



SLOVAK  
NATIONAL  
MUSEUM

# The Empire Style Gown

Focused  
on Object

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Slovak National Museum  
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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*

*nobody was interested in were burned in the manor house court for two days, because they hurried to demolish the building.”* She carried out the on-site collection of items at Častkovce and frequently referred to the sad living conditions in which she found Eleonóra Schwertnerová.

It is one of many stories, which took place (not only) in Slovakia after the change of political regime in 1948. The authorities of most of the emerging socialist governments cruelly treated nobility, bourgeoisie, and religious institutions and their members. They fell into disgrace and frequently survived in difficult living conditions. Their property was often stolen even before the commencement of confiscation activities; in the best case scenario, it was placed in state cultural institutions (such as museums and libraries).

The preserved gown from our collection, a silent witness of the Congress of Vienna, is not only an example of the Empire fashion style but a memento of the surviving family memory of various political systems.

# Family Treasure – Memento of the Congress of Vienna

Emphasizing the link between the gown preserved by the Zay family and the Congress of Vienna illustrates the reflection of political events of European significance. Despite the fact that this was an important political and cultural event, the gown is the only example in Slovakia from that chapter in history.

During the Congress of Vienna in 1814 and 1815, after the Napoleonic wars, the supreme representatives of the continent's nations discussed the new layout of the political and constitutional order in Europe. It was the first significant summit in modern European history, and for nine months Vienna was the political and social center of Europe (Pic. 2). Representatives of 18 countries including the heads of four states (Austria, Prussia, Great Britain and Russia) as well as Louis XVIII, the newly reinstalled king of France, participated in person. Special commissions focusing on specific topics were created for the first time. All of the parties agreed that the power of the traditional monarchies should be restored and that another revolution must be prevented. In reality, the congress never assembled as one at a plenary session until the signing of the Final Act in June 1815. All discussions took place in small groups and sometimes informally at the many gala evenings, dances and dinners. In addition to the political stabilization and territorial reorganization of Europe, the congress reached three principal consensuses: the slave trade was condemned, the German Confederation of 39 states under the presidency of the Austrian Emperor was established and freedom of navigation was guaranteed for many rivers, notably the Rhine and the Danube. As a result of the agreements reached during the congress, peace in Europe was maintained for many decades. Lengthy official negotiations required diplomatic mastery and tactics. The events of the congress and the city's social life were covered by the period press, and represented topics of conversation and debate in salons and at family gatherings.

The official beginning of the congress was scheduled for October 1, 1814, but it was pushed back to November 1. Nevertheless, Vienna began to fill up