Victorian Wedding Dress in the United States: A History through Paper Dolls

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The American obsession with weddings and wedding gowns is evident at least as early as 1850, when the March issue of Godey's Lady's Book included a colored plate in its feature on bridal dress. Yet brides who feed the nation's current obsession to the tune of more than $160 billion annually may be astonished to learn how much things have changed. Fashion illustrator Norma Lu Meehan and costume curator Mei Campbell draw upon collections at the Northern Indiana Center for History and the Museum of Texas Tech University to illuminate the evolution of wedding dress in the United States from 1859 to 1899. This exquisitely illustrated work situates the white wedding dress and current perceptions of tradition within a surprisingly varied and colorful history.FROM THE BOOKWhen Americans think of Victorian wedding dress . . . we recall antique photographs and tintypes, possibly family heirlooms or those we've seen in museums. Though these images, like the gowns on these pages, certainly do not reflect the breadth of American cultural custom and practice, even in that era, they do reveal how much of mainstream America—particularly a rising middle class—saw itself and how it aspired to be seen. We can begin to understand how an increasingly affluent America became smitten with a British queen and with a fashion phenomenon that over the next century would become an economic and cultural force beyond imagining.

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