



*Details of items in the Druce collection.  
Photos: George Serras, National Museum of Australia*

# HERE COME THE BRIDES:

## the Patricia Druce collection

**This delightful collection consists of wedding dresses worn by four generations of brides in the Barker-Druce family between 1900 and 1992. Patricia Druce collected the dresses, which were then donated to the National Museum by her husband Alwyn Druce. As well as demonstrating both continuity and change in wedding traditions, the collection gives an insight into the lives and fashion choices of four young Australian women over successive generations during the last century, ever mindful that the wedding dress will take centre stage. Unpacking the Patricia Druce collection was an opportunity to revisit their special days and obviously brought back wonderful memories for Alwyn.**

Wedding dresses are a central part of most cultural wedding traditions, and while they may signify a society's expectations and adherence to tradition, they simultaneously adapt to newer fashions and the bride's individuality. Many of today's customs associated with the Western wedding originate from pre-Christian celebrations of the union of two people. Romantic interpretations of these were readily adopted during the Victorian era as a reaction to the Industrial Revolution. This was due in no small part to the rise of the Arts and Craft movement supported by the influential social thinker and art critic John Ruskin. White proclaims the purity of the bride and defence against the 'evil eye' although, until the 1950s, it was more a shade of cream. Veils are an ancient Roman symbol of modesty, and the lifting of the veil denotes the loss of innocence.

The advice in a Victorian ditty, still popular today, is often employed by a bride for good luck, happiness, security and fidelity as she embarks on married life:

*Something old, something new  
Something borrowed  
Something blue  
And a sixpence in her shoe*

The Victorians invented a vast lexicon in the language of flowers, and orange blossom, signifying purity, has remained a popular choice for brides. The marriage of Queen Victoria to Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha in 1840 epitomised the romance and splendour of a Victorian white wedding that, for many decades, became the aspiration of brides-to-be.

By the Edwardian era extravagant weddings were seen as a social rite-of-passage for those who could afford it, and the desire of every bride-to-be and her family was to put on a good show. Few brides could afford to buy a dress for just one day. Her choice of flowers and the addition of a veil were often the only accoutrements the bride could afford in aspiring to mimic a patrician wedding. For those that could afford to make or buy a new dress, the style chosen was often one that would be suitable for alteration to daywear. When Grace Brandon married Percy Barker in 1900 her wedding outfit reflected the fashion of the day, and was typical for brides at the time. In the photograph the newly-married couple (not the wedding dress) is the focus of our attention.



Grace Isobel Brandon (1872–1976) and Percy James Newell Barker (1876–1940) were married at St Barnabas Anglican Church, George St West (now Broadway), Sydney on 1 August 1900. The bride's outfit consists of a full length, A-line skirt (waist measuring 20.5 inches!) with matching bodice. The fabric is a cream jacquard with a delicate floral pattern, underlined with a white cotton fabric. The bodice has insets of fine pleating on the front and back which are repeated on the caps of the gigôt sleeves. Tulle lace with a picot edge extends from the cuffs. In the wedding photograph Grace is wearing a plain long veil with a circlet of silk flowers in her hair, and a brooch at the throat of her collar. The photograph also indicates that the outfit once had an overlay of fine gauze-like fabric which has been removed. Two rows of lace have been removed from the scalloped 'bib', the high collar cut down and cotton crochet lace added. This suggests that the outfit was remodeled for daywear, possibly as a 'best dress'.

Before she was married, Grace worked as a sales assistant, after which she stayed home and raised their two sons as well as helping her husband Percy. The couple was thought to be modestly 'well off', as Percy was the proprietor of a laundry in Burwood and then bought a second at



Grace and Percy Barker



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Coogee, the Pine Grove Laundry. Grace was a member of the Sydney Harmonic Choir. She lived a long life, receiving telegrams from the Queen, Governor-General and Premier of New South Wales in 1972, acknowledging her 100th birthday.

With the exception of the aristocracy, weddings were relatively private affairs until 1922 when *The Times* of London published details of the wedding of Princess Mary to Henry Charles George, Viscount Lascelles. Mary's straight, loose-fitting wedding dress was described in minute detail and became the style for fashionable brides of the day. Mid-calf or ankle length tubular dresses made from softly draping fabrics in white or pastel colours replaced the structured outfits and sturdier fabrics in fashion only a decade earlier. A very long veil and large bouquet proclaimed the modern bride's adherence to tradition as well as the perception of a higher socio-economic position. When Rita Jones married Claude Barker in 1926, her 'flapper' dress, long veil and large bouquet attest to the bride's anticipation of the now public audience she hoped to please, and are poignantly captured in a single-portrait photograph.

Rita Gwendoline Jones (1900–1957) and Claude Adrill Perks Barker (1901–1969) were married at Burwood Baptist Church on 11 December 1926. The bride's dress is hand-stitched and loosely fashioned to slip over the head. It is made from a cream fine crepe fabric, and lined with a pink silk underslip attached at the shoulders and armholes. The lower part of the dress has a 20 centimetre-wide band of lace made up of two widths of machine-made lace. Rita also wore long white leather gloves, and her blue and white garter is also included in the collection. In the photograph she wears a long trailing embroidered veil attached with two small sprays of flowers. Also included with the dress is a hand-stitched pink silk cap with a crocheted crown and side band, and a decorative spiral worn to one side. It is thought the cap was worn when the veil was removed for the wedding reception, or made to wear with the dress on other occasions.

Rita was the daughter-in-law of Grace and Percy Barker. She was born at Wattle Flat near Bathurst in New South Wales. The donor suggests that her family were of more 'modest means' than that of the groom. Rita worked as a sales assistant in Sydney and was a keen tennis player with the local tennis club. Claude, the eldest son of Grace and Percy Barker, was born in Sydney where he trained and worked as an engineer, and where he met Rita. After their marriage Rita stayed at home and raised their two children.

After enduring the austerity of two world wars and the 1930s Depression, Australia was ready to embrace all that was new. In the wake of unparalleled production and consumption, weddings of the 1950s became the ultimate display of pageantry, wealth and achievement. The wedding industry flourished through the





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mass distribution of idealised images of weddings promoting the 'fairy princess' ideal of womanhood. Women's magazines and books dictated the minutiae of a wedding's organisation, including the bride's makeup, hairstyle and, above all, the dress. The bride, or more specifically the dress, became the centre of the wedding spectacle, and

with the invention of synthetic fabrics every bride could afford to emulate her favourite royal or Hollywood celebrity bride in the purest, brilliant white. Celebrity weddings such as that of Grace Kelly to Rainier III, Prince of Monaco, in April 1956 set an ambitious standard. Wedding dresses harked back to the romantic Victorian era, incorporating

yards of lace, flounces, ruffles and crinolines, suggesting (if not in reality) the restrictive corsets once worn under them. The dress chosen by Patricia Barker for her marriage to Alwyn Druce in 1956 exemplifies the full skirts and 'sweetheart' necklines coveted by brides of the day. In her wedding portrait Patricia smiles radiantly. She looks, and no doubt felt, like a 'princess for a day'.

Patricia Florence Barker (1930–2007) and Frederick Alwyn Druce (b.1929) were married in Newington College Chapel, Stanmore on 20 November 1956. The bride's dress is of the 'ballerina' style popular in the 1950s, and the only white dress in the collection. The main over-dress is made of a transparent synthetic fabric. The very full skirt is gathered onto a fitted bodice with a 'sweetheart' neckline. Rows of lace flowers run forward over each shoulder and extend to the hip. There are also lace flowers on the skirt; all are hand-stitched onto the dress. The floor-length strapless petticoat is made from a stiffened white cotton lawn, and was worn over a knee-length cotton petticoat with two rows of thick ruffling on each hip simulating a bustle to help support the fullness of the dress. So although the dress has a generous amount of material, the synthetic fabric has rendered it 'as light as a feather'. The bride also wore a three-layered tulle veil attached to a circlet of white silk flowers, and the long white gloves worn by her mother Rita at her own wedding. The dress's sleeves were later removed, and it was worn other at other evening occasions.





Patricia Druce

Newington College. The accountancy firm where he worked offered career opportunities that required the couple to move to Wollongong soon after their marriage in 1956. They then moved to Canberra in 1960: Alwyn describes these as the best 10 years of their life together. In 1971 the firm again asked them to move, this time to Newcastle where Alwyn took on a managerial role, a move which Patricia was not particularly keen to make. During their marriage, Patricia stayed home to raise their four children. She took an active role in the community, including the Red Hill Preschool in Newcastle, Zonta, a women's support organisation, and the Ryder Cheshire Foundation. Patricia was also the Newcastle Region Commissioner for the Girl Guides.

The radical social changes of the 1960s and 1970s were reflected in modern fashion and design. The hippie movement favoured bright colours, high hemlines, denim, caftans, and free-flowing long hair. By the mid-1970s the 'Age of Aquarius' had given way to Punk Rock hammering home its message of anti-authoritarianism. This was reflected in the fashion for leather, spikes, chains, combat boots, and distinctive Mohawk haircuts. Eventually these trends were commercialised by mainstream designers and found their way into wedding attire. The white wedding did not disappear but continued in a modified form, with many brides opting for the less traditional, pared-down styles that included mini skirts, hot pants, pant suits, big floppy hats, cowl hoods and caftans, through to *avante garde* experiments with dark colours and florals.

Patricia was the daughter of Rita and Claude Barker. She was a bookkeeper before her marriage to Alwyn, a chartered accountant who was born in Cootamundra, New South Wales. Alwyn's father was a First World War veteran of Gallipoli and the Western Front. The Druce family moved to Vacluse in about 1935, where his father managed a newsagency and Alwyn earned money on a paper round. He attended Newington College between 1943 and 1947. Patricia and Alwyn met at a function at the Haberfield Rowing Club in 1949 and were married after a six-year courtship. When deciding on a venue for their wedding, Patricia favoured a Church of England church in the Coogee area where she lived, but Alwyn insisted on the Chapel at



Janet Druce





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The marriage of Diana Spencer and Prince Charles in 1981, followed by that of Sarah Ferguson and Prince Andrew in 1986, firmly announced the return of the romantic white wedding. This backlash to the swirling colour and hard-edge trends of the previous decades can be compared to that of the Victorian era's reaction to the Industrial Revolution. With the changing roles of women from housewives to working executives and professionals, they could now engage in displays of wealth and consumption as a measure of their own success. Bridal glamour with emotional links to the past was promoted through a rejuvenated wedding industry and wedding gowns became a profitable addition, if not the highlight, of major fashion couturier collections. Designers again incorporated metres of luxury fabrics, ruffles, lace and bustles, embellished with heavy beading and seed pearls, all topped-off with tiaras where once there were orange blossoms. By the 1990s this had tempered to a sleeker, more sophisticated style and, while white remained the predominant colour, brides also sought alternatives to express their own style and individuality.

The dress chosen by Janet Druce for her wedding in 1992 is an ensemble of a bolero jacket over a strapless dress with a long flowing skirt, worn with a discreet circlet of silk flowers in her hair. Although not a traditional wedding dress, it still aspires to be 'something special', with a nod to romance and tradition. Janet admits that she did not want to be a traditional bride but, as is often the case, relented under the influence of female family elders. She and her mother Patricia chose a design that could be worn on future occasions (ironically, this is the only dress in the collection that was only worn once). After a cursory viewing of the dresses available, Janet saw a design she liked in a magazine at a bridal boutique in the Strand on George Street, Sydney. Janet was inspired by the long, full sleeves and high collar, so she and the shop's designers collaborated on a design incorporating these features. The dress was made and hand-delivered to Janet's address by the boutique.

Janet Raie Druce (b. 1962) married Craig Dunstan at 'Mandalay', Lane Cove on 22 November 1992. The bride's dress is strapless with a dropped waistline and has a matching bolero jacket with long sleeves, all made from a pale apricot finely pleated georgette lined with cream satin. The bodice is overlaid with tulle lace with a floral motif embellished with hand-stitched seed pearls and beading. The skirt is very full and closely pleated where it attaches to the bodice. The back opening has satin-covered buttons with satin loops. The jacket has lace on the shoulders and the sleeves are gathered onto deep satin cuffs edged with lace and have satin-covered buttons with loops.

Janet is the daughter of Patricia and Alwyn Druce. She went to university to study for a BA and was an executive assistant before her marriage, after which she stayed home and raised three children. Janet divorced when the children were still quite young, and as well as raising them, she started her own printing business specialising in hand-crafted wedding invitations. She has fond memories of being occasionally allowed to play 'dress-ups' in Grandma Barker's Edwardian dress 'if she was careful'.

The collection charts almost 100 years of wedding traditions within the family through the twentieth century, as well as the changes in dress fashion and the emergence of the lucrative wedding industry. All the brides were employed before they married and all stayed home to raise children afterwards. It was not until 1992 that the last bride broke with tradition by marrying outside the church and going on to manage her own business. The repurposing of three of the dresses adds to their stories and cultural significance.

### **Sharon Goddard** **Old New Land and Eternity**

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