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## After 'I Do,' Can This Wedding Dress Be Saved?

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A wedding dress can go through a lot: champagne toasts and cake cutting, photos in the garden and a night of dancing. For many brides, dry-cleaning isn't enough for a gown they spent months looking for, years dreaming of, and may hope to pass down someday.



The gown Julie Morris wore to her outdoor wedding in Florida got the 'Prestige' treatment. *F. MARTIN RAMIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

There are a number of companies that promise to clean and preserve wedding dresses for posterity. These companies say they can keep a dress looking new for years.

"Cleaning is the most important part of a gown preservation," said Sally Lorensen Conant, executive director of the Association of Wedding Gown Specialists and owner of Orange Restoration Lab, a wedding-gown preservation company in Orange, Conn. If you leave anything in the fiber, 20 years from now "there will be dark brown stains where that ginger ale or champagne was."

The association's 90 members commit to a gown-preservation method called MuseumCare, where they hand-clean dresses and use a special treatment to remove stains involving sugar, salt or acid, which often dry clear and cannot be seen.

We tested four companies that preserved four gowns from four brides. Two companies were part of garment-preservation groups that follow particular cleaning and preservation processes. One thing we learned: Since preservation companies may work with many dry cleaners and with different procedures, brides should make sure they know exactly where their gown is going.

## From India to Buffalo



Julie Morris *BROWNE PHOTOGRAPHY*

We sent a silk, beaded sari worn at a Hindu wedding ceremony in India to BridalKare of Buffalo, N.Y. Our ensemble included a silk scarf that was badly stained with fruit juice.

The preservation kit we ordered online consisted of an order form and a pre-paid UPS label. A video on BridalKare's website explained its 11-point process, which starts with a hand-cleaning of the hemline, top of the bodice and underarm area.

The gowns are steamed and hand-pressed before they are placed on an acid-free bust insert (to keep the bodice from wrinkling) and sealed in an acid-free box.

The hitch: Breaking the seal voids the lifetime guarantee against caramelized sugar stains or yellowing. It can be reinstated by sending the dress back for resealing, which costs \$35, with shipping included. BridalKare co-owner Beverly Zambito says brides should send the dress for re-sealing to protect against moisture.

Since we wanted to wear the sari to another function, we opened the box and found the scarf was still stained, though it was lighter. BridalKare co-owner Beverly Zambito said the company will re-process a gown free of charge using a tougher cleaning solution, but some stains just don't come out.

Heritage Garment Preservation of Benicia, Calif., took the longest to preserve our gown—7½ weeks—but had the best presentation. Owners Jennifer Judd, Kathy Wright, and Carmina West give brides constant updates on their dresses—emailing when they receive the dress, when they start cleaning it and when it is shipped back.

After getting an online price estimate, we sent in a long, white gown with beading and a full skirt to be cleaned and preserved using the Museum Method, a hanging approach the company says helps keep gowns wrinkle-free.

## No Foam Allowed

We found the dirt on the hem and the faint black spots on the front were completely gone. The custom-printed cloth label with the bride and groom's names and wedding date on the bag was a nice touch; the back had a large pocket to hold an 8 x 10 photo.

There was also an information sheet that gave details about the preservation: The foam bust pads were removed because they could discolor the dress with age. It also told us to replace the acid-free tissue after five years.

We took a mostly polyester knee-length gown worn at a beach wedding in Mexico to Meurice Cleaners, a Manhattan-based member of the Association of Wedding Gown Specialists. The friendly staff took the time to examine our gown with us, marking stains and explaining the process.

When we picked up the gown, the staff encouraged us to take out the gown and inspect it. The front of the skirt had had a few faint dark blotches on it, but they were now gone.

### A Gown's Odyssey

We dropped off a strapless, silk wedding gown with jeweled silk flowers worn at an outdoor wedding in Florida at Jerri's Uptown Cleaners, which was the closest authorized dealer of the Wedding Gown Preservation Co., according to its website. The Endicott, N.Y., company works with 3,500 dry cleaners, bridal shops and formal-wear dealers across the country, which ship dresses to the company for processing.

Three weeks later, our gown was ready and in a box with a "Prestige Preservation" label on it, which confused us. A representative for Jerri's said that Jerri's sends out dresses to two gown-preservation companies, and that ours went to the Cleanery, a Farmingdale, N.Y., member of the Prestige Preservation Program, a group of garment-preservation experts.

According to the Cleanery co-owner Scott Pardo, all Prestige members follow the same process: They pre-spot gowns from the neckline down and let them sit for 24 hours. Dresses are wet- or dry-cleaned (satin ones are wet-cleaned and silk are dry-cleaned), steamed and pressed.

### No Seal, No Guarantee

Gowns are guaranteed against insect damage or yellowing, but breaking the seal voids the guarantee. Gowns can be sent back to be re-sealed for about \$40. Mr. Pardo gives dry cleaners the option of showing clients their gown before it is boxed, but he says many dry cleaners skip this step since it is more expensive and time-consuming.

We noticed our once brilliant-white dress looked duller afterward. Mr. Pardo said we could send our gown to him again for a free re-processing. One option would be to re-clean the dress using a special brightener in the solvent, he said. "Can it be made brighter? Anything's possible," he said.