

Black for Marriage and Mourning in Friesland, the Netherlands

Arnolli, Gieneke

Fries Museum, Leeuwarden, the Netherlands

Abstract

The collection of the Fries Museum in Leeuwarden contains various black wedding dresses from approximately 1860 to 1930. For instance, one of them, a fashionable black dress, was worn by the daughter of well-to-do farmers, Trijntje Halbesma (1850-1942), on the occasion of her second wedding in May 1877, since she had been widowed at the age of 23. However, this was not the only reason why she wore black at her wedding. From the 18th century until World War II, it was simply the custom for rural brides in the North of the Netherlands to get married in black. This way, they started off their married life with a dress that could be worn for formal occasions and funerals, and that would usually be a lifetime investment. This paper will feature several black dresses worn by well-to-do farmers' daughters, as well as a maid.

Content

1. Introduction
2. Farmers' weddings in black
3. The wedding dress of Dettje Winkler, 1862
4. Wedding and mourning in 1877
5. Eelke Edens, an oil miller's bride, 1882
6. The homemade wedding dress of Klaske de Jong, 1909
7. Forever mourning, ca 1910
8. The austere wedding dress of Grietje Oosterhof, 1931
9. A painted wedding dress from 1831
10. Conclusion

Introduction

The Fries Museum is a provincial museum located in Friesland, a province largely dependent on agriculture, cattle breeding, dairy production and trade. The clothing collection at the Fries Museum in Leeuwarden, was mainly created through donations from private individuals, descendants of those who wore the clothes.

The traditional Frisian costume for women during the period 1750-1900 was based on a two-piece gown, following the latest European fashion (Arnolli 2000, 7-21). It was accessorised with special headwear, a lace bonnet with a frame to shape the cap made of precious metal (so-called *oorijzer*), a neckerchief or a white collar, and an ornamental apron. The *oorijzer* is part of many Dutch regional costumes, and its shape is typical of a certain region.

The collection contains a striking number of black dresses from the second half of the 19th century. Some of them are reported to have once been worn as wedding dresses, others as mourning dresses. As donors only provided little information, I undertook genealogical research to clarify their relationship with the objects. Moreover, since data helps bring context to the garments, I also investigated whether those provided by the donors could be found in the archives, which are now available on the internet.

While I was working on this project, I found examples of black wedding dresses from all over the Netherlands, and also in Friesland, including my great-grandfather-in-law's wedding in 1948 at Leeuwarden, where he and his bride were dressed in black. Another example concerned an old man who remarried after his first wife's death in 1946, just after World War II. His bride, who was widowed herself, was not supposed to wear a sparkling white dress. Wearing white at a second marriage was not an accepted custom until the 21st century.

Farmers' weddings in black

Reference to a wedding in black was found in the book by Waling Dykstra, *From Friesland's Folk Life of the Past and Later. Folk Lore, Folk Customs, Folk Tales, Folk Concepts*. Waling Dykstra was a Frisian writer, poet, and performer. In this book, he describes the custom among prosperous peasants to marry in black as follows:

'On the wedding day of a young couple from two well-to-do farming families, the whole village is decorated with flags. Two flags fly on the barn of the bride's parental home where the wedding party will take place, one on each extreme point of the roof. In addition, many barns in the surrounding area are decorated with flags, as are the mills in the vicinity, the ships in the village canal and there is hardly a house in the village without a flag flying.'

The town hall is an hour's drive away and 'after the wedding ceremony the procession enters the village again. In the chaise in front are the groom and bride. The shiny black horse has roses on its bridle and on its tail a bow of orange ribbon interwoven with the national colours. The young couple is dressed entirely in black. The bride's healthy fresh colour, her white lace cap and collar contrast more favourably with this, than the tanned face and sun-bleached

hair of the groom, who may be wearing a fine cylinder hat for the first time in his life today, as well as a white shirt and black tie' (Dykstra 1892, 205-206).

Nowadays, a so-called Frisian Farmers Wedding takes place every year in the town of Joure, since the 1950's. On that day, a couple officially marries wearing traditional 19th-century Frisian costumes. One of the folklore activities is ring-stabbing: while riding a chaise pulled by Frisian horses, the co-driver (on this day the bride) tries to stab through a ring with a spear (**Fig. 1**).

The wedding dress of Dettje Winkler, 1862

The first black dress in the Fries Museum collection, which was said to be a wedding dress, is a two-pieced dress of black silk taffeta, with a wide skirt and a jacket with a gathered peplum and pagoda sleeves (**Fig. 2**). Since the 1950's, this kind of dress is considered to be the traditional Frisian Costume, together with the traditional lace and gold headdress, white neckerchief or collar, and a decorative apron.

It was worn on May 11th 1862 when Dettje Winkler married farmer Klaas Rienks (28).

The couple had a son and a daughter, but unfortunately Dettje died only five years after her wedding. To take care of the children, her husband remarried three years later. This dress was kept in the family and was even reused.

Coincidentally this year, Willem Roelfsema, a young student graduating, took this costume as a model to make a replica of it for his training as a master tailor (**Fig. 3**). His goal was to make a traditional Frisian costume. He made it using genuine taffeta and crafted the 18 beaded buttons himself. Furthermore, he was able to purchase an original apron of embroidered tulle and a neckerchief to go with it.

A neckerchief with an attached hip part completed the original dress, making the silhouette look slender. The donor, her great-granddaughter, presumed this garment was part of the wedding dress from 1862; however, the slender hips tell that it belongs to a later fashion. It may have been used to hide a pregnancy, as Klaas and his second wife Yfke got seven children, of whom the last two were born in 1876 and 1879. At that time, wide skirts had disappeared, and the use of sewing machine had encouraged the making of pleated flounces along the skirts, for instance. The material for this particular garment was reused. The pleated flounce along the circumference was machine-made and bought ready-made.

Wedding and mourning in 1877

On May 10th 1877, Trijntje Halbesma (1850-1942) married the schoolteacher Adriaan Jaarsma (1845-1920) in a fashionable black dress (**Fig. 4**). It was her second marriage since she had been widowed at the age of 23. However, this was not the only reason why she wore black at her wedding. As writer Waling Dykstra stated, from the 18th century until World

War II, it was simply the custom for rural brides in the North of the Netherlands to get married in black. This way, they started off their married life with a dress that could be worn for formal occasions and funerals and that would usually be a lifetime investment (Arnolli 2000, 60-61). Moreover, black became a fashionable colour at the end of the 19th century.

This wedding dress was given to the museum by the bride's grandson. He presumed that Trijntje, daughter of a well-to-do family of farmers, had worn this dress at her first marriage with 19-year-old Gjalt Reitsma in 1866. Back then, she was 16 and pregnant. However, the style of this dress is of a later fashion. But I wondered: Why a teenage wedding? I might have found an answer in the family circumstances. When she was almost 7, her mother died. Two years later, her father remarried a widow with five children. The youngest daughter was not only her age, but had the same name, Trijntje. This could have been a reason for her to leave the parental home as soon as possible. Trijntje and her second husband Adriaan had a portrait photo made in 1902 on the occasion of their silver wedding anniversary (**Fig. 5**).

In this picture, she still wears the typical Frisian headdress with lace cap on top of a gold helmet with side ornaments. Her wedding dress is a two-piece dress: a long overdress with an open skirt with fringe at the hem and a matching skirt. The back of the skirt can be draped with straps that are fastened with hooks and eyes on the lining. The bodice has an inset vest with smocking and galloon along the opening and the skirt has appliques of ready-made ornaments of braided lace.

Eelke Edens, an oil miller's bride, 1882

Well-to-do farmers were not the only ones to get married in black. This photograph shows the betrothal dress of Eelke Edens, who married Lammert Brouwer, an oil miller, in 1882 (**Fig. 6**). It was given to the museum by their granddaughter, Eelkina, born in 1920. Eelkina was not only named after her grandmother, but since her mother, Jantje, died when she was only six years old, she was also partly raised by her.

Writer Ramalho Ortigão, who came from Portugal to the Netherlands in 1883 to attend the World Exhibition held in Amsterdam, observed the other visitors. About the women from Friesland, he wrote in *A Holanda* that 'even the most humble Frisian woman walk[ed] very tall, with head erect and seriously [...] Her smooth, black, close-fitting clothing as the perfect accessory to her aristocratic, beautiful figure' (Ortigão 1885, 56-57). The Frisian women he described were dressed in the very latest fashion, like Eelke Edens' wedding dress.

Looking at this dress, one can observe that the invention of the sewing machine had a tremendous effect on fashion. By 1870, almost every seamstress in Friesland possessed one. Skirts had tucks, flounces, and draperies that would have been an endless task to handle without a machine. The skirt is a fine example. The matching jacket has a little red colour at the collar, handmade buttons, and a matching bow at its back.

After the agricultural crisis of 1878, the traditional Frisian costume in daily life was virtually gone. The dresses described hereafter are no longer made of silk but of wool. However, the black colour was still being used for wedding dresses.

The Homemade wedding dress of Klaske de Jong, 1909

This photograph shows the wedding dress worn by Klaske de Jong, who worked as a maid, in 1909 (**Fig. 7**). I doubt that it was made by a professional seamstress; maybe Klaske had sewn it herself. This black bridal dress of worsted satin has a ready-made vest and a collar of black chemical lace with a yellow silk satin lining. The long sleeves have decorative pleats secured with tiny buttons. It is clearly visible that this wedding dress has been worn many times after the wedding, and that the skirt has been shortened when fashion dictated it. The buttons are worn, and the skirt has lost its shape.

Forever mourning, ca 1910

This modest black dress was given to the museum by the granddaughter of Trijntje Douwes de Haan (1864-1948), who remembered her grandmother only wearing black clothes (**Fig. 8**).

They lived in Paesens-Moddergat, a tiny fishing village on the north-east coast of the province of Friesland. This was not the wedding dress she would have worn at her marriage to Klaas Groen in 1885. The latter was one of the few survivors of a fishing disaster that took place on a night in March 1883, when the fleet of 22 fishing boats was overwhelmed by a heavy spring storm. During this storm, 17 boats were wrecked and 83 villagers perished in the icy waves, of whom several were relatives of Trijntje. Her husband never went to sea again but became a barge master.

Since then, Trijntje was in mourning and married in black. Her wedding dress has not survived, unlike this worsted dress she may have had made on the occasion of her 25th wedding anniversary. It is a simple but attractive black dress, with decorative knife pleats on the sleeves. The bodice seems to have a gathered yoke, but it is part of the front panel; there is no seam under the decorative band.

The austere wedding dress of Grietje Oosterhof, 1931

Grietje's simple wedding dress as well as her husband's wedding suit and the wedding picture were given to the museum by their only child, who did not have offspring (**Fig. 9**). Grietje was 31 when she married 39-year-old Jacob Marks. The municipality of Weststellingwerf, where they lived, is not (yet) involved in the genealogical website 'Alle Friezen' (All Frisians). As a result, no scans of marriage certificates are to be found, which could have given information about the groom's profession.

On this other photograph, we can see the bride on her wedding day; she does not hold a bridal bouquet but wears a corsage made of orange blossoms tucked under her belt (**Fig. 10**).

The original collar from the wedding dress was not passed on to the museum. Instead, the dress came with a separate black satin collar. The worsted crepe dress is straight, has no waist seam but a tuck at the hips, and loose bias-cut flaps dangling on the skirt. The separate black satin collar shows that she has worn this dress since her wedding, certainly at her husband's funeral in 1945. Grietje herself passed away many years later, in 1962.

A painted wedding dress from 1831

I searched the Fries Museum's collection of portraits for possible examples of couples married in black. I did not find any. But recently, as I was visiting the room dedicated to shipping at the Hannemahuis Museum in Harlingen, my eyes immediately fell on two portraits: one of the merchant captain and shipowner Dirk de Jong, and one of his wife, Jantje Prins, dressed in traditional Frisian costume. I was instantly intrigued by her black gown—was it a wedding portrait?

Dirk de Jong's portrait was painted in 1831, the year the couple got married. However, Jantje Prins' had only been painted four years later (**Fig. 11**). It is known that the painter P.F. Greive (Amsterdam, 1811-1872) had a busy job as a professor at the National Academy of Fine Arts in Amsterdam. One can suppose that he did not find the time to paint both portraits one after the other; or maybe that the captain wanted to be home when his wife was being portrayed.

Yet, I believe that for this particular occasion, she wore her wedding dress with the fashionable puff sleeves of 1831, her very best dress, together with the traditional Frisian headdress with lace bonnet on top of a golden tight-fitting helmet-like headdress, the 'oorijzer'. Also, since she wears her wedding ring around her neckerchief, I am almost certain she was painted while wearing her wedding dress.

Conclusion

The Frisian tradition of wearing black at farmers' weddings, recounted by Waling Dykstra, has clearly not been passed down. On the traditional Farmer Wedding Festival in Joure, this year's bride and groom did not wear black, nor did any of the couples who have participated in this re-enactment over the years. Only two of the black wedding dresses from the Fries Museum's collection were worn by well-to-do farmer's daughters; the other brides had various backgrounds.

It was common to reuse the fabric of gowns when they were not worn anymore. Colourful dresses were turned into children's frocks, but black ones were kept as they were, as a remembrance of brides from the past.

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Fig. 1

Ring stabbing by newly wed couple in a chaise at the Farmers Wedding Festival, Joure, 2023.

Photo: Johanna Faber

Fig. 2

Two-pieced crinoline wedding dress of Dettje Winkler, 1862.

Fries Museum, object no. T1999-017, A&B.



Fig. 3

Willem Roelfsema,
with wedding dress replica and example.

Fries Museum.



Fig. 4

Wedding and mourning dress
of Trijntje Halbesma, 1877.

Fries Museum, T1964-005, A&B.
Photo: Erik and Petra Hesmerg.



Fig. 5

Trijntje Halbesma, 1902.



Fig. 6

Eelke Edens' two-pieced wedding dress
in 'princess line', 1882.

Fries Museum T1973-247, A&B.

Fig. 7

Homemade wedding dress
of Klaske de Jong, 1909.

Fries Museum, T1975-029.



Fig. 8

Mourning dress
of Trijntje Douwes de Haan (1864-1948).

Fries Museum, T1997-095.



Fig. 9

The austere wedding dress
of Grietje Oosterhof, 1931.

Fries Museum, T1983-078.



Fig. 10

Wedding photo of Grietje Oosterhof and Jacob Marks.

Fries Museum, FM1983-1049.



Fig. 11

P.F. Greive, 1835.
Portrait of Jantje Prins in her wedding dress.

Hannemahuis Municipal Museum, Harlingen.
Photo: Gieneke Arnolli