

HU

CULTURE COURSE

Hungarian Folk Art & Traditions

10 Chapters

Philip Osztromok

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Hungarian Folk Art & Traditions

Course 1 · Chapter 1 · Why Folk Art? Scope & Sources

Red-and-green flowers on a white blouse, a painted jug, a dance in which the men slap their boots, a bonfire at midsummer: these are the pictures that most people have of Hungarian folk culture. This course looks at the real things behind the pictures, and at how and why they were noticed, collected, kept going and sometimes reinvented. This first chapter sets out what "folk" means, where the material comes from, which regions matter, and how to tell an old practice from a revival or a souvenir. Names, dates and listings are from general knowledge and are flagged where they should be checked.

What Does "Folk" Mean?

"Folk art" sounds simple but covers several different things, and scholars have argued about the term for a long time (check the history of the debate).

Made for use

Most traditional objects were made to be used: clothes, bedding, jugs, chests, tools. Decoration was part of making them well, not a separate art form.

Made by a community

Patterns and songs passed from person to person, changing slowly. Individual makers were often unnamed, though some villages and workshops became well known for their work.

Tied to a place

Dress, colours and dance steps differed from region to region and often from village to village, so that a person's clothes could say where they came from.

Named from outside

The word "folk" was in large part applied by educated outsiders. The villagers themselves rarely thought of their embroidery or songs as "folk art" (check this point).

How Folk Culture Was "Discovered"

In much of Europe, interest in peasant culture grew in the nineteenth century, alongside Romanticism and the rise of national movements. Writers and scholars began to look to village

songs, tales and dress as evidence of an authentic national character. Hungary followed the same pattern (check the details). Collectors travelled to villages, museums were founded, and the idea of a "national" folk culture took shape. Composers such as Bartók and Kodály later made collecting a scientific project (see Hungarian Music, and Chapter 8 of this course).

This matters for the whole course. The folk culture we can see today was shaped partly by the people who valued it, who chose what to preserve, what to call "typical" and what to leave out. A collector's choice can turn a local habit into a national symbol.

The Regions

Hungarian folk culture is not one thing but a patchwork. A few areas come up repeatedly in the chapters ahead (check the placing of each).

Area	Best known for
Mezőkövesd (Matyó)	Rich, colourful floral embroidery and costume
Kalocsa	Painted and embroidered flower patterns, famously on white cloth, and paprika
Sárköz	Elaborate women's costume and black-and-white and coloured embroidery
The Great Plain (Alföld)	Herdsman culture, pottery at Hódmezővásárhely and Mezőtúr, the csárdás
Transylvania (now in Romania)	Dance and music of villages such as Szék, and some of the richest surviving collections
Mohács	The Busójárás carnival with masks and processions

Within the present borders

The course follows Hungary as it is now, with Transylvania and other Hungarian-speaking areas named where the tradition cannot be told without them. That is a choice for the course, not a statement about borders.

Record, Revival and Tourist Version

When you meet a "traditional" object or custom, it helps to ask which of three things you are looking at.

- **Record.** A practice that was documented as it was done, by collectors, photographers or sound recordists, or an object in a museum with a known history.
- **Revival.** A practice that had faded and was brought back, often by enthusiasts, with changes. The táncház dance houses of the 1970s are an example (see Chapter 7).
- **Souvenir or stage version.** A tidied, simplified or invented form made for visitors, festivals or shops.

None of the three is "fake" in a moral sense. A revival may be sincere and full of skill, and a souvenir may be well made. The point is to know which is which, so that a claim of "ancient tradition" can be tested against the evidence.

A working method

For every custom or object in this course, ask four questions: who made or did it, for what purpose, how do we know, and who keeps it going now? The answers separate record from revival and souvenir.

Where to Look

- **Museums.** The Hungarian Open Air Museum at Szentendre rebuilds houses from several regions, and the Museum of Ethnography in Budapest holds large collections (check current details).
- **Living practice.** Festivals, markets, craft workshops and dance houses, with the caveat above.
- **Archives.** Collections of recordings and photographs, many now online (check what is accessible).
- **Heritage lists.** UNESCO's lists of intangible cultural heritage include several Hungarian practices, among them the Busójárás, the táncház method and the Matyó folk art (check the exact listings and years).

Check the details

Heritage listings, the dates of museum foundations, the names of revival leaders and the status of local crafts are all easy to get slightly wrong. Verify anything you plan to repeat, and treat the claim that something is "thousands of years old" with particular caution.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain in a few sentences why the word "folk" is contested, using at least two of the four ideas in the chapter.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Choose one object or custom you have seen described as traditional. Say whether it is best described as record, revival or souvenir, and what evidence you would look for.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Pick two of the regions in the table and note one thing each is known for. Then find one museum or archive source that you could use to check it.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **"Folk":** used, communal, local, and often named from outside
- **Discovery:** nineteenth-century Romantic and national interest, then scientific collecting
- **Regions:** Matyó, Kalocsa, Sárköz, the Great Plain, Transylvania, Mohács

- **Three kinds:** record, revival, souvenir
- **Four questions:** who, why, how do we know, who keeps it now
- **Sources:** Szentendre, the Museum of Ethnography, archives, UNESCO lists (check)

Hungarian Folk Art & Traditions

Course 1 · Chapter 2 · The Village World

Folk art makes little sense without the world that produced it. Embroidery, pottery, costume and festivals all grew out of a way of life organised around the farming year, the household and the village community. This chapter sketches that world: the house and yard, the cycle of work, the language of dress, the role of craftsmen, and the changes that began to dissolve it from the nineteenth century onwards. It is a general picture, and regions differed a great deal. Details are from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

The House and the Yard

A traditional village house was built from local materials: timber, wattle and daub, adobe (sun-dried earth bricks) or stone, with a thatched or later tiled roof, depending on the region (check the regional variety). Common features, though not universal, were a narrow house set end-on to the street, a long porch along the yard side, and a layout of living room, kitchen and a "clean room" kept for guests and festivals (check).

- **The clean room.** A room for show, with the best bed piled high with embroidered pillows and cloths, painted furniture and decorated plates on the wall. It was in part a display of the household's skill and wealth.
- **The yard.** A working space with a well, outbuildings, animals and often a garden. Gates and fences could be carved.
- **The village layout.** Streets of long, narrow plots, with a church, an inn and a common pasture. The pattern differed between the nucleated villages of the plain and the scattered farms (tanya) of some regions (check).

Many examples of these houses can be seen rebuilt at the Open Air Museum in Szentendre (see Chapter 1), where the arrangement of rooms can be studied directly (check current displays).

The Farming Year

The year was set by the work. Ploughing and sowing in spring, haymaking and harvest in summer, grape picking and the slaughtering of pigs in autumn and winter, and indoor work

such as spinning and embroidery in the long winter evenings. Many customs, such as blessing the harvest or marking the new wine, were tied to these tasks, a link followed up in Chapter 6.

Season	Typical work	Craft and custom link
Spring	Ploughing, sowing, tending animals	Easter customs, new clothes (check)
Summer	Haymaking, harvest	Harvest wreath and celebration, midsummer fires (check)
Autumn	Grape harvest, threshing	Harvest balls, the grape festival (check)
Winter	Pig killing, spinning, weaving, embroidery	Spinning-room gatherings, Advent and Christmas customs, carnival (check)

Dress as a Language

In the traditional village, clothing told others who you were. Details of cut, colour, headdress and ornament could mark a person's age, marital status, wealth, religion, occasion and place of origin (check). Girls, brides, married women and widows would dress differently, and festive dress differed from everyday dress. Cloth and decoration were made largely at home, so a woman's skill was visible in what she and her family wore.

Age and status

Headdress and colour often marked whether a woman was unmarried or married, and darker, plainer clothes marked later life or mourning (check regional practice).

Place

A visitor could often tell a person's village or district from the pattern and colour, a point developed in Chapter 5.

Occasion

The finest clothing was kept for church, weddings and festivals, so that the best work was the least worn.

Skill and wealth

The quantity and fineness of linen and embroidery showed what a household could afford and what its women could do.

Craftsmen and Guilds

Not everything was made at home. Specialist craftsmen supplied what households could not make: potters, blacksmiths, cartwrights, furriers, leather workers and tailors. In towns, craftsmen were organised in guilds, which controlled training, standards and prices (check Hungarian guild history). Some villages and market towns became known for one craft, and travelling traders and fairs spread their goods. Chapter 4 looks at pottery, wood and other craft traditions in detail.

A British comparison

Scottish crofting and island life offer a parallel: a world of seasonal work, home weaving and distinct local patterns, such as the tartans and knitting traditions of different districts, that were later collected and romanticised (check the comparison). The comparison has limits, since the economic and legal setting of Hungarian peasants was quite different.

The World Begins to Change

The village world was never frozen. Several changes loosened it, and later ones nearly ended it (check the dates and the sequence).

- **The end of serfdom (1848).** The law of that year freed peasants from feudal obligations, altering their status and land ownership (check details).
- **Railways and markets.** Rail links brought factory cloth, cheap pottery and new fashions, and made it possible to sell goods far away.
- **Education and migration.** Schools, military service and movement to towns and abroad introduced new tastes and removed many young people from village life.
- **The twentieth century.** War, border changes, the collectivisation of farming in the communist period and later industrialisation all disrupted the old pattern (check).

As the working purpose of many objects faded, some survived as heirlooms, some as museum pieces, and some were taken up and adapted as symbols, a story that continues in Chapter 9.

Why this matters

An embroidered pillow in a museum is a fragment of a system: of a house, a bed, a woman's winter evenings and a household's standing. Keeping the system in mind

explains why patterns, colours and techniques look the way they do.

Check the details

Housing types, dress meanings and the dates of social change varied by region and period. Treat any single description of "the Hungarian village" as a generalisation, and check specific claims against regional sources.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe the "clean room" of a traditional house and explain what it was for.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Choose a season and explain how its work and its crafts or customs were linked.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Pick two changes from the last section and explain how each affected folk crafts or dress.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **House:** local materials, porch, clean room for show (check)
- **Year:** work set the calendar; winter was for spinning and embroidery

- **Dress:** told age, status, place, occasion and wealth
- **Craftsmen:** potters, smiths, tailors; guilds in towns (check)
- **Change:** 1848, railways, education, collectivisation (check)
- **Remember:** regions differed; the "typical village" is a generalisation

Hungarian Folk Art & Traditions

Course 1 · Chapter 3 · Embroidery and Textiles

Textiles are the best-known face of Hungarian folk art, and the easiest to recognise: bright flowers on a dark or white ground, on blouses, tablecloths, pillows and aprons. This chapter looks at the main embroidery traditions, what the motifs and colours mean (and do not mean), the weaving and lace that sit beside them, and who still makes and wears them. As always, the dates and attributions are from general knowledge and flagged where they should be checked.

Matyó Embroidery

The Matyó are the people of Mezőkövesd and nearby villages in northern Hungary, and their embroidery is among the most famous in the country (check the place and the name). It is known for dense, richly coloured floral designs, worked on linen, cotton or wool in many bright shades on a dark or light ground, and for spectacular festive costume (check the description). The designs became very elaborate from the late nineteenth century, and the tradition was recognised on UNESCO's intangible heritage list (check the listing and year).

- **Motifs.** Roses, tulips, carnations and other flowers, often in large, full-blooded forms, and also birds and stars.
- **Technique.** Satin stitch and related stitches, often worked first as a design drawn or pricked by a specialist and then embroidered by the household (check).
- **Who did it.** Women embroidered much of the household linen and clothing, and in Mezőkövesd male embroiderers and pattern drawers are also recorded (check this point).

Kalocsa

Kalocsa, in the south of the country near the Danube, is known for both embroidery and painted flower designs, and also for paprika (check). Its style is characterised by bold, curving flowers in strong colours, often on white cloth, with a rich colour range that includes reds, blues and greens. Painted decoration on walls and furniture is related to the embroidered pattern (check the connection). Kalocsa designs now appear on tablecloths, blouses, ceramics and tourist goods, so the tradition is a good example of the line between record and souvenir described in Chapter 1.

Other Regional Styles

Style	Character (general, check)
Sárköz	Elaborate women's costume with fine embroidery, a lot of blue and black-and-white work, and decorated headdress
Hollókő and the Palóc area	Embroidered linen and distinctive costume, kept alive in a preserved village
Transylvanian villages (Kalotaszeg and others)	Often more restrained, with strong geometric and floral patterns on white; Transylvania is covered where needed (see Chapter 1)
Halas	Famous for its lace (see below)
Great Plain herdsman work	Embroidered cloaks and leatherwork rather than household linen

Motifs and Colour

Many books explain each flower or colour as a symbol: a rose for love, a tulip for faith, red for life. Such readings are common but should be treated with care. There is good evidence that certain motifs had local associations, but much "meaning" was read into the patterns later, by collectors and writers who wanted to find a code (check, and see the "record, revival, souvenir" test in Chapter 1). A safer approach is to treat the patterns as a decorative vocabulary: a village's characteristic flowers, colours and layouts, used to mark place, occasion and skill (see Chapter 2).

Reading a pattern

When a guide says a motif "means" something, ask who first wrote that down and when. If the answer is a twentieth-century book and not a village source, treat it as an interpretation.

Weaving, Lace and Other Textiles

- **Weaving.** Hemp and flax were grown, spun and woven at home into linen cloth, with woven stripes and patterns on blankets, towels and coverings (check).

- **Lace.** The lace of Halas, in the southern Great Plain, is a well-known craft, with a school and a national reputation. It is typically made with needles on a fine thread, and its modern history involves a deliberate training programme from the early twentieth century (check).
- **Cutwork and drawn thread.** Openwork decoration, common on tablecloths and shirts.
- **Felt and leather.** Shepherds' cloaks and embroidered sheepskin coats, a craft of herdsmen and furriers.

Who Makes and Wears Textiles Now?

Today folk textiles are made in several ways. A few families and craftspeople still embroider by hand to a high standard, and the state has recognised some as masters (see Chapter 4 and Chapter 9). Local cooperatives and workshops produce sets for sale. Machine-made "folk-style" goods are common in shops. Traditional costume is still worn at festivals, weddings and folk-dance events, and there is also a revived fashion for folk-inspired clothes by designers (check, and see Chapter 9). Which of these counts as "authentic" depends, again, on the question asked.

The pattern of the chapter

Textiles show the whole course in miniature: a working craft inside a household, a regional style recognised by collectors, a national symbol, and finally a mixture of craft, revival and souvenir. The same object can sit in more than one category.

Check the details

Stitch names, who designed and who embroidered, heritage listings, the history of Halas lace and the meaning of motifs are all easy to overstate. Verify any specific claim before repeating it.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Compare Matyó and Kalocsa embroidery in a short paragraph: where each is from, what it looks like and what it is used for.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

A guidebook says that a particular flower on a blouse "means" faithful love. Say how you would test the claim.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Choose one textile craft from this chapter and describe it as record, revival and souvenir, giving an example of each if you can.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Matyó:** Mezőkövesd; dense, colourful floral work (check, UNESCO)
- **Kalocsa:** bold flowers, often on white, painted and embroidered
- **Other:** Sárköz, Palóc/Hollókő, Transylvania, Halas lace
- **Motifs:** a decorative vocabulary; symbolic readings need testing
- **Also:** weaving, lace, cutwork, felt and leather
- **Today:** hand masters, workshops, machine-made goods, designers

Hungarian Folk Art & Traditions

Course 1 · Chapter 4 · Pottery, Wood and Craft

Beyond cloth, the Hungarian village made and decorated a wide range of objects from clay, wood, leather, horn and straw. Many were the work of specialist craftsmen, such as potters and carvers, who sold at markets and fairs. This chapter looks at the main pottery centres, at wood carving and painted furniture, at the crafts of herdsman on the Great Plain, and at the state title given to master craftspeople. Facts are from general knowledge and flagged for checking.

Pottery

Pottery was one of the most widespread village crafts, since every household needed jugs, bowls, pots and storage vessels. Different towns developed recognisable styles (check each).

Centre	Known for (general, check)
Hódmezővásárhely	Painted plates and jugs, with floral designs on a pale ground, and a long local tradition
Mezőtúr	Glazed earthenware with painted decoration
Mezőcsát and the Palóc area	Black pottery and distinctive local forms
Nádudvar	Black burnished pottery, a well-known craft
Tiszafüred	Pottery with a local character, from the Tisza region

Potters used local clay, shaped it on a wheel or by hand, decorated it by painting, scratching or stamping, and fired it in kilns. Decorated plates were hung on walls of the clean room (see Chapter 2), and wedding and commemorative pieces were inscribed with names and dates. The Zsolnay factory in Pécs, famous for ceramic tiles on Budapest buildings, was an industrial development with some links to the folk tradition (see Hungarian Architecture 7, and check the connection).

Wood: Carving, Furniture and Painted Chests

- **Carving.** Gates, house posts, spoons, yokes, cradles and shepherd's crooks were often carved, with geometric designs, rosettes and stylised plants (check regional styles).
- **Painted furniture.** Chests, cupboards and beds were often painted with flowers and sometimes dates and names. The dowry chest was a household centrepiece, holding the bride's linens (check).
- **Wooden buildings and churches.** Particularly in the east and in Transylvania, wooden churches and bell towers show carpentry on a larger scale (check, and see Hungarian Architecture 9).
- **Everyday tools.** Spoons, barrels, buckets and tools were made by hand and carved for pride as well as use.

Herdsman Crafts of the Great Plain

The Great Plain (Alföld) had a pastoral tradition of cattle, horse and sheep herding, and a distinct material culture of the herdsman (csikós, gulyás and juhász) (check the terms). Objects associated with it include:

Carved horn and bone

Powder horns, drinking horns and tobacco boxes, carved with patterns, often as gifts or personal items (check).

Leather

Saddles, whips, bags and embroidered leather coats, made by saddlers and furriers (see also Chapter 3 for felt and sheepskin).

Cloaks and felt

The heavy felt cloak (szűr) and the embroidered coat (suba), garments of herdsmen decorated with appliqué or embroidery (check).

Horse equipment

Harness and decorative gear, forming part of the showy riding culture still seen at some performances.

The image of the Plain herdsman has become a national symbol, often more than the reality, which makes the same caution as in Chapter 1 important: much of what visitors see at "horse shows" today is a staged version of an older way of life (check).

Straw, Basketry and Other Crafts

Straw and reed were used for baskets, hats, beehives and mats, and gingerbread (mézeskalács) with painted and moulded decoration is another widespread craft sold at fairs (check). Blacksmithing, cartwright's work and the making of musical instruments belong here too, the latter taken up in Chapter 8.

A British comparison

Compare the British tradition of craft fairs and country crafts: pottery from a particular district, carved spoons, shepherd's crooks and basketry. In both countries, the working object often turned into a collector's item or a souvenir within a few generations (check the comparison).

The Folk Art Master Title

In 1953, the state introduced an honour for craftspeople, the "Master of Folk Art" title (Népművészet Mestere), together with related recognition for younger makers (check the date and details). Awards have continued, and the title is given to people regarded as outstanding practitioners of traditional crafts and performing arts. It is a good example of how the state became a keeper of tradition, a theme taken up in Chapter 9. The title can support makers, but it also raises the question of who decides what counts as authentic.

Use against decoration

Most objects in this chapter were first of all tools, containers or furniture. Looking at the object's job first, then its decoration, is a good way to understand why a form and a pattern belong together.

Check the details

Names of pottery centres and their wares, the terms for herdsmen, the date and rules of the Folk Art Master title and the origin of particular crafts are all easy to get wrong. Confirm before quoting.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Name two Hungarian pottery centres and describe what each is known for.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Describe a dowry chest and explain why it was important in a household.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Explain why the Folk Art Master title is both useful and open to question.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Pottery:** Hódmezővásárhely, Mezőtúr, Nádudvar and others (check)
- **Wood:** carved gates and tools, painted chests, wooden churches
- **Plain herdsmen:** horn, leather, felt cloaks; the image is partly staged
- **Other:** straw, basketry, gingerbread, smithing
- **Master of Folk Art:** a state title, introduced 1953 (check)

Hungarian Folk Art & Traditions

Course 1 · Chapter 5 · Costume, Food and Everyday Customs

Folk culture is not only things but things done: dressing for an occasion, baking and sharing bread, marking a birth, a wedding or a death. This chapter brings together three strands that meet in the life of a household: costume as it was worn, the food and drink of the traditional table, and the customs that surrounded the main stages of life. The festival year has its own chapter (Chapter 6). Details are from general knowledge and flagged for checking.

Regional and Festive Costume

Chapter 2 described dress as a language. Here we look at how it worked in practice (check each point, since details differ by region and period).

- **Women's costume.** Typically a linen blouse, one or more skirts or an apron, a bodice or vest, and a headdress or kerchief. Brides and married women wore different styles from girls. The number of petticoats and the richness of embroidery could be striking in festive dress, as in Sárköz and Mezőkövesd.
- **Men's costume.** A shirt and wide linen trousers, a vest or short jacket, boots, and a hat. Herdsmen wore the felt cloaks and embroidered coats seen in Chapter 4.
- **Festive and everyday.** The richest pieces were worn at church, weddings and festivals. A person might own few of them, and wear them for decades.
- **Mourning and special occasions.** Darker or plainer colours were used for mourning, with local rules about how long (check).

Costume survived longest in some communities and is still worn at weddings, dance events and festivals today, partly as a deliberate choice (see Chapter 9).

Bread, Paprika and Pálinka

Bread

Baked at home in an outdoor or indoor oven, often once a week. Bread had a special place at the table, and it was handled with

Paprika

The red spice, from peppers, became central to Hungarian cooking from the nineteenth century, with Kalocsa and Szeged as centres

respect, for example by marking a cross on a loaf before cutting it (check this custom).

of production (check the history). Strings of drying peppers are a familiar sight in some regions.

Pálinka

A fruit brandy, made from plums, apricots, pears and other fruits. Home distilling is a long tradition, now regulated, and pálinka is offered as a welcome (check the rules and the protected status).

The winter pig

The autumn or winter pig killing (disznóvágás) was a household and community event, producing sausages, bacon and lard for the year (check).

Dishes such as goulash, stews and noodles with cheese are known abroad, though the line between peasant cooking, restaurant cooking and tourist menus is not clear (see the record, revival and souvenir test in Chapter 1). A separate food course is not planned, but the outline can be extended if you would like one.

Weddings and Rites of Passage

The great events of life were marked by customs that combined the religious, the social and the practical (check each description).

Stage	Typical customs (general, check)
Birth and baptism	Gifts for mother and child, a christening meal, and godparents, who had lasting duties
Courtship	Dances, spinning-room gatherings, and rituals such as the setting of a decorated maypole outside a girl's house in some areas
Wedding (lakodalom)	A multi-day celebration with processions, music, dance, special foods, ritual songs, and the bride's dowry display; the dress and the headdress change when the bride becomes a wife
Death and mourning	A wake, a funeral, a meal, and a period of mourning dress; All Saints' Day visits to graves are still widely kept

Hospitality

Hospitality was, and in many places remains, a matter of pride: a guest was offered food and drink, usually with pálinka, bread and whatever the house held, and refusing everything could give offence (check, and treat as a general rule, not a universal). The clean room of Chapter 2 existed partly for this purpose.

A British comparison

Compare the Scottish ceilidh and the tradition of first-footing at Hogmanay, where visitors bring gifts such as coal and whisky to a house. In both places, visiting customs combine food, drink, good luck and neighbourliness (check the comparison).

What links the three strands

Costume, food and customs are all ways in which a household showed that it belonged to a place and a community. Each one also became a symbol, in a museum case, on a menu or at a festival, and each deserves the same four questions as in Chapter 1.

Check the details

Wedding customs, mourning rules, the history of paprika, pálinka regulation and the role of particular foods vary between regions and are often retold in a tidied form. Verify before quoting any of them.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe the main parts of a traditional woman's festive costume and what the details could tell an observer.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Choose one of bread, paprika or pálinka and explain its place in the household and in the national image.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Pick one rite of passage and describe the customs around it, saying which parts you would need to check.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Costume:** blouse, skirts, bodice, headdress; festive, everyday and mourning (check)
- **Food:** home-baked bread, paprika, pálinka, the winter pig
- **Rites:** birth, courtship, wedding (lakodalom), death
- **Hospitality:** a guest was fed and given a drink
- **Method:** record, revival or souvenir; who, why, how do we know, who keeps it

Hungarian Folk Art & Traditions

Course 1 · Chapter 6 · The Festival Calendar

The village year was marked by festivals that joined the church calendar, the farming year and older customs of uncertain origin. This chapter follows the year from Advent to the grape harvest, describing the customs best known today and asking, as Chapter 1 proposed, which are record, which are revival and which are staged. Dates, origins and heritage listings are from general knowledge and flagged for checking.

Advent and Christmas

- **St Nicholas (6 December).** Children leave out boots to receive sweets from Mikulás, sometimes with a Krampusz figure who brings switches (check the regional pattern).
- **Luca day (13 December).** Linked to St Lucy, with customs including the making of a "Luca chair" over the days up to Christmas Eve and the sowing of wheat in a dish, whose growth was read as a sign for the year ahead (check).
- **Christmas Eve and Christmas.** The household meal, the tree (a relatively modern addition, check), nativity plays, and the "Bethlehem-going" (betlehemezés), where groups carried a small crib from house to house, performing a short play and song (check).
- **New Year and Epiphany.** Wishes, house blessings and the end of the Christmas season.

Carnival and Busójárás

Carnival (farsang) is the period before Lent, marked by feasting, dances, masks and mock trials. The best-known Hungarian carnival is the Busójárás at Mohács in the south, where masked figures called busós, in sheepskins and carved wooden masks, parade through the town, making noise to drive away winter (check). Local tradition links the festival to the Ottoman period and the Šokci (a South Slav community of the area), though the origins are debated (check the story, the community and the listing). The festival is on UNESCO's list of intangible heritage (check the year) and draws large crowds, so it is a clear case of living custom and tourist event at once (see Chapter 1).

Easter

Water sprinkling (locsolás)

On Easter Monday, boys and men visit women and girls and sprinkle them with water or perfume, often reciting a short rhyme, and are given decorated eggs, food and drink in return (check the details and how the custom has changed).

Painted eggs

Elaborately decorated eggs, using wax-resist and other techniques, are an Easter craft in several regions (check, and see Chapter 4 for related crafts).

Holy Week and fasting

Church services and food customs, including ham and bread blessed in church and eaten on Easter morning (check).

Spring

The custom is also a spring festival, which is why some historians link elements of it to older pre-Christian practices, a claim to treat with caution (check).

Whitsun, Midsummer and Harvest

- **Whitsun (Pentecost).** Customs include the crowning of a Whitsun queen (pünkösdi királyné) and the choosing of a Whitsun king in some areas (check).
- **St John's Eve (23 June).** Midsummer fires, jumping over embers for luck, and the gathering of herbs. Such customs are widespread in Europe (check the Hungarian forms).
- **Harvest.** A wreath made from the last ears of grain is carried in procession, with feasting and a harvest ball (check).
- **Grape harvest.** In wine regions such as Tokaj, Eger and Villány, a grape-harvest festival with a procession, music and dancing is held in early autumn (check the dates, which vary by place).
- **Martin's Day (11 November).** The new wine is tasted and a roast goose is eaten. A saying links the weather to the day (check).

Festival	Season	Today (general, check)
Mikulás	6 December	Widely kept, mostly for children
Betlehemezés	Christmas	Kept by some groups, schools and church choirs

Festival	Season	Today (general, check)
Busójárás	Carnival, February or March	Large public festival
Locsolás	Easter Monday	Still widely kept, often in a modest form
St John's fires	23 June	Kept in places, revived in others
Grape harvest festivals	September or October	Public events with parades and music
Martin's Day	11 November	Goose dinners, new wine

A British comparison

Compare Scotland's Hogmanay and Up Helly Aa, or the Burning of the Clavie at Burghead (check): old-looking fire festivals whose current form is often more recent than their reputation. The same record-versus-revival question applies.

The pattern of the year

Almost every festival has three layers: a church feast, a seasonal or farming meaning, and a local custom whose age is uncertain. Ask which layer a claim refers to before accepting that it is "ancient".

Check the details

The origins of Busójárás, the list of customs for each feast, heritage listings and the way customs are kept today all vary by place and are often presented in an idealised form. Verify specific claims, and treat "pre-Christian survival" explanations with caution.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe the Busójárás and explain why it is both a living custom and a tourist event.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Choose two festivals from the table and say what church, farming and local layers each contains.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

A website says that a midsummer custom is "thousands of years old". Explain how you would test the claim.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Winter:** Mikulás, Luca day, Christmas, betlehemezés
- **Carnival:** farsang; Busójárás at Mohács (UNESCO, check)
- **Spring:** Easter locsolás, painted eggs
- **Summer:** Whitsun, St John's fires, harvest
- **Autumn:** grape harvest, Martin's Day
- **Method:** three layers: church, season, local custom

Hungarian Folk Art & Traditions

Course 1 · Chapter 7 · Dance and the Táncház

Dance is the part of Hungarian folk culture that is still most widely practised as a living, social activity, and it is also the part with the clearest revival story. This chapter describes the main dance types, the villages whose dance became famous, and the dance-house (táncház) movement that began in the 1970s and spread abroad. If you ever learned a few Hungarian folk steps as a child, as the author did, much of this will be familiar; if not, it should still be clear. Names, dates and listings are from general knowledge and flagged for checking.

The Dance Types

Csárdás

The best-known couple dance, with a slow and a fast section, turns, and improvised steps. The name is linked to the csárda, the roadside inn (check). It became a national dance in the nineteenth century and was taken into concert music (see Hungarian Music).

Verbunk

A men's dance connected with the recruiting of soldiers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with heel clicks and boot slaps (check the origin). The name comes from a German word for recruitment (Werbung).

Legényes

A solo men's dance of Transylvania, famous for rapid footwork, in which the dancer shows skill to the music (check).

Swineherd and stick dances

Dances in which the dancer carries a staff or stick, associated with herdsman and shepherds (check names and regional variants).

Group dances, such as circle dances and women's dances with a regional character, also have a long history. The details of steps, music and manner differ between regions and even villages (see Chapter 1).

Szék and the Transylvanian Villages

Some of the richest surviving dance traditions were found in Transylvania, now part of Romania, in the villages of the Mezőség and the Kalotaszeg area, among others. Szék (Sic in Romanian) is especially famous for its dance, music and costume (check the name and the place), and became a central reference for revivalists. Transylvania is therefore included here, as the outline stated, because the tradition cannot be told without it (see Chapter 1). Questions of nation and border are not taken up in this chapter.

The Táncház Movement

In the early 1970s young Hungarian musicians and dancers in Budapest, partly inspired by the collecting work of Bartók and Kodály (see Hungarian Music) and by the village dance still seen in Transylvania, began to organise social evenings where people learned dances directly from musicians and teachers. The name táncház means "dance house" (check the dates, the founders and the first venue; names often given include Béla Halmos and Ferenc Sebő).

- **The method.** A teacher breaks a dance into steps, a live band plays the village tune, and the whole room joins in. Dancers and musicians learn from each other. The approach is sometimes called the "táncház method" (check) and has been used in teaching.
- **Why it mattered.** It moved folk dance from the stage and the museum into a living social setting, and made it fashionable among young people in the 1970s and 1980s (check how political the movement was at the time).
- **Recognition.** The táncház method was added to UNESCO's register of good safeguarding practices (check the exact register and year).
- **Spread.** Dance houses spread across Hungary and to Hungarian communities in Romania, North America and Britain, including Scotland's Hungarian community, where occasional events are held (check what is currently run).

What a Dance House Is Like

A typical evening starts with a beginners' lesson, followed by a few hours of open dancing to a live band, often with violin, viola, double bass and sometimes cimbalom (see Chapter 8). The mood is informal. People of all ages dance, couples change, and a good dancer may improvise. Costume is not required and is often worn only on special occasions. The best way to get a sense of it is to watch recordings or, better, to go (check the listings).

A British comparison

Compare the Scottish ceilidh and country dance, and the revival of English folk dance through the Cecil Sharp era. In each case collecting, teaching and social dancing mixed, and some of what is thought of as "traditional" was a codified version (check the comparison).

Record, Revival, Stage

Dance shows the three categories of Chapter 1 very clearly:

- **Record:** film and notation of village dance, from collectors and from the later archives.
- **Revival:** the táncház, sincere and skilled, built on those records and on contact with older dancers.
- **Stage version:** professional ensembles, with choreography, costume and show structure designed for an audience (see Chapter 9 for the question of state ensembles).

A personal note

The author did Hungarian folk dancing as a child. The dances learned in a group or a class may have come from any of the layers above, and part of the interest in the subject is working out which. If you are following the course from the same starting point, try the same exercise with whatever dances you remember.

Check the details

The founders and dates of the táncház, the names and origins of dances, UNESCO listings and the status of dance houses abroad are easy to misstate. Verify before quoting.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Describe the csárdás and the verbunk, and say how they differ.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Explain what the táncház is, how its method works and why it counts as a revival.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Think of a dance you have done or seen, and describe whether it is best described as record, revival or stage version, and why.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Csárdás:** couple dance, slow and fast parts
- **Verbunk:** men's recruiting dance (check)
- **Legényes:** Transylvanian men's solo
- **Szék:** a Transylvanian village central to the revival
- **Táncház:** dance house, begun in the early 1970s (check)
- **Layers:** record, revival, stage version

Hungarian Folk Art & Traditions

Course 1 · Chapter 8 · Song, Instrument and Story

Song, instrument and story are the oral side of folk culture: things carried in memory and voice rather than in cloth or wood. This chapter covers folk song and how it was collected, the instruments that accompany it, the tales and legends told in villages, and the Kodály method that turned song into a way of teaching. The music itself is treated more fully in Hungarian Music; here the focus is the folk tradition. Names, dates and details are from general knowledge and flagged for checking.

Folk Song and Its Collecting

Hungarian folk song has several layers. Scholars often distinguish an older layer of songs with pentatonic melodies (check the terminology) from a newer layer of songs in more regular verse forms and popular styles. Songs belong to occasions: work, courtship, weddings, laments, soldiers' life, and the calendar customs of Chapter 6.

- **Collecting.** From the first years of the twentieth century Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály travelled to villages, recording singers on wax cylinders and writing the tunes down (check the dates and the number of songs collected). Their work, described in Hungarian Music, is the foundation of the modern study of the tradition.
- **What they found.** The collections showed that the "Hungarian songs" known from town salons and popular bands (check the term and its use) were often different from the older village repertoire, a distinction central to the record, revival and stage categories of Chapter 1.
- **Archives.** The recordings and notations are kept in research archives in Budapest and used by singers and teachers today (check the institution).

The Instruments

Violin and viola

The core of a village band, the violin carrying the melody and the viola (often called

Cimbalom

A hammered dulcimer with many strings, associated with bands on the plain and with

kontra) the rhythm and harmony, together with a double bass (check the local names).

the concert version developed in the nineteenth century (check the history).

Hurdy-gurdy

A stringed instrument sounded by a rotating wheel, with drone strings, used by wandering musicians and in some regions (check the Hungarian name, tekerőlant, and the region).

Bagpipe and flutes

The Hungarian bagpipe (duda) and shepherds' pipes and flutes belong to herdsmen's music and some customs, such as Christmas and Carnival (check the details).

Each region has its own balance of instruments, and the band that plays at a táncház (Chapter 7) is a revival of village practice, adapted for the modern dance floor.

Folk Tales and Legends

Stories were told at the spinning room, at the table, and at the winter gatherings when work slowed. Hungarian folk tales include the familiar international types, such as the youngest son, the clever girl and the helpful animal, together with local figures and settings (check the classification).

- **The Wondrous Stag.** A legend in which the ancestors of the Hungarians, the brothers Hunor and Magor, chase a stag and find new lands. It is a founding legend rather than history (check the versions and the sources).
- **Matthias the Just.** Stories about King Matthias Corvinus (see Hungarian Architecture for his building) in which he goes among the people in disguise and judges fairly. The tales are folk memory, not record (check the king and the story).
- **Regional legends.** Local tales attached to hills, castles and springs, differing from village to village.

A British comparison

Compare the Scottish tradition of ballads and Border tales, collected in the nineteenth century (Sir Walter Scott, Francis Child), and the way both cultures treat a medieval king as a figure of justice in popular memory (check the comparison).

Ballads

Hungarian ballads are narrative songs, often short and dramatic, about love, betrayal, death, the supernatural and outlaws (the *betyár*, check the term). Transylvanian ballads, collected in the Hungarian-speaking villages there, are among the best known (check the examples). Like Scottish ballads, they survived in oral form and were gathered by collectors, then printed and sung again.

The Kodály Method

Zoltán Kodály argued that children should learn music through their own folk songs, sung from early childhood. The Kodály method (check the name and the details) uses folk song as the base of music teaching in schools, with relative solmization (the movable do, check), hand signs and singing in groups. Developed in Hungary in the mid-twentieth century, it was adopted widely abroad (check the countries and the current practice). It is one of the clearest cases of folk tradition feeding a formal education system.

Oral tradition and the page

Once a song or story is written down, printed and taught, it changes status. It is preserved, but it also becomes fixed, and the fixed version can replace the many living ones. The collector both saves and alters what is collected. This tension returns in Chapter 9.

Check the details

Collection dates, song counts, instrument names, legend versions and the history of the Kodály method are easy to misstate. Verify before quoting.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain what Bartók and Kodály did, and why their collecting matters for the study of folk song.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Describe three folk instruments and the role each plays in a village band or custom.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Choose a legend (the Wondrous Stag or Matthias the Just), summarise it, and say what it tells us about how a community sees itself.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Collectors:** Bartók and Kodály, from the early 1900s (check)
- **Band:** violin, viola (kontra), double bass, sometimes cimbalom
- **Other instruments:** hurdy-gurdy, duda (bagpipe), shepherds' pipes
- **Legends:** the Wondrous Stag; Matthias the Just
- **Ballads:** narrative songs, notably from Transylvania
- **Kodály method:** music teaching built on folk song

Hungarian Folk Art & Traditions

Course 1 · Chapter 9 · Preservation and Politics

Folk culture does not survive by accident. Someone decides what is worth keeping, pays for it, teaches it and sometimes changes it. This chapter looks at who has done that in Hungary: the state, researchers, revivalists, designers and the Hungarian-speaking communities outside the present borders. It also asks how to tell authentic practice from kitsch. As the outline stated, the course describes what is practised, by whom and what is disputed, and takes no side on questions of nation, minority and border. Names, dates and programmes are from general knowledge and flagged for checking.

State Support and the "Folklorism" Debate

Under the communist state (roughly 1948 to 1989) folk culture received public money: professional and amateur ensembles, festivals, craft cooperatives and research institutes (check the institutions and dates). Folk art suited a regime that wished to honour "the people", and it was less politically risky than many other forms of culture.

- **The benefit.** Crafts were taught, dances and songs were collected and archived, and many practitioners had a way to earn a living (check the scale).
- **The criticism.** Scholars and revivalists argued that state ensembles and craft cooperatives produced a stylised, stage-friendly version that replaced living village practice. The word *folklorism* is often used for this second-hand use of folk material (check how it is defined in Hungarian scholarship).
- **The táncház link.** The dance-house movement of Chapter 7 can be read partly as a reaction against the stage version, a return to learning from village musicians and dancers (check how far this reading is shared).

Across the Borders

Large Hungarian-speaking communities live in Romania (mainly Transylvania), Slovakia, Serbia, Ukraine and other neighbouring countries, a result of the border changes after the First World War. Some of the traditions in this course, such as the dance of Szék (Chapter 7) and many ballads (Chapter 8), were recorded in those communities.

- **Exchange.** Revivalists from Hungary travelled to Transylvanian villages to learn, and village musicians were invited to teach and perform in Hungary (check the examples).
- **Different conditions.** Each community has its own history, language rights and funding, so the tradition is kept up in different ways in each place (check the specifics).
- **A sensitive subject.** Heritage is sometimes used in arguments about identity and borders. This course records the practice and the communities, not the arguments.

The Revival and Its Cousins

The revival after the 1970s did not stop at dance. Folk-inspired bands mixed traditional instruments with rock, jazz and electronic music (check the names of bands and the term "world music" in Hungarian use). Young musicians learn at music schools and workshops. Crafts such as pottery and embroidery have their own teachers and courses.

Heritage Programmes

Several schemes aim to protect living tradition, not just objects:

- **Folk Art Master and related titles.** A state honour for outstanding craftspeople and a programme to pass their skills on (check the current names and rules).
- **Living Human Treasure.** A Hungarian programme modelled on the UNESCO idea, recognising individual bearers of tradition (check the name and the details).
- **UNESCO lists.** Items from Hungary include the Busó festivities at Mohács (Chapter 6), the táncház method (Chapter 7) and the Matyó folk art (Chapter 3). Check the exact listings, categories and years.
- **Open-air museums.** The Open Air Museum at Szentendre keeps whole buildings from the regions (see Hungarian Architecture, and Chapter 1 for sources).

A British comparison

Compare the Scottish Gaelic revival and the Highland Games. Each shows state, local and commercial interest mixing in the care of a tradition, with arguments about what is "real" (check the comparison).

Designers and the Folk Fashion Trend

In recent decades Hungarian designers have used folk motifs on clothing, homeware and graphics, from embroidered blouses to modern prints (check the designers and brands). This has brought new buyers and new income to crafts, and has drawn criticism when motifs from one region are used with no credit or understanding. The question of who may use a pattern, and whether a village or a family can own one, has no simple answer (check any legal protection).

Authenticity and Kitsch

Three questions help to separate old practice, later revival and commercial copy:

1. **Who made it, and why?** A villager making for use, a revivalist making in a tradition, or a factory making for sale.
2. **Does it keep its context?** A costume worn at a wedding in the village against one sold as a souvenir.
3. **Is it honest about itself?** A revival that says it is a revival is not a fake. A souvenir presented as ancient is.

Kitsch is not the same as tourist

A well-made souvenir by a skilled maker can be good work. Kitsch is closer to a mass-produced copy that has lost all connection to the thing it imitates. Judging between the two takes looking closely at the object, not just labelling it.

Check the details

Dates of programmes, names of titles, UNESCO listings and the history of folklorism are easy to misstate, and several touch on contested political history. Verify before quoting.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain the "folklorism" debate: what did state support achieve, and what did critics object to?

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Describe two heritage programmes and say what each protects (objects, skills, practices or people).

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Take a folk-inspired product you have seen (a blouse, a mug, a print) and apply the three authenticity questions to it.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **State support:** ensembles, festivals, cooperatives under communism (check)
- **Folklorism:** second-hand, stylised use of folk material
- **Across borders:** Transylvania and other Hungarian-speaking communities
- **Programmes:** Folk Art Master, Living Human Treasure, UNESCO (check)
- **Three questions:** who and why; context; honesty

Hungarian Folk Art & Traditions

Course 1 · Chapter 10 · A Living Tradition

This capstone draws the course together around one question: who owns a tradition, who keeps it and who changes it? The earlier chapters gave the pieces: the village world, the crafts, the customs, the calendar, dance, song and the politics of preservation. Here they are put into a single year, followed by a method for judging what you meet and some practical ways to see, hear and join in. Names, dates and listings are from general knowledge and flagged for checking.

Who Owns, Keeps and Changes a Tradition?

Looking back over the course, a tradition has at least five kinds of people around it, and the same person may play more than one role:

- **Bearer.** The villagers and families who practised it as part of ordinary life (Chapters 2 and 5).
- **Collectors and researchers.** People such as Bartók and Kodály, and museum staff, who recorded it (Chapters 1 and 8).
- **Revivalists.** The táncház generation and today's craft learners, who take it up on purpose (Chapters 7 and 9).
- **The state and institutions.** Who fund, list and sometimes reshape it (Chapter 9).
- **Designers and sellers.** Who carry motifs to new audiences (Chapters 3 and 9).

No single group owns a living tradition. A tradition changes whenever it is practised, because each person adapts it a little, and the useful question is usually not "is it original?" but "is it practised, and is it honest about what it is?" (Chapter 9). Questions of nation, minority and border are political and are not taken up here.

A Folk Year

Here is a year built from the chapters. Dates and customs vary by region, and everything is to be checked before you plan around it.

Winter

Spring

Advent and Christmas customs, Luca day, Epiphany, and Carnival ending with Busójárás at Mohács (Chapter 6). Long evenings for spinning, stories and song (Chapters 2 and 8).

Easter and the water-sprinkling custom (Chapter 6). Embroidery and festive dress come out for the church and village (Chapters 3 and 5).

Summer

Whitsun and St John's fires, markets and craft fairs (Chapters 4 and 6), dance camps and festivals (Chapter 7, check).

Autumn

Harvest and the grape harvest festivals, weddings after the work was done (Chapters 5 and 6), and the return of the dance-house season (Chapter 7, check).

Old Practice or Later Revival?

When you meet something described as "traditional", work through these steps:

1. **Find the record.** Is there a photograph, a collector's note or a museum object showing it in a village (Chapter 1)?
2. **Find the break.** Was it carried on unbroken, or stopped and then revived? Revival is not a fault, but it should be named (Chapter 9).
3. **Find the maker or leader.** Is the person a bearer, a trained revivalist or a professional performer (Chapters 7 and 9)?
4. **Check the claim.** Does the description say what it is, and how old, or does it only say "ancient"?

A British comparison

Apply the same steps to something close to home: a Highland Games event, a ceilidh, a Burns supper. Each mixes old practice, later revival and presentation, and the steps work equally well there (check the comparison).

What to See, Hear and Join

- **See.** The Open Air Museum at Szentendre, regional museums, craft fairs, and costume and embroidery in situ at festivals (check what is open and when).
- **Hear.** Recordings of village singers and revival bands, and the collecting archives made by Bartók and Kodály (Chapter 8, check what is available online).
- **Join.** A táncház, in Budapest or at a Hungarian community event elsewhere, including in Scotland (Chapter 7, check what is currently run). A dance house welcomes beginners, and for anyone who danced as a child, as the author did, it is a good way back in.
- **Learn.** Workshops in embroidery, pottery and instrument playing, run by Folk Art Masters and others (Chapters 3, 4 and 9, check).

The thread through the course

Traditions are kept alive by people doing them, and every keeper changes them a little. The most useful stance for a visitor or learner is neither to treat tradition as a museum case nor to dismiss the revival as fake, but to ask who is doing it, why, and how honestly they describe it.

Check the details

Festival dates, venues, workshop names and what is currently run change often. Check current listings before travelling or planning.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Choose one tradition from the course and name who plays each of the five roles around it (bearer, collector, revivalist, institution, seller).

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Build your own folk year: choose one custom, craft or dance for each season and say which chapter it comes from.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Apply the four "old practice or later revival" steps to a tradition from your own country, and say what you conclude.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Five roles:** bearers, collectors, revivalists, institutions, designers and sellers
- **Four steps:** record, break, maker or leader, claim
- **Folk year:** winter customs, Easter, Whitsun and fires, harvest and weddings
- **Try:** Szentendre, a táncház, a craft workshop (check)
- **Test:** is it practised, and is it honest about what it is?