

THE POLITIC OF FASHION - FASHION AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Ildikó Simonovics

Hungarian National Museum, Budapest, Hungary

Abstract

The Hungarian National Museum's textile collection has grown in the past two years, primarily with Hungarian clothes following from the great cultural successes of the "Re-button!" competitions in the earlier part of the decade. The clothes are a prominent feature in the self-definition of a small country working on its nation-state narrative, which are sought to emphasize its uniqueness and its individual and national character, in which attire played a primary role in the system of symbols worn on our bodies. The symbolic connection between fashion and politics is repeated throughout Hungarian history, from the shift towards European clothing and religion during Saint Stephen's reign in the 11th century, through to Dr. Ferenczy Ferenczy's fashion design competitions in the 1930s to combat Hitler's erosion of Hungarian values. Hungarian folk costumes have been spectacularly integrated into trends since 2011, not only in the collections of designers, but also in leaps and bounds within mass produced lines.

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The choice of the topic

The topic has been chosen due to the coincidence of the collection's random and deliberate growth over the past two years. We have acquired mainly "Hungarian" clothes from different periods by purchase or donation. In 2017, when I started to work at the Textile Collection of the Hungarian National Museum, I was looking for a concept to participate with at the regular annual Contemporary Collection Enrichment Application, which would be compatible with the intellectual and historical heritage of the material dating back to the 11th century.

Re-button: Hungarian is in fashion!

This is how the Re-button! Competition was selected from 2011, the first of which was held during the Hungarian EU Presidency as a major cultural event and, as such, received huge media attention and press propaganda. According to communications of the responsible ministry, the state wished to foster creativity and, within that framework, to support the fashion industry, which, unfortunately, had completely fallen apart as a result of the 1989 regime change and the subsequent privatization, in addition to shift of production to the Far East. The event, however, served much more to represent the government's redefined nation-state identity than to launch a strategic plan to rebuild the profession. An example of the revival of national traditions in fashion was the Hungarian Dressing Movement of the 1930s, which also sought to strengthen the patriotic national identity along the political ideology of new nationalism. The 'Re-button!' events were

brought to life due to the possibility to perform in front of Europe – valuable for the government – when the country enjoyed a special attention within the European community, to which it has been trying to adjust for the last 1000 years. And Hungary, defining itself as a small country working on its nation-state narrative in a privileged role, sought to emphasize its uniqueness, its individual, national character, in which the system of symbols worn on our bodies played a primary role. This is how we decided to organize a grand fashion event focusing on our historical and folk traditions. And although this did not make the Hungarian fashion industry flourish, it had an impact. As a result of propaganda events, Hungarian folk costume elements have been spectacularly integrated into the trend since 2011, not only in the collections of designers, but also at the level of mass production. Unfortunately, in this case embroidered or printed motifs were mostly used as simple decoration. The slogan ‘Hungarian is in fashion!’, similar to the ‘buy Hungarian’ product initiative, taken up by the media, finally achieved its aim along the line of the 19th century Protection Association aspirations. The local trend was intensified by the fact that, in parallel, folk motifs regarded as exotic appeared in the international fashion and the press, Kalocsa and Matyó patterns being the most popular among the Hungarian motifs, although their users generally did not know anything about their origins. Otherwise, Hungarian fashion attracted the interest of foreign designers even in the 1930s, and in 1935 Elsa Schiaparelli came to Hungary to study the motifs of Hungarian folk art.

We purchased three capsule collections from the first two years of the ‘Rethink/re-button!’ competition. In the selection process, we took particular care to ensure that the collection was unique and at the same time that it fit into international trends, and that the three collections represent different ways of designing. The use of different techniques and different sources of inspiration was also an important point. After two years, the Hungarian fashion competitions have become Central European-scale, the best works of the contestants coming from the Visegrad Four countries are presented at the closing show of the multi-day fashion event called Central European Fashion Week.

The symbolic connection between fashion and politics

The symbolic connection between fashion and politics can be observed several times in Hungarian history, first in Saint Stephen's time, with a reverse sign, i.e. we replaced our typical Hungarian costume with the Western fashion, when the king, crowned in 1000, decided that his country would conform to the rest of Europe. He abandoned the ancient pagan lifestyle and converted to Christianity. Along with the new religion, European clothing was adopted. Changing clothes, both men and women, abandoning trousers, wore the long tunics and semi-circular robes that became the symbol of belonging to the West, and a new way of life. From the state's foundation, in the dressing of Hungarians, the adaptation primarily to “Western” (Western European) fashion is noticeable, but sometimes more, sometimes less, the Eastern and specific Hungarian elements and their mixtures appear. Over the centuries, wearing Hungarian clothing has been a means of political demonstration. In the 19th century, with minor interruptions, it became a symbol of patriotism, awakening national consciousness, and party affiliation. During the Hungarian Reform Era between 1825 and 1848, it was worn by the advocates of modernization efforts, efforts to reduce the Habsburg influence, assert self-determination and make Hungarian the official language, and the creation of a civic Hungary, as a symbol of national unity.

Following the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence of 1848-1849, a period of retribution came: executions followed, many patriots were imprisoned, and thousands were forced to emigrate. Wearing casual clothing with cord trimming, known as "Hungarian mourning", was a political demonstration until the end of the 1850s, as were funerals, where patriots mourning for individual pain and for the fall of the Revolution could gather in lacking the freedom of assembly. At the time of the Austro-Hungarian Compromise, Hungarian clothing shone in its old color once again, the monarch and the Hungarian nation were reconciled, the spectacular sign of which was the coronation of Franz Joseph and Elisabeth according to the traditions. This was the first time that a great parade was organized, with the participation of the cream of Hungarian aristocracy wearing gala costumes (díszmagyar). The second great parade was held on the occasion of the thousandth anniversary of the Hungarian conquest in 1896, the millennium celebration, while the third one, in 1916, was the coronation of the last Hungarian king, Charles IV.

Hungarian fashion in the development of national identity

The conclusion of the First World War had fatal consequences for Hungary; the country lost more than two thirds of its territory and population. The whole country mourned the Treaty of Trianon and they expressed their grief through the way they dressed: men wore ornamented Hungarian gala costumes made of black silk and velvet with silver jewelry, while women demonstrated in Hungarian clothes inspired by folklore and history. In 1933 Dr. Ferenc Ferenczy, Secretary of the Ministry of the Interior, announced a fashion design competition, intending to create a Hungarian style of clothing that was in line with the needs of the era and satisfied the requirements of international clothing. The timing was not a coincidence: Hungarians tried to protest against Hitler's rise to power and the strengthening German influence by emphasizing Hungarian values, and, in this spirit, competitions were announced in every year until 1938.

Klára Tüdős, costume designer at the Hungarian Royal Opera House, was a prominent figure of the Hungarian Dressing Movement, who became a star for the audience of Hungarian fashion first with her haute couture and then with her prêt-à-porter pieces. Between the two world wars domestic tailors and autonomous fashion designers were able to create their own direction, independent of the Paris models with their Hungarian pieces of clothing, which was an important, though not the first, milestone for Hungarian fashion. The international trend of clothes inspired by local folklore contributed to the success of the Movement.

All in all, Hungarian clothing, whether history or folklore-inspired, has played an undeniable role in the history of Hungarian fashion primarily as a representation of political ideology and commitment, and in the development of national identity and national consciousness. In cases where the outlook fitted international fashion, they were able to go beyond the representation of local nationalist aspirations.

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