

# **The Ethnographic Collections of the Von Parish Costume Library in Munich**

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## **Abstract:**

The Von Parish Costume Library in Munich is one of the largest and most comprehensive special collections for the history of costume and related fields. The main focus of the library is the history of European fashion. But of almost equal importance are national and international traditional costumes and ethnographic material.

Illustrated with objects from the Von Parish Costume Library the essay examines in the first part the development of the visual representation of foreign people from the European perspective from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. The second part focuses on the ethnographic influences on western fashion, today commonly described as „ethno style“. The holding of the Von Parish Costume Library opens up the cultural and historical context of clothing and is therefore an important source for research.

## **Content:**

Introduction to the Library / Ethnographic Books of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries / The Thirst for Pictures and the Development of New Media / From Engravings to Photography / Traditional Garments, Ethnographic Depiction and Ethno-Fashion Today

## **Introduction to the Library**

The Von Parish Costume Library in Munich is – after the Lipperheidesche Kostümbibliothek in Berlin – one of the largest and most comprehensive special collections for the history of costume and related fields. The library is named after its founder Hermine von Parish (Rome 1907–1998 Munich), who devoted her life to collecting books and all kinds of images documenting dress and manifestations of fashion from all epochs and all regions of the world. Since 1970, this collection has been administrated by the Munich City Museum and is still kept in the art nouveau villa, where von Parish lived.

At the heart of the continuously growing collection is the library itself with approximately 10,000 books. The stock of thousands of fashion journals with 1,200 different titles is one of the largest in the world. Numerous of the 5,000 volumes from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries are hand-coloured. Moreover, the Von Parish Costume Library keeps 27,000 graphics, 13,000 photos, 7.000 postcards (fig. 1) and approximately one million other images in what is called the „Dokumentation“, a huge archive of images and ephemera from the past 150 years, which is important for students of everyday fashion.



Fig. 1:  
Several historical postcards of different Russian people, early 20th century.  
Von Parish-Kostümbibliothek / Münchner Stadtmuseum

The main focus of the Von Parish Library is the history of European fashion. But of almost equal importance are national and international traditional costumes and ethnographic material. Some books in the Von Parish Library are very rare or even unique copies.

For the “Dokumentation,” mother and daughter von Parish collected images from thousands of journals, magazines, and newspapers. The images are arranged according to categories, such as countries, epochs, professions or accessories. Therefore, one can find images of many subjects that are not depicted or photographed elsewhere – like gold washers in California from 1866 or a Chinese New Year celebration in New York from the 1880s (fig. 2). (*Chinesische Neujahrsfeier 1880s*, 207; *Goldwäscher in Californien 1866*, 109). These engravings from early journals and magazines, made before the age of photography, are highly relevant for the field of ethnography. They show in precise and reliable representation the appearance of almost all people of the world.

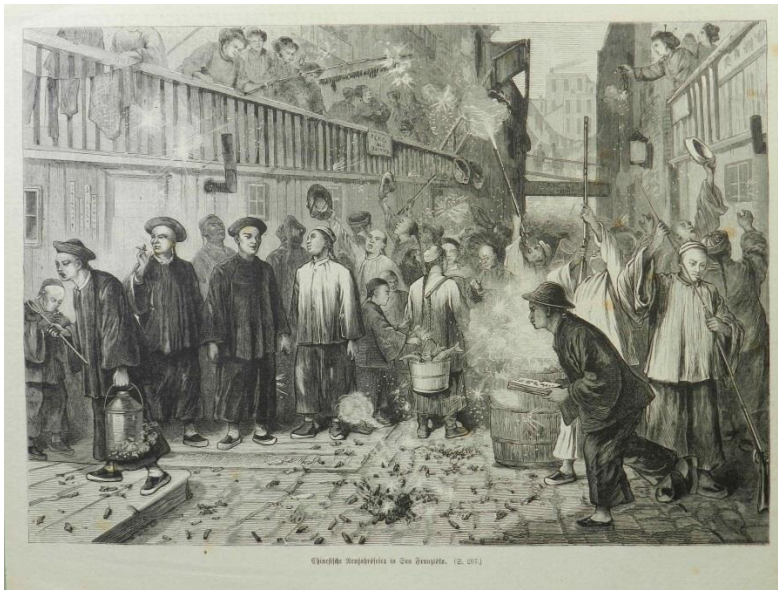


Fig. 2:  
“Chinese New Year Celebration in New York”, from: *Über Land und Meer. Allgemeine Illustrierte Zeitung*, 1880's, p. 207. Von Parish-Kostümbibliothek / Münchner Stadtmuseum

## Ethnographic Books of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries



Fig. 3:  
Title page of Löhner 1810. Von Parish-Kostümbibliothek / Münchner Stadtmuseum

Before the age of globalization different regional and national dress styles were, first and foremost, the indicator of a different culture – a material manifestation of the foreigner. Therefore, it was the clothing that always received extensive attention in the perception, description and visual representation of another culture. Looking at ethnographic books of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is evident that they served for visual education, especially for children and youth. Throughout the nineteenth century, “Aufklärung” (Enlightenment) was directly connected with “Anschauung” – meaning visual education, the learning principle of appealing to the senses. The ethnographic books always combine textual descriptions with images, mostly coloured. Illustrations play a key role, as many early book titles emphasize, such as with “Picture-book for Children” by Bertuch in Weimar (Bertuch 1801), “Picturesque representations of the dress and manners of the Russians” in London (Alexander 1823), “Picture-Geography. A Presentation of all Countries and People” in Leipzig (Löhner 1810) and, as a last example, “Evening-Edutainment concerning important subjects of geographers and ethnologists” in Cologne (Tonger 1835) (fig. 3 and 4).

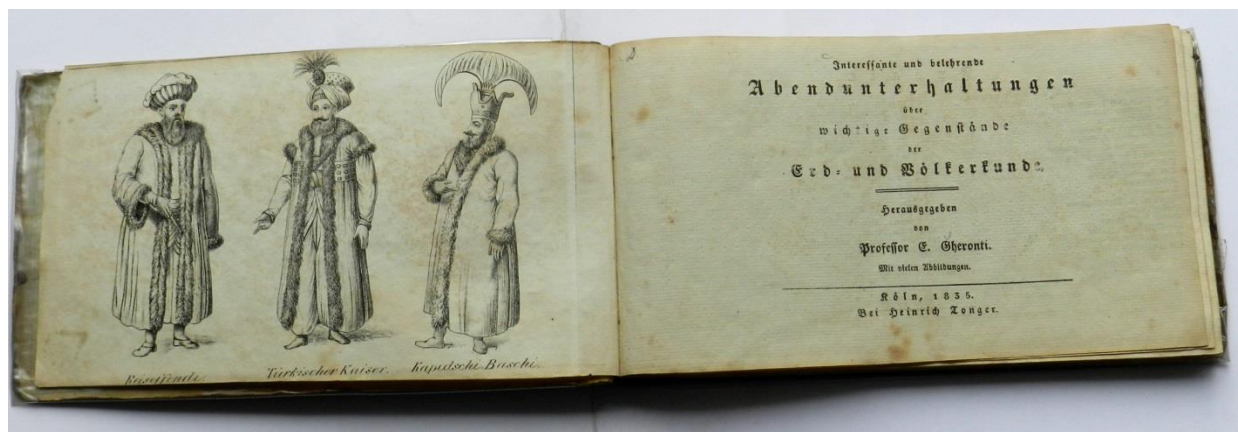


Fig. 4:  
Title page of Tonger 1835. Von Parish-Kostümbibliothek / Münchner Stadtmuseum



From the sixteenth to the end of the nineteenth century most ethnographic books satisfy the encyclopaedic claim of a 'grand narrative' – they describe the whole world. But in the early nineteenth century a new kind of representation appeared, which I call the 'small narrative'. The pictures show details of clothing in a way no painters, let alone fashion journals, would ever have represented them: like the winter dress of a gentleman in Quebec worn with chequered shoes or the Phrygian cap of the French countrymen (fig. 5a and 5b), who wear this symbol of their republican spirit even in their new homeland of Canada (Lambert 1813, 61, 159). These books of "edutainment" were for our ancestors what TV documentaries on foreign countries; Internet blogs on travels throughout the world or articles from *National Geographic* are for us today.

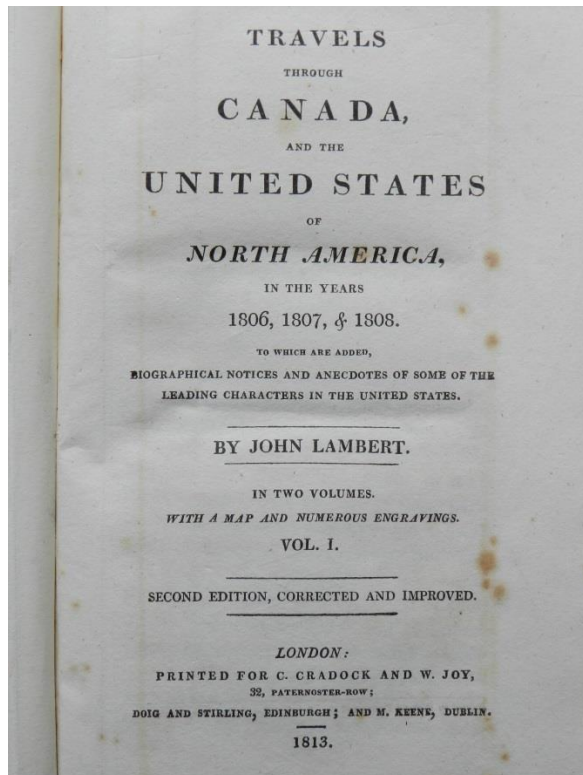


Fig. 5a:  
Title page of Lambert 1813.  
Von Parish-Kostümbibliothek / Münchner Stadtmuseum



Fig. 5b:  
"French Habitans or Countrymen", Lambert 1813, p. 159.  
Von Parish-Kostümbibliothek / Münchner Stadtmuseum

## The Thirst for Pictures and the Development of New Media

Already in the early nineteenth century there was an enormous thirst for illustrations. In their leisure time many people collected pictures, copied them from ethnographic books, coloured the engravings, and stuck them into pre-printed collectors albums. This was also a method of systemizing the growing volume of information from distant regions and foreign people. We should not forget that globalization by new media had already begun in the mid-nineteenth century: illustrated newspapers like the *Penny Magazine* (London 1833), *L'Illustration* (Paris 1843) or the *Leipziger Illustrierte Zeitung* (Leipzig 1843) published new images of events from around the world every week. In 1851, the first stereoscope was presented to the public at the first world exhibition in London. Stereoscopes preferably showed photos of foreign countries and people.

And finally, this development reached an unfortunate climax with the so called "Völkerschauen" in Europe and North America, the commercial exhibition of 'exotic' foreign people in a zoo, between 1870 and, in the United States even until the 1950s.

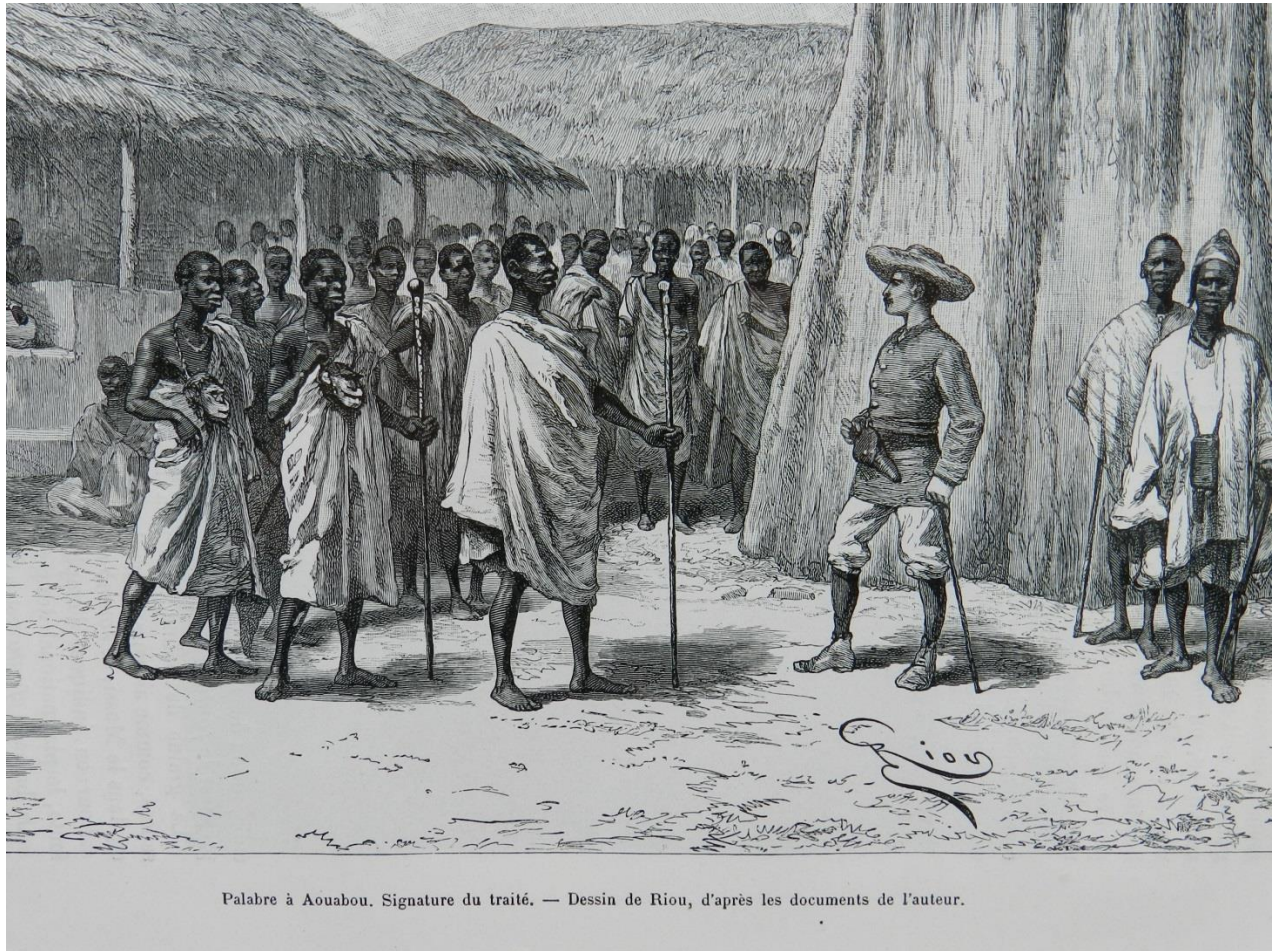


Fig. 6:  
Engraving "Palabre à Aouabou", from: Charton 1891, pp. 125-6.  
Von Parish-Kostümbibliothek / Münchner Stadtmuseum

Thus, there was a huge impact of new visual information. People were able to see foreign people and cultures, which they could never have seen before. The modern, 'civilized' world was confronted with people in a still primal state (fig. 6). (Charton 1891, 125-6)

### From Engravings to Photography

The early representations of foreign people are always typological and transtemporal. They describe a phenotype (fig. 7), whereas photography represents an individual dependent on time and location at a given moment (fig. 8). In comparison with black-and-white photography, the fine arts had one major advantage: they were able to show the world in colour. Colour played a key role in the depiction and description of foreign people in remote regions, since colourful and ornamented apparel underlined the characteristics of exotic cultures.





Fig. 7:  
Fig. 7: Coloured engraving of a "Noble Arab",  
Wahlen, 1843, vol. "Asie", pp. 484-5.  
Von Parish-Kostümbibliothek / Münchner Stadtmuseum



Fig. 8:  
Black-and-white photograph of three women and a  
servant from Cairo, 1860's.  
Von Parish-Kostümbibliothek / Münchner Stadtmuseum

But photography's key to success was its realistic nature. Increasingly, graphics aimed to represent objects like photography did, and the most suitable medium was steel engraving. The intention was to stick to reality as closely as possible. Therefore, in the second half of the nineteenth century colour gave way to black and white images of extremely high quality (fig. 9).

They already competed with photography or are even made after photographs, which could not yet be reproduced with mass printing. And, like photography, graphic depiction now focused on specific moments and on topics of everyday life. The images were no longer idealized, symbolic representations, as they had been before. The middle of the nineteenth century was the beginning of the "heyday of graphic reportage, when the expanding [...] illustrated journal business sought to quench the audience's steadily growing thirst for pictures by means of ever more sophisticated and [...] effective reproduction methods" (Roob 2008). Graphic illustrations showed details with extreme refinement.

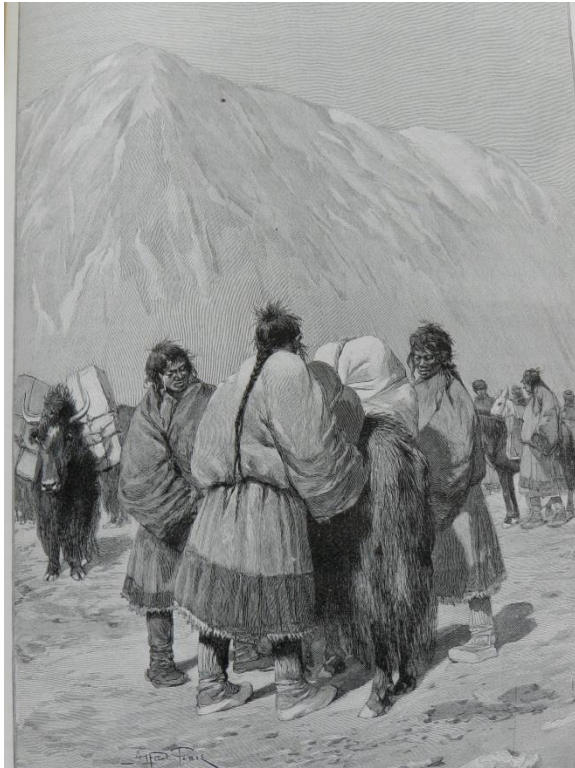


Fig. 9:  
Tibetans, wood engraving from: Edouard Charton,  
*Le Tour du Monde. Nouveau Journal des Voyages*,  
Paris–London, Librairie Hachette, 1891, p6. 125-6.  
Von Parish-Kostümbibliothek / Münchner Stadtmuseum



Fig. 10:  
Japanese countrywomen, from:  
Portfolio with 14 coloured photos from Japan,  
last quarter of the 19th century.  
Von Parish-Kostümbibliothek / Münchner Stadtmuseum

But graphics, even those made after photographs, filter the perception of reality. Photographs, however, represent it unvarnished. A photograph of Japanese countrywomen shows that their leg wraps and shoes are dirty, worn out, and fit poorly (fig. 10). This kind of “truthfulness” is specific to photography. It gives uncompromising images of the poverty of the people. A steel engraving of similar shoes and wrappings of Tibetan people from the same time period cannot compete with the “truthful” depiction of photography (fig. 9).

### Traditional Garments, Ethnographic Depiction and Ethno-Fashion Today

And what about ethnographic depiction today? Hundreds of photography books on countries and regions all over the world are published every year. They document traditional costumes and handcrafting techniques, materials, ornaments, and colours of clothes in detail. These books are made in the consciousness that they show a vanishing world (e.g. Zinser 2010; Paley 2012; Sayer 2015). The images document traditions, which are fading away, and are only kept alive by a few. Traditional costumes are still made with handicraft skills and worn for folkloristic and religious festivities or social events like weddings. But even in remote regions like the Mongolian desert or not yet fully globalized regions like north-eastern Siberia, traditional costumes are steadily disappearing from people's everyday lives. Today, the younger generations all over the world wear almost the same trendy, western style clothing, and people are hardly distinguishable by their clothing anymore (fig. 11). In many southern and eastern countries it is mainly older persons and women who still wear traditional clothing (fig. 12). Expressing one's regional or national origin through apparel is not considered important anymore. Of course, there are exceptions. They are to be found especially in several countries of Africa.





Fig. 11:  
David Sünderhauf, sisters in non-traditional garments in a supermarket in the harbour of Manila, Philippines, photography, October 2010.  
© David Sünderhauf



Fig. 12:  
David Sünderhauf, woman in traditional garments from the region of Anseba in northwestern Eritrea, photography, September 2010.  
© David Sünderhauf

In opposition to this continuously vanishing world, the so called “ethno style” celebrates a return in European fashion every few decades. After the 1910s and twenties the revival came up again in the late sixties (e.g. Paris Gypsies skirts by Dior and Yves Saint Laurent, photographed by Bert Stern, *Vogue* 1969, 72-3), throughout the seventies and has reached a new high since 2011 – starting in the United States, with the so-called “native look” imitating patterns from the Navajo Indians.

Already in the Sixties, but especially today, designer fashion is extremely expensive. For instance in July 2016, a short hand-embroidered Vita Kin dress in the style of Ukrainian farmer garb, cost 2,000 US-Dollars at Bergdorf Goodman, New York (*Harper's Bazaar*, May 2016, 135) and a long, sleeveless Alberta Ferretti dress from July 2016 in the geometric, multi-coloured style of the Navajo Indians was priced at 1,540 Euros (*Harper's Bazaar*, March 2016, 82). It is an evident contradiction: on one hand, unfortunately, there is a loss of traditional costumes in the real world and thus a loss of diversity – one can hardly find Ukrainian farmer women working in hand-embroidered garb –, and on the other hand there are the projections of desire by the rich to be dressed like more or less marginalized minorities or like countrywomen from Ukraine – and for thousands of Euros or US-Dollars.

In any case, it is the designers and the fashion industry, which profit from these trends. But reality looks different. Millions wear the standardized ‘clothing for everybody’. Of course, there are several counter movements and initiatives to preserve native practices. One prominent example, among others, are Jamie Okuma’s beadwork shoes, which are found today in many great US museums and combine Indian handicraft from New Mexico with modern western shoe styles. But on the whole, the worldwide levelling of diversity and cultural peculiarities is moving along rapidly.



It is all the more important that there are institutions like the Von Parish Costume Library, which preserve the knowledge and images of this vanishing world. The engravings, photos, articles and books remind us of what we will lose or have already lost. This institution opens up the cultural and historical context of clothing and is therefore an important source for research. It is hoped that ethnographers searching for information about people's clothing in the past will make more frequent use of this library.

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