

## ***Fashion in Modern Serbia: Tradition, Innovation, and Interpretation***

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### **Abstract:**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a turning point in the history of Serbia when the empowered bourgeoisie of the departing Ottoman province started to build a modern nation state. The article deals with the changes in dress patterns, induced by the modernization of the society, which involved a transition from the traditional Ottoman-influenced to the modern Western-style dress. Relying mainly on its own collection, the Museum of Applied Art in Belgrade has scheduled for November 2019 the exhibition on the 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century fashion in Serbia entitled *Fashion in Modern Serbia*. The development of the exhibition concept requires a new approach, departing from a traditional linear narrative and a large number of items in favor of a limited number of items organized into particular “sequences”. Therefore, the article also discusses the issues of tradition and innovation in the Serbian fashion of the period, offering a tentative reinterpretation through the forthcoming exhibition.

### **Contents:**

Introduction / Traditional Dress / National Costume / Male Dress / Fashion Silhouettes / Fashion and Trade / Tailors and Dressmakers / Haute Couture / Thousand (and One) Branches / Digital Exhibition / Conclusion / Note / References

### **Introduction**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was an important turning point in the history of modern Serbia when the empowered bourgeoisie of the departing Ottoman province started to build the institutions of an independent and modern nation state. Significant changes in dress patterns involved a transition from the traditional Ottoman-influenced to the modern Western-style dress. These changes were inevitably induced by the overall modernization of the society.

The first and the only extensive museum exhibition in Serbia covering this period was held in 1980 at the Museum of Applied Art (MAA) in Belgrade. The exhibition entitled *Urban Dress in Serbia in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century* showcased around 470 items from 15 Serbian museums. Together with the accompanying catalog, it has remained a reference point for further study of the fashion history of Serbia (Maskareli 2017b: 26).



Figure 1: View of the exhibition *Urban Dress in Serbia in the 19th and the early 20th Century*, 1980. Photo: Radomir Živković / © Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade

After almost 40 years, the MAA has scheduled for November 2019 the exhibition on the 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century fashion in Serbia entitled *Fashion in Modern Serbia*. The Serbian title *Moda u modernoj Srbiji* contains a convenient wordplay because, like in some other languages, the two words with matching roots can be used to signify both the terms “fashion” and “modern”. This time, we have decided to rely mainly on our own collection and to show what the items from our collection can tell about the history of Serbian dress and fashion. The new approach has required a departure from the traditional linear narrative that comprises a large number of items. Accordingly, we plan to organize fewer items into “sequences” that contain small narratives on relevant topics. We are developing a display based on 80 to 100 items, including accessories and illustrations.

The issues to be addressed by the exhibition include: the utilization of the elements of traditional dress in the creation of a “national costume”, the representation of distinctive fashion silhouettes, the role of imported fashion goods in changing the fashion image of Serbia. It will also seek to explain how a stylish piece of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century *haute couture* came from Paris to Belgrade and who really wore a lavish *bindalli* dress. While seeking to answer these questions, the article discusses the issues of tradition and innovation in the 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Serbian fashion. Thereby the article announces their tentative reinterpretation through the forthcoming museum exhibition.

## Traditional Dress

As soon as the Sultan granted full autonomy to the Principality of Serbia in 1830, Serbian bourgeoisie became eager to discard the feudal past and build a modern society. The transformation also included the change of dress. The depiction of the family vigil beside the catafalque of Serbian Prince Milan Obrenović, painted in 1839 by Jovan Isajlović the Younger, shows that the older members of the House of Obrenović wore traditional urban dress, while the younger ones were dressed fashionably in the western Biedermeier style. The painting, exhibited at the recently renovated National Museum in Belgrade (NM Accession No. 104), also reveals the examples of the uniforms used as the ruler’s dress in the new state (Stojanović 1970: 700; Vasić 2012: 28).



Figure 2: Princess Ljubica Obrenović in a traditional Serbian dress, lithography by Anastas Jovanović, Vienna, 1851. Photo: Dejan Sandić / © Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade.

A sequence dedicated to traditional Serbian urban dress is the first sequence of our exhibition, displaying the distinctive elements of traditional men's and women's urban attire of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Though the selection of items focuses mainly on costume, we will also rely on reproductions in order to illustrate different dress styles. The display will feature the reproductions of historical portraits showing complete sumptuous dress ensembles, e.g. the one of Princess Ljubica, the wife of Serbian Prince Miloš Obrenović, shown in an 1851 lithograph by Anastas Jovanović (MAA Accession No. 20780).

## National Costume

After the transition to modern dress, some elements of traditional urban dress continued to be used in Serbia throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a part of the national costume, worn on special occasions. In the new context, the traditional elements were reinterpreted as symbols of the national tradition and the rising bourgeoisie (Prošić-Dvornić 2012: 18–21). The most distinctive elements of women's national costume were *tepeluk*, a fez-like beaded cap (MAA Accession Nos. 980, 1951, and 15538), and *libade*, a short jacket with long flared sleeves (MAA Accession Nos. 947, 948, 1372 et al). The national costume was the most common dress of choice when sitting for a painted portrait or going to a photographer's studio.



Figure 3: Tepeluk, Serbia, the second half of the 19th century. Photo: Hranislav Mirković / © Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade.

In the following sequence, the role played by historical portraits in the first sequence will be taken over by photographs as an additional means of communication. As MAA is a national public institution, it is our task to display the fashion of the time throughout Serbia, and not only in its capital – Belgrade. A photo of a couple with children taken by Petar Dj. Jovanović in Negotin in Eastern Serbia around 1890 (MAA Accession No. 19398), shows a woman dressed in the national costume and a man wearing a western male attire. Indeed, women chose to wear the national costume for special occasions much more often than men.



Figure 4: Portrait of a couple with children, photographed by Petar Dj. Jovanović in Negotin ca. 1890. Photo: © Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade.

### Male Dress

As the MAA's collection of men's clothes and accessories from that period is quite modest, photos of fashionable 19<sup>th</sup>-century couples are a precious source for the fashion history of Serbia. Yet, we will try to bridge the gap through the sequence dedicated to male dress containing typical items associated with the male elegance of the époque, such as a frock coat, a tailcoat, a top hat, a bowler hat, or a walking stick. A significant contribution to this sequence will be dandy photo portraits taken in Belgrade, e.g. those of the architect Konstantin Jovanović, made by Anastas Stojanović around 1875 (MAA Accession No. 10445), or Mr. Simić, made by Milan Jovanović in 1892 (MAA Accession No. 23686).



Figure 5: Portrait of the architect Konstantin Jovanović, photographed by Anastas Stojanović in Belgrade around 1875. Photo: © Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade.

## Fashion Silhouettes

The exhibition sequence dedicated to different fashion silhouettes will start with a bustle wedding dress, worn in 1878 in Belgrade by Draga Kandić at her wedding to the historian and politician Ljubomir Kovačević (MAA Accession No. 5593; Maskareli 2011: 31–32, 36). It will proceed to show other items, including the 1890s wedding dress with typical leg-o'-mutton sleeves worn in Prahovo in eastern Serbia (MAA Accession No. 5207; Vitković-Žikić 2010: 116–117).

As far as the 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century fashion is concerned, Serbian museology has usually insisted on a division into *alla turca* and *alla franca*, “Oriental” and “Western”, or “Ottoman” and “European” styles, while everything within these two categories has usually been put under the same umbrella. The *Fashion Silhouettes* sequence will go a step further in showing this elaborate an important segment of fashion history and its local reception. Due to usual budget constraints and a limited number of preserved items, the sequence will surely be quite a challenge to set and mount.

## Fashion and Trade

Trade, import, and traveling had an important impact on the Serbian fashion of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. An advertisement of the Belgrade fashion and haberdashery shop *Savčić and Nikolić* published on November 13, 1909, in the daily newspapers *Moć naroda* highlighted the fact that the shop sold goods imported from France, England, Italy, and Switzerland. Many fashion goods were also obtained in neighboring Austria-Hungary. A 1914 blouse from the MAA collection bears the label of the Viennese department store *Ignaz Bittmann* (MAA Accession No. 1961), while a pair of black satin evening shoes from the same year was made by Viennese shoemaker H. Bauer (MAA Accession No. 5224). Yet, Serbian manufacturers, retailers, and customers were well-aware of the importance of Paris as a fashion capital.

On September 1, 2, 7 and 8, 1913, the daily newspapers *Mali žurnal* published an article in four sequels entitled *Kako postaje moda (How Fashion is Created)*. The author of the article refers to Parisian fashion designers as “artists of fashion” and “artists of couture”, concluding that Paris is “a fashion capital of the world” where “fashion is considered a work of art” (Anonymous 1913a; Anonymous 1913b). An advertisement of the Parisian department store *Samaritaine* was published on January 27, 1909, in the *Politika* daily newspapers, while *Mali žurnal* published a special edition dedicated to fashion named *Pariska moda* – “Parisian fashion” during 1902 (Prošić-Dvornić 1985: 66, 68).

## Tailors and Dressmakers

Serbian bourgeoisie also had a high esteem for good local tailors and dressmakers. One of them was Berta Alkalaj (Bertha Alcalay), who ran a large dressmaker’s shop in Belgrade. Her role in the society is illustrated in a story incorporated in Sreten Stojković’s novel *Na stramputici (Led Astray)* published in 1926. In the novel, she had many customers and she was not always able to accept all commissions. Yet, wearing a dress made by Berta was such an important question of prestige that women whose dress had to be sewn by another tailor were tempted to conceal the fact and tell the others that Berta had sewn their dress (Prošić-Dvornić 2006: 521). Today, the only known surviving dress made by Berta is part of the MAA collection. It is a wedding dress worn in 1911 by Danica Paligorić at her wedding to the infantry major Nikola Jorgovanović in the city of Niš in southern Serbia (MAA Accession No. 22891; Maskareli 2011: 34–35, 38).



Figure 6: Wedding dress by dressmaker Berta Alkalaj, Belgrade, 1911. Photo: Veselin Milunović / © Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade.

## Haute Couture

*Haute couture* pieces are rather rare in Serbian museums. In fact, the 1909 evening dress made by the Paris branch of the *Redfern* fashion house and held by the MAA, is probably the only piece of this kind (MAA Accession No. 22702). The dress was worn on the occasion of the engagement of H el ene "Jela" Risti c, who lived in Paris and was a granddaughter of the Serbian politician and historian Jovan Risti c, and Vojislav Todorovi c, a cavalry officer from Belgrade. During 1909, the particular *Redfern* model was published twice in the Parisian fashion magazine *Les modes*, in July and October issues. A variation of the model was designed for the following season and published in *Les modes* in June 1910. Vojislav and Jela married that year and came to live in Belgrade, bringing Jela's engagement dress with them. Eventually, their descendants gifted the dress to the MAA in 2004 (Maskareli 2011: 33–34, 37).



Figure 7: Evening dress by Redfern, Paris, 1909. Photo: Veselin Milunović / © Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade.

### Thousand (and One) Branches

At the end of the article, we will return for a moment to the field of traditional dress. The reason for this is the phenomenon of the *bindalli* dress, a popular *prêt-à-porter* product of late Ottoman fashion (Görünür 2010: 51–52). It was worn during complex wedding ceremonies in different religious and ethnic groups and it plays an important part in the history of Jewish dress. In the context of Serbian dress, it may be observed that *bindallis* often appear in museum collections and on the market as part of the heritage of families from Southern Serbia and Kosovo and Metohija, i.e. the areas ruled by the Ottomans for a longer time (MAA Accession Nos. 2203, 5386 and 23439). It is likely that *bindallis* were obtained in Istanbul as status symbols and were primarily used as part of the dowry (Maskareli 2017a). Of course, we also find *bindallis* in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century photos of Jewish women from Serbia (Labudović 2000: 2, 28).

### Digital Exhibition

Along with the main exhibition *Fashion in Modern Serbia*, we plan to set up a digital exhibition dedicated to the work of the first textile and costume curator in Serbia, Dobrila Stojanović (1925–2018), who worked at the MAA since its opening in 1951 until her retirement in 1988. A partisan fighter in World War II, an art historian, and a long-standing member of the CIETA Lyon Directing Council, Dobrila Stojanović was also the curator of 1980 urban dress exhibition mentioned at the beginning of the article (Maskareli 2017b: 22–23).



Figure 8: Dobrila Stojanović, 1988. Photo: Dragiša Radulović / © Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade.

The digital exhibition will be set up in collaboration with the MAA Library Department as part of the Digital Library of the MAA, hosted by *LoCloud*. It will present the works of Dobrila Stojanović published by the MAA, mainly the exhibition catalogs and her articles published in the scholarly periodical *Journal*. The digitized works will be accompanied with related documentary materials, such as photographs, press clipping, or exhibition posters. This part of the project is very important for us because it pays homage to the work of a pioneer and shows the continuity of fashion presence in Serbian museums, which is often overlooked, as it is invisible to the public of the digital age.

## Conclusion

The exhibition *Fashion in Modern Serbia* will be open at the MAA in Belgrade between November 6, 2019, and January 31, 2020. Similarly to other fashion-related exhibitions held at the MAA over the past years, e.g. *Wedding Dresses in Serbia* (2011), *Oh, Those Shoes!* (2013), *Bags* (2015), or *Aleksandar Joksimović* (2015), it is expected to arouse an increased interest among the audience.

A new reading of the Serbian late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century fashion scene, together with the contextualization of authentic items from the MAA collections, will contribute to the widening of knowledge of a dynamic period in the development of modern Serbian society. Taking into account that items from the period are rarely found on the market and not easy to acquire for a museum collection, the exhibition also aims at raising awareness of fashion objects from the past as potential museum objects and an important part of cultural heritage.

## Note

Most items from the MAA collection referred to in the article were featured in the *Europeana Fashion* project and are available online through the *Europeana* platform.



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