

SYMBOLIC BEAUTY: CROATIAN TEXTILE DESIGNS

An exhibit of Croatian costumes and textiles
from the private collection of
Stjepan Vlahovich of Columbus, Ohio

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The Clara Fritzsche Library
Notre Dame College
4545 College Road
South Euclid, Ohio 44121

Diversity is a major characteristic of the Croatian woman folk artist whose work with fabric this exhibit celebrates. Her use of colors, threads, weaving patterns, embroidery stitches, laces, style and designs is determined by the reality of her life experience. As a result, her folk dress speaks of a communal identity, a personal social identity and the values of her society. In its most traditional expression, the language she uses is geometric in style and ancient in origin, reaching back to the pre-Christian era.



1. HEADDRESS

Headdress is an important part of a woman's folk dress. She uses it to mark the significant changes in her life and to indicate her place in the social structure of her village. How she wears her hair, what kind of hat she wears and how she wears the hat, whether or not she wears a headscarf and how she ties it, and what colors and decorations she uses usually tell whether she is a younger or older maiden, married woman, or widow. She achieves even more variety by having a different style for everyday wear, normal holiday wear, and for high festive occasions.

POCULICE are hats worn by married women throughout various regions of Croatia, notably Hrvatska Posavina, Banija, and Pokuplje. **PEČE** are headscarves worn by older married women, very often over a *poculica*. Color, embroidered designs, structure, styles of wearing, and folding techniques often are village specific. The elegant shaping of both the headscarf and the hat is achieved by interweaving or attaching fabric, wood, or metal supports to the hair. If the hair is thin, small vines are woven into the hair to strengthen it.

Unique to **KONAVLE**, south of Dubrovnik, is the "winged" headdress. The large white linen "hat," *ubručić*, is worn over a small white linen "hat," *pošica*, by married women. The *pošica* is the typical Sunday headdress; the *ubručić* is added for high festival wear. These linen headdresses are actually square pieces of bleached linen which are heavily starched and folded into the shapes seen here. Unmarried girls wear a red pillbox hat decorated with gold wrapped thread embroidery worked in circular sun/life symbolic designs.

2. RUČNICI--CEREMONIAL TOWELS

"As soon as a girl is born, you start to put together her dowry. All the women in the family begin to work on embroidered linens for her household."

Most numerous among the household linens to be found in this dowry are *ručnici*, towels for everyday use, and towels for celebration; these are ceremonial towels. Red is the dominant color, a fitting choice. Red is considered the "life" color, and ceremonial towels often celebrate life in both its physical and spiritual aspects. Weddings, christenings, food baskets, gestures of welcome and seasonal celebrations are accompanied by ceremonial towels decorated with life symbols: the pre-Christian goddess familiarly known as Mother Earth, fruits, flowers, and birds. The peacock's symbolism is two-fold: its plumage unfurled, prosperity; its "eye," protection. Since ancient times, ceremonial prayer cloths have been used to petition deities; the *ručnik* continues this ageless tradition.

A Traditional Croatian Welcome

We greet you with Bread, Salt, and Fruit on a Ceremonial Towel: Bread--Life's sustenance; Salt--Life's immortality; Fruit--prosperity; Ceremonial Towel--from ancient times, a votive offering to petition deities. To be so greeted is to be welcomed with a prayer that you will be blessed with a prosperous earthly life and rewarded with an eternal heavenly life.

3. APRONS

Aprons are an integral part of woman's folk dress in almost all regions of Croatia, with a diversity of structure, color, and design to mark regional and, at times, village identity. They fall into two categories: work aprons and festive aprons. These are festive aprons, which would be worn for holiday, holiday, community, and family celebrations. That festive aprons originally had a symbolic meaning--protection of a young woman's maidenhood--is suggested by the choreography of wedding dances in various regions, for example,

Podravina.

4. A SPINNING WHEEL, DISTAFF, and SPINDLE (*kolovrat*, *preslica*, and *vretano*) were essential to complete the dowry. The distaff, a symbol of woman's labor and duties, was a traditional gift to the bride by one of the groom's brothers. The distaff with spindle exhibited here is dressed with hemp fibers, *konoplja*, and is strung with pig gut. Spinning wheels replaced the distaff and spindle in the home; however, the latter, being portable, were often carried out into the fields.

The spinning of thread and the weaving of fabric are metaphors for the thread of life which each of us is given and for the fabric we make of our lives from that thread. Folk traditions the world over tell us that the spinning and weaving of life never end, that there is one thread that continues to bind each generation to the next and that it is woman who creates and nurtures that binding thread.

5. SLAVONIJA

Slavonija is the "breadbasket" of Croatia, and, because of its agricultural wealth and prosperity, was throughout its history a much sought after region and trading partner. This presented opportunities to become acquainted with the upper class clothing and hair styles of other cultures, which were then integrated into the original Slavic designs of the village women.

The oldest tradition in fabrics is home loomed linen and wool. Silk was introduced through its trade with Dubrovnik, and fine cotton followed in the early 19th century. Leather, sheepskin, goatskin, and wool are used for vests and outer garments. The oldest basic structure was a one piece tunic-shirt, which was replaced with a skirt, blouse, and apron as the result of a belated Baroque influence. Distinctive elements of fashion are vertical box pleating of the back of the skirt, the use of petticoats, and layering of clothing. Embroidery is worked on the loom using various combinations of warp threads and also as surface embroidery on finished fabric. A variety of stitches is used, along with cutwork and drawnwork. The use of gold and silver wrapped threads and white on white are the older, traditional colors; other colors are of relatively recent origin.

BIZOVAC folk dress celebrates the unmarried woman with its headdress of flowers and wheat. Abundant eyelet embroidery, a lavishly decorated velvet shoulder scarf, a minimum of thirteen petticoats, a "dowry bib," and colorful stockings complete this celebration of life folk dress. In **BEBRINA**, the *zlatara* folk dress is a declaration of a prosperous married woman with its gold wrapped thread embroidery. Both of these folk dresses are high festive attire.

SLAVONSKI BROD is an example of dress for everyday wear and lesser festive occasions. Notable on this piece are the butterfly design on the sleeve edge and the circles with "sun" centers in the crocheted edge of the skirt; these are ancient life symbols. The mirrors on the vest indicate an oriental influence, the result of past Ottoman presence in the area. **CERNIK** introduces an unusual sleeve treatment.

Originally, unlike most other regions, all the various styles of folk dress were worn in villages throughout the entire region, and very little distinction of a woman's marital or single status was to be found in the style and color of clothing. Differences in dress in any area of Slavonija generally were due to the type of activity in which one was engaged at any given time and one's wealth, and were not determined by village, age or marriage. It is suggested that village identity began in the latter part of the 19th century, so that, today, the *zlatara* is associated primarily with Djakovo. In all probability, the headdress of women came to determine their social status at

the same time, however, only with regard to high festive headdress.

For young maidens, high festival headdress is intricate hair braiding with open styled headdress. For married women, it is a headscarf--*šamija*--of silk, preferably black, embroidered with silver or gold wrapped thread and partly sewed, partly tied, so that the final effect is that of a luxurious cap. The headdress for everyday and lesser festive occasions for all women is the headscarf known as the *marama križara*, the headscarf with the balled fringe exhibited with the **SLAVONSKI BROD** folk dress. Various fabrics may be used for this headscarf, but the cross folding style is specifically prescribed.

Shoulder scarves are of commercial jacquard weave or plain velvet to which are added additional decoration and macramé tying of the tasseled fringe. Both shoulder scarves and collars are important to the achievement of the layered look so sought after by Slavonian women.

6. PRIGORJE and ZAGORJE

The villages of Prigorje and Zagorje offer a comparison between more remote rural villages and those villages nearer towns and cities. Fine, home loomed linen and cotton, needle worked decoration, pleating as a fashion statement, and commercially purchased ribbons and scarves nearer the towns and cities (**ŠESTINE and VRBOVEC, PRIGORJE**); heavier, coarser home loomed linen and dense linear "embroidery" patterns worked during the weaving process in more remote rural villages (**BISTRA DONJA, ZAGORJE**).

Garment structure includes a one piece dress with a full free flowing back, held in shape by the tying of the apron, and a tight fitting bodice with tapered sleeves, as well as the more common full skirted sleeveless jumper with blouse and apron. Decoration includes white on white needlework and also shows a natural talent for the use of black as an accent color for the mixture of red hues and greens.

Characteristics of the **ŠESTINE** and **MARKUŠEVAC** folk dress are the cross stitch embroidery worked over gathers, the women's sheepskin vests decorated with leather appliqué, and the men's brown wool felt vest (*lajbek*) and outer jacket (*surka*) which are heavily decorated with felt appliqué and mercerized cotton thread cording with orange the predominant color. The design elements of endless lines, and the "flowering" of these lines into circles and fruitful branches are life symbols. The triangle, since ancient times, has been a symbol of a protective deity. The birds on the **MARKUŠEVAC** blouse are a depiction of the Mother Earth goddess in her spiritual aspect.

7. HRVATSKA POSAVINA AND BANJA folk dress is characterized by a masterful diversity in decorative weaving and embroidery techniques and design, a diversity which expresses the identity of each village of the area. Home loomed linen prevails, as this is a rich flax growing region, and flowing yards of linen are used in the construction of deeply pleated skirts and aprons to serve as a canvas for embroidered designs. The older designs were geometric and worked on the loom with red as the predominant color, both design and color being of very old Slavic traditions suggestive of life generating forces. Thought to have been influenced by the Baroque Period, "cabbage rose" designs emerged, needle embroidery and appliqué joined loom embroidery, and, while red remained dominant, other colors came into use.

Characteristic of **BANIJA** is the free flowing somewhat narrow sleeve construction in contrast to the gathered, tied at the wrist "balloon" style sleeve of **HRVATSKA POSAVINA**. The **HRVATSKA POSAVINA** blouse is an example of the older

style of color and design which incorporates the Mother Earth goddess in geometric form. The **BANIJA** blouse illustrates western influences, which brought white into greater general use other than as widow's clothing and introduced needle lace and crocheted lace as major design elements.

8. JASTREBARSKO AREA

Villages near the Jastrebarsko area continue to illustrate the diversity so characteristic of Croatian folk dress. Pleating continues as an element of decoration, the structure of the garment now also includes a sleeveless jumper, a shortened bodice with unusual sleeve patterns, and color carries specific messages of village identity and social status. The white of **ČEGLJI** (*Bijela nošnja*) is an example of intricate needlework around the neckline, shoulder area, and apron. Called *nanirčano*, it is worked on top of hand smocking. A 16th century portrait of nobility's Beatrice Frankopan shows her headdress worked in this style of needlework.

KUPINEC folk dress illustrates the symbolism of style and color to indicate the social identity of women within their community. The red linear design, known as *pismo*, is worn by young women of marriageable age and, with the addition of the headdress, by women in their first year of marriage. After their firstborn, the design becomes figural, and they may no longer wear this particular hue of red. Red (*živocrveni*) symbolizes life-giving powers, good health, happiness, and good fortune. Generally, unadorned white is for mourning and is worn upon the death of a close family member, on Good Friday, All Souls Day, and on other occasions of sadness. Advancing age, with its diminished life-giving powers, requires the wearing of subdued colors and, for older widows, black. The folding pattern of the Kupinec apron is prescribed by tradition.

A regional characteristic of the Jastrebarsko area and its environs is the back vertical mini pleating of the skirt, which must be repeated after every laundering. This style of pleating is known as *šnitanje*.

9. VRLIKA

The ancient pre Christian symbols are much in evidence on the folk dress of Vrljka, and the isolation of the mountains provided for the safekeeping of old traditions. Dress embroideries, apron and vest symbols, and cowry shell belt speak of creation, sustenance, nurturing, and protection of life: stylized goddess and daughter figure with rhomb shaped field; sun circle; and triangular lined snake or wolf's teeth designs as protective amulets. All are fitting designs for woman, who is perceived as creator, nurturer, and protector of life.



Headdress denotes a woman's social status. A single woman wears a scarf over a red hat (*crven kapa*). When she becomes engaged, she decorates the red hat with the "eye" of a peacock feather, a symbolic protection against evil. Married women wear a similar head scarf; however, it is worn over a fabric covered triangular form. The triangular shape, an ancient symbol of a protective deity, is another amulet against misfortune. Perhaps centuries of defense against the Ottoman invasions resulted in these much used protective symbols.

10. BARANJA

Bounded by two rivers, the folk dress of Baranja follows two basic styles which are appropriately identified as Podravska (along the Drava River in the west) and Podunavska (along the Duna or Danube River in the east). Distinguishing features are to be found in the winter wear and in the hats: one highly decorated woven wool skirt and apron and a square shaped hat for the former; separate front and back woven wool aprons and a round shaped hat for the latter. Both styles bear a striking resemblance to the western Ukrainian folk dress along the Carpathian Mountains.

The traditional characteristics of the entire region of Baranja include home loomed wool aprons in a linear design, vertical needle lace decoration in the sleeves, various birds interspersed with florals embroidered in horizontal rows and vertical columns on various parts of the white linen dress in red, blue, black and green mercerized cotton thread.

11. KARAŠEVO

The Village of Karaševo is home to the descendants of the oldest known Croatian Diaspora. Located in the Romanian Banat area near Resite (Rešice), Karaševo and six other villages trace their migration and origins to the 14th century Croats who left their homes in, what is today, central Bosnia. Their folk dress indicates proof of their original homeland. The stylized, very rich, detailed, dense silk thread embroidery designs are replete with goddess/life imagery, and match designs found in the traditional folk dress of Bosnia, Konavle, Dalmatia, and Žumberak, all areas whose people were touched by Eastern Byzantine and oriental Turkish influences. Similar intense colors and the dense embroidery using cross stitch and counted flat stitch are also found in Dalmatia. Garments are made of bleached home loomed linen, wool, and sheepskin, with vests and jackets trimmed with leather appliqué. Note the use of close pleating to effect a slim skirt.

12. BOSNA (BOSNIA)

Christian and Moslem Croats have lived as neighbors for centuries in Bosnia, the legacy of Ottoman rule, making their individual identities known through the color and style of their clothing. The exhibited folk dress is that of a Christian woman. The long tunic shirt is home loomed cotton, the main decoration being the puckered design woven into the fabric. Embroidered designs were always minimal, which makes the embroidered panels on the sleeves unusual, even more so because they depict the ancient goddess as Tree of Life guarded by stags. Worn underneath this tunic shirt is a coarser, home loomed linen modified *dimija*, a pantaloone type of woman's trousers. The *dimija* is a Turkish Moslem element which all women, Christian as well as Moslem, were required to wear by law. Catholic women attempted to cover this required garment as much as possible. Scarf headdresses of the Christian woman are worn by both the unmarried and married, with darker hues predominating.

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COVER PIECE:

Embroidery detail on blouse sleeve from a woman's folk dress, Posavina region

EXHIBIT

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