The green wedding guide

From fashion to flowers — how to have an ethical ceremony

Stella McCartney bridal SS19 campaign

When Stella McCartney made her bridal debut last November, she raised the bar for conscious brides-to-be everywhere. Forget the earthy, barefoot-and-yurt imagery of yesteryear, this 17-look collection featured a jaunty lace jumpsuit, double-breasted suit and, cannily, a clever iteration of the halter-necked post-ceremony gown designed by McCartney for the Duchess of Sussex’s after-wedding Windsor reception.

For the designer, a member of the Sustainable Apparel Coalition who has been reported to be working towards the elimination of hazardous chemicals and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions across her brand, the looks illuminated the vogue for sustainable bridalwear. But McCartney is not alone in courting the ethical bride. In April, Amy Powney, creative director of Mother of Pearl produced her first bridal collection, for the “sustainable bride”, offering dresses and separates in organic ivory satin designed to be worn again — Gwyneth Paltrow wore a dress from the Pearly Whites collection to Goop’s 10th anniversary celebration. “By definition a wedding dress is one of the most unsustainable items you can purchase,” says Powey. “These pieces are designed to be worn for a wedding day and beyond.”
The route to an ethical gown is as much about “something old”, as it is “something new”. The fashion search platform Lyst says there has been a 93 per cent spike in online views of pre-owned wedding dresses in the past year. And it’s easy to see why. Among the 46,518 frocks listed on the site Still White are second-hand Jenny Packham and Vera Wang gowns that retail for under £1,000, a fraction of what they would cost new.

Meanwhile online social enterprise Brides Do Good gives two-thirds of its profits from the dresses sold to Plan International and Too Young To Wed, charities working to eradicate child marriage by 2030. Set up by Chantal Khoueiry in 2016, it hosts numerous brands — Oscar de la Renta, Alexander McQueen, Vivienne Westwood and Valentino among them — some of which have chosen to donate designs directly to support the philanthropic cause.
Yet, in the moral minefield of the modern nuptials, the gown is far from the only ethical stumbling block. “Wedding floristry is an incredibly unsustainable industry,” explains Alexandra Nutting, who makes up half of the naturalistic London flower-sellers Aesme with her sister Jess. “It’s ironic because flowers are meant to be a reflection of nature, yet when they’re pumped with chemicals, refrigerated and flown around the world, they couldn’t be further from their natural state.”

Aesme, by contrast, sell their native flowers and foliage, grown at their Hampshire cutting garden, from a preternaturally photogenic Victorian railway arch in London’s Shepherd’s Bush. “It’s not a hard sell,” explains Nutting of their wedding bouquets. “The growing awareness around botanical provenance follows on from the farm-to-table food trend — it’s taking its time, but the floral world is finally following suit.”

In lieu of sculptural flower walls and floral foam (essentially, an offensively toxic plastic which can take a century to decompose), Aesme, and a burgeoning movement of wild and whimsical bridal florists that includes I Think That You Are Magic, Worm London and Grace and Thorn, offer seasonal, silk and dried flowers, as well as replantable potted blooms such as roses and trailing clematis. “Wedding flowers don’t have to be full of toxins,” says Nutting. “They can be seasonal, bespoke and beautiful.”

For Laura Lambert, the voyage to a socially conscious union begins with the engagement ring. Together with former head of manufacturing at De Beers, Kathrin Schoenke, she founded the ethically minded online-only jewellery site Fenton & Co in February.
“The term ethical engagement ring can still conjure images of opal encrusted Celtic bands from circa 2000,” jokes Lambert. “What’s interesting is that being ethical is now not something you need to shove in people’s faces. It can be done in the background.”

Driven by the desire for transparency, ethical accountability and fair pricing, Fenton & Co are focused on coloured stones which have a more easily traceable supply chain than the traditional diamond. The stones from their bestselling emerald-cut sapphire vintage style rings, for instance, are sourced from Sri Lanka but not Burma (“I don’t feel comfortable profiting off the labour of a country whose practices I can’t morally condone,” says Lambert). Seventy per cent of their emeralds are sourced by Gemfields, the first big responsibly sourced mining company. “Compared to a decade ago, people are much more discerning when it comes to provenance or value. Retailers are being pushed on all fronts.”

Big jewellery brands are also responding to pressure for transparency on their sources. In January, Tiffany pledged to provide details on the country of origin of all its diamonds above 0.18cts. But Lambert feels compelled to do more. “The first thing for me is asking questions and being willing to act on the answers no matter how challenging,” says Lambert, who successfully closed a venture capital round for the company last June. “It’s not about wishy-washy gestures or having a one-off ethical collection that doesn’t make up for having a supply chain that’s open to abuses.”

Anna Jewsbury, artistic director of Completedworks, agrees. The London jeweller has just announced the use of ethically sourced precious gems and metals across the brand’s entire bridal collections. “It’s just the first step for us,” says Jewsbury, who counts Emma Watson and Alexa Chung among her customers. “Even though we’re working on a small scale I had the realisation that we have to be ethically and sustainably accountable in everything we do.”
Their use of recycled and fair-trade metals means the reported 20 tons of waste generated in the production of a single wedding band is circumnavigated. And buyers can choose between traceable watermarked Canadian diamonds or stones from the Diamond Foundry, which are synthetically generated using solar technology. “Seeing the synthetic stones side-by-side with mined stones, they’re the same thing,” says Jewsbury. “People have such an emotional connection to diamonds — but younger customers are more open to new ideas.”

Other than foregoing gobstopping, centrepiece diamonds (they do use accent diamonds), Fenton & Co have also dispensed with the romance of the over-the-counter ring-buying experience. “As far as I could see, while the fashion jewellery market is busy and thriving, the experience of purchasing what I call ‘moment in life’ jewellery hadn’t been disrupted all it. It felt archaic,” says Lambert.

She compares her site’s step-by-step buying journey to the luxury equivalent of Build-a-Bear, with the menu of five engagement rings, men’s and women’s bands and seven different gemstones to choose from creating some 3,000 possible iterations. To date, the engagement market has comprised some 70 per cent of their business.

When it comes to more ethical weddings, it seems, both brides — and grooms — are saying I do.

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