

# Romantic HOMES

CASUAL  
ELEGANCE.  
PERSONAL  
STYLE

## Fabulous Fall Shopping

Calling All Trendsetters:  
Design Contest Giveaway

ROMANTICHOMES.COM

OCTOBER 2007 • VOLUME 20, NO. 10  
\$3.99 • \$5.50 in Canada



0 71486 03114 7





from your pen



## Discovering the Dress

*How a Vintage Wedding Gown Yielded its Secrets*

BY CHARITY VOGEL

THE MOMENT I LAID EYES ON THE DRESS, I knew there was no way I was leaving without it. It wasn't practical. It wasn't sensible. Wedding dresses rarely are. But it was calling me, and I couldn't ignore it.

Things had started innocently enough. I was slowly cruising the aisles of a local antiques mall with my husband on a Saturday afternoon, sipping lukewarm coffee from a Styrofoam cup and pushing my one-year-old daughter in her stroller. I didn't spot the dress until we were almost ready to leave. As we turned the stroller toward the exit, I passed the last stall in the last aisle. There, hanging lopsidedly on a nail near a rack of old record albums and a table covered with mismatched china, was something I had never dreamed I might want, but something I immediately lusted after: a vintage wedding dress.

The dress, in ivory fabric that shone like soft satin, was wrinkled and dirty in places, but that wasn't enough to keep me from admiring its plain, understated beauty. It was a 1940s dream version of a Renaissance-style, high-priestess-meets-Grace-Kelly dress; the very gown a Hollywood starlet would wear on her wedding day to show how mature and marriageable she was. The dress had a slender princess waist, long sleeves with delicately puffed shoulders and rows of tiny buttons marching from wrist to elbow. It had a high, pointed collar and a train that flowed from the shoulders to the floor with grace and beauty. In the midst of the piles of gaudy flea-market treasures, the dress glimmered with class and style.

It was only \$35. Once we arrived home, I shook the dress out, smoothed it, and hung it on a padded hanger in our bedroom. I began to wonder about the woman who had worn the dress—on what I assumed was one of the most important (and, hopefully, happiest!) days of her life. Who was she, and what was she like? The only way I would ever learn the answers would be from the dress itself.



*The dress, in ivory fabric that shone like soft satin, was wrinkled and dirty in places, but that wasn't enough to keep me from admiring its plain, understated beauty.*

I began to hunt for clues, seeking to find any hints the dress would provide. My first step was to scour it for labels, tags or other identifying marks. This proved to be unsuccessful. I wasn't really surprised; the dress looked handmade, not mass-produced. Perhaps the bride's mother sewed it for her, lingering over each stitch with love and tenderness, I thought. Or maybe the bride-to-be sewed it herself, full of excitement about her future life.

Examining the dress more closely, I discovered that the train was attached. That's odd, for a bridal gown—what about the dancing afterwards? In addition, I could tell that the dress was made for a very small woman—probably 5 feet 2 inches, and she was slender as a reed.

In a last effort, I decided to seek some expert advice. I turned to Nancy Barnwell and Patti Hain, docents at a national historic site in Buffalo, the Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural site, who organize periodic exhibits of vintage wedding gowns. In the site's costume room, they slipped the dress over a tiny mannequin. In today's terms, this World War II bride was a size one. Scrutinizing the gown's details, they told me that the dress was actually rayon made to look like cream-colored satin, as many dresses during the war years were. (These dresses actually hold up better than satin gowns from the same period.) The very high neck with its closed collar, coupled with the long sleeves and graceful Watteau train made this dress stand out to them as different from many they had seen — most of which are more revealing.

"This was a very modest bride," said Patti.

And while the dress was not as expensive or ornate as most others they had seen, the women said that it's clear the bride was interested in quality.

"Even a woman who didn't have much money would have gone for a cheaper, fancier dress," Nancy said. "And this was made, not

bought." Suddenly, things began to come together in my mind.

I could envision the slim young bride, rising on her wedding morning and donning the handmade dress that had been prepared for her by someone she loved. I could see her modesty and reserve as she fastened the dress at her throat, her elegance and grace as she smoothed her train. She did not have a lot of money, but she valued things that were well-made and classic. She had good taste—good enough to know that she didn't need to look flashy in order to be stunning on her wedding day.

I realized that the bride I was envisioning was, in fact, the kind of woman I hoped to be.

Just then, Nancy interrupted my thoughts. She pointed out that the dress might have a potential new use at a costume party someday.

"You'd make a lovely Guinevere," she said.

And maybe I will.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY JENNIFER TAYLOR