

## The Graphic and Decorative Physiognomy of the Folk Art in Albania



### Ethnoculture

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Ervin Meniko

University of Arts, Tirana, Albania.

### Abstract

This article brings into the focus the graphic, decorative and ornamental features of the folk art in Albania, along its historical evolution. The article focuses on its concrete aspect, on the features that represent primarily the role taken by the Albanian woman in the preparation of the different types of clothing and textiles, and secondly, her contribution in the completion of the market demands in the 19th century on. In this respect, the cotton fabrics, which were spread especially in the lowlands are distinguished for their beauty and professional texture, the flax textiles in the remote mountainous regions and the silk ones in the regions where the silkworm was cultivated. It is estimated that the rate of production and the use of the silk textiles was bigger than in the other countries of the Balkans. In these textiles, a notable importance was given to the folk art of embroidery, expressed in the diversity of colors, ornaments and ornamental composition. Among others, in the Albanian folk art, the wool textiles are distinguished for their motifs and ornaments, for their design and the rich diversity of colors. These change from region to region, according to the traditions, technique, and in some cases the quality of the material used.

### Introduction

The folk art in Albania is generally decorative and ornamental, and in a limited measure, figurative also. There is a pure national physiognomy, a clear ethnic specificity. Traditionally, the textile and embroidery art in Albania was exclusively made by the woman. She weaved weft, carpets and felt for a wide use, from shirts to sheets of all kinds, from clothes, to saddlebags and other items of practical use. It is well known that in the countryside, as well as in the cities, the production of the textiles was a domestic workmanship, but by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both countryside and city women started to produce for trade purposes. In this regard, there is a rare beauty in the cotton clothes, which were mainly produced in the lowlands, like Myzeqe and in the regions of Tirana and Zadrima. The weaving of silk textiles was widespread in those regions and cities like Elbasan, Tirana and Shkodra, where the silkworm was cultivated. Whereas in the mountainous regions, the production of linen clothes was popular, especially in the most remote ones.

Besides the great ornamental and compositional diversity, an aesthetic taste in the use of colors is found in the folk art of embroidery. Like in all forms and types of the folk art, there are some common stylistic and aesthetic features. The ornaments cover a limited part of the wear, while the rest remains blank. This way, in addition to the coloristic sense of perception, the graphic sense of the compositional structuring is reinforced.

The rich tradition in the domain of the decorative arts takes a major place in our cultural patrimony. "Here, we can recall the clear continuity of the embroidery, from the epitaph of Gllavnica, 1373, one of the most magnificent pieces of this kind in the Balkans (today preserved in the National History Museum of Tirana), to the technique, style and decorative motifs found in other pieces of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and to the characteristic fancywork of the civil clothing of Berat, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, as well as in their reflection in other southern Albanian cities and further".<sup>(1)</sup>

The aesthetic facet is an important feature of the decorative art in the Albanian national clothing. There is a rich variety of ornaments and particular characteristics from region to region in these garments. Even within the same village, there can be noticed the diversity in forms of expression, a phenomenon hardly observed in all nations. However, it should be emphasized that within the diversity of the domestic costume design, there are meeting points and common elements, also expressed in the morphologic structure of the clothing. "As regards to the general silhouette, writes the researcher Ms. A. Gjergji, there can be noticed that in the men's costumes, as well as in the women's ones, there is a pleasant diversity."<sup>(2)</sup> This diversity, in the case of the kilt costume, can

be observed at the considerable width of the kilt and the false sleeves of the doublet, which are decorated and thrown back, creating a dynamic plasticity of the Albanian man, not only during dancing, but also when he was simply walking. The trousers wear, which later substituted the kilt, had narrow trousers, decorated with a black purl. The application of this purl highlights the joint lines of the trousers and the waistcoat, creating a pronounced contrast between the soft white felt and the graphic effect of the black purl.

The coloristic choice in every region was done according to the usual preferred gamut in the general applied folk art of the respective region. The aesthetical inclination of the respective population influences the use of the coloring plants of different areas. In this level, the question is not about what colors were used in different regions, but it rather has to do with the intensity of the colors. It is known that the regions of central and northern coastal Albania, such as Zadrima, Myzeqe, Sulova, are considered regions with a rich chromatic and vivid colors, while regions like Has, the Highland of Gjakova and others more in south, are described as regions which apply ornaments with less bright colors.

The broiderery colors in the folk art are generally restrained and within a limited gamut. When gold or silver thread is used, it creates soft and smooth contrasts, which are harmonious to the eye. The golden thread motif creates an attractive view of a monumental nature in the background of overcoats and waistcoats. A particular interest is shown for the broiderery applied in the overcoat of women in the region of Lunxhëri and in the mantle of the Shkodra's women. This broiderery in the overcoats of Lunxhëri is appreciated for its ornamental clarity and purity as well as for the proficiency of the artist to use a few elements in the broiderery. The same is true for the motifs in the mantle of Shkodra women's costumes.

These broidereries have a common ornamental style with other clothings of Shkodra's women, but diverge in technique and richness of color.

In the Albanian folk art, the wool textiles have a special place too, with their motifs, ornaments, composition forms and the rich diversity of colors. They change from region to region, according to tradition, technique and in some cases, to the basic material. The wool textiles were generally used to produce sheets, carpets, mattresses, rugs, pillows, but also saddlebags, girdles etc. Among the expressive elements of the decorative art, the motif is the one which transmits the cultural form of the tradition, the diversity of forms and the rich diversity of colors, through its compositional structure. The placement determines the central, main motif, which is immediately discerned from the less important ones. In addition to the meaning it carries, it also gives the name to the decorative object that is created as for instance: weel carpet, open-closed, disc carpet etc. The secondary motifs express an ancient outlook and have lost their meaning, becoming mere decorations. They are so ranged not to eclipse the main motif, but to highlight it. All is surrounded by an edging, which is considered from the 19<sup>th</sup> century on as a development of the compositional scheme. The function of this edging is to drive the attention towards the central motif<sup>(3)</sup>.

In our country, the tradition of carpet production is one of the most ancient. This handicraft has been exercised all over the country. Each region has its own characteristics. In this sense, the Albanian carpets, from the simplest to the most complicated, such as the carpets with central motifs with repeated composition, with or without edging, are amazingly beautiful with their rare splendid interwaving and the excellent use of colors. We can mention Korça's carpets, as an example which are distinguished for their rich design, such as "the weel", "open-close", "the bun", "calk and hand", "the pergola", "the toad", "the rainbow" etc.

The development of this tradition has been influenced somehow by the convenient geografic features. The wealthy pasturage in the region of Korça has been very suitable for the breeding of sheep, which provided the raw material, necessary for the decorative art of seating. "In the most ancient weavings, when the product was entirely dedicated to the family needs, says the researcher Ms A. Onuzi<sup>(4)</sup>, we don't find the same

variegation and artistic degree as in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century”. In this period, simple rugs and woolen blankets were produced, sometimes by the sheep wool and sometimes mixed with goat’s wool. Design and colors were more limited. Bands with simple geometric design were mainly produced, while the coloring was done with natural dye. The second part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century marks a qualitative transition for the city of Korça. Along with the city life, the artistry of weaving crossed the doorstep. It’s the time when chemical dye came to use, and it had a great impact on the enrichment of the artistic values of the textiles of that period. It is the period of the appearance of the classical style in the production of carpets and rugs in the city.

The early carpets had such a design where the hole surface was filled with geometric shapes or zigzag lines, which could go on to the infinite if there wasn’t a limited frame. The length borders had a narrow, toothed band which constituted the initial edging form. In this kind of composition, two colors are used, one for the motif, one for the background and a part of these carpets contained the “open-close” motif, which is created by two zigzag lines, which can be wide or narrow and are placed vertically to each other. Their intersection creates ranges of rhombs with different sizes. The artist amenable shows that she is an expert in the coloring of the thread, providing a large gamut of colors, whether with natural or chemical dye. In the preparatory process, the weaver pays attention to the choice of two favourite colors: the resonant, cold red of carpets and rugs and the dark blue, similar to the Prussian blue. The seatings of Korça contain colors and design that are widely appreciated in other regions, while their quality and aesthetic form represent a peculiar physiognomy of expression.

Another region which is distinguished for its artistic tradition of textiles and its expressive richness is the region of Luma. This is conditioned firstly, by the suitable geographic position, which is great for providing the raw material, such as the wool of “rudë” sheep, which is of great quality, and secondly, by the proficiency of Luma’s weavers, who constituted the main resource of fulfilment of the family needs. The local weavers were prominent for the qualitative productions, such as the felt, prepared specially for men’s clothing, as well as for the refinement of wool fabric for women’s clothing. “The splendor and diversity of the textiles made by the hands of Luma’s weavers, writes the researcher A. Jonuzi<sup>5</sup> was especially apparent in the wedding ceremonies, when the house was full of guests and everybody wore their best clothes. To the atmosphere was added the splendor of the bride’s house, where dowry was exposed for the eyes of the guests, as well as the bride, wearing the traditional costume of her village.

The general tendencies of Luma’s weavers is expressed in the use of many colors. The need for a large variety of colors is parallel to the compositional features, for the weaving of clothes, as well as for other textiles. And, to give more expressive power to these textiles, the weaver prefers warm colors, while the favourites are blue, dark green, red, orange etc. But the most required remains violet, which is largely used in a very expressive way.

Among the textiles, the carpets of Luma constitute the most distinctive and original feature of the region with their extended compositional form and dynamic expression. The Luma’s weaver tends to see the center of the carpet as an expositional space, where the preferred motif can be placed thus defining the type of composition. Luma’s carpets are distinguished for their edging design, where the motif is not placed in the background without being surrounded by a thin border, like is the case in Korça.

By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the series of wool textiles, a new kind of seating appeared, which was appreciated for its advanced technique and decorative organisation. This was the technique of tapestry, similar to the Persian carpets and was initially used in religious ceremonies and family environments.

The most recognized regions for tapestry in Albania were Luma and Labëria. After the 30s, the borrowed elements in these seatings began to be subject to the creative elaboration. Different from the Persian

and Turkish carpets which contain floral and zoomorphe motifs, our tapestry contains geometric motifs, often similar to those of the carpets, but with a different compositional basis, according to the technique. The color of Albanian tapestry is pure, decorative, and mostly red. This peculiarity reinforces the motifs and gives value to the harmonic compositional rythm.

## References

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