

Preserving a Treasure: Care and Maintenance of the Lithuanian National Costume

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Vilija Kirvelaitienė's costume was woven in the studio founded by celebrated Lithuanian folk artist and scholar Anastasia Tamošaitienė.

Our national costume is one of our most cherished symbols of Lithuanian identity. Along with the national anthem, the three-color flag and the state coat of arms, it shows the world who we are. Lucky are those who are privileged to own a national costume.

Our national costume is not just a piece of folk art, a museum piece to be studied, displayed and admired from afar; it is a demonstration of who we are. It is also an article of clothing that is worn with pride at the various Lithuanian functions. Therefore, unlike the other symbols of national identity, the care and maintenance of the national costume is the individual owner's responsibility.

Great care must be taken to ensure the continued beauty of these treasures. Fabrics have many enemies: dirt, creases, damp, strong sunlight, excessive heat and insects (moths).

The best defenses are cleanliness and vigilance. Each washing, ironing and other cleaning method takes its toll on the fabric, aging it a little each time. Thus, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. In order to minimize the risk of stains, one should avoid using pens, both felt tip and ballpoint. Though not always possible, it is best to avoid eating and drinking while wearing the costume. Various odors can permeate the fabric (e.g., cigarette smoke) and are difficult to remove. Safety pins and straight pins may leave discoloration or rust marks.

Dirt attaches to the material and causes friction and abrasions that can cut the fibers. Creases cause the fibers to bend, which weakens the fabric. Damp and excessive heat attract mold and mildew. Strong sunlight fades the colors and also weakens the fibers. Lastly, moths can create little holes.

After each wearing, the costume should be inspected for any stains or signs of wear. Both must be attended to as soon as possible, as a small tear can quickly develop into a large rent and a ruined garment; and the longer a stain has been allowed to set the harder it is to remove. The best rule is to attempt the first cleaning with the simplest method possible,

such as blotting. It should be taken into consideration that all protein stains (e.g., blood) should be washed in cold water, as hot water will cook the proteins into the fabric. If the cause of the stain is known, it is best to use the specific cleaning method appropriate to that stain. Any accumulation of dirt (or mud) should be gently brushed off or vacuumed. It is important to avoid stressing the fabric with vigorous rubbing and scrubbing.

Cleaning: A Wet Fiber Is a Weakened Fiber

Blouses

The blouses are usually of linen, cotton or a linen-cotton blend. They are usually white or shades of off-white. Linen blouses show the most variability in the color white.

Bleach should never be used, as it weakens the fibers and may over-whiten spots on the linen, leaving it looking like a washed out Dalmatian. The colored designs (raštai - žičkai) are usually mercerized cotton (thread that has been treated to make it shrink resistant and color-fast) and so are color-fast. But as our costumes were woven at different periods when the weavers had access to different materials, this should not be taken for granted. If possible, a hidden spot may be tried to check for color-fastness, but only if that spot is representative of all the types of fiber used in the garment.

Beware of using "traditional" cleaning methods, as some of these recipes have quite harsh ingredients, which can harm the garment. Modern, proven-mild soaps are much better. Wash in warm water with a mild soap. Do not use dishwashing detergents, as they may contain chlorine bleach. Products such as non-chlorine bleach and Oxy-clean should be used sparingly and the instructions followed carefully. Garments should not be soaked for more than 20 minutes; any longer and the dirt may redeposit on the fabric.

Wash and iron only when absolutely necessary. Washing and ironing too much and too often causes the fabric to weaken. Wash the blouse and allow it to drip-dry in such a way that there are few, if any, wrinkles and then iron the blouse carefully just before wearing, particularly if it is to be stored for a period of time before the next wearing.

If the blouse is decorated with broderie anglaise (white-work), the decorative parts should be ironed inside out on a thick towel to prevent the embroidery from flattening out. Never iron a dirty item.

Skirts, vests and trousers

These are generally woven in wool, so there are certain cautions. Washing can cause the fibers to shrink and mat, and may cause the colors to run. Stains should be removed as soon as possible with the gentlest method available. Wet stains should be blotted without any rubbing. Sometimes vacuuming to remove accumulated dust is all that is required. The round, soft-bristle brush should be used if vacuuming.

Should a more thorough cleaning be necessary, find a dry cleaner experienced in cleaning delicates (e.g., wedding dresses),

as some dry cleaning chemicals are very harsh.

Woolens should be ironed inside-out or covered by a damp cloth to prevent them from getting shiny.

Aprons

Aprons should be cleaned according to the material: cotton and linen ones like blouses, and woolen ones like skirts.

Storage

The costume should always be cleaned before storage. It should not be placed in a plastic box or bag. The fabrics need to breathe, and plastic hinders the movement of air, which is essential to prevent mold and mildew. Instead, cover the costume in a garment bag made of size-free cotton sheeting (cotton fabric or sheets that have been washed to remove any fabric conditioners) to protect it from dust.

The costume may be stored flat or on a padded hanger. If folded, the items should have as few folds as possible. Soft folds stress the fabric less. Heavy items, such as the skirt, should be on the bottom and the lighter items on top. Place pieces of acid-free tissue between the folds and the garments to help protect the fabric. If storing on a hanger, the hanger should not be larger than needed for the garments. The garment should be hung away from the light.

If your costume is very old, consider that hanging may put considerable pressure on the shoulders, which may weaken the fabric. Older costumes are better stored gently folded.

The vests and the skirts are made of wool, and so can attract moths. There are various methods to deter moths. Most common are mothballs, but this is not an attractive solution if the costume is worn often; mothballs are also considered by some to not be very effective in repelling the moths. Some use cedar balls or planks. Some swear by newspaper, saying that something in the ink repels the moths, but paper must be changed yearly. Other old-time methods are tobacco leaves or salt, but I have no first-hand knowledge of their effectiveness. Some conservators suggest placing sticky traps around the articles and inspecting them often.

It is not advisable to store the costume in an unfinished attic or basement. Temperature and humidity must be kept moderate. If the costume has not been worn for an extended period of time, it should be taken out regularly to be aired and inspected for any problems that may have arisen during storage.

Considerations While Wearing Your National Costume

Most of our costumes are hand woven, resulting in a weave that is less dense than commercial fabrics. And the patterns that decorate our blouses, skirts and vests are woven-in. The patterns are formed by floats of threads that are exposed or hidden, according to the design.

A float is a longer-than-normal number of warp (vertical) threads that are passed over or under by the weft (horizontal) thread. This results in floats on the good side as well as the



Costume from Lithuania, 1938.

inside of the cloth. These floats, especially the longer ones, are easy to catch and cause a pull. One must be particularly careful when putting on a blouse with a complicated woven-in pattern (raštai - žičkai).

It is usually recommended that no jewellery be worn with the national costume; an exception being a string of amber or beads. However, in this modern age, few of us take off our wedding or engagement rings, or watches.

Should the unthinkable happen and a snag occurs, one should attempt to work the thread back into its original place. This can be done with the help of a small crochet hook or a blunt wool needle. If the snagged thread cannot be coaxed back into place, the excess thread should be pulled to the wrong side of the fabric and tucked under some of the other float threads. NEVER,



Costume from Toronto, 1953.

NEVER cut the thread. Should the thread have broken when it was snagged, then the two ends should be knotted together.

Your national costume is now ready to wear at a moment's notice.

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Kristina has her studio in Vaudreuil-Dorion, a suburb of Montreal, where she lives with her husband, dog and two horses.