

DESIGNER OF THE MONTH



Meet Basia Zarzycka...

Overflowing with pinks, golds, frills and sparkles, Basia's Chelsea salon is a haven for brides who take their dressing up seriously

STEPPING INSIDE BASIA ZARZYCKA'S shop is like stepping back in time to the golden age of Versailles. A Venetian chandelier dominates the central display crammed with head-dresses, brooches, feathers, fans and silk flowers of every colour and shape. Feathered head-dresses, square-toed shoes with ribbons and bows and period miniatures threaded on gold wire all compete for attention. It's a shop completely at odds with the spartan chrome and glass favoured by other Chelsea designers. 'I don't do minimalist,' says Basia, 38, sweeping her hand around her small but renowned 'salon'. 'I love dressing up. I just wish everyone else did. I hate rucksacks and trainers.'

On the day of our visit, Basia and her team are preparing for London Fashion Week. It's a long way from her first design enterprise – a stall selling accessories and masks in Bermondsey Antiques Market. Basia grew up in Birmingham and gained a Master of Arts in Fashion and Textiles. She worked for Liberty and Marks & Spencer before becoming a lecturer at Winchester College of Art. But the temptation to do her own thing was too strong and her business – totally self financed – was launched 11 years ago.

Basia's Sloane Square premises are a one-stop shop for brides – she doesn't sell anywhere else in the UK – which offers a made-to-measure and couture service. These dresses are not for brides who want simple and understated designs, but highly individual dresses of Chantilly lace, tulle and silk decorated with Basia's signature beads, flowers and splashes of colour. Each dress takes up to six months to make. 'Our fabrics are innovative,' she says. 'We take the naked cloth and embellish it in our own way.' For the bride who already has a dress, the tiaras, jewelled hair slides, brooches, earrings and countless other accessories are unique finishing touches as well as being perfect for bridesmaids of any age.

Basia's move into bridal wear was decisive, unlike many couturiers who fall into it by accident when an existing client asks for a wedding dress. 'Bridal is an obvious avenue for me to create all the decorative designs I love in a very expressive way. I couldn't design daywear if I tried. This is daywear to me,' she says with a flourish, seated regally on a gold chair in a floor-length

paisley print dress of cashmere and silk, blood red velvet and sequin shoes and a head-dress of tiny black feathers which flutter as she speaks.

There is nothing understated about Basia or her shop, which she describes as 'pure fantasy and indulgence, with a wonderful air of eccentricity. The ultimate celebration of life.' It not only feels like Marie Antoinette's apartments, there is also a strong Edwardian theme. The parasols, lace and pearls wouldn't have looked out of place at an Oscar Wilde first night. Basia acknowledges both influences and says the Victorian age is another which inspires her. 'I love femininity and colour,' she says. 'I'm constantly inventing new ways to create. I design day and night, adding to the collection all the time.'

Days are busy and long, as she switches from creating new ranges to meetings with clients – fans include Nicole Kidman and Catherine Zeta Jones. She loves to work late into the night – 'I get so much done when it is peaceful' – so it is just as well that her partner in love, Graham, is also her partner in business. They have been engaged for more than 10 years, and she claims that when they do get around to marrying, she won't be designing her own dress 'because it's bad luck'.

Her Polish heritage is evident in more than just her name. Richard, her brother, works as her press officer and both flip frequently between Polish and English as they give instructions to two assistants, who are painstakingly wrapping tissue paper around fragile tiaras so detailed it is hard to imagine fingers small and nimble enough to create them.

As we pack up to leave, Basia is on the phone discussing a necklace design with a client and someone in the shop is asking Richard about the possibility of linking Basia's tiny beaded butterflies with a conservation project. 'I could spend hours in here,' whispers one customer, browsing the central display for jewelled hair clips as we squeeze past. 'It's like Barbie for adults only 10 times nicer..!'

Basia Zarzycka, 52 Sloane Square, London SW1. For more information, call 020 7730 1660 or visit www.basias.com

TEXT: CATHY HOWES

PHOTOGRAPHS: BEN WRIGHT

I don't do minimalist – I love dressing up. I just wish everyone else did



ABOVE AND BELOW
Basia's designs, from hairclips to mules, are for those who love colour, flourish and

detail. Prices for accessories start from £25, shoes from £385, and dresses from £3,500

