

## **Black Objects in the Exhibition ‘Fashion & City’**

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### **Abstract**

The ‘Fashion & City’ exhibition of the Budapest History Museum, Kiscell Museum, opened on the occasion of the 150<sup>th</sup> birthday of Budapest, celebrating the anniversary of the unification of Pest, Buda and Óbuda, the birth of the capital city. The exhibition showcases objects related to clothing from the last century and a half, which are organised by colours. The group of black objects shows the history and significance of black in fashion: mourning, menswear, modernity, little black dress, eveningwear, and rebellion.

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### **Exhibiting the history of black**

After organising an exhibition in 2019 about the significance of ‘shine’ in fashion—how it helped to represent the privileged position of noblemen some centuries ago, and how it became a tool of personal extravagance after shiny elements became cheaper with mass production—I have decided to plan a new exhibition at the Budapest History Museum, about its opposite, ‘black’; namely the lack of light, the history of the darkest colour, and black clothing.

At that time, I had identified some important topics and aspects related to the role of the black colour in fashion, over the centuries, such as mourning, menswear, Queen Elisabeth’s beauty and horse riding (black costume, or Amazon costume), age and youth (*Lilly Langtry, portrait of Madame X*, painted by John Singer Sargent), the Art Nouveau movement (Secession, new style) at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, World War I and the changing roles of women (simple and comfortable dresses to move freely, similar to menswear), the little black dress for working women, black cocktail or evening dresses, the use of black to symbolise rebellion.

But in 2023, on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the Hungarian capital city, the Budapest History Museum, Kiscell Museum, instead decided to organise an exhibition on the history of fashion over the last century and a half. As curator of this exhibition, I started to collect objects representing the past 150 years of both Budapest and its fashion and realised that all clothes or accessories were telling the same stories: who had created them; how and where they had been produced; where they had been sold; who had bought them; who had

worn them and why; what they represented; what messages their owners wanted to deliver about themselves. Therefore, in order to avoid redundancies, I found another way to organise these objects, selecting and gathering them by colours, so that I finally got a group of black objects, among others.

### **The black groups in the exhibition 'Fashion & City'**

The question is, what does the group of selected black items from the last 150 years show us? Each group gathered a lot of different objects that coincidentally fell into the same category and belonged together.

#### Objects of mourning

A bonnet (**Fig. 1**), a fan (**Fig. 2**), hat pins, a mantle (**Fig. 3**), and a jacket—in Hungarian, called '*mente*' and '*dolmány*'—have been selected as objects of mourning. These black garments were used at the unfortunate end of World War I, after Hungary lost two-thirds of its territory. Back then, many people were gripped by grief and therefore wore mourning outfits.

#### Objects of menswear

The objects include a lot of men's garments, among which is a 'gehrock' (frock coat) (**Fig. 4**), also known as '*ferencjóska*' in Hungarian. It was named after Franz Joseph, the Habsburg Emperor and King, because this garment had to be worn when a citizen, not a nobleman, had to appear before the king. The second one is a dinner jacket (**Fig. 5**) holding a very sad story: it was the wedding suit of a man, a doctor, in 1943, who died the next year at war. The last garment is a man's suit, which was transformed into a fashionable female coat dress with a velvet collar after World War II (**Fig. 6**). As many clothes were damaged during the war, there was a lack of fabrics, and people used to re-use older clothes to make new ones. This dress was designed in the style of Christian Dior's pencil line.

#### Objects of youth and modernism

These objects prove the changing role of black in fashion. Black became more and more fashionable and was no longer only considered a colour for mourning or attributed to elderly people's or men's clothes. Free movement in clothing has become important, as shown by swimsuits (**Fig. 7**), little black dresses (**Fig. 8**), and coats (**Fig. 9**) with straight cuts, directly influenced by menswear and resulting from many changes in women's lifestyle and position in the 1920s. These objects are black accessories and hats from the 1930-1940's, when this colour became a real classic. They are perfect for everyday use, because black shoes, a black hat, or black fashion jewellery can be easily paired with any outfit.

#### Objects of rebellion and elegance

The selection presents two very different examples of Hungarian designer outfits from the 1990's. One of them follows the trend designed by Vivienne Westwood, or the Antwerp Six, namely the deconstruction of clothes (**Fig. 10**). The designers of the ARTISTA brand were very

young at that time and spent a semester in London during their studies – where they must have seen this new direction of fashion. It was quite new in Hungary then, very fresh, and a little bit unusual, as it was just some years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and socialism.

The other was designed by Kati Zoób for a very elegant occasion: a ball at the Hungarian State Opera House in 1997 (**Fig. 11**). It is an evening ensemble made of *dévoré* silk, rather simple for a ball. We can suppose its wearer did not want to be discovered or show herself off, while being very fine and elegant. Both of these designers are still working and are famous in Hungary.



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**Fig. 1**

Bonnet, Object of mourning.

Photo: Judit Fáyiné Szalatnyay.

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**Fig. 2**

Mourning fan, Object of mourning.

Photo: Judit Fáyiné Szalatnyay.

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**Fig. 3**

Mantle, 1920.  
Object of mourning.

Photo: Misi Kondella.

© Budapest History Museum



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**Fig. 4**

*Gehrock* (frock coat),  
also known as *ferencjóska*, 1895.

Photo: Misi Kondella.  
© Budapest History Museum



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**Fig. 5**

Dinner jacket, 1943.

Photo: Misi Kondella.  
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**Fig. 6**

Man's suit transformed into a female coat, 1948.

Photo: Misi Kondella.  
© Budapest History Museum





Swimsuits, Object of youth and modernism. **Fig. 7**  
Photo: Szent István Dezső  
© Budapest History Museum



**Fig. 8**

Black dress, 1920. Object of youth and modernism.  
Photo: Misi Kondella.  
© Budapest History Museum



**Fig. 9**

Black coat, 1926. Object of youth and modernism.  
Photo: Misi Kondella.  
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**Fig. 10**

Deconstruction of clothes, 1995.  
Object of rebellion and elegance.  
Designer: ARTISTA

© Budapest History Museum

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**Fig. 11**

Evening ensemble, 1997.  
Object of rebellion and elegance.  
Designer: Kati Zoób  
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