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**A research work on the History of the „Dirndl“ and the traditional costume in the
present day**

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1. The concept of traditional costume

This research work deals with the origin of the Dirndl, the „Tracht“ from the Alpine region. *Tracht* means "that which is worn" or "the way it is worn" and can be translated in English with *traditional costume* or *folks costume*. But before the dirndl can be examined more closely, the concept of traditional costume must be defined more precisely. The term traditional costume is often used to designate a very precise idea of a type of clothing. But a specific use of the term is problematic, because the clothing referred to as costume was not only worn in the Bavarian Oberland on certain occasions, but in some cases a traditional dress code was also used in everyday life.

Until the middle of the 18th century, the term "Tracht" was understood to mean the totality of what a person wore outwardly, not only clothing, but also hairstyles and even the general appearance of a person. The term underwent a change of meaning to its current understanding at the beginning of the 19th century, when the concept of folk costume emerged in the course of Romanticism. This was associated with the assumption, still widespread today, that there was a "real", "original" folks costume that had remained unchanged for centuries. However, this assumption is not correct. Previously, the costume not only marked the regional, but also the social origin of its wearer. The fact that people had a costume made for life was less an expression of a homeland-loving attitude than of the financial possibilities of the simple rural and urban population. It was not until the Enlightenment, industrialization and the revolutionary period at the beginning of the 19th century that the previously separate class order was torn down and the simpler population was given the financial means to dress fashionably. The search for a cultural identity in the young Kingdom of Bavaria in this time and the trend to dress fashionably led to the contrast between traditional costume and contemporary fashion.

In these turbulent times, the need to find and preserve patriotic national costumes grew among artists, the educated middle classes and the nobility. Prince Regent Luitpold (1821-1912), in particular, was fond of wearing lederhosen and janker to show his closeness to his homeland and to the people (cf. image 1, p. 4).

Bavarian traditional costumes can be divided into three groups: The renewed traditional costumes made according to historical models, which are maintained in the traditional costume societies, among others. The traditional costume fashion, which is strongly oriented towards historical costumes and only varies in detail, as is customary in southern Bavaria away from the traditional costume associations. The third type of traditional

costume is another variation of traditional costume fashion that is more distant from the historical model and, as it is more in keeping with the spirit of the times. In all three groups, the term *Tracht* usually refers to the Upper Bavarian mountain costume. After lodensuits became popular at the Bavarian royal court at the end of the 19th century and these also found their way into the middle classes, lederhosen increasingly disappeared from the wardrobes. This motivated the teacher Joseph Vogl from Bayrischzell to found the first society for traditional costumes. It was the time were people began to take an



Prince Regent Luipold in a painting by Defregger

interest in how their ancestors lived and what they wore. After the first so-called *Trachten*-club many other societies for traditional costumes followed. Even today members dress exactly or similarly to their ancestors, dance the old dances and sing the old songs. They want to honor the memory of the older generation. A comparatively factual definition of the tasks of a society for traditional costumes is given by the *Landestrachtenverband Niedersachsen* (society for traditional costumes Niedersachsen): "*Tracht* is the term used to describe the clothing of the rural population, the distribution of which is limited regionally, temporally and confessionally. It changes within its prescribed limits according to occasion and level of mourning and reflects social status." This definition of folk costume briefly explains its characteristics and distinguishes it in particular from bourgeois dress and professional costumes, which are not or only slightly regionally and confessionally bound.

Later, roundabout 1860, the *Miesbacher* traditional costume was created, which was exported to the whole of southern Bavaria in the following decades and led to further foundations of numerous societies for traditional costume. The creation and spread of this

costume had the effect that in many places regional costumes were displaced. In other cases, however, it contributed to the rediscovery of a local dress culture.

After taking a closer look at the term "Tracht" and defining it, we will now take a closer look at the Dirndl. After the origins of the dirndl have been considered, a number of museums exhibiting traditional costume from the Alpine region are presented. The various exhibitions once again illustrate the versatility and variation of traditional costume and also show both the displacement and the rediscovery of traditional costume by the societies for traditional costumes.

2. The History of the „Dirndl“

Today, the Dirndl is known as the typical Bavarian costume. In order to understand where the Dirndl originally comes from, the origin of the word must first be examined. The word *Dirndl* is a minimization of the Bavarian and Austrian word *Dirne*, which can be translated to *young girl*. In Bavaria and Austria *Dirne* was the name for maid or servant. The costume of the maid was called *Dirndlgwand*, which was later abbreviated to *Dirndl*. *Gwand* is the Bavarian and Austrian word for „clothing“. So originally the Dirndl was the clothing of a maid. The maids were usually quite poor and sewed their own clothes from old fabrics. Mostly old curtains or bed linen were used for this. Colorful and patterned fabrics, as we know the Dirndl today, did not exist in the past. As workwear, the Dirndl had to be plain, simple, robust, practical and durable. It was only later, from 1870 onwards, that the dirndl was also worn by upper-class women. At first only by women from the rural area. Women were proud of their origins and the dirndl was associated with the rural idyll. In addition, the apron made the garment very versatile and could be worn in different ways. The traditional costume is an expression of a mostly village community and a common life in this order. The focus is not on the wearer, rather the clothing serves to present possessions and wealth. In addition the clothing provided the knowledgeable observer with a great deal of information. It clearly indicated: the region the costume came from, the village the wearer came from, the social position of the wearer within the village community, the current economic circumstances, the marital status (unmarried, married, widowed), the stage of mourning, as well as the occasion.

Closely linked to the history of the dirndl is the story of two brothers whose fashion house contributed significantly to the popularity of the traditional costume today.

2.1. The story of the Wallach Brothers

1900 the *Volkskunsthhaus Wallach* (in English: Folk and Art House Wallach) was founded by the two brothers, Moritz Wallach (1879-1964) and Julius Wallach (1874-1965). Later their business stood as the epitome of costume and folk art. The brothers' career began in 1910 when they costumed the historical national costume procession free of charge for the 100th anniversary of the Oktoberfest. In gratitude for their work, they were promoted by the king to royal purveyors to the court and soon they were suppliers of the European high nobility. After that, the reputation of the Wallach brothers and their house rose increasingly. But only a few years later the situation in the German Empire changed.

On 28 June 1914, a nineteen-year-old Serbian student had opened fire on the Austro-Hungarian heir and heiress who were visiting Sarajevo. The Sarajevo assassination is considered as the trigger for the First World War. In the four years of war, countless people had lost their lives. Those who remained in mourning had not only lost their loved ones, but also their home and a secure income. On 11 November 1918, the German government signed an armistice in the forest of Compiègne (north of Paris). The Treaty of Versailles on 28 June 1919 between the 26 Allied and Associated Powers and the German Empire assigned the blame for the outbreak of the First World War to the German Empire and its allies. The food situation had already worsened in the second half of the war and even after the end of the war most of the population went hungry. The poor supply situation was compounded after the end of the war by a severe economic crisis and galloping inflation. The poor financial situation forced the population to look for cheaper alternatives. The Dirndl regained popularity. As a cheaper alternative to expensive summer dresses, it became a very popular clothing in the post-war period. The apron offered women the possibility to wear their dress in different variations and to wear it for different occasions without having to buy a completely new dress. As a result the brothers' business recovered quickly.

Their second breakthrough after being honored by the King in 1910 came in 1930 when the brothers designed the stage costumes for the operetta "Im weißen Rössl" (in English *White Horse Inn*). The play was very successful not only in Bavaria, but even in Berlin. When the play became a box office hit on Broadway in New York, after being performed over 223 times, the dirndl officially became fashionable. But this time too, shortly after their second breakthrough, the Wallach brothers suffered a heavy blow. National Socialism in Germany gained popularity after the hard years of war and the perceived

unfair treatment after the war was lost. In 1933 Adolf Hitler came to power. Five years later, in 1938, the brothers were forced to give up their „Volkskunsthause Wallach“. Jews were banned from wearing traditional costumes. And this despite the fact that it was the Wallachs who researched traditional costumes at the time and made them modern again. Shortly afterwards, Julius and Moritz Wallach managed to emigrate to the USA. The third brother Max Wallach, he was the technical director of the Wallach-Werke, which was



Famous traditional costume house „Wallach“
1950 in the Residenzstraße, Munich
Picture: Jewish Museum Munich



In the former headquarter of the
Wallach brothers' traditional costume
store, another fashion store now sells
its fashion (2016)

later founded in Dachau in the 1920s, and his wife Melly were not allowed to leave the country. They were expropriated and expelled from the city on 11 November 1938. Until about 1940 they lived with relatives in Paderborn. They were murdered by the Nazis in the Theresienstadt concentration camp in 1943. In the post-war period, the surviving Wallach brothers got their business back and this time, too, the traditional costume business managed to recover quickly after the war. In 1996, the „Volkskunsthause Wallach“ was absorbed into the Lodenfrey fashion house and was completely closed in 2007 at its former location, in Residenzstraße, house number 3.

2.2. The transformation to the „Dirndl of today“

During the 20th century the Dirndl was modernized and developed several times. The traditional costume and the associated fashion for traditional costumes have experienced an upswing in Germany and Austria. In particular, globalization, the economic crisis and the return to traditional values and old cultural assets associated with or opposed to these developments are seen as causal for this development.

The change of the Dirndl trend in the 20th century began in 1920 with a decadent, gold, pompous, wild and independent Dirndl style. In the 1930s, women tried to look

particularly ladylike with a restrained, elegant and simple Dirndl style. In the 1940s, the Dirndl was shaped in the way it is still worn today. Tight bodice, narrow waist and simple skirt with a variable apron is originated in the 1940s. The basic features of this Dirndl dress have remained unchanged to this day. What the women wore in the 40s, something that today's Dirndls no longer have, are shoulder pads. In the 1950s, fashion had to do one thing above all: keep up appearances. Everything had to be in order, the women had to keep the kitchen clean, the men had to drive to work in their new cars. People didn't want to deal with the past. The Second World War was over and with it one of the darkest periods in history. Now people concentrated on reconstruction and on the tasks at home,



A drawing of two women in traditional costume of the time



The latest Dirndl fashion from the 21st century

where life was full of glamour and joy but also full of contrasts. On the one hand, there was great technical progress due to new innovations, on the other hand, people wallowed nostalgically in the past. This thinking was also reflected in fashion. Clothes should be colorful, light and wrinkle-free. So should the dirndl. In the 50s, the dirndl, like the petticoat, had a flared skirt. At the same time the look was well-behaved and neat, a rather scanty neckline, discreetness and restraint are elements of the 50s. A flared A-line shape speaks for the 60s. In the 1960s the dirndl was romantic, flowery and lovely. Whereas in the 70s it was considered fashionable to wear a skimpy, colorful and particularly waist-hugging dirndl. But even if the dirndl was popular, it was not as prestigious as it is today. It was considered too old-fashioned, backward and backwoods. That has changed radically since the 1980s. Today, the dirndl is once again a must for every girl, every young woman and every young-at-heart woman.

Nowadays the Dirndl can be seen in many different designs in terms of color, cut and

length. It always consists of two parts: the apron and the Dirndl dress. The bodice of the dress is tight-fitting and is usually worn with a blouse underneath. The skirt is cut wide and pleated. This cut of the Dirndl flatters the female figure by emphasizing the breast and concealing curves on the abdomen and hips of the wearer. The length as well as the variety of colors and patterns of the fabrics are a matter of taste. Usually elderly woman prefer longer dirndls, whereas young woman wear shorter skirts. The necklines also vary from high necks to V-necks to balconies Dirndls.

For some time now, traditional elements of the dirndl have been combined with new trends. The trend back to vintage or retro costumes can be seen as a counter-movement to the standardized fashion. The global textile companies have dominated the market for a long time and, via the internet, have the opportunity to encourage people to keep buying through continuously new trends. As a result people now returning to traditional cuts and reviving traditional costume fashion in vintage style.

3. Museums that exhibit the Dirndl and traditional costumes

Especially in the south of Germany and in Austria, there are many museums which are specialized in traditional costumes or also exhibit traditional costume fashion. In the following, some museums will be introduced, but above all commonalities in the exhibitions will be discussed.



Some of the museums that exhibit the dirndl or traditional costumes in general are marked on the map.

There are museums that specialize in the dirndl or other traditional costumes, as well as museums such as the Museum for European Folk Costume in Mönchengladbach, North Rhine-Westphalia, which presents all trends in traditional costume fashion from all over

Europe. Over 100 dresses from different European countries are on display here. It quickly becomes clear in this exhibition that traditional costume was never just clothing, but always a special form of communication. One thing that was communicated through the wearing of the clothes was the relationship status of the woman. The Young woman showed their willing of marriage with the special wearing of costumes. This tradition has continued until today, even if it is no longer taken too seriously. If a woman wears the bow of the apron on the right side, so on the left from the viewer, it means that she is



The illustration shows the different meanings of the bow

taken. On the other, on the left side, it means that she is unmarried and would like to get married. If the bow is worn in the center front, it means that the wearer is still a virgin. If the bow is worn on the back of the dirndl, the woman is already widowed. But the special symbolism of the traditional costume did not only help the young men to find a suitable bride. The old adage "The richer the farmer, the more silver on the chest." is clearly evident here. From the traditional costume, the occupation of the wearer as well as their fortune could be read. In some region women showed their wealth by the number of skirts they wore. For example, in the colorful *Schwälmer Tracht* from Hesse, up to over 15 skirts were worn on top of each other, depending on how wealthy the woman wearing the costume was. In other regions, a person's wealth was not presented by the number of skirts but by wearing a special headdress. The typical *Wachauer-Goldhaube* (in English: Wachauer golden hat) were the status symbol of the privileged middle class. The golden hat is a magnificent headdress, which is handcrafted from brocade, gold lace and silk. The headdress was also special in other traditional costumes, but the Wachauer golden hat is one of the most famous one. Today it stands for the commitment, self-confidence of the wearer and the connection with her homeland. The hats are exhibited in Mautern, Niederösterreich (Lower Austria) in a historical building. Most of the costume exhibitions are located in historic buildings. This is also the case with the small exhibition in the Farmhouse Museum in Lindberg, Lower Bavaria. Here are exhibited old folk costumes

from the Bavarian Forest between 17th and 20th century. However, the focus of the museum is on the presentation of rural life in the Bavarian Forest in earlier centuries. The old farmhouse, in which the traditional costumes are also exhibited, is still in its original condition. Similar to the farmhouse at Lake Starnberg, named *Lochmannhaus*. The over 400-year-old farmer- and fisher house was turned into a museum in 1914 by the last king



The Farmershouse museum in
Lindberg



The Lochmannhaus
At Lake Starnberg

Ludwig III. Paintings and original garments from the 19th century show the clothing of the people of that time. Both the pompously dressed gentlemen in bright colours as well as the simple clothes of the farmers and fishers can be seen in the pictures and illustrations. Other museums not only exhibit the dresses as such, but also present the costume in everyday situations using exhibition dummies. This is what the *Schwarzwälder Trachtenmuseum* (in English: Black Forest Museum of Traditional Costume) does, for example. In numerous showcases over 100 different original folk costumes from the black forest are presented, supplemented by artistically crafted individual parts and objects from peasant life. The Museum Frauenfleiß in Blaibach also presents the clothes on dolls, but focuses on the hard-working women of the time. The very name of the museum refers to the hard-working women, because "Frauenfleiß" translates as "women's diligence". Girls, young woman and elderly ladies from past centuries are shown in the household, in embroidering home textiles and other ornaments, as well as in the production of splendid traditional costumes. The museum in Forchheim should be mentioned as the last example of traditional costume museums. In contrast to the other museums, it has specialized in a single traditional costume. Namely, the costume from Forchheim, as well as the costume from the surrounding region of the so-called *Fränkischen Schweiz* (in English Franconia Switzerland). Most regions in Bavaria have their own traditional costume with its special features and are characterized by its. But due to the trend of the Dirndl and its influence on other traditional costumes, the

traditional costume of this region was almost completely displaced. The museum preserves the knowledge of the last traditional costumes and exhibits unique garments. It tells the clothes-history and documents function and different occasions, like the other museums do it as well. With the help of the museums, the knowledge about the traditional costume and the traditions associated with it are preserved. Museums play an important part in ensuring that culture is not lost. Not only in terms of traditional costume, but in every respect. This research work should give an insight into the history of the dirndl and the traditional costume of the alpine region. As well as to show which different possibilities there are to preserve and exhibit this history.

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In the case of parts taken from scientific publications, the Internet or any other document, I have expressly and directly indicated the source at the end of the quotation or at the foot of the page as well as having duly marked them in the text by quotation marks where indicated verbatim.

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Anja Fürstenberg

Lisbon, 8.01.2021