Carlyle House
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Fashionable, Functional and Symbolic: The 18th-Century Wedding Dress

by Jim Bartlinski

On the European Continent, in England, and in America of the 1700s, there was a practice among brides of all social classes of wearing their "best dress," color notwithstanding, on their wedding day, rather than a dress made only for that day and then stored away. In his most enduring novel *The Vicar of Wakefield*, 18th-century Irish-born poet, playwright and essayist Oliver Goldsmith wrote that the vicar's bride chose "her wedding-gown, not for a fine glossy surface, but such qualities as would wear well." Although from a work of fiction, the tact the vicar's wife took when selecting her "wedding-gown" epitomized the choice most brides in Europe and America made when deciding on the fabrics for their wedding gowns.

The extravagance of having a dress made solely for a bride's "special day" was generally a luxury of the nobility. The quality, type, and color of material used when making a bride's dress was in most cases determined by availability and cost of material, particularly in the colonies. This circumstance led women of the period to take a more pragmatic approach and have a dress made that would afford them several opportunities throughout their lives to wear their wedding gown. To keep up with current trends, these dresses were frequently altered by a bride throughout her lifetime and were eventually passed down to a daughter, a close relative, or possibly a servant, if it became well-worn. Typically these dresses were constructed from the most elegant and durable textiles that could be purchased.

As the strongest of natural fibers and one of the most luxurious materials, silk was the preferred fabric by those who could afford it. Stylistically, Sarah's dress fabric dates to the 1740s and has been considered to be of Dutch origin. However, the English silk industry had begun in Spitalfields during the early-seventeenth century and was gaining prominence during this time. It significantly "arrived" on the fashion scene after 1756, when Queen Charlotte required her court to only wear Spitalfields silk.

Fragment of fabric believed to be Sarah Carlyle's wedding gown. Dutch silk or Spitalfields silk? c. 1747.

In the Carlyle House collections, there exists various fragments of a plain weave blue silk cloth that are believed to be pieces of the gown worn by John Carlyle's first wife, Sarah Fairfax, when they

CARLYLE HOUSE

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wed on New Year's Eve in 1747. Surviving remnants of Sarah's dress can be described as both elegant and practical. The blue silk is adorned with a red, yellow, teal, peach and taupe floral design. These remaining examples of the Fairfax dress indicate that it was similar in functionality to that of the Vicar of Wakefield's bride, and that Sarah may have chosen the fabric because it "would wear well." The physical evidence provided by the assorted silk fragments, coupled with the oral tradition passed down by Sarah's descendants, reveals that her wedding dress had been altered at least once. Modifications made to the shape of an existing sleeve in the museum's collection reflect a style indicative of the 1790s and support the family tradition of Sarah's dress being worn by either her daughter Sarah Herbert or a granddaughter to one of George Washington's "Birthnight Ball's" held at Gadsby's Tavern in 1798 or 1799. This implies that the first Mrs. Carlyle deliberately selected a resilient fabric with a multipurpose color and design that was meant to be worn many times after her wedding day.

It is not known if John Carlyle's second wife, Sybil West, took the same commonsensical approach as Sarah Fairfax or as the bride in Goldsmith's book when choosing the fabric for her wedding gown. Regrettably, there is no physical evidence or account of John and Sybil's October 22, 1761 marriage that has come to light. But if Sybil's tastes and financial prudence was representative of brides of the period, it can be assumed that the dress she wore at her wedding two hundred and forty-five years ago was stylish, versatile and durable. Most 18th-century brides were as judicious when choosing a color for their wedding gown as they were when selecting a fabric. Unlike today, white was not the dominant color choice. Unless a bride could afford to wear her wedding gown only once, white or variations of white were not practical choices because of the difficulty in keeping it clean over time. Despite this drawback white dresses were worn by a few American women of the period. In 1785, a "sweet bride" at Norfolk, Virginia "was most elegantly dressed in white satin." White wedding gowns did not become popular in the United States until the mid 19th-century.

Wedding dress, 1742-3. Manchester City Galleries, England.

Superstitions grew up around the color of a wedding dress. Most of these myths go back centuries and some are adhered to even today. Brides held the belief that wearing a certain color on the day of her wedding would secure happiness in her new home and guarantee her fertility. A bride in America during the 1700s who was as extravagant as the abovementioned "sweet bride" at Norfolk and decided to wear white satin on her wedding day did so not only to showcase her wealth and good taste, but also as a symbol of her virginity and innocence. Blue, pink, and to some extent, yellow were fashionable colors for an 18th-century bride to wear on her "special day."

Blue was one of the most popular colors for an 18th-century bride to wear on her wedding day. Besides the fabric's durability, Sarah Fairfax may have selected the blue silk because of its associations with the Virgin Mary. The color blue embodied those virtues attributed to Mary, the Mother of Christ, like purity, fidelity and eternal love. Brides who wore blue believed their husbands would always be faithful, so even if the gown itself was not blue, they would be sure to wear something blue about their person, another tradition that has survived to this day.

Martha Washington's wedding gown fabric. Married in 1759.

Pink did not enjoy the status of blue, but it too was considered a color suitable for a wedding dress. 18th-century women believed pink to be "flattering to most complexions," which made it appropriate for most occasions. Pink was also associated with "girlhood" or innocence. But a superstition of the period held pink to be unlucky – "Marry in pink and your fortunes will sink."

Yellow had varied popularity among brides during the 18th- century. For a while yellow was the fashionable color to wear, but prior to the mid 1700s, yellow had been associated with pagans and non-Christians and was considered an "unholy shade" to

wear in church. The widowed Martha Custis apparently did not heed this superstition for she wore a gown of yellow silk damask when she wed George Washington in 1759. Martha's yellow woven silk damask dress was made from some of the finest of fabrics to have been imported to the colonies during this time. It was also durable for, like Sarah Fairfax Carlyle's plain-weave blue silk, dress fragments of Martha Washington's yellow silk damask dress still survives.

For the most part it appears that European and American brides of the 1700s were practical when deciding on a wedding-gown, and like the bride in Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*, they chose their gowns for "such qualities as would wear well."

Works Cited

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Very Special Thank You!

The holiday table could not have been completed without the incalculable assistance of **Janice Magnuson**. As always, we truly appreciate Janice's efforts to share Carlyle's life with the public.

Question of the Month

Is the pot with the heart-shaped handle in the Servants' Hall a double boiler?

The pot with the crooked handle hanging in the Servants' Hall fireplace is indeed a double boiler. Double boilers first entered the culinary tradition in Latin as *balneum Mariae*. According to legend the double boiler was first used by alchemists, chiefly Miriam the sister of Moses. The French derived from the Latin *bain-marie*, transliterated "bath of water." The oldest written references date to the 12th century AD and are attributed to the German theologian Saint Albert the Great.

Cooks' desire for double boilers mirrored that of the alchemists: The two-pot approach allowed the handler better control over heat conduction. Delicate work, from alloys to custards, required an insulated removal from direct heat. The cooperation between the atmospheric pressure and the liquid placed in the outer pot (usually water), allowed for greater predictability in temperature changes, boiling speeds, and heat insulation. Since water placed in the outer pot had a known boiling point of 100°Celsius, cooks could adjust cooking times and ingredient quantities for specific foods.

The predictibility of temperature meant that luxury food items such as dairy products and confections stood a greater chance of success. Crusts did not form on custards. Cheesecakes did not split in the center. Chocolate melted smoothly and blended perfectly. Given that the mistress of a household often kept the more expensive foodstuffs under lock and key, the Cook would have valued the double boiler as a means of limiting opportunities to fail.

Double boiler.
Late 18th—early 19th centuries.
On loan courtesy of
Mrs. Rolande F. Boucher,
Alexandria, Virginia.

Consider this recipe, "To Make Custard," by Mary Randolph in *The Virginia Housewife* (1824):

> *Make a quart of milk quite hot that it may not whey when baked; let it stand to get cold, and then mix six eggs with it; sweeten it with loaf sugar, and fill the custard cups, put on the covers, and set them in a Dutch oven with water, but not enough to risk its boiling into the cups.*

Our double boiler is cast iron, once given a black coating. It is on loan to Carlyle House, courtesy of Mrs. Rolande F. Boucher. The handle of the pot gives its purpose away. First the handle is dipped, heart-like, as if it were designed to support another pot from the handle. Second, the handle is stationary, designed to be supported from a fireplace crance by two S-hooks. The pot currently inside the double boiler is made of bell metal, a form of bronze usually consisting of a 3:1 ration of copper and tin, and is not a companion pot to the larger one. It is part of the permanent collection.