

THE ELEGANCE, DECORATIVE MOTIFS AND THE CHROMATICS OF POTTERY IN THE REGION OF MOLDAVIA

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Abstract

Romanian folk art is reflected in the building of dwellings, churches, household buildings, gates and wells, crosses and in wood carvings and sculptures, the various objects that farmers use, in clothing, textiles, carpets, etc.

Within the Moldavian folk art area, pottery is among the oldest traditional crafts, originating in the ancient Gaeto-Dacian practices. In a study of Dacian ceramics, Grigore Tocilescu argued that “*pottery, in addition to its role as a historical record, is also a work of art that proves the great talent of its authors. Today our ancestors’ pottery reveals abundantly its artistic virtues. Pottery therefore acts particularly as a direct historical reference.*”

Key words: folk, pottery, ceramics, traditional

The Greek word *keramos* designates earth or clay. The role of pottery in human life was immense throughout the world. Barbu Slătineanu stated that it is hard to comprehend the place that pottery had uninterruptedly from the Neolithic up to the mid-20th century as it “... was used on the tables both of the rich and the poor.

Alongside numerous objects made of wood, textile fibres, metal or other materials, the peasant household comprises a rich collection of earthenware: pots used for cooking food on the fireplace, mugs, jugs, cups, bowls, etc. The ornamentation of utilitarian pottery has been particularly consistent over time for each particular site, with differences from one site to another and from one potter to another. Such differences are derived from the diverse creative views and the various combinations of basic decorative motifs.

The multitude of forms and their elegance, the ornamental motifs and compositions, the harmonious colours are indicative of tradition craft of modelling clay vessels and the focus on beauty of Romanian artists. The shape of traditional clay vessels was always the work of the human hand, even when modelled using the wheel. Bearing the imprint of man’s skilled hand, clay vessels bear the seal of the creative calling and skill of their maker.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

A look of pottery types according to their use reveals that nearly all pottery site produced fireplace items, objects used to serve food or

water, objects with other domestic and household roles (figurines), musical instruments (ocarinas, whistles), play objects (masks), etc

Based on the type of combustion there are two categories of pottery:

- black pottery
- red pottery

Black pottery of Dacian tradition expanded throughout the territory of Moldavia, with a few pottery centres remaining to this day in *Marginea, Rădăuți (Suceava), Dorohoi (Botoșani), Negrești, Vulpășești (Neamț), Poiana-Deleni, Schitu Stavnice-Voinești, Dumești (Iași), Zgura, Brădești, Bârlad (Vaslui), Bacău*. Black pottery is obtained by reduction firing, i.e., ensuring that oxygen does not penetrate the kiln, with sufficient draft to allow complete oxidation. Initially, this type of firing was used due to unfavourable conditions. Vessels were fired in the past in 1.5-meter wide pits, shaped as a reversed cone. A second pit was dug nearby, communicating with the first, where the fire was made with leaves, straw and brushwood. The fire led to the red coloration of vessels in the larger pit. At this point the vessels were covered with a thick layer of wet clay, thus blocking channel between the two pits. The firing would continue without oxygen, the wares becoming gray or black

The technique has been preserved until today with few changes, as has the ancient shapes of the vessels: high pots, large pots with two handles, bowls of various kinds, mugs, etc.

Similar methods are used in black ceramics nowadays, whether for decoration purposes - by polishing (using stone or felt) and by printing or incising (with a sharp point, wheel or straw). Both actions are performed on a raw vessel, the former

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after it is slightly dry, and the latter before lifting it on the wheel. Incised ornaments on black pottery are divided into geometric and vegetal or vegetable ones. Lines are a key feature among the geometric ornamentation and can take many forms: broken lines, dotted, branched, etc. Quite often a simple spiral is used or a concentric one with two or three rings, starting from a central point. Since ancient times grid-like shapes have been used on black ceramic, covering the whole vessel. As regards the plant decoration on black ceramic, it is confined to pine leaves and fir branches.

Owing to its colour, varied sizes, clay and decor, black pottery is one of the most interesting categories in our country and unique among pottery in Europe.

Unglazed red pottery is an old tradition and has been preserved as a separate category in Romanian pottery. Serving utilitarian purposes, its various uses have been survived over time. Sometimes, owing to its harmonious shapes and pleasant decoration it has been used for decorative purposes.

Depending on function and capacity, such vessels include cans reminiscent of Dacian vessels, pitchers, bowls, etc. The ornamental compositions of such pottery include parallel lines of the same colour or different colours or alternating hues with wavy stripes. Sometimes, dots of the same colour are painted along the lines. Motifs include the crest, associated with either an oblique line or with a concentric line.

Unglazed red ceramic from Moldavia maintains a slightly traditional direction both in terms of shape and decoration. Sites where unglazed red pottery is produced include *Parcovaci, Harlau, Ungheni, Grozești (Iași), Zgura, Ivești (Vaslui), Oltenești, Bicaz, (Neamț), Voroneț (Suceava)*. They are relatively few compared to black pottery and glazed red pottery centres.

Glazed red pottery in Romania is particularly diverse in terms of shapes and ornaments. It is beyond doubt that the Romanian people, born of the Dacians and the Romans, adopted glazed pottery tradition from the Byzantines, along with models of vessels, motifs and techniques directly related to the discovery of glazing.

Byzantine tradition is well represented nowadays in Romania, yet certain centres remain faithful to the Dacian tradition, while others to Roman tradition when it comes to red unglazed pottery. The most characteristic form of Byzantine tradition, adopted as such with all its morphological features, is reflected in pitchers (medium-sized pitchers glazed in green). Typical of Moldavia, in addition to pitchers, are the large amphorae with alveoli bands, large food jars, plates with handles, small-sized bowls, various cups, large containers, etc. One may note the recurrence of the feather motif, from the Byzantine tradition, in addition to tear-shaped decorations featured especially on bowls and saucers.

Glazed red pottery centres are located in *Schitu Stavnic, Voinești, Dumești, Tansa, Mircești, Răducăneni, Bivolari (Iași) Lespezi, Suharău, Dolhești, Siret, Păltinoasa, Rădăuți (Suceava) Trușești, Tudora, Broșteni, Ștefănești, Mihăileni, (Botoșani), Răchitoasa, Mănăstirea Cașin, Oituz (Bacău), Țibucași (Neamț) Vutcani, Brădești (Vaslui)*.

Rădăuți is a strong centre of traditional pottery represented by *Kuty sgraffito pottery* and *Rădăuți pottery*. Particularly impressive is the wide range of motifs: geometric, avimorphic, zoomorphic, anthropomorphic and skeuomorphic. The difference between the two styles lies in the dominant colour. The former is painted in white, green, yellow and brown, i.e. four seasons, while in the latter the background is always green and brown is used for decoration.

Cucuteni pottery is highly particular and specific and unique in Europe. It has long fascinated by its exquisite elegance, the sense of proportion and profile line as well as through spiritual messages conveyed (whether by large one-meter high vessels or containers only a few centimetres high). This pottery exudes soothing magic, yet it also raises many questions about the significance of the spirals, whirlpools and shapes on the vessels.

The spiral motif, creating a powerful optical illusion, is combined with painted circles, ellipses, lines and bands. Spirals are arranged in horizontal or oblique rows and in various other combinations. The spiral is composed and decomposed in linked spirals, which are then cut and reduced into loops. Their symmetry is not tiring and does not lack elegance; on the contrary, it ensures that the main motifs unfold, combine or alternate so that the end result is particularly harmonious in terms of colouring and graphics.

"Since the dawn of time, man has acted as a coherent, logical, total, complete being Paleolithic or Neolithic man was not a savage. Through his religious expressions, myths and rituals he had meaning from the very beginning. Mircea Eliade's point to how people were able to create, thousands of years ago, great objects with perfect shapes and decorations full of symbols.

The Cucuteni pottery technique is almost perfect: the clay is very well prepared and mixed with a few grains of sand, to prevent the vessel walls from cracking. Once moulded the vessels would be placed in clay and dried in the shade. After drying, they would be decorated or painted, only with mineral colours, black holding an important role. Every aspect of the development of this pottery style is a link conditioned upon a previous one, bearing in it the seed of the next link and ensuring its perfect continuity. The meandering spiral decoration sometimes overloaded with zigzagging, parallel lines, garlands, diamonds, triangles, squares, etc., painted in the specific colours of this styles has been preserved by only a few potters based in:

Rădăuți-Prut, Dorohoi, Trușesti, Țuguieța, (Botoșani), Valea Lupului, Corlățeni, Scanteia, Cetățuia, Rușinoasa, Băiceni, Cucuteni, Schitu Stavnic, (Iași), Brădești (Vaslui).

The classic background of Cucuteni style is white, red and black. White and red are used as background or to draw the motifs, while black is used to draw the borders of white or red strips. It goes without saying that both the red and white feature a range of shades, with red being often brown or dark brick, while white has often yellowish hues. Often the black is really a dark chocolate rather than black proper. However they may be combined, the three colours provide harmonious ensembles. With respect to the Cucuteni pottery, it is worth recalling Vladimir Dumitrescu statement - "the elegance of ceramic forms, the harmony of colours, the confidence of the outlined motifs, often their syntax and combination on the surface of the vessels rightfully stir our admiration.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Pottery is decorated when still wet or after drying. Depending on the system of ornamentation one may distinguish:

1. *Pottery decorated by drawing and painting*
2. *Pottery decorated by scratching (sgraffito) in the Byzantine tradition, practiced to this day in Rădăuți and Botoșani*
3. *Pottery decorated with embossed ornaments*

The *incision technique* (scratching or carving vessels) usually involves geometric motifs: simple continuous line, bands, broken or zigzagging lines, parallel or vertical lines, dotted lines, spikes, wavy lines, circles, spirals, diamonds, etc. Certain vessels feature vegetal or incised motifs: stylized fir twig, four-petal flowers, flowers framed by two twigs, etc.

Embossing - involves an intervention on the raw clay slurry by embossing belts on large vessels (cooking pots, pitchers, etc.), be they simple, alveolar or crest-like, cylindrical studs, wires, etc.

Among decoration techniques, painting was the most frequently used over the last two centuries. Pottery chromatics includes a limited number of colours, grouped by regions, thus making it easy to recognise styles. Traditional colours were prepared from coloured paints: red, black, different shades of brown. Nowadays, additional colours include green, obtained by burning copper, as well as yellow and blue respectively.

Everywhere such vessels were painted with naturally-derived paint to represent geometric, vegetal and zoomorphic motifs. The surface of vessels (especially the larger ones) would be

divided into registers, on which the decor would unfold. The two or three registers covered the central part of the vessel. They were flanked by wide or narrow borders. Geometric or floral motifs were used to draw the borders. Geometric motifs feature a wide range of ornamentation representing millennia of tradition and undoubted continuity, such as dashes, drops (points of colour), kisses (points located on the same line or grouped symmetrically), rows of dots, simple circles, concentric circles, straight, simple or parallel lines, wavy lines, tight or wide, intersecting lines, broken lines, single or double spirals, serrated lines, sequences of sharp angles, small squares, etc.

Plant motifs represent in stylised fashion: fir trees, leaves, flower buds, clover, wheat ear, edelweiss, tulips, sunflowers and daisies.

The tendency to represent figuratively plant motifs on clay vessels has increased in the past century, while the ancient tradition has faded. The latter favoured the abstract representation of objects. A special place is occupied by zoomorphic motifs (doves, peacocks, fish, cranes, etc.).

Symbolic reasons are poignant, as they hint to ancient pre-Christian beliefs that were once universal (the human eye motifs, the sun, the serpent, the twisted rope). An ornament on a simple ceramic pot can be a mere sign, yet if placed in relation to the sun, the cosmic cycles, the myth of permanence and the return, it acquires a symbolic value. Such an ornament then becomes a record of the ancient civilization on the Romanian territory.

Regarding Romanian ceramic ornamentation, Hubert Schmidt argued: "*The detachment of independent motifs from surface ornamentation, because it leads to a planned ordering, a synthesis of ornaments based on rules of rhythm and symmetry. Whole compositions are born, detached from free surface ornamentation.*

CONCLUSIONS

The value of Romanian folk ornamentation originates not only in the exceptionally long history of most motifs or their essential rendering, but also in the diversity and multiplication of solutions in ornamental fields. In addition to the above mentioned qualities, raw materials also play a role in individualising pottery. To conclude, we can distinguish the elements that ensure the unity in diversity of Romanian pottery namely: *the exquisite sense of proportion, subtlety and finesse, vigour and refinement.*

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