



BRISBANE  
ARCADE  
QUEEN ST MALL  
—  
CELEBRATING 90 YEARS  
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## Brisbane Arcade: the crux of Queensland's couture

*By Caroline Gardam*

*Caroline Gardam is a Queensland writer. She enjoys a longstanding involvement with Brisbane Arcade and holds an enduring interest in Brisbane's talented designers and dressmakers.*

Lydia Pearson, Pia du Pradal, Anthony Leigh Dower, Bora Couture, Gwen Gillam, Keri Craig, Irma J Smith, Julie Tengdahl, Harvey Graham, Maiocchi, Darb, Tim Lindgren, Roma Couture, Royce Facy, Petite Salon, Amaryllis Creations, Semis Disimor, Adam R Dixon, Debra Kolkka, Michael Klease, and more: Brisbane Arcade's tenant list over the past 90 years reads like a Queensland style roll-call.

From hardworking dressmakers grooming Brisbane women between the wars to the genesis of Queensland couture in the second half of last century, Brisbane Arcade has been a constant destination for Brisbane glamour. Current couturiers Julie Tengdahl, Brad Webb, Maiocchi, Bora, House of Dower, Irma J Smith House of Fashion, Keri Craig Emporium, Pia du Pradal, and Wolford Hoisery continue a fashion tradition that spans nine decades.

Designers, dressmakers, and Brisbane jewellers have been located in Brisbane Arcade since the 1920s. Early tenants Miss Clegg, Paris Pleaters, and Knowles and Sons jewellers were joined during the 1930s and 1940s by artisans, beauty salons, jewellers, and dressmakers including The Stitchery and Josephine Frocks.

The dual impact of couturiers Gwen Gillam and Harvey Graham cemented Brisbane Arcade's reputation as a fashionable destination.

In the 1950s, Gillam's workroom on the top floor of Brisbane Arcade created gorgeous evening and bridal wear using the finest European fabrics. Gwen Gillam gowns were sold in a glamorous, architecturally designed salon on Brisbane Arcade's ground floor. Managed by Gwen's sister Thellie, the salon hosted Brisbane's fashionable set in a room featuring a white leather couch and mezzanine level.



↑ Gwen Gillam at Lennons Hotel in Brisbane, 1960s. Photograph by Modernage Pty Ltd, Melbourne. Courtesy of the Gillam Family

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Brisbane fashionistas of a certain generation remember Harvey Graham as a dapper, rakish figure whose 2-door BMW coupe (possibly the only one in Queensland in the 1960s!) accompanied the leading models of the day – dressed in Harvey Graham couture – in the glamorous 'Concours d'Elegance' shows of the 1960s and 1970s. Harvey Graham opened a Brisbane Arcade salon in 1963, and it remained a favourite of Queensland's style set for nearly 20 years. His attention-to-detail is renowned to this day.

The 1970s saw other retailers introduce international flavours to Brisbane fashion, such as Mrs Vasta, a stylish Polish proprietor whose store stocked the exclusive "Mondi" collection.

Such glamour must have been in stark contrast to the owners of the Arcade's doily store, a pair of octogenarian sisters who rankled their neighbours by hand feeding pigeons that gathered outside their store – which was in the middle of the arcade! It is amusing to think of some of the Arcade's VIPs side-stepping flocks of pigeons to visit their favourite salons: VIPs like Miss Queensland, Gay Walker, who wore a blue Gwen Gillam gown when she contested the Miss Australia titles in 1972.



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↑ Harvey Graham Couture, where Tengdahl Australia is today located in Brisbane Arcade



↑ Jennifer Hawkins being crowned Miss Universe in the famous Bora evening gown in 2004

Oh yes, we love our award ladies in Brisbane Arcade. By the time Jennifer Hawkins was crowned Miss Universe in 2004, those pigeons were a distant memory. Jennifer, famously, was wearing a gown created for her by Brisbane Arcade designer Bora. Bora's store remains in the same arcade location, in the exact spot where a young Keri Craig opened her first store in the late 1970s.

During the 1980s, Keri Craig moved to her glamorous downstairs emporium, taking over a space that had morphed from bomb shelter to iconic art gallery to tea room and, in the 1960s, hosted Brad Garrett's Bistro, a space fondly remembered by many. The Bistro was in demand as a venue for upmarket private parties.

Celebrated Brisbane jeweller Barbara Heath's store, Happy Hardcore, could be found on the arcade's balcony level during the 1980s. Designer jewellers are integral to the Arcade's identity. Robert White, who bought original arcade tenant Knowles and Sons in 1974, remains on the ground floor of Brisbane Arcade today. Stones, another arcade institution, began in 1988, which means jeweller John Stone and his son Paul have been keeping Queensland's style mavens in divine diamonds for 25 years. John Stone Jr, a qualified designer jeweller also has a presence on Brisbane Arcade's balcony level.

Key Queensland businesses have links to Brisbane Arcade: Mr Delahunty's chemist on the ground floor is remembered by many. Frank Nixon's souvenir shop on the ground floor, for many years, sold quality pieces: Frank would visit far-flung Aboriginal communities to source original artwork. Larger retail chains joined the arcade's tenant mix during in the later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Sportsgirl fronted Queen Street, and Kentucky Fried Chicken spent some time as a (rather incongruous)

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downstairs tenant. But the fashion strength remained in the arcade's individuals: designers like Royce Facy, who opened in 1981 and remained in the arcade until 1997, consistently delivered quality design.

Lydia Pearson's first retail store was in Brisbane Arcade, prior to joining Pamela Easton to create Easton Pearson. Lydia Pearson stocked Bow and Arrow, the designer duo's first label (pre Easton Pearson).

The 1980s and 1990s saw the next generation of Brisbane designers: Tim Lindgren, Sam Argyrou's label Semis Disimor, Adam R Dixon, Baa Baa Black Sheep and Debra Kolkka, Irma J Smith, and Michael Klease joined Keri Craig to lead Brisbane fashion into the future. Then the Dowers arrived: Anthony Leigh Dower, in the early 1990s Brisbane's fashion whiz-kid, and his sister Leanne Dower. Their mother, Carolyn Dower, still manages House of Dower on the ground floor of Brisbane Arcade.



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↑ Model Sharen Kenny wearing Royce Facy



↑ Daniel Lightfoot, Anthony Leigh Dower and Keri-Craig @ RAQs

Queensland's RAQ Awards were known in the 1980s and 1990s as "fashion's night of nights". The

Retailers Association of Queensland (now known as the National Retailers Association) hosted this glammest of galas for over two decades beginning in 1981. Brisbane Arcade designers dominated the field from the outset. Two of the three members of the RAQ's Hall of Fame, Keri Craig-Lee and Anthony Dower, still call Brisbane Arcade home.

Other RAQ award winners from the Brisbane Arcade stable include Michael Klease, Roma Couture, Julie Tengdahl, Bora, Adam R Dixon, Royce Facy, Tim Lindgren, Irma J Smith, Amaryllis Creations, Leanne Dower, and Kristin Kavanagh.

Arcade stalwart Irma J Smith opened the Irma J Smith House of Fashion in 1994. Irma's daughters Marabeth and Bronwyn continue their mother's tradition, creating racewear and evening gowns for discerning clients in quality European fabrics. Their established clients would visit for a complete ensemble: an outfit with fabric to cover shoes, and a matching hat from one of the arcade's milliners, such as Suellen Bambrick.

As we sailed towards a new millennium, Julie Tengdahl had kept busy buying out her business partner's share of the label Principles, launching Tengdahl Australia in 1997. Her flagship store has been in Brisbane Arcade ever since, from a Gallery salon to today's Ground



↑ A spectacular Irma J Smith evening gown shown at Concours d'Elegance – the Gold Coast's Fashion Night of Nights during the 60s and 70s

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Floor emporium. Tengdahl Australia dresses a notable gamut, including media personalities such as Melissa Downes and Sofie Formica, sporting stars like Firebird Laura Geitz, and business leaders including Brisbane Marketing head, Megan Barron.

Today, Pia du Pradal is a favourite of Australia's Governor General, who chose a Pia du Pradal ensemble to wear to the marriage of the Prince and Princess of Wales. Jackie Macdonald wore Royce Facy while she collected her gold logie. The Arcade has dressed many a local and international figure: even Elton John's bride, dressed by Keri Craig with jewellery by Robert White.

As new generations discover Brisbane Arcade's couturiers, it's worth acknowledging the 90 years of fashionable history that has paraded beneath the clerestory windows. It will be a delight to see what the next 90 years brings.

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↑ Her Excellency, Quentin Bryce, Governor General of Australia with husband, Michael Bryce attending the royal wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge in 2011 (source: AAP)



Another Paul's Shop Triumph.—Paul's lead the fashions on Stradbroke Day at Ascot. Mannequins' display on the lawns at Ascot of fashions from Paul's distinguished collection at Brisbane Arcade, Adelaide Street.

↑ Pauls – another famous Brisbane Arcade retailer. Brisbane Arcade has been a dominant force in race wear and Fashions on the Field contests around Australia...just like this image shows at Eagle Farm Stradbroke Handicap Race Day, June 1935



↑ Elton John's 1984 wedding where bride Renata Blauel wears a Keri Craig designed gown with jewellery by Robert White