



SLOVAK
NATIONAL
MUSEUM

The Empire Style Gown

Focused
on Object

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Foreword

Many clothing items from the past arouse positive emotions and the desire to try them on even today. Despite the fact that they are out of fashion, the aesthetic quality represented by the material, patterns and colors still remains. Naturally, a certain nostalgia and interest in tradition have something to do with their popularity in museum and gallery expositions.

The gown presented on the pages of this publication (Pic.1), is more than 200 years old. It was made around 1814 and, according to family recollections, its owner danced in it at one of the many balls during the Congress of Vienna. But let's not get ahead of ourselves...

You will gradually learn how the gown made its way to the SNM – Museum of History (SNM – MoH) in Bratislava, to whom it belonged, the period European fashion and what was specific for Hungarian aristocratic attire. Since the gown was partially restored and exhibited and the textile restorer (a graduate of this specialization at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava) created a copy of its pattern, we will also discuss restoration and exhibiting.

We will also take you behind the scenes of working with old garments that were fashionable a long time ago, but which today are preserved in museums and have become subjects of research.

Pic. 1. Lady's Empire style gown. SNM – Museum of History/S. Okkel.

From Chest to Depository

The gown came into the possession of the SNM – MoH thanks to former museum employee, Magdaléna M. Zubercová. In 1984, Zubercová visited Eleonóra Schwertnerová (1902 – 1984), a member of the Zay family, who offered the museum several items from the family estate. As Zubercová writes in her study: *“...according to the last surviving member of this family, one of her predecessors danced in this gown at one of the numerous balls during the Congress of Vienna in 1815.”*

Eleonóra's mother was Countess Ludovika Zay (1870 – ?), daughter of Albert Zay (1825 – 1904), and granddaughter of Károly Zay (1797 – 1871), who married Franz Schwertner (1852 – 1910). Several residents of Častkovce still remember Eleonóra and called her “the little countess” and her manor house the “little countess's house.” The gown was among the items which were acquired by the museum after her death and the rapid demolition of her manor house.

The new socio-political systems affecting the life of the aristocracy in Slovakia also impacted the fates of other movable monuments of the Zay family. The famous and once legendary Zay family library in Uhrovec is a part of the historical library collections of the Slovak National Library (SNL) in Martin and several family portraits from Uhrovec were acquired after 1945 by the Museum in Bojnice, which today is a part of the SNM. Various other family items are located in the Museum of Horná Nitra in Prievidza, while family documents are part of the Slovak National Archives in Bratislava.

Tracing the furniture from the manor houses in Uhrovec, Častkovce and Bučany, which were owned by the Zay family until 1945, requires the skills of a detective and the patience of an explorer. But this is not only the case for this aristocratic family. The following stern but telltale statement of Magdaléna Zubercová can be found among the various notes from the research of acquisitions in the documentation department of the SNM – MoH: *“...It's a great pity that due to “activities” of the local national committee, items from this household were literally “stolen” and things that*