

Brides in Black: The Tradition of Black Bridal Wear in 18th and 19th Centuries Finland

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Abstract

White has become the most popular colour for wedding dresses across most of Europe and has been a favourite choice for many brides since the mid-19th century. Wearing a black wedding dress is seen as an unusual choice today, but from the late 18th to the early 20th century, black wedding dresses were considered as the norm for peasant women in several parts of Finland.

This paper explores the cultural heritage of black bridal wear and sheds light on the lesser-known traditional wedding fashions of Finnish brides. I will cover the following questions: Why and when did black wedding dresses become a part of the traditional wedding attire for peasant women in different parts of Finland? What was the design of the traditional wedding dress based on?

Finland's cultural heritage is directly tied to its rich history of textiles and dress. Textiles played an important role in peasant women's lives; they frequently wore clothing made from homespun textiles, made by their own hands. Bridal wear constitutes an integral part of this heritage, and investigating the history of black wedding dresses unveils an exciting and fascinating part of Finland's cultural traditions.

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Brides in black: a peasant tradition

When we think of the traditional and quintessential wedding day attire of most brides in Western nations, we generally picture white dresses. Quite often, bridal outfits are accompanied by a veil, tiara, or other type of headpiece often adorned with shiny gemstones (or equivalents made of plastic), which complete the 'look' most brides are trying to attain. White slowly became the norm for wedding dresses, particularly throughout the 19th century,

when it gained more and more popularity through images of Queen Victoria, who famously wore white instead of silver (considered more royal) at her wedding to Prince Albert of Saxe Coburg and Gotha in 1840. Fashion plates in many magazines published in various European countries also helped disseminate the ideal image of the bride in white, whereas in Finland, the tradition of wearing a black wedding dress only got stronger.

By the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, traditional black wedding dresses worn by Finnish peasant brides became an increasingly rare sight and caught the attention of those interested in ethnographical studies and Finnish peasant traditions. Fueled by national romanticism and a drive to discover more about Finland's heritage, traditional brides have been depicted in many portraits and photographs. Luckily, several of these depictions of peasant brides from different parts of Finland wearing their black wedding day finery and all the accessories that made a bride a bride, still exist. There are also some porcelain dolls from the mid-19th century that are part of the collection of the national museum of Finland and depict traditional peasant brides in all their wedding day finery.

(Fig.1 & 2)

The outfits shown in images 1 and 2 both consist of a black dress, which provides the backdrop for a host of decorative accessories. The accessories include a belt-like sash, several necklaces and brooches, and, most importantly, elaborate bridal crowns. Bridal crowns could weigh up to several kilograms and, therefore, were very heavy to wear. Some sources even mention crowns being sewn onto their wearers' hair in order to help them stay in place. In such cases, the bride would plait her hair, and the crown would be sewn onto the plaits.

Black wedding dresses were used by Finnish brides in several regions of the country. Indeed, the tradition was not only limited to Ostrobothnia, where the first two images were taken, but has been recorded in several other areas, including Kymenlaakso in the east and the Åland islands in the south-west. Records mentioning black bridal dresses also come from more inland areas, so the phenomenon is not strictly limited to coastal towns either. It can therefore be stated that the tradition was widely spread across the country.

These days, traditional black wedding dresses can mostly be seen in photographs and paintings, and very few of these dresses have survived in Finnish museum collections. More fashionable dresses, which simply happen to be black, did survive, but they seem to have no relation to the dresses worn by traditional peasant brides.

In borrowed finery

Traditional black wedding dresses were, as previously stated, always part of a larger selection of items that together formed the bridal outfit. This was true in many parts of Finland, though accessories did not always look the same. In image 3, we see a bridal outfit from the Kymenlaakso region in eastern Finland. In this case, the dress is still black, but the bridal crown has a completely different shape, which is somewhat reminiscent of a traditional

Russian kokoshnik headdress and of lighter construction compared to its Ostrobothnian counterpart.

(Fig. 3)

Many of the decorative accessories, including bridal crowns, were made from a variety of materials, such as glass, coloured and metallic papers, and various semi-precious gems. On the shield-like chest piece of the Kymenlaakso dress, we see two round mirrors, which are prominently placed on the front of the outfit. Such reflective surfaces were used to ward off the evil eye and the devil's gaze.

The images of this article all show peasant brides. Despite their wedding day finery, these women were not necessarily very wealthy and lived in rural communities such as farms or cottages. In fact, it is difficult to tell what their financial status was based on their wedding outfits. This is because much of their accessories, and sometimes even their wedding dress itself, were not theirs, but were on loan.

Bridal accessories were usually provided to local brides by someone called the 'bride's dresser', or '*morsiamentukija*' in Finnish. This job usually belonged to an older, trustworthy woman from the community, who loaned her accessories and helped the brides dress up on their wedding day. Hence, the same accessories were worn by all local brides, meaning that they were usually in use and passed on from one bride's dresser to another for multiple generations.

It would appear that some of the chest pieces used on traditional bridal gowns are in fact 18th century stomachers, which have been repurposed and reused to provide a stable surface on which various bridal accessories could be stitched and pinned on. As the subject of my ongoing PhD research focuses specifically on 18th century women's fashion, this piqued my interest and led me to further question the origins of black bridal dresses in general: where does this tradition come from?

Of noblewomen and kings: 18th century influence

There are several theories on why black was chosen as a bridal colour. Black was, of course, an expensive colour to create and required several dyes to achieve. A black silk dress was also a sign of maturity and seriousness; for brides who owned their bridal dress, it was the finest dress in their wardrobe. Black was a colour you could wear on any occasion, from sombre moments such as funerals and mourning periods to festivities and the reception of important guests. Wearing a black silk dress was an immediate sign of a change in status, from an unmarried maiden to a married woman who was likely the mistress of her own household.

Another theory demonstrating why bridal dresses followed a specific fashion, particularly in Ostrobothnia, takes us back to the second half of the 18th century. In the communities where brides wore borrowed dresses from the bride's dresser or, in some cases, the local parish,

and these dresses had usually been donated to the cause by wealthy local women who would have been a part of the gentry and were, in some cases, members of the nobility. Dresses were donated for several reasons, which could include the simple fact that they no longer suited their original owners or that the latter merely disliked them. There were, however, cases of wealthy women donating a dress to their local community in their will, which stipulated that a specific dress, along with specific accessories, were meant to be used by local brides.

These donations were not always favourably looked upon and peasant brides were sometimes criticised for wearing finery beyond their means on their wedding days. In the 18th century, when the vast majority of Finland was part of the Kingdom of Sweden, there were several sumptuary laws in place. These laws determined how people were allowed to dress and what types of fabrics they were allowed to wear, in both their clothing and accessories. What you were allowed to wear depended on your social class: for instance, peasants were generally not allowed to wear silk fabrics. The way you dressed was supposed to be an easy way to determine which social class you belonged to. A peasant bride clothed in silk naturally made people raise their eyebrows.

Some traditional black bridal gowns from the Ostrobothnia region present surprising similarities with an 18th-century court dress, namely the Swedish national dress, *nationella dräkten*, designed by King Gustav III in 1778. The dress was supposed to unify Swedish nobles and became a mandated court uniform during Gustav's reign. Two versions existed for both men and women: a blue one and, more interestingly for the purposes of this article, a black one. The dress was unpopular with the nobles, and it is likely that perhaps some noblewomen who scarcely visited court and had little use for the dress donated it instead for local brides. In fact, in her book *A Glimpse into 18th Century Tailoring*, Therese Holmgren introduces one of the only surviving examples of the black national dress. According to Holmgren, the dress belongs to the Västergötlands Museum and originally came from Toarp Parish, where peasant brides could borrow it to get married in.

(Fig. 4)

The black version of the national dress is also very similar to the wedding attire represented in a watercolour painting of an Ostrobothnian bridal party, by C. P. Elfström, as shown in image 4. The painting is titled *Bonde bröllop* [peasant wedding] and is dated from ca. 1800-1829. In the centre of the painting, a peasant bride sits in her distinctly 18th-century black dress, which is decorated with pink or red sashes. The decorative white sleeve cuffs are very similar to those of Ostrobothnian traditional wedding dresses, and the bride's feathered headdress and powdered hairstyle are very similar to what would have been worn by fashionable women in the late 18th century. It is possible that the decorative feathers later morphed into a bridal crown, which was sometimes also decorated with feathers. The groom is wearing an exact match of the men's national dress. In 1809, Finland became part of the Russian Empire. After that date, whatever national dresses remained in noblewomen's wardrobes would have been reused, refashioned, or perhaps donated to the bridal cause.

Conclusion

In conclusion, not all black dresses worn by peasant brides in Finland were of aristocratic origin. However, the tradition of noblewomen donating their garments, along with the general custom of people reusing expensive textiles, lends an interesting point of view to the potential origins of the traditional black wedding dresses worn by peasant brides in Finland. Wearing the traditional bridal dress became increasingly rare, and by the early decades of the 20th century, the custom had nearly disappeared. Wearing a black wedding dress is now seen as a fashion statement, usually reserved for brides who want to look less traditional. Finnish peasant brides of yesteryear would respectfully disagree with such a statement.

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Fig. 1

Photograph of a peasant bride from Ylikiiminki, by Johan Brjörkman, 1876.

© Finnish Heritage Agency.

Fig. 2

Photograph of a peasant bride from Etelä-Pohjanmaa (Southern Ostrobothnia), by Julia Widgrén, 1876.

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Fig. 3

Bridal outfit including wedding dress, bridal crown and other accessories, late 19th century.

© Kymenlaakso Museum.

Bonde bröllop (A Peasant Wedding), watercolour, C.P. Elfström, 1800-1829.

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Fig. 4

