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# The Prom Dress Moves Into the Designer Leagues

By MARISA MELTZER

LAST year, as a junior at the Latin School in Chicago, Colby Jordan wore a black silk gown designed by John Galliano with matching Dior heels to prom. “This year I’m switching gears,” she said on the phone from her home recently. “I’m doing a chartreuse Roland Mouret gown with purple snakeskin YSL Tribute sandals.”

As at the Oscars, the school has a tradition of students changing outfits for after-parties, so Ms. Jordan, 18, is also considering a white Herve Leger dress with silver heels by Azzedine Alaïa bought during Paris Fashion Week last March, plus jewelry from a “dear friend,” the New York designer Eddie Borgo, who lent her pieces when she attended the Met Ball earlier this month.

While Ms. Jordan is a rare, jet-set teenager attending such exclusive events, she’s not the only one buying a designer dress, often costing in the mid-three figures or higher, for prom night.

Goodbye, Gunne Sax! So long, Zum Zum! Caroline and Philippa McCully, 18, identical twin sisters who grew up shuttling between Lattintown, N.Y., and the Upper East Side of Manhattan, are also wearing Yves Saint Laurent Tribute sandals to their prom at Choate Rosemary Hall in Wallingford, Conn. They both ordered custom dresses online from Maria Lucia Hohan, costing \$709 and \$860 respectively and paid for by their father. “I generally find what fits me and then speak to my dad,” Philippa McCully said.

An informal survey of high school boys found them oblivious to the designer trend, renting tuxes from local shops as they have for generations. “The only guys who are wearing anything designer are getting it from their father’s closet,” Caroline McCully said.

But despite the recession, and perhaps influenced by shows like “[Gossip Girl](#)” that incorporate designer clothes into their story lines, some young women say they are enjoying the full-service experience of luxury shopping as part of prom night, like a stretch limo.

Sara Weiss, a senior at Pope High School in Marietta, Ga., who describes herself as a “total fashionista,” went to Neiman Marcus to buy her dress, where “they are so accommodating,”

she said. “They bring you water, there’s space in the dressing room, it’s just a nice experience.” She chose a white Sue Wong costing \$530 that she plans to wear to sorority formals at college next year.

Midprice junior-size prom dresses are not languishing on the racks. Danielle Gordon, 18, a senior at Fontbonne Hall Academy in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, said that her classmates would likely be wearing dresses by Jovani, Sherri Hill, BCBG, Faviana, La Femme and Jessica McClintock. She instead chose a short royal blue dress from Notte by Marchesa for \$750. “My parents pretty much said to get whatever dress I liked,” she said. When asked if she would wear the Marchesa again, Ms. Gordon, sounding doubtful, said she would consider wearing it to a wedding.

And Lily Cohen, a senior at Ethical Culture Fieldston School in the Bronx, dismissed what she called the “traditional” dress. “Those brands are more for bat mitzvahs,” she said. “At prom you’re graduating to a more sophisticated look.” Ms. Cohen, who will wear a simple red Moschino cocktail dress whose price she preferred not to disclose, was featured in this year’s Seventeen magazine prom issue. “I was wearing this crazy, puffy, polka-dotted sequin thing,” she said. “That was my taste of that kind of prom dress, and that was enough.”

For those without the means (or generous parents) for such frocks, the online service Rent the Runway, which rents designer dresses for a period of four days for 10 to 15 percent of the retail price, has taken aim at high school girls attending prom, which Jennifer Fleiss, a founder of the company, called “the first magical Cinderella-evening moment.”

Another founder, Jennifer Hyman, described wearing a designer dress to prom as a kind of sartorial gateway drug, priming a customer for the future moment when she is able to afford high-end brands. “It’s often your first taste,” said Ms. Hyman, who wore a Carmen Marc Valvo to her own prom (New Rochelle High School, 1998). “You will remember that brand you wore to prom and will want to have that brand in your closet.”

She added that designer prom style is regional, with Proenza Schouler, Prabal Gurung and [Narciso Rodriguez](#) popular among the New York City high school set, and Badgley Mischka and Temperley London in demand elsewhere.

Quincy Childs, who is 16 and attends the Hotchkiss School in Lakeville, Conn., used Rent the Runway to find a pink strapless Matthew Williamson dress with a sweetheart neckline and cinched waist that retailed for \$2,500, which she is renting for \$250. “I’m more excited about getting ready for prom than prom itself,” she said.

Ms. Childs remembered when the dress came out in 2008. “I think four different celebs wore

it in 'Who Wore It Best,' ” she said, referring to a popular Us magazine column comparing celebrities wearing the same outfit.

Ms. Weiss of Pope High School also said she had been influenced by the infiltration of fashion into popular culture. “I’m a total stalker of celebrities online, and will see what they wear to red carpet events,” she said. “I love Vogue, I go through it every month, and I watch advice Rachel Zoe gives on her show and use it for myself.”

According to Ms. Hyman of Rent the Runway, “A 13-year-old knows about Louboutin shoes because she watches Kim Kardashian on TV and wants a piece of that lifestyle.”

Jane Keltner de Valle, the senior fashion news director at Teen Vogue, which showed Jill Stuart, D&G and Vera Wang Lavender Label among other designer lines for its annual prom issue, has noticed a change from decades past (purely as an observer: “I thought it was uncool at the time,” she said of her own prom). “There were no Alexander Wangs then,” Ms. Keltner de Valle said. “Now there are all these designers catering to the aesthetics of teenagers. That has gotten girls more interested in fashion. Every girl might not be wearing a Miu Miu dress to prom, but there is a shift towards more fashion-forward dressing in general.”

Kristin Prim, the 17-year-old founder of Prim Magazine, whose agents and parents did not want her to reveal her high school, thinks the trend is harmless. “No one is buying Chanel couture who would normally shop at J. Crew,” she said. (Ms. Prim was considering a dress from Versace’s fall 2010 collection to wear to prom this year, but has to skip the dance for work commitments.)

But the pressure to wear a designer has predictably caused anxiety at some high schools.

Hazel Cills is a junior at Moorestown High School in New Jersey, where she expected most students would wear BCBG, Jessica McClintock and Betsey Johnson dresses to prom earlier this month. “When I realized there was a Facebook group for prom dresses that was up, I posted a picture of an Alexander McQueen dress as a joke,” Ms. Cills wrote in an e-mail. “A few days later, girls were coming up to me in the hallway actually looking a bit worried, and kept asking me if I was really wearing the dress. I just laughed at them and told them it was a joke, assuring them I was not going to prom and that I couldn’t afford that dress even if I wanted to.

“But there were definitely some girls who took me seriously and freaked out about the fact that they weren’t wearing McQueen dresses.”

