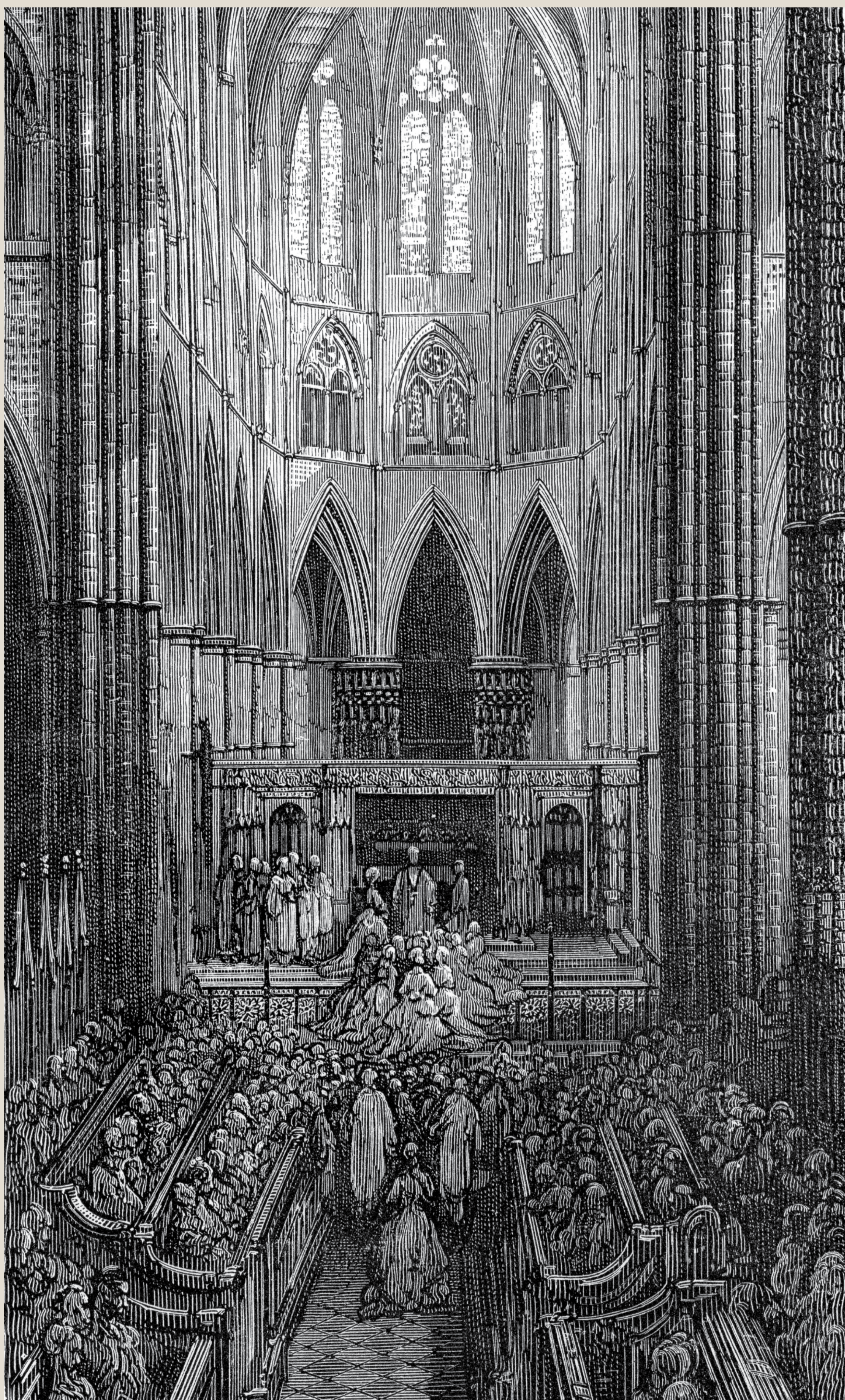
Only the most expensive fabrics were used to make the dress, such as velvet, satin or exotic fur. The colour of a fabric was also important, as only wealthy families could afford red, purple and black dyes. The most extravagant dresses would be sewn with gold thread and decorated with precious gems, diamonds, rubies, sapphires, emeralds and pearls.

In the Medieval period, a bride's wedding dress first became an expression of wealth, fortune and power.

The amount of material used to make a wedding dress has always reflected the social position of a bride's family. A gown with flowing sleeves or a train was regarded as a flamboyant symbol of wealth.



Medieval depiction of a Medieval wedding (Above)



Engraving showing a wedding at Westminster Abbey in 19th Century London (Above)

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Marriage of King Henry VI and Margaret of Anjou, 1445
Original engraving from the Pictorial Edition of the Works of Shakespeare (Right)

Traditions

“Married in white, you have chosen right”

One of the best known marriage traditions is a white wedding dress. This custom is believed to have been introduced at lavish weddings in the sixteenth century as a symbol of the bride’s maidenhood. It became popular again when Queen Victoria chose to marry in a white dress rather than the traditional silver of Royal brides.

However, wedding dresses also came in other colours, each with a well known custom.

“...Your love will always be true”

Blue, with its associations with the Virgin Mary, was a strong symbol of purity. The colour also represented eternal love and even today ‘something blue’ brings good luck.

“...Your spirit will sink”

Pink was a popular colour for a May wedding as it was flattering to most complexions and associated with girlhood. Even so, some superstitions believed it to be unlucky.

“...You will wish yourself back”

Black has always been worn during periods of sorrow and grief. It was considered such a bad omen at a wedding that even a widow was obliged to change her mourning dress for a red gown, in deference to the bride.



Queen Victoria’s dress was a rich white satin, trimmed with orange blossoms and it required months of work by over 200 seamstresses. (Above)
Image courtesy of Roger Fenton

This traditional rhyme offered some alarming advice to brides choosing the colour of their dress.

*Married in White, you have chosen right,
Married in Blue, your love will always be true,
Married in Pearl, you will live in a whirl,
Married in Brown, you will live in the town,
Married in Red, you will wish yourself dead,
Married in Yellow, ashamed of your fellow,
Married in Green, ashamed to be seen,
Married in Pink, your spirit will sink,
Married in Grey, you will go far away,
Married in Black, you will wish yourself back.*



Bride in black for her 1898 wedding (Above)



Eleanor Gilmore then in mourning, married in a white wedding dress at home. (Above)
L3036-5 Courtesy of National Museums Northern Ireland 2011.
Collection Ulster Folk and Transport Museum.



Changing Fashions

‘Traditional’ white wedding dress

In the early 19th century, every bride wanted a white dress with a veil. As with much fashion at this time, the trends began in London, eventually spreading throughout the nation. Queen Victoria was the first royal to have bridesmaids to carry her train and, since then, they have been an essential at everyone’s wedding.



The 1930s

Waistlines were more defined, hemlines dropped and gowns became figure hugging.



The 1940s

Dresses were created from parachute silk and often outfits were passed on by family and friends. Then, in 1947, Princess Elizabeth set the fashion for all to follow and long hemlines with elaborate lace skirts became popular.

Image courtesy of Hannah Campbell



The 1950s

Brides wore lace jacket bodices, tight sleeves with cuffs and a circular skirt held out by stiff petticoats. Waist length veils were fixed with a corone style headdress.

Image courtesy of Conor Maguire



The 1960s

Bouffant veils were introduced to match the back-combed hair styles. In the early 60s, waistlines dropped and the straight, stiff style dresses began to be worn. The train and cathedral veil became popular and gowns evolved with a high tight waist under the bust, known as the empire line.

Image courtesy of Una Summers



The 1970s

Exaggerated Tudor sleeves were popular. The empire line was replaced with the flared princess line, with little or no train, and the waist gradually fell to its natural position by 1980.

Image courtesy of Hilary Brownlee



The 1980s

Dresses had extravagant full skirts gathered to the waist with big sleeves to the elbow. They had flounces, bows and lace embellishments and brides wanted a fairytale crinoline or tiara. Later fashion had a low waistline, pointed at the front and back, with flared and gathered satin skirts.

Image courtesy of Heather Steele



The 1990s

Dresses were rich with embroidery and beading and often had a stiffly sculpted satin corseted bodice.

Image courtesy of Keith Beattie



The 2000s

Modern wedding dresses are rich in colour, pattern and personal style. The most popular Western wedding dresses are off-shoulder with a single sleeve, or have necklines with a single strap. Body hugging gowns with sharp angles are the current favourite with slim shaped dresses that enhance a figure.

Image courtesy of Michael McCafferty

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