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DECODING CULTURAL TREASURES: TOWARD A RESTORATION FRAMEWORK FOR FOLK DOWRY CHESTS

Abstract: This comprehensive scholarly investigation employs a systematic approach merging visual comparative analysis and semiotic examination to discern and interpret symbols and semiotics within historical dowry chests. Drawing from the extensive artifact repository at the National Museum of Bucovina and an analysis of pieces from the storage facilities of the Dimitrie Gusti National Village Museum, the primary objective of this study is to decode the visual and symbolic narratives within the context of formulating a comprehensive intervention methodology for the restoration of a distinctive collection of dowry chests, reflecting the rich cultural tapestry of their provenance.

The research focuses on the two primary typologies, „Woodworker’s” chests and „Carpenter’s” chests, revealing common motifs, such as the enduring symbolism of fertility represented by the iconic tree of life and the resplendent flora, bearing cosmogonic and faith-related significance, whether of pagan or Christian origin. Notably, the analysis distinguishes these typologies. „Woodworker’s” chests exhibit symbolic motifs contributing to a nuanced narrative, albeit encoded, conveying messages through their ornamental intricacies. Conversely, „Carpenter’s” chests manifests a penchant for aesthetic ornamentation devoid of explicit narrative informational symbolism. As generational shifts unfold, the ornamental lexicon undergoes simplification, mirroring transformations in the recipient’s interpretive lens.

Beyond academic inquiry, this study holds practical implications for the preservation and restoration of culturally significant artifacts. By decoding the rich semiotic fabric woven into these dowry chests, it informs the development of a robust methodology for the restoration of unique pieces, ensuring the preservation of their historical, cultural, and artistic value for future generations. In essence, this research not only uncovers hidden layers of meaning within these intricate objects but also contributes to their enduring legacy as vital cultural treasures in need of preservation.

Keywords: Dowry Chests, Restoration Methodology, Semiotics, Symbolism

The bridal chest, as defined in the Etymological Dictionary of the Romanian Language, is described as “a crucial element of traditional Romanian rustic furniture, typically crafted from beech wood and adorned with intricate carvings or paintings. Its primary purpose is to store the bride’s dowry items, including bedding, clothing, rugs, and more.”² However, this seemingly straightforward definition belies the profound cultural and symbolic significance embedded in this object.

The bridal chest occupied a central place within the archaic Romanian rural household, transcending its practical utility. It played a pivotal role in the ceremonial rites surrounding a daughter’s marriage. Often, it was the sole piece of furniture transported by brides from their parental homes to their new

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² Etymological dictionary of the Romanian language

marital abodes, symbolizing the transition between generations. (Paveliuc-Olariu, 2007). Thus, we deduce the multiple roles that this simple object played: a utilitarian and practical piece, yet at the same time, a tangible reminder of the valuable goods parents passed on to future generations, continuing this generational cycle.

Beyond its practical and symbolic roles, the bridal chest served as a cultural vessel, conveying a rich tapestry of beliefs through its ornamentation and decorative compositions. To fully grasp the communicative value of the symbols adorning these chests, it is essential to dissect them into their constituent elements: form, typology, ornaments, and decorative compositions. These components collectively form the categories of artistic language through which communication occurs, intricately interconnected and interdependent between the chests and the public, the chests and the folk artist, respectively between the folk artist and the public.

When considering that “folk art functions as a mode of communication, conveying a message,” (Pauncev, 1981, p. 324) where a message is defined as “a finite, organized group of elements drawn from a repertoire, arranged as a sequence of signs governed by specific rules” (Pauncev, 1981, p. 324), it becomes evident that multiple facets are at play in this communication process. The classical communication model incorporates three key elements: the sender (who selects signs from a repertoire and assembles them, in this context, the craftsman/folk artist), the channel through which the message is conveyed (manifested as the artwork—the bridal chest), and, lastly, the receiver—individuals or social groups who interpret the message using their stored repertoire of signs.

The communicative value of symbols within bridal chests encompasses form, typology, ornaments, and ornamental composition. These elements exist within the realm of the communication channel but maintain intricate relationships with both the sender and the receiver.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the bridal chest and the message conveyed through the symbols within its decorative compositions, it is imperative to provide a concise overview of the typologies of chests under scrutiny. Notably, chests referred to as “carpenter’s” or “woodworker’s” bridal chests hold a unique position in this context. These chests, characterized by their archaic nature, have existed since ancient times, primarily in the region of Bucovina but also present in other regions of Romania, such as Transylvania. The nomenclature derives from the manufacturing process, with Romanian woodworkers, or “dulgheri,” utilizing traditional carpentry techniques to craft these chests. Each village often boasted its master woodworker—a craftsman well-versed in the materials commonly employed within the rural Romanian household.

The woodworkers of the ancient Romanian village commonly utilized materials readily available in their native surroundings. Romania’s temperate climate provided an abundance of deciduous forests, and the predominant timber materials used were oak, beech, and fir. To efficiently work with wood, these craftsmen needed to understand and utilize the specific natural properties of each wood type, as not all were equally suitable for crafting bridal chests. Among these materials, beech wood stood out as the primary choice for crafting “carpenter’s” bridal chests.

The carpenter’s bridal chest comprises several structural elements, including legs, walls, the bottom, and the top with its “side wings.” The craftsmen of this era did not work with precision tools, and techniques such as butt jointing were too rudimentary, while more complex methods like dovetailing demanded extensive precision and time—resources the craftsmen likely did not possess for this particular item. Consequently, these structural elements of the chest were joined using lap joints and rabbet joints, or as commonly known, “tongue and groove” joints, further reinforced structurally by small wooden dowels.

Carpenter’s bridal chests stand out distinctly in terms of ornamentation and decorations employed to embellish these pieces. As exceptional ritual objects, their entire ornamental ensemble was intricately tied to the rites of marriage, religious significance, as well as the pagan beliefs retained in the collective ancestral consciousness. To decipher the nuptial ceremony, the decorative composition can be analyzed as a narrative. The craftsman adorning these chests was acutely aware of the mystical rituals and symbols that needed to be incised onto this chest. Within the recorded folklore of the popular community, we find

texts that underscore this awareness: “Good people, by decorating this bridal chest, I have joined the bride and groom with my knife and awl, not with mere words... May the groom be like the fir tree, tall and adorned. May they have a grand household with many children, abundant food, and may they age gracefully like the apple and pear trees. May you be of full cheer, may the Lord protect you, so I say, Amen.” (Măneanu, 2007)

The iconography adorning these chests follows repetitive patterns. Stylized representations of the same decorative elements, bearing mystical religious connotations, make recurring appearances. Among the simplest ornamental motifs are straight lines intersected by other lines to create intricate surface patterns. (Capesius, 1974). A popular motif for these chests is that of the fir tree or cypress, discreetly arranged in the decorative compositions by drawing a symmetrical axis surrounded by small obliquely distributed lines. The stylization of a tree or a cypress holds special significance because, in popular culture, it represents the “tree of life.” A nuptial symbol, the “tree of life” takes on various forms in wedding rituals; for instance, the fir tree appears in multiple places in this ceremony, being adorned and placed on the house or at the gate of the future newlyweds to invoke the regenerative power and robustness of this tree in their future. (Prepeliuc, 2012)

Another decorative element that seems to be a constant presence on the Bucovina woodworker’s chests is the rosette. It appears symmetrically concerning the central axis of the chest or even as a stand-alone element. The rosettes have either 6 or 12 rays inscribed in a circle, and the significance of this symbol is cosmogonic in nature. “The wheel of the sun” or the rosette signifies the sun’s journey from sunrise to sunset and the passage between solstices and equinoxes, making it an extremely important symbol for the archaic peasant who navigated reality based on the sun’s path throughout the year.

Many other cosmogonic elements also appear, including elements like stars, spirals, and diamonds, which were often referred to as the “makings of the world.” However, there are also elements inspired by the religious universe. Motifs such as the cross or skeuomorphs suggest the closeness of the ornamental culture of these pieces to the Divine. One of the elements that frequently appears on Bucovina chests is the skeuomorphic motif of the “house.” However, it could also represent the “imperial doors,” the central doors specific to the Orthodox church altar. (Prepeliuc, 2012)

The dowry chests, known in popular terminology as “carpentry chests,” represent a distinct type of chest that appeared much later in the region of Bucovina. They acquired this name because they were crafted by carpenters rather than joiners. Although adopted as an object of furniture with extraordinary cultural and traditional significance only in the 19th century, this type of chest, whether archaic or not, had existed in Moldova for a long time.

”Carpentry” dowry chests are categorized based on the ornamentation found on the front panels. There are no differences in shape within the native territory, as is the case with ”woodworker’s” chests, which can have either a domed or flat lid. However, there are slight differences in terms of dimensions. Occasionally, for ”carpentry” dowry chests, differences in the joining method can be observed, but these appear randomly, depending on the skill of the craftsman.³ Some, including novices or those not initiated into the mysteries of carpentry, opt for a butt joint instead of the traditional dovetail joint. In general, these chests have the appearance of rectangular boxes, lacking support elements such as wooden frames or legs. The structural elements consist of side panels, front and back panels, the base panel, and the lid. These chests vary in size but surpass joinery chests by reaching lengths of up to 120 cm and widths of 60 cm.

When it comes to the choice of wood for crafting this type of bridal chest, it appears that softwood from coniferous trees was preferred. This preference can be explained through the lens of folklore and traditional myth, which validate the use of fir as the material for crafting this object. In mythological folklore, fir trees are attributed mystical and ritualistic qualities, as explained by Doina David: “For the decorations of folk objects... fir has a special significance. It is a sign of identity for Romanians who live ‘Beyond the Forest,’ signifying a civilization that is perishable due to the chosen material for construc-

³ Aspects determined by observations made within the painted carpentry chest collections at the Bucovina Village Museum in Suceava and the dowry chests at the ASTRA National Museum Complex in Sibiu.

tion but eternal through the profound symbols it encompasses... In our Christian tradition, there is the idea that the fir tree is a tree of the first covenant.” (David, 1997) In traditional Romanian mythology, there was a custom of making a “covenant at the fir tree” before marriage, as a sacred covenant made in the shade of the tree representing human birth and regeneration. Besides its attributes within the realm of mysticism, fir was also an inexpensive and readily accessible wood for the rural population. In addition to fir, pine was also used, and when necessary, other woods like beech.

The ornamentation of “carpenter’s” bridal chests is unidirectional. They are often painted on various surfaces, both exterior and interior, but do not feature any other ornamental or decorative techniques. The compositional iconography results from an attempt to use old elements in new, revised forms. Aurel Bodiу provides an insightful perspective on how ornamentation and decorative motifs have evolved over time: “Inextricably linked to the objects it adorns due to its predominantly functional nature, decor in folk art has its own unique set of issues. Its study can shed light on matters that may seem distant from the consideration of aesthetic values. It not only encompasses the meanings of beauty but also the historical and social purposes that have led to its birth and evolution.” (Bodiу, 2006)

The iconography of carpenter’s chests can be described in a few words: daring, rich in foreign cultural influences, a synthesis of Romanian culture and the enduring symbols of pagan nature as well as religious symbols. Upon visual analysis, there is a sensation of presenting the theme of the front panel as if it were a standalone composition. However, it is composed of disparate elements at times, brought together through a collage of symbols that carry the same meaning throughout folklore. The ornamental typologies are predominantly related to floral motifs, treated through various compositional formulas such as simple flowers, flower bouquets, vases of flowers, or even floral garlands. Architectural motifs are also present, often dominating the front panel of a chest. These compositions are connected to representations of urban and rural landscapes, as well as religious and secular, civil constructions. Lastly, there are mixed compositions that combine these two groups of ornamental motifs. This mixed grouping includes, in addition to common elements, frames around the composition. These frames come in various forms, rounded or right-angled, sometimes even featuring decorative metal elements at their corners.

However, these compositions, often made up of disparate elements, form sub-genres and categories of compositions. They make use of significant central elements, such as the flower vase, and symbolically stylize them in various forms, one of them being the “heart with roots” motif. These two representations share a common root, the primordial motif they attempt to represent and whose mystical significance they bear is that of the “tree of life.”

A surprising type of ornament found in these chests is that of the fir tree, or the “tree of life” in many of its forms. This motif does not overtly appear on the exterior panels but is placed on the lid, inside, and is highly schematized, almost like a hastily made sketch.

Considering the two major typologies of bridal chests analyzed, we can identify common signs with shared messages: the fir tree and flowers, representing fertility and the “tree of life” reconfigured in various forms. We also find symbols with cosmogonic connotations and symbols that connect us to faith, whether it be pagan or Christian. One significant difference between the two typologies is evident. “Woodworker’s” bridal chests present symbols with symbolic meanings that fit into a narrative. These decorative symbols are intended to convey a message, even if that message is not easily decipherable. Simultaneously, there is a tendency to adopt decorative symbols for purely aesthetic purposes within “carpenter’s” bridal chests. Decorative compositions are simplified, and only a few symbols hold informative symbolic messages. The ornamental repertoire undergoes significant changes and simplification because, with the new generation, the message recipient also changes. Not only that, but the geometric compositions found in “woodworker’s” dowry chests seem to be replaced with ornaments that have their counterparts in nature within the “carpentry” dowry chests. There is a need for simplification of the ornamental repertoire because there is a “need for both the folk craftsman and the recipient to possess the same repertoire so that the message can be fully received, but also because the chest has lost some of its symbolic significance and functional potential.” (Pauncev, 1981, p. 332)

Bridal chests, therefore, represent objects with multiple cultural, social, and aesthetic dimensions. Perhaps their most important role was to transmit and perpetuate a specific folk artistic language that aimed to pass on the ideas, values, and ancestral family concepts to the next generation. An essential role of ornamental compositions, ornaments, shape, and chest typologies was to create a specific language that communicated these values and concepts through symbolism. The research into semiotics and symbols within the context of traditional Romanian bridal chests serves as a foundational framework for decoding, deciding, and ultimately implementing a restoration and preservation methodology. These intricately decorated chests, with their rich symbolic ornamentation, offer a glimpse into the cultural, social, and historical tapestry of Romania. Understanding the semiotics of these symbols is pivotal in unraveling their deeper meanings and significance.

Firstly, the choice of wood for crafting these chests, predominantly softwood from coniferous trees like fir and pine, carries a semiotic connection to Romanian folklore and tradition. Fir, in particular, is imbued with mystical and ritualistic qualities, symbolizing regeneration and the enduring essence of Romanian culture. This understanding of the semiotic significance of materials informs decisions about wood selection in restoration efforts, emphasizing the preservation of cultural symbolism.

The iconography found on these chests, whether it be floral motifs, architectural elements, or representations of the fir tree, forms a complex visual language. This language carries messages related to fertility, life, and cultural identity. Decoding these symbols requires a deep understanding of their cultural context and significance, which, in turn, guides restoration choices. The distinction between “woodworker’s” and “carpenter’s” bridal chests highlights the evolving semiotics and symbolism over time. While “woodworker’s” chests convey messages and narratives through their ornamentation, “carpenter’s” chests simplify their decorative motifs for aesthetic purposes. This shift reflects changing cultural and social contexts, impacting the choice of symbols and their meanings. Restoration decisions must consider this evolution, preserving the authenticity of each typology.

Additionally, the research underscores the importance of considering the recipient of these symbols—their evolving interpretation and cultural context. This understanding aids in deciding on the appropriate level of restoration and preservation, striking a balance between retaining historical authenticity and making the symbols accessible and meaningful to contemporary audiences through interventions such as chromatic reintegration of losses.

In practical terms, a restoration and preservation framework can leverage this research by prioritizing the preservation of symbolic elements during restoration processes. It can guide decisions on wood treatments, chromatic reintegration, and overall conservation efforts, ensuring that the original messages encoded in the chests’ ornamentation are not lost.

Furthermore, this framework can inform educational and interpretive programs, allowing modern audiences to engage with and understand the rich semiotics and cultural history embedded in these chests. By fostering a deeper connection to the symbolism, restoration efforts can breathe new life into these cultural artifacts.

In conclusion, the study of semiotics and symbols on traditional Romanian bridal chests is instrumental in decoding their meanings, making informed decisions regarding restoration and preservation, and ensuring the cultural legacy they represent endures for future generations. This research provides a valuable roadmap for both safeguarding the past and enriching the present through the preservation of cultural heritage.



"Woodworker's" Dowry Chest typical of the Moldova region, specifically from the village of Preutești, Suceava. This chest exhibits specific features of its typology, with a raised body supported by legs from the ground and geometric ornamentation with symmetrical elements achieved through wood surface incisions.

© Collection of the Bucovina Village Museum, Suceava

The motif of 'cypress trees' depicted through engraving on the front panel. These symbolically represent the 'tree of life.'

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The rosette motif with 12, petals' – corners

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The rosette motif with 6, petals' – corners

© Bucovina Village Museum Suceava Image Archive / chest inventory no. 6942



Skeuomorphic motif of the 'house,' which may contain religious significance, possibly representing the 'imperial doors.'

© Bucovina Village Museum Suceava Image Archive / chest inventory no. 9629



The decorative elements were incised on the wooden panel. The incisions were then filled with black, and the white was applied using the 'pastiglia' technique on the surface.

© Bucovina Village Museum Suceava Image Archive / chest inventory no. 1736

One of the specific compositional typologies of the ,carpenter's' dowry chests featuring the theme of flowers represented by two symmetrical floral bouquets on the lateral sides of the front panel.

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Composition of the front panel of chest no. inv. 12009 featuring vases of flowers with a central point represented by a flower that combines the characteristics found in the adjacent floral bouquets.

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Composition of the front panel of chest no. inv. 12408, featuring a symmetrical composition with bouquets of flowers and a central point with flowers.

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Composition of the front panel of chest no. inv. 7763, featuring a central motif of a vase with flowers surrounded by a symmetrical urban landscape and geometric decorations.

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