

## Aspects of Color Symbolism in Romanian Folk Costume

Özlem KAYA <sup>1</sup>, Laura Sinziana CUCIUC ROMANESCU <sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** *Traditional/folk costume represents one of the most important forms of culture of a nation, on the basis of which numerous researches have been carried out: the historical genesis and the main stages of evolution, the contemporary forms and the area of spread, its originality in relation to the costumes of other nations, its contribution in the genesis process.*

*Over time, clothing acquires social significance, becoming a way to know rank and hierarchy in human society. Materials, colors, cut, ornamentation become elements of the costume through which society interprets the belonging of the wearer. At the same time, clothes convey emotions and feelings.*

*Understanding the social message conveyed by the folk costume involves a careful reading of all its component elements (shapes, colors, accessories, etc.). The folk costume also communicates data of a national character, each nation flying its traditional costume, like the national flag, both having the same symbolic value from a social and historical point of view.*

*The purpose of this paper is to highlight some aspects of the color symbolism in Romanian Folk Costume, decrypting the various meanings of color in Romanian ethnographic areas.*

**Keywords:** *color symbolism; symbolism; folk costume; Romanian folk costume;*

### Introduction

Born from the need to protect the body from the elements, popular clothing, developing together with the forms of social life, manifests itself as one of the basic elements of material culture. Its knowledge allows the understanding of the people's own characteristics and contributes essentially to the definition of ethnic specificity. Varying from one region to another depending on the ethnic character, the historical evolution of the people, depending on traditions, socio-economic, geographical, climatic conditions, perfecting its structure and developing from one era to another more and more the side artistically, the components of Romanian folk clothing are among the major manifestations of popular artistic creation. The folk costume, as well as other phenomena and processes of material and spiritual culture - architecture, fabrics, ceramics, epic and musical folklore, customs, reflecting the traditional way of life of the people, shows through its strong structural unity based on continuity and creative development of its valuable traditions, its very continuity.

The unity of Romanian folk art does not exclude a great diversity of regional and zonal forms, conditioned by the different unfolding of political circumstances and the stages of economic development of the provinces. Different forms and ways to build, to decorate the costume, to play, to celebrate important events in the life of man and communities, divisions specific to the Middle Ages have been preserved to this day in different forms, as evidenced by the numerous ethnographic areas within Romania.

The folk costume is entirely the creation of those who wore it, made on the basis of tradition and the creative spirit of the communities. Knowing this field as a defining mark of

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<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Fine Arts, Uşak University, Turkey, [ozlem.kaya@usak.edu.tr](mailto:ozlem.kaya@usak.edu.tr).

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Arts, Ovidius University of Constanta, [romanescusinziana@gmail.com](mailto:romanescusinziana@gmail.com).

Romanians becomes a necessity in the conditions of globalization, of the changes taking place on an international level, of affirming our contribution to the civilization and culture specific to the European family of which we are a part (Nanu, Titieni, Nedelcu, Nedelcu, & Sarbu, 2014)<sup>3</sup>.

Speaking of folk clothing of a people, implicitly the Romanian popular clothing, we mean the clothing of the peasants in the villages, formed within a small community, having the same material and tailoring patterns, keeping their originality, with a slow pace of change, without the direct intervention of fashion, with an ethnicity and expressiveness of its own manifestation.

## 1. Short History and Origins of Romanian Folk Costume

The Romanian folk costume finds its roots in the clothing of our Thracian, Getae and Dacian ancestors and resembles that of the peoples of the Balkan Peninsula, of course with the differences consisting in decorative details and color. Throughout history, the structure and evolution of the Romanian folk costume has kept its essential characteristics unchanged.

Also, the numerous archaeological evidences, dating from the Bronze Age, attest ornaments such as salves worn around the neck, but also to the seams on the clothes, the statuettes having drawn the cut of the clothing pieces such as the shirt, the coat or the opreg with long tassels.

Although the main elements of the Romanian folk costume have not changed much in terms of cut, instead when it comes to embroidery ornamentation, the designs have diversified over time, with different styles currently existing for the regions from our country.

A real "identity card" for the inhabitants of different geographical areas of Romania, the traditional folk costume was created after a long process of creation. Countless archaeological remains, historical, linguistic and oenographic documents testify to the continuity, throughout the centuries, of the forms of culture and civilization of the Romanians and their ancestors in the Carpatho-Danubian-Pontic area. The oldest testimonies about the costume date back to the Neolithic period and the Bronze Age. The figurines discovered in the necropolis of Cârna<sup>4</sup>, Oltenia and the geometric designs on the body of some clay idols - Venus from Craiova - date from this period. These clay statuettes, discovered in the cremation necropolis of the resort of Cârna in the south of the Oltenia region, depicted women dressed in shirts, catrines and skirts with some ornamental details. Head coverings, ritual masks and some garment details we can find also in neolithic figurines belonging to the Gumelnita, Cucuteni Vădastra and Vinca – Turdaş culture<sup>5</sup>.

The model of the curled neck appears on Trajan's Column<sup>6</sup>, but also on Neolithic statuettes, then systematically on other Dacian and Illyrian signs. Also, an important similarity can be observed between the Dacian costume, either male or female, and the Illyrian one. After all, it is a common space, where the same language was spoken and there were also Romanian cultural elements.

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<sup>3</sup> Nanu, A., Titieni, A., Nedelcu, M., Nedelcu, F., & Sarbu, C. 2014. *The Romanian Folk Costume as a Component of the Country Brand. Use of Modern Methods of Education Based on Virtual Reality*. Retrieved May 16, 2024, from <https://library.iated.org/view/nanu2014rom>.

<sup>4</sup> Vladimir Dumitrescu. 1961. *Necropola de incineratie din epoca bronzului de la Cârna*. Bucureşti: Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Române, p. 263.

<sup>5</sup> Al. Tzigara-Samurcaş. 1925. *L'art du peuple roumain*. Geneva: Musée Rath Publishingy House, p. 30.

<sup>6</sup> Florea Bobu Florescu. 1956. *Caiete de artă populară. Portul popular din Moldova de Nord*. Bucureşti: Editura de Stat pentru Literatură și Artă, p. 8.



Fig. 1. *Neolithic antropomorph figurine from Cârna-Craiova*; source of image: Maria Bătcă. 2006. *Albumul de artă populară. Costumul popular românesc...*<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Romanian Folk Costume. Aspects of Color Symbolism

Throughout the Romanian ethnic territory, the same raw materials are used: plant fibers such as hemp, flax, cotton and animal fibers such as wool and borage. The same old tailoring system is also used - cutting into straight sheets, and traditional archaic decorative embroidery processes such as warp stitching, warp stitching and backstitching. All this, together with the ornamental motifs used, which again have a main common background, ensured the morphological and decorative unity of the Romanian folk costume.

Romanian textiles in general and the folk costume in particular, are characterized by the sobriety of the coloring, by the freshness and harmony of the colors used. In the past, coloring was mainly done with the help of vegetable oils, with which warm, deep and faded tones were obtained, making the old costume pieces charming.

The basic colors of the Romanian folk costume, apart from the white background, are red and black, making up an imperial chromatic trinity of great nobility and distinction. To these are added accents of yellow, green, blue and purple, just enough to diversify the harmony of the three major colors.

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<sup>7</sup> Maria Bătcă. 2006. *Albumul de artă populară. Costumul popular românesc*. București: Editura Centrului Național pentru Conservarea și Promovarea Culturii Tradiționale, p. 7.

Even when more vivid tones are used, as in the case of the costumes from Oltenia and Banat, the subtle harmonization of shades leads to highly refined color combinations. Along with the spread of cotton, arnica and wool in the village world, more vivid colors appeared in Romanian sewing, but they were melted into the fundamental harmony of Romanian chromatics.

The special quality of Romanian chromaticism and the art of coloring in Romanian folk<sup>8</sup>, the restraint and sobriety found in the use of colors, make us notice that one of the defining elements of the Romanian national specificity is precisely the sense for color<sup>9</sup>.

Starting from artistic achievements made with raw materials produced in peasant households, Romanian folk clothing has evolved over the centuries, proving a rich mastery of the Romanian peasant, both in decorating fabrics and embroideries, as well as in obtaining vegetable colors. The popular port is differentiated according to the season, festive occasions, age and gender, adapting to the occupations specific to each area.

## 2.1. Ornaments and color

The chromatic symbolism of Romanian folk clothing is closely related to the ornamentation and decorative motifs found on the garments.

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. Specific to the Romanian costume is the chromatic element, characterized by sobriety and balance in the use of colors, in their combination in a harmonious way, resulting in obtaining the color effects of good taste and artistic refinement. The basic colors are: black, red, dark brown, blue, green and purple.

The geometric decorative motifs used are of prehistoric origin and are related either to the fecundity and fertility cult, or to the solar cult. Many of them have a universal circulation: the rhombus, the circle, the meander, the zigzag line, the triangle, the star, the ram's mane. The ancient geometric motifs, components of a graphic alphabet, become signs, symbols whose magical and religious significance has been lost, remaining for us nothing more than the plastic elements of some compositions within which they are combined in infinitely varied ways<sup>10</sup>.

„The zig-zags and meanders of an ancestral script were sewn, with amici thread, of gold, silver and silk, by the industrious hands of the peasant, who opened his eyes to the world in the cradle carved with the sign of the sun, made the first steps on the decorated porch of the house, read the thrill of love in the notches of the spinning fork, wove rows of trees of life on the dowry barks, painstakingly sewed the stars of the sky on the children's wedding shirts and carefully prepared the "beds" for the last way, of meeting the ancestors.”<sup>11</sup>

Sometimes we find the geometric motifs associated on the same piece, with other categories of ornaments, such as: symbolic-religious (crosses, presques, pristornica), zoomorphic (ram's manes, deer), avimorphic (birds), skeomorphic (forks, hooks,), anthropomorphic (eyes or eyes with eyebrows), stylized plant motifs (flowers, leaves, branches, fruits).

The embroideries that adorn popular wear items contribute to preserving the unity of the wear. They were created by peasants inspired by the environment, from everyday life. Essential

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<sup>8</sup> S. Fl. Marian & Tudor Pamfile & Mihai Lupescu. 2019. *Cromatică poporului român*. București: Editura Saeculum, p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> Maria Bătcă, *op.cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

was the way in which the ornament was arranged on the white of the canvas, thus providing a balance between the different ornamental fields, a good aesthetic taste, people that inhabitate our area before bronze age being focused on a matriarchal, theocratic, peaceful, loving and art-creating society (we talk here about the cultural entity known as Old Europe, 6500-3500 BC)<sup>12</sup>.

In the sewn signs of the Romanian ia were imprinted the desires, wishes and life of the one who gave birth to her. Thus, the motifs inspired by nature (flowers, foliage, trees, branches, vines, clover), stars (the sun, moon or stars), crafts (the wheel, the fish, the ear of corn), customs (the arch, the cross, the hourglass) were represented. or the stages of life (birth, wedding), through geometric shapes meant to tell the story of creation: rhombuses, circles, spirals, etc.

The colors of the popular Romanian port are characterized by harmony and freshness, the colors being combined in an aesthetic way. The colors obtained by vegetable dyeing were warm, non-contrasting. With the advent of industrial dyes, the colors began to be stronger, more contrasting. The basic stitches that have been used and are used throughout the country are the stitch behind the needle, the stitch before the needle, the twill, the cross stitch, the single thread stitch. Each ethnographic area has specific points, apart from the basic points, such as: the hammers in Sibiu, the branelles and bradus in Transylvania, Argeş, Vlaşca, the nemtõe in Banat and Maramureş, the sharp point in Hunedoara, the butucul of Buzău, the ladder point on back from Olt.

As I have mentioned before, the basic colors used to decorate the traditional port are red and black, enriched with gold or silver thread. Over time, other colors were added, reaching harmonious compositions. To highlight the ornamental motifs, folk artists resorted to tones of different values of the same color: dark red, light red, grass green (light), royal green (dark), dark blue, yellow albei (very light), pear yellow (light), reddish yellow, orange yellow, dark yellow, etc.

## **2.2. Main colors and their symbols**

### *2.2.1. Black*

In the old days, embroidery sewn with black, dark blue or brown thread was worn by elderly women with a certain social status, as a symbol of sobriety, wisdom and decency. This type of embroidery was specific to those sewn from the Banat area, where there is a predilection for sober colors: brown, burgundy, black, dark green. However, over time, the motifs embroidered with black began to be present in the clothing of younger women, sometimes in combination with red, yellow or orange.

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<sup>12</sup> Marija Gimbutas. 1989. *Civilizație și Cultură*. Bucureşti: Editura Meridiane, pp. 48-49.





Fig. 2. *Woman and man folk costume from South of Banat, Almăj area.*  
Source of image: [http://www.orizonturicurale.ro/ro\\_studii\\_Iosif-Mihailo-1.html](http://www.orizonturicurale.ro/ro_studii_Iosif-Mihailo-1.html).

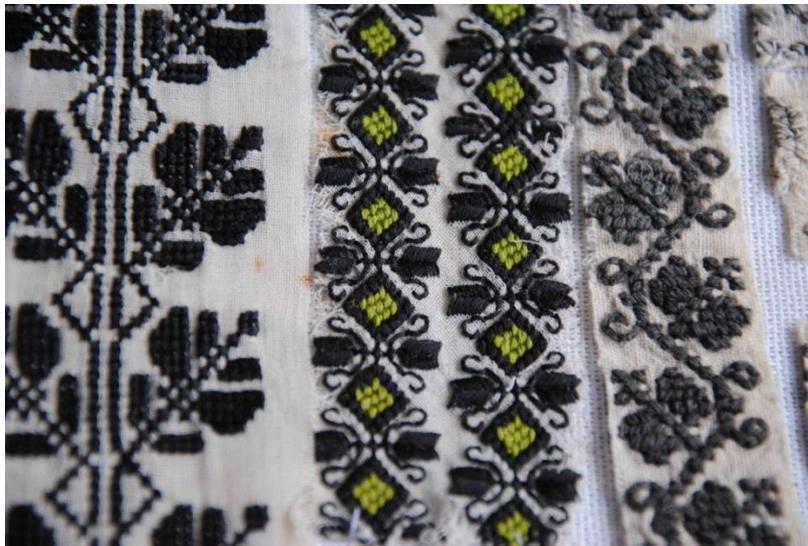


Fig. 3. *Black motives from Poboru area, Olt.*  
Source of image: <https://motivepopulare.cimec.ro/motive-populare-din-zona-poboru/#&gid=1&pid=166>.

### 2.2.2. *White*

A symbol of purity and innocence, white is specific to embroideries worn by righteous young women, virgins. However, this embroidery is more often found, either in combination with other light colors, such as beige, yellow or cream, or with bright colors, such as red or blue.



Fig. 4. *White shirt from Vrancea.*

Source of image: <https://motivepopulare.cimec.ro/colectia-nelu-dumitrescu/#&gid=1&pid=54>.

### 2.2.3. *Red*

Red color symbolizes life, love, passion, fire. The traditional dresses embroidered with this color were meant to be worn especially by young women, recently married. The energy given off by the color red, like fire, were meant to signify life-giving power, vitality and love. Embroideries sewn with red are probably the most common, being characteristic of the people of Vrancea (bright red), but also widespread in other areas, such as Argeş, Vâlcea (dark red and burgundy), Vlasca (warm red, ochre), Haşeg. This color is associated with geometric motifs, such as the horns of the ram, the crest of the rooster or with floral motifs, such as the red rose.



Fig. 2. Red motives from Poboru area, Olt.

Source of image: <https://motivepopulare.cimec.ro/motive-populare-din-zona-poboru/#&gid=1&pid=289>.



Fig. 2. Red motives from Vrancea.

Source of image: <https://motivepopulare.cimec.ro/colectia-nelu-dumitrescu/#&gid=1&pid=20>.



#### 2.2.4. Blue

Unlike young wives, who wore red dresses, women who became mothers dressed mostly in dresses sewn with blue. Predominant in Muntenia, this color symbolizes water, creative energy and is represented by geometric shapes such as the spiral and the circle. Through their calming force, the shades of blue as well as those of silver convey spiritual energy, depth, stability and hope to the wearer of this embroidery.



Fig. 2. Blue and black motives from Poboru area, Olt

Source of image: <https://motivepopulare.cimec.ro/motive-populare-din-zona-poboru/#&gid=1&pid=156>.

#### 2.2.5. Yellow

Solar energy, joy and warmth are reproduced through this color, a symbol of the earth's wealth and fruitfulness, of the life-giving star and golden ears. The traditional dresses embroidered with yellow were worn especially by young, unmarried girls, who proudly wore the cheerful embroideries in bright colors, on Sundays, at the village dance. The warm colors, gold and ochre, were most often found in the southern part of the country and were represented by geometric signs in the form of spikes, spirals or circles.



Fig. 2. Yellow and deep yellow motives from Poboru area, Olt.

Source of image: <https://motivepopulare.cimec.ro/motive-populare-din-zona-poboru/#&gid=1&pid=79>.

#### 2.2.6. *Green*

Freshness and vitality are represented by this color of nature, a symbol of youth, joy and spring. Maybe that's why, the ones sewn with raw green are most often worn by children, in combination with pastel shades of straw yellow, blue, pink or lilac. Emerald or moss green is more often found in the Moldova area, in combination with other bright colors, such as orange, bright red or intense blue, specific to the floral or geometric embroideries worn by marriageable girls.



Fig. 2. Green motives from Plaiul Cloșani, Mehedinți.

Source of image: <https://motivepopulare.cimec.ro/motive-populare-din-zona-plaiul-closani/#&gid=1&pid=13>.

#### 2.2.7. *Orange*



A vibrant, hot, healthy color, orange symbolizes energy, vitality, adventure and good health. Garments embroidered with this color were proudly worn by young girls looking for a husband.



Fig. 2. Orange and blue motives from Poboru area, Olt.

Source of image: <https://motivepopulare.cimec.ro/motive-populare-din-zona-poboru/#&gid=1&pid=277>.

#### 2.2.8. Purple

Violet is the color of obedience, submission, a symbol of autumn and the fruitfulness of the earth, found especially on the embroidery from Sălaj, Dâmbovița or Țara Oașului. Darker tones were worn by elderly women, along with burgundy, brick or brown, while light, lilac or purple shades appeared in combination with other pastel colors, on the eyes of unmarried girls or young women.



Fig. 2. Embroidery from Dâmbovița area, Brăniștea common

Source of image: <https://motivepopulare.cimec.ro/comuna-branistea/#&gid=1&pid=4>.

### 3. Conclusions

The popular port, an integral part of the Romanian culture, constitutes a living document of the past, which, enduring over the centuries, transmitted to generations the message of an authentic artistic creation, with its own, specific content, with a strong imprint of originality, manifested in form, ornamentation, chromatic. The traditional costume, gradually overtaken by the forms of clothing adapted to the constantly changing living conditions, acquires a different meaning in the contemporary ethnographic reality, being preserved as a symbol reserved for the days of celebration, an indispensable heritage from the manifestations of affirmation of the Romanian popular creation both in the country as well as abroad.

Testimony of man's preoccupation with completing and highlighting the charm and qualities that nature has given him, the costume has always occupied a special place in everyday life. The vestiges discovered in the archaeological excavations, the testimonies of the writers from Antiquity and the Middle Ages demonstrate that the port was directly linked to the life of man, to the social-historical context in which he lived, to the geographical-climatic environment. Sober or full of color and brilliance, the costume marked joy or sadness, youth and old age, wedding and funeral, in other words all stages and aspect of life.

The traveler can still see today, especially on holidays, men and women dressed in clean white clothes, made of wool, hemp, linen or cotton. Indeed, the dominant feature of the Romanian folk costume, as far as the raw material is concerned, is the use of white fabrics, made of animal or vegetable fibers. The wealth of the country in the past in sheep, in hemp and flax fields, and starting from the 19th century the massive imports of cotton, explains the use of these raw materials.

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