

OF GOWNS & GLORY

Perhaps it's the uncertainty of the times, but the grand, expressive statement of a ballgown somehow feels right again. Harriet Quick welcomes its return. Photographs by Paul Wetherell. Styling by Gianluca Longo

I had my hair dressed up in a huge chignon. It was so big that I could not fit it through the neckline of the gown. It took three people 10 minutes to squeeze me in. I got stuck!" says jewellery designer Sabine Getty. Disaster was narrowly averted and Getty did go to the ball – the surrealist ball, hosted by Dior at the Musée Rodin during January's haute couture shows. She wore a treasured black velvet gown by Alexander McQueen with a low lace-covered back, balloon sleeves and an intricate-painted "lace" mask.

Getty joined the throng of light-footed beauties shielded in masks that ranged from discreet lace bands to gigantic peacock headdresses, wearing outfits as diverse as a Gucci chinoiserie-embroidered mint-green floor-sweeping cape (the stylist and blogger Tina Leung) to numerous variations of Maria Grazia Chiuri's tulle ballet gowns, flashing Dior-branded big knickers and bras (an ingenious redux of the house's epic New Look princess gowns). Chiuri's daughter, Rachele Regini, looked a picture in a black leather corseted gown and tulle mask. "Every single time I wear haute couture, I feel like I'm a different person," says Regini, who studies art history at Goldsmiths. "I feel at ease, caressed by the dress. And it does not end when you get out of it and slip back into your jeans. The feeling stays – it's a powerful, emotional memory to have."

In our hyper-accelerated lives, the gown might seem an anachronism – a relic of bygone times when displays of pomp and power counted for all. Gowns were part and parcel of the débutante's rite of passage. Young beauties, enrolled by their mothers, were trained in dancing and etiquette, attended a season of costly, flamboyant events with the mission of finding a husband and ascending the social hierarchy. "On the whole, my mother was more interested in my clothes than my morals. 'I am determined you shall wear a pink dress,' she said, so I did, pink chiffon with rose petals which soon got dirty," wrote former débutante Philippa Pullar in *Gilded Butterflies*, her 1978 book about the rise and fall of the London Season.

Back then; the big gown was all about propriety. Now, it is about self-expression, and joy. We are as likely to see a neon tulle Molly >



*Grand designs:
wearing a beaded tulle
confection by Chanel
Haute Couture, actress
and muse Ellie Bamber
poses on the staircase
in Coco Chanel's
apartment at 31
Rue Cambon. Hair:
Sebastien Bascle. Make-
up: Karin Westerlund*





Rachele Regini – daughter of designer Maria Grazia Chiuri – wears a surrealist-inspired trompe-l'oeil Dior Haute Couture gown in the house's Paris atelier



Left: Rihanna in tiered tulle by Molly Goddard, styled with trainers and shades. Above: entrepreneur and ballgown aficionado Wendy Yu surveys the Seine in Alice Temperley



Left: Lady Gaga in Armani Privé at the Grammy Awards. Right: Meghan Markle wore Ralph & Russo for the official photographs marking her engagement to Prince Harry



Goddard frock in an East End dive bar or at a protest march as we are on a red carpet or at the palace. Perhaps it is because we have become so reliant on clothes that expedite our lives – multitasking, hybrid, seasonless clothes that can be rolled into a Rimowa and pulled out for black-tie banquets and boardroom showdowns alike – that the novelty and absurdity of a ballgown is making a comeback.

Real “numbers” look desirable again – a symbol of empowerment, and a flag-waver for dreaming and optimism in these often discombobulating and distressing times. They give us wings, transforming us into otherworldly beings. Fashioned in metres of crystal-spangled tulle, in embroidered silks, with their tiny waists and shape-altering silhouettes they allow you to float through space to alternative galaxies of glamour. Check Meghan Markle in her engagement gown (a gold-embroidered bodice with a cascading ruffle skirt by Ralph & Russo); Lady Gaga in an Armani Privé lace-topped taffeta skirt at the Grammys; and singer Janelle Monáe at the opening of *Black Panther* wearing a bustier top, huge skirt and contrasting sapphire and white silk sleeves by Christian Siriano. Or take a look at Charles Jeffrey Loverboy’s hand-painted leg-o’-mutton-sleeve gown that closed his spring show – it was a statement of exuberant rebellion.

Elsewhere, Mary Katrantzou created empire-line bubble gowns featuring embellished exotic floral prints, techno nylon panels and toggle fastenings. Burberry paired tulle ball skirts with graffiti-daubed hoodies, and even players as unexpected as Virgil Abloh at Off-White ventured into big dress territory. A one-shoulder exploding tulle gown in marshmallow pink with a just-seen corset featured in the spring collection. These are pieces with vitality that leave the old twee “seen but not heard” princess clichés in the dust.

Not since the 1980s, when the club scene generated the New Romantic movement and men and women dressed up in punkish grandeur (Westwood mini-crinis or Lacroix puffballs) and legions of teenagers flocked to Laura Ashley to buy taffeta meringues for sixth-form balls, has the gown been so poignant. “A great gown should have a spectacular

effect and make you feel immediately like a princess, a Madonna or a queen. I think we are drawn to that as women. For me (and I don’t want to sound pretentious) the gown is an art form, a masterpiece – and it should take up a lot of space,” says Italian-born stylist and fashion editor Giovanna Engelbert. “Luckily today you can fit a big dress into an SUV, even if sometimes you have to lie down,” she laughs. With her taste for flamboyant froth and finery (including Giambattista Valli gowns that are made of more than 350m of tulle; Richard Quinn’s stately floral swing coatdress; Carolina Herrera and Valentino) her joy in glamour is infectious.

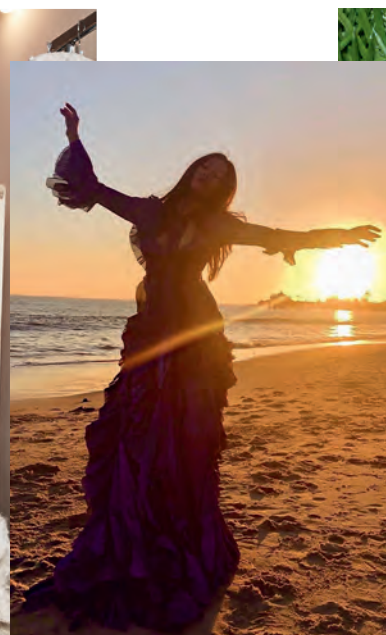
Modernity does impact on the new breed of gowns, however big the dimensions. “You want to feel powerful, elegant and upright, but not wooden. I love a pocket, too!” says 21-year-old actress Ellie Bamber, who looks like a Pre-Raphaelite muse with her long marmalade locks and big doe eyes. “My first big dress-up was for the premiere of *Nocturnal Animals* in a Chanel Métiers d’Art dress, beautiful but with an edgy aspect, too. For the *Vanity Fair* Oscars party, I wore a plunge-neck Chanel gown with gold and silver embroideries until 7am. I did not want to take it off.”

The picture of young debutantes fainting in overly constrictive corsets has been banished by a new breed of super-lightweight construction, something at which Laura Kim and Fernando Garcia of Oscar de la Renta excel. “I’m a brat at night. I’ll be kicking and screaming unless the dress is really comfortable and light,” says Kim. “If you’re not comfortable, you are not exuding confidence throughout the night, and that’s not a modern gown,” adds Garcia. “We put a lot of research into fabrics and now there are jacquards and fils coupés that are airy and use elevated heat-pressed techniques and laser cuts.” The duo sent out ethereal creations for spring, including painterly ombré tulle gowns that make the wearer look airborne. For Tamara Ralph of Ralph & Russo, too, a sense of dynamism is supreme. “I always seek a lively air, grace and modernity in a ballgown.”

Rather than being dressed by their mothers, a new generation of collectors and wearers are choosing and paying for >

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Left: Janelle Monáe in graphic Christian Siriano couture at the premiere of *Black Panther*. Right: Giosanna Engelbert wore a McQueen princess gown for her wedding in 2016



Above: stylish Tina Leung takes Gucci couture to the beach. Right: FKA Twigs in baroque, full-skirted Versace at the British Fashion Awards in December 2017

gowns themselves. Entrepreneur Wendy Yu first discovered her love of dressing-up watching Leighton Meester flaunt her beaded Matthew Williamson in *Gossip Girl*. “Growing up in China, we were not encouraged to be creative – it was all about studying hard. At school you did not wear make-up and your hair was cut short. Now the culture has changed, and I am happy for that,” says Yu, who threw a Chinese New Year party at Kensington Palace wearing a poppy-red eyelet cotton ruffled frock by Huishan Zhang.

That dress will join a collection of more than 200 gowns, including 10 couture pieces. Dresses by Giambattista Valli, Roksanda, Dior, Ralph & Russo, Valentino, Elie Saab and Temperley are all in Yu’s collection. “One of my dreams is to open a fashion museum in China, so I want the collection to be an archive, part of fashion history,” says Yu. Her criteria? “I want something refreshing, that’s inspiring on a creative level,” says Yu, who attends eight big-gown events a year.

Wearing a gown takes daring, learning and imagination. “I never want to tone it down,” says Getty, who married in a Schiaparelli couture gown, embroidered with more than 500,000 sequins, that took six months and six fittings to finalise. She also has pieces by Peter Dundas and Alexander McQueen in her collection, alongside vintage Yves Saint Laurent, Loris Azzaro and Pierre Cardin. “I grew up idolising Catherine Deneuve. If I wanted to define glamour, that is the pinnacle.”

While gowns are a big public statement, they also have an intimate personal history, with tastes and obsessions often formed in childhood. “My first gown moment? It must have been my baptism robe. I probably thought, ‘I like this!’” says Engelbert, who in girlhood staged an annual Barbie-doll gala with her sister Sarah. It was Sarah Jessica Parker in *Sex and the City* who influenced Laura Kim. “I remember wearing a huge pink silk ballgown aged 20,” she says. Meanwhile, Regini grew up surrounded by gowns. Her grandmother, like her mother, worked as a dressmaker. “I love to wear my mum’s clothes and keep the tradition going. There’s a sense of continuity and a sense of love. One of the most treasured is a lace skirt, blouse and a cashmere coat that my grandmother

made for my mother’s wedding day. She refused to wear a dress and had shaved hair,” says Regini. For her *Vogue* portrait, Regini donned a Dior couture design with a trompe-l’oeil effect of bare breasts fashioned in metallic sequins, as if seen through X-ray eyes. “I was thinking about how much time women spend in front of the mirror,” says Maria Grazia Chiuri, who is fascinated by our personal and public faces.

Getty discovered her passion through endless games of dress-up and themed parties as a child. Not that the habit has faded with age. She held a *Liaisons Dangereuses* engagement party (her hair took four hours of preparation) and last year staged an *Auntie Mame* ball, based on the 1958 film with Rosalind Russell. In tribute, Getty wore a vintage purple and pink patterned marabou-trimmed gown by Pierre Cardin. “Everyone made such an effort. Charlotte Dellal came with fully set hair in a pink feather-trimmed peignoir,” says Getty. For *Auntie Mame*, as for Cosette in *Les Misérables* (Ellie Bamber is playing the part in the forthcoming BBC production) and for every variation of Cinderella, the gown marks a blossoming, a triumph of glamour and exuberance – often in the face of adverse circumstances. “I have always been obsessed with the way models wore haute couture in Richard Avedon and Irving Penn images from the 1950s, and the way cut and proportion can really change the way you look,” says Richard Quinn, winner of the Queen Elizabeth II Fashion Award, who interprets that extreme elegance with a macabre touch. “It is a sort of poetry, because of the use of rare materials and savoir-faire. It is also a sort of resilience,” says Bertrand Guyon, creative director of Schiaparelli. And so the gown persists, and evolves to suit each new generation.

“This period in fashion has been dominated by the Vetements effect – hyper-real clothes,” says Engelbert. “But the dream is at the very essence of fashion and the gown is the dream. It’s fascinating to see how teens and twentysomethings will influence its future. Maybe a giant hoodie gown or a giant bathrobe style?” Whatever its permutation, today the wearing of a gown offers up a thrilling, unbeatable experience to be enjoyed in real time. Consider it a love letter to fashion. ■

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*Sabine Getty
reclines in
feather-strewn
Schiaparelli Haute
Couture, beneath a
screen painted for
Elsa Schiaparelli
by Marcel Vertès
in the late 1930s*

