Doukhobor Fashion

A Cultural Experience
Celebrating Traditional Doukhobor Clothing, Fibre and Textile Arts

PHOTOGRAPHS - Lola Sherstobitoff
Fashion is a communal art which tells a story about a people, their place in history and their identity. To celebrate the rich heritage of Doukhobor textile arts and traditional clothing, and as part of the Centennial of Doukhobor life in British Columbia, the USCC Cultural Interpretive Society co-ordinated a Doukhobor Fashion Show. The Vision of Peace Youth Choir members modeled the attire. The USCC Cultural Interpretive Society thanks the Columbia Kootenay Cultural Alliance of the Columbia Basin Trust for financial assistance which helped make this event possible.

Doukhobor fashion throughout the last century, from Russia to Canada, has traversed distance, time and cultural changes. But it always reflected simplicity, practicality and beauty. Fashion also played a major role in identifying and enhancing Doukhobor culture. For example, when the Doukhobors stepped off the ships upon their arrival in Canada, the first picture that comes to mind of traditional ancestral heritage fashion are the women of the day, our great-grandmothers, who were attired in colourful yet warm and practical clothing - such as the black, decorated vests, woolen long skirts, brightly coloured blouses, and a hand made hat, often worn under a shawl. The large fabric flower on the hat signified the era when Doukhobor teachings blossomed. The men were attired in warm woolen jackets and trousers, high boots and knee-length woolen coats.

In the early days on the Canadian prairies, the attire of the Doukhobors followed the traditional styles of textiles and design which they brought with them from Russia. Wool was used in Russia and Georgia and its use continued in Canada.
Peter "Lordly" Verigin's suit from the early 1900s

The suit is machine-sewn from woven, black, fine wool. A black back-pleated coat is worn over the suit.

In 2008 Peter "Lordly" Verigin was declared a National Historic Figure by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, to signify the migration of Doukhobors to British Columbia.

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Traditional Doukhobor Clothing
"Boorka", a black felt cloak worn in the Caucasus in the late 1800s. This particular cloak was from 1892 and was specifically worn when riding horses.

During poor weather the cloak was wrapped around the saddle to protect the horse from chafing. It also was used to cover wagon loads when it was raining or snowing.
Traditional Doukhobor Clothing
Bashlik, a type of hood from Russia.

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After the Doukhobors moved to British Columbia from Saskatchewan in 1908, they began to use homespun linen, in addition to wool. Many of the Doukhobor villages were near rivers where the soil was moist and desirable for growing flax. From flax, they were able to prepare linen—the textile of choice for the summer. For the winter they still used wool that was sent from Saskatchewan. When making linen from flax, a very intricate process was required. This included: growing and pulling out the flax, tying it into bundles and drying them, as well as "retting" the flax, which involved immersing the stalks in a lake or slow moving river to break down the woody outer part of the flax stalk. After that it was set upright, in the sunny fields, to thoroughly dry. Then it was threshed with wooden clubs so that all of the seeds fell out. After these steps, the women spun the flax threads into yarn for weaving the fabric.
Traditional Doukhobor Clothing
During the Communal Era of Doukhobor life in British Columbia, grandparents were deeply revered and lived together with their families.

The young mother wears a head shawl with an embroidered border, in Russian, which translates to:

"It is a fortunate family where God abides and loving hearts beat in unity."
As time progressed and communal village life faded into the past, children became integrated into public schools. Peter P. Verigin, the son of Peter "Lordly" Verigin, said:

"Let Doukhobor children attend school and become professors, maintaining their Doukhobor soul."

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Traditional Doukhobor Clothing
By this time, clothing through Eaton’s catalogue had become more available, and stores began to carry a variety of fabrics. Still, Doukhobor women in the home and in the garden dressed in a simple attire of a blouse, skirt and a "platok" on their heads. During the 1930s to 1950s, store-bought fabrics were purchased and clothes of various cottons, spun rayons, angelskin and silks became the fashion. The ladies wore a wide variety of colours. The "platok" was usually made of spun rayon. It was hand embroidered with cotton or silk threads and was fringed by hand.

In order to earn money to purchase the necessary livestock and supplies, many of the able-bodied Doukhobor men would leave the villages and work in the broader community. They worked on building railways, on other construction projects and as labourers on other farms.
Traditional Doukhobor Clothing

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Traditional Doukhobor Clothing
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Fancier store bought fabric was often used to sew outfits for special occasions.

This dressy "zanaveska" (apron) belonged to Anyuta Verigin, Peter P. Verigin’s wife.
Sunday prayer gatherings where psalms and hymns are sung as a way of expressing Doukhobor faith, continue to this day.
Often, after Sunday prayers, women gathered for socializing and doing handicrafts such as knitting, embroidering, crocheting and quilting.
Traditional Doukhobor Clothing
This authentic outfit belonged to both Peter "Lordly" Verigin and Peter P. "Chistyakov" Verigin. The fine wool pants were Chistyakov's and the linen overshirt was "Lordly's". The straw hat was worn by "Chistyakov" in the 1930s.

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Many Doukhobor choral groups emerged in the 1940s along with community youth groups, or "otdeli". What precipitated the emergence of choirs was the formation of the USCC Union Of Youth and an extensive cultural enlightenment program initiated by Peter "Chistyakov". Their psalm, hymn and folk song repertoire was extensive and it carried a clear message of peace, love and beauty of the soul. One of the first organized choirs was The Brotherhood Choir from Grand Forks. It was at first organized as a Male Chorus and later combined into a mixed gender choir. For their first choral attire, the men wore white "kasavarotki", or shirts with sashes and the women wore white blouses and coloured skirts, as well as fringed, painted or embroidered head shawls.

Later as Doukhobor choirs took on a leading role in the cultural programs, concerts and performances, many choirs chose to sew ladies' outfits from the same fabric for the blouse as well as the skirt. Choices of colour and fabric selection gave each choir its own unique visual identity.
Brilliant Choir outfit from the 1950’s

Traditional Doukhobor Clothing
Christovoye Men's Chorus from Grand Forks in the 1950s.

Traditional Doukhobor Clothing
Ootischenia Local in the 1950’s.

Traditional Doukhobor Clothing
Kootenay Choir in the late 1960s.

Traditional Doukhobor Clothing
In 1960 Anna Petrovna Markova, mother of John Verigin, Honorary Chairman of the USCC, arrived in Canada. She played a major role in every aspect of Doukhobor culture and heritage in Canada. She helped build bridges, not only within the Doukhobor community, but reached out globally as well. Recognizing the abundance of life in Canada, she harnessed the slogan from Russia "By one thread from the community, a shirt for the needy". She helped organize women to make blankets and various linen and woolen crafts to give out as gifts for the needy or for fundraising purposes. Anna "Babaoshka" Markova felt a strong connection to the young children of the community and heartily supported all Sunday School functions.
Traditional Doukhobor Clothing
Traditional Doukhobor Clothing
As Doukhobor children became more integrated into public schools a more selective style of clothing was worn to conform to societal standards of acceptance. In the home, doing daily chores, mothers wore simple housedresses, either hand sewn or purchased.

Traditional Doukhobor Clothing
Throughout the many years of Union Of Youth activities such as meetings, festivals, choir practices and choir trips, opportunities were created for young people to meet, fall in love and marry.

Traditional Doukhobor Clothing
Traditional Doukhobor Clothing
Youth Choir outfit worn at the United Nations in New York

Traditional Doukhobor Clothing
A "festive" outfit worn at a 1980s Annual Youth Festival

Traditional Doukhobor Clothing
Mothers and brides paid special attention to textiles for their wedding day. Up to the late 1940s, women dressed demurely in a simple skirt, blouse and "zanaveska". Gradually, various combinations of lace, taffeta, satin, brocade, organza and embroidered nylon were included in the Doukhobor bride's choice of attire. As of the 1950s, white became the standard colour for the wedding outfit. The "zanaveska" faded out of style. From the 1980s to the present day, polyester crepes in a multitude of colour choices, are chosen either for the bride's attendants or for the mothers of the bride and groom.
1939 wedding suit

Traditional Doukhobor Clothing
1930s wedding suit

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1960’s suit, worn at an engagement party

Traditional Doukhobor Clothing
Bridal suit from the 1950’s

Traditional Doukhobor Clothing
Laura (Relkoff) Verigin’s wedding suit. Laura designed and embroidered her beautiful wedding head shawl.

The wedding of Laura Relkoff from Castlegar to John J Verigin from Grand Forks, on June 27, 1953, was a memorable occasion. Their two-day wedding celebration took place in Brilliant on the first day and in Grand Forks on the second day. At that time because the Paulson Bridge had not yet been built, they had to travel through the United States through Cascade Customs.

Traditional Doukhobor Clothing
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Blessings and prayers from parents and grandparents have always played an important role in Doukhobor marriage ceremonies. Initially, the Doukhobor wedding ceremony was not recognized in Canada. It was after much negotiation, that in the late 1950s, the Doukhobor traditional custom was recognized by the government. Many couples that were married previously, were thus able to legalize their marriages.
The mother of the bride carries a loaf of bread as part of the wedding tradition.

Traditional Doukhobor Clothing
The father carries a rug for the ceremony

Traditional Doukhobor Clothing
Wedding suit of Nina-Verigin Decaire

Traditional Doukhobor Clothing
Throughout historical traditions at weddings, couples often went through a series of activities that encouraged humility and demonstrated appreciation as they bowed to the ground to parents, grandparents and extended families. There was humour and light-hearted fun, when the bridal couple was asked to embrace and kiss in a variety of ways. However, throughout the ceremony, prayers, love and expressions of married wisdom were always evident.
This has been a historical and cultural experience of Doukhobor fashion over the last hundred years.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

USCC Cultural Interpretive Society Members,
Eileen Kooznetsoff
Lovette Nichvolodoff
Paulette Markin
Nell Plotnikoff

thank the following community partners who helped make this production possible:

Columbia Kootenay Cultural Alliance
Columbia Basin Trust
Director and Members of the Vision of Peace Choir USCC Executive Committee and Trustees
USCC Youth Council Kootenay-Columbia School District #20
Song Selection Committee, Sound, Light, Computer Technicians
USCC Video Club
Donors and Lenders of Apparel and Props
Parents of Choir Members
Castlegar Railroad Museum
Kootenay Savings Credit Union - Castlegar Branch
Capitol Theatre Costumes

Special Thanks to:

Vera Kanigan - archivist and script writer
Doris Sookaveiff - fashion consultant
Lola Sherstobitoff - photographer
Wendy Voykin - drama director
Liana Zwick - narrator
Kathy Soloveoff - floral designer
Corinne Postnikoff - choir manager