

# Crucial Trends in Modern Ukrainian Embroidery

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## Résumé

*Du point de vue synchronique, la broderie populaire ukrainienne dans le Canada d'aujourd'hui obéit à un ensemble de forces binaires axées sur trois éléments : la couleur, le dessin et la fonction. Les manifestations non matérielles de la culture populaire ukrainienne au Canada, comme la chanson, renforcent certains éléments; et une tension entre représentation réaliste et abstraction géométrique se dissipe actuellement en faveur de cette dernière tendance. La recherche à long terme, les études sur le terrain et diverses collections montrent la transformation de la broderie populaire ukrainienne en un logogramme stylisé qui souligne la fidélité de la communauté ukrainienne à ses traditions. Ce phénomène pourrait compenser, dans une certaine mesure, l'abandon graduel de l'ukrainien comme langue fonctionnelle chez les Canadiens d'ascendance ukrainienne.*

## Abstract

*From the synchronic point of view, Ukrainian folk embroidery in Canada today operates in keeping with a set of binary forces that indicate a basic concern with three features: colour, pattern and function. Non-material manifestations of Ukrainian folk culture in Canada, such as songs, reinforce certain features; a tension between realistic representation and geometric abstraction are being resolved in favour of the latter trend. Long-term research, field studies and various collections show the transformation of Ukrainian folk embroidery into a stylized logogram that underlines the Ukrainian community's allegiance to its ethnic heritage. This phenomenon possibly compensates, to some extent, for the gradual loss of Ukrainian as a viable language among Canadians of Ukrainian descent.*

Fig. 1.

*Wearing embroidered shirts, Mike Osadchuk (from Pine River, Manitoba), his wife and his newly arrived mother from Western Ukraine watch the 1973 parade festivities during the Ukrainian Festival weekend in Dauphin, Manitoba. (All photographs were taken by the author in the course of field investigations for documentation and study purposes. Canadian Museum of Civilization, neg. no. 73-30897.)*



... Aphrodite... loosened... the embroidered girdle of many colours... In it was love and in it desire and in it blandishing persuasion which steals the mind even of the wise.  
— Homer'

Traditional embroidery constitutes one of the most popular manifestations of Ukrainian folk art in Canada today. This grass-roots enthusiasm has been commercialized with considerable success and is reflected in the transfer of Ukrainian cross-stitch design via print, decalomania and wood-burning techniques onto a variety of non-traditional surfaces; without needle or thread, glassware and ceramic items of all kinds (ranging from coffee mugs to ashtrays), lamp shades, toaster covers, business cards, photo albums and T-shirts are made to look as though they have been embroidered.

Works on traditional Ukrainian embroidery techniques have been published in this country since the 1930s<sup>2</sup> and important collections of Ukrainian folk embroideries are now found across Canada.<sup>3</sup> These tend to focus





**Fig. 2.**  
Decorative cushion covers are favourite objects for Ukrainian embroidery ornamentation. These were found in the living room of Reverend Roman Zakrevs'kyj in Gimli, Manitoba, in the summer of 1985. (Canadian Museum of Civilization, neg. no. K86-98)

on secular uses of folk embroidery as a form of ornamentation on such textile items as shirts (female rather than male shirts invariably dominate this particular genre), ritual towels (*rushnyky*)<sup>4</sup> and cushion covers.<sup>5</sup> Examples of a more eclectic approach to the application of traditional Ukrainian folk embroidery are found in the national collections of the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies, a division of the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa-Hull; these include domestic incidental items such as book marks and ladies' purses. As noted elsewhere,<sup>6</sup> sacred or religious embroideries are underrepresented and often ignored in spite of their productivity. In recent years, specialized studies devoted to traditional embroideries have been published;<sup>7</sup> and in North America, exhibitions featuring Ukrainian folk embroideries appear from time to time.<sup>8</sup>

The study of Ukrainian embroidery is especially conducive to romantic speculation and parochial sentiments. Prehistoric and pagan motifs are assiduously noted and, along with certain other elements, traced to particular villages and districts in the Ukraine. Purists consider regionally defined features inviolable but fail to broach the nature of geographical distribution in Canada.<sup>9</sup> The diachrony and descriptive eclecticism that characterize these approaches to the study of Ukrainian folk embroidery show a great deal of appreciation but avoid questions of contemporaneity.

In Canada, the old distinctions between folk/village/secular embroidery on the one hand and sophisticated/religious embroidery on the other is blurred.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, it remains an activity dominated by female practitioners;<sup>11</sup> in this connection, psychoanalytic techniques could be adopted to determine whether (and to what extent) this form of Ukrainian folk art parallels the Ukrainian lullaby corpus<sup>12</sup> and functions covertly to provide a socially approved outlet for the expression of suppressed tension and hostilities. Such approaches to the analysis of Ukrainian embroidery, however, remain underdeveloped and highly speculative—albeit suggestive.<sup>13</sup>

**Fig. 3.**  
Religious icons and holy pictures are often draped with embroidered towels (*rushnyky*) such as this. (Canadian Museum of Civilization, neg. no. K86-807)



Simplification and standardization constitute the leading trends in contemporary Ukrainian folk embroidery in Canada; stitchery, for example, is almost universally confined to cross-stitch (*khrestykamy*). Nowadays the tradition operates in terms of binary forces that in isolation and/or in combination with one another obtain as a set of productive tensions. In essence, Ukrainian folk embroidery has come to concern itself with colour coding, pattern and function.

### Colour

In effect, the table of traditional colours is currently limited to three: white, red and black. The colour white is almost exclusively provided by the cloth itself and it gives a highly contrastive backdrop for the superimposition of ornamentation in terms of red and black thread embroidery. These two colours, red and black, are imbedded in the popular psyche of all Ukrainians<sup>14</sup> and received added recognition in the 1960s when a popular, sentimental song, "Two Colours" (*Dva kol'ory*), reached the Ukrainian community and became an instant "hit" everywhere. My English translation of the text follows:<sup>15</sup>

Once when I was young,  
 One spring when I was young  
 I set out along unknown paths:  
 My mother embroidered a shirt for me  
 With red and black,  
 With red and black threads.

### Refrain:

*O my two colours, two colours,  
 Both on cloth, both in my soul,  
 O my two colours, two colours:  
 Red—that's for love,  
 And black—that's for worry.*

Life led me into oblivion  
 But I returned to my own ways,—  
 Like mother's embroidery, my happy,  
 My happy, my happy and sad paths  
 Intertwined with one another.

### Refrain (as above)

Grey hair rustles above my eyes,  
 But I bring nothing home  
 Except a small roll of old cloth;  
 My life is embroidered,  
 And my life is embroidered on it.

### Refrain (as above)

### Pattern

In general, Ukrainian folk embroideries produced in Canada show two types of preferred stylizations: realistic representations and geometric abstractions. Both kinds of configurations often combine to engage in a form of interplay that is mutually enriching. In all cases, however, the tradition in Canada operates in keeping with certain determinants rather than haphazardly. In this regard, function, purpose and intent are paramount factors, as shown, for instance, in the tendency for male embroiderers and embroidery on masculine apparel items (such as men's shirts, fobs and neckties) to prefer geometric compositions.

► **Fig. 4.** Knickknacks and household items of various kinds are frequently decorated with simulated embroidery designs through decalcomania. Produced for the commercial, mass market they are widely sold as gift items. (Canadian Museum of Civilization, neg. no. K86-698)





Ukrainian folk embroidery does not seek to duplicate reality. Instead of focusing on a single, isolated representation of some real form (floral, human or other), this art revels in the hypnotic attraction of endless repetition. The effect is achieved both physically and optically by using a seemingly infinite number of tiny embroidery stitches and, on a larger scale, by the predilection for geometric motifs, figures and elements in either linear or scattered fashion. Currently the tension between realistic representation and geometric abstraction is being resolved in favour of the latter trend, which avoids the issue of a judgmental comparison with the real thing or person. Often when realistic motifs do appear, they do so only incidentally within the context of a larger configuration that dominates as the true centre of attention.<sup>16</sup>

### Function

From the operational point of view, Ukrainian folk embroideries in Canada obtain in two kinds of settings: closed/personal and open/public. The closed/personal category of milieu is almost totally eclipsed by the public function of Ukrainian embroidery, which is maintained chiefly as a form of open display to underline a fidelity to ethnic loyalty and origins.<sup>17</sup> This public function of Ukrainian folk embroidery and its concomitant politicization is reflected in many of the Ukrainian embroidery items housed by the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies at the Canadian Museum of Civilization; these demonstrate the emergence of modern-day Ukrainian embroidery as a symbolic motif that carries with it an emblematic function. The diverse application of Ukrainian embroidery motifs, noted earlier, points to the use and widespread acceptance of Ukrainian folk embroidery as a kind of unofficial but popular

logogram. The ideogrammatic use of three colours (white, red and black), discussed above, reinforces the open/public function of Ukrainian embroidery that along with



▲ **Fig. 5.** A revived interest in sophisticated embroidery techniques emerged prior to 1988, the millenium of Christianity among Ukrainians and other Canadians of East Slavic descent. These portraits of Ukraine's Saints Volodymyr and Olha were embroidered in 1985 by Yvanna Petrowska of Ottawa, Ontario. (Canadian Museum of Civilization, neg. no. K86-160)

ornamented Easter eggs (*pysanky*)<sup>18</sup> permeates the Ukrainian Canadian community's entire range of expressive behaviour.

To sum up, then, the basics of Ukrainian folk embroidery in Canada may be defined as: the use of selected colours in conjunction with geometric configurations to produce an embroidery that is sufficiently emotive and powerful enough to serve as a visual ethnopolitical statement. It is possible that the predilection for geometric motifs compensates to some degree for the gradual loss of the mother tongue among Ukrainian Canadians<sup>19</sup> by its transformation of Ukrainian embroidery into a kind of calligraphy that bespeaks group continuity, allegiance and pride.

### NOTES

1. Homer, as quoted in John Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*, 15th ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co.), p. 58.
2. Among English-language handbooks, the following guide has been especially popular and influential: Nancy R. Ruryk, comp., ed., *Ukrainian Embroidery Designs and Stitches* (Winnipeg: Ukrainian Women's Association of Canada, 1958); the fifth edition of this work appeared in 1982.
3. Women's groups associated with the Ukrainian Catholic and Ukrainian Orthodox churches in Canada have founded networks of community-based museums that feature Ukrainian folk embroideries as important components of their

collections, displays and programming activities. Saskatoon is especially fortunate in this regard with notable collections at the Museum of Ukrainian Culture and at the Ukrainian Museum of Canada. For other Ukrainian museums, see the survey by Robert B. Klymasz, "Ukrainian Museums in Canada," *Gazette: Quarterly of the Canadian Museums Association* 9, no. 1 (Winter 1976): 34-38.

4. In this connection, see the special exhibit catalogue *Ukrains'ki rushnyky* (New York: The Ukrainian Museum, 1981).

5. For comparative insights regarding embroidered pillowcases as a feature of special "nuptial embroideries," see O.A. Sukhareva, "The Design

- of Decorative Embroidery of Samarkand and Its Connection with Ethnic Ideas and Beliefs (Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries)," *Soviet Anthropology and Archeology: A Journal of Translations* 22, no. 3 (Winter 1983-84): 25, 29.
6. Robert B. Klymasz, "Stitching for God," *The Beaver* 66, no. 6 (December 1986/January 1987): 46.
  7. Recent Soviet studies reflect an interest in the semantics of traditional embroidery. In this regard, see especially the monograph by G.S. Maslova, *Ornament russkoi narodnoi vyshivki kak istoriko-etnograficheskii istochnik* (The Ornament of Russian Folk Embroidery as a Historic-ethnographic Source) (Moscow: Nauka, 1978).
  8. In this regard, see, for example, *Traditional Designs in Ukrainian Textiles: An Exhibition* (New York: The Ukrainian Museum, 1977) and the catalogue for a multicultural exhibition, *Goddesses and Their Offspring: 19th and 20th Century European Embroideries*, organized by the Roberson Centre for the Arts and Sciences, Binghamton, New York, in 1987.
  9. In this connection, pertinent studies are lacking, and the mapping of elements has not been undertaken. However, puristic considerations are probably more dominant in eastern Canada and in the larger urban centres of western Canada; these show a preference for tight stitchery and geometric patterning. A greater tolerance for symbiosis seems to be characteristic of Ukrainian folk embroidery in western Canada.
  10. For background information, see the section on church embroidery in D. Horniatkevych and L. Nenadkevych, *Ukraine: A Concise Encyclopaedia* vol. 1 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), pp. 402-403, s.v. "embroideries."
  11. Embroidery is a favourite expression of religiosity among female parishioners, who on occasion band together to embroider (or fund the embroidery of) religious vestments and church linens. See, for example, the report by Liuba Pikh on an embroideries project at St. John the Baptist Ukrainian Catholic Church in Brantford, Ontario, "Proiekt tysiacholittia khreshchennia Ukrainyrsy," *Nasha Meta* (a Ukrainian Catholic weekly newspaper published in Toronto, Ontario), 22 November 1986 (reprinted in the issue for 6 December 1986).
  12. See Robert B. Klymasz, "Social and Cultural Motifs in Canadian Ukrainian Lullabies," *Slavic and East European Journal* 12 (1968): 176-83.
  13. Possible psychoanalytic approaches to the study of Ukrainian folk embroidery are suggested by Ljuba T. Daničić "Stickornamenten der Serben," *Anthropophyteia* 6 (1909): 59-89; and Max Allen, *The Birth Symbol in Traditional Woman's Art from Eurasia and the Western Pacific* (Toronto: The Museum for Textiles, 1981). In certain cultures, needle and thread are sometimes seen as sex symbols; in this regard, see, for example, motif numbers J86 and Z186 in Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, 6 vols. (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1955-58). In the 1950s the American ethnomusicologist, Alan Lomax, developed notions of "tense" and "relaxed" styles of singing as reflections of sexual mores; see, for instance, his "Folk Song Style," *American Anthropologist* 61 (1959): 927-54. Also relevant in this connection are Judy Chicago's widely acclaimed forays into the field of embroidery; see, for example, her work on *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage* (New York: Anchor, 1979).
  14. Red and black, along with their metaphorical connotations, appear in early Ukrainian literature as early as the twelfth century in the heroic epic, "The Lay of the Warfare Waged by Igor" (*Slovo o polku Ihoreve*). Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861), the Ukraine's national poet, also incorporated these two colours into his works; see the study by Z.P. Tarakhan-Bereza, *Shevchenko - poet i khudozhnyk* (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 1985), pp. 174-77. Ivanna Zelska, in her guide, *Ukrainian Embroidery* (2nd rev. ed., Winnipeg: The Author, 1981) suggests that the colour red makes the design happy and bright and that black lends an air of dignity to the piece of embroidery; like others, she believes that by emphasizing these two colours, the embroiderer will help preserve the national character of traditional Ukrainian needlework (pp. 81, 83 and 91).
  15. The original Ukrainian text is published in *Let's Sing Out in Ukrainian* (Saskatoon: CANUK Publications, 1977), pp. 172-73. Of related interest are two other songs published in this same collection: "Four Roses" (*Chotyry rozhi*), pp. 114-15, and "The Towel" (*Rushnychok*), pp. 206-207.
  16. For example, the Ukrainian national costume (derived from the Poltava district in the Ukraine) functions as an emblematic assemblage; the woman's shirt from Poltava is commonly embroidered with floral motifs, but these are minor and incidental to the whole.
  17. For similar statements in this regard, see Klymasz, "Stitching for God," p. 47, and Zelska, *Ukrainian Embroidery*, p. 83.
  18. See, in this connection, the following descriptive pamphlet about the world's largest Ukrainian Easter egg located in Vegreville, Alberta: Annette Del Zoppo, *The Vegreville Pysanka* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Ronald D. Resch, 1976).
  19. For the folkloristic implications of language loss among Ukrainians in Canada, see Robert B. Klymasz, *Ukrainian Folklore in Canada* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), pp. 79-80. Harvey G. Cox, among others, has suggested that "eventually books may become a marginal mode of communication, while ... visual modes ... once again become dominant" in his book, *The Seduction of the Spirit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), p. 271.