



THE MANY CLIENTS of Mireille Etienne Brunel (here in her Paris shop) are thrilled with her creations, returning at collection time to model their wedding gowns, far left. The tradition has grown to the point that today some 80 percent of the designs shown at her annual presentation are worn by brides of the year just past.



Sweetness and Light

So spectacular they belie their humble origins, these wedding gowns made of paper are the handiwork of Parisian designer Mireille Etienne Brunel, who here tells *Elegant Bride* what makes them special.

Q: WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO MAKE GOWNS OUT OF PAPER?

A: I wanted the beauty of the bride—her body, her skin—to shine through the dress, and paper allows that. These dresses are simple, poetic, magical. The magic comes from their simplicity and lightness—the finished design often weighs less than a kilo [approximately 2.2 pounds]. A priest who officiated at the weddings of three of my brides commented that

when he saw each of them enter the church he felt as if he were looking at an angel. And what is an angel? A being who is light—she flies. I am passionate about these materials and what I can do with them.

Q: WHAT KIND OF PAPER DO YOU USE FOR YOUR WEDDING GOWNS?

A: I combine two kinds of paper. One, a light-filter paper, is for the top layer of the dress—it is thin and transparent. The



LEFT AND ABOVE: It's hard to believe the cowl collar on the gown above is made of paper—to the casual onlooker it looks just like tulle! Mireille uses paper not only for the body of the dress but for decoration as well—on veils and bodices, for instance. Top: Brides and models and Mireille herself await their grand entrance at the annual presentation of the Etienne Brunel collection.

other kind, which I use for the bottom layer, is very strong and almost impossible to tear. It is sometimes used for envelopes or by scientists to make chemical products. Imagine an indestructible wedding dress. To me that symbolizes the commitment made in marriage.

Q: HOW ARE THE GOWNS DESIGNED AND CONSTRUCTED?

A: My clients come in with an idea, and I translate it. I look at the bride's body measurements and determine where she is thinnest and what her most attractive features are. These factors dictate the style. Then I mold or sculpt the pattern onto her body—pinning, then sewing the two layers together.

Q: ISN'T PAPER AWFULLY IMPRACTICAL FOR A DRESS?

A: Not at all. Since the paper doesn't absorb moisture, even perspiration doesn't show! If you get caught in the rain or someone spills wine on the dress, all you have to do is gently pat it dry. It doesn't need ironing either. I must be American in my soul because I am so practical. I never buy anything I have to iron.

Q: WHAT IS THE PRICE RANGE?

A: The cost for a typical design is 2,500 euros; 3,500 euros for one that is more complicated and includes a coat [The equivalent in U.S. dollars is approximately \$2,950 to \$4,130].

Q: DO THE GOWNS HAVE BUILT-IN BUSTIERS? ARE THEY WORN WITH UNDERGARMENTS?

A: Yes, each one is made with a bustier. A bride should also wear a structured bra to maintain the dress's shape.

Q: HOW MANY DIFFERENT DESIGNS DO YOU OFFER?

A: In this collection there are about fifty.

Q: CAN A BRIDE CHOOSE A COLOR OTHER THAN WHITE?

A: Yes, of course, but only for the top layer, the light-filter layer; that can be dyed any color she likes. A bride may individualize a design with real feathers, crystals, sequins or beads. Or she can stick with paper for the flower and leaf embellishments, which may be seen on some of the gowns. Light-filter paper is used for the petals on the veil too. In the end, it is the bride who decides what she wants.

Q: DO YOU EVER COMBINE PAPER WITH FABRICS?

A: No, because fabric is usually too heavy to be paired with paper. I may use a Chantilly lace, a very thin, delicate silk lace or *voile de famille*, an old family lace.

Q: WHAT KIND OF BRIDE IS ATTRACTED TO YOUR DRESSES?

A: A bride with lots of style. She is usually a woman with a strong personality, very independent and not afraid to be different. She likes the idea of a paper dress—it's modern, young, uplifting.

Q: HOW DO YOU PRESERVE THE DRESS?

A: Simply keep it in the paper bag we pack it in—like silk, it will last forever. It is hand-washable too. Hang it up to dry and press it lightly if necessary. Just place a cloth between the dress and the iron.

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