

RESEARCH OF ROMA DRESSES FOR THE PROJECT ROMFASHION

Traditional Roma dresses and accessories in Czech Republic



Clothes have always been a specific expression of the Roma way of life and culture all over the world.

Although Roma usually did not make their own clothes and obtained important items of clothing from elsewhere or had them sewn according to their wishes, a distinctive style of Roma clothing and ornaments developed. Roma style is distinguishable by the selection and combination of clothing items and accessories, colours and the overall manner of wearing them.

Roma clothing varies according to the individual sub-ethnic groups, the environment in which they live, and also, at present, their living standards. The most distinctive clothing has always been that of the *Vlax Roma*¹ because of their former nomadic way of life, which led both to greater isolation from outside influences and to firmer preservation of their internal laws, customs and esthetical norms connected to them. The *Lovara*, *Kalderash* and other Vlax Roma groups and Sinti preserved and shielded most of the traditional and specific aspects of Roma culture even after their forced settlement in the Czech lands in February 1959. Distinctive features of their clothing have not disappeared. This is particularly the case in women's clothing: long ankle-length full skirt, called *cocha*² or *cocha fodrenca*, with traditional layers of frills, typically very colourful or patterned with a big inner pocket *poso'i* into which cards, cigarettes, money or a hen would fit. For married women, a traditional scarf *dikhlo* accompanied this traditional clothing item, which survived centuries. They wore either a smaller scarf tied at the nape of the neck or under the chin, and/or a larger fringed cashmere shawl tied around the shoulders. Another item of this women's traditional clothing is a colourful and brightly patterned blouse *kacamajka* with long full sleeves gathered at the cuffs. Women also wear an apron *krejtinca* which is oval-cut and trimmed with a frill. Typical accessories for



¹ Group of Roma that came to Czech lands from Romanian Walachia. These Roma have not settled but were still on move (a nomadic tribe) and did professions related to this way of life.

² Vlax Roma dialect

Roma women of all ages are big hoop or dangling earrings *čeňa*, large conspicuous rings *angrust'a* made of heavy gold and gemstones worn on many fingers. These rings are also typical for Vlax Roma men, who wear them as well as golden necklaces and bracelets and gold chains *lanci* around their neck and wrists. Young men wear these chains even with modern clothes. Gold jewellery is passed down from generation and is a sign of their esthetical feeling and ethnic membership. This is also true of their hairstyle and their overall appearance or behaviour. Most Vlax women traditionally wear long hair either braided or with deep waves decorated with clips at their temples. Short hair was always viewed as a sign of immoral women and of dishonour. It is true though that, more and more, Vlax women not only dye their hair or have it dye blonde or fair. Women also like to decorate their hair with flower *lulud'i* or with bright hair trimmings or they like to braid ribbons into their hair.



The Vlax men's clothing has lost its overall distinctiveness in the past forty years in the Czech lands; nevertheless there are some characteristic clothing items still worn by Roma men. One popular item is a vest worn over a shirt with vivid colours, usually red, or a pattern. A wide-brimmed black hat *kolopo* is an indispensable accessory. The men's shirt *gad* used to have full long sleeves and a stand-up collar worn with a black vest or one with a very different colour from that of the shirt. Trousers *bugod'a* or jodhpurs worn tucked in high leather boots were worn especially by Lovara Roma – horse traders – with a scarf around the neck and a hat. The *Vajda – mujalo* (the leader of the community) used to wear big silver buttons and an expensive silver chain on his waistcoat as a sign of his power. Some Vlax groups still use them in some of their internal courts *kris*.

Traditionally settled Slovak, Hungarian, Czech and Moravian Roma groups, who had a long tradition of socializing with the surrounding majority population, were more and more

influenced by their by of dressing and gradually adapted to it. This was especially true for the younger generation in cities and towns. In the so-called Gypsy settlements in Slovakia, from where the Roma went to the Czech lands after World War Second, the situation differs markedly. The older generations came from different esthetical and cultural, as well as social, traditions. Men continue to



wear, as basic items of clothing, trousers and a vest over a shirt or a jacket and they have to wear a hat. Women continue to wear a full or pleated calf-length or knee-length skirt called *rokľa*. Along with the skirt, older women wear a blouse *vizitka* with long sleeves, a simple-cut apron *leketa*, a headscarf *khosno* tied under chin, and a cloth *zajda*, *lepeda* used to carry children, wood or groceries on their back. Even these women like wearing at least costume jewellery like beads *mirikle* mostly red, which is a colour still believed to have magical power. Even in these settlements, clothing has been changing and adapting to the clothes of the surrounding inhabitants: ready-made or second-hand dresses, sweaters, T-shirts, winter coats and shoes. Some of these Roma still do not know and do not distinguish among the various kinds of clothes – special sleepwear or work clothes, let alone house dresses. Women did not use to wear underwear, even after their arrival in their new Czech and Moravian homelands. Children in some of the settlements do not have children's clothes and wear adult clothing.

In their new, mainly urban Czech and Moravian environments, the majority of the Roma settlers first tried to change the external manifestations of their lifestyle – namely, their ways of dressing and living. In the past fifty years, the vast majority of the Roma have adopted the type of clothing worn by the majority among whom they live. This is especially true for young Roma, who wear very modern clothes. Despite all these majority group influences, however, there is still something distinctive in the Roma way of dressing, fixing their hair, and wearing jewellery. This may be their choice of colours and/or the selection of conspicuous clothes and accessories.

Women's clothing

Blouses

In the past, Roma women used to wear typical blouses (called *vizitki* in Roma) with long sleeves and a low, rounded neck. If Roma women, especially from nomadic Roma groups from the Balkans (or from the Balkan region), sewed their own clothing, they traditionally used several kinds of the best red textiles for one blouse (as well as for skirts or aprons). They are full frilled blouses, decorated on the collars and sleeves and at the hems with frills or sometimes with frills combined with ribbons. Vlax Roma women like cashmere for their clothes. It is not possible to specify the most typical blouse material used by other Roma groups. In the second half of the 20th century, most Roma women wore fashionable synthetic materials such as viscose, nylon, polyamide, etc. Very common motifs on Roma blouses are flowers. Some Roma groups (like German Sinti, Finnish Kale, and Spanish Gitanos – Flamenco dancers) used dotted fabric for their blouses.



Skirts

As for blouses we can trace some common elements among Roma skirts. Most of the skirts are gathered at the waist with an elastic band or into a firm belt. They are colourful, sewn from various materials. The most traditional skirts are richly pleated and thus made of many yards of textile, or textiles (with different patterns) to be precise; they are decorated by frills. The skirts were sewn from natural lightweight materials, where the amount of the fabric used and the rich pleating was evident only when the skirt was in motion – as for example while dancing. From the history of Roma clothing and according to the memories of survivors, it is known that Roma women usually wore ankle-length skirts.



Aprons and inner pockets

Most of the aprons have similar elements: they have a frill stitched onto them; there are traces of mending on them; they have a patch stitched on; they were stitched together from various fabrics of different kinds and colours; and they have an oval shape.

The apron was used for cleaning and cooking. Thus, the basic function of the apron was for work. Apart from this purpose it could also hide the growing belly of pregnant Roma women. And it undoubtedly had a decorative function, too. Among married or older women the apron was a perpetual accessory to the skirt and its original purpose changed to everyday wear.



An inner pocket called *teluňi posoťi*, which was

tied around the waist and put under skirt or apron, was used for storing or putting in money, cards and even for hiding a hen. The pocket was a traditional part of Romani women's clothing. Sometimes it was stitched into a skirt.



Scarves

Khosne – worn on head, *dikhle* – worn around the shoulders

The most frequent material for scarves was cashmere. Scarves were with or without fringes, small scarves worn on head and large ones worn around the shoulders (items of casual clothing). Among the large scarves, there are also woollen scarves, worn by both majority and Roma women. The most common as well as the most popular motifs on scarves are stylized roses and other kinds of flowers. Some Roma women crocheted fringes and stitched them onto their scarves.

Footwear

Today's boot's appearance cannot be considered traditional because they are reminiscent of boots worn by the majority. The current women's Roma shoes illustrate the popularity of brightly decorated shoes which combine a lacquered surface with golden metal colours. The traditional type of shoes is called *bočkora* – simple slipper made of one piece of fabric filled with straw, which was used as isolation from the cold and damp. The piece of fabric was then wound around a leg and either sewn together or tied with stripes of fabric. Women wore *bočkora* more often than men or children.

Hair ornaments

For Roma women it was also necessary to wear hair ornaments such as hair clips with ribbons made of fabric or beads. Their function was not only an esthetical one, but also a practical one: they tied semi-long or long hair so it did not get in the women's way while they were cooking or taking care of children. Hair ornaments were and still are popular among Roma women. In the past, Roma women used to braid ornaments and flowers into their hair, in Roma these decorations are called *lulud'i*. This traditional flower motif is still the most popular one among Roma women, although the material changes with fashion trends. For today's traditional folk music and dance ensembles, a flower in the hair is an inevitable part of women's costumes. Apart from the so-called *lulud'i*, Roma women wore clips and decorative, colourful or glittering elastic bands. Vlax women like wearing little golden crowns or hair clips which can be embedded with precious or semi-precious stones.



Men's clothing

Shirts

Traditional Roma shirts were made of several pieces of linen sewn together. The backs of fronts were sewn in an "A" shape and each part had a yoke. Long full sleeves (a so-called oblong-poncho cut) were wide and embroidered. The sleeves could be made of several pieces

of fabric of different colours or patterns. The sleeves ended in cuffs, which could be buttoned or the full, richly pleated sleeves could be wide open at the end. The shirt is either open at the neck with a collar or has a low stand-up collar with or without a button to button it. The shirt's cut is not unique to Roma. It is adopted from traditional folk clothing. The typical Roma shirt can be recognized by frequently alternating types of fabrics even in places where the cut does not necessarily need these alternations. This use of different fabrics is a significant feature by which a Roma shirt can be recognized in any region, as it was not typical for any of the "local" inhabitants.



Today's Roma men shirts are mainly with short sleeves and with a strait cut, but also some with typical riotous colours and fairly big, often flowery pattern's ordinarily assumed to be fabrics for women's clothing. Nowadays, cloth used in the past has been replaced by synthetic materials – viscose, polyester, polyamide, etc.

Waistcoats



Waistcoats are a very popular accessory to traditional, as well a current, Roma evening men's clothing. The waistcoat together with a coat presented an opportunity to show off the family jewellery and their symbols of power and wealth. The waistcoat was usually monochromic, but it could also have been complemented by embroidery, laces or some other sort of decoration.

In the past, the waistcoat was one of the possibilities to demonstrate symbols of power. As an example, let's take the so-called vajda's waistcoat, which literally paraded a rich quantity of silver buttons, chains and other ornaments. By ornaments, we mean buttons stitched on the waistcoat even though they had no practical function and were merely decorative. These buttons are called *kočaka* in Roma. The round buttons or buttons made of coins and other decorative ornaments were stitched on the waistcoat in as many rows as could possibly be squeezed onto the waistcoat. The number of such ornaments was proportional to the amount of property of the waistcoat's owner.

Hats

The hat is a traditional and necessary men's clothing accessory. It emphasized the men's role and status in both the family and the community. Nowadays, Vlax Roma men

usually wear hats. In the Balkans, for example, the hat is still an integral article of casual clothing for all generations of men. The hat's appearance corresponds to hats worn in the region by the majority group.

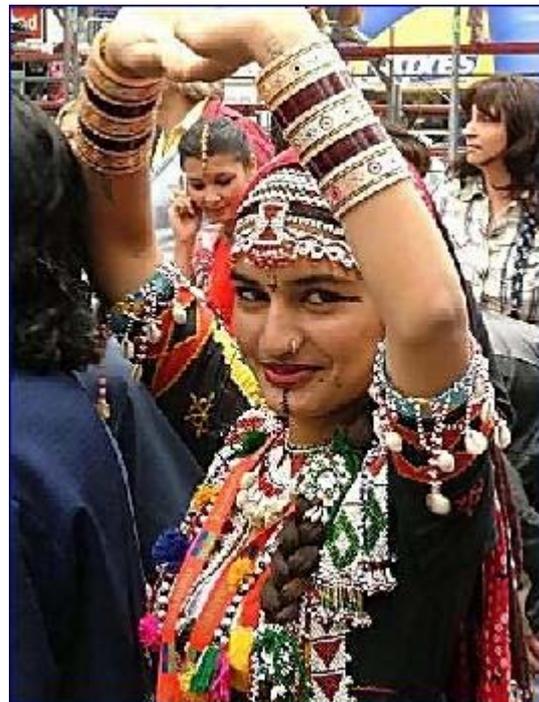
Walking sticks

Roma value the family walking stick – like a monarch's sceptre – more than gold. The family walking stick has been inherited, passed from father to son in many families or was made a part of the inheritance of a deceased member of the family. A Roma walking stick *bakul'a* was indispensable to a vajda. The vajda was the leading figure of a Roma community, his role and status is comparable to that of a mayor. Nowadays, a walking stick can be an old man's accessory and does not have to point to its owner social status. The walking stick could be made of wood, decorated with a carving; gnarled wood was frequently used for these sticks. Skilful Roma men could make these wooden canes. Another type of walking stick was made of a combination of wood and metal – hammered metal plates or coins were added onto the wooden stick.



Roma jewels

Jewels are an integral part of Roma material culture. They are prominent accessories and contribute to the overall appearance of this ethnic group. The complicated history of the Roma throughout the centuries together with their contact with various nations, cultures and religions explain the variety in the forms of Roma jewellery. Even though the style of Roma jewels is not uniform, it has significant similarities. Firstly, the resemblance to Indian jewellery is obvious. This is true in the use of materials, the way of processing them and in their motifs. Another similarity can be found in the preference for precious metals – gold and silver. These metals were chosen not only because of their financial value (which was very important to nomadic tribes), but also because of the symbolism of the materials. Gold was always associated with sun worship and silver recalled the moon and was believed to be connected to the feminine principle and fertility.



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Interesting thing are jewels reminiscent of coins. These jewels are actually made of coins but the symbolism of the coins is more important than the actual value of the jewellery. The round coin recalls the sun and symbolizes opulence and luck. This is why coin jewels accompany the turning points in life (birth, marriage, etc.), the beginnings of a new phase of life. For these jewels, the origin or the age of the coin is not important, though the coins of rulers were very popular, particularly the coins of Maria Teresa because they were perceived as extra protection.

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Source: Collections of the Museum of Romani Culture: [acquisitions] 1991-2006: the textile collection, the jewellery collection, non-collection textile and jewellery acquisitions