

European Context of the Changes of the Peasants' Clothing at the End of the Nineteenth Century in Latvia (Rucava Parish)

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Abstract:

This publication has evaluated the development of how the clothing of people of Rucava was constructed and styled over a number of generations; it has identified what influenced or hindered its development and which historical events are reflected in the artefacts. By studying the development of construction and ornamentation of dress as well as fashion trends of the time, the historic-cultural layers of clothing in Rucava are revealed, leading to an identification of the chronological change in clothing as well as in the artistic styling of individual elements of dress.

Contents:

Rucava Cultural Heritage / European Fashion and Rucava Local Style of Attire in the Nineteenth Century

Rucava Cultural Heritage

Rucava is a southwestern corner of Latvia with solitary beaches, unspoiled nature and a rich cultural heritage (fig. 1).



Fig. 1:
Rucava parish – southwest of Latvia Republic.

It is astonishing that even up to the beginning of the twenty-first century many Rucava households and local ethnographic collections carefully preserve the cultural heritage of previous generations (specifically items of clothing). This heritage has been shaped by its response to developments in folk art at different times, which suited people's everyday lives as well as their aesthetic sensibility.

The study is based on the available source material and an analysis of history, alongside the changing nature of ethnic culture at the time. The analysis demonstratively shows that, in mid-nineteenth century Rucava, just as elsewhere in Latvia, the typically local style of attire begins to decline. If, at the beginning of the century, each person of the peasant class had one set of clothing for work and one set for Sunday best (fig. 2), then, in the second half of the century, as material wealth began to increase, traditional garb was supplemented with new, urban styling: the peasant woman's wardrobe contained three different outfits just for going out: (1) a smart outfit for church, (2) a smart but slightly older outfit for Sundays, (3) festive dress for weddings, christenings and, later, funerals.



Fig. 2:
Local style of attire the middle of the 19th century – reconstruction. Rucava. Photo: J. Rieksts (1908).

European Fashion and Rucava Local Style of Attire in the Nineteenth Century

Primary source material shows that in the second half of the nineteenth century the cut of work clothing in Rucava remained as of old, but best clothes were constructed according to the latest fashion (fig.3). The young, unmarried women took most notice of new styling, as the older generation remained more conservative. New fashions came to Rucava comparatively quickly – usually, anything new from the town went through a slower route, via the manor, markets, craftspeople and itinerant merchants.



Fig. 3:
The best clothes at the turn of the 20th century. Rucava. Photo: J. Rieksts (1908).

It was the same across the whole of Latvia, the rate of change depended on individual skilled persons, who picked up new information and adapted it to suit locally accepted traditions, seen in the cut of clothing, needlework techniques and style of ornamentation, thus creatively harmonising the new with traditional skills and taste. During the nineteenth century in Rucava most change was seen in the local differences within a parish, and was largely dependent upon the maker's level of education, interest in what was happening, access to information about new trends, ability to develop new skills, as well as the demand for anything new.

Notwithstanding the relatively conservative nature of folk crafts, developments in clothing in Rucava in the nineteenth century were dynamic. This was influenced by the fast growing industrialisation taking place in Europe: textile factories, tailoring, cut of clothing and the growth of the chemical industry. The value placed on clothing changed in this period, in turn affecting the attitudes of peasant women to old-fashioned styles, newer fashions taking the ascendancy.

Both men's and women's clothing in Rucava were undeniably influenced by contemporary European fashion, for cultural exchange has existed at all times among all peoples. The change to urban styles in Rucava in the first half of the nineteenth century occurred first in men's wear, mirroring the rest of Latvia. Male attire even then was being made by specialist male tailors (accounting for the paucity of preserved examples from this period), while women modernised their dress a full generation later following the influence of the Biedermeier fashion, which at that period required equally specialist skills. It was now that the female tailored suit appeared, characterised by its form and proportions, style of wearing, use of specific fabrics and combination of colourways as well as ornamentation.



Fig. 4:
Perpečoti shirts. Second half of 19th century. Photo: A. Aigars (2015).

The urban-style ensemble in Rucava's female attire in the second half of the nineteenth century is most typically seen in the dark blue or green skirts, edged with coloured ribbon trims and crinkled fabric suits, where bodice and skirt are made of the same fabric and use the same trim for decorative purposes over the whole ensemble. The influence from abroad is most obvious in the cut of the shirt and its ornamentation. For instance, similar *perpečoti* shirts (fig. 4) are found among many east European cultures: shirts where an embroidered epaulette is attached are found in Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Russia; *krūmoti* shirts (fig. 5) (tunic style shirts with no epaulette attachment, but stylised “bush” embroidery on the shoulder piece) are seen in western European folk art in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, being particularly popular in Sweden and Norway, but at the turn of the twentieth century in Rucava it was made *irkoti* shirts (fig. 6), which decorative motifs taken from Europe Ornament editions.



Fig. 5:
Krūmoti shirts. Second half of 19th century. Rucava. Photo: A. Aigars (2015).



Fig. 6:
Irkoti shirts. Turn of the 20th century. Rucava. Photo: A. Aigars (2015).

It can be difficult to establish the ratio of new versus old in the region, but it can be stated unequivocally that the truly unique element with the greatest longevity was the straight cut and geometric designs (woven, knitted and embroidered), the historic-cultural was evident in the influence rising out of European styles (social, economic, political and other events), which in Rucava opened up possibilities for accessing new information and skills; brought in new raw materials, items of clothing, cuts in tailoring, colours, trimmings, embroidery techniques.