

# A STUDY OF DESIGN ELEMENTS IN 1930s BRIDAL WEAR

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**“Fashion in the 1930s saw a move towards a more feminine silhouette, with bias-cut clothes in smooth fabrics emphasizing the natural contours of the body” (note 1).**

1930s fashion is characterized by its romance and elegance. Garments from this period shed the boyish frivolity of the 1920s and predate the War-imposed practicality of the 1940s (note 2). The 1930s, although most often remembered for the economic hardship of the Great Depression, were also a time of glamour and escapism. With the growing number of films being made, Hollywood was beginning to take center stage. Many designers were inspired by the allure of the Hollywood image and created feminine pieces that accentuated the figure. Bridal wear followed close behind, mirroring the trends of the mainstream fashions of the time.

By comparing it to other wedding dresses from the 1930s, the context of Hamilton’s wedding dress can be better understood. Garments from the online collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Victoria & Albert Museum were used to identify the defining characteristics of 1930s bridal wear (note 3).

The sampling of comparable 1930s bridal ensembles included gowns that were cream coloured, slim-fitting, long-sleeved, and featured at least one embellishment or exaggerated manipulation. The defining features of these comparable dresses can be organized into elements that focus on the simplicity, the train, the Medieval Influence, the selective embellishment, and the fit. All of these defining features are seen in Mollie Hamilton’s dress and thereby show it to be a classic example of bridal attire from that era.



Mainbocher dress, ca.  
1937. Metropolitan  
Museum Costume  
Institute, [C.I.50.110a-j](#).

#### **THE SIMPLICITY**

Garments from the 1930s seem to exude a feeling of effortless ease. Whether it is the way the fabric draped, the textile's smooth surface texture, or the lack of elaborate embellishment, bridal gowns from the 1930s can be characterized by their clean and simple lines (note 4).



Callot Soeurs  
dress, ca. 1930s.  
Metropolitan Museum  
Costume Institute  
[2009.300.1300a-f.](#)

### **THE TRAIN**

The train was an important feature in many 1930s wedding gowns. Historically, it was a sign of wealth and rank. There were sumptuary laws restricting the wearing of certain fabrics and garments to designated groups. By the 1930s, however, this was no longer the case (note 5). Trains would have come at an added expense due to the surplus of fabric, but one did not have to be royalty to be able to wear them. The dramatic exaggeration the train brought to a dress increased the visual interest of the often otherwise plain garment.



Elizabeth Hawes  
dress, ca. 1934.  
Metropolitan Museum  
Costume Institute,  
[2009.300.3559a-e.](#)

#### **THE MEDIEVAL INFLUENCE**

Many bridal gowns from the 1930s featured embellishments and details reminiscent of the Medieval period. For example, the bow headdress on the above garment is similar to the horned headdresses and hennin worn in the 15th century (note 6). Many small accessories, necklines, and fabric manipulations are very similar to those used in the Middle Ages.



Herman Patrick Tappe  
dress, ca. 1939.  
Metropolitan Museum  
Costume Institute  
[2009.300.7325](#).

#### **THE DETAIL**

1930s bridal wear, as previously stated, was often very simple in appearance. This does not mean, though, that the garments were completely lacking in adornment, intricacies, and drama. In fact, the opposite is true. The simplicity of dresses from this era often acted as a sort of blank canvas, allowing the details to shine. Common details from this period include beading, lace, covered buttons, and gathers (note 7).



Charles James dress,  
ca. 1934. Victoria &  
Albert Museum [T.271-  
1974](#).

### **THE FIT**

One of the most defining features of 1930s bridal wear is the slim-fitting silhouette and emphasis on elegance (note 8). Since the dress hugged the wearer's body, the fit of the garment was very important. Elements such as fabric drape, strategic placement of seams, and accentuating a curvaceous female form were essential to the success of a stylish dress of this period.

## **HOW THESE ELEMENTS COME TOGETHER IN MOLLIE HAMILTON'S WEDDING DRESS**

### **THE SIMPLICITY**

Mollie Hamilton's wedding dress was made of a sleek, shining, cream-colored satin. The body of the dress has very little decoration; the emphasis is on the flowing fabric and long, elegant lines. Mollie exuded an effortless beauty in the garment on her wedding day of June 27, 1936 when she married Dr. Horace Gifford (Lou) Walton-Ball.

### **THE TRAIN**

The long flowing train on Mollie's dress highlights its drama and elegance. Her trailing veil drapes over and beyond the length of the train to create a captivating difference in textures.

### **THE MEDIEVAL INFLUENCE**

The headpiece Mollie wore with her wedding gown resembles a divided hennin (note 6). The beaded rosettes along the dress's collar are also reminiscent of the neckline embellishments used in dress from the Middle Ages.

### **THE DETAIL**

Mollie's wedding dress features smocking around the cuffs and on the shoulders. This decorative effect is enhanced by small imitation pearl beads. Beads are also used to elevate the centers of the neckline rosettes. These features create interest and drama on the otherwise unadorned dress.

### **THE FIT**

The dress Mollie wore on her wedding day fit her perfectly. The draped fabric fit closely to her body and clung to her curves. The gathering in the bodice created a slight blouson effect that was mirrored in the sleeves. The slim fitting dress was an embodiment of elegance.

Mollie Hamilton wore a very fashionable dress to her 1936 wedding. As this comparison to wedding dresses in other museum collections has shown, her dress illustrates the stylistic features most common in 1930s bridal wear.



Mollie Hamilton's wedding dress from the Ryerson Fashion Research Collection.



Mollie Hamilton's wedding dress from the Ryerson Fashion Research Collection. Close up of collar. Photograph by Hannah Dobbie, 2016.



Mollie Hamilton's wedding dress from the Ryerson Fashion Research Collection. Close up of beading. Photograph by Hannah Dobbie, 2016.

## Notes

**Note 1:** "Introduction to 20th-Century Fashion," *vam.ac.uk*, accessed October 31, 2016, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/i/introduction-to-20th-century-fashion>.

**Note 2:** To view more garments like this, visit "Collections". *The Met Museum*. Last modified 2016. <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection>.

**Note 3:** This is Question #15 on the Reflection Checklist (Appendix 2) in *The Dress Detective: A Practical Guide to Object-based Research in Fashion* (Bloomsbury, 2015), 201.

**Note 4:** M. DeLong and K. Petersen, "Analysis and Characterization of 1930s Evening Dresses in A University Museum Collection," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 22, no. 3 (2005): 99-112.

**Note 5:** Catherine Kovesi Killerby, "Sumptuary Law in Italy 1200-1500". *Oxford Scholarship Online*, 2002. Chapter 6. DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199247936.003.0007

**Note 6:** For more information on Medieval headdresses, visit "Glossary of English Hairstyles and Headdress," [sites.tufts.edu/putajeweloniit](http://sites.tufts.edu/putajeweloniit). September 21, 2011. <http://sites.tufts.edu/putajeweloniit/2011/09/21/glossary-of-english-hairstyles-headress/>

**Note 7:** To view more garments with these features, visit "Victoria and Albert Museum Search the Collections". *Collections.Vam.Ac.Uk*. Last modified 2016. <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/>.

**Note 8:** M. DeLong and K. Petersen, "Analysis and Characterization of 1930s Evening Dresses in A University Museum Collection," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 22, no. 3 (2005): 99-112.

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