CHAPTER XXVI

NATIONALITY IN COSTUME

WHEN seen in perspective, the costumes of various periods, as well as the architecture, interior decoration and furnishings of the homes of men appear as distinct types, though to the man or woman of any particular period the variations of the type are bewildering and misleading. It is the same in physical types; when visiting for the first time a foreign land one is immediately struck by a national cast of feature, English, French, American, Russian, etc. But if we remain in the country for any length of time, the differences between individuals impress us and we lose track of those features and characteristics the nation possesses in common. Today, if asked what outline, materials and colour schemes characterise our fashions, some would say that almost anything in the way of line, materials and colour were worn. There is,
PLATE XXXI
Costume of a Red Cross Nurse, worn while working in a French war hospital, by Miss Elsie de Wolfe, of New York. An example of woman costumed so as to be most efficient for the work in hand.

Miss de Wolfe's name has become synonymous with interior decoration, throughout the length and breadth of our land, but she established a reputation as one of the best-dressed women in America, long before she left the stage to professionally decorate homes. She has done an immeasurable amount toward moulding the good taste of America in several fields. At present her energies are in part devoted to disseminating information concerning a cure for burns, one of the many discoveries resulting from the exigencies of the devastating war.
Miss Elsie de Wolfe in Costume of Red Cross Nurse
however, always an epoch type, and while more than ever before the law of appropriateness has dictated a certain silhouette for each occasion,—each occupation,—when recorded in costume books of the future we will be recognised as a distinct phase; as distinct as the Gothic, Elizabethan, Empire or Victorian period.

As we have said, in studying the history of woman decorative, one finds two widely separated aspects of the subject, which must be considered in turn. There is the classifying of woman's apparel which comes under the head of European dress, woman's costume affected by cosmopolitan influences; costumes worn by that part of humanity which is in close intercommunication and reflecting the ebb and flow of currents—political, geographical and artistic. Then we have quite another field for study, that of national costumes, by which we mean costumes peculiar to some one nation and worn by its men and women century after century.

It is interesting as well as depressing for the student of national characteristics to see the picturesque distinguishing lines and colours
gradually disappear as railroads, steamboats and electric trolleys penetrate remote districts. With any influx of curious strangers there comes in time, often all too quickly, a regrettable self-consciousness, which is followed at first by an awkward imitation of the cosmopolitan garb.

We recall our experience in Hungary. Having been advised to visit the peasant villages and farms lying out on the püstas (plains of southern Hungary) if we would see the veritable national costumes, we set out hopefully with letters of introduction from a minister of education in Buda Pest, directed to mayors of Magyar villages. One of these planned a visit to a local celebrity, a Magyar farmer, very old, very prosperous, rich in herds of horses, sheep and magnificent Hungarian oxen, large, white and with almost straight, spreading horns, like the oxen of the ancient Greeks. There we met a man of the old school, nearly eighty, who had never in his life slept under cover, his duty being to guard his flocks and herds by night as well as day, though he had amassed what was for his station in life, a
great fortune. He had never been seen in anything but the national costume, the same as worn in his part of the world for several hundred years. And so we went to see him in his home. We were all expectation! You can imagine our disappointment, when, upon arrival, we found our host awaiting us, painfully attired in the ordinary dark cloth coat and trousers of the modern farmer the world over. He had donned the ugly things in our honour, taking an hour to make his toilet, as we were secretly informed by one of the household. We tell this to show how one must persevere in the pursuit of artistic data. This was the same occasion cited in *The Art of Interior Decoration*, when the highly decorative peasant tableware was banished by the women in the house, to make room, again in our honour, for plain white ironstone china.

The feeling for line accredited to the French woman is equally the birthright of the Magyar—woman and man. One sees it in the dash of the court beauty who can carry off a mass of jewels, barbaric in splendour, where the average European or American would feel a Christmas
tree in the same. And no man in Europe wears his uniform as the Hungarian officer of hussars does; the astrachan-trimmed short coat, slung over one shoulder, cap trimmed with fur, on the side of his head, and skin-tight trousers inside of faultless, spurred boots reaching to the knees. One can go so far as to say there is something decorative in the very temperament of Hungarian women, a fiery abandon, which makes line in a subtle way quite apart from the line of costume. This quality is also possessed by the Spanish woman, and developed to a remarkable degree in the professional Spanish dancer. The Gipsy woman has it too,—she brought it with her from Asia, as the Magyar’s forebears did.

Speaking of the Magyar, nothing so perfectly expresses the national temperament as the czardas—that peasant dance which begins with calm, stately repression, and ends in a mad ecstasy of expression, the rapid crescendo, the whirl, ending when the man seizes his partner and flings her high in the air. Watch the flash of the eyes and see that this is genuine temperament, not acting, but something
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inherent in the blood. The crude colour of the national costume and the sharp contrast in the folk music are equally expressions of national character, the various art expressions of which open up countless enticing vistas.

The contemplation of some of these vistas leads one to the conclusion that woman decorative is so, either as an artist (that is, in the mastery of the science of line and colour, more or less under the control of passing fashion), or in the abandonment to the impulse of an untutored, unconscious, child of nature. Both can be beautiful; the art which is so great as to conceal conscious effort by creating the illusion of spontaneity, and the natural unconscious grace of the human being in youth or in the primitive state.