

THE ORNAMENTATION OF TRADITIONAL FOLK HOME TEXTILES IN THE AREA OF MOLDAVIA

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Abstract

Amid the disruption of our society we are nowadays confronted with an apparent return to our original values, characterised primarily by nostalgia for the origins of the Romanian village, which results from a growing sense of loneliness and alienation generated by urban life. “It is not the ethnic peculiarity nor the folk genius, but rather the authentic, the universal, generally human in their original simplicity that modern man’s soul searches and discovers today in the traditional folk art” - argues the prominent professor Dumitru Pop referring to the new dimensions of folk culture. The interior of the Romanian folk house is a collection that constitutes the most decisive part – as an expression of the lifestyle and spirituality, of the ideas and words of a nation, of family and social life with all that these involve. The factors that determine the structure and evolution of folk home interiors are generally of a human and historical kind.

Human, as the organization of the interiors reflects the living conditions of the community that the individual belongs to. Forms of organization of home interiors have undergone a historic evolution, since whatever may be the human side expressed by a particular home design, it can only be analysed in relation to the era when it was made and developed, within a broader style, which often is predominant to a certain period.

Key words: ornamentation, folk, motifs, traditional

The interior of a peasant home, even when this may mean a single room, has always had a dual function, practical and decorative. This results from the very structure of its constituent elements, i.e. the items that serve a practical role never lack decorative elements (ovens, benches, bed, cabinets, clothes hangers, bed sheets and covers etc.).

Hence, stoves feature plated profiles, are adorned or coloured, furniture items are decorated with sculpted motifs, carved or painted, while their free surfaces are covered with hand-made objects such as textiles, ceramics and paintings.

Even some natural products such as gherkins and com cobs find a spot on the surface of the stove or on windowsills. Heritage elements in interior designs are due to the influence of certain institutions such as monasteries, noble estates and even princely courts, which variously infused new elements in folk housing. Among all the categories of objects that constitute the interior of peasant dwellings, textiles serve the most important decorative role.

Regardless of the fabric they are made of - wool or cotton, hemp or silk - the way they are arranged on furniture, walls or beams, their through decorating composition and colours, textiles define the decorative style of a particular area. Even a regular towel, hanging on a hook on

the door, is refreshed by several ornaments. Thus, on simple cloth, hemp, or cotton fabric, the lady of the house would stitch discrete rows of diamonds, stars, flowers, such towels serving to wrap food for those who toiled in the fields. Lucian Blaga, in his typical comparative-analytical spirit, would argue that “... *in terms of dominance and dosage, we can find that in Romanian ornaments the sovereignty of straightforward linear geometrics and stylised figures is more marked than elsewhere, while the dosage of geometrics and organically stylised motifs displays unequalled balance....*”

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Traditional interior tissues, made of white fabric and black, red or burgundy wool, are still found nowadays in new homes. They play an important decorative role, defining the interior decoration style of the area. Beauty of rugs and other interior textiles once sparked the interest of many foreign travellers who visited the Romanian principalities, as evidenced by their writings. A. Ramasay made an interesting description “..... ***all around the rooms, against the walls, there are benches covered with exquisite home-made rugs in wool or cotton. In a corner of the room, many other rugs are usually put aside for the girls’ dowry***”.

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In terms of the fabric they are made of, home textiles may be:

- textiles made of animal fibres (wool, cotton, silk, etc.);
- textiles made of vegetable fibres (flax, hemp, cotton).

As regards their function inside the home, they may be:

- regular use textiles (blankets, runners, pillow usually placed on the bed or dowry chest);
- fabrics with a decorative role (rugs, carpets, tablecloths, towels);
- fabrics linked to certain occasions such as ceremonies, weddings, baptisms, etc.

In terms of function, home textiles can be classified into:

- items that hang on the wall (covers, rugs, or carpets);
- bedding and covering items (blankets, various types of bed spreads)
- items laid on the floor (floor rugs)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Covering sheets (*prostire de perete*) are put on clothes to protect them from dust and may have other functions such as when used on special occasions, i.e. wedding or funeral.

A century ago, certain styles of **covers** (*lăicer*) and **mats** (*păretar*) used to be made in dyed vegetable wool, being placed on the wall next to the bed or the benches. They were decorated with alternating transverse stripes, arranged in a rhythmic fashion, in pastel shades of green, yellow, mustard, purple, red, black and white or the natural colour of wool. The ornamental motifs used included: national ones, wheels and half-wheels, rhombus, rosette or 8-corner shapes, vine leaf, fir tree, star or “fork”, symbols that once had magic and religious meanings.

Mats (*păretar*) were smaller carpeting items made of wool, placed on the floor near the bed. Decorative motifs used include wheels and sad figures, widely used archaic symbols.

In relation to covers and mats, **rugs** (*scoarță*) feature certain peculiarities of form and ornamental composition. Their rectangular shape and greater width provide space for a more complex composition all over the fabric surface, in all directions, without transversal divisions (as is the case of the *lăicer*). The background of rugs is monochrome: brown, beige, green, blue, yellow, sky blue or faded pink.

As regards the execution of **carpets** covering the bed or wall near the bed, we may distinguish two categories: the former is dominated by frequent geometrical and floral decor, achieved in discrete harmony, while the latter is marked by anthropomorphic and zoomorphic representations

in bright colours that give a feeling of exuberance and vitality.

Many motifs are of ancient origin. Dacian and Latin elements overlapped by Byzantine motifs have contributed to an unmistakable original style. The most common compositions include motifs arranged in rows across the entire surface. Even nowadays designs include wide decorative borders with double stalks, oak or walnut leaves, ears of wheat, vines or miniaturised motifs drawn from heritage compositions. Floral elements are accompanied by zoomorphic and anthropomorphic representations. One of the motifs in Moldavian rugs is the bird, e.g. rooster, peacock, cuckoo, swan, crane, stork, etc.

The emergence of the border, viewed as a superior shape on the evolutionary scale of the ornamentation of folk fabrics, has contributed to higher profile for decor and the symmetrical and rhythmic grouping of ornaments around a central decorative element.

In the colour and arrangement of decorative elements one may distinguish clearly the aesthetic concept of Romanian folk art as a whole, with ornaments being grouped into well-defined strips of white fields, highlighting the vibrancy of colours. In the decorative interplay of ornamental motifs of rugs, covers, mats, carpets, woven blankets, etc., skeuomorphic elements, i.e. images depicting objects forged by man are included: mills, rakes, stakes, carding combs, shepherd's hook, ploughs, all symbolising wealth and abundance.

The home textiles category also includes **blankets** (*cergi*). To craft such items, the wool yarn is spun thicker and then twisted reasonably tight. In the past, rugs were monochrome (white, grey or seine), only natural colours being used as these items had a utilitarian purpose. Over time, interest in decorating rugs grew steadily, leading to remarkable polychrome textiles, with discreetly refined ornaments.

Macatul de lână is a weave in two colours namely wool and cotton, placed on the wall or the dowry chest. It was also used to craft bed spreads.

Velnița is patterned wool fabric with stripes or *alesături* used as linen on the bed, to decorate the walls or for wrapping.

Țoluri de podele (floor mats) play a very practical and aesthetic role. They are woven at home from strips about 2 cm wide cut from different old clothing items.

Towels (*ștergare*) and their miniature versions, woven from hemp or cotton and used to decorate the rooms, are distinguished by geometric patterns in vivid colours (red, burgundy, blue, yellow) with floral decorations (flowers, leaves,

buds). The diversity of solar symbols and abstract shapes such as the rosette, squares, triangles, vortex, solar wheel, rhombus, crossed circle, etc., are prevalent in the decorative composition of old towels in the area of Moldavia. Many of towels have tasselled ends with red, blue, yellow, silver, white or green beads. Towels used as a scarf are a specific item, related to folk costume accessories, inherited from the time of the Gaeto-Dacians.

There is a rather high proportion of **embroidered towels**. The innovative spirit and the skill of embroidery artisans enable them to use, simplify, stylise and process motif achieving classical morphological perfection. The chief, most widespread element of embroidery compositions is the tree of life, rendered according to the Oriental influence surrounded by stylised birds (cuckoos, roosters, peacocks, pigeons, etc.).

Thanks to their shape and size, to the variety of display systems (placed on walls, at the door, near windows, icons or mirrors) within the broader collection of interior decorative items, and their decorative and chromatic composition - towels create exquisite artistic effects, highlighted against the white background of the fabric.

Pillowcases and handkerchiefs feature embroidered ornaments: star or rosette, fern, clover, dianthus, vines, which all symbolise luck and the joy of life. All traditional seams are made in a single cross (the well-known Romanian point) or the double cross.

Solar symbols are frequently associated with elements of the tree of life, a consequence of ancient links with the Mediterranean civilisation. Contemporary folk artisans regularly use textile fabrics, to craft either a towel or pillowcase, have also adopted the sun as a motif, thus extending its life. This motif is featured on carpets, tablecloths, covers. Rugs often display an interesting sequence of trees of life and feminine silhouettes in dresses with traditional cuts. The presence of horses and horsemen (on towels) is related to an visual representation fundamental to the Dacians, the “*Thracian knight of the Danube*”. One may also notice an invasion of Oltenian patterns used on carpets: roses, tulips, carnations, etc.

Tablecloths feature complex decors, the main motifs being birds, branches with flowers or potted flowers as a variant of the tree of life. The repetition of embroidery on tablecloths creates a relationship of complicity and inclusion. Repetitions are sometimes gradual, with the same motif being rendered in simple or complex shapes and hues.

The colours once used by the ancestors on the territory of ancient Dacia, are used to this day

in rural communities. They are vegetable colours, in particular:

- **Red**: symbol of blood, sun, fire, love and joy of life; it is made from sweet apple peel, leaves and flowers of sweet apple, madder, marjoram flowers, peony flowers, rose hip shell;
- **Blue**: represents the sky, health, vitality; it is obtained from the flowers of violets and woadwaxen, and hawthorn root;
- **Green**: symbolises the renewal of nature, freshness, fertility, hope; it is made from raw springtime rye, mint leaves, walnut leaves, alder bark, wild apple tree bark and buds, sunflower, parsley, etc.;
- **Yellow**: stands for light, youth, happiness, harvest, hospitality; it can be obtained from sea buckthorn fruit, onion peel, privet shell, haggberry shell, chamomile and linden flowers;
- **Violet**: represents self-control, patience, trust in justice; it is obtained from ripened cranberry and elder fruit, bitter black cherry, well ripened hybrid black grapes;
- **Brown**: is obtained from quince leaves, the bark of birch, linden or oak trees, hard walnut shells, tobacco leaves;
- **Ochre**: may be obtained from the flowers of lavender, lilac branches, horseradish leaves, hop stems, marigold flowers, chestnut bark, soybean strains.
- **Black**: is obtained from peppermint, alder and nettle.

Vegetable colours are prepared based on recipes handed down from generation to generation, involving a large variety of processes and techniques. It is important to note that plans offered a large variety of hues, depending on when they were harvested, the drying time or the ways in which they were mixed.

CONCLUSIONS

The life experience accumulated by successive generations has been passed on using a system of plastic signs. This compels us to state that these symbolic ornaments also serve as records that encapsulate an impressive aesthetic and human experience.

The ceremonial spiritual sphere has provided a strong impetus to preserve ancient heritage. With their many implications in the folklore of family customs, the napkin, handkerchief or shawl have substituted, on a concrete level, the bridge, which holds spiritual meanings and serves in purification rituals. All worldly and spiritual gifts collected in the interplay of ages sanctify the moments of silence

when one contemplates joys of life. The shawls, towels, carpets, rugs and covers, viewed in the continuity of human dwellings, provide today poignant glimpses into the simple biography of the Romanian peasant.

Folk ornamentation, Tancred Bănățeanu argued, “*expresses a great wealth of feelings and an exquisite artistic sense of the Romanian people, resulting from the unmediated link that exists between art and life*”.

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