CHAPTER XXI

LINE AND COLOUR OF COSTUMES IN HUNGARY

The idea that man decorative, by reason of colour or line in costume, is of necessity either masquerading or effeminate, proceeds chiefly from the conventional nineteenth and twentieth century point of view in America and western Europe. But even in those parts of the world we are accustomed to colour in the uniforms of army and navy, the crimson "hood" of the university doctor, and red sash of the French Legion of Honour. We accept colour as a dignified attribute of man's attire in the cases cited, and we do not forget that our early nineteenth century American masculine forebears wore bright blue or vivid green coats, silver and brass buttons and red or yellow waistcoats. The gentleman sportsman of the early nineteenth century hunted in bright blue tailed coats with brass buttons, scarlet waistcoat, tight breeches and top hat!
We refer to the same class of man who to-day wears rough, natural coloured tweeds, leather coat and close cap that his prey may not see him.

In a sense, colour is a sign of virility when used by man. We have the North American Indian with his gay feathers, blankets and war paint, and the European peasant in his gala costume. In many cases colour is as much his as his woman's. Some years ago, when collecting data concerning national characteristics as expressed in the art of the Slavs, Magyars and Czechs, the writer studied these peoples in their native settings. We went first to Hungary and were disappointed to find Buda Pest far too cosmopolitan to be of value for the study of national costume, music or drama. The dominating and most artistic element in Hungary is the Magyar, and we were there to study him. But even the Gipsies who played the Magyar music in our hotel orchestra, wore the black evening dress of western Europe and patent leather shoes, and the music they played was from the most modern operettas. It was not until a world-famous Hungarian violinist
arrived to give concerts in Buda Pest that the national spirit of the Gypsies was stirred to play the Magyar airs in his honour. (Gypsies take on the spirit of any adopted land). We then realised what they could make of the Recockzy march and other folk music.

The experience of that evening spurred us to penetrate into southern Hungary, the heart of Magyar land, armed with letters of introduction, from one of the ministers of education, to mayors of the peasant villages.

It was impossible to get on without an interpreter, as usually even the mayors knew only the Magyar language—not a word of German. That was the perfect region for getting at Magyar character expressed in the colour and line of costume, manner of living, point of view, folk song and dance. It is all still vividly clear to our mind’s eye. We saw the first Magyar costumes in a village not far from Buda Pest. To make the few miles quickly, we had taken an electric trolley, vastly superior to anything in New York at the time of which we speak; and were let off in the centre of a group of small, low thatched cottages, white-
washed, and having a broad band of one, two or three colours, extending from the ground to about three feet above it, and completely encircling the house. The favourite combination seemed to be blue and red, in parallel stripes. Near one of these houses we saw a very old woman with a long lashed whip in her hand, guarding two or three dark, curly, long-legged Hungarian pigs. She wore high boots, many short skirts, a shawl and a head-kerchief. Presently two other figures caught our eye: a man in a long cape to the tops of his boots, made of sheepskin, the wool inside, the outside decorated with bright-coloured wools, outlining crude designs. The black fur collar was the skin of a small black lamb, legs and tail showing, as when stripped off the little animal. The man wore a cone-shaped hat of black lamb and his hair reached to his shoulders. He smoked a very long-stemmed pipe with a china bowl, as he strolled along. Behind him a woman walked, bowed by the weight of an immense sack. She wore boots to the knees, many full short skirts, and a yellow and red silk head-kerchief. By her head-covering we
knew her to be a married woman. They were a farmer and his wife! Among the Magyars the man is very decidedly the peacock; the woman is the pack-horse. On market days he lounges in the sunshine, wrapped in his long sheepskin cape, and smokes, while she plies the trade. In the farmers' homes of southern Hungary where we passed some time, we, as Americans, sat at table with the men of the house, while wife and daughter served. There was one large dish of food in the centre, into which every one dipped! The women of the peasant class never sit at table with their men; they serve them and eat afterwards, and they always address them in the second person as, "Will your graciousness have a cup of coffee?" Also they always walk behind the men. At country dances we have seen young girls in bright, very full skirts, with many ribbons braided into the hair, cluster shyly at a short distance from the dancing platform in the fair grounds, waiting to be beckoned or whistled to by one of the sturdy youths with skin-tight trousers, tucked into high boots, who by right of might, has stationed himself on the platform. When
Mrs. Vernon Castle in one of her dancing costumes. She was snapped by the camera as she sprang into a pose of mere joyous abandon at the conclusion of a long series of more or less exacting poses.

Mrs. Castle assures us that to repeat the effect produced here, in which camera, lucky chance and favourable wind combined, would be well-nigh impossible.
Mrs. Vernon Castle
A Fantasy
they have danced, generally a czardas, the girl goes back to the group of women, leaving the man on the platform in command of the situation! Yet already in 1897 women were being admitted to the University of Buda Pest. There in Hungary one could see woman run the whole gamut of her development, from man’s slave to man’s equal.

We found the national colour scheme to have the same violent contrasts which characterise the folk music and the folk poetry of the Magyars.

Primitive man has no use for half-tones. It was the same with the Russian peasants and with the Poles. Our first morning in Krakau a great clattering of wheels and horses’ hoofs on the cobbled court of our hotel, accompanied by the cracking of a whip and voices, drew us to our window. At first we thought a strolling circus had arrived, but no, that man with the red crown to his black fur cap, a peacock’s feather fastened to it by a fantastic brooch, was just an ordinary farmer in Sunday garb. In the neighbourhood of Krakau the young men wear frock coats of white cloth,
over bright red, short tight coats, and their light-coloured skin-tight trousers, worn inside knee boots, are embroidered in black down the fronts.

One afternoon we were the guests of a Polish painter, who had married a pretty peasant, his model. He was a gentleman by birth and breeding, had studied art in Paris and spoke French, German and English. His wife, a child of the soil, knew only the dialect of her own province, but with the sensitive response of a Pole, eagerly waited to have translated to her what the Americans were saying of life among women in their country. She served us with tea and liquor, the red heels of her high boots clicking on the wooden floor as she moved about. As colour and as line, of a kind, that young Polish woman was a feast to the eye; full Scarlet skirt, standing out over many petticoats and reaching only to the tops of her knee boots, full white bodice, a sleeveless jacket to the waist line, made of brightly coloured cretonne, outlined with coloured beads; a bright yellow head-kerchief bound her soft brown hair; her eyes were brown, and her skin like
a yellow peach. On her neck hung strings of coral and amber beads. There was indeed a decorative woman! As for her background, it was simple enough to throw into relief the brilliant vision that she was. Not, however, a scheme of interior decoration to copy! The walls were whitewashed; a large stove of masonry was built into one corner, and four beds and a cradle stood on the other side of the room, over which hung in a row five virgins, the central one being the Black Virgin beloved by the Poles. The legend is that the original was painted during the life of the Virgin, on a panel of dark wood. Here, too, was the marriage chest, decorated with a crude design in bright colours. The children, three or four of them, ran about in the national costume, miniatures of their mother, but barefoot.

It was the same in Hungary, when we were taken by the mayor of a Magyar town to visit the characteristic farmhouse of a highly prosperous farmer, said to be worth two hundred thousand dollars. The table was laid in the end of a room having four beds in it. On inquiring later, we were told that they were
not ordinarily used by the family, but were heaped with the reserve bedding. In other words, they were recognised by the natives as indicating a degree of affluence, and were a bit of ostentation, not the overcrowding of necessity.