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Short version

The Doll's House Museum Basel presents:

“Yes, I do!”

A special exhibition about bridal fashions, customs and traditions associated with weddings. 17 April - 3 October 2010.

The exhibition presents over 350 objects associated with the most beautiful day in one's life: enchanting wedding dresses with veils, wonderful wedding shoes, nostalgic bridal bouquets, romantic gloves and bridal wreaths of myrtle with wax flowers and buds. Wedding crowns, bridal crown stands under glass domes, old original photographs and many other items of wedding memorabilia dating from around 1810 to 1960 are on display, too. Historic films of royal weddings from around the globe and a film on bridal fashion in bygone decades get visitors in the mood for the subject.

Customs and traditions

Weddings have been celebrated since time immemorial. Certain customs and traditions associated with the wedding ceremony have evolved since then which have been kept up for many centuries, some of them right up to the present day. These customs frequently serve the same purpose: they were intended to protect the bride against evil spirits; after all, young girls were seen as being at particular risk of attack by both supernatural and earthly villains at the time of transition from childhood to adulthood. In addition, many traditions served to ensure that the young couple would be blessed with fertility and children.

Even though we may dismiss these traditions to some extent as superstition and the customs bring no real benefit, they do no harm either. On the contrary, whether throwing rice, kidnapping the bride or wedding night jokes, these traditions are a great source of amusement for the both the bridal couple and the guests and make the big day truly memorable. That's why customs such as a guard of honour or a stag or hen night continue to be a firm fixture of every wedding celebration.

Colour and history of the wedding dress

When we think of a wedding, an image of a bride in a white gown springs almost automatically to mind. White is the colour of innocence, the white dress is supposed to symbolise virginity and maidenhood. In Europe, the colour of the dress has long had a symbolic value and over the centuries, the colours were governed by various fashion trends. However, white has only been the traditional wedding colour since the 19th century. Important burgesses had been marrying in red since the 15th century. Towards the end of the 16th century, the influence of the Spanish court led to the rise of black as the undisputed fashion colour. Even into the 20th century, it was considered very elegant to marry in black, especially in rural areas. White was therefore also an unpopular colour at that time, on account of the fact that white dresses were very difficult to clean. Marrying in black was supposed to remind people that happiness and sadness, life and death were often not far apart. Incidentally, it was also a common custom to wear the wedding dress again later as a burial gown.

It was around the end of the 18th century that the white wedding dress came to be seen as a new status symbol in aristocratic circles. But it was not until the 19th century that white became accepted for wedding dresses as the symbol of purity, perfection, joy and celebration. In 1854, Princess Elisabeth of Bavaria, or "Sissi" as she was known, married in a white dress made of silky Duchesse satin with a long lace veil. She was hailed as the most beautiful bride of the century. From now on, it was clear that for a fashion-conscious bride, only white would do as the wedding colour.

The flourishing fabric industry and the invention of the sewing machine ultimately resulted in wedding dresses becoming fashion-oriented and shorter-lived.

By tradition, the bridegroom paid for the wedding dress. Today, however, the cost is met by the bride's parents or the bride herself.

Customs and superstitions associated with wedding dresses.

As you might expect, there are many customs and myths associated with the wedding dress. Sometimes they defy all logic and should probably not be taken too seriously, but nevertheless they are still amusing.

- It is considered unlucky for a bride to sew her own wedding dress. According to an old proverb “the number of stitches she sews will be the number of tears she will shed during the course of her marriage”. In days gone by, even seamstresses got a colleague to sew their dresses. It was said that the seamstress who sewed the first stitch in a wedding dress would also get married within a year.
- The appearance of the wedding dress is a secret. The bridegroom is not permitted to set sight on it before the ceremony, he must not see the bride wearing it under any circumstances. And even the spirits may not set eye on it – so peace and tranquillity must prevail in the room in which it is sewn. Loud singing, crying, whistling or arguing is prohibited.
- The dress should have as many buttons as possible since there is a saying that the bride has as many years to live as the number of buttons sewn on her wedding dress.
- An old custom has it that work should continue on the wedding dress until the wedding day. It is important to add a little something for good luck, even at the last minute: the final seam is closed, a shiny penny sewn into the hem.
- On the day of her wedding, the bride should not look into the mirror too soon. It is alleged to be unlucky for the bride to look in the mirror before she is fully dressed.
- An Austrian custom has it that on her wedding day the bride should wear an item of underwear inside out. This is also said to confuse the evil spirits and ultimately drive them away.

The veil

The veil has been part of the bridal trousseau in many different cultures since time immemorial. Most importantly, it serves to symbolise the dramatic transition. It covers the bride at the moment of separation, thus making the parting visible, but not the feelings or the tears that she might be shedding. It protects the bride on the way from the parents to the husband. It is only when she reaches the altar that the veil is lifted or turned back by the bridegroom. This custom goes back to an old precaution: the future husband wanted to reassure himself that he was not being fobbed off with the wrong bride.

Since according to Christian belief, the veil symbolised virginity, for a long time, only “respectable” brides were permitted to wear a veil. Pregnant women were not permitted to do so. Wall paintings in the Roman catacombs show that the veil is much older than the wedding dress.

In many rural areas it was the custom until well into the 20th century to wear a white veil with the black Sunday dress on the wedding day. This can be seen on various original photos in the exhibition. There is also a superstition concerning the veil: no-one but the bride may wear

the veil. If a friend were to try on the veil, according to the legend, she will seduce the bridegroom.

The bridal wreath

The bridal wreath stood for chastity and purity and was intended to ward off evil spirits. The closed circle was regarded as a magical sign to keep away evil spirits. In the early wreaths, the blossoms and buds were made of wax and represented peach or cherry blossoms. Later, the blossoms were made of fabric.

The German expression “unter die Haube kommen” for getting married (literally “come under the bonnet”) derives from the time when unmarried girls wore a wreath, and married women a bonnet. On the wedding day, the custom was for the bride’s wreath to be removed and replaced with a bonnet – in other words, she came “under the bonnet”.

The bridal crown

The bridal crown is very much older than the bridal wreath. It was already worn by the ancient Greeks and Romans. The bridal crown is also a symbol of the bride's purity because it was seen as a perfect replica of the crown of the Virgin Mary, the celestial goddess. A number of very fine bridal crowns can be seen in the exhibition.

The bridal bouquet

Wedding flowers were not always intended solely to adorn the bride. In earlier times, a bouquet also served to pacify the evil spirits. The bridal bouquet has a long tradition. In ancient Greece, brides preferred delicate mimosas, among the Romans, it was only ever roses. On ancient drawings of the Egyptians, you see Nefertiti with a lotus blossom. In the Middle Ages, rosemary was a popular wedding plant, that was used both for the bridal bouquet and for the bridal wreath, as were thyme, lavender and orange blossoms. After the wedding, the bride would then take a sprig of rosemary from the bouquet and place it in a flower pot. If the sprig rooted and began to blossom, it was seen as a good omen for the newlywed couple.

The flowers in the wedding bouquet are full of symbolic power. Roses, the symbol of love, are the classic flowers for the bride. This is what some of the popular flowers stand for:

Carnations: the woman's love

White lilies: purity and innocence

Lilly of the valley: good fortune and virtue

Ivy: faithfulness and wedding

Orange blossoms: chastity and purity

Sweet peas: pleasure

The rings

Up to the Middle Ages, wedding and engagement rings were only given to the woman. This tradition did not change until the 14th century. The couple made a vow of mutual fidelity and for the first time, they exchanged wedding rings. By wearing the ring, the husband also pledged to be faithful to his wife. It was around this time that the first partnership rings appeared. Today, the wedding ring is more important and meaningful than ever before.

The glove

The glove ranks among the oldest wedding accessories. This is because in the Middle Ages, gloves served not only to keep the hands warm. They reaffirmed an agreement. If a woman gave her glove by way of a gift, this was regarded as the highest token of favour. The long, richly embroidered gloves were regarded as a legally binding component of the wedding ceremony. By handing the bridegroom her glove, the bride was giving him the symbol of her love. If he returned the gift, his glove was the confirmation of the contract, which a marriage always represents. Exchanging gloves before the altar was an acknowledgement of Christian principles and promises in the marital and family life ahead.

The wedding shoes

In earlier times, the bride-to-be would hide away every penny, saving money with which to buy her wedding shoes. The large number of pennies was supposed to show that the bride was very thrifty and able to look after money once she was married.

In some places the wedding shoe is auctioned, a custom that brings in a tidy sum for the bride which she can use as housekeeping money for the first month of the marriage.

In some regions, it is the custom to remove one of the bride's shoes and fill it with flowers. At the same time, the bridal couple are served a glass of wine which they drink together. This custom is supposed to guarantee life-long health.

Something old, something new ...

According to this ancient European custom that originates from Great Britain, on her wedding day, the bride should wear something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue. The old and the new represent single and married life. The borrowed signifies the indestructible friendship of her friends. The blue stands for loyalty and purity. The bride was supposed to incorporate these in her wedding outfit on the big day. Something old is generally a piece of her mother's or grandmother's jewellery. Something new is of course usually the wedding dress. Something borrowed is often a piece of jewellery from her best friend and something blue a garter or a blossom in the bridal bouquet.

The bridal kiss

After exchanging rings, the bride and groom are permitted to kiss. In earlier times, this kiss was not only (generally) the first kiss shared by the newlywed couple, it also had its roots in a church tradition. During the mass, the bridegroom received the so-called “kiss of peace” from the priest and passed it on to his wife.

The wedding cake

It is thought that the modern wedding cake is derived directly from a type of cake that formed an important part of the wedding ceremony among the Romans.

In the course of time, the simple cake became a fine gâteau. In England it has developed into the custom of the rich wedding cake. This splendid, Anglo-Saxon, multi-tier wedding cake in bridal snow-white icing is popularly decorated with marzipan symbols of love, hearts and roses, doves or sugared almonds and sometimes crowned with a miniature bridal couple in marzipan (or plastic) or with cupids. Today one often encounters five-tier wedding cakes. The five tiers are supposed to symbolise the life cycle: birth, youth, wedding, children and death. Depending on the area or custom, the bridegroom or bride has to cut the cake and distribute it to the guests.

An old superstition has it that the bride and groom should feed each other with a piece of wedding cake at the reception. Continued wedded bliss is then assured

Moving pictures of royal weddings all over the world

The exhibition features historic films of royal weddings. These include the marriage of Prince Rainier III of Monaco to Grace Patricia Kelly in 1956, the wedding ceremony of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi – the Shah of Persia – and Farah Diba in 1959 or the marriage of Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales, to Lady Diana Spencer on 29 July 1981. A particular attraction is a strip from the roll of fabric used to make the bridal veil of Diana, Princess of Wales.

Live wedding in the display window

To mark the opening of the special exhibition “Yes, I do” on 17 April 2010, a couple will exchange vows live in the display window of the Doll's House Museum. The wedding will be performed by a priest in the presence of around 25 guests invited by the bridal couple. It will certainly be an exceptional experience for all involved.

Opening hours

Museum, shop and café: Daily from 10.00 – 18.00

Admission

CHF 7.00 / 5.00

Children up to 16 years of age are admitted free of charge and only in the company of adults.

No additional charge for the special exhibition.

The entire building is wheelchair-accessible.

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