

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: Rădăuți, Cîmpulung, Bazinul Dornelor, Valea Bistriței, Neamț, Suceava, Dorohoi, Iași, Fălticeni, Bacău, Tecuci, Huși.

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 Mehedinți. 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.² 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 (catrința) – 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*³. 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. *Casâncea* is specific to the area analysed, being black or floral.

² *Stani* – Front and back sides of the shirt.

Lânică– Fine, industrial wool thread, used to decorate headscarfs in Bukovina.

Arnici–Twisted cotton thread, dyed in various colours

³ *Vrâste* – Decorative stripes made by using the shuttle, from one side to another of skirt wraps and head towels

mountains.

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 oghiele (leggings) or over “colțuni” (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 vrâstată*” (striped), “*traistă aleasă*”, “*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 (“*bundiță*”); wide girdle (“*chimir*”); trousers (“*îțari*”). 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.

“*Îțarii*” 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*”.

“*Bundița*” - 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

waistbands, scarves, bags, leather bags, peasant sandals, great coats, hats, belts, girdles⁴.

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 status of a sign endowed with 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).

⁴ Leather bags are small in size and are worn usually at the girdle or waistband. They are used to carry keys or money.



Figure 1 Folk costume designs

Research on folk costumes, colours, motifs and forms opens up a broad horizon on the process of cultural evolution, of plastic thought and expression of past craftsmen. By drawing on tradition, the folk artist is the representative of a culture which he has inherited and which he passes on to the infinite group of cultural descendants. His work of art expresses the views and tastes of the village community that he belongs to, prompting the intense movement of the same motifs even as monotony disappears: *“Folk costumes and art in general are like a book, a book from which one can learn the most complex data about the life of a human community, provided that the student seeks to decipher its language and decode it for the sake of the future generations”* (Stoica Georgeta, 1974).

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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