Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

SCANDINAVIAN COSTUME DOLLS G158

Norwegian Costume



From 1380 until 1814 - a total of 434 years - Norway was united with Denmark. In effect, this meant that it was ruled by Denmark. In 1814, when Denmark found itself on the losing side in the Napoleonic wars, attempts were made by Norway to declare independence, but Sweden invaded and took over the country.

Sweden allowed a degree of local control, but many Norwegians wanted to be independent. Along with a campaign for political independence, the nineteenth century also saw the rise of Norwegian romantic nationalism - a cultural movement in which Norwegians sought to express their distinct national character. The main product of this movement was the creation of Nynorsk ('New Norwegian'), a written language which was formed from various Norwegian dialects, in opposition to Bokmål ('Book language'), which used a lot of Danish vocabulary. Even today these two written languages are officially recognised in Norway - though Norwegian people tend to speak their local dialect, which is not the same as either Nynorsk or Bokmål!





Another product of Norwegian romantic nationalism was the creation of regional costumes, such as the one in this box. In Norwegian these costumes are called bunad/bunader. There are now several hundred varieties to be found. A few are illustrated on this page. At the top right there are costumes from the Hardanger Fjord region. The photograph on the left shows costumes from Nordland. The photograph on the lower right shows costumes from Opland.

Norway gained its independence in 1905. Although in England it is rare to see anyone dressed in such costumes, in Norway they continue to be widely worn for special occasions, both personal and national, by both men and women.

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The various costumes that were developed in the nineteenth century were intended to reflect the clothing worn on special occasions - church festivals, weddings, dances and so on - they were not meant to represent everyday working clothes.



As far as possible they were based on actual examples (right), although there was sometimes a fair amount of imaginative improvement involved. There is continuing debate about the extent to which costumes must conform to strict patterns or whether it is acceptable to vary or improvise based on general themes. All the designs, though, involve a lot of bright colour, richly stitched decoration and silver ornaments. There are thought to be between 200 and 300 local designs, although no one is sure of the exact number.

In the past these costumes were given when teenagers were confirmed and had their first communion. This is still often the case, although nowadays young children also often wear a version of the costume they will be given later. Most people in Norway belong to the Norwegian Lutheran church and although actual church attendance is low, being confirmed is still an important rite, marking the point at which teenagers join the adult community.

The costume you are given is meant to reflect the region where your family comes from. Nowadays this can get quite complicated as people move around the country more than they did in the past - your mother might be from the south, your father from the north and your grandparents from somewhere else entirely! Increasingly people choose which of their ancestral strands they want to commemorate in their costume. Often the costume is hand-made by a member of your family - otherwise they can be very expensive. The photograph below shows girls at their confirmation wearing costumes from different regions.



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In Norway most students are confirmed and leave school at 18 or 19. In the month before their final exams, they are known as a 'Russ', an abbreviation for the Latin phrase *cornua depositurus*, which translates as 'take off the horns'. In this period they do all sorts of crazy and outrageous things.



The Russ are easily recognisable - they wear baggy trousers with big pockets and a hat or cap with a long string at the end. All sorts of objects are tied onto the hat to indicate each student prank (left). For example, having a picnic in the entrance of the local police-station might entitle you to tie a plastic fork onto your hat. The hats and trousers are colour-coded depending on which subject a student is studying - red for those studying general education (rødruss), white for medicine or social studies (hvitruss), and so on.

Norwegian national day takes place on 17 May. On this day there are parades in most towns in which the mix of traditional costume and the outfits of that year's Russ make a colourful display.



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Norwegian Costume Dolls



The two costume dolls from Norway are wearing bunad from Setesdal (left). Setesdal is a valley and in the county of Aust-Agder in southern Norway. The Otra river flows through the valley of Setesdal into the sea near the Kristiansand.





The woman's bunad from Setesdal is one of the oldest folk costumes in Norway and one of only a few costumes which has been in continuous use. It is shorter than the other Norwegian women's costumes, coming to just below the knee. Some people claim the dress was short so that Setesdal woman could show off their strong legs to Setesdal farmers - a woman with strong legs would make a good farmer's wife!



Both the male and female costumes use black wool embroidered in red and green, with some silver buttons. Silver jewellery (sølje, from sølv, meaning silver) is used in most bunad. This added some glitter - and also allowed you to show off your wealth! A typical array can be seen on the right.



A photograph of a woman wearing modern Setesdal bunad can be seen on the left.

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Swedish Costume Dolls



The use of folkdräkt folk costume is less widespread in Sweden than it is in Norway. In the nineteenth century Sweden was affected by the fashion for romantic nationalism, but it was perhaps less strong than in Norway.



In some areas, such as the province of Dalarna, folk music and folk costumes lasted longer than in many urban areas. As in Norway, these costumes were worn on festive occasions. The picture on the left was painted by Anders Zorn in 1897. Zorn lived in Dalarna and this picture shows local peasants in the costumes dancing on Mid-Summer Eve, the main festive occasion in the Swedish year. The illustrations on the right are from a Swedish book published in 1908 which shows some of the costumes from around the country.

In 1902, Märta Jörgensen and some other women formed a Swedish Woman's National Costume Association in 1902. One of its purposes was 'to bring about a liberation from the domination of foreign fashion among Swedish women through the introduction of a more common use of national costumes'. Soon after this, Mrs Jörgensen designed a Swedish national costume (Allmänna Svenska Nationaldräkten).







This was based on regional designs, but was intended to be used by women from all over Sweden. Versions of this costume (left), often in blue and yellow, the colours of the Swedish flag, are sometimes worn today on National Day (6 June) or on Mid Summer Day (below left).

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These three dolls date from about 1930. Originally their clothes could be removed and they have hooks and eyes. They have now been sewn to the dolls to help preserve them. Some parts of the dolls and their clothes have been hand sewn. Their hair is made from human hair and their faces are made of compressed felt.

Each of the dolls is dressed in folk costume. It is not possible to identify the costumes of two of them with certainty, but the doll above left is wearing a costume which is clearly based on that of Rättviks, a town in Dalarna. The dress on the doll has been shortened, but apart from this the costume is identical to that shown on the illustration on page 5 (enlarged on the left). The Rättviks costume is also shown on the illustration from 1905 below right (marked with red arrow).



It is possible that the male doll is also wearing a costume from Rättviks. A photograph of a folk dancer from that town is shown on the lower left, which is similar to that on the doll. The third doll, dressed in orange, may be intended to illustrate ordinary clothing, rather than the costumes worn on festive occasions.



