

# **Dark and Romantic Goths: Contemporary Documentation Project**

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## **Abstract**

Black is often associated with death, darkness, and elegance in Western cultures. This colour, associated with both evil and mystery, has diverse connotations, from formal wear to political symbolism. The introduction of black to rock music occurred in the 1970s, through the punk movement. This legacy was carried on, for example, by Goth rock bands, and, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, within post-punk circles, the dark ambiance of both music and clothing became referred to as 'gothic.' In the 21st century, goths are connected by music, dark aesthetics, and club culture.

The Gothic Subculture Documentation Project of 2010, conducted by Tampere Historical Museums, aimed to capture the essence of Goth culture in Tampere, Finland. This paper explores how the Goth subculture appeared in 2010, detailing the research process, and emphasising how the museum acquired clothing and accessories for its collection.

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## **Introduction**

Black is often associated with death, darkness, and gloom in Western cultures. Additionally, this colour is linked to elegance and mystery, as well as to darkness and evil forces. In politics, black has served as a symbol for both fascism and anarchism. In contrast, its timeless and elegant nature has made it one of the most frequently used colours in the fashion industry, representing a strong and enduring fashion trend and being a widespread choice for formal wear.

The introduction of black to rock music occurred in the 1970s through the influence of the punk movement. This legacy lasted, with a particularly impactful influence on heavy metal and gothic rock bands. In the late 1970s and 1980s, within post-punk circles, the dark ambiance of both music and clothing became known as 'gothic.' As a result of this term's use as an adjective to characterise a musical style, members of this subculture have also come to be referred to as goths (Fig. 1).

### **Gothic Subculture Documentation Project, 2010**

The Tampere Historical Museums occasionally undertake various contemporary documentation projects. The aim is to study specific subjects through interviews, photography, and videography, and to collect images, artefacts, and archival materials for the museums' collections. Themes in contemporary documentation range from changes in the cityscape to local companies' activities and production. The process begins with an examination of existing research literature related to the theme. However, scientific literature on contemporary cultural phenomena may not always be available, so supplementation from periodicals, newspapers, and internet sources is often needed.

It is important to note that contemporary documentation projects are relatively small-scale and quite swiftly implemented initiatives, and as such, they should not be compared with comprehensive research projects. Materials from these projects are sometimes incorporated into new exhibitions, but this is not always the case. For instance, the materials gathered during the Gothic Subculture Documentation Project in 2010, discussed in this article, have not been used in museum exhibitions so far.

The project group typically consists of two or three members of the museum's staff, although some minor projects can be executed by a single person. In the Gothic Subculture Documentation Project, a project researcher was assigned to handle the background study and research plan, which included conducting some interviews. A photographer and researcher from the museum's photo archive took photographs and saved them in the museum's database. Additionally, a researcher from the Collection Department managed the artifacts donated to the museum.

The choice of this theme stemmed from the quite strong presence of gothic subculture in Tampere during the early 2000s. Tampere even earned the nickname 'Gothic Capital of Finland,' despite the fact that there were active scenes in Helsinki and other cities, too. The only Gothic Rock festival in Finland, Lumous, was hosted in Tampere (2001–2020). By 2010, it had become an established and popular four-day event, featuring club gigs, a sauna evening, a Gothic Market, and a Gothic Picnic known as 'Gothnic'. These events were visible throughout the city. Personal preferences also influenced the theme choice, as the project group members were attracted by both popular culture and rock music, making an in-depth exploration of the gothic subculture a compelling task.

Therefore, in 2010, the focus was on the gothic subculture in Tampere. Although the gothic subculture in Finland has always been relatively small, it has existed since the early 1980s and holds significance as a subject of research for any current community. Looking back, the timing of the project was good; in 2023, it would have been too late. The marginal group has become even more marginal, and even the goths' own festival concluded in 2020.

This paper sheds light on how the gothic subculture was perceived by researchers in 2010 and how the work was carried out, with a particular focus on the clothing and accessories added to the collection. An emphasis is placed on Goths' style and clothing, omitting discussion on music, despite its acknowledged importance in the Gothic subculture.

All objects and photos featured in this presentation are sourced from the Gothic subculture documentation project and are all from the collections of Tampere Historical Museums.

## The Gothic subculture

Subculture: The way of life, customs, and ideas of a particular group of people within a society that are different from the rest of that society. (Cambridge Dictionary: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/subculture>, 1.12.2023)

Drawing distinct lines between various subcultures, including the goths, often proves challenging. Is a Goth defined by societal perception or self-identification? In the early 21st century, debates within the gothic subculture constantly pondered what was gothic and what was not. It is jokingly said that a genuine Goth denies being a goth even on her/his deathbed.

The Modern Goths' roots trace back to the 18th-19th centuries, originating from the Gothic style and its ideology. The original Goths were East Germanic people who influenced, on their part, the downfall of the Roman Empire. The term 'Gothic' itself turned negative during the Renaissance; it became synonymous with barbarianism. Over time, it evolved into a neutral descriptor of the gothic art period. In the late 18th century, interest in 'gothic' castles' ruins, medieval romanticism, Catholicism, and supernatural nostalgia grew. Also, the Gothic novel emerged in the late 18th century: Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) is generally regarded as the first Gothic novel. Nowadays, 'Gothic' is more associated with horror, darkness, and the supernatural. From the late 1990s onwards, horror movies used similar topics: graveyards, castle or church ruins, ghosts, vampires, nightmares, cursed families... Similar horror imagery is still an important part of Gothic subculture.

The convergence of Gothic style and popular music occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s within post-punk circles. The dark atmosphere of music and clothing was called 'Gothic.' As a result, this term's use as an adjective to characterise a musical style led to members of this subculture also being referred to as 'Goths'. In the 21st century, goths are united by music, dark aesthetics, and club culture. The roots of modern Gothic fashion can be found in the world of both punk and glam rock.

Defining the common features of a group is always simplistic, but let's allow it here. Although each Goth is unique, contemporary goths can generally be characterised by:

1. A preference for dark aesthetics.
2. A specific musical taste.
3. A distinct mindset or worldview.

Goth ideology primarily centers on aesthetics rather than ethics or politics. They do not share a common religious bond, although spiritual, supernatural, and religious imagery hold a significant place in gothic fashion, song lyrics, and the visual arts. The reason for using religious imagery varies from expressing conviction to satire or mere decoration.

(Fig. 2)

## The Gothic Fashion Styles

Gothic dressing can be very diverse, and during the course of its 40-year history, its styles have evolved as well. There are several different ways to classify Gothic styles, and the ways of classifying have changed over time, too.

The classification utilised here comes from Laura Schwöbel, an anthropologist who explored Finnish Gothic subculture in her Master Thesis in 2006. The temporal and local proximity to the museum's contemporary documentation project justified the use of her categories. Schwöbel introduced 'ideal types' of goths, emphasising that these are not direct reflections of reality but rather serve as measuring tools to evaluate it. According to her, 'ideal types' are artificial measures created by science to simplify the analysis of reality (Schwöbel 2006, 47). So it is important to note that these ideal types serve as analytical tools, simplifying the understanding of Gothic fashion rather than directly reflecting the diversity and complexity found in real-life Gothic communities.

The ideal types of goths, according to Laura Swöbel, include: Velvet Goth, Victorian Goth, Death Rock Goth, Cyber Goth, and the Elegant Gothic Lolita.

The ideal type called 'Velvet Goth' (**Fig. 3**) is strongly influenced by the medieval way of dressing, namely long dresses and gowns that resemble the appearance of a young lady of a castle. Black and ruby-coloured velvet fabrics fall beautifully and breathe the romantic and dark atmosphere of the bygone world. Long coats or robes are also worn by male Velvet Goths.

'Victorian Goth' (**Fig. 4**) is inspired by Victorian fashion, especially the Victorian tight-lacing corset, which highlights the bosom and minimises the waist, thus producing an hourglass shape. To complete the outfit, the corset should be combined with long skirts and dresses with petticoats. Accessories borrowed from baroque fashion play a crucial role and may include long gloves, fans, neckbands, handbags, and parasols. The male Victorian Goth's outfits often include hats, decorated shirts, and velvet jackets.

The ideal type called 'Death Rock Goth' (**Fig. 5**) is greatly influenced by the punk style, with spiky or Mohawk hairstyles, sometimes colored in bright colors. It also includes bondage trousers, ripped fishnets, studded, or spiked jewelry. The dominant colour for clothing is black. The style is quite masculine when compared to other Gothic styles; for example, trousers seem to be more popular than skirts. Combat boots are commonly worn.

'Cyber Goth' (**Fig. 6**) is a kind of hybrid machine-man futuristic style that has been very fashionable in the 21st century. Its most distinctive attribute is the use of bright colours in addition

to traditional black. This can be seen in colourful hair extensions, which are woven into black hair and are very popular amongst both women and men. Cyber Goths' clothing is also a combination of black and some other bright colours, such as blue, purple, and pink. Cyber Goths often use PVC material, huge platform boots, and glowing make up. Piercings and goggles are also common in this style.

The 'Elegant Gothic Lolita' (**Fig. 7**) style first appeared in Japanese youth culture in the late 1990s. This "French maid meets Alice in Wonderland style" often aims to imitate the look of Victorian porcelain dolls. Costumes are often decorated with ribbons and a lot of lace. Skirts are knee-length, and often worn with a crinoline or petticoat to enhance volume. It appears that this Lolita fashion forms a distinctive subculture on its own.

Early in the 21st century, Finnish clubs saw the manifestation of all the different Gothic styles at the same time, in perfect harmony. The small subculture exhibited a wide range of variation. This diversity can also be seen in the photographs taken at the Lumous festival.

### **Characteristics of Gothic fashion**

The Gothic subculture is closely associated with a distinctive style of clothing that often conveys elements of darkness, individualism, and self-expression. Gothic fashion varies, but certain common features unify its aesthetics.

**Color Palette:** Gothic fashion is known for its preference for dark colours, particularly black. Deep red, purple, dark blue, and green may also be incorporated into the Gothic clothing.

**Clothing:** Gothic clothing displays considerable diversity, ranging from Romantic and Victorian styles to more modern and bold outfits. Typical garments include corsets, long skirts, fishnet stockings, black jeans, and leather ensembles. Goths may also opt for concealing attire such as capes or long coats with sizable hoods, thus adding an extra layer of mystery to their look (**Fig. 8**).

**Materials:** Leather, velvet, lace, satin, PVC, and metallic details are common materials in Gothic fashion. Various surfaces and textures add complexity and richness to the monochromatic palette of Gothic fabrics (**Fig. 9**).

**Accessories:** Gothic dress is often complemented by a variety of accessories, including large jewelry, chains, studs, crucifixes, or other symbolic elements. Additionally, black gloves and long nails can be important components of the Gothic look. These accessories contribute to the bold and expressive nature of Gothic fashion, adding distinctive and symbolic touches to the ensemble (**Fig. 10**).

**Shoes:** The range of gothic footwear is wide. Common choices include high boots, platform shoes, high heels, and heavy combat boots. The selection of shoes adds to the overall versatility of Gothic style, allowing individuals to express their unique preferences within the broader aesthetic (**Fig. 11**).

**Hair:** Hairstyles in Gothic fashion display diversity, ranging from long and straight hair to curls or dishevelled hairstyles. Additionally, hair colour can range from black to various bold colours like purple or red, adding another layer of individuality to the overall look.

**Make-up:** Strong and dramatic make-up is a common feature in Gothic style for both men and women. Examples of Gothic make-up include dark lips, intense eyeshadow around the eyes, and faces with a white-powdered complexion. This bold and distinctive make-up enhances the overall gothic aesthetic, contributing to the expressive and individualistic nature of the style.

## **The Gothic collection**

As part of the Gothic Documentation Project, 33 pieces of clothing, accessories, or other objects were added to the museum's collection. The museum's database includes 88 photos with the keyword gootti\* (encompassing both 'Goth' and 'gothic'), but the actual number of photos taken is likely higher. Additionally, the Gothic collection comprises about 20 posters, 20 flyers, and two music CDs.

All the outfits in the collection are women's clothing. Three donors contributed to it, with one donating a single long winter coat. The donors selected items from their own personal wardrobes, while others were purchased for the museum's collection. Information about the original purchase and usage context of the clothes was also recorded in the database, which significantly increases the museum value of the collection. The clothes and accessories are dated from 1994 to 2010. Recycling has been very common; many items were bought from flea markets and friends. Notably, Finnish Gothic shops like Back Street in Tampere are well represented.

It is unfortunate that no men's clothing was added to the museum's collection. Whether due to a lack of available donors or the perception that black pants and a band shirt are not distinctive enough; for example, buying a spectacular outfit directly from a male Goth could have complemented the collection nicely.

The photos complement the collection of objects well. During the Lumous festival, people entering the Tullikamari club, the audience at gigs, and musicians have been filmed. The Gothic market features photographs of sales products, clothes, accessories, and CDs. The photographer also documented a picnic in the park, providing additional context to the documentation project.

## References

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**Fig. 1**

Gothnic at the Näsinpuisto Park,  
11 July 2010.

Antti Liuttunen, Vapriikki Photo Archive.

**Fig. 2**

Typical gothic accessories:  
crucifixes in both necklaces and ear-  
rings, long gloves, fan, black nails,  
lip piercings and black lace.

Antti Liuttunen, Vapriikki Photo Archive.



**Fig. 3**

On a warm and bright midsummer evening, there  
were fewer goths wearing heavy velvet clothes, but the  
deep red top with trumpet sleeves, fishnet tights and  
high-heeled boots represent the goth style very well.

Antti Liuttunen, Vapriikki Photo Archive.



**Fig. 4**

Full-length, black Victorian-inspired gothic dresses feature corset-like tops. Black lace and ruby red accent color is used in the dresses. The outfit is completed by black nails, silver jewelry, handbags, and hat-themed hair accessories.

Antti Liuttunen, Vapriikki Photo Archive.



**Fig. 5**

**Left:** Jeans and vest cut from a denim jacket with band badges, combat boots and probably an army surplus bag.

**Right:** A long leather jacket, leather pants, and boots, a frill shirt, and a crucifix. Almost everything in black: typical attributes of male goths.

Antti Liuttunen, Vapriikki Photo Archive.



**Fig. 6**

Cyber Goths with their colorful hair extensions brought color to the dark look of the goths. However, they had corsets as well as other female Goths.

Antti Liuttunen, Vapriikki Photo Archive.





**Fig. 7**

Goth folk diversity.

**Left:** Mohawk hair and black, punk style bondage shirt and pants and combat boots;

**Right:** A little girly dress, Mary Jane platform shoes, a bonnet, a Hello Kitty tote bag, and a lace parasol.

Antti Liuttunen, Vapriikki Photo Archive.



**Fig. 8**

**Examples from the museum's goth collection:**

- a) Faux leather corset, used in the years 2005-2007.
- b) Vinyl shorts, worn with fishnet stockings.
- c) Skull-patterned corset with a pinstripe patterned mini skirt adorned with zippers, buckles, and straps.

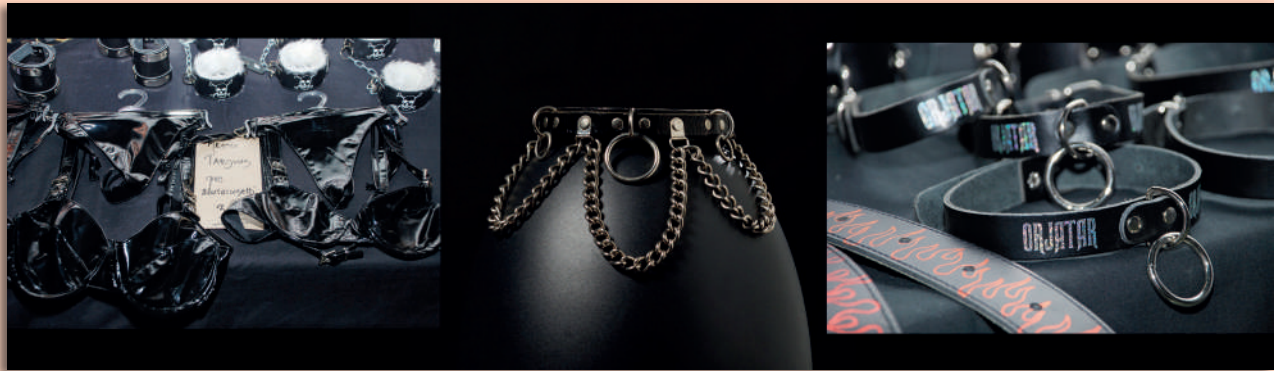
Collections of Tampere Historical Museums. Photo Reetta Lepistö.



**Fig. 9**

Gothic skirts vary in length from full length to mini. Black outfits were diversified by combining different textures, adding accent colours, or embellishing them with studs and zipper decorations.

Collections of Tampere Historical Museums.  
Photo Reetta Lepistö.



**Fig. 10**

**Fetish-style accessories from the collection:**

a) and c) some examples what the Gothic Market had to offer at the Lumous festival in 2010.

Antti Liuttunen, Vapriikki Photo Archive.

b) A leather collar decorated with studs and chains, used for festivals from 2001 to 2005.

Collections of Tampere Historical Museums. Photo Reetta Lepistö.



**Fig. 11**

**Showy platform boots:**

a) Buckle-adorned boots purchased in London in 2007, only worn a few times.

b) Glamrock-style favorite shoes, heavily worn during the years 2007-2008, including during Inter Rail trip.

Collections of Tampere Historical Museums. Photo Reetta Lepistö.