

RE-Mind: (Hi)stories from the First Public German Dress Collection

Dr. Adelheid Rasche
Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg, Germany

Abstract:

My paper is focusing in two different ways on the collections of the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg and its highly important collection of dress and accessories.

In a macroscopic perspective, I will show why and how the founders of the museum included a dress collection in their idea of the new museum for the German speaking areas of Middle and Central Europe.

In a microscopic perspective, I am presenting the (hi)story of a recently acquired bracelet made of braided hair with an enormous narrative power including the story of a mother and her ten children literally woven into the object.

Contents:

Origins of the Germanisches Nationalmuseum / Dress and Jewelry Collection / Early Acquisitions / Special Exhibitions / A Bracelet from 1855 and its History / Conclusion / References

Origins of the Germanisches Nationalmuseum



Fig. 1:
Carthusian Monastery in Nuremberg, in: Die Gartenlaube, 1877, p. 655.

Freiherr Hans von und zu Aufsess, a Franconian noble, trained as a lawyer and with a great passion for history and for collecting, had been trying to establish a central museum of German history since the 1830s. After some unsuccessful attempts, in 1852 the *Germanisches Nationalmuseum* was founded with its location in the city of Nuremberg. Aufsess's extensive private collection formed the nucleus of the new institution. In 1857, King Maximilian II of Bavaria designated the former Nuremberg Carthusian monastery (fig. 1) as the domicile for the steadily increasing museum collection – and this is right the place where the museum is still housed today with quite a lot of later extensions. (fig. 2)



Fig. 2:
Germanisches Nationalmuseum, 2009.

The name *Germanisches Nationalmuseum* (i.e. Germanic National Museum) makes reference to the German term of “Germanistik” (i.e. German philology). This wording emphasizes that the museum is to encompass the cultural heritage of the entire German-speaking world. One should keep in mind that the political landscape of the mid-nineteenth century did not show one unified Germany but a quantity of duchies and princedoms. The revolution of 1848 had not brought the much-desired result of a unified German nation. This explains why Aufsess and his team have been considering the German language as the relevant linking tool for their idea of a museum for the cultural heritage of the respective countries. In today’s political borders we are talking about Germany, Austria, the northern and eastern part of Switzerland, the Duchies of Liechtenstein and Luxemburg, the eastern part of Belgium, South Tyrol and some areas in Alsace and Lorraine. German speaking minorities can be found in many other parts of the world.

The beginnings of the *Germanisches Nationalmuseum* were characterized by a romantic, patriotic glorification of the Middle Ages with original objects and copies from libraries, archives, everyday life, cultural history and art. Aufsess’s idea of setting up a collection of source material on German cultural history was structured similar to a family tree. His concept of collecting objects from all areas of life made the *Germanisches Nationalmuseum* a model and an ideal prototype for all later cultural-historical museums. The concentration on artefacts of material culture – and not the common interest in single masterpieces – makes this museum quite unique in the rich landscape of German and international museum’s foundations of the mid-nineteenth century.

Immediately after the founding of the museum, a fundraising corporation was created: investors could acquire shares or provide interest-free capital – a very modern system which lasted for the following thirty years. Additionally, a great number of private donors gave objects to the new museum or contributed with financial gifts.

Dress and Jewelry Collection

The focus of my paper is the question why the history of this museum is of interest to costume and fashion historians. The founder Aufsess designed a kind of cataloging system similar to a genealogical family tree. In the section called “Zustände” (Conditions) he listed all

material culture issues including “Lebensbedarf” (Requirements of life). In this group, he fixed the “Leibesbedeckungen” (Covering of the body) with detailed content: men, ladies, children, all strata and classes, accessories like headdress, footwear, undergarments, bags and purses, belts and other elements. He also included jewelry of all kind. This means, that in contrast to almost every other public collection, dress and accessories have been a field of collecting from the very beginning. The Museum did not acquire clothing because of the textiles used but because of their power to show the circumstances of human life and because of their cultural values. Additionally, the museum also bears an important collection of textiles, laces, embroideries and tapestries.

Early Acquisitions

Looking at some of the early acquisitions in the dress section we discover a focus on the Middle Ages and the Early Modern. Most of the pieces were quickly included in the permanent display of the museum. One of the first acquired objects and a famous one is a gold-spangled ladies' headdress (fig. 3) from Nuremberg, dated to the second half of the seventeenth century, called “Flinderhaube” in German. According to the sumptuary laws of the seventeenth century only upper-class patrician ladies were allowed to wear these rich caps.



Fig. 3:
Patrician Headgear with Dangling Metal Platelets, Nuremberg, ca. 1650 – 1699,
Germanisches Nationalmuseum Inv. T35, Photo: Georg Janssen.

The *Germanisches Nationalmuseum* also acquired artefacts from different European countries to show the connections and differences between the various cultures. The comb (fig. 4) has French inscriptions, it was cut and carved in boxwood and is dated around 1500. This type of comb was to be offered as a precious gift.



Fig. 4:
Decorative Comb, France, ca. 1500, Germanisches Nationalmuseum Inv. T168, Photo: Monika Runge.

Another fine example of an early acquisition is a purse with English and French coats of arms (fig. 5), made during the first half of the thirteenth century, and embroidered in silk and metal threads.



Fig. 5:
Purse, France or England, ca. 1200 – 1249, Germanisches Nationalmuseum Inv. T518, Photo: Monika Runge.



Fig. 6:
Jack of Plate, England (?), ca. 1600, Germanisches Nationalmuseum Inv. W2175, Photo: Monika Runge.

A good selection of garments was acquired between 1850 and 1870. A so called “jack of plate”, probably English from 1600 (inv. W2175), includes some 700 small plates inserted in the padding (fig. 6). A fine ladies’ shoe of Spanish origin is said to have been worn by a rich Nuremberg patrician lady for her wedding in 1594 (fig. 7).



Fig. 7:
Shoe, Spain (?), ca. 1594, Germanisches Nationalmuseum Inv. T44, Photo: Monika Runge.

Since the mid 1870ies the Germanisches Nationalmuseum has been presenting parts of its dress collection in permanent galleries, with changing displays according to the taste of the period. As the dress collection does not only include fashionable dress but a big variety of rural dress in extraordinary quality, the actual display on a surface of 1000 m² entitled “Kleiderwechsel” (Changing Clothes) shows interesting connections between the so called

“Volkstracht” (folk costume) and fashionable styles of dress, especially during the nineteenth century (fig. 8).



Fig. 8:
Permanent Gallery „Kleiderwechsel” (Changing Clothes), Germanisches Nationalmuseum, 2002.

Special Exhibitions

Special exhibitions are presented from time to time. The last important show (fig. 9) was realized by Jutta Zander-Seidel, my predecessor as the chief curator of the collection. The book (in German) on the exceptional museum’s holdings of sixteenth and seventeenth century costumes and accessories can be acquired through the museum’s website. I’d like to remind you that Janet Arnold used quite a lot of early pieces from the collection for her book on patterns.



Fig. 9:
Special Exhibition „In Mode“ (In Fashion), Germanisches Nationalmuseum, 2015.

What is less known, is the strength of the dress collection for the modern period. You're most welcome to explore our growing online catalogue (<http://objektkatalog.gnm.de/>) where we are publishing parts of the collection. Many of the garments, the accessories and jewelry are worn pieces and linked with personal stories.

A Bracelet from 1855 and its History

In the second part of my paper I would now like to switch the perspective from the macroscopic view to a microscopic one. This change of perspective will allow us to focus on one single object from the collection. The bracelet made of braided hair in its original box (fig. 10) remained within the family for 160 years and was acquired by the museum in 2014. What makes it such an extraordinary object is the story which is linked to it.



Fig. 10:
Bracelet, 1855, Germanisches Nationalmuseum Inv. T8377, Photo: Monika Runge.

Looking at the reverse side (fig. 11) of the bracelet, we discover engraved inscriptions. The first element at the left reads: M. B. 27th of May 1855. The next elements show two first names each: Heinrich / Margarethe; Marie / Friedrich; Burchard / Carl; Henriette / Mathilde; Emilie / Catharina. Luckily the donor's family is in the possession of a typed manuscript with the family tree. According to this precious information which was made accessible to us, we know a lot of details about the bracelet's background.



Fig. 11:
Bracelet, 1855, Germanisches Nationalmuseum Inv. T8377, Photo: Monika Runge.

It was worn by Marie Caroline Elisabeth Bartels (the monogram MB). She was born in 1804 in St. Petersburg where her father was a pharmacist appointed to the Russian court. In 1824, aged twenty, she married a certain Heinrich Fixsen, a rich owner of a sugar refinery in St. Petersburg. His family originated from Hamburg in Germany. Marie Bartels gave life to 10 children between 1825 and 1842, four boys and six girls, all listed in the family tree. Knowing this, we can easily understand that the names on the bracelet refer to a very personal story of a mother and her ten children. Probably the first two elements include the hair of Marie and her husband Heinrich.

The bracelet was made in May 1855. Marie's birthday was May 24th; she was celebrating her 51st anniversary in 1855. A few months earlier the family had moved from St. Petersburg to Hamburg. We can thus locate the manufacturing of this singular piece of jewelry in Hamburg where a good number of goldsmiths is documented for the mid-nineteenth century.

The front side of the bracelet is composed of twelve equal rectangular fields made of gold-plated silver with chased ornamental decoration. All fields are filled with braided hair. One might be frightened or even shocked by the idea that human hair has been used as a material for jewelry. This kind of jewelry, however, enjoyed great popularity since the eighteenth century as one form of memorial jewelry with great symbolic power. Often jewelry with human hair was made after the death of a beloved person. Like a part standing for the larger whole, the hair represented the person as a whole. Additionally, it was said that the human life force was based in the hair. The ways, in which hair was used for jewelry varied largely. On the one hand, hair was subjected to special braiding and lace-making techniques; on the other hand, it could be laid out in flat images.

In the bracelet one can observe two different braiding or weaving styles. The elements on the far left show a kind of plain weaving, whereas all the other elements have been realized in a herringbone type pattern. To give you an idea of the popularity of hair jewelry, I'm showing a watch chain for gentlemen (inv. T8442) from the mid-nineteenth century in our collection (fig. 12). These chains were often decorated with clasps of non-precious metal and marked with the initials of the owner. Most of the time the used hair came from the wife or daughters of the owner but we also know about an extensive hair trade for jewelry making.



Fig. 12:
Watch chain, ca. 1850, Germanisches Nationalmuseum Inv. T8442, Photo: Monika Runge.

The Lipperheide Costume Library in Berlin owns a rare manual from 1818 explaining and showing details of different hair braiding techniques. The illustration (fig. 13) shows that a kind of bobbin cushion and more than 16 bobbins were used. Once the “hair lace” was finished, it was wrapped with a thin brass wire and cooked for 45 minutes in boiling water. After this procedure, the wire was removed and the finished hair weaving was solidly fixed but still very flexible. A final treatment with shellac could be added.



Fig. 13:
Hair braiding, in: Emilie Berrin (Ed.): *Gründliche Anweisung für Frauen, auf alle mögliche Art Haargeflechte nach der jetzigen Mode zu fertigen*. Leipzig, ca. 1818.

The second way to use human hair for jewelry consisted of image making with laid-out curls and single hairs. By using different colors and shapes the makers created miniature landscapes including various symbols, portraits or architectural elements.

Conclusion

The hair bracelet was for sure serving as a strong symbol for the family of Marie Bartels, her husband Heinrich (who probably had the bracelet made as a gift for his wife) and for the ten children of this marriage. We may assume that Marie was wearing her bracelet on special occasions like Christian holidays or for family festivities as weddings and baptisms. Wearing her bracelet, she could feel in company of her husband and her children even if the oldest ones had already left the family's home when the bracelet was made in 1855. As stated earlier, the symbolic value of hair was so strong that it could stand for the larger whole. In our case, Marie Bartels had her family woven into her jewelry.

Within the jewelry collection of the *Germanisches Nationalmuseum*, this unique object fulfills the wish of Freiherr von Aufsess, the museum's founder, in the very best way. He had claimed that objects linked to the personal life were as important as objects of general historical importance or of great artistic value.

As the definition of the term “narration” or “story” says, every story needs acting people and a plot. Stories are transporting values and emotions, they are shared imagery where the truth is not the most important part.

We should be careful in our museum’s collecting policy to preserve the stories given by the donors, to check their reliability as good as possible and to tell them in future presentations. This way to use the narrative power of dress is shown in the best way on our website “Clothes tell stories”. (<http://network.icom.museum/costume/clothes-stories/>) We can read there: “Clothes so easily illustrate many kinds of stories because, when correctly used, they bring an extremely personal, engaging aspect to our history.”

References

Kammel, Frank Matthias et al, ed. 2012. *Germanisches Nationalmuseum – Guide to the Collections*. Nürnberg: Germanisches Nationalmuseum.

Zander-Seidel, Jutta, ed. 2015. *In Mode: Kleider und Bilder aus Renaissance und Frühbarock*. Nürnberg: Germanisches Nationalmuseum.

Zander-Seidel, Jutta. 2002. *Kleiderwechsel: Frauen-, Männer- und Kinderkleidung des 18. bis 20. Jahrhunderts*. Nürnberg: Germanisches Nationalmuseum, 90-2.

Berrin, Emilie. ca. 1818. *Gründliche Anweisung für Frauen, auf alle mögliche Art Haargeflechte nach der jetzigen Mode zu fertigen*. Leipzig: Baumgärnter. Complete scan: <http://www.digishelf.de/objekt/PPN770650295/7>.