Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

TRADITIONAL POLISH COSTUME G164



The Republic of Poland is a country in Central Europe. It is bordered by Germany to the west, the Czech Republic and Slovakia to the south, Ukraine and Belarus to the east and the Baltic Sea and Lithuania to the north. Poland is marked in orange in the map on the right.

Poland is a largely Roman Catholic country, a fact which links it culturally with western Europe. Polish, like Russian, is a Slavic language, but Russia traditionally belongs to the Orthodox Christian area. Because of this religious difference, Poland's relations with its large eastern neighbour have often been tense. Not that its relations with German speaking countries to the east have been any easier. From the early Middle Ages German settlers pushed into eastern Europe and inevitably came into often violent contact with the eastern Slavic peoples.



In the fourteenth century Poland was united with Lithuania to form a loose confederation. The century following the Treaty of Lublin in 1569, in which Poland/Lithuania controlled a huge area containing many different language groups, is usually referred to as Poland's Golden Age.



After a period of decline, in 1795, Poland was divided up by its neighbours, disappearing entirely from the map - the east of Poland went to Russia, the south to Austria and the east to Prussia. It was only after the First World War that Poland was revived. After the Second World War there were further changes Russia took control of the east of Poland, but Poland itself moved to the west, acquiring territory that had previously been largely German. When Poland joined the European Union in 2004 the country had about 40 million citizens, the vast majority Polish speaking - the first time that the country has been so ethnically unified.



Photographs, from top: Small farms in southern Poland; Kraków, Poland's second city; the Polish flag.

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In 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 such countries there was often an interest in recording local folk songs and dances, or in collecting and making regional costumes. 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. A similar assertion of cultural traditions took place in other European countries, from Bulgaria to the Faroe Islands.



In Poland, which ceased to exist during the nineteenth century, this feeling of defiant pride was very strong. The various folk costumes that were developed in this period were intended to reflect the clothing worn by Polish people on festive occasions - church festivals, weddings, dances and so on. They were not meant to represent everyday working clothes. Such costumes are still worn today for local and national special days.

Because such clothes were worn on grand occasions they were usually brightly coloured and richly embroidered. Silver or gold jewelrey was another common feature. Also married women and unmarried girls usually wore slightly different styles - in many places the former wore a covering on their head. The costume of a bride might be particularly spectacular. In many areas of Europe a bride was given a fancy crown to wear.

There are two national days in modern Poland. In spring there is Constitution Day (3 May), which celebrates the 1791 Polish constitution. The photograph above left shows Polish students in various regional costumes and was taken on this occasion. In the autumn there is Independence Day (11 November), celebrating the restoration of Poland's independence in 1918 after 123 years of partition. This is much more solemn. Poland's independence was gained as a result of the collapse of Germany and Russia at the end of the First World War. In Britain 11 November is Remembrance Sunday, when the many soldiers who were killed in the two World Wars are remembered.

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Costume Doll



The costume doll is wearing a costume from Lowicz in central Poland, to the west of Warsaw. For many centuries Lowicz was part of a separate dukedom governed by the archbishops of the city of Gniezno. The people of Łowicz were known as ksiezacy, or people of the priests.

The traditional costume of the Łowicz region is one of the most beautiful in Poland - rich in colourful woven patterns and ornate embroidery. The women wear layers of dresses made from thick, heavy wool. The bodices are of black velvet with beautiful bead work and the skirts have wide vertical stripes. The sleeves of the blouses have elaborate embroidery, as do the kerchiefs worn over the hair. These costumes are worn when church holidays are celebrated, such as Corpus Christi. They are also often used in folk dancing events, although the heaviness of the dresses makes them rather sweaty to wear!



The men from the Lowicz region dress in colourful striped trousers which are tucked into high black boots. Their black jackets with shiny black buttons are pleated at the back. Their white linen shirts have embroidered collars and cuffs. Hats are made of thick black felt and have colourful bands.



Right: Dancers wearing Lowicz costume.

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The smart soldier-like figure is wearing a coal-miner's festive costume from the city of Dąbrowa Górnicza in southern Poland. Dąbrowa Górnicza started to grow in the nineteenth century, after the discovery of coal near the city. Thousands of miners lived in the area. Their traditional holiday was on the 4 December. On this day they dressed in uniforms like this. Mass was said in the churches for their safety in the coming year. There were also many steel works in the area. However, these industrial concerns were heavily subsidised by the government and caused terrible pollution. By the 1990s all the coal mines there had been closed.

One of the costume cards shows the dress of the Lowicz area, which has already been discussed. The other two cards show dresses from Cieszyn and Pszczyna.



Cieszyn (German: Teschen, Czech: Těšín) is a town in the far south of Poland, on the border with the Czech Republic. Traditionally it was a town with a mixed population of Poles, Czechs and Germans. During the seventeenth century the once thriving Protestant communities of Poland were destroyed, except for those in this area. It is still today the most important centre of Polish Protestantism. Despite this cultural difference, Cieszyn shares many folk traditions with the rest of the country.

Pszczyna (German: Pleß) is another town in southern Poland with a very mixed cultural heritage. In both of these areas women wear coloured skirts with patterned or lace aprons.

Right: A dance troupe from Pszczyna. Far right: A couple from Cieszyn.



