

## **DELIA-ANAMARIA RĂCHIȘAN<sup>1</sup>, ROMÂNIA**

**Cuvinte cheie:** nonculori, culori, semnificații, artă tradițională românească, Maramureș.

### **Simbolistica nonculorilor și culorilor de bază în arta tradițională românească**

#### **Rezumat**

Lucrarea își propune să evidențieze impactul pe care îl au nonculorile (alb, negru) și culorile (roșu, galben, albastru, verde) de bază asupra artei tradiționale românești. Nonculorile și culorile menționate anterior, analizate individual din perspectivă interdisciplinară, sincronică și comparativ-analitică dezvăluie filonul artei tradiționale românești. Binaritatea general - particular relevă semnificația nonculorilor și culorilor fundamentale în diverse spații culturale. Interacțiunea cu riturile de trecere, cu praxis-ul ritualic, combinațiile de culori (binaritățile alb-negru, roșu-negru, triada alb - roșu - negru; alb - roșu-sur/albastru; alb - roșu - verde; roșu - galben - albastru; roșu-galben-alb; policromatismul roșu-galben-alb-albastru etc.), multitudinea obiectelor cromatice (trăistuțe, podoabe tradiționale, cămăși, clopuri, zadii, „țoluri” [covoare], săcuți de pernă, măștișoare tradiționale, cruci de mormânt din Săpânța, vase de ceramică etc.) subliniază complexitatea temei.

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<sup>1</sup> Cluj-Napoca Technical University, North University Center from Baia Mare, Department of Philology and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Letters, Ethnology Specialization.

**Keywords:** non-colors, colors, meanings, traditional Romanian art, Maramureș.

## **The Symbolism of Non-colors and Basic Colors in the Traditional Romanian Art**

### **Summary**

The paper aims to highlight the impact of non - colors (white and black) and basic colors (red, yellow, blue, green) on the traditional Romanian art. The non - colors and the colors mentioned above, analyzed individually from an interdisciplinary, synchronous and comparative-analytical perspective, reveal the traditional Romanian art. The general - particular binarity reveals the significance of non - colors and of fundamental colors in various cultural spaces. The interaction with the rites of passage, with ritual praxis, color combinations (the binaries black-white, red - black, the triad white - red - black; white - red-sur / blue; white - red-green; red - yellow - blue; red - yellow - white; the polychromatism red - yellow - white - blue etc.), the multitude of the chromatic objects (little bags, traditional ornaments, shirts, peasant`s hats, striped woolen skirts, „țoluri” [carpets], pillow cases, tombstone`crosses, Ceramic pots, etc.) highlights the complexity of the theme.

## **The Symbolism of Non-colors and Basic Colors in the Traditional Romanian Art**

### **1. Introduction**

In the traditional Romanian art, we find black and white non-colors and fundamental colors such as: red, yellow, blue, green. For the peasants living in the ontological world of the traditional Romanian village there is an important color and two essential non-colors: red, white, black. At this triad another complementary triad is added (blue-yellow -green), strengthened by the nuances' register, namely, by combined colors.

In the past, the colors were not as strident as they are now. Colors and non-colors were naturally obtained. For example, red was obtained from phytomorphic symbols, from plants such as: apple blossoms, red poppy blossoms, grains of snowball tree, rosehip, red onions' peels, beetroot, St. John's wort. The blue was obtained from the following plants: cornflowers, crocus, chicory, violets. The yellow color was obtained from the following phytomorphic symbols: yellow onions' peels, dandelion, birch leaves. The green is obtained from the following phytomorphic and dendromorphic symbols: walnut leaves, crust from wicker trunk, from „rujă” [name of the sunflower in Sălaj]. The black was obtained from the root of the garden sorrel, from walnuts' shells, from the crust of the oak trunk.

Accomplishing an incursion in time, referring to Cucuteni ceramics, we discover the white-red-black triad, a triad that has survived over time: „The Geto-Dacians have remained loyal to the place and spiritual space of Cucuteni, between the mountains, the Danube and the sea. Their beliefs are also of chthonian type, which reclaims again the white-(red)-black chromatic triptic to regulate the religious behavior, the cult of the Great Goddess, temples, sanctuaries, consacrated places (for example, the mythical mountain Kogaion, the high priest's seat) „<sup>2</sup>.

Black and white binarity and the basic colors (red, yellow, blue, green) can now be identified in various combinations. In order to understand the chromaticity of these combinations, we must understand the meaning of each non-color and color in part.

### **2. The meaning of non-colors and basic colors**

If we start from the premise that shepherding was one of the basic occupations of the Romanians, then we understand that the black, white and sour wool was the most used

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<sup>2</sup> Petru Ursache, *Ethnoestetica*, Cluj-Napoca, Eikon Publishing House, 2014, p. 245.

material until the colors obtained from plant fiber appeared.

All non-colors and colors are ambivalent. We analyze each non-color and color in turn.

The color black in the Romanian cultural space is a polyvalent non-color: on the one hand it represents the earth (fertility and fertility function), on the other hand it is a color of mourning in Europe (a function of mediated awareness between the microcosm and the macrocosm, between the vertical and horizontal plane, between human and divine) or a symbol of humility, of penance, renunciation of the worldly matters, of the material life, when referring to priestly or monastic coat (initiation function).

Referring to mythology, the goddesses who embodied fertility were rendered in black (Demeter, Isis, Kali).

At the same time, the devil, because of the absence of the light, of the soul, is represented in black. Black does not emanate and does not catch the light. In this context, black is associated with chaos. Extrapolating, even if black is an elegant color, it is not advisable for children or sportsmen to wear black clothes for long periods of time. It is believed that this non-color generates stagnation, loss of competition, or causes the complete malady state.

In the world of the traditional village, in distant times, when the community was about to get ill of the plague, nine righteous girls strictly respected the ritual praxis: in one night they made the Pestilence Shirt which was buried at the boundary of the village in order to stop the disease, then the lads were pulling with black oxen a circular clod to banish the disease, called by the people black plague or red plague.

Nowadays, for Europeans, black is a color of mourning: „The Christian Europe has devoted the black color to a color of mourning „<sup>3</sup>. In the countryside, the deceased was led on the last road, at the cemetery, by the nearest ones, and if he was placed on the truck, the horses were black (chthonian symbol). Black horses also have a psychopomp role.

On the symbolic level, black is a complex non-color that takes us with our mind to the element of the earth.

White is a non-color that must be associated with essential moments in human life: birth, marriage, death. In rural areas, the newborn is wrapped in „crijmă” [in blank canvas]. In some regions of Romania, if the newborn was a boy, he was wrapped in his father's shirt from when he was a groom, if she was a girl she was wrapped in the mother's shirt from when she was a bride. At the wedding, the bride is wearing a white dress, a symbol of uniqueness. If the bride has to go to the house of the groom who lives in another village, the white horses (solar symbol) and the bride must be blindfolded in order not to recognize the way, so that they do not return to the parent's home. By this gesture it is desired that the newlyweds never to separate, but to remain together happily ever after. Nowadays, the white pigeons that are released on the wedding day are a symbol of peace, harmony, conjugal love. The white dove, encountered in the church, in iconography, or as an object of worship,

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<sup>3</sup> Ioan Botiș, *O istorie antropologică a culorilor*, County Museum of Art « Artistic Center Baia Mare », 2008, p. 80.

is a symbol of the holy spirit.

The blank canvas which is put over the deceased is a matte-white canvas of death. At symbolic level, white represents joy, fidelity, light, righteousness, innocence, purity. In the terms of the competent authors, white has a series of meanings: „White can be understood, either as a color or as the full union of all the colors of the spectrum of light”<sup>4</sup>; whites designate „sometimes the absence, sometimes the sum of all colors”<sup>5</sup>.

Red is a dual color, a symbol of the god Mars that leads us to think about aggression, in the capacity of the god of war, but also to think about sensual love in the capacity of protector of marriages, of fields, of sheep flocks, herds of cowherds.

The sacrificial red can be correlated with the Jewish tradition, referring to the „red cow sacrifice”<sup>6</sup>.

In the Romanian village world, red is meant to stop the evil eye. The newborn will wear a red thread on his wrist to keep the evil eye off. It is believed that the evil energy will be stopped by the three nodes of the string worn on his hand wrist. The red string will have a „apotropaic” [defense] function.

The color yellow must be associated with the sun, the gold, and the wheat. As a dual color, yellow represents on the one hand jealousy, illness, envy, and on the other hand intuition: „The golden yellow with a slight reddish shade is most often the attribute of love of knowledge; the pale yellow is characteristic to aggressiveness full of cunning, thus being presented Judas` clothes ”<sup>7</sup>.

Not accidentally, in the past, the gold coins, spread across all regions of Romania, were called „galbeni” [golden coins].

Green is the color that must be associated with the vegetal kingdom, with hope, with eternity. Extrapolating, it is not accidentally believed that the heart chakra is green. The green leads us to think on the one hand to dendrolatric worship, to the „green gods of renewal”<sup>8</sup>, for example, to Vishnu, Osiris, on the other hand leads us to think at the annual celebrations when green fir-tree branch are used - Arminteni [ May day] (1 May), Sfântul Gheorghe [Saint George] (April 23), Florii [Palm Sunday], Crăciun [Christmas], Anul Nou [New Year].

Blue is an ambivalent symbol - celestial and aquatic. The blue color inserts a mix of meanings: the absolute, the truth, water, platonic love, infinity, ideal world, piety, eternity. At a religious level, Jesus Christ is represented in iconography in blue, mythologically,

<sup>4</sup> Hans Biedermann, *Dicționar de simboluri*, vol. 1, Bucharest, Saeculum I. O. Publishing House, 2002, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Ivan Evseev, *Dicționar de simboluri și arhetipuri culturale*, Timișoara, Amarcord Publishing House, 1994, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Sabina Ispas, *Mărțișorul și relațiile lui cu timpul sacru*, in *Sub semnul mărțișorului*, Ministry of Culture of Moldavian Republic, National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History, Ethnology Society of the Republic Moldova, Chișinău, 2015, p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> Hans Biedermann, *Dicționar de simboluri*, vol. 1, ed. cit., p. 163.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Chevalier; Alain Gheerbrant, *Dicționar de simboluri*, vol. 2, P-Z, Bucharest, Artemis Publishing House, 1995, p. 439.

Vishnu, reincarnated in Krishna is rendered in blue.

In the past, in Maramureș County, the „sur color” [gray] was called „blue color”. The Romanians of Maramureș were certain that when they raised their eyes to the heavens they had the blessing of divinity.

At the same time, the traditional Romanian trinkets<sup>9</sup> reveals a unique chromatism. Both non-colors and colors reveal a distinct and ambivalent chromatic universe.

### **3. The chromatism of non-colors and colors in traditional Romanian art**

Approaching the chromatism and the aesthetics of Romanian traditional art, we decipher aspects related to the ontology of the peasant living in the traditional village world. The non-colors and the colors reveal the traditional Romanian art and allow the valorization of the cultural heritage of Maramureș, a unique patrimony. Referring to the traditional Romanian art and especially to Maramureș, an archaic space of great cultural prestige, we identify unique objects and unique combinations of non-colors (the black and white binarity) and colors (the red and black binarity, the triad white-red-black; white-red-sur/blue; white-red-green; red-yellow-blue; red-yellow-white; the polychromatic red- yellow-white-blue etc. We list a few objects on which we can find some combinations of non-colors and colors mentioned above: white and black little peasant bag (photo 1), traditional ornaments with Dacian knot in white-red-black (photo 2), polychrome ornaments with the symbol of the serpent, with small rakes (photo 3), polychrome detail on the shirt (photo 4), cloche with ornamental narrow braid in red-yellow-blue (photo 5), striped woolen skirts in red-black (photo 6), „țol” polychrome rug with rhombuses (photo 7), the white-red-blue triad on the pillow case (photo 8), the binarities white-sur / blue, white-red, white-black on the traditional trinket (photo 9), chromatic detail on the grave cross in Săpânța (photo 10), chromatic detail on ceramics (photo 11), chromatic detail on the women’s embroidered blouse (photo 12).

In order to potentiate better the colors (blue, yellow, red, green) and the non-color black, we render the impressions of a French author who analyzed the chromaticity of the crosses from the precincts of Cimitirul Vesel [The Merry Cemetery] from Săpânța: „un bleu intense, vibrant, profond, qui n’en finit pas d’éclater [...]. Le jaune encode la jeunesse et les promesses de fécondité. Le rouge, si fréquent et si puissant au Maramureș, est associé à la maturité et à la force [...]. Le vert-brun encode la certitude et la sagesse, les destins qui s’accomplissent et la maturité à son tournant vers le déclin. Le noir, enfin, est associé à la cérémonie [...]. Le noir vraiment noir est en effet captateur de lumière. [an intense, vibrant, deep blue, which never ceases to burst [...]. Yellow encodes youth and promises of fertility. The red, so common and so powerful in Maramureș, is associated with maturity and strength

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<sup>9</sup> See details about the chromatism of the traditional Romanian trinkets at Delia-Anamaria Răchișan, *Istoricul și estetica măștișorului românesc din cele mai vechi timpuri până în prezent*, Cluj-Napoca, Mega Publishing House, Argonaut Publishing House, 2017, pp. 143-174.



[...]. The green-brown encodes certainty and wisdom, destinies that are fulfilled and maturity at its turn toward decline. Black, finally, is associated with the ceremony [...]. The black which is really black is indeed light catcher.] „<sup>10</sup>.

The chromatism and the aesthetics of the Romanian traditional art reveal a unique universe full of meaning, vitality.

#### 4. Conclusions

The paper, appealing to the synchronic perspective, to the comparative-analytical analysis, to the interdisciplinary perspective emphasizes the chromaticity of colors and non-colors, a unique and fascinating chromatics that deserves to be contemplated. The approached levels (the meaning of colors and non-colors, the interaction with traditional Romanian art) reveal the complexity of the theme, which remains an open door to other researches.

#### Photo annex with photos made by Delia-Anamaria Răchișan



Foto 1: White and black little peasant bag, Personal archive, Budești, Țara Maramureșului, 2018.

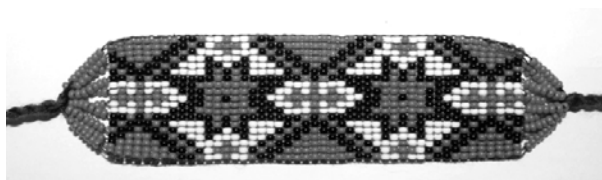


Foto 2: Traditional ornaments with Dacian knot in white-red-black, Authors: Viorel și Marinica Pârvu, Baia Mare, Maramureș, Personal archive, 2018

<sup>10</sup> Jean Cuisenier, *La table de morts et le Paradis bleau*, dans *Mémoire des Carpathes. La Roumanie millénaire: un regard intérieur*, Paris, Plon – Terre Humaine, 2000, p. 217; 219.



Foto 3: Polychrome ornaments with the symbol of the serpent, with small rakes, Giulești, Țara Maramureșului, Personal archive, 2018



Foto 4: Polychrome detail on the shirt, Giulești, Țara Maramureșului, Personal archive, 2018



Foto 5: Cloche with ornamental narrow braid in red- yellow- blue, Author: Vasile Borodi, Sârbi, Țara Maramureșului, Personal archive, 2018.



Foto 6: Striped woolen skirts in red-black, Budești, Maramureșul Voievodal, Personal archive, 2018



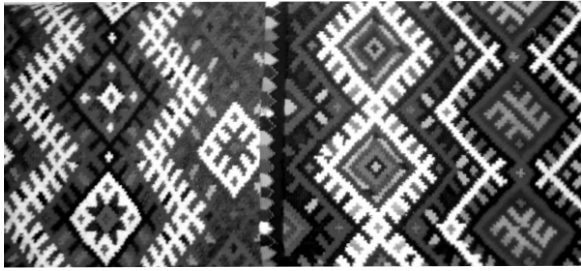


Foto 7: „Țol” Polychrome rug with rhombuses, Collection: Ioana Hotico, 71 years, Ieud, Maramureșul Voievodal, 2014.



Foto 8: The white-red-blue triad on the pillow case, the Ethnography Museum Collection in Sighetul Marmatiei, 2018.



Foto 9: The binarities white-sur / blue, white-red, white-black on the traditional trinket, Personal archive, 2018.



Foto 10: Chromatic detail on the grave cross in Săpânța, Cimitirul Vesel [The Merry Cemetery] , Maramureșul Voievodal, 2018.



Foto 11: Chromatic detail on ceramics, Valea Izei, Collection of the Ethnography Museum, Sighetul Marmatiei, Maramureșul Voievodal, 2018.



Foto 12: Chromatic detail on antique women's embroidered blouse dated 200 years ago, Băița de sub Codru, Țara Codrului, 2014.

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