

I live in the Schwalm and as it happens, I work for the Museum of the Schwalm which is all about this area and its history. We also have an original painting by Fritz Sonderland in our collection. It's got a similar topic and shows a class in morning prayer. So it was kind of eerie to stumble over the "Knitting School", I've never seen that one before! Unfortunately, I don't have a scanner here at work, but I can send you a scan of our Sonderland picture later tonight once I'm home.

The Schwalm is an area that is situated in Hesse, right in the middle of Germany and it's called after the river "Schwalm". This rather small area (we're talking about roughly 30 villages and three towns here!) is best known for its rich and beautiful traditional dress. The typical traditional costume was developed in the early 19th century and was worn till the 1960s. After that, the people over here gave up a lot of their old traditions and, among other things, dressed "in the modern way". The "rules" and customs of the traditional dress are rather complicated - the dress used to be a status symbol and you could see on the dress (or rather the different parts of the dresses) what status the wearer had in society. Was he or she rich, poor, married, unmarried, was he or she mourning a family member? Etc. The children wore a smaller version of the traditional dress.

Which brings me back to the picture by Sonderland. This is a typical scene how it was in schools in the 19th century. The girls had to learn how to manage the household and doing handiwork and learning how to knit and sew was part of it. The gloves and stockings of the traditional dress were knitted and they had different patterns for different occasions. My grandmother still knew how to knit those various stockings and gloves and my family still owns a set!

The children in the picture are wearing the traditional bodice where the buttons were sewed on in the form of a heart. You can see it on this picture:

<http://www.lagis-hessen.de/img/bd/s2/21-003.jpg>

It was called the "Kneppding" (basically meaning "the thing with buttons").

This was worn for everyday life, the costume for festivities was far more complicated though.

They also have the little cap on their head, also a typical part of the dress. Every girl or woman had the same hairstyle, the hair was braided together on the head in the form of a hair knot. The cap covered the hair knot. With progressing time, the cap became smaller and smaller. Since the painting was made in the earlier days of the traditional dress, the caps are bigger and broader than the one of the woman of the picture above.

In the middle of the group, there is a girl who is wearing "city clothing" - it's a sure bet that she was not a local girl, probably the daughter of one of the teachers or maybe the village priest.

The chair to the right of the teacher is also typical of the Schwalm area btw. The form of the backrest was developed out of two pelicans, but was so abstracted later on that you couldn't recognize them anymore. What's left is the heart in the middle, usually formed out of the beaks and their necks. However, the heart was also a typical ornament in this area and it reoccurs in the dress (embroidery) or on pottery or furniture.

A few more words about Sonderland himself. He didn't come from this area, he was born in 1836 in Düsseldorf and died there in 1896.

However, in the early 19th century, one of the oldest artist colonies in Europe was founded in Willingshausen, also a Schwalm village. Artists from all over Germany flocked to the Schwalm to paint the "idyllic" country life. The colourful traditional dresses and beautiful landscape over here certainly played a role in attracting the artists to this spot. Sonderland was one of them and it seems he loved painting children. There is also a painting of a music lesson that I know of:

<http://prints.ensemble-editions.com/500/0/fritz-sonderland-german-the-music-lesson.jpg>