

More than Oktoberfest: The Richness of German Traditional Costume

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Abstract

The international perception of traditional German clothing today is usually limited to the *Dirndl* and *Lederhosen*. However, this reduction to stereotypes completely ignores the historical and actual regional diversity of clothing in Germany. Extant museum collections are valuable reservoirs with many undiscovered treasures of 19th and 20th century rural clothing, documenting an enormous range of festive wear and work attire.

The three examples of modern interpretation presented here demonstrate ways to revive traditional dress successfully. The special values transmitted by traditional dress – social affiliation, self-positioning, premium handcraft and an affinity to one’s homeland – are highly contemporary concepts in a global world where individual identity is oscillating between the local and the international.

For the projects described, the museum served as a place of reflection and self-referencing. The in-depth analysis of the collections’ material heritage helped to develop contemporary interpretations—an auspicious way of linking tradition with the future.

The international perception of traditional German clothing today is usually limited to the *Dirndl* and *Lederhosen*. The worldwide knowledge about these two types of traditional German clothing is mostly due to the long-standing fame of Munich’s biggest popular festivity, the Oktoberfest. This beer festival, first held in 1810 and since that time organized every year, is an important part of Bavarian culture, now attracting more than 6 million visitors every year. During the 19th century, most visitors were dressed in fashionable urban style. Only in the 1930s it became popular to dress in folkloristic and often “invented” festive rural dress when attending the Oktoberfest (Egger 2008, p. 35—44). Since the beginning of the 21st century, most of the visitors wear some kind of fantasy dirndl dresses and Lederhosen which can be rented or bought in many shops close to the entrance of the Munich Oktoberfest.

Even the website “German Culture” shows a family from Southern Bavaria next to the headline “Traditional German Clothing – Dirndl and Lederhosen”. This reduction to one single type of female and male traditional German clothing completely ignores the actual regional diversity of clothing in Germany which will be explored in this contribution.

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Rural Dress in Germany

In order to better understand the historical development of rural dress in Germany, a short geographical historical survey may serve as an introduction.

When looking at the political landscape of Central Europe in the late 18th century, one can discover that Germany – as it is understood now – did not exist at all as one single political unit. The German map resembled an irregularly shaped rag rug with a patchwork surface of more than 35 independent units: Kingdoms, Princedoms, Counties, Electorates, Dioceses, and quite a number of free cities, all depending directly on the powerful Habsburg Empire. Every single small political unit, sometimes with little more than a few thousand inhabitants, developed a strong identity, which found its expression not only in individual fiscal systems or in local dialects but also in individual dress styles in every single area.

Regional dress at this period must thus be understood as an important sign of local and social affiliation. As with all forms of clothing, it used a number of symbolic signs for non-verbal communication within the group. When persons meet for the first time, dress is the primary visual information. Through details of clothing, accessories and jewelry, of materials, colors and cuts, which are only recognized by the knowing, a person could immediately be classified as rich or middle class, as married or unmarried, as protestant or catholic. What is today called traditional clothing (“Tracht” in German), is defined as the characteristic clothing that identified a person as belonging to a particular group in terms of social and legal status, origin or trade.

Our knowledge about the various historical forms of German traditional clothing is fed by various source material, among which a few examples of visual documentation and surviving garments have been selected for this contribution.

Georg Emanuel Opiz’s (1775-1841) series “National-Trachten oder Volks-Trachten der Deutschen”, a series of six colored lithographs published ca.1830 in Leipzig, depicts garments from various regions: the Vierlande next to Hamburg, Saxonia, Altenburg in Thuringia, and others. They show a great variety not only in the headwear but also in the dress forms and colors. An interesting feature is the shortness of the women’s gowns in some regions. Urban fashionable styles of the same period prescribed ankle length skirts without exception.



Figure 1. Peasants from the Vierlande / Hamburg region. Colored lithograph by Georg Emanuel Opiz (1775-1841) from: “National-Trachten oder Volks-Trachten der Deutschen”, Leipzig, ca.1830. Kunstbibliothek, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

According to former ethnographical theories, rural dress would not have participated in any fashionable changes. This opinion has been revised by quite a number of modern dress studies (Bringemeier 1980, Keller-Drescher 2003, Brückner 2008). During the 19th century, local dress was regarded as a stabilizer within the quickly changing society of the industrial age. As has been shown, it often was politically desirable to set rules for the so-called “Volkstracht” (folk costume), which meant that certain dress forms were artificially defined as “typical” for rural inhabitants. Today we know from surviving garments and images that everyday and festive dress of peasants and other rural inhabitants was as varied and changing as urban dress. Furthermore, a close relationship between urban and rural dress in terms

of general shapes and changing silhouettes existed. In short, it can be confirmed that new fashionable styles, like a high waistline or puffed sleeves, trickled down to the rural areas with some delay. As one example, in Opiz's illustrations, all men wear breeches, either loose or tight fitting. These styles were fashionable in urban centers some decades earlier. In the 1830s, when Opiz published his illustrations showing breeches for all men, a fashionable city inhabitant would wear long trousers in light or dark fabric. The rural men, in contrast, continued wearing breeches.

Rural Dress Collection at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum

The collection of 18th and 19th century rural dress from German speaking countries at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg was created in the last decade of the 19th century. It was first exhibited in 1905 in a new wing of the museum displaying 370 fully dressed mannequins (Selheim 2005). Since 2002, some of these wooden mannequins, dressed in highly fanciful combinations of what originally would have been singular pieces of underwear, outerwear and accessories, have been on display in the museum's permanent gallery of general dress history from 1800 to 1970 (Zander-Seidel 2002).

The collection encompasses all German speaking regions, from the Netherlands to Switzerland and Austria, including German regions from Bavaria and the Black Forest area to centrally located zones and the northern islands close to the Danish border. Most of the dress is festive attire which was better conserved than everyday working dress. In one example, the village of Pohlgöns in Hesse, close to Frankfurt am Main, is represented by a dress combination for a bride, with a characteristic bride's crown.



Left: Figure 2. *Bride's attire with bride's crown, village of Pohlgöns, Hesse, ca. 1875/1905. Germanisches Nationalmuseum Nuremberg, Inv. KlingK132*



One of these bride's crowns was recently restored and exhibited as an extraordinary piece of craftsmanship and decorative art (Braun 2017). This impressive headwear – a combination of a cap and a large ornamental piece on the back – shows a colorful combination of silk ribbons, braids, glass pearls, textile flowers, tinsel and wire. All these elements came from different German regions where the specialized production was located. This proves that even locally worn dress and accessories benefitted from the highly developed trade contacts between various regions and countries.

Figure 3. Bride's crown, village of Pohlgöns in Hesse, ca. 1875/ 1905. Germanisches Nationalmuseum Nuremberg, Inv. KI4143, KI4144b, KI4145, KI4152, photo: Georg Jenßen



Another historical example comes from the north of Germany, where influences from abroad played a big role. A young woman's rural dress from the region of Stade is arranged on a carved and painted wooden mannequin.

Figure 4. Rural dress, city of Stade in Lower Saxony, ca. 1880. Germanisches Nationalmuseum Nuremberg, Inv. KlingK36

Stade was once a rich free Hanseatic city next to Hamburg; during the 19th century the town depended on the Kingdom of Hanover. The festive attire is decorated on the front with a huge brooch attached to an impressive silk bow. Additionally, a group of 10 purely decorative silver buttons is sewn on the stomacher. Many of these brooches and buttons were imported from Amsterdam via the sea route, serving as signs of richness and international trading connections.

What has to be mentioned for all the rural dress ensembles in the collection of the Germanisches Nationalmuseum is the fact that the mannequins were dressed around 1900 by the private collector Oskar Kling (1851-1926) according to his understanding which was mostly based on printed illustrations from the 19th century (Selheim 2005). Today it is known that he – as did many other collectors of rural dress in Europe – deliberately combined pieces which would have never been worn together in real life. Kling focused on combinations attractive to his eye rather than on the actual everyday dress styles of rural persons. This is why today's dress research has to follow a critical approach to these historical arrangements which have in their own history an invented glorification of the circumstances of rural life.

Various German museum collections and their displays document an enormously diverse range of festive wear and, to some extent, work attire from 19th and 20th century rural clothing.

Unfortunately, most of the permanent galleries have not been refurbished for decades, which is a pity and transmits an extremely old-fashioned image. They follow outdated museological concepts which makes it absolutely desirable to reconsider these displays in order to raise the public's interest in the richness of the German heritage of traditional clothing.

The future of tradition

But traditional costume is not a closed history in Germany. There are many activities to keep traditions alive, to adopt them to today's users and to include traditional costume in the creative process. Within modern society "cultural heritage" and "roots" are important key concepts which can be followed up in a great variety of projects dealing with traditional dress in modern society. For this contribution, three different initiatives out of a great quantity of interesting projects have been chosen: a one-woman activity in southern Germany, a book publication by a highly renowned fashion photographer and a creative project at a University's Fashion Department.

The first example, Christine Gerg, a woman in her fifties, was trained as a florist and is now working as a window dresser. Years ago, she married into a village close to the market town Mittenwald in Southern Germany, next to the Austrian border, 40 kilometers from Innsbruck. Knitting is her primary hobby since her childhood. When she discovered that the traditional men's wear in Mittenwald included only mouse gray colored half stockings, she decided to break new ground. Christine Gerg started to produce her newly invented hand-knitted stockings by dyeing the wool herself to get the colors she wanted to use. She deliberately combines historical patterns with new ones, and makes all the stockings in colorful combinations. Every single pair of her hand-knitted half stockings is a one of a kind. There is no repetition and every pair gets an individual name like "Heidi" or "Annerl" (young Ann) or "Goassach", the name of a village close to her home region. Forty to fifty hours of work go into one pair of stockings, and her private clients are inscribed in a long waiting list.

She says: "Traditional costume is not a Holy Grail, it is living and we are allowed to try and test new things." Her newest stocking invention is called "Dirndl Tattoos" – narrow half stockings to be worn by women with the traditional Dirndl dress (<http://dirndltattoo.de>).



The second example, *Traditional Couture*, is the English title of a 320 page fully illustrated book published in 2015 by the renowned German photographer Gregor Hohenberg with the publishing company Gestalten.

Figure 5. *Traditional Couture*, Book cover, photography: Gregor Hohenberg, Publisher: Gestalten, Berlin, 2015

Gregor's daily work is portrait and fashion photography for magazines like *Vogue*, *GQ*, *The New York Times Style Magazine* or *Architectural Digest*, to mention only a few. Gregor is always concentrating on the persons behind fashion phenomena. His interest in German culture and history led him to the subject of traditional clothing, which, in his opinion, is an undeservedly neglected topic with great potential.

He first studied historical documentary photographs of traditional costume in museum and library collections. After the historical research, Gregor contacted more than twenty German regions via local associations, museums, village communities and other useful addresses. Within the

following three years, he travelled to all the selected regions in all parts of Germany. He portrayed local individuals, young and old alike, who wear authentic traditional attire. His images capture not only the dignity of the wearers and the beauty of the surroundings, but they are often focused on the gorgeous details of the distinctive clothing and its intricate tailoring.

The female costume from the Island of Amrum at the very north of Germany was shot in a captain's house with Dutch wall tiles. The dress front is decorated with distinctive filigree jewelry (breast chains and buttons) imported since the early 19th century from Portugal and Amsterdam.



Figure 6. Traditional Couture, Island of Amrum, photography: Gregor Hohenberg, Publisher: Gestalten, Berlin, 2015

One photo session was devoted to the attire of a young man from the Schwalm area, some 100 km north of Frankfurt, in the center area of Germany. His festive attire was developed around 1850 with a dark blue coat and jacket, a decorated waistcoat in red with green fluffy edges, a silk necktie with embroidered tulips, and a headgear made of otter fur. An important detail is the green velvet insert on the cap: in this region, green is the symbolic color for a married person. This insert on the cap would have been red if he was still unmarried.



Oben links: Der Schwalmmann trägt seinen Oberrock - oder für den Sommer den „Kurtchen“. Unten links: Der Schwalmmann trägt seinen „Hosenrock“, eine Art „Hose“. Unten rechts: Der Schwalmmann trägt seinen „Taschentuch“. Unten rechts: Der Schwalmmann trägt seinen „Hosenrock“.

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Figure 7. Traditional Couture, Married man from the Schwalm Region, photography: Gregor Hohenberg, Publisher: Gestalten, Berlin, 2015

The attire for an unmarried woman from the same area includes a tiny red cap. Most impressive are the voluminous elements on the back called “Brett” (tray or board) which were only worn for the days of the local kermis.



Figure 8. *Traditional Couture, Unmarried woman from the Schwalm Region, photography: Gregor Hohenberg, Publisher: Gestalten, Berlin, 2015*

Gregor Hohenberg’s photographs give a contemporary context to traditional heritage clothing. The English title is rightly *Traditional Couture* -- traditional clothing is and was essentially made like haute couture throughout the 20th century and today: few in number with elaborate craftsmanship, made for individual clients, with high quality materials from all over Europe, and produced in particular regions. Traditional clothing is inspiring some of the most ambitious and radical fashion designers of both today and tomorrow. In this sense, Gregor Hohenberg’s photographs are building visual bridges between the past and the future.

The third example comes from the fashion department of the Hanover based University of Applied Sciences and Arts, one of the places in Germany where young fashion designers are trained. Design professor Martina Glomb worked for years with fashion designer Vivienne Westwood in London where she designed the collections “Anglomania” and “Red Label”. This student project, based on traditional costume from the Schaumburg area, was realized from 2013 to 2015. The Schaumburg region is southwest of Hannover, and the students’ historical research started with local museums and personal contacts with local tailors and costume groups. A particular feature of the protestant Schaumburg attire is the enormous size of the headdress for Sundays, formed by a stiffened bow.



Left: Figure 9. *Festive attire from Bückeburg, Schaumburg area, Celle 2010, photo: Oxfordian Kissuth*

Right: Figure 10. *Bride’s attire from the Schaumburg region, 2007, photo: Reinhard Schulte*

Traditionally, brides wore red dresses with embroidered silk ribbons and embroidered long cuffs, combined with a large bride's crown made of glass beads, tinsel and embroidery. All together, these outfits are heavy and hard to wear, complicated to dress and highly expensive to produce. They are full of symbolic value and seem to come from very far away times.

The students started their creative project by studying traditional garments and their shapes from outside and inside, and by learning to understand traditional craftsmanship from the few remaining persons still knowing the methods. They reconstructed some of the chosen garments and headwear in nettlecloth in order to recreate the original silhouette and to wear the pieces on their own body. In this way, the mood and feeling for a specific garment and its structures became evident.

The individual creative process started with various changes referring to the historical patterns and cuts: altered proportions, new combinations of color and unique forms of dress. The students continued with sketches and drawings, with experiments in draping, with material selection and intuitive workshops in order to avoid established routines in the design process. The goal was as follows: "In debate with tradition, the fashion designer's weapons are respect, humor and a critical eye: the various silhouettes created have this in common, whether wearable or extreme, sporting or elegant, denim or couture." (Glomb 2017, 91)



Left: Figure 11. Design by Ina Sabrina Gast, Collection "Chez Schaumburg", 2013-2015, photo: Norbert Müller, University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Hanover, Fashion Department

Right: Figure 12. Design by Boom Studio (Jing Jing Qi and Robin Rau), Collection "Chez Schaumburg", 2013-2015, photo: Patrick Slesiona, University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Hanover, Fashion Department

The outfits realized by the students Ina Sabrina Gast and by the design duo Jing Jing Qi and Robin Rau combine traditional handicraft, screen printed graffiti, valuable silk, digitally altered traditional costume braids, opulent embroidery, crazy patterns, sequins and wood veneer. These

contemporary garments reveal an intuitive and successful play with historically inspired volumes and materials in couture-like unique items.

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The three examples of modern interpretation presented demonstrate possibilities for a successful revival of traditional dress. The special values transmitted by traditional dress – social affiliation, self-positioning, premium handcraft and an affinity to one's homeland – are highly contemporary concepts in a global world where individual identity is oscillating between the local and the international.

For the student projects presented, the museum served as a place of reflection and self-referencing. The in-depth analysis of the collections' material heritage helped to develop contemporary interpretations—an auspicious way of linking tradition to the future.

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