

ROMANIAN FOLK SYMBOLS IN CONTEMPORARY FASHION DESIGN

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Abstract. For some good years, there have been frequent returns to ethnic motifs in design, seen as a necessity in terms of inspiration, but also as a cultural reference present within the fashion system. Through this return to the ethnic motives and elements, the importance of the cultural and social archetypes, developed during an important historical duration, archetypes that have kept their meaning and essence until today, persists. Ethnic motifs have a special importance as a symbol and as an archetype in contemporary fashion.

The effect of symbols on the transfer of meaning can be clearly seen when examining textile products and clothes. These cultural meanings are expressed in fashion and textile, in points such as color, motif and weaving. At this point, it is stated that some symbols, such as colors or the qualities represented by some birds and animals, do not need to be explained because people react to symbols in a universal context and instinctively. The human mind is equipped to think and communicate with symbols, and the language of symbols and especially archetypes transcends time and space.

Fashion attracts attention as an important area in the ability of nations to transfer folk symbols within their own culture and to spread them to other cultures, or at least to create a sense of familiarity. In this study, the use and importance of Romanian folk symbols in contemporary fashion designs are emphasized.

Keywords: *Art, fashion design, color, ethnic motifs, folklore, Romanian folklore.*

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1. Introduction

Since its creation, human beings have used various ways to convey their thoughts to others and express themselves. In these ways, form, color and fictional expression have a great place. The concept of symbol emerges as an expression of this narrative.

In the historical process, symbolic expressions show similar qualities in certain periods and local people due to many factors such as cultural interaction, religion, tradition, belief, customs, nature data, human psychology (Alp, 2009).

As Warner (1961) states, symbols that explain emotions and values and activate them are like genetic codes of societies. These codes are passed on to the next generation by the society. It is shaped over time according to need. Symbols play a major role in the socialization process of the individual, giving a sense of belonging to the individual. National cultural symbols reflect the daily lives, historical events, beliefs, traditions and artistic understanding of nations. National symbols mediate individuals' sense of belonging to the society they live in and contribute to the creation of collective feeling.

The most prominent image of the sign, the symbols that are constantly renewed, transformed and even developed from the first ages to the present day, show diversity as

the expression of people's feelings. Although the symbols in the material and spiritual fields produced by human beings were for limited situations in the past, they have become indispensable forms of expression for the whole of life today.

The created symbols have shown themselves in every field of art in prehistoric times and today. Especially in the formation and development of folk culture, the symbolization of material and spiritual cultures or their meaning with symbols has become widespread. In this respect, symbols have been processed on material cultural products, both for ornamental purposes and by building their backgrounds. The utensils they use, jewelry, clothes, covers, tents, harnesses, tools and equipment, structures, flags, sculptures, and symbols such as pictures are many and varied.

According to Gibson (2013), as psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung have stated, the human mind is equipped to think and communicate with symbols, and the language of symbols and especially archetypes transcends time and space. The symbolism that culture has developed over time is an example of visual storytelling. As a means of conveying folklore, cultural beliefs, history, politics, status, kinship and other messages, textile conveys a culturally understood visual language. This type of symbolic communication is part of a larger piece of creative symbolism through abstraction, such as painting and poetry, as well as part of cultural symbolic communication specific to textiles.

Cultural symbols have a defining and conceptualizing feature in conveying the values and common meanings of a society. This feature gives strength to cultural symbols. Cultural symbols are very effective in combining parts of conceptual knowledge and taking place in human memory. In the absence of cultural symbols, a concept may be misunderstood or interpreted in different ways, which poses a threat to the continuity of culture and its transfer to future generations (Lizardo, 2016).

In this context, it is extremely important to transfer from generation to generation the symbols, which are the most basic elements of culture, and the hidden meanings underlying the visible with its discursive infrastructure in the cultural structure.

Designers encode culture semiotically through the selection and matching of materials, colors, patterns, etc. *Decoding* is the viewers' perception of the clothing product and then completes the process of providing information. While the fabric, color and structure of the garment belong to both the environmental communication form and the signifier in the symbol, it refers to the conceptual content shown, abstract thought and expression of emotions, etc. (Zou & Joneurairatana, 2020; Wi & Choy, 2008).

It is possible to encounter the symbolic power of fashion throughout history. Fashion's need for symbolic meanings is driving designers to seek different expressions day by day due to socio-cultural and marketing-sales functions apart from creativity. In this sense, fashion design, which serves as an important communication tool, appears as an area where symbols are frequently used. By combining the meanings represented by symbols with design elements, designers create products to create the desired emotion in the audience and the consumer. In this way, it is predicted that designers and brands will create strong emotions on consumers and provide positive effects on both brand loyalty and purchasing behavior, thanks to the integration of the meanings of symbols in the social memory with the symbolic language of fashion (Chen, 2016; Berthon *et al.*, 2009: 45-66; Jelinek, 2018: 294-307).

As stated in Yixuan (2018), art and culture are more diversified today. It is extremely important in fashion design to make reasonable use of our traditional cultural folk symbols and to promote the heritage of the national spirit.

Folk symbols, which are an important part of traditional culture, affect the thoughts and behaviors of every generation. Therefore, the application of folk symbols in fashion design can reflect the relationship between traditional and modern.

This paper is focused on the fashion design world and showcase the Romanian ethnic costumes that was an important source of inspiration for classic and contemporary international fashion houses.

It is worth to mention that this paper will only cover international fashion designers and not Romanian designers that made collections inspired by Romanian folk clothing, this topic could be the subject of another research paper.

We can think that contemporary fashion designers aim to reach an ideal of beauty by using rich Romanian folk symbols, reflecting elements such as strength, sensitivity, etc., which express different concepts in their collections, to their designs through form, color, pattern, and by addressing these classical decorative motifs and symbols in fashion, the characteristic of which is constantly changing. At this point, we can say that Romania, which has a deep-rooted history and is located in a very rich region, is a unique and deep resource for the fashion field and fashion designers.

So, every nation has a unique and rich cultural history of folk symbols that is a valuable source of inspiration. How this resource is applied to fashion design and thus to product design is discussed in this study.

At the same time, in this study, the reflections of Romanian folk symbols on contemporary fashion design, their applications as colors, silhouettes, patterns and the meanings represented by these elements are conveyed by associating them with clothes.

2. Traditional Romanian clothing. History and tradition

The Romanian folk costume as well as the whole folk art (architecture, wooden carvings, ceramics, etc.) was born and lasted on the territory of our country since ancient times.

Testimonies about the origin of the Romanian folk costume/clothing can be seen on Trajan's Column and on the monument from Adamclisi (Mitrovici, 2016). The long and wide cut of the traditional shirt, the wearing of *itars** for men and wide skirts for women, the thick sums have remained the same today. By discovering the clay figurines, from Cârna-Craiova, from the Bronze Age, elements corresponding to the Romanian costume were found in clothing. Also, the numerous archeological evidences, dating from the Bronze Age, attest to ornaments such as necklaces worn around the neck, but also the seams on the clothes, the statuettes having drawn the cut of the garments such as the shirt, the *catrința*†.

Although the main elements of the Romanian folk costume have not changed much from the point of view of tailoring, instead when it comes to ornamentation by embroidery, the patterns have diversified over time, there are currently different styles for the regions from our country.

* long, tight and wrinkled peasant trousers on the leg, made of a cotton or wool fabric, specific to the Romanian folk costume.

† item of clothing from the national dress of Romanian women, which serves as a skirt or apron and which consists of a rectangular piece of fabric often adorned with beads, sequins, etc.



Figure 1. Clay figurine from Cârna-Craiova – Bronze Age; source of image: <https://muzeulolteniei.ro/epoca-bronzului-cultura-carna-si-verbicioara/>

Usually by the Romanian folk costume is meant the clothing of the peasants from the villages, formed within a small community, having the same material and tailoring patterns, keeping their originality, with a slow pace of change, without direct fashion intervention, with an ethnicity and expressiveness of own manifestation.

The Romanian folk costume (Liliana, 2014) finds its roots in the Dacian clothing and is similar to that of the peoples of the Balkan Peninsula, of course with the differences that consist of decorative and colourful details. Throughout history, the structure and evolution of the Romanian folk costume has kept its essential characteristics unaltered.

Starting from artistic achievements made with raw materials produced in the households of the peasants, the Romanian folk costume has evolved over the centuries, proving a rich mastery of the Romanian peasant, both in decorating fabrics and embroidery and in obtaining vegetable colours. The folk costume is differentiated according to the season, festive occasions, age and sex, adapting to the specific occupations of each area.

The main element in the ornamentation of the Romanian costume consists in the way of decoration, both as placement and composition of the motifs, they being placed in certain spaces. In general, the ornamentation of the costumes is geometric, stylizing the forms of natural inspiration, such as: birds, flowers, animals. A special place is represented by the symbol of the cross adorned and stylized in many forms, but also of other religious symbols: fish, Byzantine cross, ladder of life, vine, ear of wheat, grapes, peacock, etc. The embroideries that adorn the objects of popular dress contribute to the preservation of the unity of the port. They were created by the peasant who was inspired by the environment, by everyday life. Essential was the way the ornament was arranged on the white of the canvas, thus providing a balance between the different ornamental fields, a good aesthetic taste.

Specific to the Romanian costume is the chromatic element, characterized by sobriety and balance in the use of colours, in their harmonious combination, resulting in obtaining coloristic effects of good taste and artistic refinement. The basic colours are: black, red, dark brown, blue, green and purple. The chromatics of the Romanian folk costume are characterized by harmony and freshness, the colours being combined aesthetically. The colours obtained by vegetable dyeing were warm, non-contrasting.

With the advent of industrial dyes, the colours began to be stronger, more contrasting. The basic stitches that have been and are used throughout the country are the needle stitch, the needle stitch, the stitch, the cross stitch, the stitch.

It is interesting that fact that, at the beginning, it was not acceptable to copy ornamental motifs from another person's costume or to alienate them from community traditions. Each girl had to create her own holiday costume, leaving the imprint of local traditions and her aesthetic vision. The costume must correspond to the man's nature, to harmonize with his outfit, with the color of his eyes and hair, his age and his place in society. Each suit had a unique and unrepeatable value. For the period of the past we hardly find two identical costumes, each having one or a few costumes, which differed from each other in part in design and color, proportions.

Over time, the main distinctive elements of the Romanian folk costume have remained the shirt (the basic piece), worn by both men and women (under traditional name *ie*), *ițari*, traditional tights / pants (specific to the men's folk costume) and *fota* or *catrința* (a skirt, present in the traditional dress of women). Other Romanian garments also include *sarica*[‡], but also the breastplate, made of animal skin, or the hat influenced by the Dacian dress - all these being specific to the cold season.

The Romanian folk costume, as general features, has the same resemblance throughout the country, having of course differences in details, with changes in shape, cut or just the way of using the hairstyle and ornaments. Its essential feature is the unity in variety, the different costumes being characteristic of the respective regions and areas.

Starting from the raw materials produced in the peasants' households, the Romanian folk costume proved and confirmed the mastery of the Romanian peasant, in embroidering and decorating the fabrics, but also in obtaining the vegetal colours. With patience, skill and artistic sense, women have created clothes that keep their spectacularity and today, the Romanian folk is a model of inspiration for great fashion designers, the clothing being worn by international personalities, working in various fields.



Figure 2. Old image with *ițari* (pants from Romanian folk costume); source of image: <http://www.culturaneamt.ro/stiati-ca-15/>

[‡] Long, bumpy peasant coat on the outside, woven of thick woolen threads, worn by mountain people.



Figure 3. Different images of fota or catrința (traditional Romanian woman skirt); source of image: <https://dibavictoria.wordpress.com/2013/01/30/catrinta/>

According to specialists, the traditional Romanian folk costume has gone through different stages throughout history.

- In a first stage, the traditional clothes knew a differentiation from those of the neighbouring peoples, creating, at the same time, different styles and motifs for the areas of the country, but also chromatics / models for age, social categories, etc.
- In the second stage, which took place in full economic and industrial development, industrial materials replaced household textiles. At the same time, pieces with an urban influence appeared: for example, the white *marama*[§] was replaced by a *naframa* (head scarf).
- In the third stage, the folk costume began to be gradually replaced by "urban" clothes and to be no longer worn regularly, for household chores.

Today, the folk costume is used to capitalize on artistic traditions, but also at local events or holidays in regions where ancient customs and traditions are preserved.



Figure 4. Image of a *marama* (head scarf made of fine fibres), Rectangular piece with decoration placed at the ends in wide registers. The decorative motifs are geometric in the form of lines; floral, leafy tulip, anthropomorphic, "Adam and Eve". Chromatics: yellowish background, white decor; source of image: <http://clasate.cimec.ro/detaliu.asp?k=94170053C37E4C06A1553894A2692C7B>

[§] Veil of very thin cloth, of cotton or very thin melted linen (embroidered), with which the women of the country embellish themselves, leaving their heads to hang on their backs, close to the ground.

„La Blouse Roumaine“ by Henry Matisse

The famous painting "La Blouse Roumaine", which depicts a young woman wearing pride, entered posterity as the first painting that made the "Romanian blouse" famous. The plastic artist Henri Matisse created numerous variants, both in color and in black and white, where the woman is represented in different poses, thinking, resting, sitting reclining on an armchair, on various chromatic backgrounds.

It was April 1940, when the most important colorist of the twentieth century, Henri Matisse, gave the final touch to a painting that would become the symbol of a universal artistic movement. The painting became extremely well-known to Romanians with the creation of the *La Blouse Roumaine* movement, which promotes the Romanian brand as a national brand and which managed to declare June 24 as the Universal Day of Ia**, in the day that is celebrated an old Dacian holyday named *Sinziene*††.



Figure 5. 1st image represents Henry Matisse „La Blouse Roumaine”, 2nd image represent a contemporary interpretation of the masterpiece, 1981 fashion collection by Yves Saint Laurent named „La Blousse Roumaine”; source of image: <https://junimearomana.com/event/la-blouse-roumaine/?lang=fr>

** ia is a blouse, a component of the traditional Romanian costume, worn by women. It is made of white cotton, linen or borangic fabric [1]. It is adorned with embroideries in Romanian folk motifs, especially on the sleeves, on the chest and on the neck. Some are also adorned with beads or sequins. In Romanian communities around the world, the universal day of iia is celebrated on June 24 (in Sânziene or Drăgaica).

†† there are, in Romanian mythology, good fairies from the class of ieles, but who, when their holiday is not respected, become smiling with Pentecost, which are bad fairies. Sometimes Sânzienele are synonymous with Drăgaicele, manifesting themselves, according to superstition, on the day of St. John the Baptist - June 24.

Romanian folk symbols in contemporary fashion design

In recent years, there have been frequent returns to ethnic motifs, seen as a necessity in terms of inspiration, but also as a cultural reference present within the fashion system.

Through this return to ethnic motives and elements, the importance of cultural and social archetypes persists, developed over an important historical period, archetypes that have kept their meaning and essence until today. Ethnic motifs have a special importance as a symbol and as an archetype in contemporary fashion.

Although contemporary designers work in accordance with a vision, using a wide range of styles and using current technological methods, they cyclically return to traditional techniques and ethnic folk motifs, which they transform and resize, thus integrating them into the contemporary space.

Following the European trends, we can observe, lately, the traditional Romanian costume present as a source of inspiration in the collections of international designers, as well as local ones. They created outfits with a creative and decorative design and unique details, starting from the variety of clothing, as well as the complexity of the decorative elements of the Romanian folk costume.

The French designer, **Philippe Guilet**, who made contact with the traditional Romanian dress, paid homage to the country through the "Prejudice 100% Ro" collection (2011). The main elements of the collection were the traditional hats, reinterpreted with modern elements and inspired by the costumes of the horsemen. His interest in Romanian traditions and crafts was aroused by a traditional mask. Many months of research followed, discussions with various craftsmen and a lot of dedication, all for organizing the presentation and designing the garments. Thus, was born the largest 100% Romanian haute couture project. The collection included 31 outfits inspired by Romanian traditions, by the life experiences of the designer in Romania, as well as by the Romanian specifics.

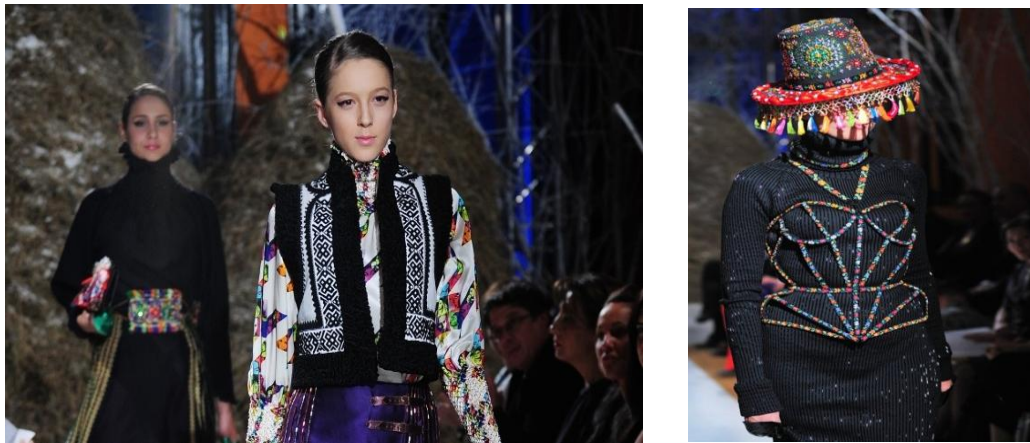


Figure 6. Image from Philippe Guilet runway, 10 November 2011; source of image: <https://epochtimes-romania.com/foto/colectia-100-ro-a-designerului-francez-philippe-guilet--175>

Joseph Altuzarra, the French designer who owns the American brand Altuzarra, was inspired by the Romanian costume for the Resort 2015 collection. The collection includes colorful outfits, blouses that resemble Romanian ia and pencil skirts with ethno prints.



Figure 7. Joseph Altuzarra, Resort 2015 collection; source of image:
<https://www.vogue.com/slideshow/altuzarra-resort-2015-runway>

The American brand **Anthropologie** has created an entire collection for autumn/winter 2011, inspired by the folk costume from Maramureş. This collection has had a major impact in the world, being distributed in America, England, Canada and online in over 30 countries.



Figure 8. Anthropologie, AW 2011 collection; source of image:
<http://artboom.info/design/anthropologie-romanian-folk-inspired-collection.html>

Back in time, designer **Yves Saint Laurent** created an entire collection for autumn/winter 1999/2000 inspired by Romanian folk clothes, more exactly from Maramureş^{††} area. The fashion show exudes Romanian spirit, and the models' hairstyles were made to resemble the way the girls from the country wore their hair adornment.

^{††} Maramureş is a geographical and ethno-cultural region located on the territory of Romania and Ukraine, made up of the Maramureş Depression, located on the upper course of the Tisa Valley, and the slopes of the surrounding mountains: Oaşului, Gutâi, Țibleş and Rodnei mountains to the west and south, and Maramureş Mountains to the east and north.

Yves Saint Laurent also created an entire collection inspired by *La Blouse Roumaine*, Matisse's masterpiece, in autumn/winter 1981 collection.



Figure 9. Annette Stay in *La blouse Roumaine* by Yves Saint Laurent, inspired by Henri Matisse's painting, 1981. Photo: Denis Piel / © Condé Nast Archive / Corbis; source of image: <https://lablouseroumaine.io/yves-saint-laurent-la-blouse-roumaine/>



Figure 10. Paris, France, July 15, 1999. Yves Saint Laurent and Laetitia Casta, the bride of the autumn-winter haute couture collection 1999 -2000. Photo – Daniel SIMON / Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images; source of image: <https://lablouseroumaine.io/yves-saint-laurent-la-blouse-roumaine/>

For the spring-summer 2012 collection, **Tom Ford** found sources of inspiration in Spain, South America, but also in Romania, more precisely, in the Făgăraș^{§§} area.



Figure 11. Tom Ford, SS 2012 collection; source of image:

<http://www.fulltimeford.com/2012/01/17/the-official-lookbook-tom-ford-springsummer-2012-womenswear-collection-images-hq/>

Italian designer **Valentino** presented on his catwalks pieces with inspiration in Romanian folk clothes in 2015.



Figure 12. Valentino, AW 2015 collection; source of image: <https://www.iutta.ro/blog/2018/03/09/10-designeri-internationali-care-s-au-inspirat-din-portul-romanesc/>

^{§§} Făgăraș (Hungarian: Fogarasch, German: Fogarasch) is a municipality in Brașov County, Transylvania, Romania. Before the Union of Transylvania with Romania, the city was the administrative center of Făgăraș County, and between 1920 and 1950 it was the residence of Făgăraș County. At the exit from Făgăraș to Brașov is the geographical center of Romania.

Actress Kate Moss was seen dressed in a Romanian-inspired piece from the “La Blouse Roumaine” collection, by French designer **Isabel Marant**. The same thing happened with actresses Anne Hathaway and Katie Holmes.



Figure 13. Isabel Marant; source of image: <https://www.iutta.ro/blog/2018/03/09/10-designeri-internationali-care-s-au-inspirat-din-portul-romanesc/>

Romanian fur coat (cojoc^{***}) was „almost stolen” by **Dior** fashion house and appeared in their 2017 collection.



Figure 14. Romanian traditional coat (cojoc); source of image: <https://timponline.ro/cojoace-care-ajungeau-la-pretul-unei-vaci-purtate-de-cei-mai-bogati-dintre-bistriteni-expuse-la-muzeu/>

^{***} The fur coat is a type of traditional Romanian winter coat. It is made of sheepskin, with wool pointed inwards, and often decorated with embroidery on the outside.



Figure 15. Dior AW 2017; source of image: <https://www.iutta.ro/blog/2018/03/09/10-designeri-internationali-care-s-au-inspirat-din-portul-romanesc/>

Jean Paul Gautier included in his autumn/winter 2006 collection elements of traditional Romanian inspiration.



Figure 16. Jean Paul Gautier, AW 2006; source of image: <https://anothercoolro.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/oscar.jpg>

Oscar de la Renta is another famous designer, well known for his haute-couture creations, that inspired his Spring/Summer 2008 fashion show from Romanian ethnic costumes. The entire collection was a great success, the pieces were unique and rich in motives, with very high attention to each detail.



Figure 17. Oscar de la Renta, AW 2008; source of image: <https://anothercoolro.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/oscar.jpg>

Regarding one of her creations, American designer **Tory Burch** had some misunderstandings involving legal credits. Inspired almost 100% by one traditional Romanian coat, the designer she claimed that her inspiration was African culture, but later changed her mind.



Figure 18. 1st image represents Romanian traditional coat and 2nd image represents Tory Burch's coat; source of image: <https://www.iutta.ro/blog/2018/03/09/10-designeri-internationali-care-s-au-inspirat-din-portul-romanesc/>

3. Conclusion

Culture, which is expressed as the common mind of a society, carries out its presentation and transfer with cultural symbols. Each culture provides the transfer and creation of different experiences and perceptions through its own symbols. At this point, cultural symbols form the basis of meaning by transferring the forms of feeling, thinking,

believing, etc. to individuals. In other words, cultural symbols play an important role in a society's relations both among its members and with other societies.

Traditional cultural symbols are an indispensable part of the Romanian folk culture system. Therefore, the use of Romanian folk symbols in fashion design serves as an important bridge between the past and the future.

Today, more and more traditional cultural folk symbols are used in clothing, all with rich Romanian features, such as clothing patterns and colors, clothing accessories. All these are successful examples of the integration of traditional culture and modern culture.

It is quite an important step for fashion designers to successfully adapt Romanian folk symbols to present this rich culture and help them use clothing to meet the aesthetic needs of the audience.

At the same time, the interest of international fashion designers in the rich Romanian folk symbols and the collections they will prepare inspired by them will be a great way to promote Romanian folk art and symbols.

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