

## CONVERGENCES BETWEEN THE TRADITIONAL MOTIFS OF THE ROMANIAN AND MEXICAN TEXTILE HERITAGE

Antonela LUNGU\*, Melinda PUSKÁS\*\*, Camelia COȘEREANU\*

\* Department of Wood Processing and Wooden Products Design, Faculty of Wood Engineering, "Transilvania" University, Brașov, Romania, \*\* Graduate, Faculty of Wood Engineering, "Transilvania" University, Brașov, Romania

**Abstract:** Under its various forms, tradition is an integral component of every nation's culture, it is that which every generation inherits and subsequently passes onwards. An important role in its perpetuation can be attributed to the textile heritage and, by extension, to the women who weaved and stitched traditional motifs across the ages. The symbols found on traditional clothing used to have a double purpose: they were both apotropaic, meant to protect the wearer, as well as ornamental, meant to be decorative and aesthetically appealing. This has been true around the world, as people everywhere gazed at the sky, observed the nature that surrounded them and then chose signs and symbols with which to represent what they were seeing. In the present day there exists a worldwide trend of returning to traditional values in a form adapted to modern tendencies. Ethnologist Nicolae Dunăre has undertaken ample research of traditional Romanian and European popular ornaments, in a continuous global comparison. The painter Frida Kahlo reclaimed Mexico's great variety of indigenous motifs when she wore the costumes. Bearing this in mind, we shall analyse some motifs found on textiles from Romania and Mexico, both countries with a vibrant popular culture, in parallel, observing whether or not commonalities exist. We shall also transpose said motifs in a digital format by way of vector drawing.

**Keywords:** embroidery; traditional; textile; symbol; Romania; Mexico

### 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the ways by which traditional ornament has reached modern times was that in every corner of the world women weaved and stitched these motifs, transmitting them from generation to generation, which, fortunately, is still occurring (fig. 1). They performed this as a means of sustenance, but also as an artistic act, thus contributing to the cultural heritage of their own nation, but also to the common, universal one. Although modern society has the means available to mechanize such manufactories, it is consider it imperative that these arts and crafts are perpetuated. They may significantly contribute to the development of creative industries, a sector which will see major growth in the near future because of the increasing demand for women's jobs.

The theoretical framework of this study has its starting point in the fact that ornamental elements and motifs tend to have a universal character and can be found in multiple geographical areas.

...it is precisely the permanent character of the aspiration towards beauty, in the Romanian people

as well as the people of all continents, unveil some very significant convergences in the methods of systemizing the invaluable cultural and artistic heritage that is traditional ornament. (Dunăre, 1975:41).

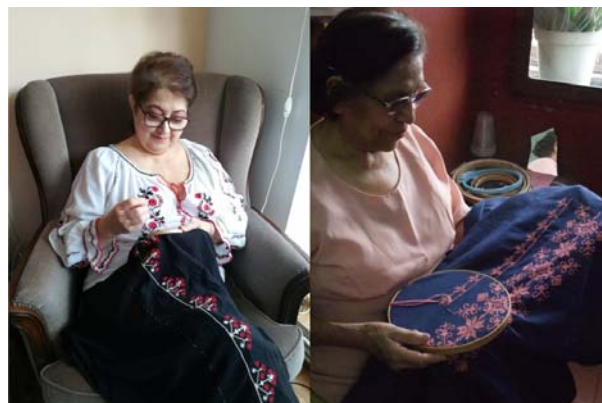


Fig. 1. Stitching women. Left – Maria Szabo, Brașov, România, Photo: Anisia Szabo, Right – Francisca Torres Hinojosa, Morelia, Michoacan, Mexico, Photo: Rebecca Devaney

Nicolae Dunăre (1975:48) classifies traditional ornament in the following: the ornamental element

- the simplest, indivisible part, which can exist independently of the decoration (leaf, petal, branch, stem, fruit, star), the ornamental motif made out of two or more ornamental elements, divisible in elements from the same thematic group (flower), and ornamental composition, constructed out of two or more ornamental motifs, which can be part of different thematic and stylistic groups. Style refers to the form: geometrical, free or mixed. From a stylistic point of view, ornaments may be: abstract, cosmomorphic, geomorphic, phytomorphic, zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, skeuomorphic, social, mythological, religious, emblematic. (Dunăre, 1975:41)

The idea behind this project appeared as the result of a common passion and an existing collaboration attempting to save and then pass on traditional motifs. This study's objectives are the identification of common points in traditional motifs from the textile heritages of Romania and Mexico, through the analysis of textile elements from both countries.

## 2. METHODS AND DATA

At the moment the best method of ensuring the continuity of traditional ornament consists in transposing it into a digital format by a vectorial method. To this end we have been utilising the graphical software CorelDraw, with the help of which we have drawn, to scale and maintaining original colours, the models that we have chosen for our study, saving them as digital images. All figures in this article have been obtained by this method, having however been shrunk to the allowed dimensions.

The vector file format may be edited by any kind of CNC (Centre with Numerical Control) and made available for use in a variety of applications, ranging from textile, furniture, interior design elements, graphics, etc. Concurrently, the models may be manually stitched using the drawings themselves.

With an eye to comparative documentation we utilized data from previous projects we took part in and which consisted in initiating a database with traditional elements, motifs and compositions from South East Transylvania. In particular, these projects aimed to recover signs and motifs stitched on the shirts of Junii din Șcheii Brașovului and on various costume parts from the so-called Carpathian Gate (Bran - Moieciu - Fundata) and the surroundings of Brașov (Făgăraș, Rupea).

## 3. SIMILARITIES

Situated many thousands of kilometres apart in very different geographical, environmental and cultural regions, Romania and Mexico are both nations with a very old history of embroidery. While in Romania we have the ie (the traditional women's shirt, rich in ornament), in Mexico we find the huipil (a sleeveless tunic), as well as the "colonial-style" blouse (blusa or camisa in Spanish), inspired by the European chemise, which has replaced the huipil in many communities and is often found with richly embroidered yokes and sleeves.

Analysing the models we have digitised in the last few years and going through numerous photographs with textiles stitched and woven in Mexico, we identified the following similarities:

The vine leaf and grape bunch are a symbol of eternal life, of talent and of the promise of salvation. The vine leaf in particular is an originally pagan symbol that was adopted by Christianity. (Lungu, Puskás, 2017:61) (fig. 2).



Fig. 2. The "Wine leaf" motif. Upper – Men's shirt of a June Roșior din Șcheii Brașovului, Romania; Lower – Sampler, unknown, mid-19th century, Mexico, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

In Mexico, floral decorations are widely used, especially on the women's clothing. "I paint flowers so they will not die" - Frida Kahlo.

Among the motifs embroidered on the Oaxaca huipils, many bear the influence of pre-Hispanic drawings. These multicoloured embroidery tell mythical stories mixing a certain vision of the cosmos to that of nature and the deities that surround these populations. Colours, shapes and textures give meaning to the symbolic life of representations: a place, a season, a feeling (Pepiot, 2019).



Fig. 3. Floral motif. Upper – Shoulder towel worn by girls, Rupea area, late 19th century, Ethnography Museum Braşov, România, exhibit „Siebenburgen embroidery from Szöcs Karoly collection”; Lower – Mexican Blouse Traditional Embroidered

In popular art there exists a certain number of ornamental motifs with a similar thematic, not only within the limits of an ethnographic area or of a nation, but also on far extended areas of time and space. Among these, “tree of life” (Dunăre, 1975:24).

Triangular urns of flowers, surrounded by birds, are a stylised version of the universal and ever-popular “tree of life” foliage motif. The idea of a “World Tree”, important in many cultures, was part of the cosmology of the Aztecs, the Maya, and other ancient civilisations of Mexico (2018) (fig. 4). The “North Star” motif also referred to as “The wing of the mill” or “The eight point star” and symbolizes the wheel of time and the regenerative energy of the universe (Corduneanu, 2012b). It is the guide, the only fixed star on the night sky, a mark for shepherds and sailors alike, without which they would get lost (fig. 5).

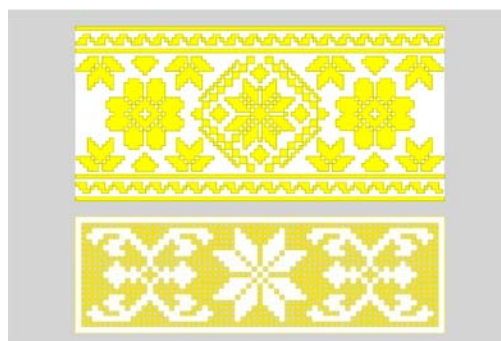


Fig. 5. The “North Star” motif. Upper – Men’s shirt, Veneția de Sus, Făgăraş area, Romania; Lower – Sampler, unknown, mid 19th century, Mexico, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

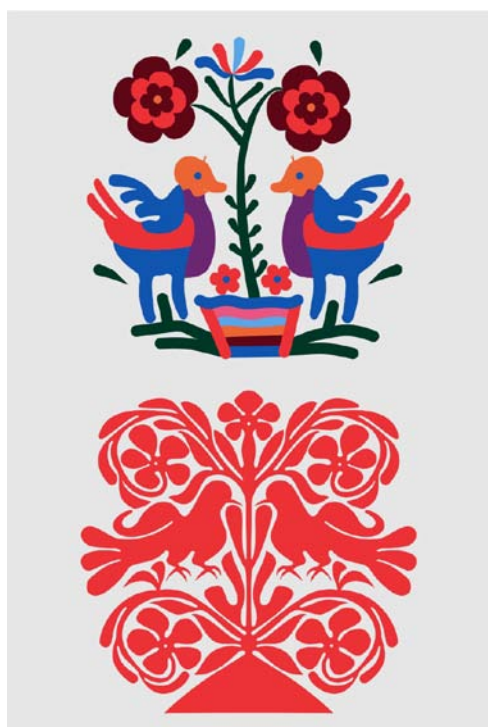


Fig. 4. Birds composition. Upper – Women’s shirt, Bihor area, România, IE Vie collection; Lower – Huipil, unknown, 1800s, Oaxaca State, Mexico, Museum Victoria and Albert Museum, London

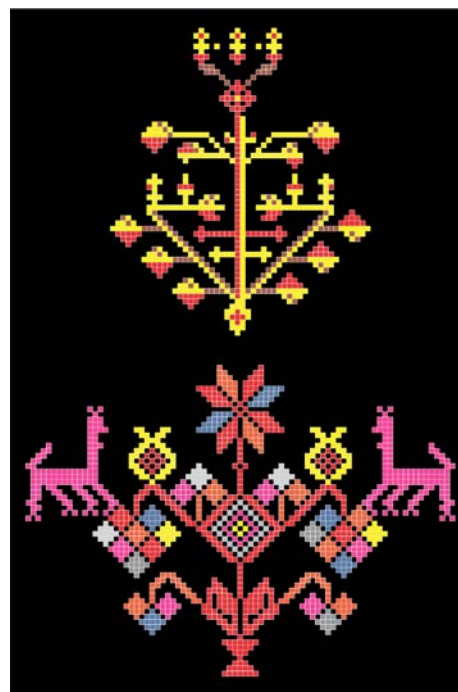


Fig. 6. The “Tree of Life” motif. Upper – Carpet, 1866, National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, Bucureşti, Romania (2010); Lower – Nahua wool-embroidered tomicotón from Hueypan, Tlatlauqui, Puebla, from Museo Frida Kahlo, Mexico (2008)



The tree of life symbolises the cyclical character of cosmic evolution: death and rebirth. It is also considered a symbol of the relationship between Earth and Sky (Lungu, Puskás, 2017:61) (fig. 6). The roots of the tree lie in the ground, thus allowing a journey into the subterranean world, while the branches grow towards the sky, constituting a connection to Divinity.

The shepherd's hook, frequently used in pairs of 2 or 4, means that the lost sheep has returned to its herd (Corduneanu, 2012a). This motif, which takes the shape of the letter S, has been stitched by functionally every people that have ever practised transhumance (fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Motif with “The shepherd's hook and scissors”.  
Upper – Women’s shirt, Șirnea village - Fundata, Romania, Mărioara Voinescu collection; Lower – Sampler, unknown, mid 19th century, Mexico, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

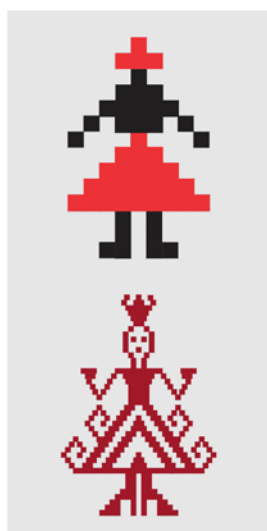


Fig. 8. Woman representation. Upper – Romanian motif named “The girl’s hora”; Lower – Sack bag from Museo Frida Kahlo, Mexico (2008)

The idea of a human being is most often represented in Romanian popular art as a woman (Antonescu, 2016:244).

The girl’s hora is an ancient ritual, with ties to the Moon, seduction and fertility (Corduneanu, 2012c) (fig. 8).

In Mexican embroidery, human figures appear with relative frequency. They feature prominently on the embroidered napkins.



Fig. 9. Upper – Motif with meander from women’s shirt, Rucăr area, România, Georgiana Andrei collection; Lower – The N-shaped serpent on a Huipil (women’s tunic), unknown, 1850 – 1907, Oaxaca State, Mexico, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The meander illustrates the geometric decor that is widely used in European popular art. Being an ornamental motif with very old roots, characterised by a sinuous line, sometimes composed out of volutes or spirals disposed consecutively or sequentially, it symbolizes eternity. It is found on every type of decorative item and in all ethno-folkloric areas, on elements of popular architecture, ceramics, stitches and embodiment, tools and utensils, painted eggs, religious items, etc. (Antonescu, 2016:423).

The N-shaped serpent is strongly reminiscent of the pre-Hispanic feathered serpent (2018). Among the Aztecs, whose beliefs are the best-documented in the historical sources, Quetzalcoatl was related to gods of the wind, of the planet Venus, of the dawn, of merchants and of arts, crafts and knowledge. He was also the patron god of the Aztec priesthood, of learning and knowledge (Smith, 2001:213). Though strikingly similar, these

two motifs are categorically part of differing thematic classifications (Fig. 9).

In addition to flowers, other natural themes appear in woven or embroidered motifs, including birds, both in Romania and Mexico (Fig. 10).

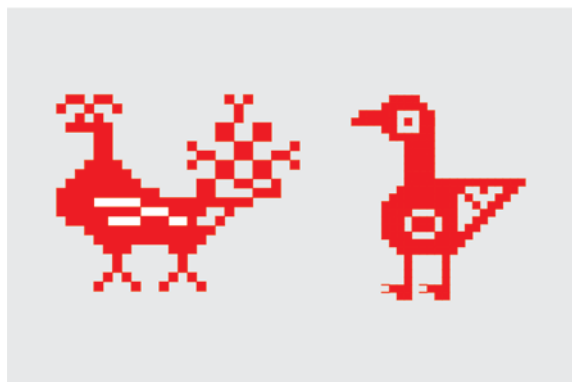


Fig. 10. Bird motif. Left – Table cloth and towels, village Araci, Bârseiland, România, Csulak Magda tome; Right – Embroidery on Huichol pants from Museo Frida Kahlo, Mexico

A general symbol with many possible interpretations, the bird embodies liberty and the happiness of an unconstrained being; it functions as the emblem of the love-lorn, an allegory of the freedom and uncaring nature of youth. There also exists a belief that the figure's presence has beneficial, protective powers (Antonescu, 2016:497).

The results of this study are also disseminable into a practical work: for instance, a public exhibition that would contain all the models present in this paper, manually stitched. We intend to work on this exhibition between May and November 2020 and to subsequently present it at the Etnovember 2020 Festival, a prestigious multicultural event which takes place every year in Braşov, organized by "Transilvania" University and the City's Townhall. Thus, these motifs would carry, besides the fascinating tale of their symbols, thematic and style, a personal fingertip: that of the emotions and experiences of us, the women who will stitch them.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The objective of this study has been to identify commonalities in the motifs of Romania's and Mexico's textile heritage. Although the sample of studied motifs was small compared to the vast pool of existent embroideries, we have identified many common symbols, including phytomorphic, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic motifs, among

others, a fact which clearly indicates that commonalities between the two cultures, one belonging to Central and Eastern Europe, the other to Hispanic Latin America, do indeed exist.

Regardless of the area he inhabited, man has always been a lover of nature, which he took with him through the symbols on his clothing and other textile elements. Precisely because of this it is imperative that we maintain and perpetuate this heritage, an act that is as much the duty as it is the honour of every generation

#### 4. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Cristian Lungu for his help translating the paper in English.

The Romanian motifs from the present paper will be part of a larger research work included in Antonela Lungu's PhD thesis, in which she will more widely approach Perspectives on the Development in Furniture of Some Traditional Romanian Motifs of Textile Heritage from Bârseiland and Its Surroundings.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Antonescu, R. [2009], (2016). Dicţionar de Simboluri și Credințe Tradiționale Românești. *e-Patrimoni.ro*. [online]. URL: <http://cimec.ro/Etnografie/Antonescu-dictionar/Dictionar-de-Simboluri-Credinte-Traditionale-Romanesti-1-o.html> [Accessed on March, 2020]
2. Corduneanu, I. (July, 2012 a). Motive: carligul ciobanului (cioaca). *Semne cusute*. [online]. URL: [//semne-cusute.blogspot.com/2012/07/motive-carligul-ciobanului-cioaca.html](http://semne-cusute.blogspot.com/2012/07/motive-carligul-ciobanului-cioaca.html) [Accessed on March 2020].
3. Corduneanu, I. (July, 2012 b). Motive: colul morii. *Semne cusute*. [online]. URL: [//semne-cusute.blogspot.com/2012/07/motive-colul-morii.html](http://semne-cusute.blogspot.com/2012/07/motive-colul-morii.html) [Accessed on March 2020].
4. Corduneanu, I. (July, 2012 c). Motive: hora de fete. *Semne cusute*. [online]. URL: <http://semne-cusute.blogspot.com/2012/07/motive-hora-de-fete.html> [Accessed on March 2020].
5. Devaney, R. Mexican Embroidery. *Rebecca Devaney* [online]. URL: <https://www.rebecca-devaney.ie>. [Accessed on February 2020].
6. Dunăre, N. (1979). *Ornamentică tradițională comparată*. Bucharest: Meridiane.
7. Lungu, A. & Puskás, M. (2017) Patrimoniul textil de Secheii Braşovului. Câteva considerații asupra simbolurilor și motivelor

- tradiționale cusute pe cămășile Junilor Albiori și Roșiori din Șchei. In A. Stănescu, *Portul de sărbătoare al Junilor dișcheii Brașovului. Portul Rășiorilor și al Albiorilor*. București: Monitorul Oficial R.A. 60 – 64.
8. Pepiot, A. (August, 2019). The history of Mexican embroidery. *Ethny*. [online]. URL: <https://ethnycorner.com/en/2019/08/24/quelle-est-lorigine-des-fleurs-mexicaines-sur-les-vetements-mexicains/> [Accessed on March 2020].
  9. Smith, Michael E. [2001], (2003). *The Aztecs*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
  10. \*\*\* (2018) Mexican Embroidery. Produced as part of Frida Kahlo: Making Her Self Up. *Victoria and Albert Museum* [online]. URL: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/mexican-embroidery> [Accessed on March 2020].
  11. \*\*\* (2008). *Self portrait in a velvet dress. Frida's wardrobe. Fashion from the Museo Frida Kahlo*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.
  12. \*\*\* (April, 2010) Textile din Bucovina clasate în Patrimoniul Cultural Național. *Institutul Național al Patrimoniului* [online]. Available: <http://clasate.cimec.ro/Detaliu.asp?tit=Covor&k=D140FCE16951445BA1F1BF39A385A419&selectie-bunuri-culturale=motive-populare-textile> [Accessed on March 2020].