

# Dress and Fashion in Denmark

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Creativity at Work:

# Dress and Fashion in Denmark

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# Abstract

In terms of dress and fashion Denmark is an example of a West European peripheral country within the international fashion system. Since the Middle Ages, new fashions have found their way to Denmark through the internationally oriented royal family, the purchases of well-traveled citizens, various international and national fashion reports, and the international purchases by local retailers. With varying speed new cuts, colors and styles have impressed themselves upon both the everyday and festive fashions of the Danish wardrobe. The same foreign influence applies to local fashion production. Design, craftsmanship and technology has through time been shaped under influences from abroad. But these international influences have not undermined the recurring idea of a particular Danish dress and fashion culture. In the middle of the 19th century the prevailing view was that the peasants' festive dress represented specific national dress. By the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century discussions in the Danish fashion industry and industry policy concern Denmark's status as a fashion nation and Copenhagen as a possible new global fashion center. This is due to the growing Danish fashion culture, the textile and clothing industry's export success, and not least the fact that Denmark is a world-leading fur exporter.

# Keywords

Danish fashion, casual wear, fur industry

# Author

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## Dress and Fashion in Denmark

In terms of dress and fashion Denmark is an example of a West European peripheral country within the international fashion system. Since the Middle Ages, new fashions have found their way to Denmark through the internationally oriented royal family, the purchases of well-traveled citizens, various international and national fashion reports, and the international purchases by local retailers. With varying speed new cuts, colors and styles have impressed themselves upon both the everyday and festive fashions of the Danish wardrobe. The same foreign influence applies to local fashion production. Design, craftsmanship and technology has through time been shaped under influences from abroad. But these international influences have not undermined the recurring idea of a particular Danish dress and fashion culture. In the middle of the 19th century the prevailing view was that the peasants' festive dress represented specific national dress. By the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century discussions in the Danish fashion industry and industry policy concern Denmark's status as a fashion nation and Copenhagen as a possible new global fashion center. This is due to the growing Danish fashion culture, the textile and clothing industry's export success, and not least the fact that Denmark is a world-leading fur exporter.

In international surveys about values, the Danes are usually portrayed as a happy, relaxed and open-minded people. This is associated both with the Danish appreciation of "hygge", a concept that can roughly be translated as "cosiness", and with the country's recent history as the first in the world to legalize pornography in 1969, and the establishment in 1971 of the *Freetown Christiania* as an alternative society based on basic democracy and the absence of private property rights. However, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the open-mindedness of the Danes was under attack, partly due to the country's stricter immigration policies and partly through the debate initiated by the country's Liberal government about the cultural values and heritage of the Danish society.

The relaxed and open-minded values still characterize Danish style in dress as casual wear is the norm. In the last part of the 20th century, the dress code of the Danes grew more uniform across age, social and economic barriers, and also more informal in both private and public. Jeans, known as "cowboy pants", and T-shirt have become a common uniform, regardless of gender and age, as in many other countries across the world. But some variation can be found in Danish dress. In Copenhagen and in large provincial towns it is no longer rare to see people dressed exclusively in international high fashion brands, just as there are many both Danish and immigrant women or women dressed in accordance of their religious belief, in for example chadar or burka.

Along with its well-known agricultural exports, bacon, butter and cheese, Denmark has been a world-leading exporter of mink and fox fur since 1979.

Through Saga Furs and Copenhagen Fur, Denmark has also been a leader in fur marketing and product development. In spite of this, the Danes and Danish fashion designers have a limited use of fur. This is partially explained by the preference for casual styles and the Danes' relative low clothing budget, which in 2003 was estimated to be only three percent of the average household annual budget. However, since the 1990s sealskin from Greenland has achieved a certain popularity.

## 19th Century: International fashion and Danish national dress

With their background in the Danish National Museum's dress collection a four volume book series with the title "Danske Dragter" ("Danish Costumes") has been published in the period 1977-1994. The book series traces changes in fashions in Denmark from the 18th century up to the 1920's. Strong emphasis is put on the fact that styles of dressing and fashions have come to Denmark through inspiration from abroad. Even so, it has been found necessary to give an account of international fashion history in a Danish context, as the dating of the various fashions in Denmark do not follow the same time line as abroad, but typically fall later.

Around the year 1800, knowledge of new fashions came to Denmark through, among other things, foreign fashion magazines, which were often circulated between the wealthier bourgeois homes through newspaper advertisements. At the time there were virtually no Danish fashion magazines. The first Danish fashion magazine "Dansk Modejournal" ("Danish Fashion Journal") was published in 1831, but only for a year. The country did not establish a fashion magazine industry until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. At the beginning of the 19th century fashion, inspiration for both men's and women's wear came from England as British fashion was seen as more accessible than the French. However, the French influence grew with the emergence of haute couture and with the establishment of the first Danish department stores. At the prominent department stores in Copenhagen, Fønnesbech (est. 1847) and Magasin du Nord (est. 1879), it was possible to purchase real Parisian fashion, or have it made to measure using patterns brought directly from the fashion houses of Paris.

Earlier fashion goods, such as lace, ribbons, silk garments and the like were sold by traveling fashion merchants, and fashionable clothes were made to measure by local tailors and seamstresses, if they were not homemade. Ready-to-wear existed at the time, but with limited availability and primarily in Copenhagen. It was only at the beginning of the 20th century that an industrialized clothing industry came into existence.

By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century an interest arose in defining a Danish national dress as a contrast to the fashionable clothing of the time. This interest

was awoken in extension of the general Romantic Movement in culture and society, where the awareness of one's origin and history was seen as significant to the development of modern life and the modern nation state.

The even before that there had been an altogether different attempt at defining Danish national dress on the basis of mercantile, economic thought. The introduction of a common Danish dress style was intended to limit the import of luxury goods and thus strengthen the Danish economy. In 1788 a Danish essay competition posed the question: "Is it useful or disadvantageous to introduce a national dress?" The incoming answers revealed a negative view of the establishment of a national dress, as a form of civilian uniform which was seen as a restriction of the individual's civic rights. However, there was greatly unanimity that government officials should be required to wear a uniform based on national dress.

In 1827, the multifaceted person, the doctor, actor and financial inspector Johan Christian Ryge (1780-1842) again raised the question of a Danish national dress in the pamphlet: "Ideer til en national smag i dansk klædedragt" (eng. "Ideas for a national taste in Danish dress"). He expressed the opinion that a national dress would limit the influence of international fashion, which he considered to be unhealthy. By contrast, national dress should be adapted to the Danish weather, and this in turn would strengthen the visual identity of Danes. His suggestion was that the Danes should dress in clothes reminiscent of 18<sup>th</sup> century fashion only cleansed of any unnecessary details or decorations.

The idea of the festive dress of the peasants as an expression of a national dress was not brought up until around 1840. To the bourgeoisie and the National Liberalist Movement, the peasants represented the authentic national character of the Danes. Their way of life was viewed as the materialization of the link back in time to the origin of Denmark and the Danes. This, in spite of the fact that the rural population at the time was making a great effort to imitate urban everyday life, style of interior decoration and dress, widely recognized to be internationally inspired. Therefore it is not surprising that it has since been possible to trace the influences of changing fashions in the peasant's dress or so-called "stagnated European fashion", as it was formulated by the founder of the The Danish Folk Museum, Berhard Olsen (1836-1922), in an article from 1879 on the subject.

This romantic idea of the peasants' festive clothes as a form of national dress was further emphasized with the abolishment of absolute monarchy and the establishment of representative democracy in 1849. In 1854, the newly established state institution, The Danish National Museum, asked the Danish painter F.C. Lund (1826-1901) to travel around Denmark, commissioned to paint the different forms of Danish national dress still in use. In 1863, F.C. Lund published his finished work of 30 lithographs by the title: "Danske Nationaldragter" (eng. "Danish National Costumes"). The images became very popular among the Danes, especially after Denmark in 1864 lost its three

duchies (Slesvig, Holsten and Lauenburg) and the area of Southern Jutland, in the war against Prussia (Germany). As a consequence it became the public opinion that Denmark was a small country now and had to unite in order to prevail. Previously, the Danish kingdom had included the rule of Norway (from 1380 to 1814), the colony Tranquebar and the three duchies. In 1864, the Danish state consisted of the geographical area called Denmark, the Faroe Islands (under home rule authority since 1948), Iceland (achieved independence in 1944), and the colonies Greenland (abolished as a Danish colony on 1953 and under home rule authority since 1979) and the Virgin Islands of Saint Croix, Saint Thomas and Saint John (the islands were sold to the US in 1917).

In the limited studies of Danish dress and fashion, which during the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been dominated by a cultural historic approach, the question of national dress has been discussed. It has been concluded that the phenomenon is an example of an invented tradition and thus the use of the concept of national dress should be used with reservations as to its significance. As a consequence the term "national dress" is no longer used as a museum category. Instead this kind of dress is classified by Danish museums as "folk dress", "regional dress" or "peasant's dress". The term national dress has become limited to the Danish folk dance movement.

The peasants' festive clothes most common is being made from patterned fabrics in the basic colors red, green and blue. The colors became part of the garments in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. At the time the fabric used was so-called "hvergarn", linsey-woolsey, which is woven by flax yarn in one direction and wool yarn in the other. The male dress consisted of the following parts: a homespun top with a long linsey-woolsey waistcoat, a so-called "brystdug", white homespun knickers with shiny metal buttons, white knitted socks with patterns from the heel and up the leg, homespun garters made of multicolored wool, and finally a dyed homespun coat with a stand-up collar and metal buttons. For women it was common to wear: a shift on top of which a full dress or skirt and top was worn, an apron, a shawl and a headdress. The woman would combine her clothes according to the occasion. This could be wearing a nicer apron for a party, a waistcoat in a contrasting color to a top or a dress, or tying a colored silk ribbon around your arm and the like.

Danish dress researchers have found that regional differences were especially noticeable in the women's festive dress, especially in headgear, colors and decorations. Other regional characteristics are the use of lace by the w people from the town Tønder in the southern part of Jutland, many pieces of silver jewelry as dress decoration worn by the women of the Northern island of Læsø to the North, and the use of silk fabrics for their festive clothes by the women from the island of Samsø. Their caps were made of silk and bound with a silk scarf, the three or four cornered shawl was embroidered and made from silk, and the sleeves and apron were made of semi-silk. Only the skirt was made of pure wool and it was customary to wear several skirts at the same time.

However, in the peasants' everyday wear the regional differences were tended to be negligible in as far as they existed at all. Men wore non-dyed homespun clothes, which became grey and muddy with wear. The everyday clothes of the women were typically black or dark blue. The accessories were often knitted items of non-dyed wool: stockings, gloves, jackets, and pixie caps for the men; and shawls, slips and headscarves for the women. Fur and hide were also used in peasant clothing. Among other things, the men wore sheepskin furs in winter and their knickers were often made from tanned buckskin. For festive occasions the hide could be embroidered. Both men and women wore clogs for everyday and festive use.

## 20th Century: Casual wear as Danish fashion

In the course of the 20th century a Danish textile and clothing industry developed. The industry was at primarily focused on the home market. In the first part of the century fashion was still something that came to Denmark from abroad and was accessible for the affluent. Copenhagen had the best selection of fashion. The newest fashions of the finest quality for women were sold in the fashion salons in the department stores of the city and the independent dressmakers. For men, fashionable clothes could be bought at gentlemen's outfitting shops and made to measure by local tailors. A more accessible fashion and more reasonable priced could be bought from the postal order firm and department store Daells Varehus (est. 1910). Finally, many women still sowed their own clothes or had their clothes made by a local seamstress after patterns, which came with contemporary fashion magazines.

The idea of a particular Danish couture grew out of this context and has since in the Danish fashion memory been shaped by the so-called "three B's". This referred to the three dressmakers by the names of Holger Blom, Uffe Brydegaard and Preben Birch, who in the period from 1930 to the 1960's were responsible for creating fashion after a Parisian ideal. Holger Blom (1906-65) is considered to be the greatest of them all. He was self-taught, known as the French couturiers for being devoted to beauty, quality and good craftsmanship. From 1930 to 1965 he had his own fashion salon in Copenhagen. The two other B's were Blom's competitors. Uffe Brydegaard (1901-1962) began his career with Blom's fashion salon in the beginning of the 1930's, but soon established his own fashion salon and began to produce as well ready-to-wear women's clothes. The last B, Preben Birch (1906-1992), began his career in Paris where he drew sketches for the fashion houses Poiret and Patou. Upon his return to Copenhagen he ran his own fashion salon from 1937 to 1969 and was also known for his theater and film costumes designs.

To have worked for Holger Blom is still seen as a sign of fashion quality in Denmark. The dressmaker Jørgen Bender (1938-1999), who took over Blom's fashion salon when he died, was since known as the favorite tailor of the



Danish royal family. But also for the fashion designer Erik Mortensen (1926-1998), the apprenticeship with Blom is viewed as contributory to his local fame and has been seen as the basis for his subsequent international career. First with the fashion house Pierre Balmain, where Mortensen from 1982 until 1990 was head designer, and later as head of the fashion house Jean-Louis Scherrer from 1992 until 1994.

However, the couture-inspired fashion production slid into the background in the last part of the 20th century in favor of industrially produced youth fashions. The fashion salons of the department stores and dressmakers disappeared to around 1970. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century there are only a very limited number of dressmakers with their own fashion salons and traditional tailors left in Denmark. The first mentioned primarily make a living from making bridal and festive gowns. The last mentioned have in the last few years experienced a revival as more men and businessmen desire a personally fitted wardrobe.

As to the rest of the Western world, the time after World War II was a time of upheaval. In terms of fashion and dress, this is also the period where a new national self-awareness of a Danish fashion identity again came about. But in a different way than previously. It became possible to understand fashion as something being particularly Danish. Fashion did also mean youth fashion, which was industrially produced, designed by young fashion designers and intended for themselves and their peers. Nevertheless, the phenomenon came about and existed in a complex way. That fashion could be understood as Danish was due to the fact that it was designed in Denmark by trained Danish fashion designers, and that it was predominantly produced in Danish factories. These facts were promoted by the industry through its trade fairs and other marketing initiatives. And the local fashion press, which was in growth at the time, communicated the same message. The style of Danish youth fashion was casual with simple and clean lines. In many ways it corresponded with the Danish furniture design of the time, which already by then had gained international recognition branded as either "Danish Design" or "Danish Modern".

How Danish fashion was different from international fashion is not easy to point out. Even though the Danish designers were aware of their independent design practices, it was still a central part of their design process to go on inspirational trips to Paris, London and other European cities, or find inspiration in international fashion magazines.

These changes took place while the Danish textile and clothing industry was growing in the areas around the towns of Herning, Ikast and Brande in Jutland. Here the industry based its self-perception on the old hose binder trade, which had existed in the area for centuries as a sideline to the cultivation of the poor heath soil, due to a royal license. The growth conditions of the industry had been fortunate since the 1930's, where as a part of the fight against Danish unemployment import restrictions were imposed on manufactured

goods from abroad, and the import of raw materials and semi-manufactured goods was facilitated. Danish goods thus had good conditions on the local market. However, a different story when it came to the export markets as Denmark's neighboring countries imposed the same import restrictions on manufactured goods. These restrictions were not lifted until the end of the 1940's. Since then the Danish textile and clothing industry has met tough competition on both its home and export markets. The development of the industry has therefore been based on the need to be able to compete as regards price, quality and design.

As early as in 1947, the manufacturing industry in Jutland realized the necessity of proactive promotion through trade fairs and exhibitions in order to gain market shares. The first trade fair was held in the town of Herning. At the same time the latest international fashions was shown to the local retailers and fashion buyers through similar events in Copenhagen. Since 1966 and onwards all trade fair activity has been concentrated in Copenhagen, twice a year corresponding with the rhythm of the international fashion system. This is still the case and since 2006 the trade fairs and individual fashion shows have been branded by the network organization *Danish Fashion Institute* under the name *Copenhagen Fashion Week*. The event is based on three trade fairs: *Copenhagen International Fashion Fair*, *Cph Vision* and *Gallery* in addition to a four-day schedule of independent fashion shows at different locations in the city. The event is estimated to be the largest of its kind in Scandinavia and Northern Europe, as regards to size and number of visitors. The event is renowned for mainly focusing on casual and street wear. Main exhibitors are Danish fashion brands, but Scandinavian and international street wear companies also find their way to Copenhagen.

The Danish fashion designers, who received much attention in the 1960's, primarily in Denmark, but also in the rest of Scandinavia and abroad, were names like Søs Drasbæk, Sysser Ginsborg, Margit Brandt, Lennart Raaholt, Bent Visti, Mugge Kølpin, Lise-Lotte Wiingaard and Kirsten Teisner. Several of these were trained at the artistically inspired design schools. Either the private fashion school *Margretheskolen*, (eng. "Scandinavian Academy of International Fashion and Design", est. 1932), or at what since 1990 has been named *Danmarks Designskole* (est. 1930 under the name *Kunsthåndværkerskolen* – eng. "The School of Arts and Crafts"). From the late 1960's and onwards Danish designers have also been trained at the industry's own school *TEKO-Center Denmark* (est. 1968 under the name *Dansk konfektions- og Trikotageskole*) and at *Designskolen Kolding* (est. 1968).

A number of the designers from the 1960's have been behind fashion brands that are still seen as mainstays in Danish fashion. For example, *Margit Brandt Copenhagen* (est. 1965 and relaunched in 2005), *Dranella* (est. 1956) and *In Wear* (est. 1969). Also a few youth fashion shops, which were established around the same time, still exist. This includes *Deres* (est. 1957) and *Nørgaard på Strøget* (est. 1958). *Nørgaard på Strøget* has become a Danish fashion institution for both young and old female consumers. In the shop danish and international

fashion brands are sold side by side. From the shop's own collection, the cotton T-shirt in vest quality "Rip 101" has even become an icon of everyday Danish fashion and was in 2007 honored by the Danish Design Counsel Annual Award. Since the T-shirt was first launched in 1967 it has as following changing fashions been produced in many different colors and stripe-variations. As in 1967, it still says, "Made in Denmark" on the back of the label. This is a rare in contemporary Danish fashion, as production for the most companies has been outsourced to low wage countries. In the same period as Danish fashion design came into existence, the worldwide shoe manufacturer *Ecco* was founded (est.1963). Ecco is known for its practical and comfortable shoes with a simple and tasteful design.

## 21st Century: Fashion, Nation and Globalization

As concerns the way Danes dress, the influence from abroad has not become less significant than earlier. But great changes have taken place in the Danish textile and clothing industry, as has also been the case in a series of other European countries. In the case of Denmark, the upheaval began in the early 1990's where Danish clothes production was for economical reasons outsourced to low wage countries in East Europe or Asia. As a consequence many local manufacturing companies had to close down and the Danish press predicted it was the end of the industry. However, things worked out differently. New companies were founded and the ones remaining found new areas of growth. This was the case for companies as *Bestseller A/S* (est. 1975), *BTX Group* (est. in 1935 as *Brandtex*, since 2005 BTX Group) and *IC Company A/S* (est. in 1969 as *In Wear Group A/S* and since the merger with *Carli Gry A/S* in 2001, *IC Company A/S*). These companies are responsible for three quarters of the Danish textile and clothing export, which in 2006 grew to be the country's fourth largest exporter among the general Danish manufacturing industry. Bestseller A/S is the largest Danish fashion company. In 2007 it consisted of 14 fashion brands, among these Vero Moda, Only, Exit and Jack & Jones. The company employs approximately 13,000 people globally. Their main market is Europe, both wholesale and through their own retail stores. In 1996, the company also entered the Chinese market and in 2007 was announced market leader within mid-market fashions, operating 1600 franchised or own concept stores.

Among the new fashion companies that have developed concurrently with the industry's restructuring for a global production, are companies that focus especially on design and most often are founded by a fashion designer. Up through the 1990's several of these have been able to create a new awareness in Denmark of a particular Danish fashion, based on a bohemian romantic style. Characteristically of the women's wear is a feminine, dressed up, yet practical expression, which is created through the use of embroidered fabrics, color and

pattern mixes, layers, braiding and a frequent and often lavish use of sequins. For men's wear the style is expressed through relaxed and loose-fitting clothes, often in light colors. Fashion brands like *Munthe plus Simonsen* (est. 1994), *Bruuns Bazaar* (est. 1994), *Rützou* (est. 2000), *DAY Birger et Mikkelsen* (est. 1999), *Julie Fagerholt* (est. 1998) and *By Malene Birger* (est. 2003) is recognized for creating this style. However, a fashion brand that has been more focused on a modern and clean casual style is *Mads Nørgaard Copenhagen* (est. 1986). The company is regarded as quintessential Danish fashion and through its design to correspond with the furniture design tradition of the 1950's, that through the concepts of "Danish Modern" and "Danish Design" placed Denmark on the design map of the world.

The interest in fashion in Denmark seems to be continuously growing at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. This is among other things apparent through the increasing local media attention, as the fashion magazines such as *Dansk*, *Cover*, *Costume*, *VS* and *Eurowoman*. Through these Danish fashion and models are appreciated in the same way as international fashion. Of the Danish models Helena Christensen (born 1968) has to date the most significant and international profile being included in the phenomenon of supermodels of the 1990's. In addition to the magazine industry, a series of books and exhibitions have helped define a Danish fashion culture. The first Danish fashion encyclopedia: *Modeleksikon, Fra couture til kaos* was published in 2002 ("Fashion Encyclopedia: From Couture to Chaos", edited by Mads Nørgaard, founder and head designer of the company Mads Nørgaard Copenhagen). In the encyclopedia entries on international fashion are mixed with specific Danish ones and hereby Danish fashion has been integrated as equal part of international fashion history. The book *Modens mestre* ("Masters of Fashion") written by one of the leading Danish fashion journalist, Lotte Freddie, describes the significant Danish fashion designers of 2002, which she sees as having the greatest creative potential. Finally, the exhibition *UNIK: Danish Fashion* has in the same way paid tribute to promoting the creativity of contemporary Danish fashion design. The exhibition was first shown at the *Danish Design Center* in Copenhagen in the summer of 2004, before traveling to different destinations in both Europe and Asia. The exhibition predominantly gave attention to a new generation of more avant-garde Danish fashion designers. This included Henrik Vibskov, Anna Gulmann, and the design duo, Rikke Baumgarten and Helle Hestehave, behind the brand Baum und Pferdgarten (est. 1999). But also three Danish born designers who are both trained and work abroad: Camilla Stærk, Jens Laugesen and Peter Jensen. All three have shown at London Fashion Week a few times. Their international careers can be seen as initiating yet another direction in Danish fashion.

A few newly established companies have a strategy to penetrate the international high fashion market immediately, instead of building its platform on the Danish market first, known for street and casual wear. The fashion company *NOIR / Illuminati II* (est. 2005) is an example of this tendency. The company is building on a paradoxical concept, like a catholic Letter of

Indulgence as the founder of the company has stated, to be a meaningful luxury brand. On the one hand promoting ethical values such as social responsibility in fashion, by using mostly Fair Trade certified materials and the company's own grown organic cotton (from Africa), and on the other hand promoting fashion as being exclusive, irrational, seductive and sexually appealing.

On the basis of the government's globalization policy which focuses on innovation and design, Denmark is increasingly branded as a contemporary fashion nation. In 2005 the network organization *Danish Fashion Institute* was established for the purpose of coordinating the local fashion week and to promote and communicate Danish fashion, its history and future potential. The awareness of Danish fashion has also renewed research interest in the field of fashion, dress and textiles at the universities, design schools and museums.

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