

Latvia's textile history

Weaving holds an outstanding position in the history of mankind's culture as one of the oldest crafts, also in the history of Latvia.

In the early Stone Age, around the 2nd thousand BC the livelihood of inhabitants was breeding and agriculture. These branches yielded linen and wool that was raw material for clothing production. Processing them, people developed different techniques of wreathing, spinning and weaving. During this time the Corded Ware Culture started to spread around the present territory of Latvia. Vestiges of the early Stone Age cloths and textiles are not preserved.

The oldest messages about textiles are provided by clothing remains gained in the archaeological excavations. These cloths were made of linen or wool. Especially tiny fragments of the woollen clothing that are remained at the bronze ornaments are related to the AD 2nd- 4th century.



The most of textiles that are got in excavations were made of fleece. Its colour has become dark and nondescript; however in the wrinkles of some cloths the vestiges of indigo blue colour are still visible. Colouring in indigo blue colour holding plant *mēlene* is often mentioned in our *dainas* (Latvian folk songs). There are often mentioned also bedstraws used for obtaining red colour. Its tones are often found in an ancient *celaine*

(belt). The yellow and dark-brown colours that are seen in the textiles and *celaines*, are available in several plants. A part of woollen textiles had also been done from naturally light or dark wool.

Textile fabrics made of linen and hemp fibre are remained comparatively little, because they rot off fast. Widespread are combined woollen and linen-hemp textiles.

Grounding on the technical analysis of the ancient textiles we can conclude that the belt-kind textiles are derived from primitive and more ancient kind of textile – winding and then, the textiles made in weaving frames that are known in the northern Europe since Neolithic.

Besides, Latvians had known the rolling of wool and woollen fabrics. It reposes on the woollen fibre upper layer scaled structure. When wool is being machined strongly fibre gear into each other and the fabric gets certain tightness. That time the fabrics were made of yarn that was spun by an axle. The first message about the spinning-wheel comes only starting the 15th century. The typological trait of yarn done by an axle is uneven roughness and uneven twist. It is often observed that spinning the warp yarn they are turned to the right and weft yarn to the left side. The yarn spun this way better joins each other while weaving and the material comes out smoother.

As ordinary as thrown yarn was used for textiles. An ancient weaving equipment was used loom or fork; where the warp hanged down from head to downwards and were held hard by stones fastened in the endings. Wefts were placed between warps and tacked with a long wooden comb from bottom to top. There were used 2,3 and 4 shafts.

Basic fabrics - plain cloth and huckaback. These both we can find at the Latvian tribes already AD 2nd century. The fabric of plain cloth two-shaft is considered as the oldest one and as a base of all the other fabrics. It is the densest fabric because the alternate warp and weft thread crosses. Also the huckaback (a fabric of three shafts) is a very old kind of weaving. The weave is made by diagonal lines here. This technique is spread in the 12th century and in comparison with the previous techniques gives the better quality of the fabrics. Especially here can be mentioned men's cloth fabrics because they are hairy as well. It witnesses about the introduction of comparatively complicated figured fabric technique in the 12th century. It also witnesses about the weavers work of that time

and with that about the spreading of the more progressive tool of work – horizontal weaving frame.

Around the middle of 17th century, in Kurzeme (Courland) the weaving workshops are encountered with the 20-30 weaving frames where Zemgale is holding an outstanding position with broadcloth, linen, wallpaper, brocade, tapestry and sail weaver's workshops; Rucava with broadcloth, linen of Dutch and French techniques. Craftsmen of Holland, Germany and France put the weaving techniques contemporary achievements at the disposal of Latvians, and Latvians with their knowledge accumulated in their family traditions formed it further overcome their masters.

The Kurzeme cloths of the 16th – 17th were highly appraised product of export. Later it turned an extremely valuable house-art for local needs in family losing as local as foreign market.

Since the 1880s the weaving course were organised with the training programme made in Finland. This course had a great importance for the formation of living accommodation equipment culture for middle layer of Latvians, especially intelligence. The course started a new tradition – adornment experience stored in national costumes was transferred to the furnishing textiles: door and window curtains, carpets and rugs, wall blankets, decorative pillows. The course graduates became elaborators of methods and weaving course lecturers. They participated in the exhibitions of handicraft and applied arts organised by the agricultural societies.

The organised weaving course by Zemgalian (middle of Latvia, also Bauska) Pēteris Viļumsons and his popularised weaving equipment – weaving frame with the pattern-maker of *zakards* type, became an unique fact of the Baltic's area. It promoted the origination of such ware where the Mid-European craftsmen's experience combined with the local craftsmen's art traditions. In the wide territory the commercial textile fabrics spread mainly in patterned huckaback bindings with a rich background patterns.

The craft centres declined while the industry developed. In the second half of 19th century the professional applied art was formed from the artistic craft. The professional applied art in its turn started to influence hardly the folk applied art. After the First World

War in Latvia the folk applied art ware was gathered, processed and researches were published by the Board of Latvian Historic Monuments and State Historic Museum. Their task was to preserve and hand over this heritage to the next generations.



Zemgale mittens.

After the Second World War, during the soviet times, the three main applied art development directions were developed:

- 1) individually working persons;
- 2) persons joined into collectives (hobby groups and studios) that prepared decorative items for particular needs and sale;
- 3) persons working in the state enterprises that with their hand work or industrial methods produced the applied art pieces. A part of these products were made grounding on professional artists' made patterns.



Linen towels.

Nowadays the house weaving has diminished hardly. It has been outdone by the produce of cheap foreign factories. Textile fabrics are cheaper but in their aesthetic meaning they are not equal value to home-made cloths. In home weaving every weaver can make a cloth on his/her own taste and pleasure adjusting it to the interior but manufactured cloth has to be taken as it is. Therefore, during the last years Latvian women have started to approve the home-made cloth advantages again and getting down to work, to respect the old habits.



Questionnaire

What were the oldest textiles found in Latvia made of?

- a. **Linen and wool**
- b. Silk
- c. Cotton

When was the spinning wheel first mentioned?

- a. In the 2nd century
- b. In the 12th century
- c. **In the 15th century**