Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

NORWEGIAN GIRL'S COSTUME G34



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 define and express a 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 - as is the costume in this box. 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.

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

NORWEGIAN GIRL'S COSTUME G34

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.



Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

NORWEGIAN GIRL'S COSTUME G34

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.



Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

NORWEGIAN GIRL'S COSTUME G34

Hardanger Girl's Bunad

At 111 miles in length (179km), Hardangerfjord is the third largest fjord in the world. The surrounding district is called Hardanger. The entrance to the fjord is just south of Bergen, Norway's second largest city - marked by a red arrow on the map below. The steep rugged sides of the fjord, with green woods and orchards running along the water's edge, make Hardagerfjord one of the most beautiful places in Norway.









In Norway there is a council which approves and decides questions about bunad costumes. Costumes are sorted into different categories. The costumes from Hardanger are recognised as coming from an unbroken tradition. The woman's dress from Hardanger is one of the most familiar, both in Norway itself and outside the country - some people think of it as the national costume. The picture on the left shows Queen Maud, the daughter of Edward VII of England, who married Norway's first modern king, Haakon VII. She is wearing a Hardanger bunad.

There are variations in decorations from dress to dress, as can be seen from the various illustrations on this page, but the basic design remains the same - green dress, white blouse and apron, bright red jacket.





Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

NORWEGIAN GIRL'S COSTUME G34



The decoration on Hardanger costume usually involves bead work and embroidery. A fine example of typical decorative beadwork can be seen on the frontpiece - bringeklut, in Norwegian (right). This piece of the costume doesn't really have a practical function - it is pinned inside the waistcoat to add an area of rich colour. It can be seen in several of the photographs in these notes.



The blouse in this box is decorated with lace. The apron is decorated with Hardanger embroidery (Hardangersom - meaning 'work from Hardanger area'), a style of embroidery in which white thread is used against a white background, which is characteristic of this region. Hardanger work is very geometrical in form, using several basic shapes such as squares, rectangles, triangles, diamonds, hearts, zig-zags and crosses. A fine example can be seen on the left.







There are often several different costumes worn in each area - one style for winter and another for summer, for example. Another area of variation is in the area of headgear and depends on the status of the woman wearing it. The hat in this box is for an unmarried girl. On her wedding day, in many parts of Norway, a woman wore a crown. The nineteenth century photograph on the right shows a lady from Bergen wearing such a crown. In the Hardanger area married women wore a starched white cloth on the head (left).





Silver jewellery (sølje, from sølv, meaning silver) is another widespread feature, being used to make pins, brooches, chains, belts, clasps, buttons, cufflinks, buckles, rings and the bridal crown. This added some glitter - and also allowed you to show off your wealth! A typical array can be seen on the left. The brooch in this box, which is from Bergen, is for fastening the neck of the blouse.