

# How Much is That Dress Worth?

## Dollar Princesses Go Shopping

### UHP Staff

Shoes, stockings, hats, dresses, negligees, gloves, handkerchiefs, parasols, petticoats.

The total bill came to \$67,000. In 1907.

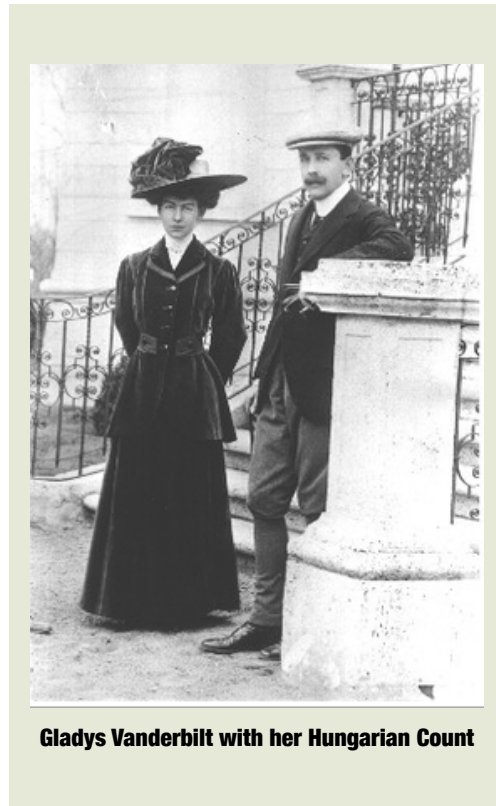
As the heiress to a twelve million dollar fortune, Gladys Vanderbilt saw no reason to skimp on her trousseau. After all, she was marrying Count László Széchenyi, a Hungarian count whose distinguished family, *The New York Times* solemnly reported, “goes back fully 1,000 years.”

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American heiresses like Gladys Vanderbilt and the fictional Cora, Countess Grantham, on *Downton Abbey* flocked to Europe where, in exchange for American dollars, they acquired titled husbands.

These American dollar princesses might, as European and American newspapers rather snidely pointed out, lack the long and distinguished lineage of their husbands, but if they played their cards right, their clothing could establish them as social leaders on a par with, or even above, their European in-laws.

No surprise, then, that Gladys and her mother had traveled to both London and Paris to buy her trousseau, the wardrobe she would bring to her

marriage. If clothes were to make the woman (or the countess), no expense was to be spared.



Gladys Vanderbilt with her Hungarian Count

### The European Shopping Trip

Long before Gladys Vanderbilt married her count, American women had begun traveling to Paris to acquire elaborate wardrobes. But while Paris was the center of the world of fashion, the city revolved around an English designer, Charles F. Worth.

By the time Gladys Vanderbilt went shopping for her wedding gown, Worth had been dead for twelve years.

But his company---the House of Worth---was still in business and it was here that Vanderbilt picked up her custom-designed \$10,000 wedding dress, along with other items for her trousseau.

In choosing the House of Worth as the designer of her wedding gown, Vanderbilt followed in the footsteps of the dollar princesses who had come before her. Worth had been a favored designer of American socialites ranging from Jennie Jerome (the mother of Winston Churchill) to Vanderbilt's cousin, Conesulo Vanderbilt who had become the Duchess of Marlborough in 1895.

### Worth the Artiste

After leaving Britain in the 1840s while he was in his twenties, Worth had found work with Gagelin and Opigez, a well-known Parisian firm that sold high-quality textiles. While working there, Worth began designing clothes for his wife and selected clients. His designs proved popular and Worth found a backer who provided him with the funds to establish a dressmaking firm. The firm, Worth and Borbergh (Borbergh provided the financial backing) quickly found clients and by 1870, Worth was able to branch out on his own, formally establishing The House of Worth.

Often considered the world's first *haute couture* designer, Worth credited his career and its success to the craze for costume balls that had



Worth Dress, Smithsonian (Left)

Charles M. Worth, Public Domain

Worth Costume, Metropolitan Museum of Art, (Right)



emerged in the mid- to late nineteenth century. Attracting the patronage of Empress Eugenie who became his client in 1859 also helped spur his career.

## Changing Fashion

Although Worth had attracted aristocratic customers before acquiring Empress Eugenie as a client, his designs for the empress, including one modeled on Marie Antoinette and another in “black tulle and marabout feathers” representing Night, assured his fame and fortune. The empress, who was considered a noted beauty, was an easy muse for Worth.

Empress Eugenie, however, was not always enamored of Worth’s designs. Eugenie was the wife of Napoleon III, whom many European aristocrats considered an upstart and whose court was regarded as *declassé* when compared with older royal families. Concerned about maintaining the dignity of her rank, Eugenie was conservative in her dress. Worth’s

designs, which broke with traditions and which were considered by some to be “indelicate” in their rejection of frills, sometimes presented a fashion risk the empress was unwilling to take.

While the empress often hesitated, Worth had no difficulties in finding clients who were willing to wear his more controversial designs. Once Worth’s clients had worn the design, Eugenie often followed suit.

Like many a designer after him, Worth claimed to oversee each dress before it left his shop. Fit was central to Worth’s success. Unlike designers today, Worth confessed that he did not especially like thin models and his dresses often boasted yards of fabrics.

It was this fabric which was central to Worth’s success. In an era when fabrics were being produced by machine and which were, as a result, not especially varied, Worth sought out rich fabrics with subtle variations and elaborate designs as well as handmade trimmings such as antique lace.

## Fabrics, Embroidery, and Lace

A Worth dress might boast lace that cost, even in the nineteenth century, several thousand dollars. Although it was probably designed by Worth’s sons, Gladys Vanderbilt’s wedding gown was a typical Worth dress as the dress included yards and yards of antique and priceless handmade Irish lace.

Similarly, a Worth dress might be made of a fabric that reflected subtly shifting shades of color. When interviewed by a Boston newspaper, Worth pointed to what was clearly one of his favorite designs, a dress with yards and yards of shaded fabric.

While Worth’s success rested in large part on his designs and his use of fabric, the late nineteenth-century custom of requiring women to change gowns several times during the day also meant that the wealthy women who flocked to his firm bought



Russian Court Dress  
(Left)

Worth Dress, (Right)

Courtesy of the  
Metropolitan Museum of  
Art



multiple dresses: morning gowns, tea gowns, and evening gowns, all of which were to be worn in the course of just one day. No woman worth her salt would buy just one Worth dress.

By the early twentieth century, when Gladys Vanderbilt was shopping for her trousseau, other designers had begun to compete with the House of Worth. Newspapers reported that, even as she bought her wedding dress from Worth, Gladys Vanderbilt had also bought clothes from other up and coming designers.

## Waning Fashions

In the decades that followed the Vanderbilt-Széchenyi marriage, The House of Worth slowly lost its dominance in the field of fashion. While Charles Worth's sons were able to carry the firm into the twentieth century, competition from new and more innovative designers pushed the firm into decline and in 1952, the

world's first great fashion house came to a formal end when Charles Worth's great-great grandson retired.

While fashion has its trends---and by its very nature, will often rise only to fall into decline---the fall of the House of Worth was also tied to shifting views of wealth. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, displays of conspicuous wealth, as highlighted by Worth's expensive fabrics, were admired.

But in the aftermath of World War I and the political and social revolutions that followed, attention shifted away from the gilded few whose lives had little to do with those of most Americans and Europeans. It was not simply that these revolutions devastated the European aristocracy and even leveled some American fortunes, it was also that new and more democratic ideas had come to the fore.

*Haute couture* never died, of course. But fashion increasingly became democratized during the twentieth century. Ironically, this, too, was a trend which Worth had pioneered as his focus on fit had led him to develop standards that became commonly used in ready-to-wear clothes.