

WHY



BIG BANG THEORY

Eveningwear trends come and go, but the voluminous ballgown remains the center of the social universe. VANESSA LAWRENCE uncovers its ageless appeal.

THIS FALL, THE ANNUAL NEW YORKERS for Children Gala was a traffic jam of jewel-toned column dresses, black tuxedos, and popping flashbulbs. The crowd parted, however, with the arrival of Ivanka Trump. Was it the heiress's star power that had guests taking a step back? The 6-foot sometime model's towering physical presence? Neither—it was her dress: an imposing Carolina Herrera satin gown with multiple bows, a modified bustle skirt, and a train so long that partygoers had no choice but to move aside.

In our casual age, when men rarely bother with a jacket for the opera, one would think such a major dress an anomaly. But Trump was barely in the room 10 minutes before she ran into former hedge fund manager Julie Macklowe, decked out in an equally elaborate blue-sequined Zang Toi number that trailed several feet behind her. "You make me feel better about my train!" said Trump, laughing.

These days, the dress code at black tie events is not so black and white. Cocktail frocks, microminis, and even Le Smoking suits are all commonplace at charity galas. But as styles have fluctuated—Balmain's puff shoulders giving way to minimal Céline sheaths—one silhouette has remained a stalwart: the ballgown. With corseted bodices and huge skirts composed of enough fabric to warm a family of seven, these dresses are the very definition of high maintenance. Their exaggerated proportions render both dancing and eating potentially painful; they practically require an extra seat at the dinner table; and forget about squeezing into a cab on your way home. Still, each autumn, as the social season kicks into high gear, Cinderella styles inevitably return—trends be damned. So how has the ballgown managed to survive, somehow transcending fashion itself? What accounts for its lasting appeal?

For some, romanticism and fairy tale fantasies are the draw. Alexandra Lebenthal, financial exec by day, charity-circuit regular by night, bought her first ballgown, a silver-and-black-lace Elizabeth Fillmore, 15 years ago. She owns at least 20, acquiring a new one each season from designers like Douglas Hannant and Angel Sanchez. "The more train, the more bustle, the more beading—the happier I am," she says. "My job is so not about being romantic or a princess; it's a man's world. The opportunity to be in this long, flowing gown lets me leave everything that happened during the day behind."

Psychiatrist and society-page fixture Samantha Boardman, meanwhile, can trace her love of full-skirt dresses to the Carolina Herrera organza gown she wore at her Waldorf-Astoria debut when she was 18. "I think that's when I drank the Kool-Aid," she says. "There was no turning back." Her collection now includes designs by Rochas, Giambattista Valli, Oscar de la Renta, and Vera Wang. "It's the way it feels, the way it sounds when you move, the whole process of getting into it and doing it up—it takes a village to put one on."

Because of their complete lack of trendiness, ballgowns, despite being fiendishly expensive, can arguably be better investments than, say, the latest

look from Marc Jacobs. "Gowns are incredibly well constructed and last a very long time," Lebenthal says. "I wear them over and over again." Adds Georgina Chapman, the cofounder and designer of Marchesa, which includes ballgowns in practically every collection: "They're timeless pieces."

How timeless? According to fashion historian Caroline Rennolds Milbank, full-skirt floor-length dresses first appeared in the Elizabethan period. "The silhouette at night was pretty much the same as the silhouette during the day, just with gradations of decorativeness," she says, noting that Empress Eugénie (the wife of Napoleon III) was credited with starting the trend toward enormous crinolines, using them to hide her pregnancy.

It wasn't until Dior's New Look in 1947 that one saw a true demarcation between daytime dress—say, a little suit—and evening dress. White tie, not black tie, became the true arena for grand gowns. By the 1980s, though, so-called creative black tie had come into existence, resulting in an anything-goes approach. Today, Milbank says, most Americans get a glimpse of major dresses only on Oscar night: "The red carpet has, in a way, replaced the concept of white tie."

Which raises the question: How long can the not-so-humble ballgown continue its reign? Will the next generation of society girls, brought up in the yoga-pants-at-lunch era, really be willing to put up with voluminous skirts, tight corsets, and cumbersome trains in the name of glamour?

Danielle Steel, for one, doesn't think so. Despite owning a ballgown collection worthy of a museum archive—including a Monet-esque Dior Haute Couture and a violet-covered Balmain that Oscar de la Renta designed for her last wedding—the novelist hasn't put one on in more seasons than she can remember. She's never even worn her last such purchase, a brown satin Christian Lacroix she bought almost six years ago—though her 28-year-old daughter, Victoria Traina, did take it for a spin at a Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco gala in 2006. "From my perspective, they've become a piece of history," says Steel, "a relic from a beautiful and perhaps simpler time. When we are concerned with the health of our planet, the solidity of our economies, and the future of our children, wearing such grand clothes seems out of place."

Even Boardman, for all her love of a big skirt, says context is key: "Truthfully, on the charity circuit, I don't think ballgowns belong. It's hostile to be in a dress that requires everyone to keep a certain distance," she says, adding that the annual Costume Institute gala is the one exception. She reserves her acquisitions for private events, like white tie weddings and European balls.

Trump, of course, begs to differ: "I was emboldened to wear a true showstopper, as it was my first black tie outing since having a baby," she says of her New Yorkers for Children look. "I have loved the glamour of gowns for as long as I can remember, for which I credit my mother. I will wear them indefinitely." ♦

Above, from left, background: Ballgowns in the musical *Dames*; a Balmain gown, 1952; foreground: Alexandra Lebenthal; Beyoncé Knowles; Doutzen Kroes; Samantha Boardman; Serena Williams; Ivanka Trump; Danielle Steel; Julie Macklowe; Ashley Greene.