Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

ESTONIAN WOMAN'S COSTUME G143



The Republic of Estonia is located in north-eastern Europe. It borders Russia to the east and Latvia to the south. It is separated from Finland in the north by the Gulf of Finland and from Sweden in the west by the Baltic Sea. On the map on the right Estonia is marked in orange (the countries marked in pale orange belong to the European Union, as does Estonia).



The Estonian people speak a language very similar to Finnish. It is not known when the first speakers of the language arrived in the area, but it was presumably before the Roman Period. In the Middle Ages the Baltic area was invaded by western European powers looking for land, trading routes and in order to convert the last area of Europe that was not Christian.

During the thirteenth century the Danes conquered northern Estonia. Later control passed to the Germans. In the sixteenth century the area was taken over by Sweden. Finally, in the eighteenth century, the region became a province of Russia. Until the Second World War many of the ruling families in the country were German speaking. There were also relatively large communities of Swedish farmers, particularly on the islands and the coast. The majority Estonian speaking community were peasants who provided labour for the large landowners.



Estonia achieved independence in the early twentieth century. In the turmoil that followed the Russian revolution Russian troops were driven out. Estonia maintained its independence for twenty-two years, although political instability meant that after 1934 the country was no longer a democracy. In 1940 Nazi Germany invaded, only to be later driven out by the Soviet Russians. After the end of the Second World War Estonia found itself again a province of the Soviet Russian empire. During the war years many Estonians were killed and later many of the middle-classes were deported by the Russians. Large numbers of Russians were moved into the country and many Estonians felt they were being turned into a minority in their own country.

Photographs - Above left: A traditional Estonian farm. Such buildings are still common in Estonia. Below Right: Medieval walls in the capital city, Tallinn. In the Middle Ages German merchants dominated this town, making their money trading furs from Russia.

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During the nineteenth century many European countries that were struggling for independence were influenced by ideas of Romantic Nationalism - a cultural movement in which a people sought to define and express a distinct national character. In Norway, for example, which gained independence from Sweden in 1905, middle class people collected (and even created) regional costumes in order to foster a sense of pride in Norway. Today most teenagers in Norway are given a costume from the region where their ancestors originated, when they are confirmed (at about the age of 19). Between 200 and 300 regional costumes are officially recognised in Norway. The photograph on the right shows one of the many Norwegian costumes, in this case from Hardanger Fjord. A similar assertion of cultural traditions took place in other European countries, from Bulgaria to the Faroe Islands.



Despite being excluded from power for many centuries Estonian speakers kept their language, songs, dances and seasonal traditions alive. The period from 1850 to 1918 is referred to by Estonians as the era of National Awakening. During this time Estonian peasants gradually began to acquire land of their own. There was also an explosion of cultural activity. In 1857, the founder of the first Estonian-language newspaper *Perno Postimees* (above), Johann Voldemar Jannsen (1819-1890), replaced the term 'country people' with the word 'Estonians'. Patriotic poems and songs were written which extolled the beauty of Estonian nature and expressed ardent love for the native soil. Folk songs and tunes were collected and choirs and orchestras were established in parishes to play and sing this music. The first national Estonian song festival was organised in 1869 in which one thousand singers-musicians and an audience of 12,000 participated in the event.



Estonian peasants.

The Russian government was alarmed at this nationalist movement and from the early 1880s there was a severe clampdown on Estonian self-assertion. By the end of the nineteenth century, the entire Estonian and German-language educational system, from primary schools to the University of Tartu, functioned in Russian. Numerous Estonian teachers who were also key figures in the national awakening process, were sacked because of their insufficient knowledge of Russian. However, these attempts to Russify Estonians were far from successful. Estonian ethnic identity, based on its ancient national culture, had strengthened during the awakening period to the extent where massive-scale re-nationalisation was no longer possible.

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In the nineteenth century an Estonian may have had three kinds of clothes - special clothes which were worn only on festive occasions and were handed down from generation to generation; visiting clothes for errands, business and visits of less festive nature; working clothes which were worn every day and which were made of poorer material and without decorations.

The various folk costumes that were developed in the nineteenth century as part of the Estonian National Awakening were intended to reflect the clothing worn by ordinary people on festive occasions - church festivals, weddings, dances and so on - they were not meant to represent everyday working clothes.



As in other Scandinavian countries, young men and women received a complete set of festive clothes for confirmation, which marked their coming of age. Generally speaking there was no marked difference between the clothes of a bachelor and a married man, but a strict difference was maintained between the clothes of a girl and those of a married woman and also between the garments of a wife and of a widow. A girl did not cover her head in summer and partly even in winter, using only a ribbon or a garland to fix her hair and decorate it. A girl also did not wear an apron in most parts of Estonia. A married woman, on the other hand, had to cover her hair and wear an apron. It was believed that an apronless mistress of the farm would damage the fertility of the fields! A pregnant girl had to wear an apron as well.



Although Estonia is small, there were numerous local differences in folk costume. There were four major groups Southern, Northern, Western Estonia and the Islands. People moved around mostly within the borders of their home parish. The principal meeting point was the church. Local traditions of dress were strictly maintained. It is known, for example, that a woman from the island of Saaremaa who married into another parish, wore her local clothes until her death, whereas her daughters clothed themselves in garments typical of their father's parish. Some of the many costumes can be seen on this page.

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It would be wrong to think that each detail of an Estonian folk costume will be centuries old. Festive clothing was constantly being altered as new cloth designs were imported or as ideas were borrowed from the upper classes.

The example in this box is perhaps a case in point. It was given to the Museum of Reading by a Mr and Mrs Roach of Pangbourne. It had been given to Mr Roach when he visited Estonia in 1935. It is described as 'coming from one of the islands off the Estonian coast'. As can be seen from the map below, there are several large islands in the Baltic Sea which are part of Estonia. This costume, however, does not look like any of the designs that are currently said to have been worn on these islands.



There is, though, at least one piece of evidence which shows an identical costume was worn in Estonia in the 1930s. The photograph on the right shows Ljubor Hermann (1907-2003), who was born in the parish of Jämaja, which is located at the southernmost tip of the island of Saaremaa (marked with a red arrow on the map). As can be seen, she is wearing a dress identical to the one in this box.

Ljubor Hermann was crowned Miss Saaremaa in a beauty contest in 1931. In 1988 a film was made in Estonia about this doughty lady, who lived to the grand old age of 96. The size and arrangement of the stripes on her dress, the pleated woollen fringe and the patterning on her waistcoat are exactly the same as on the dress in this box. It is possible that this design of dress was made on the islands in the 1930s for sale to tourists. It may not reproduce the exact style of a specific folk dress, but it suggests the general Estonian folk tradition. Another possibility is that we have Miss Saaremaa's actual dress and that it was made specially for the beauty contest! Unfortunately, at this late date the exact details of the costume's history are lost in the mists of time.

