

Fashion Outlook

Down the aisle

Bridal offerings are updated classics

By Joan Lebow

It's no surprise to learn that down the aisle in 1988 will come romantic wedding gowns that are long and white, lacy and beaded, ruffled and bowed. But this season has its own subtle yet distinctive details — including new colors and deep "V" backs — that will appeal to brides' modern fashion sense.

Moreover, top bridal designers each add their own point of view to "traditional" wedding dresses. Their design signatures are as personal and varied as their backgrounds.

Frank Masandrea began his bridal-design career in the 1960s. While still a student at the Fashion Institute of Technology, he worked part time for the display department at Lord & Taylor in New York City. After showing his free-lance designs to the bridal buyer, who commissioned him to do an exclusive collection for the store, his career was launched.

In 1984, Masandrea teamed up with businessman Paul Diamond. Masandrea's dramatic and lavish pure silk for the Diamond Collection mix ceremonial formality with fashion-smart, and sometimes sexy, details.

Masandrea says, "For spring, the dresses are very romantic. There are poufy ball gowns, bustles, crinolines and tiers of fabric. It's just like what's happening in ready-to-wear."

Masandrea is also showing lots of revealing wedding dresses. "Brides no longer want high necklines; they want something off-the-shoulder and bare," he says. This year, he adds, there is less lace on many gowns, and beads and lace are both more strategically placed. Finally, he stresses the importance of color.

Each year, designers introduce one or two pale pink gowns for the rare bride who eschews white. But in 1988, many designers are showing peach, pale blue, mint and especially pink gowns. Most provide an underlayer of color with an overlay of white tissue taffeta for a frosted effect.

A master of that technique is Priscilla C. Kidder, president of Priscilla of Boston. Kidder and her husband opened The Bride's Shop on Boston's prestigious Newbury Street in 1945. Kidder got national renown for designing the wedding gowns of Tricia and Julie Nixon and coordinating

their White House weddings.

While some Priscilla gowns are ornate, most are characterized by an elegant simplicity. Kidder helped popularize raw, slubbed silk as a wedding-gown fabric and uses it in her frosted pink dresses, which are just a blush beyond white. Ivory and white are far and away the most popular hues, and sweeping ballgown shapes are the favorite silhouettes (always worn with a petticoat). But Kidder also likes a shade she calls "French vanilla" — a not-quite-as-classic alternative to the basics.

"The bridal business has become all-seasons," Kidder says. "We use all types of fabrics year round." She notes that higher-priced silks are prevalent in designer gowns today,

while rayon and polyester were once more important.

"There is a trend toward sheers like organzies or beautiful tulle on dresses," she continues. "The girls want to float down the aisle." There is less beading on the newest gowns, she says, because "the bride wants to call attention to her face, not her clothes."

As for short skirts, the veteran bridal designer will have none of it. "I tried it in the '60s and didn't sell a dress, so I'm not going to do it this time. It's fine for cocktail parties and dancing, but not for a bride."

More adventurous brides will be inclined to seek out the unique gowns of Tokyo's fashion rebel Yumi Katsura. Katsura has been selling to American stores since 1981. Her gowns embody some basic bridal guidelines — they are elaborate, long and white — then they break all the rules.

Trained in the theater and the art of costume design, Katsura later studied fashion in Paris. She returned to Tokyo, and in 1963 presented the first Western-style bridal show in Japan, where brides have traditionally worn only kimonos.

Katsura was exposed to white, lacy gowns as a fashion student in France. Yet her own designs are far less sweet and demure than those of her counterparts in the United States and Europe.



From left: Priscilla's China-silk gown with elongated basque bodice and full ballgown skirt (\$1,500) and lace tilara atop a waltz-length lace-edged mantilla (\$220); Imported Alencon lace gown beaded with sequins, beads and pearls with silk chiffon detachable cape (\$2,500) from Yumi Katsura; asymmetrical-hip peplum with high-necked bodice of sequined and beaded lace and cathedral-length train (dress, about \$1,550; headpiece, about \$450) by Frank Masandrea for the Diamond Collection.



The designer favors sensuously close-to-the body silhouettes with detachable trains; ruffles, ruching and Fortuny-style pleats; and unabashed bare backs and plunging necklines. Some of her fabrics are hand-painted. "Today's bride is highly individualistic, sexy, adventuresome and self-assured," she says.

This year Katsura has merged some Asian and Western influences, designing with kimono-like sleeves and shapes.

In Japan, Katsura is a national television star, as well as a renowned designer, and her flair for drama is always apparent. Her bridal-house headquarters in Tokyo is a giant rococo-style building that resembles a wedding cake. But she has a traditional side, too: Katsura has written four books published in Japan on weddings and wedding etiquette, earning her the nickname, "Emily Post of Tokyo."

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