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A guide for purchasing gloves for Carnival balls and presentations (for men and women)

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Debutantes in opera-length, kid-leather gloves. (Josh Brasted Photo)

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As debutante presentations and Carnival balls approached, I knew I needed a pair of white, kid gloves (in addition to a vast reserve of long black dresses.) If you haven't been to one of these events, in addition to wearing floor-length, formal dresses, women -- debutantes and those in the front row -- wear white, opera-length kid-leather gloves.

These preludes to Mardi Gras have strict dress codes, so here is what you need to know before purchasing your gloves.

Gloves and Queen Elizabeth I

While it is said that gloves, in some form or another, have been worn for more than 3,000 years, it wasn't until the late 18th century that gloves just below or to elbow became popular. Though living in separate countries, accounts have it that both Catherine de' Medici and Queen Elizabeth I were fans of gloves, with Elizabeth known for her collection of 2,000 gloves. Opera-length didn't truly become fashionable until Empress Josephine kicked off the craze during the Napoleonic/Regency period (1800-1825). (And it helped that Napoleon was a fan, too.) Alas, the mid-Victorian age, with its elaborate sleeves, saw a downturn in opera-length gloves, though for the upper-classes, wearing gloves was still a sign of your social station.

It wasn't until the late 19th-century and early 20th that opera-length gloves had a resurgence in popularity, most likely due to actresses Sarah Bernhardt in France and Lillian Russell in the United States, who wore them on and off stage. A continued popularity through the 20th century -- a must-have accessory for Christian

Dior's "New Look," for example -- and into the 21st, debutante or not -- have kept opera-length gloves in fashion.

My Search

I thought I already had a wonderful pair of white opera-length kid-leather gloves: Years ago, my mother had given me her vintage, circa 1950s pair. Even though I had used them vigorously for costumes, and had them restored, I thought they were in good enough shape. Not so, when I pulled them out -- the fingertips were worn down a little, and I think those years of using them for costumes had aged them. Back into the costume rotation they went, and now I had to purchase a pair.

Length:

I had seen three types of lengths: opera (which comes up to mid-upper arm), elbow (or forearm) and wrist. I had been told by various friends in the know that I should get opera or elbow length, as I was looking to buy only one pair.

The length depends on the where the sleeve falls:

- Opera

There is another form of measurement for gloves: "buttons," whether they have buttons or not. Derived from French, the exact measure is a bit longer than one inch. For example, wrist-length gloves are eight-button; elbow, 16-button; and opera, 22. As most people do not know this type of measurement, and pre-made gloves are made a consistent length, these measurements do not often come into play.

Material and Color:

Women: Kid-leather and white ONLY. No cloth.

There should be no decoration on these gloves. No rhinestones, no lace. For opera length, the only adornment are the three small buttons by the wrist opening, called the *mousquetiere*.

Lined or unlined: You will see the option for lined or unlined. Lined (usually silk) gloves are easier to put on, plus the lining protects the leather from the oils from your hand, thus preventing yellowing of the gloves.

Men: If you are an escort, white kid-leather, wrist-length gloves. Invited to the ball and unsure? White cloth wrist gloves will do. (You

will need them for dancing.)

Sizing:

I had originally looked in some of my existing gloves (used during the winter) for sizes, and one pair said 7.5. Don't go by that! Measure your hand.

This is how you do it: Measure your dominant hand (for example, if you are right-handed, then measure your right hand). Take a tape measure and wrap it around the four knuckles of that hand (measuring the circumference). No tape measure? Use a string: just mark where it ends, then put flat against a ruler to get size. (Many thanks to Florentine Gloves for these directions.)

Taking gloves on and off:

Yes, there is a right and wrong way to do this! The right way to put on opera-length, kid-leather gloves, as told to me by Perlis Clothing's Maureen O'Dwyer: Flip your arm over, so your palm is up. Put the glove on your hand first, then fit in place, pushing the leather down between your fingers. Push, DO NOT PULL, the rest of the glove up your arm. Taking them off,

again, DO NOT PULL. Roll down to the elbow and if you have to pull, do it from the middle of the glove.

Also, make sure your hands are clean before you put the gloves on. Many times, it is recommended to lightly dust your hands with talcum powder before.

Storage:

Always wrap in a clean cloth, such as a cotton pillow case, or in archival paper.

Pricing:

I initially went online (mainly eBay) to see pricing for my opera-length, kid-gloves, because I had heard were expensive. While there were good buys -- anywhere from \$9.99 (for a pair of well-worn wrist) to \$47.99 to \$102 (opera), most that I saw were vintage and gently worn. Each of my choices had photographs -- some better than others -- and pretty good descriptions. But after reviewing them, I would say that like my mother's pair, most just didn't look quite right. (But I highly recommend going

online if you want a pair for a costume!) Locally, prices range for women \$75 to \$132 for wrist; \$255 elbow, and \$198 to \$330 for opera.

At Perlis, men's wrist gloves were \$8 for cotton; \$95 for kid-leather. While cotton gloves are one-size-fits-all, for the kid-leather, it goes from small to XXL.

Getting your gloves cleaned

A season of Carnival balls and presentations can take a pristine pair of white, kid-leather gloves and make them look like they were found on Bourbon Street. Cocktails, food, pens, lipstick, foundation, eyeliner -- anything that can possibly mark, stain and soil your gloves -- will do so.

Mine -- opera-length, white, kid-leather -- by the end of the season needed a bit of refreshing. I was tempted to try the many homegrown tips I read on the Internet. (Gently run lighter fluid on surface dirt was one recommendation.) Instead, I asked around for places to have them cleaned.

Though everyone I spoke to highly recommended getting the gloves professionally cleaned, no one could point me toward a local establishment. (Many recalled a former dry cleaner that is now closed.)

I checked out who Florentine Gloves used - Arrow Leathercare in Kansas City, Mo. This company not only revitalizes post-Carnival gloves - and most things made out of suede and leather - it also cleans bridal gowns, debutante dresses, UGG boots, fur, bedding, rugs and more.

I sent my pair off for an estimate, and a few days later they called to say it would cost \$45 to clean (my bill says "heavy stain"), which I thought was fair. Prices will vary due to size of gloves and how soiled they are. (It also did not include the cost of shipping.)

"White leather is the hardest to clean," said Bob Gershon of Arrow Leathercare. Founded by Gershon's father, a tailor, in 1914, Gershon expanded it to dry cleaning after he returned from World War II. Today, Arrow Leathercare is still family-owned and operated -- his son owns

the company, and his daughter works there, as does Gershon, who still goes to the office at age 88.

About stains, Gershon says, "Many times you don't know what the stain is, except for ink. (Unfortunately, the harder we work on it, the color of the leather may change." And, he told me, if the stain turns yellow, those gloves will need to be refinished.

Anything else?

As Carnival season is here, and invitations are now in the mail, I asked Julie Williams of Town & Country, on St. Charles Avenue, about when you should purchase gloves. As opera-length is the store's most popular style, she said recommended not waiting until the last minute to purchase.

Lynn Watkins, who is known in New Orleans for advising debutantes, gave me this tip: Carry a small, zippered plastic bag when you go to a ball or party. If you are not using the your gloves, place them in the bag so as to avoid stains from spills.

In New Orleans, gloves and Carnival balls are inevitable, like formal attire. And, New Orleanians are known far and wide for wearing gloves. For example, I will refer to a story a friend told me: A man from New Orleans traveled to Florence, Italy, and while there, he decided to purchase a pair of white, kid-leather gloves for himself. When the man asked if the store had them, the owner replied, "You must be from New Orleans or Vienna." (Vienna is the another famed city where the men are required to wear white gloves during debutante balls.)

So, when you don a pair of white kid-leather gloves, you become part of a well-fitted tradition.

This article was updated on August 19, 2014 with information concerning where to get gloves cleaned.

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