

About Modern Bavarian Clothing

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Abstract:

Around the year of 2000 stereotypes of Bavarians in Dirndl, cotton garbs, and leather breeches suddenly became reality, as people started dressing up in regional costumes to visit Oktoberfest. Wearing traditional clothes had never been so popular in Munich and Bavaria until the end of the 20th century. During the last 15 years more and more people from all over the world have arrived in the metropolitan region for private or business reasons, as refugees or high skilled migrants. The effect is an increasing diversity of society. At the same time Dirndl and Lederhosen advanced to basics in wardrobes, and offer identification for its wearers.

Content: Welcome to the Oktoberfest! / The Bavarian kingdom: historical background / Dirndl and Lederhosen / Practices, backgrounds and meanings / Literature

Welcome to the Oktoberfest!

There was a peculiar development going on in Munich, and as well in entire Bavaria, around the year of 2000. Images suddenly became reality, as people began dressing up for the Oktoberfest in regional costumes. By the end of the 20th century, it had never been popular at all to wear traditional clothes in Munich – with the exception of some individuals or special associations trying to keep supposed traditions. And then, young girls and also some boys of all people suddenly started wearing folklore dresses and trousers. In the centre of Munich second hand shops offered pieces of the 1960s till 1980s, and due to the high demand, also began to sell newly designed dresses and complete outfits with checked shirts and leather breeches, for instance. It was even fun to buy a retro Dirndl dress wearing it with sneakers and denim jackets, following the example of friends. So, on the one hand, there was a cheap offer at prices everybody could afford. But on the other hand, there was an interest of young people in Bavarian style. After these beginnings a new development became apparent. Consequently, more and more people at all ages wore regional costumes and the phenomenon became fashion hype. Nowadays, most people living in Munich or Bavaria usually have at least one piece of regional attire. During the last ten years, from an initial trend a rule has developed. In particular Dirndl and Lederhosen became a more and more popular outfit for the Oktoberfest – but why are these clothes supposed to be traditional, as strongly demanded right now, at the onset of the 21st century?

The Bavarian kingdom: historical background

What most people appreciate nowadays as regional costumes are first and foremost Dirndl and Lederhosen. From a scientific point of view, I distinguish historic regional garment and modern Bavarian clothes. Historic costumes are composed of several different items, like corsages, spencers, aprons, and skirts for women, and typical boots, jackets, breeches and waistcoats for men. There have been characteristic styles referring to the federal regions of Bavaria. Furthermore, we have to differentiate between clothes for daily life, such as skirts or trousers made of rough materials, and magnificent dresses, for example made from black half silk with a collar of fox fur worn on the occasion of Catholic holidays. The height of historic costumes can be ascertained for the years around 1800, when in the age of enlightenment after the French revolution the corporative system prised step by step. It was the same time, when early anthropologists, particularly teachers and priests, started to study and describe folk's life, habits and conventions at the countryside. On the lines of these developments, the Bavarian kingdom was founded in 1806 by Napoleon's grace, and the Wittelsbach king Max I Joseph started what we would nowadays define as a process of

nation building. Munich should become the well-funded capital of Bavaria, a royal city of arts centring all important administrative institutions. The king and his ministers wanted to unify the nation and build a Bavarian community belonging together. In order to achieve their objective, they needed to find symbols for the new entity everybody could understand.

In 1810, crown prince Ludwig married his young bride Therese in Munich. Some 10,000 people came to see the horse race and the royal family on the 17th of October. The festival was repeated and over the following years the celebration began to grow. With the development of the railway between Munich and the federal Bavarian regions and villages, after 1840 more and more visitors travelled to the Oktoberfest. With its primal occasion and the presence of the royal family, the Oktoberfest did indeed have a national character from its beginnings – intensively supported by the king and his ministers in the following decades. In this spirit, already at the first race children with regional costumes from every part of the kingdom had rendered homage to Ludwig and Therese, symbolising the nation before all eyes. And how did the visitors of the Oktoberfest dress in the 19th century? We may only speculate that farmers still dressed up in historic costumes and clothes made of silk, leather and loden, when they came to the capital of Bavaria. The richer farmer families dressed with more expensive clothes than the poorer families and this conclusion may also be transferred on the civic people. Members of the Bavarian army styled in uniforms, while upper class women wore fashionable clothing. Probably, there also were women in historic civil costumes with black corsages and silver chains – the so called Munich citizen's costume. In the course of industrialisation, when people could buy modern attire produced in fabrics, the regional costumes including the citizen outfits were in danger to disappear. But, the Bavarian kings tried hard to keep the traditions, costumes and other forms of popular culture. Against the background of the changing realities in the 19th century, regional costumes thitherto taken for granted lost their original meanings and converted into symbols in a romantic atmosphere.

Dirndl and Lederhosen

While the historic dresses lost their authentic function, modern tourism was just discovering the Bavarian, Swiss and Austrian Alps. As one of its implications, the representative quality of the attire was increasing. Tourists from England or the northern parts of the German Empire came to have a look at the magnificent folklore life in the southern countryside. The tourists wore alpine suits made from loden and leather breeches for climbing the hills. In this context, the Dirndl was invented in the Austrian and Bavarian holiday regions around the lakes in the alpine uplands, at the Attersee, Starnbergersee and so on. The "Dirndl" originally served as undergarment for the maidservants – called "Dirndl" in the Bavarian language. There must have been an artistic dressmaker somewhere in this area, who transformed the cut of the underwear, consisting of a close-fitting top and a skirt, into a dress model of cotton fabrics with small flowers, checks or similar decorations. The genuine dress blossomed from a simple work smock to a summertime dress worn by the upper class ladies from town at the end of the 19th century. From the beginnings till today, the basic cut of the "Dirndl" has never changed (fig. 1). About twenty years later two brothers from Munich, Julius and Moritz Wallach, succeeded in establishing the Dirndl in the Bavarian capital as a summer dress. The Dirndl always represented an urban view of the country.



Fig. 1: Oktoberfest 2009. Photo © Simone Egger.

For hundreds of years, men in the Alpine region, in particular farmers and shepherds, had already been used to dress in hard-wearing materials like loden, which is made out of felted wool. The cut of the leather breeches was probably copied from the fashion of the French or the Spanish royal court. To resist the hard work in the Alps, it was translated into another material, which was leather (fig. 2). The Bavarian and Austrian kings ennobled these materials by adopting this kind of clothes from their hunt entourage. Members of the gentry copied the royal style, which subsequently also passed over to the normal citizens. The Munich clothier, Johann Georg Frey, started his business in 1842. To him first was issued the patent for fine striped loden. But even if time and again there are people in Dirndl and Lederhosen or other regional dresses on pictures from the Oktoberfest – for a very long time, a special Wiesn dress could not be observed. In the 1950s, for example visitors came to the Theresienwiese in their fine suits, dresses, coats and skirts. But the Dirndl matched very well with the folklore style of the 1960s. Even in 1966, when Munich applied for the XXth Olympic Summer Games of 1972, the hostesses were styled in Dirndls. The first advertisement of a Munich clothing store I could detect in the archives of the von Parish costume library dates back to the year of 1968, when Loden-Frey offered a special Dirndl for the Oktoberfest. The hostesses at the Olympics in 1972 wore Dirndls coloured in pale blue, immediately making the corset-and-skirt-dress popular. Since then, the enthusiasm for Bavarian style clothes, also at the Oktoberfest, is working as a wavelike development. The latest chapter of the story started around the turn of the new millennium.



Fig. 2: Oktoberfest 2010. Photo © Simone Egger.

Practices, backgrounds and meanings

At the beginnings in the year of 2000, it was not easy to find suitable stockings or other accessories. In 2010, you may choose between violet and red stockings, hats, jewellerys and other decorations. Simultaneously with the cheap offers of various shops the designer Lola Paltinger started to create couture Dirndls in 2002. And as a response to the new interest in regional attire, already existing manufacturers and producers started to provide more and more different styles. The market faces an increasingly dynamic growth, you can buy Dirndls from 50 Euros up to 2500 Euros. Small shops sell Dirndl and necklaces with Brezn, as do big department stores. Loden-Frey is still one of the most important producers, offering articles from other designers in addition. For several years, the German edition of Vogue magazine has presented Bavarian costumes in its September issue; of course, in corporation with Loden-Frey. Meanwhile, the seasonal regional costume collections gather current styles and colours. The clothes became part of the Oktoberfest as a society event. Multiplication by the media is an essential part of the whole phenomenon.

The cut is the same for all Lederhosen, and there is also very little variation with the Dirndls: the dress is close-fitting and sleeveless at the top and has a wide skirt at the bottom, and it is worn together with an apron and short-sleeved blouse. Everybody may take the basic cut and diversify the garment in terms of his own style. Most people want to be part of a group and at the same time, they also like to have an individual look. Distinctions are defined by quality, material or the length of the skirt. Just as interesting are the accessories, which are combined with Dirndl and Lederhosen. Bags from the French label Longchamp or Timberland shoes, scarves and denim jackets have already been part of the Oktoberfest style. But, it has to be stressed that an expensive, richly decorated Dirndl is by no means

more “authentic” than a cheap cotton dress. The phenomenon works as an interface telling something about the mental state of old and new inhabitants, Munich, Bavaria and even on the role of cities in a global world. The choice to wear traditional costumes appears to be more than just a fashion trend. Possibly, a mobile society in particular wishes to demonstrate affiliation. In times of international networking, local and regional references become even more important. However, the girls and boys who started the trend, had no necessity to confine from the parental generation and could effectively answer without differentiating. At present, Munich is a successful city with a positive image. With the Oktoberfest, the city moreover has a unique event that attracts the world’s attention. Dirndl and Lederhosen advanced to basics in wardrobes, and offer identification for everybody wearing them. Modern Bavarian clothing gives people the chance to become a part of it.

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