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# TLS Commentary

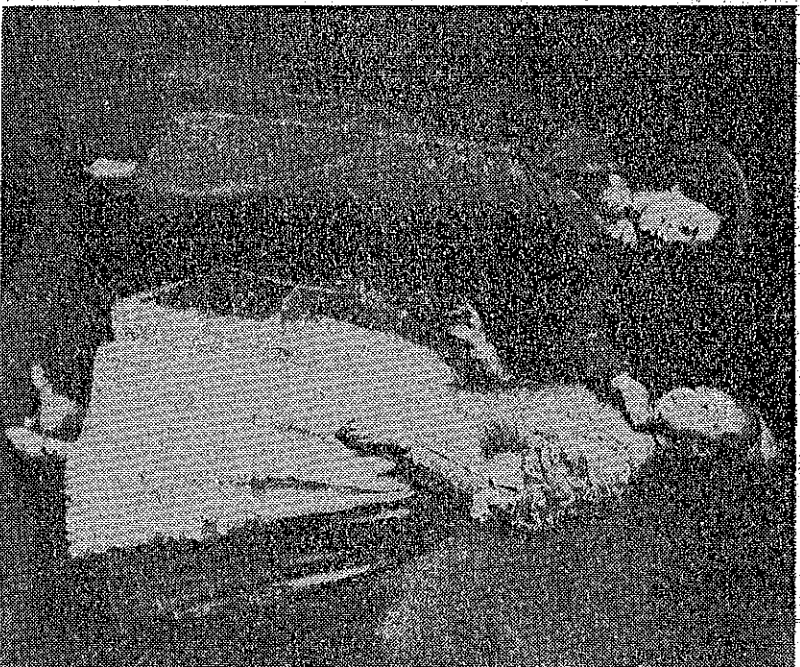
## The Russian art of dress

By Anne Hollander

Exhibitions of costumes mounted on mannequins have a certain depressing flavour, something akin to the effect of a waxworks museum. There is a slight ghostliness about the presence of many non-living beings sumptuously clad and otherwise quite inexpressive. When a costume is shown far out of context and motionless, remote from its original owner's spirit and manner, half its beauty is always missing, however rich or remarkably clever the artifact is. Unlike the other decorative arts, the whole art of dress requires the living self: disowned garments seem deadened and bereft, and helpless in the hands of the resurrectionists. Still, something of their human dimension does precariously endure, and is always worth seeking among breathtaking embroideries and amazing proportions.

The costume display now on view until the end of August at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, entitled "The Glory of Russian Costume", contains hundreds of garments of startling design and craftsmanship made in a wide range of stuffs in differing stylistic traditions, according to period and region. Some of these clothes are recognizable vessels of actual self-conscious physical life: others are as laden with mystery as they are with gold galloon.

Diana Vreeland, special consultant to the Metropolitan Museum Costume Institute and for many years an important figure in the world of fashion, has mounted several very successful costume displays in recent years. She has usually employed the excellently conceived method of exhibiting historical dress as if it were a current fashion collection—displaying it to promote it, so to speak, as new



Two young ladies of the Court dressed for a play: a painting by Dimitri Levitsky (1735-1822) reproduced in Jacqueline Onassis's *In the Russian Style*.

Even more spellbinding as evocations of fabulous individual character are the garments worn by the prodigious Peter the Great and the even more prodigious Empress Catherine II. Peter was nearly seven feet tall. His coarse and grim jackboots indicate the startling length and strength of his leg; but in bizarre opposition to these appears his equally oversized fieldcoat of soft rose silk, trimmed with gold-thread lace. An enormous full-dress court suit, trimmed in delicate silver but made of vivid red broadcloth, bearing further witness both to Peter's height and to the broad strokes in which his character was drawn.

But it is Catherine's clothes which have the sharpest individuality. The quality of the living woman is still strong in the cut and colour of these extraordinary collections. In the 1760s and 1770s, Catherine, by then as outstanding in girth as Peter had been in height, had uniforms designed for her in which to appear formally as the honorary colonel of various army and marine regiments. These uniforms are in fact vast and graceful dresses, masterpieces of theatrical design. They incorporate the standard motifs of masculine military dress (collars, facings, buttons and braid, in an open-coat over-closed-waistcoat formula) into huge silken, pastel versions of the regimental serge in primary colours. They are like operatic costumes for a mature, Imperial *Fille du Régiment*. In the 1760s Catherine's figure was far but still trim, and her green, gold-laced infantry uniform coat is cut close to the thick waist, with a matching waistcoat peggedly fitted over the corsetry of the imposing bosom. A resplendent hoop-skirt finishes the ensemble below. One can imagine the brisk wig and tricorne above, and the air of elegant but businesslike authority. A decade later, however, the empress was fatter still, and her "uniforms" as colonel of the equestrian regiment of the Life Guards and of the navy are pallid, tent-like abstractions. Each is an open gown over an underdress with

unusually... which is often shrewd and penetrating and is never laboured... we know so much more about Professor Tolstoy!

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'revealing and meticulously researched biography'  
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Hamphrey Carpenter under-stands very well the antithesis between the ordinary life this writer led, and the extraordinary imagination that created his mythology. He also understands how to write a biography.  
Hamphrey Carpenter's plain, unadorned tale is absolutely gripping  
Evening Standard

'fascinating read. It will delight lovers of Tolstoy and entice those wary of him to try again'  
Birmingham Post

'perceptive and imaginative... I was entirely fascinated'  
Oxford Times

'intelligent and sympathetic study'  
The Listener

'Hamphrey Carpenter analyses extensively and fascinatingly a complex and sympathetic character.'  
The Spectator

'painstaking and often moving account'  
Times Literary Supplement

287 pages  
16 pages of illustrations  
£4.95

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conceived method of exhibiting historical dress as if it were a current fashion collection—displaying it to promote it, so to speak, as new merchandise. To do this, Veeland has used theatrical lighting techniques, bizarre and gaudy kinds and arrangements of mannikins, mood-music—all the best resources of chic commercial display, and fashion photography, without any breath of fussy antiquarian scholarship to make the flounces wilt. Sometimes accuracy has suffered, and the effects have not always been on target, but generally the method has been a huge success, and it has effectively removed most of the zombie-like, waxwork quality from the shows at the Costume Institute.

This time, another influence has been at work in addition to the Veeland flair. The treasures of Russian historical dress were accompanied to New York from the Hermitage and the Kremlin and other historical museums in the Soviet Union by three Russian ladies, all costume curators, historians and technical experts. The show was mounted with their help and supervision, so that the result is a combination of top-down Veeland and time-up Soviet conservatism. The lighting and arrangement of the exhibit is vivid, though more decorous than theatrical, but there is music. One may examine the embroideries to the sound of Rimsky-Korsakov, Tchaikovsky and Borodin.

The collection is enormous, and so it is necessarily divided into categories between which the practical, historical and geographical connections are not immediately clear. There is a room of nineteenth-century peasant clothing all made of varieties of vividly dyed home-spun fabric and embroidery. These heavy garments, mostly for women, were worn in layers which obscured both the shape and surface of the body: only the face and hands emerged, paler from the coarseness, coloured folds. Blooses with voluminous sleeves and bodice, often full-length, were closed firmly at waist and throat. They were worn under stiff skirts, aprons and jackets, or most characteristically under a version of the *sorotkan*, a long, pineapple-like pyramidal gown closed down the front with a row of buttons. Belts were tied loosely. The female torso was given no distinct modelling of the bodice, unlike that characteristic of the Austrian dirndl and other European

clothes—the tendency toward unflattered, straight-cut garments with full sleeves, rather than towards creative cutting and fitting to mould the body.

This first group in the show is distinguished by the uniformly made-finished textures of wool, linen and cotton, dyed and embellished in strong colours of which red is the most common. Russian red has been a symbolic colour for centuries, identified with life and beauty, and it dominates these homespun garments. Veeland and her associates have further emphasized it by mounting all the costumes in this group on mannikins with stylized blood-red hands and faces, and setting them up against unrelieved red backgrounds. Bright white, green and deep blue vibrate in contrast; and in this vibrance is their chief beauty. These dresses have no metal or jewelry to trim them, only colour upon colour, woven, dyed, embroidered, printed, and applied in strips of ribbon.

In great contrast are the clothes in the next group. These folk garments date from several generations earlier, beginning in the late eighteenth century. Here are both day clothes, still all families of an almost legendary richness: heavy brocade, silk satin, gold embroidery, gold lace, gold gabbon, intricate fusions of over pearls. They are nevertheless almost all rendered in the traditional shapes of full-sleeved shift and *sorotkan*—embroidered up to the neck, down to the wrist, and spreading bell-like to the ground, crowned with stiffened headresses and veils. Women in such dress must have seemed like shimmering, floating mountains.

Some outer garments trimmed with fur appear, adding a touch of that famous element of Russian luxury to the already almost indistinguishable display. In all this stiff, silken clothing, unlike the homespun group, the colour is muted and subtle, tending to shades of mulberry, apricot, and rose, and dim varieties of blue. The late eighteenth-century Russian broadsides of which they are made are very like those used in the French robes de cour of the same date, worked in the same rococo floral patterns, but here cut in monumental Russian folk style. The faceless mannequins who wear them aptly have head and hands encased in gold mesh, but on the walls, behind them appear several primitive portraits of real women wearing the same sort of heavy

carefully over gold-embroidered stomachs. Cossack ladies wore these clothes, and banded them down from mother to daughter to grand daughter.

There are a few examples of a singularly unbecoming short jacket which instantly suggests pregnancy to the Western eye. Stiff with gold, padding and fringe, this abstract-looking overgarment was made to fit neatly to the waist at the back and stick crudely out in front, boxing in the configurations of the bosom and belly and stopping short at around navel-level. Women of all ages wore this as a part of festive dress, and it was clearly intended to shield any kind of natural frontal contour from the eye. Even slim and firm-breasted girls had to look ponderous and fecund in such holiday clothes.

Men's clothes are singularly lacking in all this sartorial wealth. What did they wear on holidays? The few male garments among the examples of folk-dress date from much earlier, and they are among the most affecting in the show—simple clothes with which to feel a kinship both of wear and of craft. There is a tiny seventeenth-century boy's shirt of white linen with scarlet undergarment gussets and a front closing artfully set just left of centre. The imaginative delicacy of this little garment, with its red acrimps and asymmetrical neck, is as breathtaking as the couched gold embroidery on the kerchiefs or the pearl-sewn velvet boot.

All the folk-dress, so various, so rich and strange, is what carries the most raw glamour in this exhibition. But the keenest flavour of the Russia familiar to the English-speaking world is in the nineteenth-century European garments which seem to walk straight out of the pages of Russian literature. There are the filmy ball dresses and gaudy uniforms from *War and Peace*, the romantic puffed sleeves and skirts of Eugene Onegin, the gored skirts in which the tortured Anna's moving gowns. There is nothing visibly Russian about these clothes: they resemble French or English dress of the same date. But the fact that they were undeniably worn by Russians lends them a satisfying fictional intensity, and they look like stage costumes, pregnant with potential drama. As if purposely to add to the effect, most of these dummies are headless: we can fill in the characters ourselves.

Guards and of the navy are pallid, tent-like abstractions. Each is an open gown over an underdress with a centre vertical strip of trim, in a quasi-medieval, faintly *sorotkan*-like arrangement, each still carefully echoing the broad, buttons and cuffs of the officers' full-dress regiments. She must have appeared like some baroque dream-companioner in a cloud of taffeta, feminine and potent, familiar but mythic.

And around another corner is the fairy-tale wedding-dress of this same ruler, worn in 1745 when she was sixteen. It is a formal European court-gown in cloth of silver embroidered in yet more silver and gold, with a three-yard train and a seventeen-inch waist. The tiny corset bodice stands rigidly on its huge tea-cosy of a skirt, witness to Princess Catherine's corporeal fragility in her said days before her accession to both power and substance.

The abundance of familiar, unfamiliar and extraordinary clothing in this exhibition makes it hard to understand how do all these ways of dressing relate to one another? What other sorts of things were worn during the same periods and at the same places? Fortunately an informative catalogue entitled *History of Russian Costume* is now available, prepared by the Russian guards of these treasures, which includes a succinct history of Russian dress and some idea of its regional differences. On the other hand, the book which accompanied the opening of the show, edited by Jacqueline Onassis and entitled *In the Russian Style*, is in no sense a catalogue, being rather a compendium of sensational lore about Russia under the Tsars. It is as chock-full of arresting pictures as the show is of dazzling clothes, but both fail to make as much good sense as the few paragraphs in the catalogue. Stilled translations and gratuitous praise for Russian artistry cannot hamper its usefulness for understanding this amazing display.

L. ERMOVA, T. KORSHUNOVA and L. ERMANOVA: *History of Russian Costume from the Eleventh to the Twentieth Century*. 116pp. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art. \$5.95.  
JACQUELINE ONASSIS (Editor): *In the Russian Style*, 184pp. Thames and Hudson. £10.