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PHILOSOPHY OF UKRAINIAN EMBROIDERY

Ukrainian folk embroidery, preserved till nowadays, is unique material for studying, as it absorbed the wisdom of ancestors. Despite the historical change of folk art in general and embroidery in particular, it retained its uniqueness and spirituality. Complex analysis of embroidery is one of the ways to access the cognitive space of the Ukrainian people, in which information has been accumulating for centuries. Comprehension of this information is an important stage in the way of self-identification of each person as well as Ukrainian people as a whole.

Keywords: Ukrainian embroidery, fractal, conceptual fractal, ornament

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ФІЛОСОФІЯ УКРАЇНСЬКОЇ ВИШИВКИ

Українська народна вишивка, яка зберіглась до наших часів, є унікальним матеріалом для вивчення, адже вона увібрала в себе мудрість нащадків. Незважаючи на історичні зміни, які, безумовно, відбилися на народному мистецтві в цілому, в тому числі на вишивці, вона зберігла свою неповторність і духовність. Комплексний аналіз вишивки є одним зі шляхів доступу, підходів до розуміння когнітивного простору українського народу, в якому сторіччями накопичується інформація. Осягнення цієї інформації є важливою сходинкою на шляху самоідентифікації як кожної людини, так і народу в цілому.

Ключові слова: українська вишивка, орнамент, фрактал, концептуальний фрактал.

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ФИЛОСОФИЯ УКРАИНСКОЙ ВЫШИВКИ

Украинская народная вышивка, сохранившаяся до нашего времени, является уникальным материалом для изучения, так как она впитала в себя мудрость предков. Несмотря на исторические изменения, отразившиеся, на народном искусстве в целом, в частности и на вышивке, она сохранила свои неповторимость и духовность. Комплексный анализ вышивки является одним из путей доступа к когнитивному пространству украинского народа, в котором веками накапливается информация. Постижение этой информации является важным этапом на пути самоидентификации как каждого человека, так и народа в целом.

Ключевые слова: украинская вышивка, орнамент, фрактал, концептуальный фрактал.

Embroidery plays an essential role in Ukrainian culture. It is a perfect combination of beauty and practicability. Embroidered clothes, interior items and towels (rushnyky) have been in use for a long time in every Ukrainian family. Embroidered items used to be an important part of all ritual events of each Ukrainian: from the birth to the death. Moreover, they were the objects of inheritance, meaning they would be passed from parents to children for many generations. For centuries embroidery has been accumulating wisdom of our ancestors, therefore its analysis helps to understand their culture, traditions, beliefs, which allows, in turn, to understand ourselves and find our place in the outer world.

According to historians, Ukrainian embroidery has its origins in ancient times. As the evidence scientists use statues, jewelry, arms, and other objects found during archaeological excavations. Images on these objects depict either people whose clothes is covered with ornament, or people involved in the process of sewing and embroidery. Although these archaeological finds date back to the fourth century BC, the oldest existing piece of silk tissue with golden embroidery found on the territory of Ukraine dates back to the first century BC [4, p. 12 – 15].

The art of embroidery was being developed by the Slavs and other tribes, in the times of Kyivan Rus and later, in the 15 – 16th centuries, however, researchers have enough embroidered samples starting only from the 17 – 18th centuries. The phenomenon of embroidery became the object of systematic research in the middle of the 19th century with foundation of museums in different cities and private collections by famous Ukrainians: Ivan Franko, Volodymyr Shukhevych, Lesya Ukrainka and others. Since the end of the 20th century the phenomenon of Ukrainian embroidery has been investigated by T. Karavasylyeva, R. Zakharchuk-Chuhaj, M. Selivatchov [1, p. 3]. Nowadays the number of researchers has increased, and among those who are working in the field L. Ivanevich, Yu. Melnychuk, Yu. Nikishenko, A. Varivonchik, should be mentioned.

Embroidery meets two goals simultaneously: from one hand, it brings aesthetic enjoyment, and from the other hand, it carries a message from its creator. Melnychuk claims [5], and we must agree with him, that the latter is the most important. Hence our task is to comprehend the meaning of the message, which depends on several factors such as shape of elements of ornament, their arrangement, colors.

Usually, several types of folk Ukrainian embroidered ornament are distinguished: abstract (geometrical), phytomorphic (floral ornament), zoomorphic (animal ornament) and anthropomorphic (mythological). The most common and at the same time the most archaic elements of ornament are the abstract ones. They are: straight horizontal line (represents the land); wavy horizontal line (water); square, divided into four parts, with circles or dots in each (sown field); circle (sun) [3, p. 179].

The most ambiguous and controversial are the meanings of the cross sign.

1. Straight cross (like a plus sign “+”), symbolizes harmony, the union of matter (—) and spirit (⋈). It is also a symbol of the sun and a man.

2. Oblique cross (like letter “X”) symbolizes the moon and a woman.

3. Double cross, the result of imposition of an oblique cross at a straight cross, which, in turn, implies the union of the sun and the moon, symbolizes the beginning of life, nature.

Among fairly common symbols of cross-like shape Svarga or swastika should be mentioned as being symbols of Svarog — the supreme god in religion of our ancestors. Since Svarog is the god of the sun, svarga means the motion of the sun in orbit during winter and summertime (clockwise or counterclockwise direction) [1].

Thus, the basic elements of geometric ornament are simple lines and shapes like straight line, spiral, circle, triangle, rhombus, square, etc. Other elements, including depiction of plants, animals and deities are made of these simple ones.

What adds strength and value to the message carried by an embroidered ornament is its color. White is the color of power, energy and spirituality. It serves to protect a person if she is wearing white clothes, whereas black clothes was worn by old people to retain their information, every piece of their wisdom. Black is also the color of ground, prosperity and solemnity.

One of the most active, influential and protective colors is red. It is the color of life, that is why it was used to embroider rushnyky and clothes for wedding ceremonies along with clothes for children and youth. The opposite of active red color is passive blue, which symbolizes water, otherworldly. Sometimes blue and black colors are interchangeable, and they are commonly used together with the yellow color, symbol of the sun, fire and

wisdom [5]. Particular colors or their combinations are characteristics of certain regions of Ukraine. Thus, black embroidery was used during the wedding ceremony in Podillya, while red was used for the same ritual in Poltava, Kyiv, Chernigiv, Slobozhanshyna.

The third important factor in interpreting embroidery is number. Although the idea of significance of number is often traced back to the thinkers of ancient civilizations, especially to the so-called neo-Pythagoreans [11], the symbolic meaning of different numbers used to be important almost in all cultures and religious beliefs. Thus, according to Philo of Alexandria, “one” is a number of the Creator, the indivisible source of all numbers [11]. In the composition of Ukrainian embroidered ornament “one” also frequently symbolizes the God or another central element such as tree of life, the sun, octagon star [5].

“Two”, revealed either through repetition of the same element or through symmetry of ornament, embodies the idea of duality (day and night, winter and summer), unity of opposites, couple. “Three” is interpreted as triplicity of the world (heavens, earth and underworld) or triplicity of the Universe (heaven, earth, man) [Ibid.]. The meaning of “four”, embodied in embroidery mostly in crosses and quadrangular shapes such as square and rhombus, corresponds, like in Greek interpretation, to four seasons, four natural elements (earth, water, air, fire), four lunar phases [9].

“Five” is the number of a man (pentagram) and fingers (on hand or foot) or four elements and the spirit. It can be present as five flowers on a tree of life or as combination of five diamonds. “Six”, the first perfect number, according to Pythagoreans, symbolizes the union between the God and man. It is depicted as two triangles combined in a star.

Seven is the number of structure of nature, organization of the Universe. There are seven days in a week and seven days of Creation, seven pure notes in diatonic scale and seven colors. That is why a tree of life, which symbolizes the universe, is often depicted having seven branches. In addition, the width and height of a wedding rushnyk had to be multiple of seven, being the symbol of holiness and happiness [7]. Eight is the number of harmony and balance, nine – is the number of mystery of birth, death and metamorphosis.

One of the most perfect numbers is ten – the basis of decimal number system. Being the sum of the archetypal numbers ($1 + 2 + 3 + 4 = 10$), it symbolizes completeness or finality [10]. It is also a combination of “one”, meaning being, and “zero”, meaning non-being, which results in union of spirit and matter [5].

Two more numbers are considered to have non-trivial meaning: twelve and forty. Twelve is considered to be a number of a complete cycle inasmuch as a year consists of twelve lunar cycles, twelve months and is divided into twelve zodiacs. In addition, there are twelve hours in a day and a night. Forty, in accordance with Christian tradition, is believed to be a number of trial and privation [10], but at the same time purification and transition. Thus, there are forty days spent by Moses on Sinai, forty days of the great flood, forty years spent by Jews in the desert and forty days of the Great Lent.

The fourth factor that helps to analyze the meaning of embroidery is knowing the names of elements of ornament and their historical background. Since names of the same element can be different in different regions of Ukraine, it can shed light on general perception of the element or its meaning in the particular area. For example, a tree of life can also be named as a world tree, family tree or even flower and flowerpot. Such a variety of names allows to comprehend the multifaceted character of the element, which brings together the concepts of the Universe, family and time.

The fifth important factor involved in the process of interpretation of embroidered ornament that follows from the fourth one is the “interpretant” (in Peirce’s terminology). According to Charles Sanders Peirce’s sign theory, signs consist of three parts: a sign, an object, and an interpretant. The “interpretant” is an understanding of relationship between sign and object [8], between symbol of ornament and its meaning. In other words, people can read an embroidered message in various ways.

The sixth factor in analyzing embroidery is composition, or arrangement of its parts. Usually embroidered ornament is a rhythmical repetition of certain elements. Moreover, sometimes these elements contain self-repeated parts, when the whole is similar to its parts, in other words, they have fractal structure.

The term “fractal” was introduced by Benoit Mandelbrot in 1975 [12] and was used to name a shape that can be split into self-similar parts. Although such a construction is pretty common form of natural objects (landscapes, riversides, snowflakes, trees, cauliflower, fern, etc.), it can be met in cultural concepts. Thus, according to Elena Nikolaeva, the author of the term “conceptual fractal”, similarity in this case is revealed on the level of ideas and concepts shared within social, cultural or philosophic system [6].

An example of conceptual fractal found in Ukrainian embroidery is tree of life. Firstly, the form of a tree itself is fractal since every branch is a small quite identical copy of the whole tree. Secondly, self-repetition is present in the structure of roots. Moreover, the tree itself is similar to the system of its roots.

The tree of life holds a special place in Ukrainian embroidery since it symbolizes the Universe and nature, from one hand, and a family, from another. This motif is quite popular and is embroidered in different regions of the country through several centuries. The symbolism of tree of life in Ukrainian embroidery has been analyzed by Zakharchuk-Chuhaj, [2, p. 99 – 101], L. Ivanevich [3, p. 178], Yu. Melnychuk [5] and others. Thus, as it was mentioned earlier, the tree symbolizes the Universe and diversity of forms of life, uniting underworld (roots), earth (pivot) and heaven (branches). At the same time it unities spirit (growing parts of trees during summer time – leaves, flowers and fruits) and matter (slightly unchangeable basis of tree during the year – roots, pivot and branches). In other words, it stands above time and space, symbolizing immortality and infinity of life [Ibid.].

Another meaning of tree of life, as it was stated above, is the concept of family consisting of many generations, uniting past, present and future. Roots would be interpreted as ancestors of a family and branches with leaves and flowers as present and future generations. Thus, in Podillya bride would embroider on her groom’s shirt a tree without leaves and flowers as a symbol of creation of a new happy family [3, p. 178]. Often tree of life is depicted growing from a flowerpot, meaning tree of family as a part of the tree of the Universe, – a thought-provoking example of concept fractal of Ukrainian culture. In this case similarity of mankind and family, the Universe and a person is revealed.

Fractal structure can also be revealed at the level of number: three triangles make one bigger triangle; four as a square or rhombus (square as a combination of four squares or rhombus consisting of four rhombus), eight as a cube, nine as three triples and so forth.

Thus, embroidery is a complex phenomenon which has to be analyzed as a whole through the prism of six factors: shape, name and color of each element of ornament, their composition, number and historical background.

The process of self-identification is important for every person as well as for every nation. No nation appeared from nowhere, that is why an interest to ethnic heritage has increased worldwide. Embroidery, being sensitive to changes in culture, is one of sources of knowledge from the past. Although it absorbs styles and method of other cultures, it preserves its spirituality and uniqueness.

Ukraine is a country with rich history that is why its cultural heritage is diverse. Analysis of information carried by embroidery from different parts of the country can shed the light to historical processes taken place on the territory of Ukraine as well as to people’s beliefs and traditions. Every embroidered message should be analyzed through the prism of symbol, color, number and historical background. Understanding and acceptance of the past will allow to build the future.

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