

Why Black? Case Study of the National Museum in Krakow Collection (1861-1930s)

Kowalska, Joanna Regina

The National Museum in Krakow, Poland

Abstract

Case studies of several artefacts from the National Museum in Krakow collection help to better understand the function of black in fashion, notably through the hidden stories behind the objects. This research explores the patriotic connotation of black during the post-1861 national mourning period, and its function, as it stood for modesty and practicality within Krakow citizens' wardrobes. While looking at the glamorous and elegant black outfits of Polish noble women, we came across the sad story of a black dress that has become a souvenir from the donor's childhood. The analysis of certain objects always offers the opportunity to further understand our ancestors' motivations to wear black.

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Introduction

There could be many motivations behind the choice of wearing black, depending on the context, status, or personality of the owner. Case studies of several examples (both textile and iconographic) from the National Museum in Krakow collection help to better understand the function of black in fashion, notably through the hidden stories behind the objects. Black had a patriotic connotation during the post-1861 Polish national mourning period. As a modest and practical colour to wear, it was also willingly chosen by Krakow's citizens, as shown in their wardrobes at the time. As a symbol of 'modesty,' black was strongly associated with education, as represented by the dress chosen to attend a doctoral exam

just after the Great War. This modesty could also be quite expensive when considering black Worth dresses belonging to certain princess, or sensual if we think about shiny black night gowns from the 1920s. The analysis of certain objects always offers the opportunity to further understand our ancestors' motivations to wear black.

Polish National Mourning

Since 1796, Poland was under Prussian, Russian, and Austrian occupation. Russian rules were particularly harsh, as Polish culture and language were systematically oppressed. The Russian partition of Poland was also part of the former Polish Commonwealth, where the two most important uprisings erupted. The first one, the November Uprising on 30 November 1830, also called the Polish-Russian war. After it collapsed, Konstanty Gaszyński wrote a poem emphasising the need to only wear black because of the defeat of the homeland:

Black dress

*Mother, put away my dresses,
Pearls and rosy garlands.
Dazzling garments, splendid costumes,
Are no more for me.
Flowers and finery once I adored,*

*Our hopes they did gush like a fountain;
But now as Poland lies stretched in her grave
Nothing will I ever wear again
But a black dress.*

(...)

The words 'black dress' end every other verse of the poem, where colourful and decorative clothes from joyful times are contrasted with black garments representing days of sorrow.¹

This poem became even more relevant during the national mourning period in 1861, and even more popular when it became a song. Black, then, became the most meaningful colour. The national mourning was announced on 3 March 1861, after the massacre of five patriots killed by Russian occupants during the patriot manifestation in Warsaw.² The Archbishop of

¹ Translation by Mark Bence, based on: Patryk Zakrzewski, *The Revolution Wore Black: Protest Fashion in 19th-Century Poland* online: <https://culture.pl/en/article/the-revolution-wore-black-protest-fashion-in-19th-century-poland> [4.12.2023].

² About Polish national mourning for women read: Aleksandra Krypczyk, *Czarna sukienka. Wizerunek Polki w twórczości Artura Grottera*, *Rozprawy Muzeum Narodowego w Krakowie. Seria Nowa*, T. 5, R: 2012. Kraków: Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie, s. 117 – 136. Małgorzata Możdżyńska – Nawotka, *O modach i strojach*, Wrocław 2002, s. 233; Joanna Dobkowska, Joanna Wasilewska, *W cieniu koronkowej parasolki. O modzie i obyczajach w XIX wieku*, Warszawa 2016, s. 166-167; s. Nadia

Warsaw and Primate of Poland, Antoni Melchior Fijałkowski, launched a circular calling for national mourning for an unlimited period of time, valid in all parts of Poland. The following caption is an excerpt from it:

‘All parts of eternal Poland put on indefinite mourning; women only wear a white dress on their wedding day. (...) Today, and for many years, our emblem is the Crown of Thorns, the same one with which we crowned the coffins of the victims yesterday.’³

As a result, all women patriots gave up wearing colourful clothes.

Another massacre, committed by the Russian army in Warsaw in April 1861, when dozens of people were killed, strengthened this decision to wear black. The national mourning had to go on, as in January 1863, a national uprising burst, and after its defeat, many people decided to wear black clothes for many more years. Black clothes received a very strong patriotic symbolic meaning. The most poignant example of this are two pictures by Artur Grottger, widely reproduced in newspapers: *Farewell* and *Welcome*. The first picture shows a Polish maiden in a black dress saying goodbye to her fiancé, who joined the Polish national uprising without certainty of return. She is dressed in a typical black mourning dress from the Crinoline period, with neither decoration nor jewellery, made of matt fabrics (**Fig. 1**). The second picture shows the same couple; this time, she is wearing a white dress, embodying the joy of his return. A careful observer would notice that this joy is imbued with sorrow, as the young man has lost his right arm.

There are very few national mourning dresses preserved in Polish collections, maybe because of the ‘practical’ characteristic of black clothes, which could be worn out to a thread. A very interesting example of such a garment, bearing its own story, is a black outer cover from the collections of the National Museum in Krakow (**Fig. 2**). According to family tradition, it belonged to Konstancja Moraczewska, of the Malski family, aunt of Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, a famous Polish writer of historical novels. The cover was specially commissioned in 1861 on the occasion of national mourning. Konstancja Moraczewska lived in the Palace of the Zamoyski family in Warsaw, from where, in 1863, a bomb was thrown at General Fiodor Berg (19.09.1863), Viceroy of the Kingdom of Poland, at that time part of the Russian Empire. This assassination attempt failed, but the search carried out in the palace after this event was apparently such a difficult experience for the lady that she died the day after. The cover is made of black, soft velvet and decorated with grapevine motives, embroidered with narrow silk tape, silk yarn, and cord. The lining is made of black taffeta.

The Polish national mourning was a very special situation because of its duration. Unfortunately, its message to the world was weakened by Queen Victoria’s mourning after Prince Albert’s death, making the black colour rather more fashion than meaningful. Therefore, women in black were not so impressive anymore. Their wish of being noticed was expressed in Maria Ilnicka’s poem:

Sola-Salamacha, *Moda patriotyczna w Polsce od konfederacji barskiej do powstania warszawskiego*, Lublin - Warszawa 2019, s. 65-92.

³ After Krypczyk, *op. cit.*, s. 125.

'Until the chain of slavery bleeds the necks of free people/ Let the Polish woman's black dress testify to the world / About the most terrible violence committed by criminal lawlessness.'⁴

Although national mourning fashion was mostly identified with women wearing crinoline dresses, men also started to wear mourning black.⁵ As black was not as unusual for men as it was for women, this colour was not enough to symbolise the significance of their grief. As a consequence, each patriot wanting to stress his sorrow was wearing a black *czamara*. This modest, relatively cheap urban outfit served as a distinguishing characteristic for those who defied the occupant's authority and those who believed that the nation was meant to include citizens and peasants, besides nobility and aristocracy. On many occasions, the *czamara* served as a uniform during the January Uprising. After it collapsed, whoever wished to manifest their support for the idea of national independence would wear it. For aristocrats, choosing to wear the modest *czamara* instead of the noble men's *kontusz* costume was a way to prolong national mourning.

Marian Rosco Bogdanowicz, born in 1862, left a very impressive picture of it in his memoirs, from the late 1860s. He wrote:

'The national mourning impressed a ghastly stamp on the entire environment of my childhood years. Our mothers and grandmothers in black dress, often also in veils. The fathers and grandfathers in many homes would wear *czamaras*. My grandfather Podleski and my father would wear them as long as they lived.'⁶

One *czamara* from the National Museum in Krakow collection belonged to the Sapieha family, from Kodeń (**Fig. 3**). We can likely associate it with two family members: Prince Leon Sapieha (1803-1878) and his son, Adam (1828-1903). Leon Sapieha wore a *czamara* to manifest his democratic views. His son, Adam, joined the January Uprising and, in later years, supported progressive political and economic movements. The *czamara* became distinctive apparel for both of them. Adam Sapieha gained the moniker 'Red Prince' for his campaign for unity among all social strata. A black woollen-cloth *czamara*, tailored at the work in the Vienna workshop of A. Matlach and preserved in the collection of the National Museum in Krakow, is similar to the one depicted in the portraits of the Red Prince. It is hard to say today whether it is the same piece of garment we can see on Leon and Adam Sapieha's portraits, or the one modelled on them and kept with great care by Paweł Sapieha (1860- 1934), Adam's son.⁷ The latter was also a true patriot, and is well known as the first

⁴ Krypczyk 2012, s. 117-136

⁵ About men's fashion during national mourning period read: Sola-Salamacha, *op. cit.*, s. 92 – 108; Joanna Regina Kowalska, „Style narodowe w polskiej modzie”, in: *Polskie style narodowe. 1890 – 1918*, ed. Andrzej Szczerski, *Kraków: Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie 2021*, s. 121-143

⁶ Za Kowalska, 2021, s. 129-130

⁷ About *czamaras* in the collections of the National Museum in Krakow read: Kowalska 2023, s. 122-124.

president of the Polish Red Cross Organisation in Galizia. Konstush costumes and czamara were bought to the National Museum Collection in 1980.⁸

Black as colour of modesty

Black became a popular colour choice for burghers' clothes in the second part of the 19th century. A lot of black clothes were part of an important donation from Leszek Wajda (1927-2015), professor of Krakow Academy of Arts, graphic designer and scenographer, and also brother of the famous Polish film director Andrzej Wajda.⁹ But it was his wife, Hanna Mściwujewska, who preserved a huge amount of outfits, or rather mostly pieces of them, which belonged to her family, from the 1860s onwards. These were women clothes from an intelligentsia family connected with Krakow, notably from Maria, born Cińciała, married to Jan Bystroń, a famous Polish linguist, and mother of Jan Stanisław Bystroń, historian, ethnographer, and sociologist. Both Jan and Maria Bystroń came from peasant families and climbed the ladder through studies. Black is predominant in this collection¹⁰ and this followed the conviction that it was seen as modest and practical (a nice example is a black silk blouse with tiny white dots, and black silk skirt that belonged to Maria Bystroń (**Fig. 4**)¹¹). The huge amount of fabric—mostly leftovers after sewing dresses or blouses—proves the importance of practicality at the time. Hanna Wajda's family lived in Lwow (her grandfather, Gustaw Bisanz, was a very important person there—he was professor of the Lviv University of Technology, Dean of the Faculties of Architecture, Rector, and Vice-Rector several times). In 1945, Hanna Wajda's family was evicted from Lviv and lived afterwards in Krakow, in Maria Bystroniowa's apartment, together with Hanna's aunt Zuzanna.¹²

The use of black as a symbol of modesty was inevitably bound to the teaching profession. The collection of the National Museum in Krakow preserves a very special black dress (**Fig. 5**). It belonged to Celina Przemecka, born Piórko (1894-1973), the daughter or ward of a railway doctor from Podgórze. She completed her studies at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Jagiellonian University in 1918. She chose this dress for her doctoral thesis defence ceremony, which took place in 1919. It is modestly black but made of fine silk fabric, well-tailored, and fashionable. What is interesting about the dress is its symbolic meaning. Celina Piórko decided to wear a dress with a white collar similar to sailors' collars and therefore characteristic of school uniforms. Such a dress was appropriate for the character of the

⁸ Kowalska, 2021, s. 210-211.

⁹ For the first time examples from Leszek Wajda donations were published in: *Modna pani u wód: kąpieliska nad Bałtykiem 1880-1914*, ed. M. Buchholz – Todoroska Sopot: Muzeum Sopotu 2010

¹⁰ There is over 40 examples of dress, pieces of dress or accessories in this collection.

¹¹ Inv. No MNK XIX-11140, MNK XIX-11148.

¹² Many information about Leszek Wajda's wife family was gathered by our colleague Rafał Róg, curator of Old Photography Department.

ceremony. On the other hand, it was very suitable for school, where Celina Piórko started her career as a teacher. This also means that practical reasons stood behind the commissioning of this particular dress. It was acquired by the museum in 2018.¹³

The wardrobe of another Krakow teacher, Zofia, born Eminowicz Żulińskiej in 1908, and donated to the museum in 2016 by her daughter, Ewa Żulińska-Dutka, presents several other black outfits. Among them are an elegant day dress in woollen crepe (**Fig. 6**) and a jacket made of a similar fabric, an afternoon dress of light georgette with a matching coat, also made of georgette but more opaque, and a long black satin ball dress.¹⁴ All these outfits date back to the 1930s, when Polish linguist Zofia Żulińska worked in a school for girls from good upbringings. The outfits were commissioned from the workshop of a certain Jewish tailor, whose name, unfortunately, was forgotten.

Glamorous black

Sometimes, black dresses could be transformed into glamorous and rich outfits, by adding some shine to them. One of the most luxurious dresses in the collection of the National Museum in Krakow is a dress from Charles Frederic Worth's workshop, which could be dated back to around 1890. It was obtained in Paris for Elżbieta de Vaux (1866–1940), princess Lubomirska (**Fig. 7**). In 1890, she was just married to Prince Władysław Lubomirski, so the dress could be commissioned as a part of her dowry. It is extremely splendid and was quite proper outfit for her high social status. Its deep black velvet is only shaded with decorations made of jets. The main emphasis is placed on the decoration of the sleeves. The jets create an ornament of huge carnations, clearly referring to the ornamentation of Turkish fabrics and the taste of Polish people. It makes us think that such ornamentation may have been done according to a special wish expressed by the future princess. Some parts of the pattern are lined with cotton tulle, which enhances the three-dimensional impression of the ornament. The dress is fastened like a coat and is partially decorated with freely flowing jet decorations on the shoulder and at the waist: bows with flower garlands. A jacquard label from the Worth workshop is sewn into the waistband. The dress was bought for the National Museum collections by the ancestors of Elżbieta Lubomirska.¹⁵

Black is inseparably linked with shine for the 1920s ball dress generation. The simply cut chemise dresses of that time very often combined delicate black fabric with sparkling

¹³ Joanna Kowalska, "Suknia Celiny Piórko" ("Dress of Celina Piórko") in *Nowy początek : modernizm w II RP (A new beginning : modernism in the Second Polish Republic)*, ed. P. Juskiewicz, A. Szczerski, Kraków 2022, s. 247 – 248.

¹⁴ Inv. no: MNK XIX-12319/1-2, MNK XIX-12320/1-2, MNK XIX-12321/1-3, MNK XIX-12322/1-2, MNK XIX-12323.

¹⁵ Nr inw. MNK XIX-5460 (Beata Biedrońska-Słotowa, Joanna Kowalska, *Za modą przez wieki. Ubiory z kolekcji Muzeum Narodowego w Krakowie. [Wystawa - Gmach Główny Muzeum, 26 września - 31 grudnia 2003]*, Kraków : Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie, 2003, s. 82.

decoration of heavy glass beads, jets, or sequins. The collection of the National Museum in Krakow preserves five such dresses. They all belonged to members of wealthy families¹⁶. One of them is a beautiful dress with a bodice covered with black, shiny sequins, resembling knight's armour, with a light, asymmetrical skirt of tulle edged with machine lace (**Fig. 8**).¹⁷

Black dress as a souvenir from the past

The very special ball dress was donated to the National Museum in Krakow in 2011 by Teresa Maria Reguła. She was the daughter of Róża and Jan Reguła, and Secretary of the Jagiellonian University¹⁸. The sad story of the person who wore the dress made it a precious souvenir and a reminder of old times. According to the donor, the dress belonged to her mother, Róża Reguła, and was sewn in a tailor's workshop during her holidays in Budapest in 1935 or 1936. Both of the donor's parents were murdered by the Germans during World War II: her mother in the Gestapo prison at Montelupich Street in Krakow, and her father in the Gross-Rosen Nazi concentration camp. This very elegant dress was made of black silk fabric with matte avers and shiny revers. The donor remembers happy moments, when she was accompanying her mother during her visits to the tailor's workshop. For 70 years, she kept the dress because it was the only thing belonging to her mother left. Not having any ancestors, the lady decided to offer the dress to the National Museum in Krakow collections as an everlasting souvenir of her personal sorrowful history.

Conclusion

The meaning of black in costume is very different depending on time and circumstances. It was one of the most used colours in the wardrobes of Polish men and women, and its presence in the costume collections of the National Museum in Krakow seems to be privileged.

¹⁶ Nr inv. MNK XIX- 5025 (Słotowa, Kowalska 2002, s. 101; *Nie tylko art déco. Wystawa w Muzeum Narodowym w Krakowie, [maj - wrzesień 2007]*, Kraków : Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie, 2007, s. 54); MNK XIX-10677; MNK XIX-11011; MNK XIX-11540; MNK XIX-11542.

¹⁷ MNK XIX-11011.

¹⁸ MNK XIX-11547/1-2.

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Fig. 1

Artur Grottger (1837-1867),
Year 1863 - Farewell.
Poland, 1866.
Purchased, 1897.

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of the National Museum in Krakow.

Fig. 2

Velvet cover for National Mourning, Warsaw, 1861.
Purchased, 1966.
© Photographic Workshop
of the National Museum in Krakow.



Fig. 3

Czamara
A. Matlach tailoring house,
Vienna, second half on 19th century.
Purchased, 1980.

© Photographic Workshop
of the National Museum in Krakow.

Fig. 4

Silk blouse and skirt, belonging to Maria Bystron Kraków,
circa 1905.

Given by Leszek Wajda, 2009.

© Photographic Workshop
of the National Museum in Krakow.



Fig. 5

Dress worn for a doctoral thesis defence,
belonging to Celina Piórko.
Kraków, 1919.
Purchased, 2016.

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of the National Museum in Krakow.

Fig. 6

Woollen dress belonging to
Zofia Eminowicz Zulinska
Tailor's workshop of unknown Jew,
Kraków, 1930s.

Given by Ewa Zulinska-Dutka, 2016.

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of the National Museum in Krakow.





Fig. 7

Velvet dress belonging to princess Elzbieta Lubomirska,
Charles Frederic Worth's workshop,
Paris, circa 1890.
Purchased, 1968.

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of the National Museum in Krakow.

Fig. 8

Ball chemise dress,
Poland, circa 1928.

Given by
Barbara Lewartowska-Skalska, 2008.

© Photographic Workshop
of the National Museum in Krakow.



Fig. 9

Evening dress belonging to Róża Reguła,
Budapest, 1935 or 1936.

Given by Teresa Maria Reguła.

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of the National Museum in Krakow.