

Native Craft Study at University Level as a Tool for Maintaining Craft Heritage: The Example of the University of Tartu Viljandi Culture Academy, Estonia

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ABSTRACT

The present paper describes the native craft education and research carried out at the University of Tartu Viljandi Culture Academy in Estonia. ‘Native crafts’ are understood as creative technical and cultural practices, applications, and developments that are based on traditional local crafting techniques, materials, design principles, and skills. The mission of the academy is to represent the values that reinforce and re-establish local and national traditions and identities through active participation in the cultural process. Its courses, which were launched in 1994, have been developed to cover the majority of the traditional crafting techniques, skills, and materials that are used throughout Estonia. By means of these courses, the academy has assumed responsibility for teaching, preserving, and integrating Estonian vernacular culture and skills. It is the only institution in Estonia advancing the practice-based research and popularization of Estonian traditional costumes, jewelry, and construction, for example, at the level of higher education. The present paper provides an overview of the BA and MA program in native crafts and their main developmental trends. It also offers a more detailed overview of costume studies as part of the textile program. It covers the history, techniques, and regional peculiarities of traditional costumes, as well as the innovative ways in which traditional materials, patterns, and ornaments can be used in modern fashion.

KEYWORDS

heritage crafts, craft education, folk costume

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CRAFT EDUCATION IN VILJANDI CULTURE ACADEMY

Established in 1952, Viljandi Culture Academy (VCA) is an institute of higher education that focuses on various aspects of culture. Since 2005, it has operated as a regional department of the oldest university in Estonia — the University of Tartu. The academy offers five four-year applied higher education program and three two-year MA program. Two of the programs are connected to the research and development of traditional handicrafts: the BA in native crafts combines programs on Estonian native textiles, construction, and metalwork, while the MA in creative cultural heritage applications focuses on handicrafts and traditional music. Applicants for the BA courses are expected to have an interest in traditional crafts, although specific skills and knowledge are not required. Applicants for the MA program are required to have prior in-depth knowledge and skills in one of the narrower fields of handicrafts. There are about 130 students in total studying at BA and MA level. Although most of them study part-time, they cover the whole of the curriculum, mainly learning from home and attending the academy only for regular study sessions lasting three to four days. In addition to the programs referred to above, shorter handicraft modules are included in the training course for teachers of arts and technology and the folkloristics and applied heritage studies program (which is taught in English).

The mission of VCA is to represent the values that reinforce and re-establish local and national traditions and identities through *active participation* in the cultural process. Thus, handicrafts are not merely something to be studied from the outside: instead, the aim is to support the preservation of traditional skills, lifestyles, and dynamic handicraft heritage by participating in the process and channeling it (JÖESTE et al. 2020:21). Good practical skills constitute the core of all programs and are given equal attention together with academic studies. In order to support the preservation of traditions, development activities are considered important, including the development of research methodology, the development of teaching methodology, and the development of craft entrepreneurship.

Two aspects are of importance in terms of studies and research work: studying traditional techniques, skills, and materials and mastering them to a level of excellence with the objective of preserving their variety and depth; and identifying everyday applications for them so as to ensure their viability. Although these are arts-based programs, they have increasingly approached the sphere of the humanities over time. Graduates who have taken the BA programs can choose a career in either research or creative work based on their interests, while graduates from the MA program are more likely to find work as researchers, teachers, and museum staff than as artists.

STUDIES ON ESTONIAN NATIONAL COSTUMES

The following is an overview of activities aimed at heritage preservation, drawing on the example of the study of Estonian national costumes. The curriculum, which originally focused exclusively on traditional Estonian textiles, was launched at VCA in 1994 on the initiative of textile artist Anu Raud (KÄSTIK – MATSIN 2019:211). The move was clearly inspired by the wave of nationalism after Estonia regained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, which encouraged the establishment of organizations and courses focusing on cultural heritage. Initially, attention was broadly concentrated on farmstead culture, including textiles, and the



first programs touched only briefly on national costumes. Although a substantial part of these courses was devoted to familiarizing students with traditional textile techniques (knitting, weaving on looms, embroidery, crochet, and belt weaving), less attention was given to putting together costumes and sewing.

In 2008, a six-month specialization module on the making of national costumes was added, aimed at exploring in greater detail how national costumes are actually put together, as well as learning about their history, customs related to wearing them, and their social meanings. According to the course curriculum, having completed the module the student is expected to be:

- familiar with the technology, development, and traditions related to the wearing of national costumes and accessories in different parts of Estonia;
- able to compile and produce national costumes from specific eras and regions; and
- able to style traditional national costumes and adjust them according to the needs of modern wearers.

The best national costume makers in Estonia at the time were involved in the development of the curriculum, and their advice was taken into consideration when devising the new courses. Among the major additions were various national costume sewing courses, courses focusing on specific parts/accessories (headgear, shoes, etc.), and practical courses — delivered in collaboration with skilled practitioners, museums, and advice chambers — on how to put together national costumes and how to make and present them.

The aim behind the creation of the module was to construct a systematic and broad approach to teaching the history and making of national costumes, since at the time there was no program in Estonia, at any level of education, that focused on this particular topic. The best national costume makers were Soviet-era skilled practitioners from a variety of collective art and handicraft workshops, who produced national costumes primarily for folk art groups. As there was no institution for the training of professional national costume makers and researchers, there was a danger that many of the skills would disappear together with these practitioners.

But why are national costumes so important to Estonians? Estonia had belonged to various bigger countries before achieving independence in 1918. About half a century earlier, in 1868, when the renting of labor was abolished in addition to serfdom, there had been a gradual increase in self-assertion — the so-called national awakening — and Estonian national identity began to be forged. As part of this, greater value was attributed to the tangible cultural heritage of the rural population and its display. Festive local attire, which was one of the most colorful and accessible means of self-expression among country folk, slowly evolved into an integral part of Estonian national identity, a role that was also preserved during the Soviet occupation. At the beginning of the 1990s, when Estonia regained its independence, national costumes were given specific emphasis. The Estonian tradition of song festivals, originating from 1869, and later the accompanying dance festivals, also played an important role in preserving national costumes. National costumes are still the main attire for performances even today at both types of festival. In addition to the use of national costumes for performances, it is increasingly popular to have a national costume made for personal use: according to the formal dress code, it is considered equivalent to a tailcoat and evening gown.

Even today, there are local variations of national costumes that are associated with around a hundred historical administrative units, known as parishes or communes. Estonian folk costumes have also been influenced by European fashions, especially via neighboring countries.



Different regions have adapted these influences in different ways. In general, three large, unique groups of folk costumes can be distinguished, which nevertheless encompass many smaller differences, mainly with respect to composition. These three groups are Northern Estonia, Southern Estonia, and Western Estonia with the islands, and there are big differences between them in terms of cut, pattern, and color. In addition, the appearance of the costumes is influenced by the period and the wearer's social status. As a result of the combined impact of these factors, both researchers and wearers of national costumes are faced with a world characterized by huge variety and significance. The way in which national costumes were produced during the Soviet era, and the fact that they were worn as performance attire, tended to make them more uniform. The image of national costumes was simplified, and many adjustments were made due to their function as performance costumes. Introducing variety into national costumes, preserving the skills required to produce them, and making them more readily available to broader circles of interested people were therefore the main goals behind the launch of the module. Introduced in 2011, the MA program in handicrafts (under native crafts at the time, although now part of the creative applications for cultural heritage) provides a basis for carrying out in-depth studies in the field of national costumes. Students who complete the program are able to carry out independent research on national costumes and everything related to them, make national costumes, and pass on their skills.

EXAMPLES OF GRADUATION PAPERS ON NATIONAL COSTUMES

In order to complete their BA studies, students must carry out extensive, two-part research, consisting of a practical part and theoretical research to support it. Students on the MA program must write a thesis that involves mainly theoretical research while nevertheless focusing on the practice-based analysis of a traditional technology, material, or item type situated within the broader context of application and crafting. The main research sources are museum objects, written archival sources, and fieldwork materials. Many of the papers mentioned above are also related to national costume research. At BA level, students deal primarily with the mapping and analysis of a technique or item group that is more limited in range, for example bobbin lace, knitting, crocheting, embroidery, leatherwork, and various sewing techniques. In the case of MA papers, similar studies are carried out, although research work on full national costumes is also undertaken on a significantly larger scale. It is very important to emphasize that in the case of most papers, the focus is on the technology used to make the items and on the researcher's rather than the practitioner's perspective. Some typical examples of graduation papers on national costumes are presented below.

For her seminar and graduation paper in 2016 (MARKS 2016a), professional weaver Margot Marks researched the technique used to weave skirts for the national costume of Muhu (an island in Western Estonia) in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century (Fig. 1). With the popularization of folk art in the 1920s, a very specific way of making skirts was introduced, which involved the weaving of richly colored skirts with a striped pattern. In her paper, Marks suggested a number of technical innovations that would help simplify the process of weaving the skirts without affecting their quality. Following the defense of her thesis, Marks expanded the material and published it in book form, devoting particular attention to the provision of weaving instructions to help those interested in making their own skirts (MARKS 2016b).





Fig. 1. Margot Marks, *Skirts for Estonian national costumes on Muhu Island. Türi, Estonia, 2016.* (Photo by Anu Pink)

For her MA thesis in 2013, handicraft teacher and publisher Anu Pink studied over 700 pairs of socks and stockings preserved in Estonian museums, focusing on the knitting technique used to produce them, or more precisely on the technique for knitting the heels and toes. Her main finding was the recognition of technical versatility: while today, as a rule, two or three different ways of turning a heel are taught, Pink discovered in the course of her research at least 15 significantly different ways of knitting sock heels. When smaller details are taken into account, the number of different techniques increases to around 40. When responsibility for passing on skills moved from home to school, technical variety and local idiosyncrasies disappeared (PINK 2013:17). The research carried out by Pink was very important in terms of demonstrating how the application of a technique-based method can yield new knowledge about cultural changes. A book based on the research and aimed at a wider readership has been published in both Estonian (PINK 2017) and English (PINK 2018).

Handicraft entrepreneur Kersti Loite wrote her BA graduation paper (2012) on the national costume skirts of the Virumaa region in Northern Estonia, focusing on the composition, crafting technology, and usage functions of this item group. As part of her research, she mapped and



analyzed all the 110 skirts from 11 parishes in the Virumaa area that are preserved in museums. For her MA thesis in 2015, Loite wrote *Ajaloolistel allikatel põhineva rahvarõivakomplekti koostamise põhimõtted, komplektide koostamine ja valmistamine Virumaa rahvariете näitel* [The Principles of Compiling a National Costume Set Based on Historical Resources: The Compiling and Making of Sets after the Example of National Costumes from Virumaa], in which she analyzed the methodology suggested by earlier researchers for compiling sets of Virumaa national costumes. She also produced new sample sets, providing in-depth descriptions and documentation for her choices (Fig. 2). Her work was the first attempt to explore and clearly express the methodological foundations for compiling national costumes. The work on Virumaa national costumes carried out by K. Loite for her MA thesis was published in full in 2017 (LOITE 2017).

In 2014, Inna Raud wrote her MA thesis on the national costumes of a small parish in Vändra in West Estonia, having studied all the items from this region preserved in Estonian museums. National costumes from Vändra had previously been considered relatively modest, with only a couple of set versions in wider use. However, as a result of the research work carried out by Raud, nine sets of national costumes for girls and women of varying social status, dating from different eras and with different functions, were identified, accompanied by instructions for making the sets (Fig. 3). This thesis clearly demonstrated the extent of the variety in national attire that may be hidden within an area apparently characterized by very poor resources. The work by Raud was also published with supplementary material (RAUD 2016).

The final example of research on national costumes is the MA thesis written in 2018 by Mareli Rannap: *Activity Principles of the Regional Advisory Board of National Costumes. Based on the Example of Saaremaa*. Before undertaking the research, Rannap had been a local community activist and had spearheaded several national costume workshops in Saaremaa, as a result of which the need had arisen to establish a local advisory board for matters related to national costumes. Rannap researched the history of providing advice on national costumes in Estonia as well as in neighboring countries, including present-day practice. As a result, it became clear that the activities of compiling, making, and providing relevant advice have been organized very differently and with varying purposes among the different countries, from state-run systems to private entrepreneurship, and from very precisely established ‘correct’ national costume sets to a relatively free creative approach (RANNAP 2018:23–24). With respect to the compilation of modern Estonian national costume sets, it is typical to look for authenticity in terms of both resources and crafting techniques. However, there are few rules governing the compilation of sets, and practitioners have quite a lot of freedom. In her MA thesis, Rannap mapped the ways in which advice on national costumes is provided in Estonia and, based on this information, suggested an appropriate model for Saaremaa. The research also identified the target groups for the advisory board and suggested various activities and materials to support its work. At the end of 2018, the Advisory Board for Saaremaa National Costumes started work at the Saaremaa Museum, following the principles identified during the research.

In addition to the above, several other activities can be highlighted as indirect outcomes of studies focusing on national costumes in higher education. These include:

- several new local national costume schools (two years of non-formal studies);
- several new regional advisory boards for national costumes;





Fig. 2. Kersti Loite, Festive costume of a married woman from Rakvere parish from the 19th century. Rakvere, Estonia, 2015. (Photo by Sandra Urvak)



Fig. 3. Inna Raud, Festive costumes of a married women from Vändra parish from the middle of the 19th century. Kurgja, Estonia, 2014. (Photo by Sandra Urvak)

- a study program for national costume makers at vocational level; and
- scientific articles and monographs demonstrating the relevance of research on national costumes and the compiling of sets.

THE REVITALIZATION OF TRADITIONAL SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE THROUGH MODERN FASHION

The other aim of national costume studies is to revitalize traditional skills and knowledge through modern fashion. This places creators in a situation in which they need to explore in depth the ways in which national costumes are made and worn so that they are able to harness this knowledge in the service of modern sustainable garment production. This leads to the preservation of skills and techniques, since they are in everyday use, as well as to the preservation of cultural variety. Consumers are able to wear on an everyday basis items that value as well as emphasize their heritage.

The program also includes fashion design, product development, and entrepreneurship for students who are more interested in developing their own clothing brand. As one possible



outcome, students are able to present their costumes at the OmaMood (OwnFashion) show, established by VCA in 2012. Initially launched to showcase works by students only, today the show has become part of the international Estonian Fashion Festival (<https://fashionfestival.ee/omamood/>), where, since 2018, the competition is open to all designers who respect the same values. In order to support the fashion show, an in-service training program of the same name has been launched — OmaMood Meistrite Kool (OwnFashion Masterclass). The OmaMood show and training program support the sustainable preservation of local handicraft skills and materials, as well as the broadening and deepening of the notion of heritage. They also focus on trouble spots in society and on ways in which cultural heritage values can help to solve contemporary problems.

EXAMPLES OF STUDENT FASHION COLLECTIONS

Below, I present some examples of aspects of heritage that have inspired students from the University of Tartu VCA when creating their fashion collections. In 2012, as part of their



Fig. 4. Karolina Lehtma and Liisi-Ly Viitkin, Part of the collection of coats inspired by the coat from Anseküla. Viljandi, Estonia, 2012 (Photo by Sandra Urvak)



Fig. 5. Piret Tiismaa, Part of the collection inspired by the floral embroidery used on West Estonian blankets. Tartu, Estonia, 2019 (Photo by Kerttu Kruusla)



graduation work, Karolina Lehtma and Liisi-Ly Viitkin created a modern collection of coats inspired by the coat typical of women's national costume in Anseküla (a village on the largest Estonian island of Saaremaa in West Estonia). Remarkably, they used only the cutting pattern of the coat as the basis for their work (Fig. 4).

The most traditional way of applying heritage to new fashion design is to use visual ornamentation and embroidery as well as other patterns. For her graduation work in 2019, Piret Tiismaa drew inspiration from the floral embroidery on blankets from West Estonia from the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. She created a collection of dresses, cut according to the style of the era, to which she applied the floral ornamentation (Fig. 5).

In recent years, the fashion shows have also turned their focus towards the sustainable use of local materials. Wool from local sheep and the hides of both domestic animals and hunted game had come to be seen as waste, for example. In 2019, Piret Albert and Taive Peedosaar created a joint collection in which they specifically used wool and hides from local sheep to make coats and headgear (Fig. 6). The patterns used for the coats were modern, although the headgear was based on traditional styles and decorative elements.



Fig. 6. Piret Albert and Taive Peedosaar, Part of the collection based on local craft material. Tartu, Estonia, 2019. (Photo by Kerttu Kruusla)



In summary, the research and development work undertaken at a university can be said to offer several different options to ensure the exploration and viability of heritage. The combination of practical skills and academic research yields new examples of practical application that support the viability of heritage, while variety in terms of the fields of heritage application guarantee its sustainability.

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