

A Hidden History

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Abstract:

The textile collection of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague comprises a broad spectrum of textile artefacts. There is both the uniqueness of a human individuality and personal history contained in each of the clothing exhibits. Some of the exhibits are forever bound to exceptional figures of public and cultural life, most of them, however, belonged to far less notable people. A specific period that demonstrates the relationship between the attire and an individual is found in the years between 1948 and 1989, when the society in Czechoslovakia was strictly subdued by the totalitarian Communist regime. The ready-made industry was ever more falling behind and it became more difficult to acquire fashionable, quality attire. There are incredible and obscure human stories behind many of the beautiful pieces from aforementioned period. A variety of other stories are linked to the wives of the former Communist party officials, who had their luxurious outfits made bespoke. Their families often donate these exquisite clothes to the Museum's collections, although they often conceal their true origin.

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Collection and Personal Stories

The fashion and textile collection of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague contains a broad range of artefacts, ranging from fragments of Coptic fabrics dating back to the fourth century A.D., liturgical vestments from the Middle Ages, remnants of Renaissance textiles and Baroque lace, to a great many garments and clothing accessories dating from the second half of the eighteenth century to the present.

Every item is imprinted with the individuality of its wearer, and his or her unique personal story. Some pieces are linked with distinguished figures of public and cultural life, but most of them belonged to persons of lesser prominence. In the history of the former Czechoslovakia, the period from 1948 to 1989 was a specific era in terms of clothing and the individual, when society was under the tight control of the Communist state. The country's prêt-à-porter industry was very obsolete and obtaining fashionable and high-quality garments was difficult. This is why unusual life stories often go hand in hand with that period's clothing. One such story has to do with Jaroslav Heyrovský, a Czech scientist who received the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1959.

In the context of Czechoslovakia's historical developments in the twentieth century – with a special focus on the year 1948, when the democratic political system was replaced by a totalitarian Communist regime – we may follow the personal stories of several women, whose manner of dress tellingly documents the twists and turns of history.

Elegance between World Wars

The first story is that of Marie Tilleová. Tilleová was born in 1901 into a wealthy family in the Moravian town of Olomouc. She grew up in a harmonious, culturally-minded milieu, with a refined sense of fashion and elegant style. At the age of twenty-seven, she married a man of the world, Dr. Jan Tille, Director of the Mining and Metallurgical Company, and a member of many distinguished Czechoslovak and international professional organizations. Moreover, he was an excellent athlete, who represented Czechoslovakia in fencing and was President of

the Czechoslovak Olympic Committee. His wife's wardrobe, therefore, had to be sufficiently varied and suitable for formal and social events.

Although Mrs. Tilleová had ample financial means and knew what was worn in Paris, she nevertheless chose the Prague fashion house operated by Oldřich Rosenbaum to make her haute-couture clothes, just like the members of the wealthiest families of industrialists had done in Czechoslovakia between the two wars.

It is very difficult to choose only a few sample pieces from her extensive wardrobe. In the late 1920s, shortly after her wedding, she had an ensemble of clothes made consisting of a silk georgette dress and a wool coat with a lynx fur collar, accompanied by snakeskin shoes and belt, and a hat in a shape typical of that period. Witnesses to the most festive events in Mrs. Tilleová's life were her evening gowns, among them a Charleston dress she wore to the industrialists' ball in Prague in 1927 and a reception in Amsterdam held by Queen Wilhelmina of The Netherlands in celebration of the Olympic Games. However, her most luxurious evening dresses include a toilette made of silver-woven, light blue lamé, complemented by a jacket adorned with a silver fox collar (fig. 1). The dress was made in 1934 for a ball held at Prague Castle by the Czechoslovak President Thomas Garrigue Masaryk. She also wore the outfit to two balls in London, one organized by the Mayor of London and the other by the Secretary of State for Industry.



Fig. 1:
Evening gown, silver-woven, light blue lamé, 1934, Prague, Fashion House Oldřich Rosenbaum.

In 1948, with the onset of Communist rule, life in the country changed in every respect. Mr. Tille could no longer hold prominent political functions and his wife Mrs. Tilleová could no longer purchase beautiful and elegant clothes.

Strange Circumstances Create Strange Tales

The year 1948 was the beginning of a harsh, Stalinist-type of regime that subjected all spheres of life to strict control, including dress and fashion. Clothing designed in the traditional, Western European fashion centres was pilloried as a manifestation of the rotten imperialist system. Although unsuccessfully, new clothing styles were relentlessly sought suitable for people living in a society governed by Communist ideals. In such a situation, one would expect that the Prague fashion houses that had previously clothed the wealthy bourgeoisie, including Mrs. Tilleová, would be closed down. Yet these “temples” of Czechoslovak fashion continued their work in quiet and without publicity, and were patronized by a surprising clientele.

The arrival of new customers marked a major turning point in the history of these fashion houses. The wealthy social strata were gradually stripped of their property and liquidated as part of the regime’s class struggle. In no time, the chic world of elegant women was wiped out. However, a new clientele slowly emerged composed mainly of representatives of the Communist regime. In the framework of the still-valid social conventions, they, too, needed clothing that would reflect their social status.

And so, with the emergence of Czechoslovakia’s new political system that proclaimed the concept of “classless society”, society was re-stratified, no longer based on property but on its membership in the ruling class. Marta Gottwaldová, the wife of the country’s first Communist president Klement Gottwald, was a typical example of this new situation. Gottwaldová came from the poorest background, and her cultural outlook and education were pitiable. Yet she was so fascinated by Mrs. Benešová, the elegant and graceful wife of the last democratically-elected president Edvard Beneš, that she had replicas of Mrs. Benešová’s clothes made in the same fashion house. Recent archival research has shown that Marta Gottwaldová subscribed to *Vogue*, an American fashion magazine. This was absolutely unheard-of around 1950. Had it been any other person who managed to smuggle such a magazine through the Iron Curtain, they would have faced severe punishment for propagating bourgeois culture. Regrettably, Marta Gottwaldová’s wardrobe is no longer extant, but at least a number of photographs have survived.



Fig. 2:
Cocktail dress and ball gown, cotton tulle, 1957, Prague, Fashion House Styl.

Czechoslovakia's fashion houses were also frequented by members of the pre-war higher middle class and the intelligentsia, who had survived the Communist purges and whom the new regime needed for various reasons. These people included physicians. The museum's costume collection holds an ensemble of garments made in the 1950s for the young daughter of a prominent Prague physician and obstetrician, who – quite understandably – was not subject to the Communist regime's restrictions. The parents mainly ordered custom-made evening dresses for their daughter (fig. 2). The owner of these garments told us that whenever she appeared in the dresses in public, she wore costume jewellery with them. She could wear the family's diamond jewels for festive occasions held in a domestic milieu, but not in public. The reason was – she explained – not the danger of potential thieves, but because of the risk of being denounced by eager fellow citizens devoted to the new regime.

Another story is associated with the clothes donned by Mrs. Galušková, the wife of a high-ranking Communist Party functionary. Her husband Miroslav Galuška was a Communist intellectual. Early on, he had worked as a journalist and took part in the Nuremberg Trials in the role of a foreign correspondent for the Communist daily *Rudé právo* ("Red Law"). In the late 1950s and early 60s, he held the post of Czechoslovak ambassador to Great Britain and, in the late 60s, was appointed Czechoslovak Minister of Culture. His wife therefore needed a wardrobe that would be appropriate for formal and social occasions. Having the clothes made was relatively easy, because their making was financed by the State. This was one of the many privileges of high functionaries working in the Communist apparatus. In 1958, a blue dress of silk repp was made for the ambassador's wife (fig. 3).



Fig. 3:
Cocktail dress, silk, 1958, Prague, Fashion House Eva.

A truly exceptional collection of garments in the holdings of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague comes from the posthumous estate of our former colleague, Olga Herbenová. The set of clothes totalling about twenty pieces is also noteworthy due to its origin. These were

finely tailored, ready-to-wear garments made in the 1950s and 60s in limited series in the United States, not in Czechoslovakia (fig. 4). Where did such clothes come from, amidst the drabness of everyday life, clothes that represented American affluence for women demoralized by the Communist regime? There is a remarkable love story behind them: a U.S. soldier, who took part in liberating Czechoslovakia in 1945 met a beautiful girl, whose photo he took back home to the United States. A friend of his saw the picture and fell madly in love with the unknown girl, so much so that he didn't hesitate to overcome many obstacles and later married her, whereupon she left with him to Oklahoma. For twenty years, this young woman kept sending clothes to Czechoslovakia, to her cousin Mrs. Herbenová, the former curator of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague. At the time, these garments seemed out of this world in a country that was unable to supply stores even with the most basic staples. I forgot to ask my colleague years ago whether she had actually dared to wear these eye-catching clothes in public and not attract the uncalled-for attention of the Communist authorities. I will never know the answer...



Fig.
Cocktail dress, silk tafetta, around 1960, United States.

It often happens that elderly women come to see me, kindly offering the museum items from their wardrobes. The transfers tend to be lengthy and I know I will have to undergo the slow process of winning their confidence. It is often at the moment they are handing over the garments that their former owners realize what the clothes mean to them, recalling the occasions they wore them for. They are overcome by the feeling that rather than donating a piece of textile to the museum, they are relinquishing a piece of their lives. Generally, we spend some time in pleasant chatter and the deal is done. Other times I feel that those ladies

are keeping something from me, something that was part of their lives and that they are perhaps even proud of, but – on the other hand – that they hesitate to talk about. Over the years, I have devised a kind of detective method and occasionally discover contexts that I sometimes prefer to keep to myself (fig. 5).



Fig. 5:
Evening outfit: a dress and mantle, 1962, Prague, Fashion House Platýz.

This is how I found out that the woman who kept bringing me more and more beautiful clothes and clearly was not telling the truth about them was the wife of a high-echelon, inner-Party Communist functionary, who had held the post in the 1980s. By chance, I also learned that the woman who donated to the museum interesting costumes purchased in New York in the 1970s was the wife of the Czechoslovak James Bond. In some cases, I discover these contexts only years later, while other times I never do.

About two years ago, I was contacted by a pleasant and refined lady, who offered the museum custom-made clothes designed in the 1970s and 80s by Zdena Bauerová, an accomplished Czech fashion designer (fig. 6). Some time later, I no longer heard from her and I was unable to re-establish contact with her. Eventually I learned that she had committed suicide, leaving in her closet several pieces of clothing marked with my name. This woman and later her family also had their “skeletons” (so to speak) that I deciphered only recently and by pure coincidence.



Fig. 6:
Evening outfit, silk georgette, second half of the 1970s, Prague, Design by Zdena Bauerová, Fashion house Styl.



Fig. 7:
Cocktail dress, cotton lace, 1965, Prague, Fashion house Eva.

Another case was a Czech theatre actress, who devoted her life to her professional career and spent her remaining years without children or a husband, in complete isolation, amidst her wardrobes overflowing with clothes, which she had so wished to donate to the museum but was unable to part with. For these clothes were the sole witnesses to her fame and her only life companions (fig. 7). After her death, nearly everything was probably thrown out during the hasty clearing out of her flat.

Special Cases

Our museum's costume collection also contains a smaller number of items of men's attire. Mr. "Z" is a specific kind of donor – a man who is obsessed with fashion and purchases every outfit twice – one to wear himself and the other for our museum. In doing so, he is continually building up a private collection of mostly Italian fashion, which he has bequeathed to the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague.

The greatest contribution to the museum's collection of men's wear was a large donation for which I travelled in a small truck to Lucerne, Switzerland, in 2014. This trip was preceded by several years of a telephone friendship with a man, for whom I will use the initials J. A. D. This man immigrated to Switzerland in 1976, where he soon found his life partner. Both men worked for the partner's uncle, whose name I would rather not disclose. This man was on the highest echelons in the oil and weapons business. Persecuted by FBI undercover agents, he

found refuge in Lucerne, Switzerland, where he isolated himself from the world in a luxurious mansion, surrounded by his bodyguards. It was in the services of this man that the partner of my friend J. A. D. was murdered and J. A. D. fell into a deep depression. At his psychologist's advice, he decided to do away with everything that reminded him of their happy, more than twenty-year-long life together. This initiated the generous gift through which the museum acquired some 250 items of men's apparel crafted by classic British fashion companies, Italian couturiers, and such designer labels as Versace, Jean Paul Gaultier, and others (fig. 8). Included was every type of footwear that a gentleman needs for his life and other accessories, all in deluxe quality! Unfortunately, three years ago J. A. D. passed away unexpectedly as a result of a banal operation. His death affected me deeply. I will hardly find another person who can tell me so much – and with such expertise and humour – about men's high-end fashion and the Big World of glamour.



Fig. 8:
From the donation of J.A.D.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to note that some people consider a museum curator's profession boring and dull. However, they have no idea what adventure can take place behind the museum's walls and what adventure the museum's articles of clothing actually contain. A costume collection curator does not simply accept lifeless objects that meet the museum's criteria, but with them also the personal stories of their owners, who donate to the museum not only a piece of textile but also a piece of their lives, expecting the curator to safeguard those stories forever. It is indeed necessary to preserve these stories for future generations, making certain that the individual objects do not just remain entries in the inventory of art historical artefacts.