

THE UNIVERSITY OF ART AND DESIGN

CLUJ-NAPOCA

PhD THESIS IN ART

THE GRAPHISM OF ELEMENTS IN ROMANIAN RELIGIOUS EMBROIDERY

(14TH TO 19TH CENTURY)



SUMMARY

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CLUJ-NAPOCA

2016

The technique of religious embroidery, a complex and precious art (through the materials used and the message illustrated) has reached a historical stage when its qualities and its visual impact are significantly diminished, as a result of technological evolution. Aesthetically speaking, this is explained by the industrialization and consequent standardization of the techniques of working with fabrics which lead to a loss in the uniqueness and aesthetic value of the embroidery pieces (which, at their time of creation, used to be a reference point).

This PhD thesis graphically illustrates the road that Romanian religious embroidery followed throughout the centuries (14th to the 19th), painstakingly noting its beauty and complexity, the evolution and modification in the techniques and fabrics used. The analysis focuses on embroidered fabric pieces that were created in the centuries mentioned above (when embroidery was seen as Art, not applied art). It is worth mentioning that this special place was gained through the compositional rendering of religious themes, through base treatment, through stylistical innovations in tune with the evolution of mural paintings, miniatures etc. In short, a closer look is devoted to the treatment of religious themes, whereas everything which falls under the category of *stylistical innovation* is also taken into account.

This paper represents the gist of the author's preoccupation for fabric arts in general and embroidery in particular. Consequently, it is an illustration of the complexity of religious embroidery, from the multiple points of view of themes and techniques (with an emphasis on the embroidery point), alongside the plastic expressivity of embroidered bases and the plasticity of material coupling (gold and silver thread with coloured silk thread).

The overall goal of this thesis is not that of analyzing the embroidery pieces from the perspective of the religious message or the theological perspective of using them in church. The embroidered pieces are considered from the perspective of *aesthetic analysis*: the artistic ways of rendering these theological messages, the composition of embroidered bases, the colours, the visual effects obtained through the techniques of manipulation of light on carefully constructed bases, the structure resulting from the joining of embroidery points sewn in different rhythms and techniques, using various embroidery steps and multiple thread twists.

The chapters of this paper are arranged in a logical manner, reflecting an order of thinking that the author believes essential.

The first chapter, *The Embroidery of Religious Fabric Artefacts* (and its first subchapter, *1.1. Antique Influences and Continuity in the Ornamenting of Religious Fabric Objects*) shows a historical view of embroidered pieces, taking into account their evolution alongside technical development.

Understandably, this chapter focuses on various cultures that developed on the territory of nowadays Romania, casting light on profound or superficial influences that followed them. Religious embroidery is seen from the perspective of the materials used, the type of ornaments and the major aesthetic modifications brought about by the passing of time. The impact of symbols (seen as means of visualizing of the non-figurative and as compositional elements both in religious and (subsequent) lay embroidery) is mentioned in the second part of the first chapter.

The old Neolithic cultures and the Bronze Age, as developed on the territory of our country, are remarkable through an ornamental wealth of textiles and embroidered pieces, according to archaeological discoveries. During the course of history, there were notable influences from other civilization and art currents: the Greek-Roman, Byzantine, Oriental, Northern, all of these bringing along their influences, be they profound or superficial. The ornaments were made by weaving and embroidery with wool thread, then silk thread and finally evolving to complex metallic threads of gold, silver and other valuable materials.

Over the centuries, religious textile pieces have suffered major modifications. Romanian embroidery has had a parallel evolution to the other parts of Europe, improving constantly due to the influence of Byzantine workshops and works of art, be they Constantinopolitan, Serbian or Macedonian. The transformation is clear, from the monumentality of religious objects in 14th to 16th century to the decorative pieces of 18th to 19th century whose decorative compositions have the clear value of marking the transition from an exclusively religious embroidery to a lay embroidery. Even though religious embroidery changes to lay embroidery, the composition of these embroidered pieces still keeps numerous symbols.

As compositional elements represented in religious textile pieces, symbols have the strength of changing simple embroidered signs to elements of interest from the point of view of transcendent reality (the meaning and importance of symbols constitutes the gist of subchapter *1.2. Symbols in Romanian religious embroidery*)

In all the religious embroidered pieces analyzed in this PhD thesis we will encounter symbols pertaining to more categories. Be they figurative, cosmic, sacred, geometric, zoomorphic, vegetal, in various combinations and sizes, according to the theme rendered in

the embroidered piece, they succeed in visualizing the non-figurative and hence every detail gains meaning and value. In religious embroidery of 14th to 19th centuries symbol representation has a massive importance in understanding the message of the scenes that are represented. The symbols are the elements with a huge iconographical and artistic impact in textile pieces.

The second chapter, *The Plasticity of the Embroidery of Romanian Religious Fabrics* encompasses the research undertaken in this paper. The first sub-chapter, *2.1. Elements and Technical Procedures Used in Religious Embroidery* focuses on the technical stages of embroidery throughout the 14th up to the 19th century, mentioning the basic shapes that structure an embroidered piece. This basically technical part of this PhD thesis shows the possibilities of embroidery to join the other arts of the time, as one of the most representative parts of decorative arts, through its artistic beauty and technical complexity.

From the point of view of iconography, embroidery is a technique that is close to mural painting, through the use of valuable thread; it succeeds in harmoniously combining metallic thread with coloured silk fibres in a theatre of light and shade through which compositional centres are focused on according to the theme.

“The balance in the use of colours, character representation, the graphism of the outline of character clothing are essential characteristics of religious embroidery in Romania.”¹

Embroidery is one of the oldest means of ornamenting textile pieces, religious embroidery being characterized by the means of aesthetic improvement of the clothing used in the religious ritual.

The large sizes and the important compositional surfaces allow for impressive embroidery, seen from the technical point of view. According to the technique used, the embroidery of textile religious pieces are divided into many different categories: *filled* – made through the means of multiple types of knots or *applied* – obtained by applying beads and sparkles. Manual embroidery features embroidery points (the part of thread that remains on the surface of the textile base between two needle pokes) which, by putting together and combining, form embroidered surfaces that are equivalent to compositional shapes. The embroidery point is defined by the embroidery step which determines the quality of the former having in view the length. The embroidery step can be long or short. The embroidery

¹ Émile Turdeanu, *La Broderie religieuse en Roumanie. Les eEpitaphioie moldaves aux 15e et 16e siècles*, National Printing House, 1941, pp. 36-50

point is the basic element that contributes to the delineating of an artistic vocabulary as far as the technique of embroidery is concerned. There is a great variety of embroidery points and they shape the surface by providing outlines. The resulting parts differ in height, so that the embroidery becomes two-dimensional or three-dimensional. The materials used in embroidery were of two types: natural fibres (cotton, silk) and metallic threads (gold, golden or silver). In order to create a specific colouring, a mixture of threads is also used (silk, cotton and other natural fibres wrapped around metallic thread).

Romanian religious embroidery had a constant evolution in 14th to 17th centuries when it was characterized by an impeccable technique (short embroidery points of valuable metallic thread and silk thread) and a technical retrogression in 18th to 19th centuries when embroidery became easier to make, since there was a marked loss in the quality and quantity of the materials used.

The subchapters 2.2. *Embroidery of religious clothing* and 2.3. *Embroidery of shrine objects and funeral textiles* present Romanian embroidered pieces that are used in the religious ritual, underlining the stylistical evolution by century and according to the types of religious textiles. Their analysis is done from a structural-formal perspective (artistic visual language, composition, colours), as well as from a technical point of view (embroidery points, fibres, metallic threads etc.). Another idea tackled in this chapter is that of iconography themes represented by each piece, according to the canon that has to be obeyed stylistically and chromatically.

Well-chosen examples support the author's findings: from the first religious embroidery pieces dating from the time of Vlaicu-Vodă (1374) – which no longer exist as a result of the use of natural materials- to the religious works of art at Tismana Monastery (1380), Cozia Monastery (1396), Putna Monastery (14th century), St Nicholas' Church in Rădăuți (1400)².

The scenes represented on these religious articles of clothing respect the canon (gold, silver, coloured silk on a silk or linen base). It is worth mentioning that some characteristics are delineated by red silk or pearl laces.

The 14th century is remarkable from the point of view of composition and rendering of embroidered pieces (such as *The Epitaph of Princesses Euthymia and Eupraxia* that has a Serbian-Byzantine background and can be found at Putna Monastery)³. The theme is

² Ion Barnea, Octavian Iliescu, Corina Nicolescu, *Byzantine Culture in Romania: La culture byzantine en Roumanie*, Bucharest, 6th-12th September 1971, p.123

³ Gabriel Millet, *Broderie religieuse de style Byzantin*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1947, pl. CLIX

canonical from the iconographical point of view, while the composition is in accordance with the aesthetic principles of Byzantine art. Decorative textiles show a visible evolution (when compared to those made in the centuries before) but they are not sufficiently exquisite from the point of view of the embroidery techniques used.

A notable improvement in embroidery is triggered by the organizing of embroidery workshops in monasteries (an example being *The Epitaph of Siluan* – a work of art made at Neamțu Monastery in 1437, one of the most complex embroidered pieces from the multiple points of view of the composition, the colours, the technique used). This embroidery piece bridges the gap between 15th and 16th centuries through iconographical innovations, balance, artistic expression of the composition and exquisite technique. It will become a prototype for Romanian religious embroidery.

The establishment of Putna Monastery had a central role in the development of cultural-artistic life during the time of Ștefan cel Mare with the emergence of the *Moldavian style* that integrates Byzantine, Gothic and Renaissance elements in an artistic vision specific to Romanian spirituality.

The embroidered pieces from Putna Monastery have a great documentary importance and clear artistic value in the introduction of the portraits of the donors in the compositional base. The oldest of such representations is the epitachelion made in 1427 for rulers Alexandru cel Bun and Marina (whose portraits are included in the lower part of the epitachelion).

Most such textile pieces that feature portraits are to be found in monastery museums. (e.g. The Epitachelion of Govora – 1480, The Epitachelion of Dobrovăț - 1504 and others). The works of art from these workshops bear the names of the first embroidery artists (the monks Zosima, Ioil, Mardarie).

The imagery of religious textile pieces is tightly bound to the painting style of that time.

The 15th century marks a climax as far as the artistic and technical development of embroidery is concerned. There is a great Byzantine influence, especially noticeable in the knots, in the treatment of the base, in the rendering of light and volume with the help of metallic threads.

15th to 16th century Moldavia is remarkable through the great embroidery pieces made during the time of Ștefan cel Mare (their unquestionable artistic and documentary value is evident both from the point of view of history and technique).

15th and 16th centuries are remarkable through the embroidery that perfectly obeys the iconographic canon and the technique. The gold and silver threads used on a large scale create metallic shapes; the silk threads are used for the outlining of the shapes, chromatically pinpointing to the important elements. The overall effect is contrasting tones obtained by light reflection on the differently textured bases.

The Epitaphs of Dobrovăț - 1506 and Slatina -1556 are proof of the technical and compositional complexity.

The embroidered pieces made in the workshops in Moldavia and Wallachia have common characteristics up to the 15th century, but they will suffer different compositional, iconographic and technical influences from then on. Wallachian embroidery tends to stay more traditional from the point of view of representation and technique, while Moldavian embroidery begins to feature elements of Eastern influence. The Byzantine influence is felt in the making of the knots, in the treatment of the base, in the rendering of light and in the three-dimensionality acquired with the help of metallic thread.

The embroidery of 17th and 18th centuries begins to lose artistic value, its departure from the Byzantine style marking the passage from sacred to lay, from the iconic to the natural and the decorative. The technical qualities also begin losing ground, as traditional decorative motifs mark their way into unexpected compositions. The Western influence introduces this change in the religious art that becomes a means of representing the beautiful and the elegant with a wealth of materials.

The visual effects take first place, while the value or the perfection of the execution comes second. These lay pieces are dominated by luxury and elegance. The technique of religious embroidery is no longer of paramount importance, the threads are no longer of top quality, the embroidery points do not occur frequently on the base. The compositions have important edges, made up of vegetal elements inspired from Baroque painting. *The Icon Clothing at St George's Church* in Bucharest is representative chromatically, compositionally and mainly symbolically.

The big textile pieces have a clear decorative character and feature ornamental edges that usually represent a winding stem and floral elements embroidered with golden silver thread. The heraldic symbol of Wallachia (an eagle carrying the cross in its beak and a crown supported by a medallion) that can be found on *The Icon Clothing at St George's Church* in Bucharest is worth mentioning.

The narrative character of these textile pieces is remarkable in the value given to the portraits. The portraits of the donors are painstakingly made, so that the embroidered pieces

gain documentary value. Alongside other characteristics of the embroidery of this century, the shapes are clearly delineated and the characters have obvious outlines made by using another type of thread that focuses on the faces, the hands or symbolic elements of the composition⁴.

The portraits of the donors and the scenes of the donation change their compositional importance by a marked departure from the canons. The religious textile pieces show the image of the donors or the deceased on great compositional surfaces, turning into documents of the historical time. Simion and Ieremia Movilă, the portraits of Tudosca and Ion (wife and son of ruler Vasile Lupu) are all important portraits. These works of art are exquisite, even if we take into account the retrogression from the prior value of embroidered pieces⁵.

The embroidery of 19th century is inferior to the other centuries considered from all the points of view. The compositions lose monumentality, the colours are abundant, but without exquisite shades of colours, the technique is reinvented. The gold and silver threads are replaced by lower quality silver threads, gems are replaced by sparkles and beads and technically speaking some important steps are overlooked. The pieces of 19th century are two-dimensional and their beauty only resides in the colour contrast between the metallic threads and the base. They only keep part of the old Byzantine embroidery techniques that strictly followed the canon (thematically, compositionally and technically).

The Epitaph of Samurcășești Monastery worked by Zoe Samurcăș (founder of the monastery) in 1808 is proof of the embroidery of the time. The iconographical theme is obeyed, but the wish to show a wealth of materials at the expense of technical perfection is also noticeable. The shaping of the surfaces through the light shining on the embroidery knots disappears, while the technique is that of painting with threads in multiple hues or shades of colour. The textile piece is a combination of painted and embroidered parts.

“The evolution phases of Romanian medieval embroidery is in accordance with the evolution of all the artistic genres. They show the history of the material and spiritual culture of the Romanian people along five centuries, from the points of view of the technique, iconography, themes and art. It is a way of rendering the taste and aspirations, the mentality and sensibility, the knowledge and human relationships in 14th to 18th century Romanian society⁶.

⁴ Ibid, p. 34

⁵ Pauline Jonstone, *The Byzantine Tradition in Church Embroidery*, Alec Tiranti, London, 1967, p. 45

⁶ Mariana Sturzu, *The Science of Working with Thread*, *Lumina* Newspaper, article, 13th February 2012

The third chapter presents the conclusions illustrated in the personal artistic endeavour of the author of this paper, namely fabric pieces of art inspired by Romanian embroidery. The sharp interest for the influence of light on the shapes resulted from the rhythm of embroidery points, as well as the subtle creation of space by the juxtaposing of different textures are the main topics of the personal artistic portfolio.

The creative path mentioned above is based on the study of light as reflected by fabric bases. The author's personal preoccupation in the domain of fabric art originates in the study of traditional techniques of manipulation of textile fibres and threads (considering both the loom-based manipulation and the techniques of intertwining the wool with various types of thread and natural fibers – wool, cotton, silk – in combination with unconventional materials). This study of the effect of light began when the author was still a university student and all the works of art created in that period were a way of rendering the examples studied and the documentary material that helped delineate the ideas that support this artistic endeavour.

The author's artistic portfolio focuses on the embroidery point seen from a new perspective, as it is enlightened by the fabric base designed manually through techniques of weaving and wool intertwining.

The research in weaving with natural textile materials continued and imprinted on a series of works of art in which the visibility of the simple knot was replaced by a structure of unwoven wool in compact weaving. Light reveals the sensibility of the unprocessed fibre, giving birth to interesting light effects from some viewpoints.

Two-dimensional works of art also comprise those in which the base is not woven, but intertwined (the intertwining technique being based on the direct contact with the textile fibre which yields a well-textured base. Apart from natural fibers, the author also used unconventional materials, thus researching the glowing effect of gold foil on various bases.)

The noteworthy artistic breakthrough of the author of this PhD thesis is created at the meeting point of classical techniques of handling textiles (weaving, intertwining, embroidery) with modern techniques (mechanical sewing, intertwining, thermal transfer of surfaces that have been processed in graphic design programs such as Photoshop or Corel Draw on a wool base).

The mixture of classical and modern techniques of working with fabrics adds to the beauty of fabric compositions in which two-dimensional decorative elements harmoniously join accents of three-dimensionality on which light glows in a multitude of reflections (wool

and cotton absorb the light, while silk or metallic thread emphasizes the reflections of light on compositional bases).