

IowaLife



Sarah Dornink, with dresses she has designed. Her own wedding dress is at right.

The power of *the dress*

Royal wedding piques dreams of the perfect gown — brides 'just light up,' designer says.

By MICHAEL MORAIN
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When the world turned its attention to the royal wedding last month in London, the microblogging site Twitter nearly collapsed under the crush of admiring tweets. But the biggest surge of comments weren't about the groom or his famous grandmother or even the bride herself.

Oh, no: They were about a few yards of silk and lace. "It's all about the dress," said Sarah Dornink, whose namesake dress boutique, Dornink, opened three years ago in Des Moines' East Village. "For any bride, that's the thing she's thought about since she was a little girl." And for any designer, there is no bigger runway than the red carpet that runs through Westminster Abbey. Not the Oscars. Not the president's inauguration. Nothing demonstrates the power

of a single piece of clothing quite like the spectacle that swirled around Kate Middleton — sorry: Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge.

But a dress can cast a spell over commoners, too.

"Sometimes you can see it in their face," Dornink said of the brides who come in for fittings. "They just light up when they try on the right dress."

Dornink made the dress for her own wedding five years ago. She keeps it in the store and pulled it off the rack to show it off. It's long and sleek, with diagonal strips of silk satin and brocade she patterned after a hardwood floor. It's not exactly the frothy pile of ruffles she had envisioned as a child.

"I found a pattern in a book, with a monstrous white heart and puffy sleeves," said the designer, now 32.



ANDREA MELENDEZ/REGISTER PHOTOS

Sarah Dornink's shop is located at 518 E. Grand Ave., in downtown Des Moines' East Village.

She grew up near Roosevelt High School and spent a good chunk of her early years picking up pins under her mom's sewing table. Her mother, Faythe Dornink, taught home economics for a few years and made many of her daughter's dresses, including an itchy white Easter dress and slinky black Morticia Adams costume with long shredded sleeves. There were a couple of prom dresses, too, including one with a midriff-baring top inspired by a skating costume of Kristi Yamaguchi's.

"She always told me, 'Mom, don't worry about my date. I'll worry about the date. Just get the dress done,'" said Faythe Dornink, who sold custom-made clothing from home before teaming up with her daughter at the store.

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The younger Dornink hadn’t planned to follow in her mom’s footsteps. She studied math at the University of Iowa and didn’t learn how to sew until her senior year. But her notebooks told a different story. She’d filled them with fashion sketches, doodles from distracted moments during class.

So she tried her luck. She headed out to New York, to fashion school and a few jobs “with a bunch of designers that nobody’s head of,” she said. She learned a lot and came back home.

Dornink opened the store in 2008, in an old brick storefront on Grand Avenue. She takes care of the designs and her mom handles the construction for a range of dresses that sell for a few hundred dollars on up. Wedding gowns start around \$1,200. It’s working out well.

“Anyone who walks in, we love to make the look good,” she said. “We’ve seen every kind of body under the sun.”

Sometimes, those bodies are famous. The Dorninks made the blue-green silk gown Christie Vilsack wore to President Obama's inaugural ball. They sent some pieces to Lolo Jones and designed a few things for Shawn Johnson, including a dress with a flouncy skirt to give her compact build more curves.

But most of the customers are getting married or heading to prom. When Kate Hudson wore the backless yellow dress a few years ago in the movie "How to Lose a Guy in 10 days," every high school girl in town wanted something like it.

"We probably made that dress 10 times," Dornink said.

She expects the Duchess of Cambridge's gown to prompt more requests for long lace sleeves, a wedding trend that was already catching on before last month. Strapless dresses have been popular for the last 10 or 15 years, but more brides are covering up.

A number of brides bring wedding dresses their moms or grandmothers wore, and Faythe Dornink can almost pinpoint the year – the fitted dresses from the '50s and '60s, the flowing ones from the '70s and the more elaborate ones that followed Princess Diana's wedding in 1981.

The styles change but the effort does not.

"It's such hard work. We have to nip and tuck and make everything just right," she said.

And sometimes, even the perfect dress can do only so much.

"A hair dress is just as important," she added. "If the bride doesn't like her hair, you know, forget it."