THE MOLDAVIAN FOLK COSTUME - AN ETHNO-CULTURAL UNIT OF HIGH VALUE FOR RESEARCH, HISTORY AND ART

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“Villages do not seek to conform to the customs of one single village. Whether by its own attire, customs, song, each village cherishes its own autonomy and aura.” (Lucian Blaga)

Abstract

The present research study provides an insight into an important repertoire of compositional and colour elements specific to the traditional folk costume of the region of Moldavia, by highlighting the great richness and variety of garments, shapes, and hues, “an immense creative workshop” of major aesthetic value which draws strong interest. The male and female folk costumes each represent an ethno-cultural unit of high value for research, history and art, passed on by our ancestors.

Keywords: folk attire, garment, ornament, motif, tradition, folk art

Gaining knowledge about one’s ancestors by deciphering folk art brings more lucidity in judging the Romanian ethnos, while also serving as a well-grounded orientation point in the sense of understanding and assessing the broader Romanian culture and modern literature.

In the Romanian space, the folk costume has its roots in the attire of the ancestors, Thracians, Gaetes and Dacians, which underwent continuous developments, yet retained unaltered its essential characteristics: unity and continuity.

Romanian folk costume is a document of material and spiritual culture, a language that carries an artistic message, whose development followed and was shaped by economic, social, moral and aesthetic transformations.

Although in terms of decoration it differs from one area ethnographic to another, the folk costume is an ethnocultural unit that was passed on from the autochthonous archaic legacy of the forefathers through the feudal era and up to the modern times. This significant cultural process of preserving unaltered the basic elements of clothing, was highlighted as early as the last century by ethnographers and historians and is a specific phenomenon in our popular culture.

The folk costume in the region of Moldavia is original due to the fabric used to fashion it, its tailoring, the art of the ornaments that adorn it and the parts that compose it. The costume is monumental and elegant, the decorative motifs being particularly artistic, especially the wool belts adorned with stylised elements and geometric motifs known as national, typical of the Romanian art which, as the poet Lucian Blaga would argue, is: “... a classical form in the sense that it is measured and discreet.”

The Moldavian traditional costume preserves general Romanian elements, such as the Dacian blouse, gathered at the neck, belts, peasant coats, sheepskin coats, and traditional foot wraps (Pavel Emilia, 1976). Sharing the same origin, it forms an ethnocultural entity alongside the folk costume in other provinces of the country: Transylvania, Wallachia, Oltenia and Banat.

The ornamental motifs that embellish the Moldavian costume garments also feature on interior fabrics (rugs, carpets, blankets, rugs, mats, strips of carpets, towels, tablecloths, bed sheets, pillowcases, handkerchiefs, etc.), on carved wooden objects, on household items, on peasant furniture or pottery, confirming the unity in variety of Romanian folk art and the poly-semantic descriptions of these motifs.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Folk costume, both the female and the male versions, although generally similar to that of Moldavia, presents certain characteristics determined by the specific historical and

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geographical transition area between plains and
The ethnographic areas with impressive
diversity and frequency of folk costume elements
include in particular: Rădăuţi, Cîmpulung, Bazinul
Dornelor, Valea Bistriţei, Neamţ, Suceava,
Dorohoi, Iaşi, Fălticeni, Bacău, Tecuci, Huşi.

The female costume, owing to the richness
of garments and the varied decorations, is the main
structural element, dominating the Moldovan and
Romanian costume ensemble and consisting of
shirt (gathered at the neck); skirt; skirt wrap;
narrow belt; leather vest.

The “shirt”, of “Dacian” origin, can be
found across the Carpathian Mountains from the
north of Moldova to the Mehediniţă. It is richly
decorated with geometric, floral, zoomorphic and
anthropomorphic motifs and is fashioned out of
homespun cloth (on looms). Sequins, butterflies
and beads are used to adorn shirts. This type of
shirt can be found on Trajan’s Column and the
Adamclisi Monument. The ornaments created on
“stani” (front and back of the shirt) and sleeves
were made using “lânica” or “arnici” (twisted,
coloured cotton threads) in a single colour or in
two or several colours (black, yellow, red, green,
blue). The most commonly used geometric motifs
on shirts in the area include: wheels, diamonds,
circles, wafers, stars, undulating lines, sun paths,
cereal ears, etc.

The skirt (poale), decorated only at the
bottom, observed the same pattern as the shirt.

Skirt wrap (catrinţa) – found mainly in the
mountainous area of Moldova is the piece of
clothing worn over the skirt, covering the body
from the waist down; it is found as far as Muscel
where it is known as fota. Hopespun using 4 or 2
wool yarns and silk, gold or silver threads (if the
wrap is to be worn on a feast day). The chromatics
of skirt wraps ranges from dark blue, burgundy to
dark green, or dark red usually on a black
background.

Women girdle their waist with a belt, also
woven from four threads of canvas, in colours that
match voes of the skirt wrap. Like peasant women
all over Romania, those in rural Moldova only
cover their heads after wedding (marriage), as
young women walk bareheaded. Casânta is
specific to the area analysed, being black or floral.

As regards footwear, until after the mid 20th
century, women and men would wear traditional
foot wraps. These were made of pig or cow leather
and were worn over wool-knit obiele or ghiele
(leggings) or over “colţuni” (stockings or socks),
yet these have now been replaced by high-top
boots.

As for jewellery, young and married women
wear beads, bead collars, earrings and rings. The
most beautiful ornaments are geometric collars or
“gherdane” popularly called “interlaced flowers”
made of beads coloured red, blue, yellow, green,
black, brown, white, pink, purple, etc. The custom
of women wearing jewels is ancient.

The female costume on occasions is
completed by the “traistă” (bag), which would
match the colours of the costume. There are a
number of variants of fabrics and ornamental
motifs for bags: “îngusturele”, “traistă vrăşată”
(striped), “traistă alesă”, “traistă în ochiurele”
(with eyelets), “ridicată” (ribbed), “brodată”
(embroidered).

The manly folk costume unlike the female
one is characterized by a smaller number of stripes,
sober colors and simpler ornamentation. It consists
of: hat; shirt; leather vest (“bundîţă”); wide girdle
 (“chimir”); trousers (“iţari”). Most of the folk
costumes for women and the male are mostly
homemade.

The hat, worn especially in cold weather, is
made of lamb skins coloured black, white, or blue.
Often hats like caps are decorated with flower
motifs.

The shirt: the embroidery is executed using
“arnici” (cotton threads) and silk, with geometric,
zoomorphic or plant motifs, in one or several
colours. Ornamentation is less rich than in female
shirts, being distributed on the collar, shoulders,
front and backside and the cuffs. The most archaic
type of shirt is tailored from a piece of linen or
hemp fabric and can be encountered in all
provinces of the country.

“Iţari” are trousers whose style can be
traced to the time of the Dacians. Made of a special
white, fabric, fashioned at home, their inseam was
usually longer than the leg, so that when worn,
they would gather at the ankle. During winter men
wear “bernevici” (foot wraps) woven out of white
natural colour white or gray thick wool. They are
also known as “cioareci”.

“Bundîţa” - is a garment worn by both
women and men. It is a short leather sleeveless
vest made of “jamsa” (a very fine lamb skin),
richly adorned with geometric and vegetal (floral)
embroidery, the latter being more common. The
male costume is completed with wool or leather

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2 Stani – Front and back sides of the shirt.
Lânica- Fine, industrial wool thread, used to decorate
headscarfs in Bukovina.
Arnici-Twisted cotton thread, dyed in various colours
3 Vrăște – Decorative stripes made by using the shuttle,
from one side to another of skirt wraps and head towels
waistbands, scarves, bags, leather bags, peasant sandals, great coats, hats, belts, girdles.

Unlike the regular work outfit, which is sober and less ornate, festive folk costume is characterised by rich ornamentation and greater colour palette.

Over time, folk costumes have undergone transformations imposed by the progress of society, in particular changes related to the materials used to manufacture them. Consequently, homespun fabric was replaced with factory-made “bleached” or “toile”. The wearing of sheepskin great coat has largely been abandoned in favour of industrially produced coats, while foot wraps have been replaced by shoes, boots, brogues or high boots. Nevertheless tourists who stop in or transit through the Moldavian lands are particularly impressed with the diversity and quality of folk art, which is why many buy such local items. Today the traditional Moldavian garments are worn mainly at cultural or artistic celebrations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The examination of the Moldovan folk costume has placed particular emphasis on analysing shapes, the variety of styles, the relationship to the human body, namely to what extent the manufactured costume complies with the morphology, proportion and somatic rhythm of the body. The distribution of ornaments, the dynamics of the alternation of decorated and undecorated surfaces, the material which sometimes has a decisive effect on the whole costume are the defining factors from the artistic and aesthetic standpoint. Colour, just as the relationships between all these elements, plays a key role in the study of folk costume and language. A certain gleam of colours, a particular rhythm of the material forms, the harmony of air vibrations of sound all acquire, as part of artistic creation, the virtue of impressing effervescence, emotions and ideas.

On the topic of form and structure Ion Pascadi argued that “the work of art will be considered as a whole system of signs, which serve a variable aesthetic purpose that presupposes dynamic understanding”. The same author would add: “We view structure as the ideal model corresponding to actual traits of the work itself, i.e. as a methodological tool that we use to gain a clearer understanding of the artistic fact” (Pascadi I., 1971).

CONCLUSIONS

The folk art which has developed in Moldova is a result of the historical and geographical conditions of the local population evolved across the millennia, as they accumulating incessantly new experiences as part of a perpetual cultural artistic dialogue with neighbouring populations.

In Moldovan folk art there is a rich repertoire of motifs - ornamental “signs” carrying particular significance, expressed both by the importance assigned by folk craftsmen and by their frequent use in various art genres.

The village and the home are microcosms of folk artistic creation for rural communities, where the consciousness of family and nation were born and developed (Doncean Marilena, Doncean G., 2007). Romanian poet and philosopher Lucian Blaga viewed the “Romanian village as a centre of world from which traditional Romanian folk culture propagated.”

Foreign travellers who visited Moldova in the 19th century admired the handiwork skills of
the local peasant women: “The poverty of homes is enlivened by the abundance of woven objects. One cannot step into such a house without feeling respect for the energy of such a woman, who works hard in the field, constantly cares for her children, more often than not weaves the family’s clothes and still finds the time and enthusiasm to make such domestic industry flourish”.

Folk creators, messengers of the thoughts and ideals of the Romanian people, who have been living for thousands of years in the Carpathian-Danubian-Pontic area, have known how to combine colours, to stylise motifs in order to render them as ornaments, signs, symbols, ideas and messages of a millenarian magical thinking.

As previously mentioned in this study, the Moldavian folk costume features specific attributes, yet it is also connected with folk costume in the other provinces of the country, Transylvania and Wallachia. This connection is profound and essential, as Moldavian folk costumes share the same ancient origin.

Regarding the Romanian folk costume, the academician C. C. Giurescu emphasised: “Romanian folk costume is a synthesis that the Romanian people achieved, over the centuries, between the functional and artistic, in a manner that distinguishes it among other nations, although the mutual influences were never absent. In the Romanian land, which is among the most harmonious and rich, not only in Europe but in the whole world, people have integrated their specific garments into the culture they have crystallised, in an individual structure.” (Grigorescu C.C., 1973).

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