Review Essay

The Wedding Dress on Display*

Wedded Perfection: Two Centuries of Wedding Gowns. Cincinnati Museum of Art. October 9, 2010 – January 30, 2011.

I Do! Chicago Ties the Knot. The Chicago History Museum. May 22, 2010 – January 3, 2011.

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For many, the default interpretation of the bride in her white finery has been a vision of happiness. And this is how she is usually portrayed in the museum—through exquisite examples rendered in tulle and silk and lace. But in recent years, the bride, her dress, and the wedding ritual in which they appear have become the subjects of public debate in America encompassing many issues from fiscal irresponsibility (e.g., Otnes and Pleck 2003), to capitalist exploitation (e.g., Penner 2004; Howard 2006), to social inequality and oppression (e.g., Ingraham 1999; Geller 2001). While scholarly and popular writing has adopted this more scrutinizing discourse, museum exhibits have been slower to go beyond the simple celebration of fine craftsmanship and good taste.

Wedding dress exhibits are remarkably common in the United States, for both small and major institutions. They can reveal a great deal about different perspectives on wedding dresses and how these understandings are impacted by institutional or disciplinary orientations and collecting practices. Wedding gowns—because they are cherished by owners, because they often represent the highest quality a woman can afford, because they are rarely worn but once—are offered as donations far more often than other types of clothing. For this reason, most art and historical museums in America, if they keep costume collections, house significant numbers of wedding apparel in their permanent collections. Permanent collections become the building blocks of exhibits, sparking inspiration and guiding design. But more importantly, if the public highly values, and therefore commonly donates, bridal gowns, it is logical to assume that the public also wants to view them on display. Wedding dress exhibits, in fact, are some of the best-attended shows.

Due to the logic and popularity of wedding dress exhibits, small organizations, like local county museums, depend on them as easy, rewarding endeavors. Curators within higher-stakes institutions, on the other hand, tend to dread them for their very ubiquity. Cynthia Amneus, curator of fashion arts and textiles at the Cincinnati Art Museum, argued that her recent show *Wedded Perfection: Two Centuries of Wedding Gowns* was not typical. She (Vaughn 2010) revealed about her planning process: "I was determined that this show would be different and I

really wanted to take a more scholarly approach to the subject—not just put the gowns up chronologically and repeat the same basic, often erroneous, history of the dress."

Wedded Perfection opened on October 9, 2010 at the Cincinnati Art Museum and was slated to close January 30, 2011. Set to stunning visual effect against steel blue walls, the whites, creams, and pastels of the dresses popped. The gowns were beautifully arranged on bone white mannequins with era-appropriate, paper-cut hair. Dividing walls featured cut-outs that created windows onto hidden angles of the dresses and staired risers gave dramatic space for silk and velvet trains to spill over like milk. Organized by thematic groupings rather than stylistic chronology, more than sixty gowns, art installations, paintings, and photographs presented examinations of wedding dresses as artistic creations (e.g., "Historically influential Design," "Influential Designers") or manifestations of complex cultural values, symbols, and individual choices (e.g., "Bridal Traditions," "Brides in Color," "Women, Marriage, and Wedding Gowns").

Perhaps in part because of her interest in recent scholarship, Amneus adopted a less celebratory tone for this exhibit, highlighting the personal and social struggle she feels contemporary women embody when donning wedding dresses. Considering a long history of patriarchal domination, Amneus tried to balance the aesthetic choices of brides and designers with feminist commentary on the evolving institution of marriage and gender relations. She did this to greatest visual effect by going beyond traditional gowns to include contemporary art pieces that intentionally reveal, and throw into contrast, symbolic renderings of bridal clothes. A large 1967 piece by the Bulgarian-born artist Christo entitled "Wedding Dress," for example, consists of a mannequin dressed in white satin shorts and tank top straining against a harness of silk ropes leading to a giant satin-wrapped load she pulls behind her. Though presented as a sculptural here, the artwork was originally designed as a performance piece with a model replacing the mannequin. For this display, a nearby label read: "Today, brides step of their own free will into what is considered an equal bond," but earlier generations were regularly "regarded as chattel, domestic servants, junior partners, and child care workers" who may have exercised less choice. Amneus challenged visitors to consider the symbolic, historical, and emotional load brides are asked to carry by participating in the wedding ritual.

Wedded Perfection—as if to avoid adding to their representational load—honored the brides whose dresses populated the galleries by recognizing their unique identities and by acknowledging the socially and historically situated choices they made. Object labels did attend to the typical information that helps illustrate fashion history, such as the invention of new dyes and fabrics, or changing ideas about desirable silhouettes. These elements, however, rather than being treated as historically determined, were often discussed as optional and intentional selections directed by the wearer. For example, the gowns of two sisters, Louisa and Rose Uphoff, married four years apart in the 1870s were compared for their "fashion forwardness": Louisa's white two-piece dress could be interpreted as slightly more conservative than Rose's pink-tinged one-piece princess line. Both women, however, generously applied trendy lace trim and tendrils of orange blossoms. Equals in station, time period, and geography, the sisters followed their own personal tastes, adopting or ignoring the newest styles.

While the Uphoffs may have kept up with fashion, others consciously defied standards and expectations by choosing simple homemade and ready-wear dresses or exploiting the

opportunity for drama with avant-garde fantasies. Sandra Landeros Thomas and her mother Kristina M. Manning together created a gold spangled, black velvet gown complete with fuzzy, black feather wings reflecting the bride's Gothic tastes. Rather than upholding ideals of perfect, blushing brides, *Wedded Perfection* displayed how some women have embraced choices that dismantle norms. Anne Elizabeth Thompson, for example, selected a green and black gown that stretched pleasantly across her pregnant belly.

Within art museums, wedding dress exhibits offer unique opportunities. Rarely do visitors to fashion-oriented exhibits learn much about the actual wearers of displayed garments, if, in fact, they ever were worn. *Wedded Perfection* certainly included gowns by noted designers like Charles Frederick Worth, Bob Mackie, and Christian Dior. More often than not, however, these examples were not exclusively runway pieces and were once worn by identified brides. Unlike couture, high-end designer, or historical garments—things far removed from the average visitor's daily experience—wedding dresses seem familiar. Perhaps because wedding dresses—despite their exceptional character—are actually quite common, modern visitors cannot help but see the woman, singular unto herself, represented by the garment. Much like the discourse of true love, contemporary conceptions of the wedding dress promote the idea that there is one perfect gown out there for every bride and she must go to great lengths to find it. Fashion, as it is understood within the museum, lets us consider the body as a canvas for art. But wedding dresses as a subject forces us to acknowledge art's functions, forces us to contemplate excellence and creativity as a part of life with all of its limitations and demands. Wedding dresses let us consider the wearer as an active participant in the production of sartorial art.

Being the product of an art museum, it was not surprising, though no less disappointing, that labels for *Wedded Perfection* automatically prioritized the identities of designers and makers over users. While the names of brides had to be be teased out of the text, the names of designers headed object labels in larger, boldface type. Many of the labels did include small inset photographs of the bride wearing her gown, confirming her presence for those who rarely read labels. However, these photographs did not always identify the pictured woman with captions, but instead merely named the photographer.

Regardless of these presentational decisions perpetuated by disciplinary tradition, *Wedded Perfection* revealed many telling moments of individual, lived experience. A number of the dresses, for example, hinted at stories that illustrate the flexibility of tradition to respond to desires and needs. Labels tell of Winifred Miller's reluctance to wear lustrous white after her sister died shortly before her wedding in 1924 or of practical Ann Isabel Eaton who bought a racy backless gold gown in 1935 knowing that she could wear it with a matching jacket on her wedding day, and without, later out dancing.

Some of the best examples of fashion-in-action included a series of giclée prints by Stephanie Carson that appeared throughout the exhibit. These black and white photographs exposed the real, creative *work* behind dressing for an audience. Primarily depicting brides in the middle of preparations, the images revealed women surrounded by teams of committed attendants biting off loose threads with their teeth, strategically applying copious layers of deodorant, or strapping the bride's stilettos while she lies on a bed immobile in her tightly-bodiced dress. One print titled "Brenda and the Duct Tape" showed a bride holding up her bustier, stuffed with silicone bra

inserts, while helpers duct tape her chest to create impressively unnatural cleavage. The photographs evocatively captured average women, some jubilant and some glazed over with anxiety, attempting to transform themselves into perfect brides, into individual works of art. One needed only to compare the images of these real women with the pencil-thin columns of silk created by Vera Wang found elsewhere within the exhibit to understand the tall order of perfection.

Even as gender equality has improved historically, Amneus portrayed the bridal industry and its "invented traditions" of excessive spending and hard-to-achieve beauty standards as potentially victimizing agents. The label for "The Fairy Tale" section argued that our contemporary understanding of the wedding gown—one that transforms wearers into princesses for a day—was promoted first by the burgeoning Association of Bridal Manufacturers beginning in the 1930s for purely commercial reasons. Amneus wrote, "The pervasiveness of this transformational concept socializes twenty-first century girls from an early age to anticipate their wedding day and imagine it as a fairy tale-like event," "even feminists are comfortable orchestrating and engaging in this fantasy." If even feminists—thoughtful, liberated women—cannot disentangle themselves from nuptial fantasies saturated in wasteful extravagance, hurtful beauty expectations, and subservient connotations, Amneus suggests there must be something powerfully resonant for participants who willingly take up ambivalent symbols and ritual acts.

Taking one look around the gallery on the day I visited *Wedded Perfection*, I noticed rooms crowded with women of all ages, engaged in enthusiastic conversations about their experiences as brides, mother-of-brides, maids of honor, and guests. While ostensibly the wedding ritual and its dress bind a man and a woman together, they equally connect women with other women, across generations and through shared experience. And we must not forget that rituals, regardless of culture, produce powerful, aesthetic experiences for their participants. For many women in America, the excitement of touching something truly beautiful, slipping it over one's skin, and relishing the admiring looks of others, is too alluring to support an unwaveringly cynical view of wedding dresses. As I wandered the exhibit, I overheard a young girl in a pink ruffled coat proudly tell her mother "I think I'll have a prettier dress than this. I'm going to have my train 30 feet long. Will I be a princess then?" Her mother replied without irony, "*every* woman is a princess on her wedding day."

Despite *Wedded Perfection*'s fine achievements, it reproduced a lack of diversity common in fashion-focused exhibits. Usually, such a complaint is directed at the tendency of art museums to uphold socio-economic disparities, celebrating wealthy elites to the exclusion of all other possibilities. This exhibit did, however, highlight women from a variety of economic backgrounds. *Wedded Perfection* faltered with its attempts to display dresses connected to an African American and a lesbian couple; rather than being garments worn in real weddings, these were in fact costumes from the soap opera *All My Children,* as if implying that adequate examples could only be found in fiction.

Another wedding dress exhibit, recently held at a different Midwestern institution, reached further toward representative inclusiveness. The Chicago History Museum's *I Do! Chicago Ties the Knot,* with candy-colored pop art graphics and quotes from *Vogue* and famous style-makers like Paul Poiret decorating the walls, looked very different from the serious *Wedded Perfection*.

Though the white mannequins with paper-cut hair echo Cincinnati, they were arranged into little groups gesticulating to each other as if engaged in elegant conversations, like the ghosts-of-brides-past at a cocktail party. Timothy Long, the museum's costume curator, strived for visual cleverness with his design. One of the first things one saw upon entering the space is a round bench with plush seats made to look like a giant multi-tiered wedding cake topped with a life-sized bride and groom in stereotypical wedding dress loaned by Macy's. The main label, written in both English and Spanish, declared with a wink: "wedding attire has not always been so black and white."

The exhibit that followed this introduction worked hard to display variation not only for bridal garments, but also for other players and objects associated with the wedding ritual. Examples worn by grooms and adult or child attendants infiltrated the dominant timeline of bridal dress. Smaller vignettes grouped together like accessories from different time periods, such as jewelry, corsets, shoes, hats, and men's fancy waistcoats. One case labeled "All the Trimmings" displayed an assortment of personal possessions used by couples to "bring individuality and self-expression to a familiar backdrop" of wedding dress. The selected items illustrated a range of religious and cultural backgrounds, from bejeweled Indian bangles to Aztec calendar cuff links to two religious texts—a Christian prayer book and a Torah—carried during different ceremonies.

Like Amneus, Long highlighted individuals through identification and inset photographs, but his strategies and focus were very different. Every wedding dress within the exhibit, whether homemade or couture, could be traced back to a Chicago bride and it was the name of the wedded couple, not the designer, that headed object labels. So important was this conceit that even for gowns without fixed provenance, "Anonymous Couple" was identified as the primary source, reminding the viewer that a real person, a Chicagoan, had worn it.

Labels offered, in addition to fashion history, interesting biographical tidbits about the couple, but this information was often unassociated with their nuptials or personal style choices. Instead, we were introduced to the people of Chicago. A label for an 1893 champagne-colored gown with enormous leg-o-mutton sleeves and worn by Grace Mittie Cheney for her wedding to Jefferson George Harbor read: "He worked as a real estate broker in Chicago until his death in 1928. Grace outlived him by twenty-six years." When the couple's past proves elusive, Long looked to their immediate families: for a 1901 lace dress, the reader was told "little is known about this couple who suffered tragedy when Florence passed away three years after her wedding. Florence's father founded a company that constructed stained-glass windows for churches in the Midwest. William's father was a train engineer, who drove the last locomotive out of the city before the Great Chicago Fire." On the few occasions when even this data could not be obtained, the consequent label forlornly announced, "no biographical information is available on this couple." Rather than simply glossing over the absence, *Chicago Ties the Knot* drew attention to it, confirming that no oversight on the part of the curator had occurred.

Rather than contemplating tradition and aesthetic prowess—as did *Wedded Perfection*, this exhibit located named individuals—represented by the beautiful dresses of women—within the history of Chicago, personalizing and beautifying the city. The tagline for the exhibit, found on promotional materials, contended, "Through the fashion of a single day, hundreds of stories unfold." And these "stories" articulated an increasingly modern, cosmopolitan epicenter.

Chicago Ties the Knot, while organized by typical chronology, cast a wider narrative net, examining not only changing fashion over time, but also an evolving city marked by growing national, commercial influence and cultural diversity. As home to Marshall Fields (now Macy's on State Street), Chicago can claim the first bridal department and registry, bringing fashion and affordable luxury to the masses. A fascinating interactive screen allowed visitors to flip through digitized wedding planning catalogs from 1955 and 1962, inspect fabric samples and cloth patterns from 1951, or see spectacular window displays that rival any of the tableaus found elsewhere in the exhibit. In other words, Chicago has been a key player in the formation of the national wedding industry.

Chicago Ties the Knot began, like many costume exhibits, with the dress of white, wealthy elites. Of the earliest bride Sarah Maria Seymour who wed in 1854, for instance, we learn that her "life and friendships inspired *The Elegant Eighties*, a fictionalized account of high-society life in Chicago." Before long, however, these early examples were joined by an increasing array of people from diverse backgrounds. Sara Kozak, a Ukranian immigrant, brought her colorful, hand-embroidered wedding dress with her to the U.S. Later, her granddaughter Jane Sarah Cooper wore it in 1984. Two bi-racial couples incorporated various ethnic garments and customs into their ceremonies, represented in part by a Spanish-style mantilla veil and a shimmery white and gold sari. And perhaps most interesting among the many frothy gowns were two identical Ralph Lauren suits worn by Brian von Rueden and Benjeman Nichols during their 2008 wedding at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church (which we are informed made the cover of *Windy City Times*, a local LGBT publication). These selections presented a multifaceted, multicultural image of Chicago, one that could rival any major metropolis.

Both institutions—an art museum and a city history museum—started with different disciplinary agendas, but both hoped to bring prestige to those who support them—local people—and to those places in which they are situated. Whether celebrating fine taste or historical importance, both of these exhibits helped the museums assert their city's prominence on a national stage. The Chicago History Museum more overtly made claims with its emphasis on commercial innovations and cosmopolitanism. The Cincinnati Art Museum was subtler, its mission not directly related to Cincinnati arts, culture, or history. Interwoven among the many exquisite gowns, a few exemplified the wealth and aesthetic superiority of native Cincinnatians—like Katherine Phillips who traveled to Paris in the 1870s to have her wedding attire made by the famed couturier-to-royalty Charles Frederick Worth. Elsewhere in the gallery, two lavish gowns shared a single label showcasing their use of opulent embellishment—one from Manhattan decorated with elaborate box-pleating, the other from Cincinnati covered with dangles of seed beads and faux pearls. Side by side, the dresses suggested a relationship, one in which Cincinnati equals, if not bests, her more famous East Coast sister. In fact, it is this Cincinnati gown—bedecked in pearls—that represented the exhibit in most of the museum's promotional materials.

Cynthia Amneus and Tim Long, curators representing two different museums with different missions, approached the display and interpretation of wedding dresses from their own professionally and personally-influenced viewpoints. Amneus, a highly-educated, career woman, highlighted a feminist analysis. Tim Long, an openly gay man, presented an understanding of wedding attire that embraced an expanded definition of marriage and its participants. Both,

however, harnessed the symbolic power of wedding dress to signal heightened status, one that glamorizes people and places.

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