

Swiss national costumes

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SWISS NATIONAL COSTUMES

In Switzerland as in other parts of Europe, the *Tracht* used to be the distinctive garment of the rural population. Its heyday fell into the 100 years between 1750 and 1850, in other words into the so-called era of enlightenment when natural sciences began to develop, which also benefited agriculture and resulted in an improved position for the free farmer. The status pride of the rural population strengthened, and it found expression in the characteristic farm buildings of which the most famous and beautiful date back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Flourishing crafts produced lovely and well-made furniture and implements, such as carved dressers, painted chests, fine pewter and copper and a variety of artistic pottery, carved and painted implements, showing a predilection for flower and bird ornaments and for symbols such as stars, the tree of life, etc.

It was with that background that the costume flourished and became distinctive almost from valley to valley. Fine filigree ornaments on the bodice, embroidered flowers, silver chains, beadwork, delicate lace on bonnet and blouse, flowers on the strawhat. The charming costumes formed a pleasing unity with the well-furnished living rooms, harmony between man's handiwork and nature.

Flourishing tourism was good for native handicrafts, and paintings of landscapes and costumes became sought-after souvenirs. Centres for painting and etching began to be established, and their most famous exponents, the *Kleinmeister* became part of the history of Swiss art and culture. The best-known are Sigmund Freudenberg (1745-1801), Franz Niklaus Koenig (1765-1832), the two Gabriel Lory, Father (1763-1840) and Son (1784-1846). We owe them whole series of etchings which represent the typical costumes of many areas. There are two artists in particular who left a wonderful legacy of picture costumes, having painted them from life: Josef Reinhart from Lucerne (1749-1824) who left over a hundred tables with costumes from the Rococo period, and the Zurich artist Ludwig Vogel (1788-1879) who, at the turn of the century, drew and painted costumes from the *Empire* period. These lovely reproductions have been published by the thousand and are no doubt partly responsible that the Swiss people never quite lost their love of the *Tracht*.

When the technical era began its conquest in the second half of the nineteenth century, the picturesque rural arts gradually lost in importance. Machines and factories more and more replaced the old handicrafts, and railway and car put an end to the life of the romantic mail coach. The new time brought a new way of life which gradually conquered the Alpine valleys. Traditions and old customs handed down from generation to generation began to lose value and were scoffed at or forgotten, and the actual rural culture disappeared.

There were plenty of people who warned against the sad loss, and museums were created to save the valuable possessions at the last minute. In 1898, the Swiss National Museum was founded, and the Swiss *Heimatschutz* began its activities seven years later. Its aims were to protect Switzerland's natural and historic character and to develop it further. It was not only the beautiful countryside and ancient monuments that had to be preserved, but also homely customs, costumes and dialects, the popular song and *Volks theater*.

But it was not until the first world war shook the Swiss people and made it realise what was at stake. At

long last, the broad masses began to see what was valuable culture, and the old Swiss costumes were brought back to their place of honour. The first great success of the *Heimatschutz* was the "village" and the popular plays at the National Exhibition in 1914. The war interrupted progress, but in the 'twenties, new efforts were made, and gradually festivals and special events left their mark, such as the "Bernfeste". The Agricultural Show in Berne in 1925 brought to life the whole riches of Swiss costumes and Swiss popular songs, and the event was so impressive that the Swiss Costume Association was founded a year later in Lucerne. The old songs, dialects, dances and costumes were brought back and fostered systematically, and costume groups were started in many local places. The "*Heimatleben*" (formerly "*Schweizertracht*") is a much-read periodical which has been flourishing for nearly forty years.

It was hard work to renew the traditional costume and to adapt it to the needs of the present time. New workday costumes and simpler Sunday costumes were created which were less costly than some of the old festive costumes. It was not easy to procure the missing materials and accessories and to find the people gifted to use them. Costume and bonnet making became new crafts, and today one can hardly picture the difficulties there were to find the right men and women to make the shoes and the typical jewellery. But gradually the untiring efforts bore fruit, and good quality and fine clothes began to be appreciated again.

To-day, the *Tracht* is not only a festive garment worn for a few hours. It is special to the Swiss people and reflects the characteristics of the regions and the people. Either picturesque or sombre, gay or more serious, elaborate or simple, the *Tracht*, like the dialect, is a kind of identity paper for the wearer. The nation-wide costume festivals are of unforgettable splendour. At the Swiss costume festival in Basle in 1961, and again at the Swiss National Exhibition, several thousand men and women took part and proudly displayed their costumes from every corner of the country.

(Freely adapted and translated from an article in the "Echo" in August 1962. The writer was the well-known costume expert Louise Witzig.)

WHO COMPOSED THE BERNERMARSCH?

Edmund Ludlow was his name, a great soldier and statesman, born of a good old Wiltshire family, in 1617, and studied at Trinity College, Oxford. He was a student in the Temple when he volunteered into the Life-Guards; he served in the Civil War, became M.P., sat among the King's judges, and had a place in the Council of State of the Commonwealth.

After the Restoration of the Stuarts to the throne of England, Ludlow, who was a sturdy republican and refused to recognise Cromwell's protectorate, fled to France for safety. From France he made his way to Vevey, in Switzerland, where he wrote his Memoirs and died in 1692.

It was in about 1665, and in Vevey, that Edmund Ludlow, an Englishman, composed the characteristic and most popular of our Swiss melodies — the Bernermarsch!

P.S.

("Swiss Observer", 1937.)