

The British  
Museum



## Life in Miniature

Armenian Dress at the British Museum

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## **Life in Miniature: Armenian Dress at the British Museum**

This display of 19<sup>th</sup>-century model garments came to the British Museum in 1934. It was thought to be a collection of doll's clothes from Eastern Armenia, but my investigation has led to a very different conclusion. The collection consists of about 87 pieces including miniature undergarments, trousers, dresses, coats, shawls, belts and blankets made of decorative silks and trims. The collection is most likely model garments for a bridal trousseau that were once used by a dressmaker in Eastern Armenia as dress samples for her clients. It represents the dowry of a wealthy urban bride. The garments on display are specific to the Armenians of Tbilisi, the capital city of Georgia, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.



## Traditional Armenian Costume

Traditional Armenian costume is very diverse. Historically, Armenian costume was divided into two main subsystems: Western and Eastern Armenian dress styles. Within these subsystems there are many different regional dress styles but they share common elements including shapes, colours and symbolic significance.

The basic outfit consists of undergarments, long dresses or blouses worn with long skirts, belts, headdresses and aprons. Symbols connected to nature and the four elements through colour and pattern are very strongly presented in traditional Armenian dress. For example, black represents earth, white symbolises water and purity, red represents air, courage and martyrdom, and yellow is a symbol of fire. In addition, the apricot colour symbolises wisdom and prudence and blue signifies heavenly justice.



### **Model of Trousers**

Armenia, 19<sup>th</sup> Century

In Eastern Armenia, women wore red (or pink) trousers under their dresses. They were richly decorated with gold braid on the front and the cuffs. Bands of trim were stitched onto the garment rather than embroidered directly on it.

The colour red symbolizes fertility.

As1934,1023.1d

### **Model of a Woman's Belt**

Armenia, 19<sup>th</sup> Century

The belt was a very important element in the Armenian dress ensemble. It had practical, aesthetic and amuletic significance. Each regional Armenian dress had its own belt design. Belts were made of silver or woolen and silk fabrics and were

often inscribed with amuletic and religious texts to protect the wearer, particularly her womb. The belt used by Armenians of Tbilisi consisted of a long strip of embroidered cloth with geometric and floral patterns. The floral motifs symbolised the tree of life, prosperity and fertility.

As1934,1023.1c

### **Model of Coat**

Armenia, 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Coats of this type were mostly worn by women in the mountainous regions in Armenia. They were often made of striped fabrics and were worn over dresses to protect from the cold. The cuffs of the sleeves were elaborately decorated with

needlework or lace.

As1934,1023.1c

### **Two Dress Models**

Armenia, 19<sup>th</sup> Century

The styles of these dresses represent types that were worn by Armenians from Yerevan who migrated to Tbilisi, the capital city of Georgia, between 1778-1804. Dresses were usually made of satin and silk, particularly in darker shades of green, blue and grey.

These dresses would have been worn with a red undershirt, a long embroidered belt and an elaborate headdress consisting of a velvet cap with gold and silver embroidery and a lace head veil (see picture).

As1934,1023.1a-b



