



SIMONA BORTIȘ-SCHULTZ

WOMEN'S WORK

WOMEN'S WORK: THE SEMIOTICS OF THE ROMANIAN BLOUSE

simona

*“A-ți lua inima în dinți” or to
hold one’s heart in one’s teeth
is a Romanian proverb meaning to
brave forward despite fear.*



*Dedicated to my grandmothers and
to all those who endure in creating even
while surrounded by rubble.*



First views upon entry into the Motherland, August 2022.



Babi Zeni (left) posing with unknown friend or relative.



Baba Floare (right) pictured on her wedding day.

THANK YOU

Ian, Dave, Lorena and Natalia, my advisors, who are continually awe inspiring and motivating. Lou and Roger whose patience, support and love would have not made this grad stuff possible. To my sister, Lavinia, for reading my thesis and offering helpful feedback and sharing her ancient Romanian blouse collection. To my parents for their continued support of all I do.

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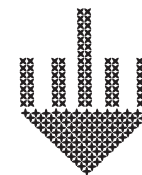
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MOTHERS

OF THE BLOUSE

A womb is a mysterious and infinite universe. While pregnant, I felt a potent connection to all the mothers who ever were. Galaxies, constellations, planets and life itself all swirled around in this dark, moist and mystifying world. That a tiny seed bloomed into existence, was nurtured in my body then emerged kicking and screaming into the world was both wondrous and terrifying. The feminine archetype represents an urge to breathe life in and propagate, and where birth, death and regeneration are one.

Female deities were worshiped and connected to this bubbling, cosmic cycle and it's very clearly visible in a myriad of female figurines and painted ceramics unearthed all over Romania. Spiraled bold lines emanate from the fatty and fertile, feminine body parts in ceramic forms dating from 4,300 to 4,200 B.C. excavated in the region of what is now Northeastern Romania.¹ The artifacts' markings spell out a communication of ideas on the surface of the body. These deliberate, vibrational lines revere the feminine form and inspire a communal identity. Through tattooing or clothing one cannot be sure, these radiating markings act like a prayer exalting the power of the Goddess and the swatting away of bad vibes.



I smile upon seeing another sculptural relic from a village called Frumușica or “Pretty One” of six joyful, feminine figures fused

eternally in a ring, their shoulders and feet glued together as their nubile behinds show off their fertility in the 5th millennium.² Melting together these figures dance the *hora* from the Neolithic and beyond; These artifacts were crafted by the Cucuteni-Trypillia civilization, a Neolithic culture (c. 5500 to 2750 B.C.) of what is now parts of the Ukraine, Moldova and Romania and one of the earliest known European artisans. Their culture was a matriarchal, Goddess worshiping, peaceful society of subsistence farmers and salt harvesters.³

These craftswomen carefully painted robust lines of chevrons, spirals and all-seeing eyes on objects that were sacred to them and called out to a God that existed in the form of a woman. These matriarchs prospered and created detailed designs with red, black or white pigments, and wove textiles. They were a community of makers who must have been free and well-fed enough to have the resources to create. Ceramic vessels ornamented with the pubic triangle shaped chevron are one of the earliest exaltations to the mythical feminine deity and life as we know it.⁴ Early pigments forming a diamond shape with seeds inside reveal the nurturing of life and pregnancy.⁵ Meandering waves point to the sustenance of water and the power of Mother Earth.⁶ The all-seeing eye protects and is vigilant on vessels for worship and nourishment.⁷ These are only some of ancient symbols from this matriarchal civilization that have been passed down from ancient hands to create and adorn what would later become the Romanian traditional blouse.

The pioneering use of the warp weighted loom in this maternal culture is an instrument that continues to be used today in the heirloom construction of the peasant blouse.⁸ A vision forms in my mind of Cucuteni mothers clustered near a fire comfortable in their skins and female camaraderie, as they diligently create, while children scamper around freely playing in the dirt of their homeland. Indo-European nomadic warriors and early ancestors of the Dacians may have eclipsed this pacifist, matriarchal culture.⁹ Warfare and unrest have since continually plagued this corner of the world. Meditating on this placid moment of creativity is like a healing balm. Who were these women if not heroines of design? The merit of their perseverance continues. Their legacy lives on in the many surviving embroidered symbols meant to fortify our earthly trials in the forms of the chevron, meandering sign, fertility diamond, all-seeing eye, rams horns, snake, comb and spirals that survive like charms on the shoulders of modern day women holding up a world we are still struggling to understand.









DACIA

As kids we would examine our ears in hopes of finding ancient, warrior lineage. This was a game among stints like sharing one piece of chewing gum until its flavor ran out. If your ear was attached, you evolved from those who believed themselves to be the descendants of wolves. The Dacians were hairy, bearded Thracians part nomadic, early Iranian or Scythian, and a touch Celtic who wore wolf skins, and were fierce, noble and rebellious.¹⁰ Romanians prefer stemming from these ethnic Dacian tribes. Prosperous and fiercely independent, they gave the Roman Empire a run for its money. With shields emblazoned with a wolf's head and the body of a dragon, they charged ahead amassing wealth and power in their barbarian corner of the world.¹¹

Emperor Trajan, spurned by the Dacians' refusal to bow down, sent tens of thousands of troops to Dacia and set off consecutive wars between 101 and 106 A.D. In Rome, Trajan's column stands at 620 feet tall; erected on the golden spoils of Dacia, the friezed edifice features 2,662 figures in 155 carved scenes depicting these two endless, bloody wars between the Dacians and the Romans.¹² Loosely gathered, home spun and plant derived tunics worn by Dacian warriors delicately preserved and carved on this tower exist as the precursor to the traditional Romanian folk garment carried forth as a culture's surviving artifact.

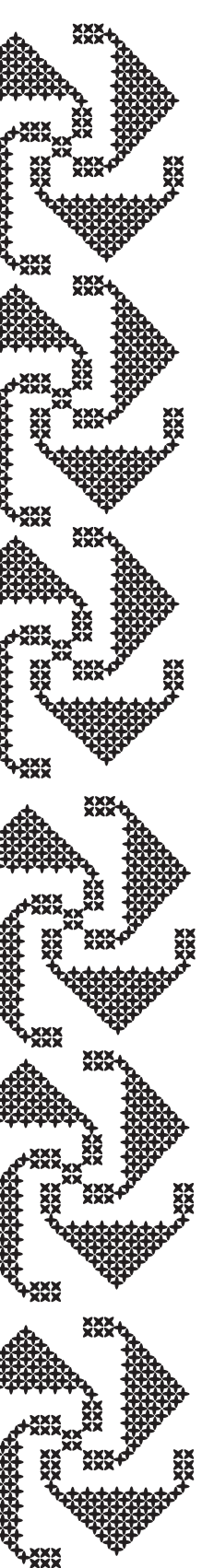
These battles culminated in Rome gathering over 500,000 Dacian slaves; 10,000 of whom were paraded and tortured over a month's time in the showy propaganda of Roman gladiator games. Fertile Dacia was soon after colonized by Roman veterans; a coerced canoodling of the surviving Dacian women with these Roman soldiers proceeded to produce modern day Romanians.¹³ There is no honor in being descended from the aggressor, the colonizer and the group who eviscerated the beauty that was firmly planted. My ear is not attached and so I must live with this unsettling history.

The Dacians' wolf god, Zalmoxis, they believed watched over as protector, and to this day the Romanian folk garment has wolf fangs stitched on the edges of sleeves as an amulet of safety from dark spirits in the night.¹⁴ The slow and steady progress of cultivating, harvesting, scutching and then ultimately weaving together the strands of the unshakable hemp plant, to produce shelter



from the elements while garnering pride in its achievement and design was the work of women. It must have been these tenacious Dacian women who continued the making of these sturdy, hemp made caftans while retaining the elements and language of their indigenous identity.

Threads of the Dacian language remain on the Latinized tongue of Romanians because of these enduring women. The cry of a mother to her child is the preserved Dacian word for offspring, in *copil* and *prunc*.¹⁵ I mourn these ancestors from thousands of years ago who were all but smothered from existence due to their power, artistry and courage. I am consoled by the realization that this fruitful women's work lives on within the lush fibers of the Romanian blouse and woven within the cornucopia of its language.



Salutări din România.



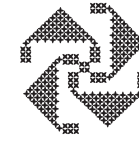
Opposite: Charity stamps circa 1906 featuring Queen Elisabeth wearing folk garb weaving and spinning. Vintage postcard greetings from Romania.



Brooklyn Museum Costume Collection at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of the Brooklyn Museum, 2009; Museum Expedition 1920 and 1921, Robert B. Woodward Memorial Fund, 1921.



Queen Elisabeth wearing peasant garb in 1882. Photo by Franz Duscheck.



FOLK

REVIVAL

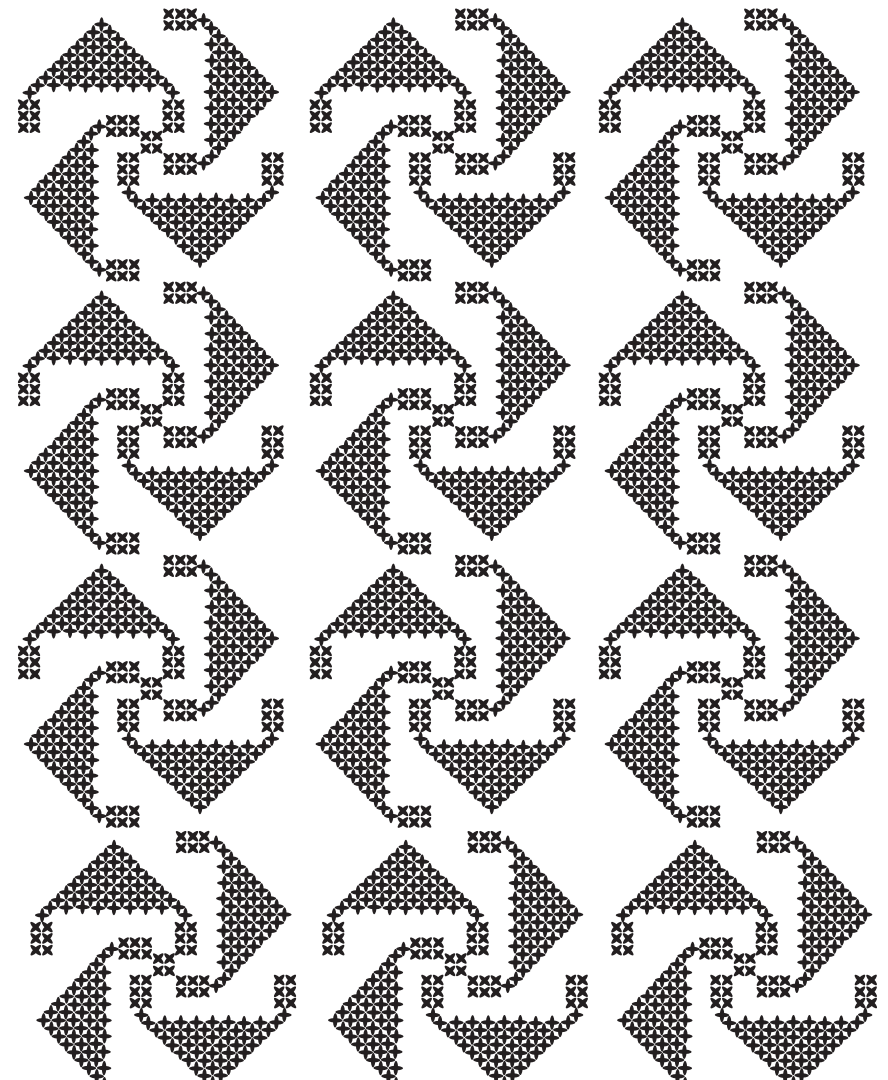
Threaded graphic patterns tell a story with luscious motifs of red, stark drops of azure and cooling, white silk stars sit waiting to be adored in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Romanian traditional blouse collection. It makes us pause in seeing its magnetic ornamented glory, at a time when the quickening stride of the world feels like too much and we look back at a slower, more sustainable pace that highlighted the work of the human hand.

Skein winder symbol of regeneration shown above.

This garment from the late 1800s from Romania, appeared during the start of bustling, factory work and mass, impersonal production. It was an age when the world fell back in love with the artisanal goods of rural folk. Made from living, breathing hemp plants not rushed nor squandered. The green stems were harvested from the outskirts of tiny villages. Retted, dried and scutched, and then woven into cloth by rural girls and women, who continued this ritual for thousands of years.¹⁶ They created cloth out of a need to clothe themselves and their families. Busy, calloused hands embellished tirelessly into the night and created a nation's homespun treasure that eventually found its way into textile's art history. Ancient female hands were to guide and transpose this customary visual language into a covering for the body that resurfaced into the fast forward of the industrial age to claim its rightful place.

It was a similar blouse that Elisabeta of Wied, Romania's first Queen, was given by her husband, his royal highness Carol I, as a wedding present in 1869. Befitting a newly adopted Queen with a brand new country full of ripe traditions, Elisabeta's fascination with the Romanian folk costume would persevere as photographs would show her wearing the Romanian folk costume every chance she got. Her union produced an only child, a daughter, who died from scarlet fever as a toddler. The Queen, a creative spirit, patron of the arts and poet, screamed out her grief into ballads that washed over the waves of the Black Sea in hopes of reaching the ears of her dead child. Writing under the name Carmen Sylva, she wrote not only poetry, but also many articles on Romanian traditional folk arts and crafts.¹⁷

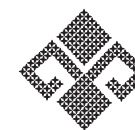
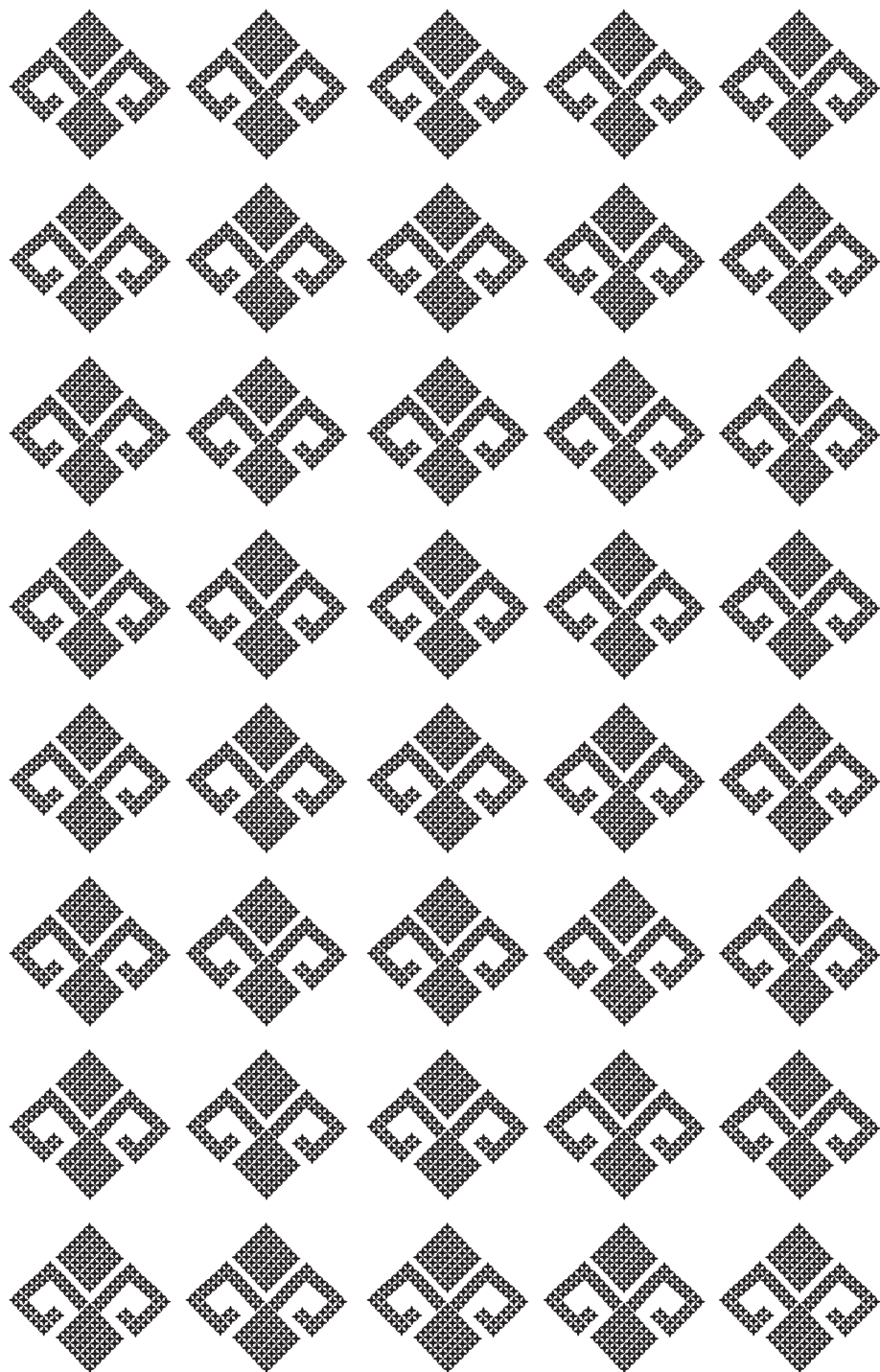
Forming the first women's traditional work association aptly called "Furnica" or "Ant," under the direction of Elena Cornescu, this group preserved a dowry full of ancient motifs and patterns in books and publications that survive today. Makers of the Romanian blouse seek out this 1902 manuscript of embroidered symbols to create their own coverings of adornment.¹⁸ A forever grieving mother who happened to be royalty, preserved the masterpieces of a country and placed fastidious, unschooled women and their work on a pedestal.





Al. Bădăuță, *Images Roumaines*. Bucuřești, "Adevarul Edition. 1932 *Șezatoare in Tismana*.



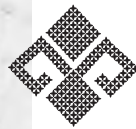


ȘEZĂTOARE

On Peasant Craft's Youtube channel I watch a pleasant, rural lady of about eighty going through the motions of weaving, and adjusting the reeds holding varying strings of an intricate pattern. The motif is made up of a white silk on an off-white cloth. She explains that this section is for the sleeves. Rural women created cloth on a weaving loom called a "război."¹⁹ This word has two meanings in Romanian defining both a weaving loom and the act of war. I can only guess that because of the contrasting movements of two forces combining in tying up strands would be similar to dueling forces intersecting, overlapping and coming into forceful contact. Painstakingly and slowly formed, hemp fibers join together into durable cloth. The thread dyed using flowers and herbs is then hand stitched into the constructed fabric for eternal wear. The woven-in pattern on the loom featuring intricate seamless designs transforms into a more recent variation.



Seeing this process of weaving in its purely analog, hand crafted, heirloom precision, I am reflecting on the fact that it's a dying art form. In Tudor Pamfilie's book on *The Domestic Industry of the Romanian People* written in 1909, skilled weavers and craftspeople in Western Europe had nearly disappeared. In Eastern Europe, the handmade way of making was still alive and well. Industrialization progressed at a snail's pace in this part of the world where literacy remained low, especially among rural women, until the 1950s.²⁰ However, the power of myth and the steady workings of traditional craft flourished. According to Leonard Shlain's *Alphabet versus the Goddess*, art and design prospered in ancient civilizations where the archetypal feminine energy of symbolic making was glorified before the age of literacy and the draw of words.



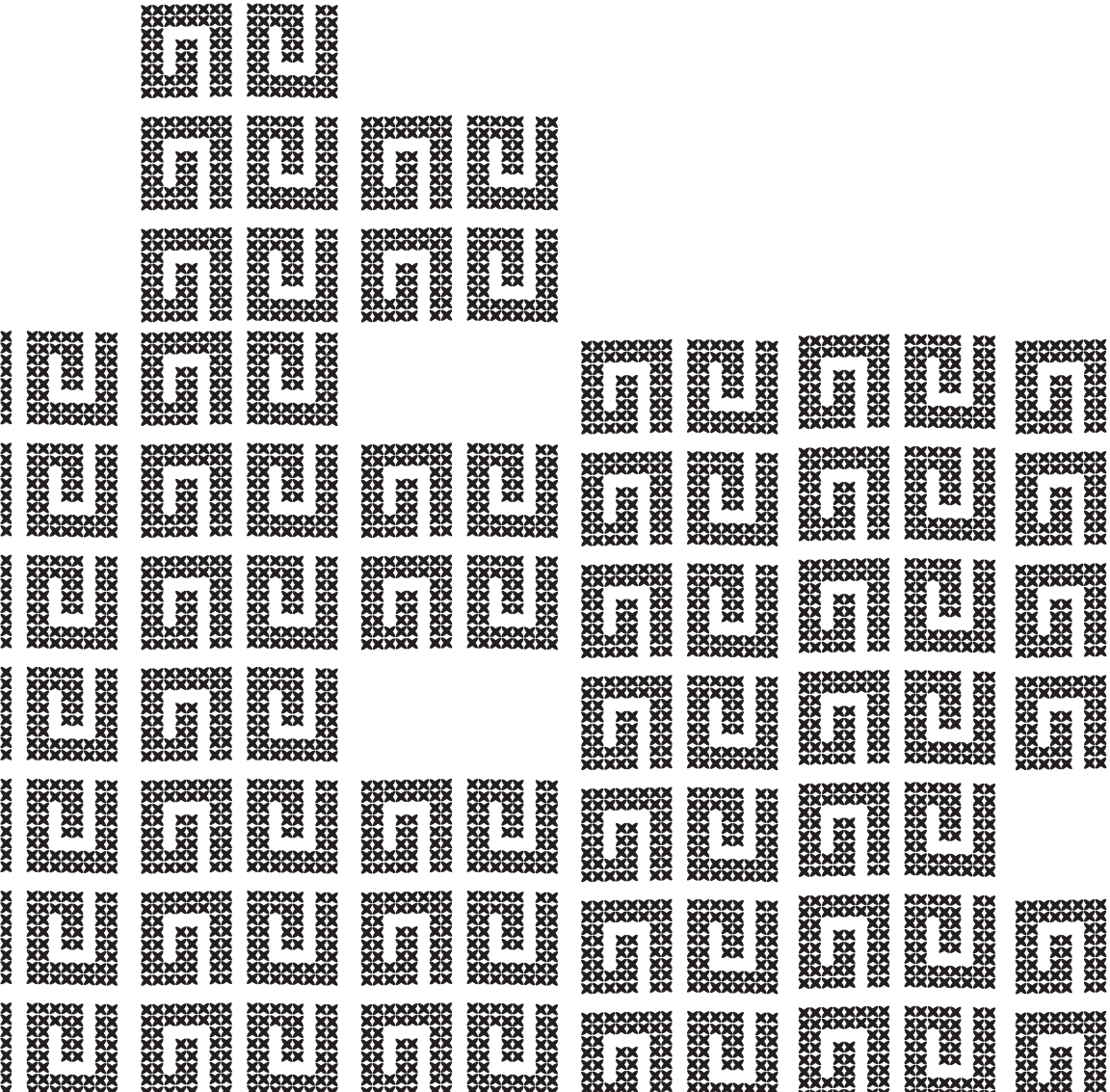
I can only imagine the warm glow of conversation in a tightly packed room filled with chattering women as they wove or embroidered. Meticulous and tedious women's work, female hands worked busily indoors while on leave from the sweltering summer's work in the fields. While carefully assembling these garments for dowries and wedding ceremonies, these women formed their own sanctuaries of female kinship with their own social code. They became queens of making within their patriarchal society and family circles.

Described as a "Șezătoare" or "sit in", where a woman planned a work week or more for herself and her female family members and friends.²¹ A respite from the patrilinear hierarchy in Romanian culture, this work space was theirs alone and where they were solely in charge, and free to focus on being makers, artisans and designers. Visiting suitors had to win the approval of the older women usually stationed closest to the door, whereas the sultry maidens sat protectively in the back. A flirting, brazen bachelor needed the permission of the gate-keeping matriarchs to even make his acquaintance known to his intended prospect.

It was a social dance within the rules of a community of women. These making circles of mainly unschooled women were diligently building what would become the surviving, ethnographic map of Romanian artisanal folk wear. Over the millenia, this consistent, customary and regional women's work and its visual language would define a country and its people.







CEAUȘESCU'S

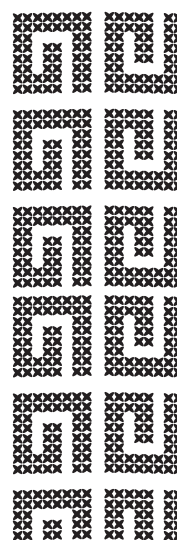
PEASANTS

New Year's Eve in communist Romania rolled all holiday celebrations into one and played out as an all-night "reveilion" TV party. It was the one occasion per year when there was more than two hours of black and white TV programming. Nonstop kitschy folk songs and national Romanian traditional outfits swirled and twirled in a synchronized national frenzy. "Doinas" the Romanian traditional songs of lamentation were sung across chants of "Ceașescu and the People" along with a chorus of government achievements.

Contraries, progression symbol shown above.

On state radio, the agricultural goal posts of the Romanian peasant farmer had been lauded to the extreme; if one were to sum it all up, the harvested crops would outrun Romania's actual physical borders. It was folk mania on steroids and it ran all night to the tune of grown ups offscreen dancing and drinking palinka into the wee hours. I would dread the hokeyness and the overplayed visual tapestry of the Romanian peasant in their Sunday best. The stitched patterns of peasant women's hard earned dowries tainted by manipulation. Refashioned as a trophy of Ceasescu's accomplishments, the "national costume", which is what the traditional folk garment was now called, replaced the individual.

The Romanian peasant's traditional life and customs and artisanal making was glorified in public. It was uprooted and eviscerated in private. Collectivization had taken away many lands and livestock for the benefits of the state decades before. Farmers were enslaved to providing for the government's henchmen. All were forced to clap for an oppressor who utilized ancient customs and clothing to create a façade of solidarity. Rural ways of making were heralded while the music blared, but villages and traditional life were razed and generational lands destroyed and taken behind closed doors. Ceaușescu hoped to erase 8,000 to 8,500 of Romania's 11,000 rural villages in an effort to centralize all into cemented, agroindustrial complexes.²²

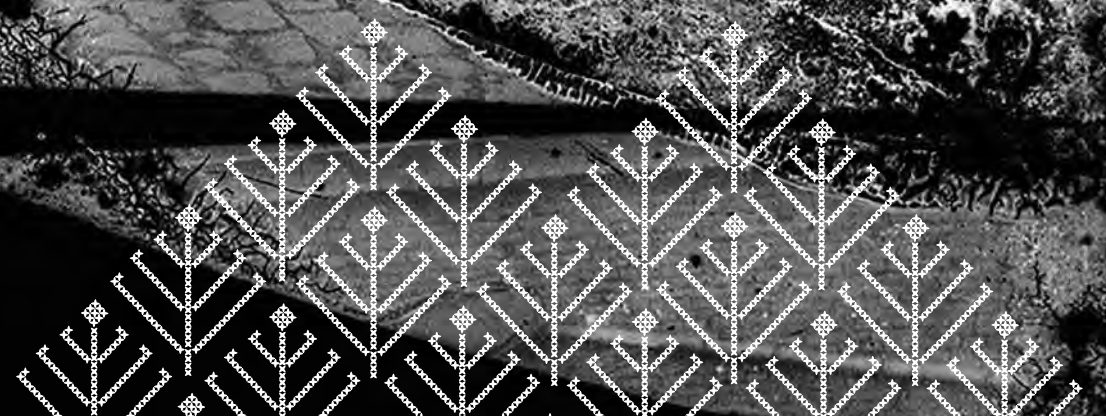


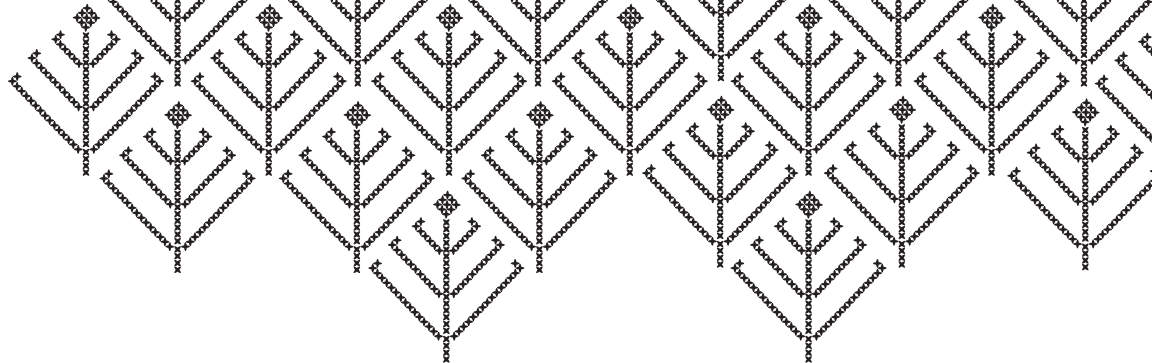
Piling them in like sardines so as to keep tabs on who says "da" and who does not. Productivity and production were paramount. All sense of home or belonging was stripped away to become one of the many pawns of the state. Warm, earthen floors were replaced by cold concrete. So much else during Ceasescu's 24-year rule per arts and culture propagation was stunted, rewritten, censored and obliterated. So much so, that my parents decided to stray away from studying liberal arts and veered only to the rational and unbiased sciences. There were no lies in mathematics.



Romanians wearing the "national costume" in Ceasescu's parade, 1986. Courtesy Wikimedia commons.







WORLD

In a decaying classroom with drippy faucets, where school halls smelled of bleach spilled onto bathroom floors used to disinfect the squatty style Turkish toilets, we learned life skills from the stern, “Tovarășă” or Comrade who was our teacher. I remember sewing an x shape as a unit for manifesting a traditional motif, but I barely remember this rich expertise now.

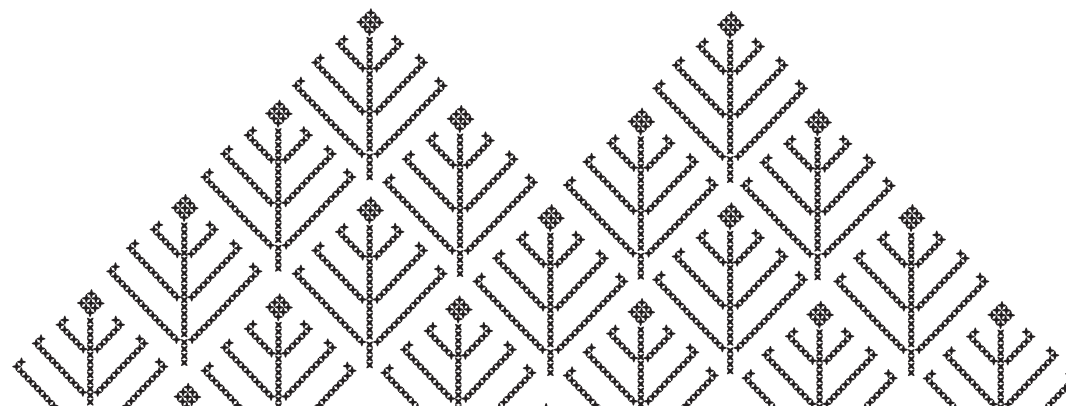
I do seem to have the superpower at times to change space but not time. Maybe I am in tune with the mythical feminine which is all about being. The womblike inner workings immersing one world within another. In melting the confines of a physical space with the ornamentation on its walls, I feel I am able to gift a better version of space for others to experience. In this same way the hands of the maker of each Romanian blouse similarly inscribe their best wishes unto the wearer for living their best life. The maker's initials are worn into the fibers of designs of the commonly bleached hemp textiles, or in the composition of embroidery. Over time and generations the wearer can touch and link back to these ancestral signatures.

Offering protection and shelter from the elements and as a nonverbal way of communicating and connecting, what we choose to wear can define us. For donning on a shirt is taking on persona and all the stories woven in and implied. The Romanian blouse with its stitched talismans is simultaneously a protective shield and an ethnographic passport. Iconography within the stitched marks leaves room for the viewer to engage rather than remain apart in the literalness of the world.²³ The creator of this application of surface design weaves their own world within a blouse. The ethnographic, tribal symbols stitched onto the Romanian blouse's chests and arms brings forth a validated, experienced identity spilled out into the context of a blouse.²⁴ Mircea Eliade, a Romanian philosopher, says, "for to weave is not merely to predestine, and to join together differing realities but also to create, to make

something of one's own substance as the spider does in spinning its web."

For these emblems on the blouse are the story the maker inscribes into their interpretation of the world. The incantations of the maker are proclaimed in the garment with the experience of the wearer. Similarly to the ways the walls of a room transcend the space by the painted lines, shapes and color transposed. Clothes in themselves are complex systems relaying everything about the wearer from age, social class, affluence to ethnic identity.

Through pattern, symbolism and exposure, the icons become part of a visual language that is retained generationally through the matriarchal creators who share their stories and craft. Visual markers on the Romanian blouse narrate stories of the cosmos in its strife, quest for peace, good luck, fertility, abundance, afterlife and unity with creation itself.²⁵ These mostly uneducated makers who stitched and generated their own visual language transformed a piece of cloth into a garment for both body and soul. The Romanian blouse in essence becomes a world to experience, just as the confines of a room dissolve into supergraphics' manifestations.

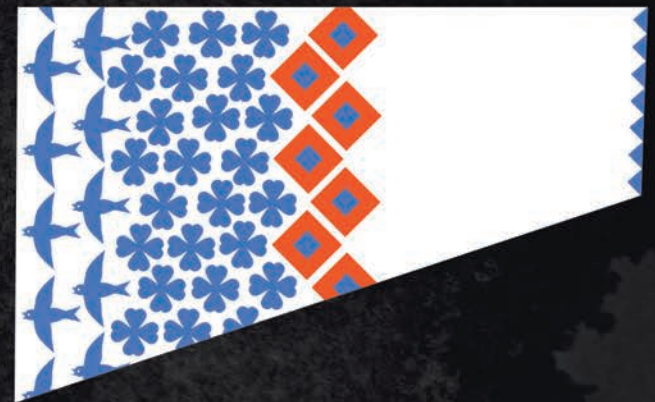
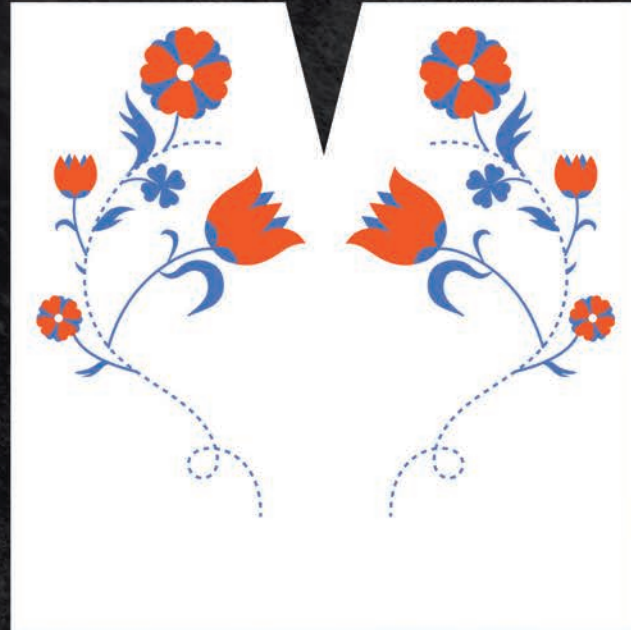


THE BRACELET extends to the edges of the world.

THE MOST HIGH or ALȚIȚA reaches up to the heavens on the shoulder.

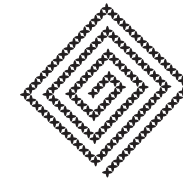
THE RIVERS of plant animal life run along waterways of chests.

EARTHLY TOTEMS on the INCREȚ provide protection for daily woes.





Mixed media illustration created for "Women's Work" animation, 2021.



MAP

The traditional Romanian blouse takes form from homespun, plant-based fabric garnered from the Earth. Fertile agrarian practices surge back to the archaic feminine or Goddess and her treasures.²⁶ The process of making was directly linked to what Mother Nature provided and her cyclical seasons. With yellowing leaves in the late July sun, ripe for the picking and later in early fall showing crisp, yellow flowers, women gathered the stems of the cannabis plant. After days drying in sunshine, a retting process would begin where a soaking of the stalks would help separate the woody stem from the usable fibers. Bunches of golden strands were refined further by a process called hemp braking or scutching on a dry, warm day. This sturdy plant hair is then combed through to be finer and more malleable.²⁷

Shown above, snail symbol which represents evolution.

Spun and rounded up into skeins, the hemp yarn was bleached in a composition of boiling water and beechwood or plum ash six times over. After drying in good weather for a couple of days, the hemp thread was ready for weaving. Typically, in the late fall and winter, cloth was woven on a loom. In the spring, the hemp textile produced and stored in rolls was brought in baskets to the river. In knee deep water with their friends, these village ladies would bleach the woven cloth again in the same process as the yarn, to be ultimately grazed and softened by the sun's rays.²⁸

Looking at the collection of heirloom women's work in my possession, I see the ragged edging of this homespun, time-intensive material left unhemmed for extending if one gained a few pounds or for tucking under voluminous peasant skirts. Nothing was wasted. This native shirt took about a year to complete from the weaving of its fabric to the threading of its iconographic adornment. It's a blouse built to outlive its maker.

Made up of four equal pieces of hemp fabric, the quartered pieces are traditionally forbidden to be cut with scissors. By the manner of using nature's elements, fire singes the cloth as the pieces of hemp are then divided. Metal is unsanctioned from grazing the fabric as the construction of the blouse traditionally predates the discovery of metal. All pick up the thread, so to speak, of our Neolithic mothers' and sisters' legacy. Everything is appointed in the creation of the Romanian blouse as ancient peoples wore these special garments on holy days when they believed the heavens opened up and touched the

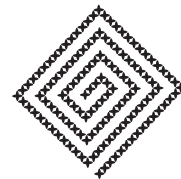
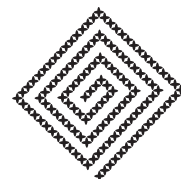
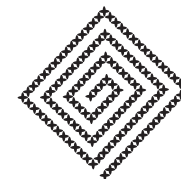
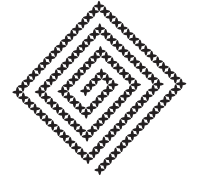
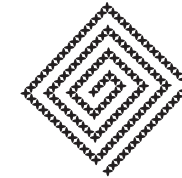
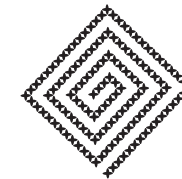
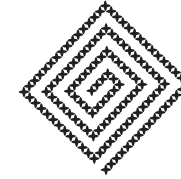
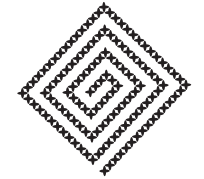


Earth. There is an order and a respect for the inscribed layout of the garment.²⁹

The area on the shoulders and closest to the heavens is called the "altița" alluding to the most high. A woman wearing the blouse is holding up the world on her shoulders. Symbols on the area of the shoulder evoke celestial visions and wishes. The sun, shooting stars, galactic patterns and a field of crosses commonly make up this skyward area. It was believed that the creators invoked their wishes through the symbols they stitched, or merely continued a custom they were taught by their mothers and grandmothers. Some chose to wear their folk blouse to final resting places on Earth completing an unrelenting cycle. Void of color, embroidered symbols in white prepare older women for the journey beyond. Talismans of safe passage and regeneration offer a proper and peaceful sendoff in a blouse that becomes eternal.³⁰

Our survival on Earth are symbols located lower on the arm sleeve, devoted to our woes and struggle. The diamond shape with seeds inside bestows fertility and wishes for our continuation and survival. The all seeing eye may also be featured here as a powerful charm warding off evil. The lower sleeve edge of the garment commonly ends in simple, wolf fang teeth echoing the ancient Dacians as a shield against the ravages of wild animals in the dark. The stitched rooster bridges a way out of the darkness by announcing dawn and an escape from night spirits. Traditionally all our mortal needs for survival and the codes with which to combat life's struggles were transcribed here.³¹

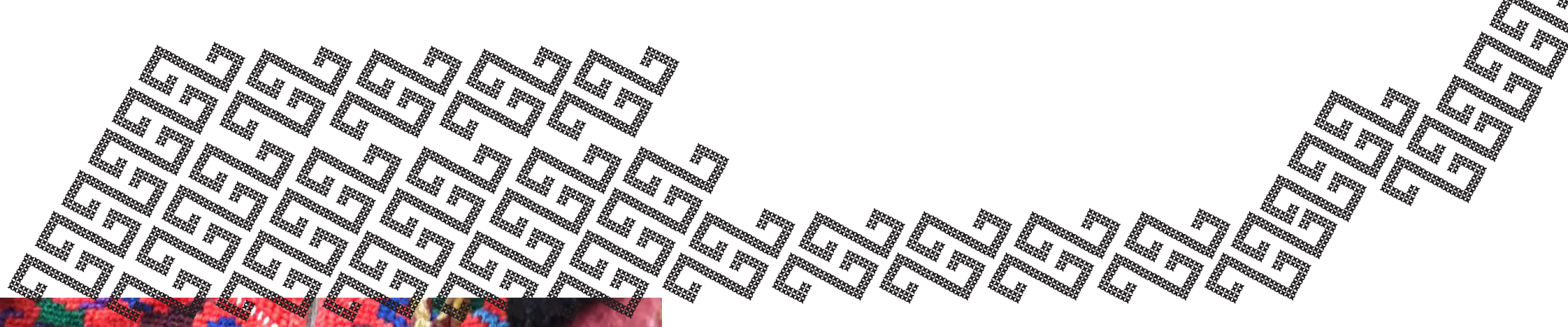
On the chest run two patterned rivers or one depending on regional customs and the time constraints of the maker. Botanical and wildlife symbols pay homage to the life and abundance near rivers leading to the sea or fringes of our world. Wheat grass, flowers, birds and animals sprout here. It is no coincidence that this adorned area spirited with life is located near the breasts where rivulets of milk nurture the young. Some regions have no embroidery present as a warning. In the tormented region near the Dniester River in Moldova, near Ukraine, where upheaval has raged for centuries, this white space is left starkly empty.³²







Red blazing on the chest of a blouse from the Transylvania Museum of Ethnography in Cluj, Padureni region. August 2022.



RED

A red string graces a baby's wrist. Cardinal needlework amuses and instructs per a good life's path on a cotton crafted ornament holding plastic combs hanging on top of stenciled walls in my grandmother's house in the village of Laz. This warm to the touch tinge spells out a protective journey in Romanian folklore. One of two apotropaic colors known the world over, crimson adorns sleeves and chests as symbolic armor against evil.³³ Proclaiming vitality and strength, in shielding against the "evil eye" or those oozing jealousy while gazing upon a beautiful, healthy baby. Roma women also slip on these carmine shades within their long skirts and hair ribbons for warding off the devil.³⁴

The shepherd's hook shown above symbolizes vitality.

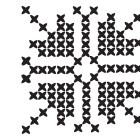
Besides protection, these fiery threads define the age of the wearer as being in the summer of life, chock full of vibrancy and youth. Blood is after all the force of life itself and so is the color sheltering life. The hue of red is sex, power and childbirth. The legend of Dracula from these parts is a seeker and sucker of this fresh, sanguine fluid. So it's no wonder that Dracula's legendary pounce leaves behind zombified vampires lacking vitality.

While the color red is worn by the young, it is seen as unseemly and crude to be worn by women past forty in peasant culture. Subdued, dark and funeral like, these clothes are donned by elderly women as a sign of pious, modest respect of age and all it carries forth. Blouses for mature women have a serious seeming dark blue or black in comparison to the celebratory, carefree cherry of youth.

This cardinal color becomes a totem of life scrambled in for measures of good luck. In a recent Romanian film seen as part of *Seattle's Romanian Film Festival* called *After 40 Days*, Titi, a religious man living in a small village is planning out his own funeral as he paints his coffin red. Fending off wicked spirits that may haunt the body after death, Titi ensures his peaceful slumber into the after life by coating his wooden coffin in an amulet of scarlet.



Sleeve embroidery from the Transylvania Museum of Ethnography in Cluj, Padureni region.

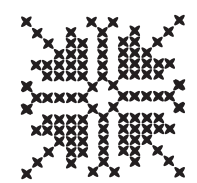


STARS

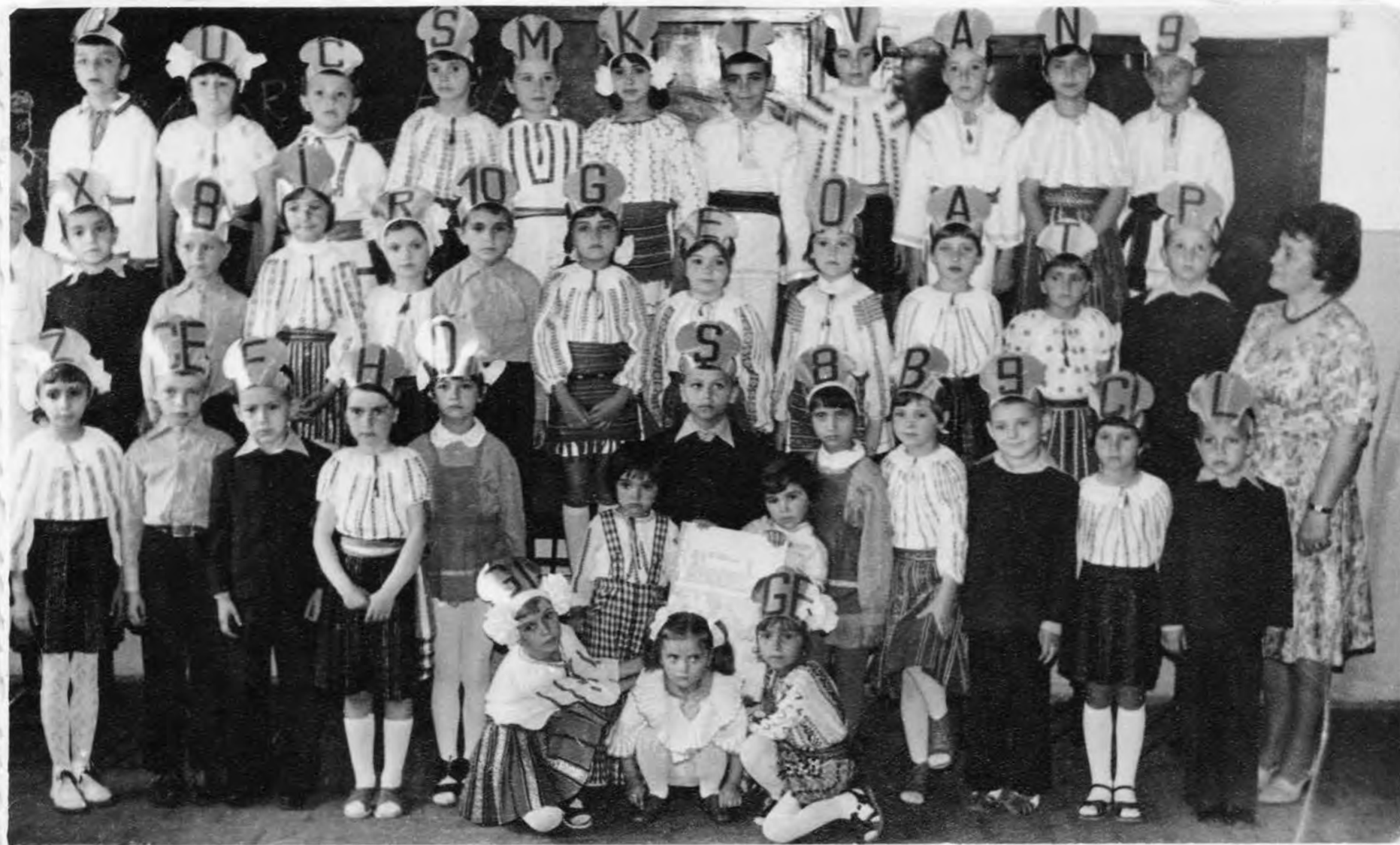
Before maps or GPS, the night sky offered navigation to travelers. Illuminating paths to uncertain destinations, the stars mapped a way forward. Stars dance on the surface of the traditional Romanian blouse, comforting early artisans inspired by the heavens. The night sky offered guidance. If one was leaving an inhospitable place there was hope and optimism in the face of these astral markers. According to Christian tradition, the stars offered epiphany and revelation for the magi who traced their path to fulfilled prophecy.

As I look at old elementary school photos, I try to confirm as I decipher the stellar markings up high on my shoulder. Class photos in two worlds; one being in black and white in Constanța, flourishing to a full color photo taken a year or so later at Starlight Park Elementary in Phoenix, Arizona. My passport photo in its stark contrasting tones of gray, reveal the clearest view of these budding cardinal stars.

One of the most commonly adorned charms in red sits on young girls' shoulders. Star-studded emblems are up high on the sleeve. Celestial bodies light up and smile on my shoulder, in my black and white passport photo. I am wearing this blouse of native armor complete with wishful illuminations. I wore this blouse before leaving Romania on all special occasions and in the West as an anchor to the world I left behind. Like Harriet Tubman following freedom, these celestial signs opened up the way. They twinkled as we landed at JFK airport on a hot August day in 1981. With our giant, homemade, duffel bags overstuffed with our only possessions, the airport attendants chuckled among themselves in seeing the monstrous, cylinder shaped, khaki twins filled to the brim. Wishes for a clear bright path sang out into the universe.



My Romanian passport photo, 1981. Visa stamps from Baba Zeni's passport.



Photo, Costanța, 1980. I'm fourth from right (top row) and my sister, Lavinia (in plaid), is holding the sign in the front row.



WOMEN'S WORK: THE SEMIOTICS OF THE ROMANIAN BLOUSE





Mixed media illustration for "Women's Work" collectible stamp series, December 2021.

SEED

Before the written word, when humanity worshipped the Earth and the Goddess that bestowed all life, the diamond symbol with seeds inside offered the long-awaited treasure of survival. Neolithic pottery speaks of this struggle within this very ornamentation.³⁵ On the Romanian blouse, it continues to proclaim our need as humans and as women to endure. Fertility is something we yearn for and are weighed down by. It is our continuation and our failure wrapped up into one. Our bodies are an incubator of life as well as death. An inability to conceive is a frustrating, stinging blow. To try and fail over and over again and see life extinguish itself every month, is a grieving process I knew so well in my late 30s. The ability for a seed to root and grow became a miracle. Once pregnant, I felt the whole universe open up with all its ripe possibilities and tragedies.



A woman's role was to propagate the seed no matter the costs within the fundamentalist ways of my extended family. On Babi's wedding day, the bridal party hoisted themselves up unto a horse-drawn wagon. A bump in the road and bridesmaids and the blushing bride came tumbling. Women's skirts flipped up on their heads exposing their naked regions to the sky. Peasant women didn't traditionally wear underwear. It must have been breezy, and made a woman generally available. The gates were open for action whenever or wherever. Patrilinear power always there even in this lack of undergarments. The societal role of rural brides was a continuation of the head of the family, and bringing forth children. There is an element of grief at a peasant wedding as the carefree time of girlhood leads the way to the responsibilities of being wife and mother.³⁶

My Dad's father's family was a huge one, and so were some of my great uncles' and their children's. Women's bodies were seen as vehicles for the making and carrying of infants. Their belief was that God decided how large or small a family would be. My cousin Emil has 19 children. A Pentecostal religion whose fire and brimstone passion was born in America's South, in mainly Black communities, reached the unlikely shores of an East bloc nation where it became a lifeline for many. I was born into this faith and although my parents were not practicing members, being around my grandparents I was both influenced and revolted by their faith. My cousins' gaggle of siblings and their soon to be burgeoning families contrasted with my youthful, career hopes, and later with my fertility struggles, culminating in my unexpectedly tinier but happy family unit.

*Girl in diamond symbol studded blouse. Partially destroyed negative on glass plate.
Costica Acinte Foto Splendid digital archives, before 1960.*







FLOWER

Botanicals sprout on all of the ancient, familial blouses in my collection. Splendid reds, pinks and violets stun against the white fibers of fabric. The natural dye extracted from flora and fauna endures over a hundred of years and counting. These buds form amongst the rivers or chests in the embellished construction of the Romanian blouse. Generations of women before me have touched the same cloth and threaded into constructing, adorning, or wearing these sturdy shirts with blossoming designs. This showcases the invisible work of women in between toiling in fields, feeding and caring of families and husbands.

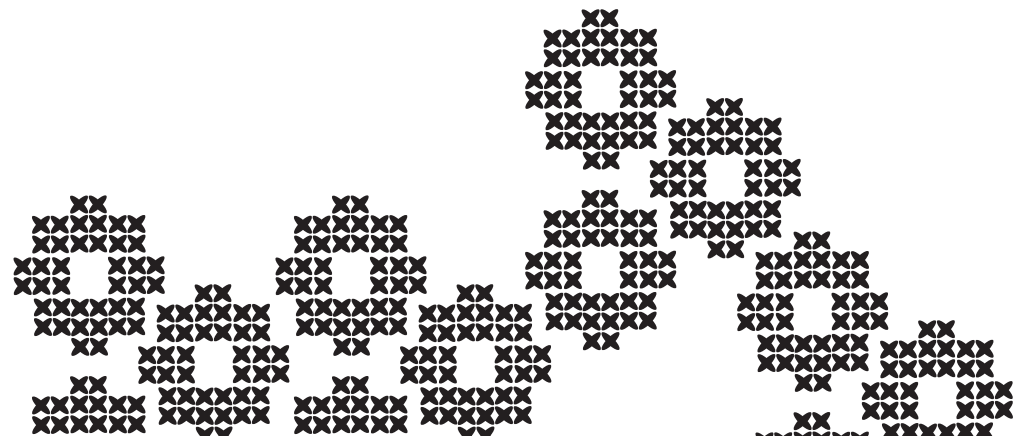
Looking at myself these days, I see the vanishing maiden years that I barely appreciated when in the face of glowy, burgeoning youth. I've slipped comfortably into motherhood and soon the mature, crone years. Plump and vigorous molecules that pumped life in slowly diminish and give way to relished wise contentment. Sculpted cheeks give way to droopy jowls, chins and noses. It's the natural cycle of things. Our svelte feminine wiles unravel to matronly figures. A flower stitched on to a sleeve or chest of a traditional blouse becomes a literal heart on your sleeve. Embroidered florals celebrate the gorgeousness and pluckiness of youth while living in the reality that beauty has a limited shelf life.

My mom used to say that women were flowers who craved to be admired. Her mother was named Floare meaning "flower." In a small village with limited opportunities, Floare created hemp and cotton textiles from scratch. The general store in their village didn't sell fabric and so the village women made their own. Creating their own personal luxury goods, they harvested nearby hemp. Later after soaking, they beat the stems to separate the preferred fibers from the woody core. Women wove the fibers in the winter to supply the family's garments and bed clothes. In summer, the nubile, proud girls paraded in their adorned outfits at fairs, weddings and celebrations to be seen and adored. They were flowers in full bloom.

Floare's renown in her village was tailoring these festive velvet vests which were then embroidered with florets by another woman's hands. She had six children with one cherished son who died of

pneumonia as an infant. Family rumors abound that Floare tried to kill my mother moments shortly after she was born; a bud squashed before coming into bloom. Maybe it was the unpredictable flurry of postpartum hormones, and feeling the weight of being an uneducated, rural woman who had interrupted ambitions. Having had one son and two daughters, my mother was one more female mouth to feed. More dowries to prepare and burdens to keep. Energy flowing into diverted dreams.

My mother would become a sassy, ravishing creature with dark hair and smoldering eyes who could draw attention in any room. She survived her childhood and prospered, and possessed more confidence than most. Leaving behind the village, attending college and climbing up the social ladder, folk ways and peasant upbringing were locked away and forgotten. Repurposing the handmade folk garments to create new clothes, my mother dyed the hemp cloth and refashioned all into modern, sleeveless numbers in vogue.









WHEAT

Throwing away bread is a mortal sin. That is a mantra I grew up with. I still hear it in my head every time I ponder leftovers. The sign of plenty lives in a kernel of wheat on the Romanian traditional blouse. I come from a region that considers itself the bread basket of the world. Wishes of abundance breathe eternally within the threads of a garment and its embroidery. Wheat grass sprouts on the rivers of the peasant blouse and spurs a gift for survival. Food wasn't to be squandered. Lack of bread is the stuff that sparks revolution. Sustenance was hard to find in in the late 70s and into the early 80s in Communist Romania. Grocery shelves were empty of any basic, sought after items like milk, eggs, meat, salami, sugar, or flour. Bread was just starting to be rationed.

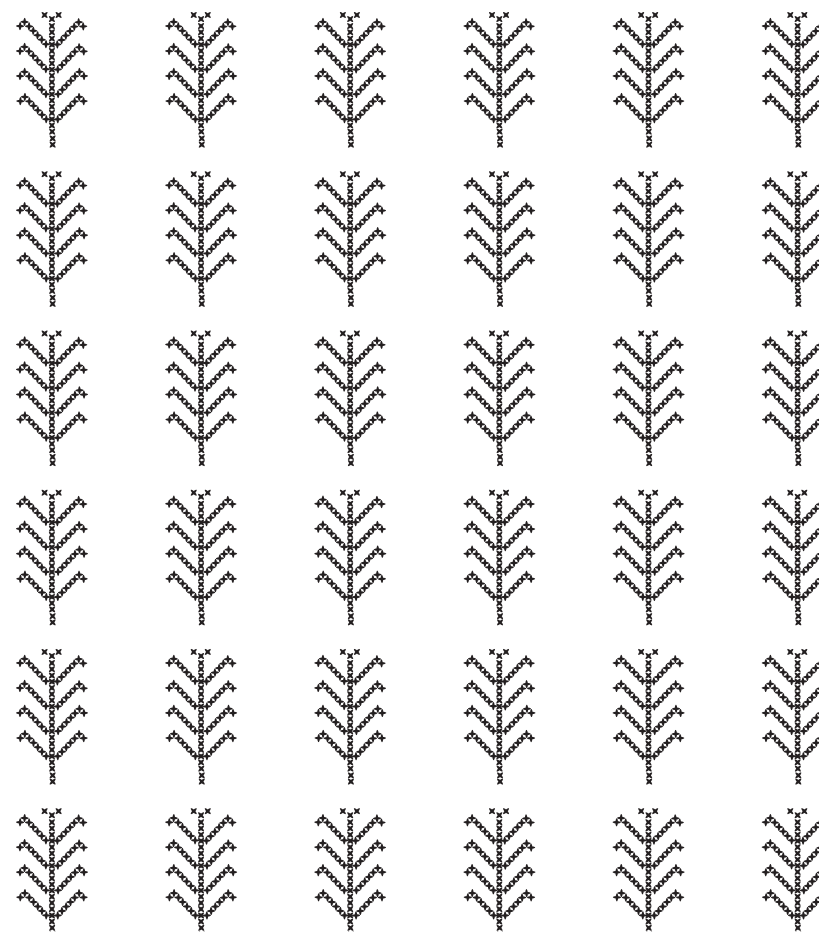
Peasant woman from Huneadoara, 1922. Photo by R. Vuia. Transylvanian Ethnographic Museum in Cluj.

In this austerity, you relied on hushed whispers and gossip as to where you could find coveted edibles and get in line before your neighbor beat you to the last slice of salami. Scarce goods like coffee, cigarettes, soap, deodorant and sugar were money in the bank for the bartering of goods and services. At the pediatrician's office for obtaining a favorable prescription for a sick child, you might bring a nice *Lux* soap or perfectly packaged *Kent* brand cigarettes to grease the palm of the nice doctor to prescribe antibiotics. All the shiny and well packaged brands were from the West. All smuggled in from relatives or people who managed to breathe the free air on the other side of Europe or beyond. If you were lucky enough to have grandparents who lived in the countryside, you could rely on an occasional supply of eggs, milk, chicken, pork and seasonal produce.

I remember the first time I tasted a contraband banana, *Tic Tacs* or *Toblerone* chocolate. It tasted delicious and illegal. I remember the little plastic Tic Tac box with the reclosable door and the perfect, little orange flavored capsules of candy spilling out one at a time. I slowly savored each burst of artificial citrus. My 14-year-old cousin, Iulia, and her siblings would visit us when we lived by the shores of the Black Sea. Iulia hoarded all her mysteriously acquired Western candy in secret.

It would be a year or so later that I would see and taste *Bazooka Joe* gum with its clever little comics tucked inside. Iulia coveted these similar fragrant, graphic wrappers of her thoroughly consumed

sweets. She would brag about the details of her foreign confectionary fortune, and her prized candy lipstick. We struck a deal in exchange for her wearing my mom's chic clothes while she was out. My mom's wardrobe had Romanian blouses in varying colors, and refashioned strapless numbers made from antique, peasant garb. All coveted and envied by my cousin and her teenage fashion sense. Iulia having agreed, allowed me the experience of a few licks of the lipstick. While blindfolded, I was at first only permitted to smell the aroma of the wrappers in her collection; then, the main attraction was the long awaited few swipes of sugar on the lips. It was glorious but oh so short lived.



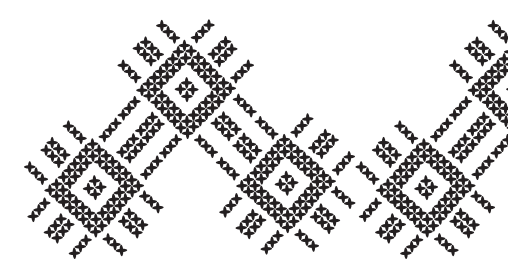




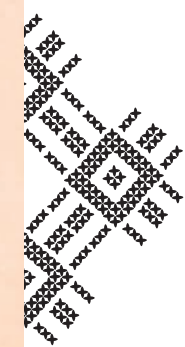




simona



THE EYE



In the comedy “My Big Fat Greek Wedding,” spitting in unison in warding off the evil eye tickles the funny bone. In Romania and all over the Mediterranean and Middle East, you spit a few times to invoke a sort of spit fueled force field from the invading, devilish vibes floating in the atmosphere. A custom put in motion upon seeing an adorable, cherub cheeked baby or child along with slipping in a wish for long life and good health. The ancient visual of the eye of protection goes way back to Egyptian cuneiform and Neolithic Goddess worshipping tribes.³⁷ A superhero of semiotics, this emblem fights the good fight on the finery of the Romanian blouse.

Framed by what looks like abstract eyelashes embroidered in an apotropaic black, the thread splays out in a pattern of sanctuary. Worn by celebrity folk singers and those very visible in a paparazzi filled world, the sewn eye is on a superhero mission. A customary, regional motif on a mainly black and white filled blouse, this hidden soldier comforts and relieves those plagued by worries of being envied, cast upon or inspiring of jealousy.

In seas of angular forms, the sewn in *hamsa* within a blouse works double duty. Its customary continuance from ancient days lies hidden in its very graphic nature. An attractive embroidered structure that conceals a secret language of thousands of years. Prehistoric emboldened eyes which gaze, ponder and shelter. Women makers conjured up a veil of safety within adornment.

WOMEN'S WORK: THE SEMIOTICS OF THE ROMANIAN BLOUSE

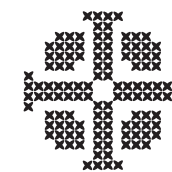




Folk singer Maria Tănase wearing a Romanian folk blouse.



Vintage photo of folk singer Maria Lătărețu wearing a Romanian folk costume.



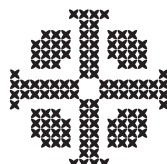
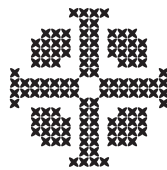
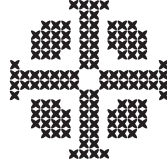
THE CROSS

In my upbringing, the symbol of the cross was invisible yet infinite. Gesturing the sign of the cross with your fingers was akin to blasphemy in my fundamentalist extended family's eyes. Without fancy, curvy decoration plainly presented in a very stripped down, Protestant way, the minimalistic cross stood behind the church altar. Raging sermons of repentance echoing in my head, its weight was heavy, passionate and stinging. Making you aware that you were in fact the embodiment of the cross in your human, female, earthly and oh so flawed nature.

A line points up and incites hopes of heaven. It is masculine in its upright action. A horizontal line guides to the panorama of the feminine and the languid, earthly horizon. Within this ancient symbol there is unity and balance in male and female energies. Ancient wayfinding presents where in the world you are going, as cardinal directions were mapped out this way for eons.³⁸ Christianity further enriches the cross's meaning to include the relationship of humanity or Earth to Sky or God the Father. A balance of existing between your everyday reality and the mysteries of a higher power.

As Joseph Campbell, an American mythologist, writer, and lecturer says in *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, "Woman, in the picture language of mythology, represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know...And if he can match her import, the two, the knower and the known, will be released from every limitation...The hero who can take her as she is, without undue commotion but with the kindness and assurance she requires, is potentially the king, the incarnate god, of her created world." This maternal universe is always teetering in this battle of male and female energies. The cross for many cultures globally exemplifies this fight to stay in balance.

Hollywood's Dracula movies flash a shining crucifix deterring vampires in their tracks. Simply scrawled or painted outdoors on rural village houses, or as religious iconography indoors, it's a security alarm. A striking blue cross pattern on shoulders and flowing onto the chest interlocks like chainmail. Keeping one

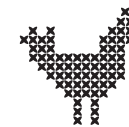
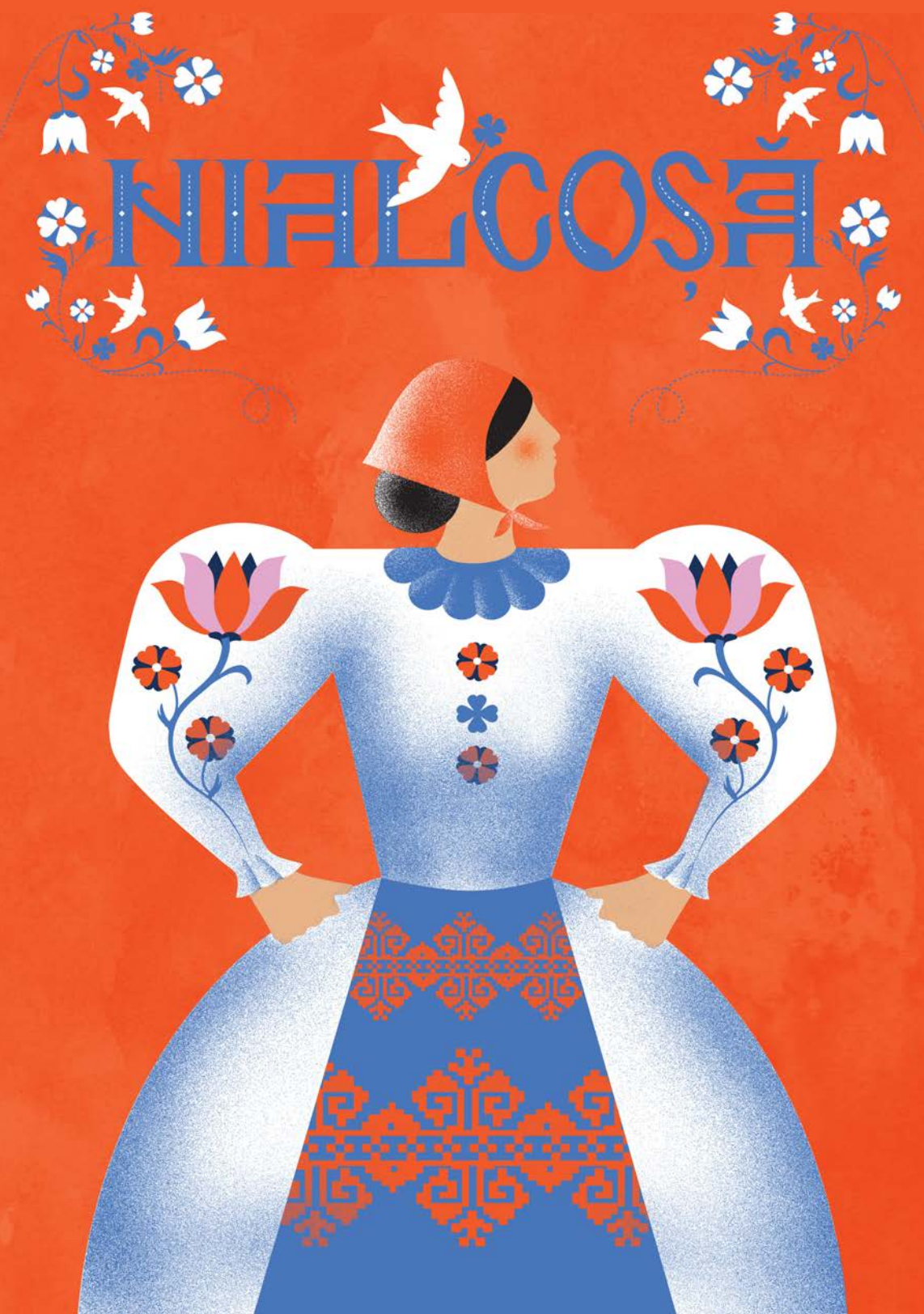


grounded to Mother Earth and connected to God the Father. The structured motif embellishes up high near the sky and also lower near the heart like a locket keeping your faith close and safe. This ancient, universal talisman is like a weather vane aiming to balance and guide. Like the stars and sun which adorn the shoulders, the cross on the peasant blouse functions like a prayer. "We are nothing but breath and shadows" spoke a Romanian Pentecostal minister in an online funeral service for a close relative. We are only souls whose physical body returns back to the Earth, as dust coming full circle. Peasant women have worn these blouses as shrouds on epic trips to the afterlife. Our foothold lies in the centered tokens we carry for the journey.



Peasant groom's shirt with the cross symbol stitched in silk, from the Marius Matei collection at the Banaŝean Village Museum, Timișoara. August 2022.



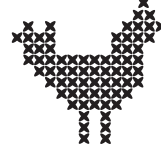


PEASANT

SLANG

The language spoken by my parents behind closed doors and away from intellectuals' ears was a rural slang only understood by those in close proximity and whose hands worked the earth day in and day out. Those with schooling or "with book" as villagers would say, looked down upon these folk perceived as backward, uneducated and primitive.

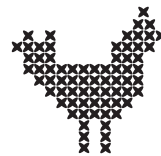
*Opposite: Illustrated poster with "nialcoșă" meaning "proud and good-looking," January 2022.
Rooster symbol shown above repels dark spirits.*



To this day, my parents hold no misty-eyed reflections for the village life, or so they pretend. There has always been this sort of social stratification and division between those who remain tied to tradition and those who rise up and leave it all behind. The lack of keeping up with sentimentality in their mind, assumes a clear mark of garnered education and rising up the food chain.

For me, peasant life excavates the wonderful sounds and aromas of childhood. Our senses teasing us back to where memory gushes in. I recently found an Instagram account that shares this fragrant regional slang on @graiuardelenesc. “Manci un blid de zamă?” translates to “won’t you sit down and have a bowl of soup?” in rural talk that evokes mirages so full that a soup cup runneth over into the achy craving of bygone days. This manner of speaking is laid bare only in close quarters in the relaxed discourse of family. In conversations with degreed coworkers in our concrete apartment *bloc* in Romania these ways of speaking were suppressed and totally out of place.

Words from my childhood and grandparents’ universe cannot be found on Google searches and have no easy conversions into official Romanian or English. “Nialcoșă” for example means proud, clever, good looking and female fused into one. You remove the “a” for the male gendered version. “Musai” is another term meaning it is impertinent I act on this. A word I can clearly still hear in my maternal grandmother’s voice as she rushes with tasks, chores and things or “treabă” to do. Words that supply a sense of longing and belonging.



From small village worlds these words with loaded interpretations are completely misconstrued in other zones of Romania.

“Porodaică” means tomato instead of the regular big city version of “Roșie.” “Lebeniță” is watermelon instead of the bougie “Pepene Verde.” A friend of mine who is also named Simona but originally from Moldova has no idea what my particular region’s peasant slang means.

Much like these peasant slang phrases, the legacies of making folk costumes and their customary semiotics vary from region to region. From woman to woman across the varied landscape, there was a muse constantly at work. Symbol codes with corresponding visual language of regional color ways followed this colloquial system. For example, in the western region of Romanian called Ardeal where I am from, there is more of a graphic, black threaded geometry with small bursts of vibrant red, yellow or blue. An intricate lace collar was created, and attached to further set apart the area’s custom version of the national peasant blouse. These notions evolved as craftswomen competed to outdo one another in their own neighboring worlds. Aiming to be the most renowned pattern maker in the land, they continued a rich heritage and also improved upon it in their own communities and beyond.





Peasant house exterior from the Banaŝean Village Museum in Timiŝoara, August 2022.









MIGRATION

At Bliss spa in New York City, I met Cristina, a fellow Romanian immigrant and aesthetician, whom I got to know pretty well on my frequently needed waxing trips in the hot, east coast summer. When I think of Cristina, I think of a woman on fire. She defected in the Cold War era with her young son, in a tangled, dark decade of diminished quality of life in regimented Romania. After going on a hunger strike, Cristina told authorities in no uncertain terms that she would set herself ablaze along with her young child if not granted permission to leave the country. I completely understand this tethered passion for survival and continuation. Archetypal feminine energy mimics nature in being both destructive, yet regenerative and nurturing.

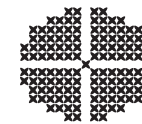
Mixed media editorial illustration, March 2021. Clover symbolizing goodluck shown above.



“No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark.” from Somali British poet Warsan Shire, *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth*. Thinking of all those worldwide migrating in search of safety as millions from the Ukraine now seek refuge, in Romania, in Europe and beyond. Most are mothers and children. May their path be clear and bright. Stitched stars adorned my shoulders in my now 41-year-old black and white photo pasted into my mother’s passport from the Socialist Republic of Romania. Stars forge clear paths perfect for a refugee or one braving forward and escaping a home that is no longer a nurturing place to be. “A-ți lua inima în dinți” is a Romanian proverb that expresses this courage-fueled plunge forward.

My immediate and extended family are all too familiar with the desire to flee. Under the Communist regime of Ceaușescu spanning 24 long years of authoritarian deprivation and control, young people in the 1970s yearned to breathe the Western air of freedom. The ways to escape or “defect” were risky and treacherous. Trust was hard to come by, and if caught punishment would mean being jailed, tortured, and maimed for life. My father as a young man aimed to squeeze his thick frame under a train compartment to ride out past the border. He couldn’t manage to fit. My then recently engaged, nimble parents crafted new duds in preparation for their debut on free soil. They planned an elaborate escape at dawn with a collaborator who never showed and instead stole their dreamy new clothes.

Yet, hunger for freedom still burned. *Radio Free Europe* fanned the flames as households tuned in to the word on the streets of the occident. It was my dad’s 19-year-old cousin, Florica, eldest of 12 children, who prevailed along with her fiancé Pavel. “Don’t eat onions because you will get thirsty” was advice received from a fellow escapee while aiming to be invisible under bridges, in ditches, in farmyards or crowds in unfamiliar places and languages. They stole vegetables from village farms to survive as they ducked and hid from authorities. Florica recounted looking in the windows of pastry shops, her stomach growling, her throat in knots wishing for just one bite. Florica and Pavel clawed their way to the United States as political asylum refugees and brought their families over. I wish I knew if she brought a Romanian blouse with her on this momentous journey. All I do know is that Florica’s tenacity is her legacy, and that these were the enduring seeds she planted in this new soil full of perceived promise and safety.





Romanian blouse with open embroidery of four leaf clovers from my paternal grandmother's family, early to mid 1900s possibly created for an older woman.



DIASPORA

Fashion clad Barbies restrained behind display glass, melting gelato, bright red Coca Cola cans with the clever tabs, and the *Stazione Terminale* train station full of homeless drug addicts and garbage, was my tainted, Technicolor first view of a capitalist West. When we left in the summer of 1981, we lived in Rome for six weeks for the bureaucratic process of paperwork and permission for immigration to the United States. It was my first view of the occident; it was colorful and glorious. We were stationed near *Stazione Terminale* in Rome where the destitute slept and hung out among the hustled bustle of tourists. A man in a dark suit met us and we exchanged smuggled lei for lira.



Holding a clear plastic bag with a collage of foreign bills, the trade took place. We purchased gelato with our newfound lira and dreamt of rotisserie chicken. Miles and miles of walking in my new Candies sandals took us to the Vatican, the Tyrrhenian Sea, and oh so many fountains and churches like Santa Maria Maggiore near our pensione. It seems like a treasure trove of sights available even within our meager means from the Socialist Republic of Romania.

When you transplant a tree to new soil you must be very careful with its roots. The tentacled foundation must travel well and with enough nutrients to sustain its growth in a new environment. For generations, Romanian women have been packing their best representational ethnic blouse to plant themselves on new soil with their hearts still threaded to ancient traditions. Romania is the fifth largest diaspora in the world in relation to its national size. The most popular destination for the Romanian European diaspora has been Italy. The link and similarity of language and customs proves easiest for assimilation. The Romans after all, colonized and put their mark on ancient lands that were then labeled Romania.

The native Romanian blouse has traveled with women on ships, planes, trains and maybe wagons to new destinations where life began anew. The blouse and its ethnographic meaning has comforted and retained a pride of identity and belonging. The roots of one's identity need nurturing to grow. It is no wonder that today the digital world is the vehicle for sharing the continued global legacy of the Romanian blouse. The diaspora of Romanian women who make up



the Facebook, Instagram, Youtube and all manners of social media communities continue to pine away for the remaining artifacts of the traditional tapestry. These women are far from home but connect back to the archaic feminine and a way of life, with a more sustainable quality echoing the Mother Land they miss. The heritage of their mothers and mothers before them exists in this desire to nimbly move forward in holding a legacy of ancient craft alive.



My mother must have picked out my best clothes for the snapped black and white photo of me in anticipation of leaving the country. This image would be pasted into a brown passport from the Socialist Republic of Romania for people without citizenship. Any sense of official belonging was stripped away as punishment for leaving. Yet the Romanian blouse and all its ethnographic roots would remain with me, with its twinkling celestial bodies on my shoulder holding up a new world while keeping a thread linked to the old. The blouse would reappear in old black and white communist era photographs with the decorative framed edges.

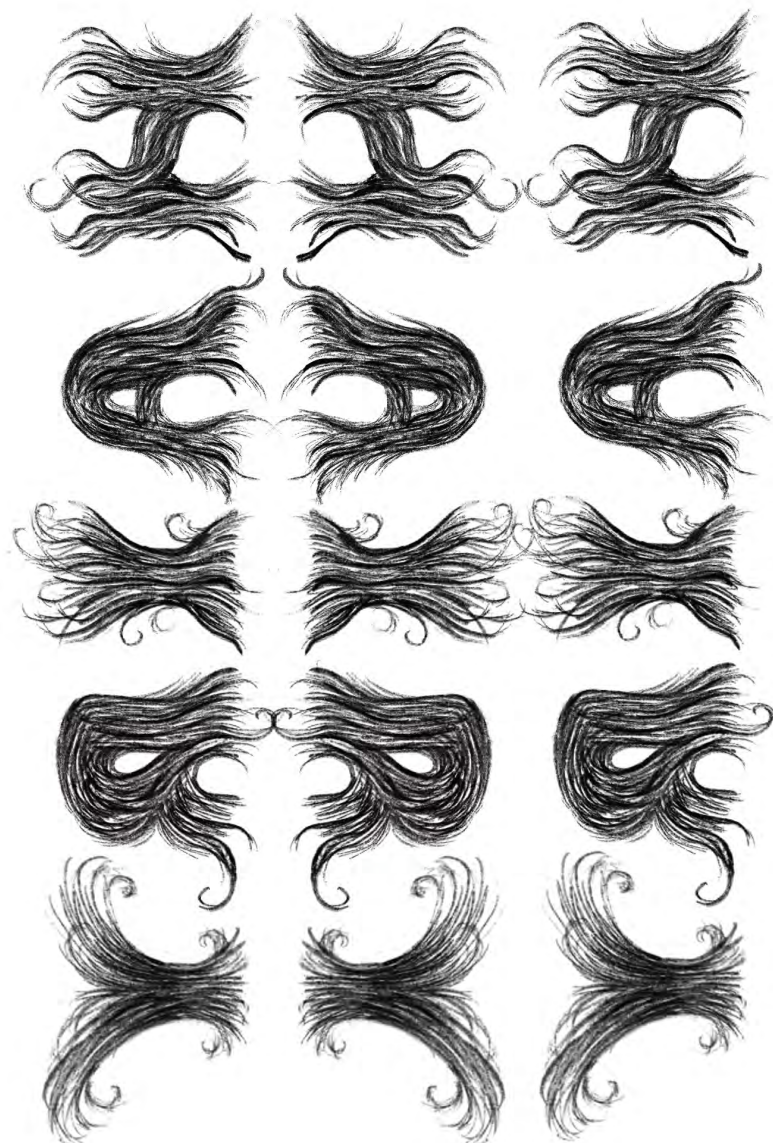
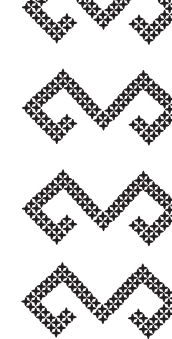
In my very first official full color school photo taken the same year in Phoenix, Arizona, I spoke no English and held up a cream, poster board with a marked red letter B as I waited in line for school photos. As my photo was taken, I didn't understand that I was told to put the poster board down as I mistakenly thought the second letter of the alphabet somehow needed documenting. Captured holding the letter B, my face obscured, my Romanian blouse and my bushy eyebrows peek out beyond the poster board, unveiling an accurate and true portrait. The Romanian blouse I brought with me like many before represented my identity and who I was at the core, before blending in and assimilating, a true lucky charm of who I was and who I was becoming.







Following ancient semiotics in modern times, a recent folk blouse sewn using ancient ram horns symbols made by Florina Buda. Buda is part of the active global "Semne Cusute" or "Sewn Signs" Facebook group. August 2022.



HAIRYNESS

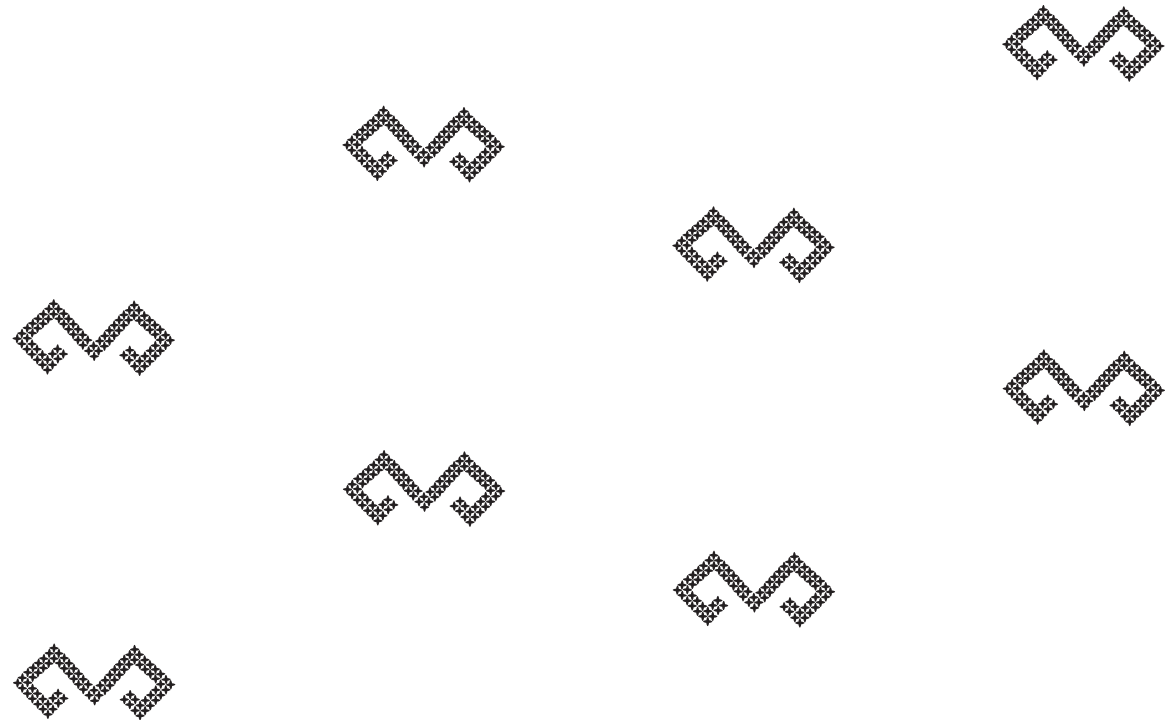
Things are bolder and extra when you're hairy. A soft whisper becomes a shout. A roll of the "r" becomes a song, and a certain ethnic warmth engulfs you. I am more comfortable and myself around those who are hairy. Give me a Latin American or a Lebanese and I feel an instant connection. Our wispy, human fur speaks volumes, and according to my grandmother Zeni or Babi, hairy girls are the best girls.

I feel like my move to the East Coast or namely to New York City then Upstate drew me like a moth to a flame towards my hairy tribe. Our bushy eyebrows unite us in this New Yorker melting pot, and in our varied Mediterranean, Latin, South Asian and Middle Eastern dark haired and gestural ways. It is home in the third dimension where memories and real life collide. The traditional Romanian blouse bridges this ancestral familiarity just like the hairs on my upper lip. These are the tidbits that make one comfortable in new surroundings. The structured designs composing the peasant blouse hum a melody I can remember.

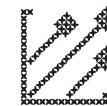
My grandma Zeni or Babi as I called her never cut her hair and braided and arranged it into a neat circular pile on top of her head. She would use rags within the braids to keep the hair tightly together. Back in Romania, she would put gasoline on her locks for some now forgotten sanitary reason. Walnut husk juice would stain fingers black and conceal her gray hairs. Babi kept her long, braided and petrol infused hair covered with a scarf. She was a married, pious, Christian peasant woman and this was the custom. It went along with women sitting on the right side of men in church in a very gender segregated, born-again, manner for two hours twice a day on Sundays. The manner of braiding and putting hair up and covering it, Babushka style, was a routine of peasant brides endured even into silver-haired days and widowhood.

My paternal grandparents had lived with us for a few years in the U.S. while growing up. For many of my teenage woes, I would come

to Babi for solace. I dealt with extraneous facial hair and it was a personal source of anguish. My grandmother would soothe by saying “All the best girls are the hairy girls, and the most sought after in my village.” This cheered me beyond words as I imagined a throng of girls being chased by ravenous, male suitors seeking the hairy ones’ spicy and mysterious, hirsute ways.




LEAF



LANGUAGE

My sister and I wore matching white denim rompers and “Yes” emerged as the first word in English. We disembarked the plane at J.F.K. airport then L.A.X. and a Romanian to English handbook lugged over from a bookstore in Arad to Rome, then Phoenix, was our do or die. My engineering father seemed to comprehend more English than the rest of us but only at first. “Yes” came to replace “Da” and “Daddy” replaced “Tati.” Language and identity split into onion skin layers.



Daily life in America was nothing like the popular 1980s Dallas serial or the spaghetti westerns I had seen brief glimpses of. The tall, worn Old World buildings, were replaced by starry skies, dry landscapes and ranch style homes. We could walk to my cousins' house on crackling hot sidewalks, roller skate and ride plastic, gravelly Big Wheels and go swimming in Phoenix, Arizona where we settled. It was the early 80s Cold War era and I stood out like a sore thumb as the only non-English speaking, Caucasian girl among mainly non English speaking Mexican kids in the third grade at Starlight Park Elementary.

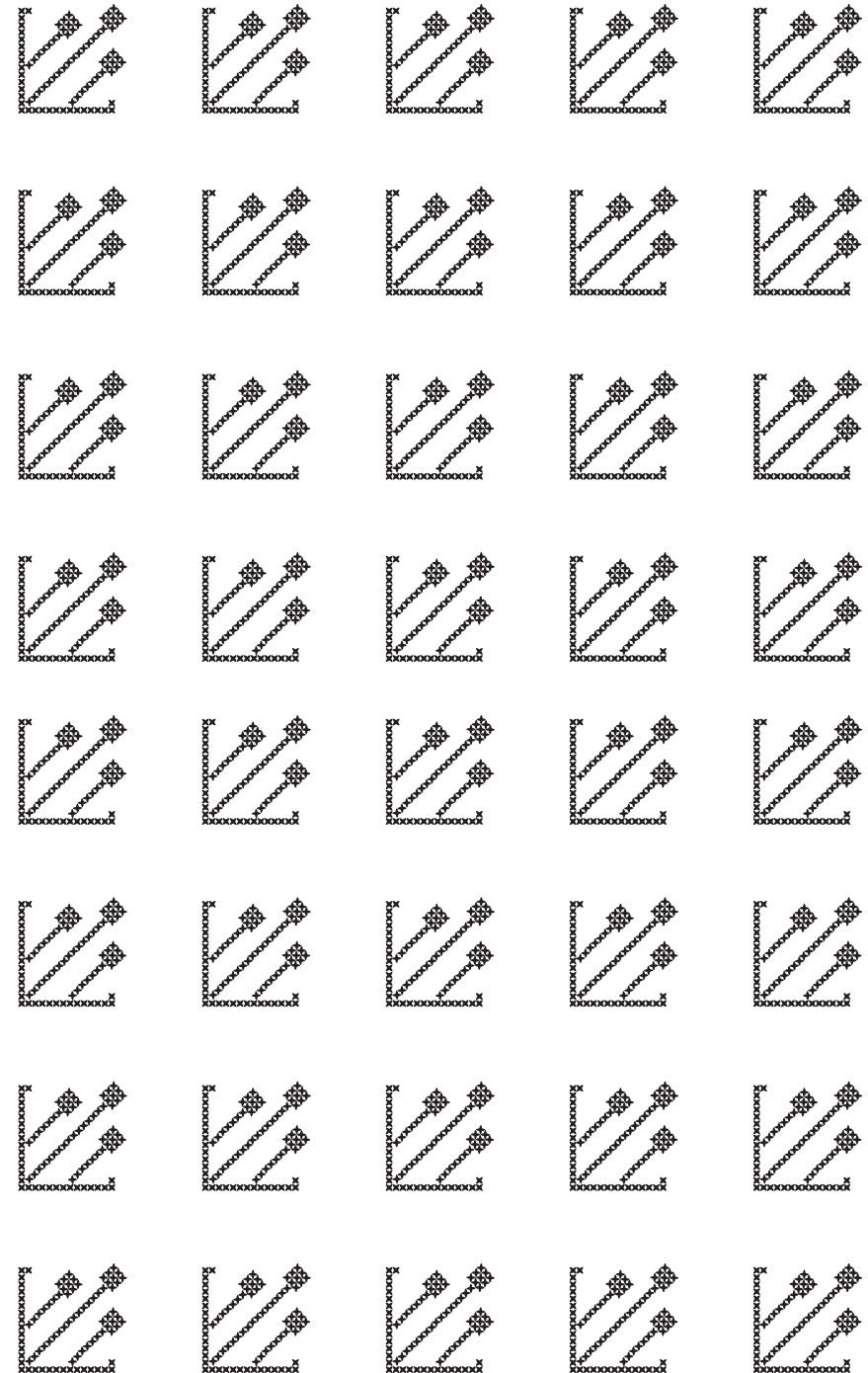
On the first day of school in America, my little sister Lavinia and I, and cousin Mihaela boarded a school bus. Mihaela spoke little English. My sister and I only knew the word "Yes." So it went almost unnoticed when we were dropped off at the wrong school. We were separated. I was promptly partnered with a school staff guide and briefly inducted into a class of ESL students. I kept quiet. What do you do if all you know how to speak in a new country is a single word? My escort completed the tour and offered a bathroom break. Exploding out of the stall with bursts of Romanian that had been slowly bubbling up, I let it all out. In that moment of transience I completely forgot where I was. That this was really Phoenix, Arizona and not Arad or Constanța, where hardly a soul spoke my native tongue. Later, I'd grasp that Spanish and Romanian mirrored each other as Latin based languages. My Mexican ESL cohort and I would practice our English vocab with Mrs. Parades, and understanding English in fits and starts by way of Spanish clicked.

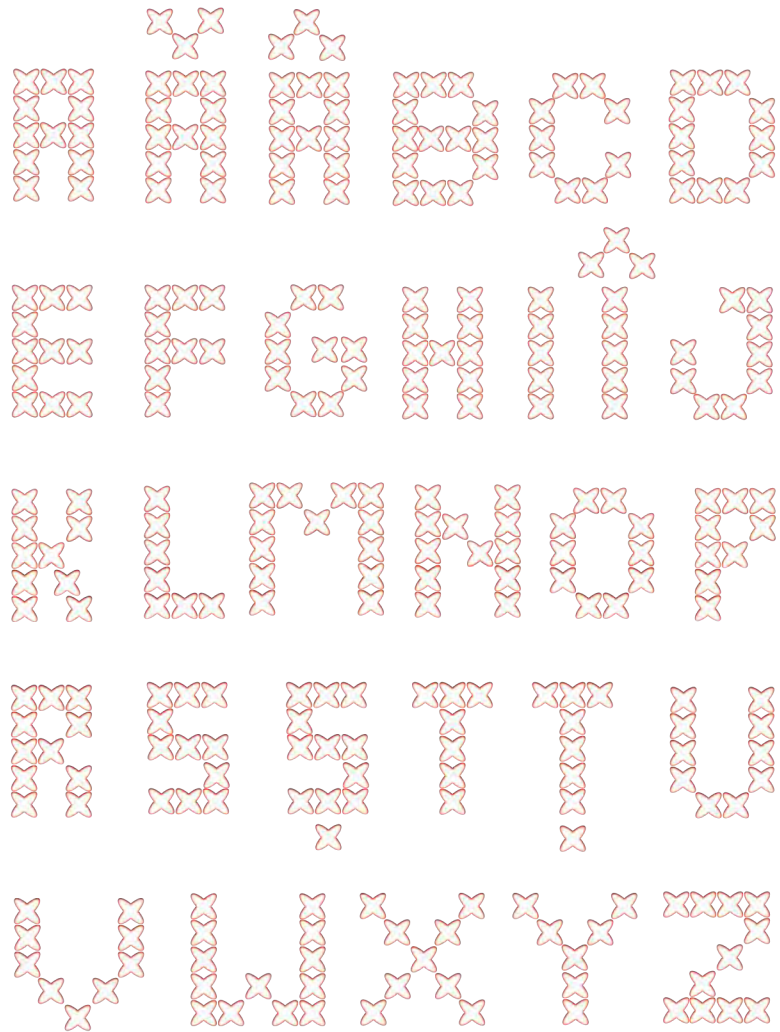
The Romanian written language first appears in writing in the middle of the 15th century, and according to its definition is claimed to be derived from a "vulgar Latin." What or who is this vulgar Latin? I picture a very furry guy wearing a track suit with dark, curly hairs proudly on display flashing a few strategic, gold teeth. He is Mr. Vulgar Latin. A stereotypical Romanian dude on the street ready to talk some shit or make you buy something illegal. Despite my imagination, this really means everyday Latin. Leaning into this vision of the Romanian language and its alphabet, I am confronted by the fact that it was derived from Latin letter forms only after having been printed in Cyrillic first. Some Slavic crumbs remain as in "Da" being "Yes", and a thin blanket of residual visual forms.

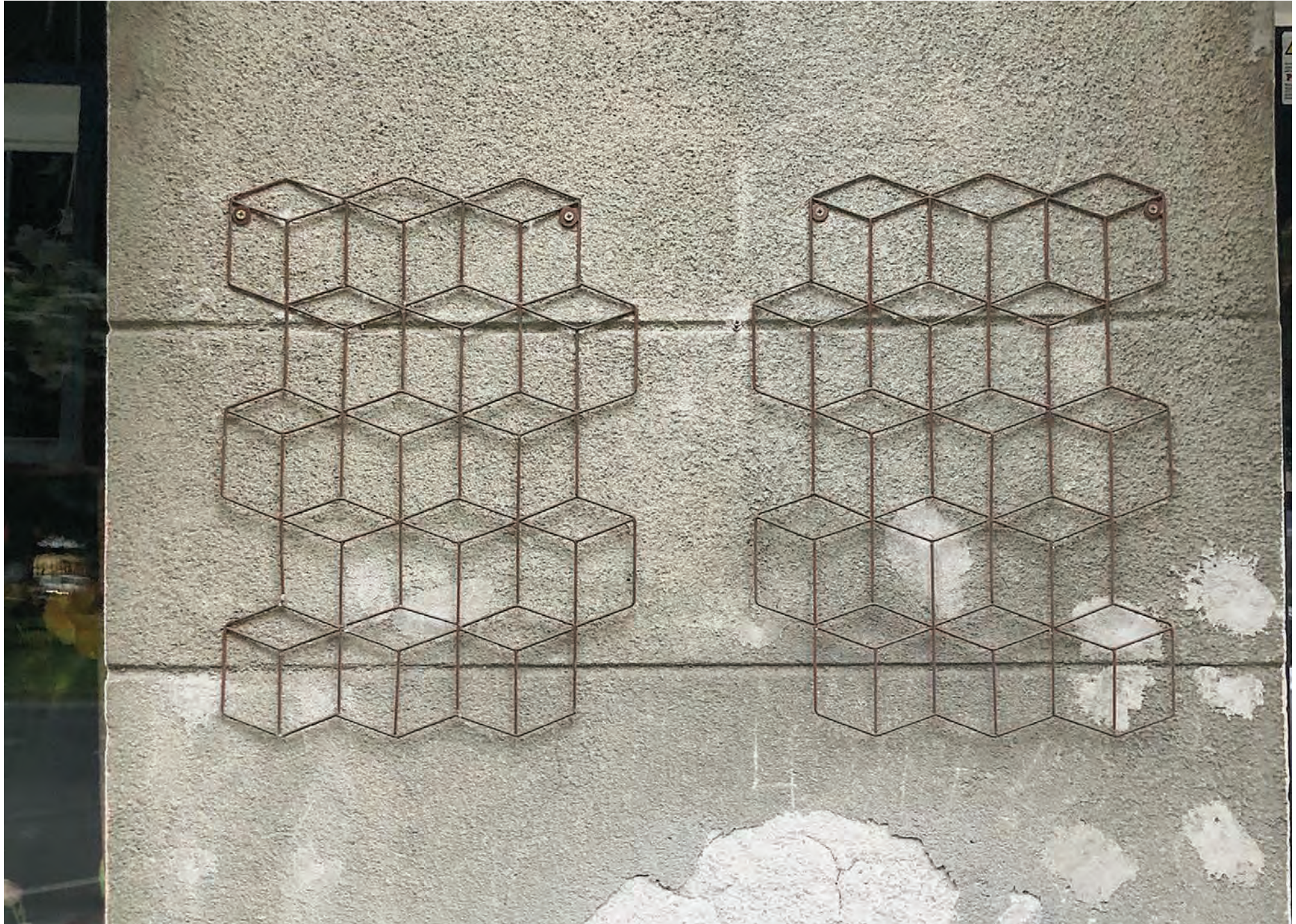
The Romanian alphabet was first written in liturgical Slavonic. A splintered Orthodox Church branch in 1698 allied with Catholic Rome, brought forth Latin based Romanian language characters and schools in the late 1730s. The western bordering Transylvanian School and funding from Rome, brought Latin based characters to the modern-day Romanian alphabet. Gheorghe Lazăr, who was born to an Austro-Hungarian peasant family, whom were no strangers to traditional folk garb, founded the first Latin-based Romanian language school in Bucharest in 1817. A variant of the original Latin alphabet and modified to include 31 letters, five of which (Ă, Â, Î, Ș, and Ț) morphed from their original to accommodate the expressive needs of the language.³⁹

Looking at an antique, printed prayer book from 1780, I can decipher the word “Tatăl” which means Father before the rest melds together into a sea of Cyrillic looking typography. I also scrounged up a calligraphic instructional book from 1921 featuring an art deco typeface full of pomp and circumstance. This was before the faceless, utilitarian, worker bee sans serifs that would take over in the wave of Communist propaganda which followed.

A distinct border graces the manual’s cover with a symmetry of meandering pixels. It echoes a history seen on Neolithic ceramics, folkloric national costumes and a number of other recognizably Romanian regional artifacts. The synchronized repetition speaks volumes. Like a name badge introducing what is ethnically Romanian, this motif created by the continually busy hands of women conjures a heritage. Printed during pre-Communist times when a monarchy still existed with its heraldry of rural life and human centered craft, this *Caiet de Caligrafie* reflects a graphic relic of a rich, ornamented cultural legacy. A continuum of pattern most obvious in the symbols adorning the traditional blouse before the Communist regime would bleed such ornateness dry.

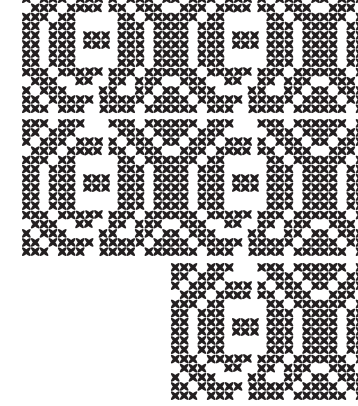
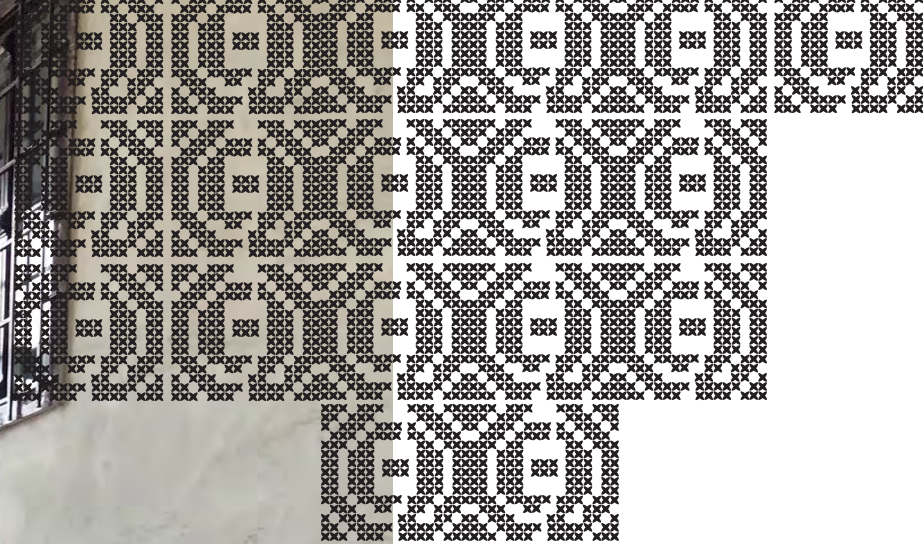












DOR

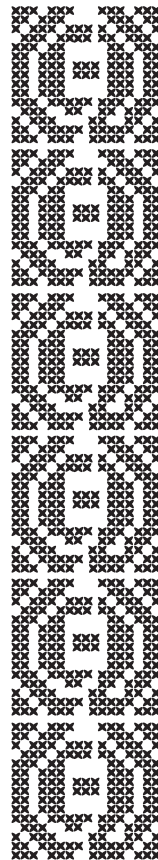
Visiting Ellis Island's immigration museum in New York City more than 20 years ago, I remember seeing the Romanian native costume among the archived belongings of those fresh off the boat during the island's operation. You pressed a button to hear a voice echoing back a hundred years recanting their first views of America. The folk wear was elaborate but worn from being exposed to daylight for more than a century, triggering a rehashed nostalgia.

Symbol for galaxy, the journey of souls shown above. Opposite: Staircase to my grandparents' old apartment. August 2022.

Dor, which sounds a lot like door, is a Romanian word that has no single word translation in English. From every day Latin *dolus* meaning “to feel pain,” in Romanian it alludes to missing a beloved, a place, a situation, or an object. It is present in every Romanian folk song or *doina*. It is a song of lament that beats in every emigre’s heart. The traditional peasant blouse represents the same aching magic. A physical way to connect to what has been taken away; a nostalgia without end.

My parents aim to fly yearly from Florida to Romania. I braved forward and joined them there this summer. At over seventy years old my parents float over Covid, war zones, and physical and health barriers to visit their land. Nothing will deter their longing to stand in the dirt of where they sprouted and to stroll familiar streets. I also felt this pull and longing. The Romanian folk costume embodies a sometimes suppressed identity for those who have left the Motherland. It is a keepsake that transports to the poetics of home.

It’s a recurring dream I’ve had for the last 41 years. Climbing up marble steps to my grandmother’s apartment in Arad, Romania. The Austro-Hungarian era building is in the shape of a U. Like a magnet it pulls me into its embrace. I remember the details in the veins of its marble steps. Like a living breathing thing under my feet, in a caramel color with rivulets of black, it danced towards the wrought iron vines and flowers of the banister. I could not wait to reach the familiar door with the name Simion Bortiş on it. This was a pivotal place in my universe; I continually climb this staircase in my dreams. It was



comforting to climb up these steps in reality but heartbreaking to not open that front door to all that was inside.

This old, faded European manor house exists conjoined at the hip with other buildings in the center of Arad on what was once *Strada Republicii* (Republic’s Street). Bullet holes now decorate some city walls on what is now called *Revolution Street*. This building once housed Arad’s mayor, his family and servants in the 1920s, and then transformed in the Communist era to an apartment building piling in countless families. The massive, once green door of at least twelve feet pointed to the courtyard, and would need propped open to make way for the government produced, crude yet indestructible *Dacia* car to be parked inside.

A secluded garden was tucked away beyond this courtyard that I stumbled into at 11 years old while playing hide and seek. A defiant and crumbling fountain sat clogged with falling leaves. It’s fading beauty remained. I wonder if it still exists? In my rehashed dream I climb up to the apartment to knock on the door. The door in reality opened up on to a bright and busy kitchen where at night invading cockroaches made their debut, and scurried when the light flickered on. A tightly packed narrow bathroom was located to the side with a vintage style toilet complete with dangling, toilet chain. Next beyond the kitchen, was a dark, grand inner room where an awkward, rectangular wooden frame was positioned with chairs around it. This was my grandparents’ workroom where my grandmother would chalk patterns while both worked crafting satin, Eastern European

style quilts filled with wool into the night. My grandfather, named Simion like my father, prided himself on the quality of the filling and the superiority of their homespun product.

Nearby there was a bed sometimes used for guests but mostly as a storage spot for layering completed quilts ready for delivery. Memories of plopping down on the cool material and laying down on the plump, silky duvets quenches some nostalgia. The apartment ended with two large bedrooms facing the street. These were the walls I first slept near as an infant. Immense windows overlooked the hustle and bustle of Arad where trams and cars sped by in the near distance. Once opened you could glance down and say hello to a friendly face.

I had reimagined these fragments and yearned for those wrought iron, art deco banisters, long forgotten hidden fountains, dusty fused attics, mildewy foundations, cabbage smells, kisses from relatives, satin patterned coverlets and more. Would it all still remain the same with World War III brewing in neighboring Ukraine? As an immigrant child living in the U.S., I regularly transported myself through an imaginary portal dissolving from one place to another like in the original *Star Trek* series. I would be back in my grandparents's apartment, sitting at the kitchen table savoring Baba Zeni's *Greta Garbo* pastries, in the city where I was born. This summer riding along in a propane fueled *Dacia*, newly paved highways broke through the land sprouting sunflowers and I was glad it was all still there.



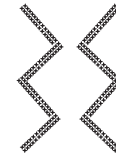






WOMAN'S WORK

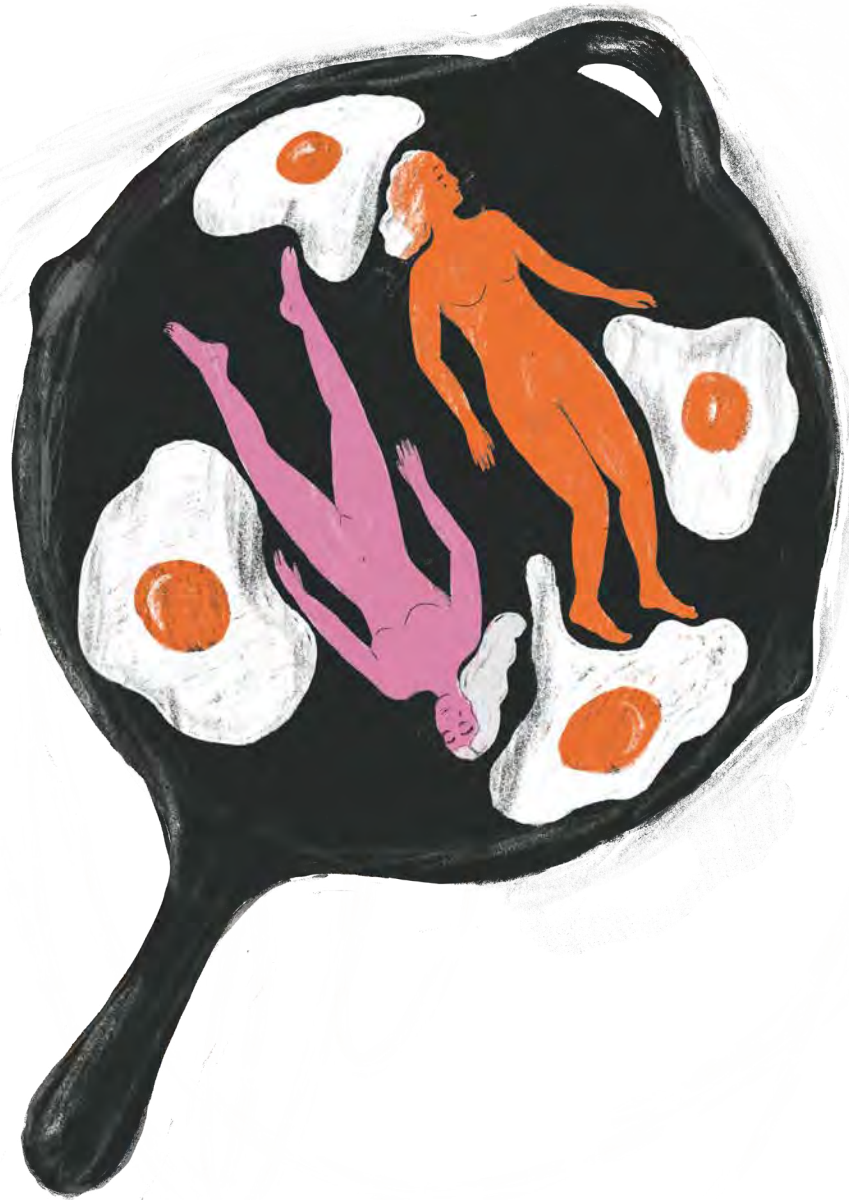
IS NEVER DONE



WOMEN'S

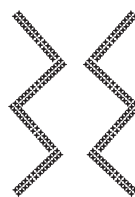
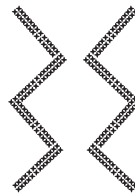
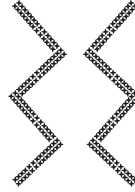
WORK

While in the delicious, naive dalliance of youth, I engaged in a complicated, long distance love affair with someone living in Romania. On a sweltering summer day on one of these visits in Bucharest, I opened the window onto an unromantic, ugly, concrete view of the residual, scarred leftovers of a regime. Concrete slabs for miles and miles lay before me. Removed from any semblance of nature and machine like in their creation, the buildings morphed into decaying canisters filled with people. I lived in a similar apartment *bloc* before the age of eight, when it boasted of its clean, modernist lines for the people.



Tripping on rebar in the dusty, neighborhood courtyard, the scars remain on my knees. These apocalyptic, hard structures in their degraded condition reflect the lingering, tyrannical portrait of a prison. They sadly stand defeated, hopelessly dilapidated, reminding inhabitants of their suppressed humanity. As earthly beings we yearn to be led back to the natural world and its glory in our daily lives. To dream and hope for better days, we crave to see, wear, read or hear the grace of something that takes our breath away. These cloned cubicles of life hid a secret, glow of sanctuary within their interiors. Each apartment offered a respite adorned with what one was most proud of. Artwork, artisanal stitched portraits, and ancestral photos adorned otherwise sterile walls and offered a chance for life. Bruno Munari believed and says in *Design as Art*, “When the objects we use everyday and the surroundings we live in have become in themselves a work of art, then we shall be able to say that we have achieved a balanced life.” Design has the capacity to elevate our every day experience and brighten our human condition. So who historically were these preeners of dwellings or transformers of inner worlds?

Since the beginning of time, women have swept up, beautified, patched up, clothed, fed and nurtured homes, caves, temples and those within them. This toiling away has been largely invisible, expected and taken for granted in our modern, patrilineal societies. A popular proverb so accurately says “Man may work from sun to sun, but woman’s work is never done.” Women’s work conjures up a derogatory term of demeaning, menial, and expected labor



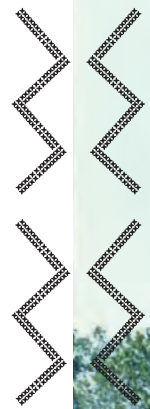
overlapping global, cultural gender roles. Illiterate rural women, perceived as primitive, stitched codes on sleeves and chests of traditional garments and established a visual language; the makers’ wishes and dreams preserved a legacy. There was initiative in being the best symbol maker in the land. Whether creating ceramic vessels for serving food or clothing to protect or parade in or logo designs, women persist as keepers of the flame in echoing the archaic feminine in the continuance of ideas through symbols and ornament. All too often these tireless multitaskers struggle for time to realize forgotten dreams. “Women piece together their lives from the scraps left over for them,” says Terry Tempest Williams in *When Women Were Birds*. Things evolve and things remain as modern working women persist in being complex birds in flight seesawing between career and domestic worlds.

I had gone on a spiritual journey to seek the mythical heroine in my MFA thesis work. I discovered her alive and well in this body of women’s work. The Romanian folk garment’s symbols echo Neolithic beginnings as protective signs that chant of preservation, fortitude and survival. Over millennia, the ravages of conquests, plagues, wars, and endless violence, a tireless endurance pressed onwards within prolific, matriarchal traditions. They persevered to create artistry where none existed, despite the torrents of invisibility based on gender biases or lack of opportunity. Forging ahead and continuing to this day to create a momentous canon of design that unveils the power of the feminine and an unwavering, anthem of ethnic, international pride.









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ART NOTES + COLOPHON

All illustrations and photographs are the work of Simona Bortiş-Schultz unless otherwise noted.

Custom created lettering inspired by early Romanian

Slavonic letterforms featured in headline type, plus custom, stitched lettering and symbols throughout book.

Typefaces used are Monarcha for captions, MachoModular

for subheads and Ernestine Pro for all body text.

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Laz, maternal grandparents' village and oak tree and concrete pillar I used to play on, August 2022.



Paternal grandparents' house gate, August 2022.



Corn fields, Arad, August 2022.



Accidental self portrait, paternal grandparents' house, Slatina, Arad, August 2022.