

Fig. 1. Bridal Gown and sash, ca. 1890s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2018.08.001AB. Photo by Erin Colquhoun.



BRIDAL WEAR: ROMANTIC HISTORICISM IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY

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As I visit Toronto Metropolitan University's Fashion Research Collection and get to experience a historical gown in person, I catch myself simultaneously romanticizing and dramatizing the life of its wearer (Fig. 1). Little is known about the origin of the gown, which leaves much to the imagination indeed. The time period is the 1890s. Somewhere in the world, one might generously assume somewhere in Britain, a woman is dressing for her wedding. Might she be a girl younger than me, younger than twenty-three, sliding her arm through the gigot sleeve? Is she nervous, I wonder? I hope she is marrying someone kind. I imagine myself in her place, gliding my hands down the cream silk satin, fingers catching on the ribbon rosette detailing (Fig. 2). The long train of the gown slips across the floor, the twisted stain along the hem of the skirt glinting in the light. I can only begin to imagine where in nearly 130 years the hem would have been stained beyond repair. The gown is more of an ensemble, and as the bodice is hooked together, and the belt fastened high around the waist, I can almost feel the weight of the petticoats and heavy cotton. Despite the beauty of the gown, it is not made for comfort.



Fig. 2. Close up of the bridal gown's bodice, featuring lace and ribbon detailing. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2018.08.001AB. Photo by Erin Colquhoun.

The bodice of the gown is fastened together with hand-stitched, hook-and-eye closures. The structure appears to have corset boning. There are lace overlays over the gigot, or leg-of-mutton, sleeves, and the neckline is ruched. The shape is perhaps reminiscent of the seventeenth century, in the corset styling and the V-shape of the pleating. The skirt has a long train; the hem damaged prior to acquisition and repaired at the FRC. Mysteriously, there is an extra sash, external to the belt style stash attached to the bodice. The fabric has a woodgrain, or moiré, pattern that is unfinished and accompanied by a mesh piece. It is unknown what this piece was used for, but could have been a piece for a bridesmaid, or meant to be a sash for the groom.



Fig. 3. Close up of the bridal gown's skirt, featuring the waistband. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2018.08.001AB. Photo by Erin Colquhoun.

Aside from one's wedding day being a significant ceremonial milestone of one's life, in the context of dress, a wedding was often a woman's biggest opportunity to make a social statement with her clothing (Edwards 1). In this analysis, I will attempt to answer the following research question: What might explain the historical romanticism of bridal wear in the late nineteenth century, its significance, and how it is practiced today?



Fig. 4. Late Victorian ladies' fashion. Getty/Charles Phelps Crushing/ClassicStock. Image from Bloomsbury Fashion Central.

QUEEN VICTORIA, AESTHETIC, AND "THE NEW WOMAN"

The 1890s were a time of change, as was much of the early to mid-nineteenth century. Following the First Industrial Revolution, sometimes defined as ending in 1830 or 1850, there was a shift in women's dress that reflected the shifting cultural and economic landscape (Allen 2). In Britain, the reign of Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1901 dominated the fashion landscape (Fig. 4), including famously setting the norm of the white wedding dress at her wedding to Albert in 1840 (Mitchell 6).

This period was rife with tumultuous class issues, which Maynard theorizes to be the source of the romantic historicism present throughout many of the fashion trends (2). For these reasons, the end of the nineteenth century saw two movements in women's dress that reformed the Victorian ideal (Mitchell).

The Aesthetic Movement, most popular in the 1860s and 1870s, was a nod to pre-Raphaelite beauty standards and promoted the notion of "art for art's sake" (Cicolini 2). The 'softness' of aesthetic dress resisted the corsets and crinolines in favour of early Renaissance elements in dress (Cicolini 2). This romantic historicism can be seen in other trends, particularly in bridal wear. Much like our FRC gown, the below wedding gown from 1888 (Fig. 5) references the much more structured and aristocratic connotations of the eighteenth century in its adornment, material, and skirt style (Edwards 3).



Fig. 5. 1888. Wedding Dress: Two Bodices and Skirt by Corbay-Wenzel, Paris. Museum Collection: Philadelphia Museum of Art. Image from Bloomsbury Fashion Central.

Moving into the 1890s, the concept of “The New Woman” began to take hold in counterculture dress as some women began to access spaces previously barred to them, like higher education and sport (bicycling), and required more freedom of movement (Jungnickel 363). This style of dress borrowed from menswear, and would typically consist of “a close-fitting blouse and jacket, often with leg-of-mutton sleeves, a tie or cravat, and a natural-waisted gored skirt that hit the low calf,” (Mitchell 5).

Romantic historicism might be a simple conclusion to draw when considering the similarities of the FRC’s bridal ensemble from the 1890s and the trends of previous time periods, the gigot sleeves of the 1830s and Elizabethan period to name a few, but Maynard rejects this impulse, citing “the perceived decay of manners, concern about the apparently increasing dynamic of female fashion, a disenchantment with contemporary art and a reaction against beauty culture as a scientific endeavour,” among the reasons people in the late nineteenth century would be referencing the eighteenth century in their portraiture (2). I would argue that this would be true for modes of dress, particularly in maintaining tradition at a wedding ceremony.



Fig. 6. 1996 - Vivienne Westwood 'Watteau' evening dress made of silk faille, taffeta, and deerskin. Museum Collection: Victoria & Albert Museum. Image from V&A Collections.

VIVIENNE WESTWOOD: ROMANTIC HISTORIAN?

In searching for modern examples of the historicization of women's dress, especially in bridal wear, look no further than Vivienne Westwood. Westwood is known to have taken inspiration from both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for previous designs, seen in the 'Watteau' evening dress from 1996 housed at the Victoria & Albert Museum (Fig. 6).

On October 7, 2020, Vivienne Westwood's official Instagram page began posting images introducing the new Made-to-Order and Couture Bridal Collection for 2021, calling it "a retrospective of iconic catwalk silhouettes are curated into a collection which celebrates 25 years since the inception of couture at the London atelier," (Vivienne Westwood, Instagram post). The gowns incorporate blatant references to eighteenth and nineteenth-century styles, including the leg-of-mutton sleeves (Fig. 7), Watteau cape-like pleats, (Fig. 8), and polonaise-style ruching in the crinoline skirt.



 **viviennewestwood** • Following ...

 **viviennewestwood** Introducing the new Vivienne Westwood Made-to-Order and Couture Bridal Collection for 2021 – a retrospective of iconic catwalk silhouettes are curated into a collection which celebrates 25 years since the inception of couture at the London atelier.

#Bridal #VWBridal #WestwoodBridal

6w



 **angelinamerkelina** perfection 🥰

6w Reply

   

 Liked by **denny_dreadful** and **52,857 others**

OCTOBER 7

Add a comment... Post

Fig. 7. Vivienne Westwood Instagram Post.



 **viviennewestwood** • Following ...

 **viviennewestwood** Inspired by 25 years of couture at the atelier, the Made-to-Order 2021 collection includes the Ball Tie with a graceful georgette detachable cape.

#Bridal #VWBridal #WestwoodBridal

5w

 **laurenjauregui** Ok yes

5w 589 likes Reply

— View replies (26)

 **laurenjauregui** The thing is, I don't have anyone to marry rn so gimme a sec

   

 Liked by **denny_dreadful** and **34,251 others**

OCTOBER 8

Add a comment... Post

Fig. 8. Vivienne Westwood Instagram Post.



viviennewestwood • Following ...



viviennewestwood The Vivienne Westwood Bridal Made-to-Order 2021 collection includes the Bagatelle dress and corset top which are inspired by the Spring-Summer 1997 collection Vive La Bagatelle in silk duchess.

#Bridal #VWBridal #WestwoodBridal

5w



emmajones8113 all I can think of is Nana Osaki in these dresses 🥺

🥺🥺🥺🥺

5w 14 likes Reply

View replies (2)



Liked by **denny_dreadful** and 30,891 others

OCTOBER 9

Add a comment...

Post

Fig. 9. Vivienne Westwood Instagram Post.

Fashion is cyclical, and everything old feels new again, albeit slightly altered. In the time we're in now, in 2020, amidst a pandemic and socio-political upheaval the likes of which I certainly haven't seen in my lifetime, Westwood seems to be following the practice of romantic historicism in bridal wear. Romanticizing the past as something softer, perhaps to juxtapose with the harshness of today. With weddings being cancelled, postponed, or at the very least severely altered to follow COVID-19 restrictions, it makes sense to pull out as many romantic stops as possible.

CREATIVE PROJECT

My creative component for this research is a mock-up of a mini-book proposal that outlines the research as if I were going to write a book about it. Using the software Canva, I repurposed the format of an old assignment from a writing-based undergraduate course. The old assignment was far more substantial, but the general outline of the content was not only useful in producing this creative component, but also in organizing my research. Two of the images used were ones I took at the FRC myself, and one is a cropped image sourced from Bloomsbury Fashion Central.

BRIDAL WEAR:

*Romantic
Historicism
in the Late
Nineteenth
Century*

PREPARED BY ERIN COLQUHOUN

MINI BOOK PROPOSAL

FS8002

DR. ALISON MATTHEWS DAVID

NOVEMBER 18, 2020

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Executive Summary



What might explain the historical romanticism of bridal wear in the late nineteenth century, its significance, and how it is practiced today?

This book proposal is based on an object analysis of a wedding gown from 1895, and explores the historical romanticism often found in bridal wear.

This book will first analyze and give context to the object. It will also give cultural context to the late nineteenth century, and how social and political ideals dictated dress practices in the mainstream and in counterculture.

Finally, the book will draw comparisons to modern examples to give context as to how this practice is present in bridal wear today.

Rationale

The practice of romanticizing the past is one we see take many forms, and one that is closely linked with dress. This object indicates this practice is not specific to modern times, but has taken place in historical periods as well. Object-based research in this context can be used to draw larger conclusions about the who, what, where, when, why, and how of the matter.

While this project is based on a bridal gown from the 1890s, currently housed at Ryerson University's Fashion Research Collection, the scope is broadened by examining modern bridal wear collections that also make historical references in their designs.

In a time when fashion is more cyclical than ever, and late twentieth century trends seem inextricable from those of the new millennium, it becomes increasingly popular to look to the past for fashion. Additionally, in times where progress seems lightening fast, it stands to reason that some would grasp at older traditional styles, particularly during ceremonies like weddings.



Scope

What might explain the historical romanticism of bridal wear in the late nineteenth century, its significance, and how it is practiced today?

In order to provide a comprehensive answer to this question, I will also answer the following subsidiary questions:

Object Analysis

1. What time period is the object from?
2. Who might have worn this object? (Gender, age, class, and more.)
3. What was the typical style of this garment at the time?
4. What are the elements of this garment that are incongruent with the time period?

Romantic Historicism

1. How is the romanticization of the past present in bridal wear?
2. What other causes might there be to nod to the past in dress practices?
3. Do we see this practice in other forms of dress?
4. What was the cultural context of the late nineteenth century?

Modern Context

1. What does bridal wear look like today?
 2. In what ways does Vivienne Westwood exemplify romantic historicism in her collections?
 3. What does the historical romanticism of Vivienne Westwood's 2021 Made-to-Order and Couture Bridal Collection indicate about today, given the conclusions drawn from the object?
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Sample Chapter Outline

Chapter 1: Object Analysis

This is the introductory chapter that will provide the understanding necessary to engage with the material. Readers will be introduced to the object, a 19th Century bridal gown from Ryerson University's Fashion Research Collection

Chapter 2: Historical Context, Part 1

I will delve into the cultural context of the late nineteenth century. This will include the implications of the preceding Industrial Revolution, as well as the changing opportunities for women. This chapter will focus largely on Europe and America, but will give some larger global context as well.

Chapter 3: Historical Context, Part 2

This chapter will delve into the Victorian period and how the Aesthetic Movement and the era of "The New Woman" took hold in fashion, both in mainstream and as counterculture.

Chapter 4: Defining Romantic Historicism

In referencing the Romantic Era, I will discuss the term 'romantic historicism' for the purposes of this research. I will elucidate the ways in which the romanticization of the past began as a resistance to progress, and interrogate the very key fact that to romanticize the past is to downplay, or fully erase, the negative aspects.

Chapter 5: Case Study: Vivienne Westwood

This chapter will focus on Vivienne Westwood's Made-to-Order and Couture Bridal Collection for 2021, as it features a number of silhouettes and elements that are reminiscent of late 18th and 19th century bridal wear.

What might explain the historical romanticism of bridal wear in the late nineteenth century, its significance, and how it is practiced today?

Conclusion



C.1890. Ivory damask silk bridal gown. Museum Collection: Kerry Taylor. Image from Bloomsbury Fashion Central.

This proposal contains a brief outline of object-based research concerned with late nineteenth century bridal wear. The book will discuss romantic historicism in bridal wear of this time period, offer contextualization from a number of perspectives, and draw theoretical conclusions about the practice of romanticizing the past through dress.

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