

## National fashion in 19th century Pest

Anikó Lukács

From the 1820s, “the nation” became the centre of thought and public discourse in Hungary. The debates were not confined to political forums; there was one form of expression in which the national issue accessible to everyone. It featured at balls, fashion journals and all places where the public gathered. Dress became was one of the chief indicators of national awareness, after language and dance. The discourse on fashion (in its urban or genteel forms) appears, from articles published in fashion journals (fashion reports, social news, articles propagating national costume), to have progressed in two major waves during the 19th century: one in the 1830s and 40s, and the other after 1859. The revival or reform of Hungarian costume, the use of costume elements considered particularly “Hungarian” and their incorporation into dress in the context of political debate were taken up to express national unity, the origins, independence and viability of the Hungarian nation. The messages conveyed through dress were: we must turn away from foreign models, stop copying others, and even forswear fashion itself, putting in its place what we have here at home, in the sense of both form and – during the *Védegylet* period – material. To forswear foreign fashion meant setting a new fashion, although it did not turn out to be immune from international influences. In addition, being a fashion phenomenon (subject to constant change), national dress did not become the possession of the whole nation in the modern sense. How wide it spread is hard to tell, but it seems only to have reached those sections of society who would have followed fashion anyway, and could afford to.

National fashion was not a self-contained phenomenon, but an integral part of the contemporary national discourse. Authors who ventured opinions in the matter of national fashion were in fact discussing general questions under the pretext of fashion, questions much talked about at the time in connection with many other elements of national culture (national literature, music, dance, architecture) and of much more general application to the affairs of the nation. They explored the issues of past and present, tradition and renewal, the relationship between nation and people, the compatibility of oriental origins with Europeanness, and in general the whole question of national identity. When writers on national fashion made statements as to what 19th century Hungarian national costume should be like, they were also seeking a answer to the question of what the Hungarian nation and its members should be like. Fashion journals may not, in general, have been given over to matters of vital concern to the nation, but dress, in itself a powerful shaper of identity (both

individual and group identity), and belonging to the world of everyday life, something that everybody could see and understand, presented a tangible medium through which these great questions could be expressed. Secondly, when national issues could not be discussed freely in the usual political forums, it was useful to translate them into social-life equivalents – like costume. This gives another good reason why national dress (along with independent national culture and the national past in general) appreciated in value in the 19th century, almost substituting for the real independence and self-determination of the nation.

The subject of national fashion is investigated in through the contemporary discourse on the subject, the primary focus being on notions put forward regarding “national dress”. The presentation of 19th century national fashion draws on various sources (contemporary fashion writing, the Hungarian-language fashion press in Pest, diaries and memoirs) and concentrates on the issues outlined above. The dissertation is most of all about propaganda: by what means and arguments the fashion press and the makers of fashion goods (not completely independent of each other) attempted to persuade their readers and customers – at a time when the cut, form, decoration and material of urban and genteel dress had for more than a century been dictated by Parisian and Viennese fashions – to buy and wear Hungarian national dress and put away the constantly-changing, novelty-generating fashion to make way for apparel that expressed durable customs. The sources are chiefly press articles, but the analysis also draws a kind of “control group” of sources: diaries and memoirs permit an examination of the national-fashion question from an utterly different perspective, telling us what might have motivated individuals to buy items of “national” dress and wear them on certain occasions or perhaps as their everyday attire. In addition to patriotism, the motives included simple following of fashion, and external compulsion.