

# **The Story Behind a Black Wedding Gown**

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## **Abstract**

When this black gown was donated to the Fashion and Costume Department of the Kunstmuseum The Hague in 1978, it was noted that it was a wedding gown. Although today we associate wedding dresses with the white colour, in the 19th century, many people still married in colour, including black. In 2014, when this gown was worn for an exhibition, a lot of extra space in the stomach area was discovered, demonstrating that it was a maternity gown. From then on, it had been assumed that it was a wedding gown that had been later altered into a maternity gown, which is certainly not unusual. However, a recent study points out that the gown does not show any signs of alteration and, thus, was originally made for pregnant women. This can only mean two things: either the donor's story is wrong and the dress was not a wedding dress; or the bride was pregnant on her wedding day.

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## **Introduction**

One of the things that makes the history of fashion and costume so interesting is the stories behind the garments: those of the wearers and the makers. Oftentimes, the older the garments are, the harder it is to discover or verify these kinds of personal stories. Yet it is always worth going after these narratives, as they can enrich a collection and offer nuance to established costume historical views.

Within a collection as vast as that of the Kunstmuseum The Hague, comprising over 60,000 objects just within the Fashion and Costume Department, there is an endless amount to discover. It is crucial not only to look for new discoveries but also to test previously acquired information about objects, such as donor stories, from time to time. One way to challenge these existing narratives is by doing object-oriented research. Because what is told about certain objects is not always the same information as can be acquired from the objects themselves, it is important to always keep a fresh mind and a sharp eye when studying them. The fact that existing stories do not always match at first glance the information that can be derived from the objects themselves will be illustrated in this paper, with an investigation into a black gown from the late 1880s in the collection of Kunstmuseum The Hague.

Object-based research brought a striking discovery, namely that the gown, which was donated as a wedding gown, was in fact a maternity gown. This paper will explore the narrative behind this particular dress from an object-oriented view, complemented by archival research into the wearer and maker, and will also attempt to place the gown in a broader social-cultural context, touching on the choice of black for a wedding gown and, in this case, perhaps even more striking: bridal pregnancy.

### **A black wedding gown**

When this black gown was donated in 1978 (**Fig. 1**), the donor specified that it had been worn as a wedding dress. In the past, black was not considered an unusual colour for a wedding gown; the reason it is conceived as remarkable now is mainly because of contemporary preconceptions. Especially in the 19th century, marrying in your finest gown, regardless of the colour, was very common. If you did choose to make or have a dress made for your wedding day, choosing a coloured one was also usual, so it could be worn for other occasions as well.

Although already in the collection since 1978, the gown was first exhibited in 2014 in the Romantic Fashion exhibition at the Kunstmuseum, an exhibition dedicated to 19th-century fashion that was held in 2014-2015 (**Fig. 2**). While dressing this gown for the exhibition, it was then discovered that the gown presented some space in the stomach area and that it was in fact a maternity gown. Since then, the gown has been listed as a wedding gown, and later altered as a maternity gown in the system. Possibly this is why the gown was not used for an exhibition before: dressing the gown elegantly becomes impossible when the mannequin is not made to look pregnant. The gown was later on display in the 2020 exhibition Fashion in Colour, as an example of how common it was to marry in black in the past.

### **Altered wedding gowns & maternity gowns**

During the 19th century, it was not unusual for a wedding gown to be altered for future wear. This was because fabric was more expensive than labour, and wearing a gown just once, or

even for only a couple of occasions, was a luxury very few could afford. In the Kunstmuseum collection, there are at least two other examples of altered 19th-century gowns, of which it is known that they were originally made as wedding dresses. For instance, the one worn by Johanna Macload in 1896 was later altered into an evening gown (**Fig. 3.1**). For this purpose, the train, sleeves, and top of the bodice were removed. To the bodice, yellow decoration of silk gauze was added around the neckline and sleeves.

Another example is the gown worn by Marianne de Graeff for her wedding in 1911 (**Fig. 3.2**). Her first child was born the following year, in 1912, so her wedding gown was adapted to fit her pregnancy: the bodice was made shorter, and the skirt was sewn high-waisted onto a new lining, turning it into a tunic. In addition, the belt was reversed, and the bow that was first located at the back now has a prominent place in the centre. These kinds of alterations are often not immediately obvious, but only when the gown is thoroughly studied. This applies to alterations of any kind, but especially to maternity gowns.

Detecting maternity gowns is often challenging, especially when the gown is hanging or lying flat on a table; cut and proportions constitute the only indicators. For instance, maternity gowns present extra space at the front, while the back and sleeves remain narrow. And even when dressed, it is often near impossible to tell from the front and back that a gown is indeed made as or altered into a maternity gown; only the silhouette on the side betrays the pregnancy. The difficulty lies in the fact that 19th-century women dressed to disguise pregnancy. Special maternity corsets were used to push the belly as low as possible. The rest of the belly was hidden by the clever cut of clothing. This seems somewhat counterintuitive to us; after all, they were more frequently pregnant, and, especially in certain circles, offspring were highly desired.

The fact of altering garments, like wedding dresses, is very common, and maternity clothes are also not unique in our collection. So, what makes this particular black gown so special? As mentioned earlier, when this gown was donated in 1978, it was registered as a wedding gown. In 2014, it was determined that it had been altered into a maternity gown. However, according to a recent examination, it was discovered that the gown showed no traces of alteration at all; in other words, the gown was originally made as a maternity gown.

### **Cut and construction**

From a technical point of view, the gown is very cleverly made, with beautiful black silk. Dating from the late 1880s, the dress follows the fashion of the time: there is still a bustle, although less pronounced, and the choice of fabric and decoration echoes the preference for a more austere fashion, which was popular around 1890. The fashionable nature of the dress becomes clear when compared with other dresses in the Kunstmuseum collection, from around the same period. For example, strikingly similar are two dresses worn by aristocratic sisters for a wedding in 1891, also made in one colour and very sober decoration-wise (**Fig. 4**) (Sloof, 2014, 232-235).

The bodice of the black gown is very simple in terms of decoration, except for a piece of fabric set in vertical pleats at the middle front, just above the chest. The bodice closes centre front with hooks and thread loops. Over this, the right front closes asymmetrically with another row of tread loops. A small pocket, which cannot be reached from the outside, is sewn at breast height in the centre front. The gown has side and back boning and a tie waistband that keeps the bodice continuing into the long train, smooth against the back. The dress lacks the maker's name on the waistband, as is becoming more common in this era. Large paddings in the shoulder pits give the gown a rounded line. Alteration marks, including unpicked seams, stitching marks, yarn remnants, and different types of lining, are completely missing. Not only are alteration traces missing, but traces of frequent wear, such as perspiration or other wear marks, are also missing, which leads us to conclude that this gown has hardly been worn (**Figs. 5.1 & 5.2**).

The gown is technically of high quality, with the back panels of the bodice continuing into the train, which is held in folds with ties on the inside. The bottom of the train is lined with black gauze, and a *balayouse*, or dust ruffle, is sewn in at the very bottom. The skirt is made of the same material as the bodice and is pleated at the front, partly covered by an asymmetrical drape. At the bottom, the skirt is decorated with a ruffle. At the back, the skirt has a panel of lining fabric in which a baleen is sewn, and over which the train falls. Although the gown is from the late 1880s, when the bustle was already in decline, this baleen gives just enough form to keep the train nicely in shape.

**(Figs. 6.1 & 6.2)**

### **Leonarda Veenendaal**

So, it turns out that this gown was not altered into a maternity gown but was originally made as a maternity gown. Could the donor's story, stating that it was a wedding gown, then be wrong? As is frequently the case with stories passed down through generations, it might happen that things are misremembered within a family. In this case, the solution was found by delving into the archives. The gown was worn by the donor's grandmother, Leonarda Veenendaal. Her marriage certificate states that she was a seamstress and was married on 28 November 1889 to George Schenk, who worked as a diamond cutter at the time. On a registration card from another archive, the occupants of a house in Amsterdam, where they lived, are listed. Registered at the same time are Leonarda, George, and their children. According to this register, their eldest daughter, Jacoba Geertruida, was born on 4 March 1890.

These documents provide the answer to the question: the gown is both a wedding gown and a maternity gown, as it can be determined that Leonarda was almost 6 months pregnant when she got married. This raises questions, like what being unmarried and pregnant meant for women in the 19th century? Although, of course, it is impossible to give a conclusive answer, archival documents can be used to find out more about her, and specifically about her social background. Because, in 19th-century class society, where you came from said a lot about you as a person.

## A pregnant bride

Contrary to popular belief, it was actually quite common in the 19th century for a bride to be pregnant on her wedding day. Although frowned upon, in the Netherlands, as well as in other Western countries, roughly 25 to 50 percent of all brides were pregnant upon their wedding day at that time, depending on several factors such as location, social class, age, and religion. For instance, in the countryside, it was quite common not to get married until a woman was pregnant; this guaranteed the success of a marriage. Generally speaking, pregnant brides were also a bit older. It is also true that it was much more common in lower social classes than in middle ones, notably higher social classes, among whom strategic marriages were the norm. The last point is religion. Whereas bridal pregnancy was out of the question within the Catholic Church doctrine, it was already more common within the Reformed Church and most common among Evangelical Lutherans, who were less strict on chastity before marriage (Kok, Bras and Rotering, 2016, 165-191).

By looking at Leonarda and her family through archival sources, a picture can be painted of the environment where she came from. Leonarda was born in Amsterdam in 1859. Her father was a town superintendent, which is not exactly a high position, and her mother worked as a maid before her marriage. Her father was of Evangelical Lutheran persuasion, as was Leonarda; her mother was of Dutch Reformed affiliation. What is striking is that the family often moved, something you mainly see in lower social classes. People lived in rented houses and had little property, so they soon moved when they could live somewhere more affordable or when the lease was simply up. At a subsequent address, her father is described as a 'worker by trade'. A later register from another family shows Leonarda and her sister Geertruida working as maids in the second half of the 1870s. In the early 1880s, the sisters had moved back home.

Perhaps most interesting is the register of the address where the family lived from 1884 onward. Leonarda's father had died, and she lived here with her mother and siblings. Her mother and some of the children left this house in 1885, and Leonarda and her brother and sister continued to live there until they both left the house in 1887, leaving Leonarda on her own, which is very unusual for an unmarried young woman in the 19th century. After her marriage in November 1889, her husband moved in with her. It is, of course, quite possible that he had lived here before, although he was not officially registered. Leonarda was 30 years old when she married, and her husband was five years younger. He is first described as a diamond cutter and was later employed as a postman. Although her marriage certificate indicates that Leonarda was a seamstress, this is not reflected in later records. Possibly her husband's income was sufficient to support the family's needs, and Leonarda could focus on domestic tasks as a housewife, which, in the late 19th century, was an ideal attainable by more and more people. However, it is quite possible that she continued her work as a seamstress after her marriage. It is frequent that married women's jobs are neglected in archival records.

From the same donation comes a gown of blue pinstriped cotton, most likely also worn by Leonarda Veenendaal (**Fig 7**). In terms of fabric choice and cut, the gown is simple enough to be worn by a housekeeper or governess. The buttons, however, indicate a slightly more pronounced taste, perfectly matching the clothes a seamstress would have worn: simple

enough to stick to her origins but beautiful enough to show her customers what she could do. By 1891, Leonarda already had her second child. This gown also seems to have been barely worn. She presumably wore it exactly in between, and possibly just after, the birth of her two eldest children.

## Conclusion and reflection

As noted earlier, a pregnant bride in the 19th century was perhaps less shocking, or at least less uncommon, than it is often thought. Furthermore, Leonarda largely fits the profile of most 19th-century pregnant brides: she may not have lived in the countryside, but she was somewhat older, came from low social standing, and was Evangelical Lutheran, a denomination with more liberal beliefs.

Having learned more about the gown in terms of shape, cut, and construction, as well as about the wearer, it is now important to connect these narratives. What is striking is that the gown is of exceptional quality. You would almost be inclined to think that it would have been worn by someone from a higher social class. In the 19th century, however, it was not the intention to dress nicer than what was appropriate to your social standing. Leonarda may have fashioned the gown herself because she was a skilled seamstress. She came from a rather simple background, but she must have been an accomplished seamstress. What makes the gown so striking is the fabric and the cut; in terms of decoration, the gown is quite simple. Its austerity seems more a sign of the fashion of the time than a marker of the wearer's social position, certainly when comparing this dress to other dresses from the era in the Kunstmuseum collection (**Fig. 4**). In that respect, it is mainly the colour of the wedding dress that makes the difference. With this gown in a sober black, Leonarda stayed within her class while displaying her skills as a seamstress.

With virginal white presumably not an option, the choice of black is what gives the gown its modest look. Whether she chose black with the idea of wearing the gown more often and possibly altering it, is questionable. In any case, the latter never happened. And even during her pregnancy, she did not wear it so much; as noted earlier, the gown shows few wear marks. One may easily presume that the choice for black was driven more by what would have been considered appropriate than by financial considerations.

Like in many collections, the historical costumes that are preserved in the Kunstmuseum collection mostly come from the upper social classes, which could afford to dress according to fashion and could afford to keep the clothes as well. These are often also the people who are best known. Therefore, knowing that these dresses were worn by a seamstress is very important information. While, of course, it can never be said with certainty, it seems most logical that Leonarda made the gowns herself. It is also good that most garments without signed waistbands were made by anonymous people.

## Acknowledgements

For the past two years I have had the pleasure to study the collection of 19th century gowns in the collection of the Kunstmuseum The Hague together with costume historian Jacoba de Jonge. The discovery of the maternity gown highlighted in this paper is one of many that we came across during our studies.

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Deel: 1627, Periode: 1874-1893, Amsterdam, archief 5000, inventarisnummer 1627, 17 mei 185

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**Fig. 1**

Gown, 1889, obj.nr. 0394291.

Coll. Kunstmuseum The Hague.



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**Fig. 2**

Exhibition Romantic Fashions (2014) at Kunstmuseum The Hague.







Figs. 3.1 & 3.2

Wedding gown, 1896, obj. nr. 0556309 and  
wedding gown, 1911, obj. nr. 0783023.

Coll. Kunstmuseum The Hague.



**Fig. 4**

Gowns, 1891, obj.nr. 0783043  
and obj.nr. 0783044.

Coll. Kunstmuseum The Hague.



**Figs. 5.1 & 5.2**

Details and inside of the bodice, 1889,  
obj.nr. 0394291.

Coll. Kunstmuseum The Hague.



**Figs. 6.1 & 6.2**

Skirt, 1889, obj.nr. 0394291.

Coll. Kunstmuseum The Hague.

**Fig. 7**

Gown, c. 1890, obj. nr. 0394290.

Coll. Kunstmuseum The Hague.

