

# **Folded Prints: A Common Orthodox-Islamic Heritage in the Ethnographic Museum's Costume Collections**

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## **Abstract**

The Ethnographic Museum's collection of traditional costumes from the Balkans holds both Muslim and Orthodox garments since members of these two religions coexisted in the same territory for centuries. A common thing for both populations was that the scarf constituted one of the basics of women's costume. Till the last decades of the 19th century, these scarves were exclusively ornamented with handmade embroidered decorations, and dyed with natural colours. At the end of the 19th century, women started covering their heads with printed scarves. This change can be explained by a few factors: the ending of handmade production in front of a rising market; and the strong influence of urban costumes and fashion trends. Scarves made of printed fabric, imported from Turkey for the global market, started to be purchased in town stores. The way of wearing them also changed: the practise of enveloping it around the head in different ways was replaced by folding the scarf in a triangle shape called *na pero*.

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## **Meaning of the headgear**

The headgear held a special place among all the components of the traditional Serbian women's costume. As it was placed on the head, it was the most impressive and the most striking element of dress, vividly visible and recognisable. Interpreted as a channel of visual communication, it delivered information about the social, economic, religious, or aged status of its holder. Headgear was one important element of costume for both men and women. It was literally used as a protection from bad weather conditions as well as symbolically, from evil powers and demons. Collecting national costumes for more than 120 years, the textile

collection of the Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade comprises a broad spectrum of caps and other types of headdresses, overall around 400 items. Most of them were collected/bought during a field work, between 1901 and 1912. (Niskanovic 1999, 5).

## **Conquering and discovering the Balkans**

In the past, the Serbian territory was under different cultural influences. The Ottomans conquered the Balkan Peninsula in the 14th century, which became the most western province of their large Empire.<sup>1</sup> The Islamic population settled with the invasions; since then, both Orthodox and Muslim communities have been living together. Under Ottoman rules, the Balkans remained unknown to the rest of Europe. It was not until the beginning of the 19th century, when the Empire's strength and power started to decline, that the region attracted the interest of western countries.

The following words best describe the perception of the West towards the Balkans: '[...] no man's land, not at all European, but not Asian either,' 'the transition of the West into the great Orient of Asia' (Neumann 1993, 17); in other words, undiscovered and mysterious yet inviting and tempting. Scientists and artists from all over Europe started travelling to exotic Balkan countries—Bosnia, Montenegro, Serbia, Dalmatia, Transilvania—to discover orientalisation.<sup>2</sup> All of them, along with domestic scientists, teachers, priests, and artists, left valuable notes about the Serbian national dress. Sketches by Carol Popp de Szathmari are stored in the illustrative collection of the Ethnographic Museum. These *Crocs from the Belgrade market* stand as a precious testimony of life back then, featuring all the variety of costumes and different types of headdresses. *Women's meeting at the market* is a display of traditional costumes, from both the city and the countryside. Every essential components of the costume have been documented by the artist: long shirt, *jelek* vest, woven apron, skirt, belt, and *opanci* (traditional shoes). Of course, their heads are adorned with various headdresses (**Fig. 1**).

## **Dressing the head in the traditional society**

In 19th-century traditional Balkan society, the headgear represented the most important part of the women's costume: all women, young or elder, could never be seen publicly without a scarf or some other headgear. Numerous travellers recorded evidence of ancient types of caps from the first half of the 19th century. These were complex headgears composed of multiple elements. The Russian travel writer and diplomat Alexander Hilferding once said that it was '...not easy to describe a woman's headdress, which consists of four parts'

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<sup>1</sup> Northern parts of the Balkans were under the rule of another Empire, Austro-Hungarian, and as the military border was established, all these influences also left traces and shaped the traditional costume.

<sup>2</sup> One of the first visitors to the Balkan was Prussian officer Oto Ferdinand Dubislav von Pirch who left significant information about life in Serbia in thirties of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Felix Philipp Emanuel Kanitz published and epoch-making work on Serbia on more than 700 pages, in 1869. Aforementioned Carol Szathmari, 'skilled photographer from Bucharest' to cite the Emperor Napoleon III, was awarded a medal by Queen Victoria for his work. Théodore Valério, famous for his drawings, acuarels, albums of scetchings, exhibited at the World Exhibition (L'Exposition universelle) in Paris in 1855.

(Hilferding 1974, 84). To mention some of the usual headdress 'supports': wooden structure in the form of horn, cylindrical forms of fabric around which the hair was wrapped, and *trvelj* (wool braid filled with sponge or cloth) used to achieve lushness and volume of hairstyle. Women also decorated the head with filigree decorations, silver chains, coloured glass, and strings of coins, horsehair, flowers, tassels, and peacock feathers (Zega 1926, 68). A scarf was draped over everything.

Both Serbian and Muslim women covered their heads as required by traditional rules. Perhaps the best example of the common life of these two confessions lies in the Pešter Plateau (Sjeničko-pešterska visoravan), located in southwestern Serbia. This region is geographically remote, situated on a plateau with very poor transport connections, a harsh climate, and poor weather conditions with long, cold winters from early autumn till late spring. As a result, many archaic elements were maintained here for longer, while new influences spread more slowly than in other regions (Bjeladinović 2011, 186). Mutual influences were powerful in different aspects of everyday life and sometimes deeply intertwined. A towel, part of the museum's collection (Inv. No. 3707), can be interpreted as evidence of these claims: according to the museum's documentation, it was woven by a Serbian woman and decorated by a Muslim woman, before being worn as a bride's cap till 1912 (**Fig. 2**).

Both Serbian and Muslim women shared similar fashion habits and could wear one or two braids, wrapped around the head with a felt cap *fes* on top of their heads. British archaeologist Evans was exactly referring to such depictions when he wrote, in 1875, that he saw young girls 'braiding their hair around the *fes à la belle Serbe...*' (Evans 1972, 135).

A scarf was placed over the top of the head, gently falling down the back. Serbian scarves and towels were handmade products of hemp or linen cotton, ornamented and dyed with natural colours. A photo of one of the typical traditional Serbian headdresses shows its richness of embroidery and decoration with different materials: beads, pearls, buttons, coins, feathers, and mirrors. These details could be picturesquely described using the words of French writer, graphic artist, and reporter for the illustrated magazine *Le Monde Illustré*, Charles Yriarte, who reported having seen '*...women with headscarves draped like stars...*,' referring here to the beauty and splendour of the traditional Serbian headdress. These monumental headgears, mostly made for brides and worn to represent a specific status, are a true masterpiece of folk art. Like other types of complex headgears that were wrapped around the head in different ways, they were abandoned in between the centuries (**Fig. 3**).

The usual type of towel worn by Muslim women was a long one, made of cotton with woven white stripes. It was worn over the head with *feredža* by brides at their wedding, and women in general when going outside the house. Women tied it under the chin with the endings falling freely, swept back. For public appearance, they were usually completely covered.

Items worn by wealthier Muslim women were decorated with embroidery. This one was made in the second half of the 19th century. With a surface of delicate thin silk called *bez*, it is embroidered with silk and golden thread. Ornaments are small flowers intertwined in a form of vines. Both endings are with golden fringes. The Arabic inscription 'BISMILLAH' is embroidered.

## Introducing prints

Until the last decades of the 19th century, scarves were exclusively ornamented with handmade embroidered decorations and dyed with natural colours. At the end of the century, certain social changes took place, such as the rapidly growing industrialisation, the opening of textile factories, the growth of the chemical industry, as well as new fashion trends, influenced by urban costumes. Eventually, complexed headgears transformed into simple square scarves.

However, the main purpose of the scarf remained the same, and women continued to wear headgear in accordance with unwritten traditional rules. The headgear was no more strictly a household product. Printed fabric scarves were bought in local town stores, and materials for producing them were imported from Turkey, a global market centre at that time.

At the beginning of the 20th century, one specific type of scarf stood out, the *šamija*: a type of thin cotton scarf, squared in form, unhemmed, and decorated with printed floral ornaments. Usual ornaments were small flower vines called *vođica*, along all sides, with flower branches in every corner.

*Šamija* was very popular and worn by women of both faiths. The ornaments worn by Serbian women presented certain variations of colour and size. *Šamija* was mostly made in strong yellow, light, or olive green colour, commonly known as *zejtinli* (the olive oil colour). Flower ornaments were always very colourful, mostly red, blue, and green. The Ethnographic Museum's collections hold scarves made in burgundy colour with larger floral ornaments and fringes at the endings (Inv. No. 17144), as well as some of yellow surface from the vicinity of Belgrade decorated with lace (Inv. No. 26800) (**Fig. 4**).

Examples from the museum's collections, which primarily come from southeastern parts of Serbia, exhibit other variations. The colour of the surface is white while the printed floral decorations called '*black branches*' (Inv. No. 38061) is black. Furthermore, it is decorated with yellow lace and black beads along all edges. The same pattern, but with a change in the colour of the beads, can be observed on the scarf from the vicinity of Knjazevac in southeastern Serbia (Inv. No. 12973). Along all sides it is decorated with white lace, green beads, *manistri*, and yellow thread. All these types of scarves were very popular during the first two decades of the 20th century, as parts of the traditional folk costume. Older women continued to wear it until death, while in the following decades, younger women changed their outfit under the powerful influence of urban fashion.

There are several examples of silk scarves in the museum's collections. One part of the Prizren city costume is a thin, transparent scarf of beige colour, with ends decorated with lace, *kerica-oje* (Inv. No. 49458). The second is from western Serbia. Of the same colour, it is composed of lavish decoration in the form of friezes in all corners and in the middle. The ornament is floral, garlands of green and pink flowers. Edges are decorated with ribbons and tassels of black and green silk.

The usual way of wearing a headscarf also changed through time. The practice of enveloping it around the head in different ways was being replaced by folding the scarf in a triangle shape called *na pero* that hung freely. Both Muslim women and girls wore the same type of scarf, folded it diagonally, *na pero*. They crossed it behind the neck and tied it up on

top of their heads. Older women wore a larger scarf with ends crossed under the chin and tied from the side against the cheeks. Serbian women used to fold the scarf *na pero*, crossing it under the chin, and tying it in the back of the head. The triangle-shaped part was hanging down the back (**Fig. 5**).

Every curator would say that museum documentation is an inexhaustible source of information about the object. However, sometimes, a lack of data can also be useful. We know that this scarf is from Novi Pazar, Southwest Serbia. Women wore it folded in a triangle, wrapped all around the head, with the ends on top of the head. Braids under the headscarf were decorated with yellow Turkish coins called *aspra*. What we do *not know* is whether this garment is Serbian or Muslim. As previously said, coexisting in such difficult conditions resulted in the headscarf being a part of a shared heritage. (Inv. No. 26460) (**Fig. 6**).

### Historical changes in the 20th century

In addition to the influence of urban and Western fashions, Serbia underwent certain social and historical changes that strongly impacted clothing. The Balkan wars of 1912-1913 further weakened the Turkish Empire. Following these conflicts, Turkey surrendered its territories in the Balkans. The southern territories, where mixed populations had been living together for centuries, became part of the Kingdom of Serbia.

These political changes affected both communities. Immediately after the liberation, Serbian people began to reject the traditional Serbian way of dressing and to gradually accept urban influences. At that time, Serbian women completely abandoned older types of headgear in favour of urban European fashion trends. These political changes further traditionalised Muslim people. Muslim women preserved archaic forms of clothing, retaining local traditional characteristics from the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. Meanwhile, the increased acceptance and use of urban Turkish-oriental elements was noticeable (Bjeladinovic-Jergic 2011, 345-372, 377). Both populations still wear *šamija* with flower decoration and *kerica*, narrow lace at the ends.

### After World War II

While there was no change among Serbian women, Muslim women continued to wear *karaklem šamija* (Inv. No. 6772) for everyday use: a simple white scarf with tiny black prints worn by older women that was bought for the museum in 1966. Over this headscarf, they put a larger scarf, *namabez*, on holidays. It partially replaced the *zar* and *peča*, which were banned by the communist authorities after the Second World War (Menković 2013, 13-45). The scarf was bought in Istanbul, an important trading centre. *Šamataljka* (Inv. No. 23147) was a scarf for special occasions. It is decorated with large printed ornaments of red, yellow, and blue, grouped in nine fields with a zigzag line along the garment's edges. This kind of scarf was worn by both older and younger women over *taslak šamija*. They folded it *na pero*, put it on the head, and let the three ends fall freely down the back. The museum documentation on this item states that it was made by Ćamil Plunčević in 1978, who was a *šamdžija*, a craftsman from Novi Pazar. Just like the importance of the scarf in clothing, the

existence of this special craft in the last decades of the 20th century can also be considered valuable in maintaining and surviving the tradition (**Fig. 7**).

### Scarf in modern time

The region that makes up the southernmost portion of Serbia is known as Gora. Located on the slopes of the Šara Mountain, this remote area has been inhabited for generations by people mostly engaged in cattle breeding. According to data, people of Gora were of both Orthodox and Muslim religions, until the mid- 20th century, when they all declared themselves Muslims. They represent a community with very strong traditional ties. Every 6<sup>th</sup> of May, people from all over the world gather in Gora to celebrate wedding festivities that took place in the previous period. Special wedding dresses are crafted for these occasions.

One of the Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade's biggest recent acquisition is a '90 bride's headgear purchased from Zarifa Alija and her husband, Arif Alija, in 2021, along with 88 other items that were part of their wedding costume. All items were made by the bride and her mother-in-law, together with other women from their village, who were paid for the work. The general name for a bride's costume is *ruho*. They produce it in their village, buy the material in Dragaš, Gora's main centre, which is originally purchased in Turkey. Every year, a 'new model of wedding clothes' comes into existence.

The scarf is made of synthetic yellow muslin, with large printed floral ornaments (Inv. No. 52042). Along all the edges, it is woven with silver thread called *tel*, and decorated with silver pearls and Turkish coins, *aspra*. The bride wears it folded *na pero* (**Fig. 8**).

Rather than a conclusion, the previous example is a testimony to the strength and respect for tradition. We saw, on one hand, that society progress and the rise of fashion at the beginning of the 20th century resulted in the complete disappearance of a traditional item, and in general, of a complete costume, while, on the other hand, some traditional garments have survived—despite fashion trends and technological progress.

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Fig. 1

'Crosses from the Belgrade market,' 1849-1885.  
Carol Popp de Szathmari, Illustration 15454.

Illustrative Fund of the Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade



Fig. 2

Embroidered towel, 'scarf,' from Sjenica, southwestern Serbia, first half of 20th century.  
Tatjana Mikulic, inv. No. 3707.

Collection of the Ethnographic museum in Belgrade





Fig. 3

Woman headdress from Stari Vlah, Serbia,  
beginning of 19th century.

Ivana Masnilkovic-Antic, Inv. No 23724.

Collection of the Ethnographic museum in Belgrade

Fig. 4

Some examples of *šamija* scarves  
with different colour on the sur-  
face and different type  
of ornaments.

Top to bottom: scarves with Inv.  
No. 50948, 4050, 38061, 26799,  
49458, 17144.

Ivana Masnilkovic-Antic.

Collections of the Ethnographic  
museum in Belgrade





**Fig. 5**

Peasant women with headscarves, Krupanj, around 1950. On the photo are Milojka Perić, Dobrila Popović and Vujka.

Unknown, Inv. No. 17546.

Fund of digital archive of the Ethnographic museum in Belgrade

**Fig. 6**

Way of wrapping a scarf.  
The item is from Raška, southwest Serbia, beginning of 20th century.

Ivana Masnilkovic-Antić.,  
Inv. No. 26460.

Fund of digital archive of the Ethnographic museum in Belgrade





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**Fig. 7**

Muslim woman costume, Sjenica,  
southwest Serbia, second half of 20th century.

Zoran Rodić, photo from the fieldwork,  
Inv. No. 41582/29.

Fund of digital archive of the Ethnographic museum in  
Belgrade

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**Fig. 8**

Scarf, *mafez*, from Gora, end of 20th century.

Tatjana Mikulic, Inv. No. 52042.

Collection of the Ethnographic museum in Belgrade

