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Naslov: Status and Class: Dress Codes in Serbia

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As the Ottoman influence slowly lost its ground in Serbia, the Serbian Christian population during the latter half of the 19th century started to wear colorful clothes after hundreds of years of restriction.

Photo: Courtesy of the Ethnographic Museum



Serbian upper class women would braid their long hair around the tepeluk and affix their engagement ring in their hair.

Photo: BIRN/Siri Sollie

Status and Class: Dress Codes in Serbia

In the 19th century, married, upper-class Serbian women braided their engagement ring into their hair to display their social status to society.

Siri SOLLIE

In 19th Century Serbia, fashion in the cities was heavily influenced by both European and Turkish-Oriental trends.

"Serbian urban dress during the 19th century was being worn until the beginning of the 20th century," says Vjera Medic, the curator of national dress at the Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade.

However, dress codes in rural Serbia differed greatly to cities such as Belgrade.

The main distinction was related to class. The types of gowns favoured by 19th century aristocrats in Belgrade were made with store-bought textiles. Ordinary folk in rural areas made their own fabric and clothes by hand.

According to Medic, it took years before the fashion in Belgrade took hold in the Serbian countryside.

However, there was one characteristic that clothing in rural and urban areas shared, and that was their relationship to colour.

Under Ottoman rule, Serbs and Christians were forbidden from wearing colourful clothes that featured red, green or any light colours. This was a privilege reserved for the Ottoman elite.

In old photos from that time period, black was clearly the predominant color of the day among peasants and city dwellers.

However, these conventions slowly faded out - in the cities in particular - as the Ottomans lost influence in Serbia at the turn of the last century, as can be seen in the picture on the left.

The picture shows a young upper class Serb wearing an expensive silk green brocade dress decorated with

gold, appropriate for formal or festive celebrations.

The young woman is also wearing a black jacket, or libade, over the dress - as was very much the fashion in Europe at the time.

The libade is said to have originated in the Levant but those who adopted the style left their own imprint on the designs, including in the Balkans.

The jacket was almost exclusively worn by wealthy Serbian urbanites until the early 20th century, when it began to make an appearance in the countryside. A reminder of how slowly fashion trends were adopted in rural areas.

In the painting, the subject wears a silk ribbon around her chest - called a bajader - that served as a clear status symbol for silk was very expensive at the time.

Last but not least, it was also common amongst urban aristocrat women to

wear a small head ornament: the tepeluk. The tepeluk was, small round, and often made of silver or gold-plated filigree with typical oriental decoration.

Married women would braid their long hair around the tepeluk with ribbons, which they would then circle around their heads. They would also affix their engagement ring in their hair at the centre of their foreheads.

Today, Serbian women do not bind their engagement rings in their hair but you only have to peek outside the window or take a stroll down Knez Mihajlova to see what trends Serbian women have adopted today.

One thing that has certainly changed is that ordinary women rarely make their own fabrics and clothes, as most can be seen darting in and out of popular chain stores such as Zara and H&M.

