

# #218: NORWEGIAN WEDDING

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"Bridal Procession in Hardanger (1848)" by Tidemand and Gude

## INTRODUCTION

Marriage customs in Norway have changed over time. While the original Norse wedding customs do not always apply to modern weddings, some of this history still transitioned over to become the traditions we have today.

woman with her own property, had the right to marry without asking for the consent of her father – although her relatives might influence her.

## KJØKEMEISTER – TOASTMAKER

After the bride and groom the *kjøkemeister*, or toastmaker, is one of the more important individuals of a traditional Norwegian wedding. Instructed with maintaining revelry, they are often in charge of welcoming guests, organizing the wedding procession, and leading songs and toasts during the meal after the ceremony. One of the most important speeches, *Takk for maten* – thanks for the food, is the final speech of the evening given by an honored guest, as directed by the *kjøkemeister*.

## BEDAMANN – INVITER

Historically, the invitations to a Norwegian wedding were delivered by hand. This person was designated as the *bedamann*, or bidding man, and was also typically in charge of informing the community of christenings and funerals as well as weddings. A *bedamann* usually recited his invitations in an old-fashioned style of eloquent cordiality that today can appear stuffy to modern listeners. If a Norwegian today is accused of speaking in a *bedamann* manner, they should think about trying to appear less pompous and assumedly pious.



Woman in national costume and  
bridal crown, Hardanger.  
Wikimedia Commons

## THE FAMILY

Original marriage customs in Norway were centered on the *ætt*, or family (this includes all blood relatives and also ancestors). As a civil contract between families, the *ætt* gave away the bride. Both families involved in the contract would then participate in a gift exchange as dictated by custom. The groom would offer an appropriate wedding gift to the family in exchange for the loss of their

daughter, while the bride's family would provide her with a dowry that often included items needed in a new household. Each family would return the exchange with an additional gift until everyone was satisfied. The gifts varied in type and value from livestock to land.

Even though the bride didn't get to choose the man she married, any property and goods include in the dowry were rightfully hers if she ended up leaving her husband or became widowed. A widow, or a





Photo: Terje Rakke/Nordic life  
Visitnorway.com

## TRADITIONAL DRESS

The bunad is the traditional dress of the Norwegian bride and groom. Each wore the appropriate style for their respective regions; though it is common for modern couples to forgo their traditional bunads and to see brides wearing a white gown instead. The bride would also wear wedding *sjøle*, silver jewelry that often remained in families as heritage pieces. Finally, the bride would also traditionally

dawn a *brudekrone*, or bridal crown. The *brudekrone* is commonly decorated with small metal bangles that make a soft tinkling as the bride moves; the noise is thought to ward off evil spirits who might attempt to harm the bride.

Wedding rings are done a little bit differently in the Norwegian tradition. Only one ring is used for both the engagement as well as the wedding, typically a simple gold band. When the couple is engaged the ring is worn on the left hand and is moved to the right during the wedding ceremony. It is also common for the man to wear an engagement ring as well as the woman. During the ceremony, the circular wedding bands are meant to be symbolic of the couple's endless love. After the wedding bands are exchanged, the couple is expected to kiss in representation of the two exchanging their souls.



Photographer: Normanns kunstforlag  
A/S, National Library of Norway

## THE PROCESSION

The wedding procession to the church is a distinct aspect of a traditional Norwegian wedding. Accompanied by the bridal party and guests, the bride and groom are lead to the church by a fiddler. Since the procession traditionally started at one of the houses of the couple,



A Nordfjord bride and groom with guests and parents at their house door, Brigsdal, Norway, 1906. Photographer: Elmer Underwood (1859-1947) National Library of Norway

the bridal couple, or sometimes only the bride, would travel on horseback. If the procession had a long way to go, sometimes the guests would also ride horses or in some cases the procession would have to travel by boat.

The popular painting "Bridal Procession in Hardanger (1848)" by Tidemand and Gude depicts this Norwegian tradition as completed by boat.

Once the procession reached the church, the bridal couple is expected to sit for the ceremony and answer a simple *ja*, or yes, in response to their ceremonial vows. Historically, Hardanger fiddlers are not allowed in churches and are therefore expected to wait until the completion of the ceremony before joining the party to provide entertainment during the dinner and reception.

## WEDDING FOOD

A *koldtbord*, or cold table buffet, is often served after the wedding ceremony. The dinner is expected to last several hours and is accompanied with toasts and songs lead by the *kjøkemeister*. Historically, this part of the celebration was expected to last up to a week depending upon the income of the two families, but this is rarely practiced today.

A variety of wedding cakes are also served after dinner. Two common cakes seen at a traditional Norwegian wedding include *bløtkake*, a sponge cake with alternating layers of fruit and whipping cream, and *kransekake*, a multi-layered almond ring cake decorated with icing and tiny flags or edible flowers. Sometimes the bride and groom will ask their friends and family to bring supplemental cakes so that a variety can be served.

After the traditional meal, it is common to also serve food as long as the guests continue to dance and celebrate into the night. Called *nattmatt*, or night food, this usually consists of sausages, soup with bread, or sandwiches.

## AFTER THE WEDDING

There are two simple traditions that are commonly practiced after a traditional Norwegian wedding. First, it is common for the bride and groom to exchange a *morgengave*, or morning gift, on the morning after their wedding. The size and type of gifts exchanged depends upon the couple. Second, it is common to plant two small fir trees on either side of the couple's door after they are married. The fir trees are symbols of the future and represent the children the couple will conceive.