

Anatomy of a *Wedding Dress*



The Making of a Genuine Eugenia

Eugenia's daughter Barbara is getting married. An event of this magnitude would inspire excitement in any mother's heart, but for Eugenia this is a particularly special occasion—she happens to be a bridal gown couturier.

Barbara already has two gowns picked out, but she says she is not truly committed to either. "I may change my mind the week before!" she laughs. Her mother's quick frown discourages the notion.

Eugenia Vasiliadis, the owner and founder of Eugenia Couture, has been in the design business since immigrating to the United States from her native Greece at the age of 17. When asked to determine how long she has been designing high end bridal gowns, she estimates that it has been anywhere from 20 to 25 years. No matter what the exact date, it quickly becomes obvious that designing bridal gowns is her one true calling.

By Amanda Harding
Photography by Lori Smith



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Second generation
couturier, Barbara
Vasiliadis, begins
to pin a new
Eugenia creation.



It all starts with a sketch and some swatches of fabric.

A Bustling Design Studio

Eugenia's design career began with a simple classified ad in the local paper offering her pattern making services. She was contacted by a woman who was interested in a custom bridal gown, and thus her bridal industry career commenced. In the beginning, Eugenia designed custom gowns out of her home, but as the business grew she hired a few full-time employees to help with the sewing. She eventually gave up the custom business to transition into wholesale. The current company headquarters is located right here in the Lehigh Valley, at a bustling Bethlehem studio where all the designing, sewing and organizing takes place. While she occasionally takes on a custom gown order, the majority of her customers purchase her designs at distinguished retail locations all across the United States. Eugenia's collections have been featured in major bridal magazines and websites such as *Brides*, *Modern Bride*, *The Knot*, *Elegant Bride* and *Martha Stewart Weddings*. Pennsylvania brides only need to travel the short distance to Bridals by Danielle in Philadelphia or Anne Bailey's in Fountainville to purchase a genuine Eugenia Couture creation.

The whole collection starts with an inspiration board layered in fabrics, sketches and trims. Sketches offer a rough estimation of what the final product will look like, but it often takes the physical act of draping fabrics to figure out what works. Current dresses may be deconstructed and reworked with new fabric treatments, layers and other embellish-

ments. The designs take inspiration from the past, and often popular gowns from previous collections are redesigned with minor changes. "They were popular for a reason, so we try to stick with what brides want," Eugenia says. Since fashion is inevitably cyclical, prior design elements are bound to make a comeback in some way. There could be fabric changes, more or less embellishment, one skirt paired with a different bodice, or any number of other variations to keep the collection fresh and interesting. As the collection progresses, one original idea may translate into three gowns or the initial design could be scrapped all together in favor of something different. One thing that never changes is the meticulous attention to detail and construction. Only the best quality fabrics and trims imported from all over the world and purchased in Manhattan are used to create Eugenia's masterpieces. She only has five employees, which helps tremendously with quality control. All of the gowns are designed and manufactured in the United States.

The 2011 Collection



Creating a collection is no easy feat, but trying to imagine one with her daughter's whims in mind is particularly challenging. Barbara has been an integral part of the design process for years, so she has some definite opinions about gowns. "Really, I never thought about gowns the way I do now," she muses, "Being a bride has given me a totally different



Eugenia (left) and daughter, Barbara, both have a keen eye for detail and construction.



The finished product as shown at NYC Bridal Market.



The 2011 Eugenia Couture collection was shown at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in mid-town Manhattan .



Market photos by Anneke Schoneveld.

straight across and sweetheart. For silhouette, she elects the ball gown skirt as the most timeless. Her collection this season features ball gown skirts as a major focus.

NYC Bridal Market



The collection needs to be officially completed by the time market rolls around in the fall, although Eugenia admits that she is usually scrambling to finish up last minute details until she packs up her masterpieces into garment bags. "I wouldn't say I'm ever finished," she admits. "There is always some tweaking to be done." Barbara adds that some of the best designs come from that last minute dash to finish for market. The actual bridal market show in Manhattan is an intense, stressful few days of runway shows, competition and savvy salesmanship. The other designers who attend New York market are guilty of their fair share of posturing and attitude, but Eugenia and Barbara insist that they do it all for their brides. These two ladies pride themselves on their down-to-earth Bethlehem roots and try to ignore all the pretense. Although it can be challenging to please both buyers and brides, at the end of the day the customers are the main focus.

There is no time for rest and relaxation in the life of a bridal gown designer. The moment that Eugenia returns from market initial plans for next season's collection start taking shape based on the feedback from the potential clients. While some designs begin a year in advance, they are frequently reworked over and over again before the next market rolls around.

Another integral part of a bridal designer's life is the trunk show, a traveling showcase of the latest designs that brings Eugenia's recent collection to both current and prospective retailers. Preparing for these events is less stressful than the moments leading up to market since the collection is already complete, but trunk shows come with their own unique challenges. The main purpose of a trunk show is to introduce customers to the latest and most exciting gowns from the new collection. The underlying goal of any trunk show is to sell as many gowns as possible. Discerning brides attend these events to see the newest collections before they are available in stores, to meet the designer in person, and to occasionally enjoy a discount when the purchase is made that same day.



Eugenia and her models at the 2011 Bridal Market.



See more great gowns from Eugenia's NYC Bridal Market show at lehighvalleystyle.com.



This asymmetrically shirred taffeta ball gown is part of Eugenia's 2011 collection.

perspective." Barbara admits to putting some of her own personal taste into this collection, which is an inevitable side effect regardless of engagement status. Luckily for Eugenia Couture customers, her taste is impeccable.

The 2011 season collection is all about dreams and romance, which explains the proliferation of tulle, organza and ball gown-sized skirts. There is a distinct fairytale quality to the dresses that may or may not have everything to do with Barbara's wedding planning excitement. Rows of gowns adorned with crystal beading, lace, fabric petals and other luxury embellishments crowd the racks and cover the dress forms of the small studio. Hand painting has always been a signature look for Eugenia's designs and this season is no exception. "It makes the gown completely unique and special," she says. Painted floral designs are usually done in white or ivory for the sake of subtlety, but Eugenia has been known to add a hint of color for a truly unique touch. This type of re-

finned decoration ultimately makes all the difference in separating high quality bridal wear from cheap imitations.

With this season's otherworldly vibe, simplicity is passed over in favor of adornment. "Fabric manipulation is very important. We are layering a lot of fabrics to make each gown look full," Eugenia says. Indeed, gowns for the fall collection are masterpieces of fabric enhancement, ruching, feathers and many other clever design details. The structure inside the gown contributes enormously to the overall look. A well-constructed gown fits better, regardless of a bride's size. Full tulle skirts (picture any fairytale princess) are more important to this collection than the sleek bridal gowns of seasons past. "There is one time in your life that you get to stand out and look special, so why not look like a princess on your wedding day?" she says. Satin has been

the fabric of choice for many years, but this season Eugenia has moved toward more tulle and organza. Lightweight in feeling and appearance, these two dreamy fabrics are perfect for any bride who dreams of hearing descriptive adjectives such as "angelic" or "ethereal." Even though Eugenia's current collection features mostly embellished gowns, there are always a few minimalist gowns in the mix, perfect for any bride desiring a more streamlined look. Simplicity of design should never be confused for ease of construction, however. The most unadorned gowns are often the hardest to pull off.

One design element that has withstood the test of time is the strapless neckline. Eugenia estimates that the style has been popular for about ten years, and will most likely continue to reign supreme over all other necklines for many years to come. "I think women want to show off their strong shoulders," she says. For this reason, the majority of Eugenia's designs boast strapless necklines in various cuts, such as

Your Perfect Dress - Choose the Best Style for Your Body Type



A-line gown

This is the most universally flattering gown silhouette. The bodice is fitted and the skirt has a slight bell shape (similar to the letter A) making your waist appear smaller and giving you proportion. This style is perfect for pear shaped, slim, petite and full-figured brides.



Ball gown

This princess sized skirt offers a dramatic distinction between the bodice and the rest of the dress. This style is also flattering for most body types, giving full-figured brides a defined waistline and helping pear shaped ladies accentuate all of their attributes. Petite brides may want to avoid ball gowns that are too voluminous, or they run the risk of being overpowered by the gown.



Empire waist

This gown cuts right below the bustline and falls gracefully to the floor, making it perfect for petite brides who wish to appear taller. It is also ideal for ladies with a thicker waistline or pear shaped figures.



Mermaid

This sheath alternative clings to your figure and then flares out at the bottom. This is perfect for women who are proud to show off their figures, and looks best on hourglass figures or thin women who want to add the illusion of curves. Pear shaped women should avoid this look because it will make them appear disproportionately bottom heavy.



Drop Waist

This gown style is versatile and may have an A-line or ball gown skirt. Short-waisted brides can create the illusion of length with this tummy-flattening cut. It is also flattering on full figured brides.



Sheath

This fitted silhouette clings closely to the body. It looks best on thin brides who wish to appear curvier and petite ladies who want to avoid being overwhelmed by fabric.



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Trunk shows also give Eugenia a chance to mingle with her customers, and she enjoys how they are much more low-key than going to market. Here, she gets to know her brides on a personal level, which is one of the things that makes the stress of design and manufacturing all worth the effort. While other types of designers may have trunk shows, the effects are not nearly as fulfilling as they are for a bridal gown designer. Eugenia describes designing bridal gowns as a personally gratifying experience. "No other type of designer gets pictures sent to them of their clients wearing their designs," Eugenia says, thoughtfully indicating the memo board covered with beaming brides wearing Eugenia Couture on their wedding day. These photos hang in the work room and help to provide motivation for the whole studio.

When asked what the future of the bridal industry holds, both Eugenia and Barbara are quick to agree. "We need to get back to brides appreciating high quality products and being willing to pay for them," they say. The ladies are referring to the latest economy driven trend toward off-the-rack, low-budget gowns sold at mass dress retailers. Brides may push themselves to lose ten pounds, when in reality a well made gown will camouflage trouble spots and highlight the curves of a woman's figure, ultimately making her look better. There is usually only one time in life that a woman is able to treat herself to true couture, and that is on her wedding day. Paying a little more for a made-to-order gown constructed from exquisite fabrics and properly structured underneath can make all the difference in photographs.

Eugenia's best advice for brides is to do plenty of research before going out shopping. Arrive at the gown retailer armed with images, but keep in mind what looks good on your particular body type. There are plenty of resources that recommend specific silhouettes for your figure, and also caution against the unflattering styles. Also, brides should try to limit how many people come on the shopping trip; too many opinions in one room can get confusing. Finally, the most important part of the decision is choosing what looks best, not what is currently in fashion. Looking at your wedding photos in 50 years should prompt you to smile at how beautiful you looked, not to cringe and wonder what possessed you to choose giant puffed sleeves. While Eugenia admits that East Coast brides have very different taste than their Midwestern or West Coast sisters, the bottom line is that every girl dreams of how she will look on her wedding day, and nothing less than stunning will suffice.

The studio has never been busier, especially since Eugenia Couture recently expanded to design both mother of the bride gowns and evening wear. Barbara's wedding day is taking place in May, deliberately scheduled far away from market time. The mad dash to finalize all the details, from Barbara's multiple gown changes to the bridesmaids and mother of the bride, will most likely be very similar to the craziness surrounding preparations to debut a new collection. When asked if stress levels are high, both laugh and admit that they work best under pressure. For two women selling dreams and fantasy, this mother-daughter design team has everything covered. ■■

Hair by Enzo Giarrantana, make-up by L Studio.
Model, Jackie Kelly of Image International, Allentown.



Slim sheath dress of tightly ruche chiffon embellished with scatter crystals and beaded belt.

lehigh valley
style
the valley's monthly lifestyle magazine

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Amanda Hurd worked for *Lehigh Valley Style* as an editorial intern for a period of three months from early January through April of 2010.

I found Amanda to be a lovely and mature young woman with excellent communication and social skills. She shows an exceptional amount of initiative and drive. She also has an eye for detail and is a very proficient writer.

I would certainly consider awarding Amanda a position with our publication should we ever have the need and ability to expand our staff. I have also expressed that I would be happy to extend some freelance writing opportunities to her upon the completion of her internship.

I would highly recommend her for employment in a variety of entry-level positions should she require such.

Thank you,



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