

Introductory study¹

In the year 2016, in the Starchiojd commune, Prahova county, the second volume of the monographic study entitled *Starchiojd. Moștenirea culturală. (Partea a doua) Sărbători, obiceiuri, repertoriu folcloric, tradiții locale reprezentative* [*Starchiojd. Cultural heritage. (Part two) Holidays, customs, folk repertoire, representative local traditions*], was launched, compiled under the coordination of Mrs. Ioana Ruxandra Fruntelată and Mr. Cristian Mușă, published in 2015, at the Mythos Publishing House of the Prahova County Cultural Center.

On that occasion, an exhibition with ethnographic objects was organized. We admired and appreciated at that time the value of the exhibits, especially of the huckaback towels, pillowcases and tablecloths, beautifully and richly decorated, which spoke through themselves about the status, craftsmanship and concerns of the members of this community.

We returned to Starchiojd, within the context of ethnographic research, being convinced by the fact that those valuable pieces of folk art must be registered, filed, photographed, valued in an album and shared with people, both specialists and the general public.

We were sustained and supported in this endeavor by people who showed the utmost respect for the heritage passed down for many generations, and we mention here Mr. Cristian Mușă, son of the village, currently a researcher at the “Constantin Brăiloiu” Institute of Ethnography and Folklore and Mr. Sorin Fofircă, director of the Technological High School from Starchiojd, as well as other members of the community, who showed availability and provided us with valuable information: Elena Mușă, Lucica Tănăsescu, Maria Bărbuceanu, Tinca Marcu, Rodica Gabriela

¹ Translation by Alexandra Badea.

Dima.

This album is intended to be a visual pendant of the monographic study *Starchiojd. Moștenirea culturală* [*Starchiojd. Cultural heritage*], volumes I and II – which illustrate with passion and scientific meticulousness the tradition of these places, in the hope that we offer to the reader the opportunity to know, understand, respect and appreciate the value of these pieces of heritage.

The pieces included in this album are an integral part of two ethnographic collections: the collection of the Technological High School from Starchiojd² and the collection of Mr. Cristian Mușă³. If the second one is a private collection, the fruit of the passion and desire to save and preserve these valuable ancient testimonies, the pieces that are currently in the custody of the Technological High School from Starchiojd belonged to the Starchiojd Village Museum, established in the summer of 1944, through the care of several intellectuals: the historian Nicolae I. Simache, the teacher C.M. Râpeanu, the teacher Cornelia Ionescu Lungu (from Ploiești) and the local teacher Elisabeta (Lucica) Gârbea, helped by several students⁴. Over time, the museum collection was organized in several spaces, which resulted in the loss of some of the valuable exhibits. It is therefore appropriate to express, on this occasion, our thoughts of gratitude and appreciation for all those who have contributed to this process of recovery and patrimonialization of these ethnographic pieces.

For the edition of this album, from the multitude of ethnographic objects found in the aforementioned collections, we selected huckaback towels (also known as napkins or towels), tablecloths, pillowcases and curtains, all based on linen which was handmade by weaver. For their special value, noticed in the process of some rituals, we also included handkerchiefs in the album.

The fact that these exhibits were mostly collected many years ago, some even

² pp. 1-7, 9-33, 35, 37-45, 47-59, 61-63, 65, 67, 69, 71-73, 76-82, 84-86, 88-98, 106, 108, 109, 112-118, 121, 122, 124, 128-132, 134, 137, 139, 141-146, 148-150, 153-170.

³ pp. 8, 34, 36, 46, 60, 64, 66, 68, 70, 74, 75, 83, 87, 99-105, 107, 110, 111, 119, 120, 123, 125-127, 133, 135, 136, 138, 140, 147, 151, 152.

⁴ Fruntelată, Mușă, 2014: 33.

more than seventy years ago, made it almost impossible for us to obtain valuable information regarding the popular name of work techniques and especially concerning the symbolism of the ornamental motifs. In this regard, our approach will be one within the limits of current meanings and scientific categories in the field.

For a comprehensive approach and a diachronic perspective on the issue, we quote the statement of the ethnologist Eugen Holban: “Revolutions, though, are not a characteristic of popular art. The determining attribute is precisely the preservation and improvement of the same elements. Here renewals occur gradually, with caution. Any creator, no matter how gifted, does not attempt radical transformations, but a refinement and an enrichment of the existing motives. Thus, the elements from ancient times still persist in the popular ornamentation until the beginning of the 20th century, even if their initial meanings have been lost, and details have appeared, as they were imposed by more recent epochs, on their old morphological structure”⁵.

One of the decorative motifs frequently found on the huckaback towels highlighted in the album is the *tree of life*. According to the renowned Romanian ethnologist Paul Petrescu, “the tree of life is one of the ancient myths of humanity embodying, under the poetic form, *the unachievable dream of youthfulness without senescence and of life without death*. In the legends and beliefs of the peoples, this myth is somewhat constantly present, being essentially a tree whose wonderful fruit or miraculous sap are the elixir of life. In the crown of the tree or at its root there are birds or frightening animals that guard the priceless treasure”⁶.

Of the three patterns of representation of the tree of life in folk art: Hellenistic, Iranian and Dacian, the Hellenistic version is most often found on the huckaback towels in the Starchiojd collection. Two of the huckaback towels illustrate the variant of the Greek *kantharos*⁷ (a type of ancient vessel); on one of

⁵ Holban, 1974: 22, 23.

⁶ Petrescu, 1971: 39.

⁷ pp. 2, 3.

them we can even find two facing birds, placed in the upper part of the tree, thus completing the plastic image of this motif. On most huckaback towels, the representation of the tree of life takes the form of a pot or flowerpot⁸, which, in some cases, retains bird-shaped representations located at the base of the vessel. We can also observe transient or even dissolution phases, in terms of illustrating the motif of the tree of life, by preserving the representation of plant parts and birds placed at the base, and omitting the vessel, or placing at the base of plant-shaped motifs of bird-shaped representations, anthropomorphic or zoomorphic, which acquires an aesthetic role, rather than a symbolic, integrative one.

The representation of the tree of life in the Iranian version⁹ appears on the huckaback towels at Starchiojd with the thickened root (thus emphasizing the “source of life”) or with the bi-tri-forked root.

On some huckaback towels, the motif of the tree of life has a central arrangement, being framed by an edge; on others, it has a linear, repetitive arrangement. The aspect of anthropomorphic motifs should also be noted, with the tree of life worn in the hands of female characters¹⁰, which emphasizes a varied, complex range of representation of these decorative motifs.

As a general observation, the representations of the tree of life are framed or based on a register with different plant-shaped, geometric (broken lines, reminiscent of the *path of life* motif¹¹, the hourglass¹²), or astral¹³ motifs.

Anthropomorphic decorative motifs, less common in the range of the Starchiojd wave, are represented only in the female version¹⁴, in a complete rendering of the human being. In the case of both representations, on a huckaback towel and on a cloth of smaller dimensions, we notice the feminine versions, with

⁸ pp. 4-10.

⁹ pp. 14-18.

¹⁰ p. 1.

¹¹ p. 3.

¹² p. 4.

¹³ p. 4.

¹⁴ p. 112.

*bell*¹⁵ dresses and the tree of life supported in their hands, in a naturalistic-geometrized approach. The surprising fact is the rhythm created by the repetitive rendering of the characters, maintaining or alternating the red-black dual coloring, reminiscent of the old motif of the *hora* (round dance).

The zoomorphic representations, self-subsistent, are reduced to plastic images, treated in a naturalistic manner, of some small canine specimens¹⁶, rather than pets, rendered in a static hypostasis, and horses¹⁷, illustrated in a version that suggests the idea of movement, which one may encounter represented on the *alese*¹⁸ huckaback towels, made with raw silk thread.

The bird-shaped motifs¹⁹, represented on the cloth from Starchiojd, can be structured on several categories, among which we observe: enchanted or exotic birds (peacocks, parrots), poultry (roosters, turkeys) and small birds, similar to those from the local fauna. If the enchanted birds are rendered in a magnificent outfit, in solitary or face to face poses, in images associated with plant-shaped motifs, poultry or small birds are rendered in repetitive poses, contributing to the shaping of independent registers.

From the category of geometric decorative motifs²⁰, rendered on both embroidered and woven huckaback towels, we find *straight lines, stripes, broken lines, zig-zag, the winding, diamond* etc. Intertwined with the range of geometric motifs, we may also find the *ram's horns*²¹, *vârtelnița (reel)*²² and *prescura (altar bread)*²³.

Analyzing comparatively the pieces illustrated in the album *Ștergarul*

¹⁵ pp. 1, 112.

¹⁶ pp. 59, 60.

¹⁷ pp. 78, 79.

¹⁸ Type of fabric made by inserting the weft thread (distinct from the basic thread) through a certain number of warp threads, resulting in a certain pattern.

¹⁹ pp. 47-58.

²⁰ pp. 61-67.

²¹ p. 61.

²² pp. 62, 63.

²³ pp. 82-83.

prahovean [*The Prahova huckaback towel*], compiled by prof. N.I. Simache, “collected from the Prahova county, namely from the upper basin of the river having the same name”²⁴ with the huckaback towels highlighted by us from the Starchiojd commune, we observe, in the case of the first category, the preponderance of the linear registers, richly decorated, represented compactly towards the extremities of the huckaback towel, especially in the case of stylized geometric or plant-shaped decorative motifs, and, at the same time, the discreet ornamentation of the field of the huckaback towel. If we refer to the pieces identified and selected by us at Starchiojd, we observe the preponderance of maintaining the “field” of the huckaback towel free. We also find similarities between the two categories analyzed, regarding the decorative approach of the huckaback towels which represented a singular dominant motif (usually plant forms – tree of life, or bird shapes) placed towards the ends of the towel, completed at its basis by a discrete register, most often plant-shaped.

Looking as a whole at the huckaback towels emphasized in this album, we notice the observance of the three basic principles of the decorative art: symmetry, alternation and repetition.²⁵

According to *Atlasul etnografic român* [*The Romanian Ethnographic Atlas*], compiled by the specialists of the “Constantin Brăiloiu” Institute of Ethnography and Folklore, at Starchiojd the huckaback towels were mainly made of hemp linen, cotton or raw silk, woven in two or four threads, *alese* (made with a flying shuttle resulting in different decorative motifs), *nevedite*²⁶ (woven in pattern) or sewn.²⁷ The huckaback towels emphasized by us in the album have an average width of forty / forty-five centimeters, and their length does not exceed two hundred and eighty-eight centimeters. The tablecloths were made of wool, cotton or hemp,

²⁴ Simache N.I.: 8.

²⁵ Papa, 2007: 13.

²⁶ Weaving technique performed by prior arrangement of warp threads, which results in a homogeneous decoration, repeated on the entire surface of the fabric.

²⁷ Ghinoiu, 2011: 227, 229.

woven in two or four threads, *alese* or sewn.²⁸ Please note that the tablecloths²⁹ are mainly made of two (widths) strips of cloth, joined on the long side, the embroidery being applied on two or three of the four sides. The pillowcases³⁰ are based on woven cloth, with approximate dimensions of forty-five / fifty centimeters, describing a square or a rectangle. In some cases, a strip of slightly wrinkled cloth is applied to offer a certain note of elegance.

The handkerchiefs³¹ are made of strips of cloth with a side of forty-one / forty-two centimeters. The curtains³² are made of two strips of cloth, similar to the huckaback towels, with various dimensions adapted to the window.

Following the interviews taken by us at Starchiojd, we identified a few local names of some work techniques. Thus, for stitching or embroidery³³ we have: „pe muscă” (simple stitch), „pe bățai” (wide stitch) and „pe pășitură” (square stitch), and for the versions made by weaving³⁴: fabric in two threads, *alese* with *speteaza* (board with which the warp threads are lifted when weaving with decorative motifs), *nevedite*. It should be noted that if the embroidery „pe muscă” was frequently made with thicker cotton thread, resulting in a seam with a rich filled shape, the embroidery „pe bățai” was made with both thin and thick thread, and the embroidery known as „pe pășitură” was most often made with thin thread, resulting in a delicate, discreet seam.

The beauty of the pieces emphasized by us in the album is also completed by the mastery of making “tassels”, „colților” (decoration in the form of scalloped triangular or semicircular cuts, on the edge of the collar and sleeves [shirt], of the skirt hem, on a lace), “lace”, or „fringes” (a decorative edge of hanging threads on a curtain, piece of clothing etc), worked by different techniques: crocheting, weaving,

²⁸ *Ibidem*: 233, 235.

²⁹ pp. 133-138.

³⁰ pp. 113-128.

³¹ pp. 129-132.

³² pp. 108-111, 166.

³³ pp. 1-64, the last one illustrates all the three types of embroidery/stitching

³⁴ pp. 68-111

knotting, which reveals a special concern of the creators for their aesthetic value.

If, in terms of their decorative purpose, the huckaback towels responded to the natural need to brighten the interiors of peasant houses (being placed above woolen rugs or carpets, or framing icons) and even to trends and habits of beautification and ornamentation specific to certain periods of time, their ceremonial purpose provided them with a much broader existential projection, an aspect which is well emphasized by a careful radiography of some parts from the rites of passage to the beyond.

While tablecloths and curtains have a mainly functional and decorative purpose, huckaback towels (napkins), pillows (pillowcases) and handkerchiefs also have a significant ceremonial purpose. In this sense, we further emphasize some of the reports obtained within the field research undertaken at Starchiojd, in 2018:

At the baptism ceremony,

“one was obliged, after bathing the child, the next day, to have, to give her (n.n. to his godmother) a huckaback towel”³⁵.

At the wedding,

“that white towel was put on the groom”³⁶. “The groom took the godparents and went together at the bride’s house. The bride’s mother would put the napkin on the groom, and the groom would put money in her cleavage, and he would say that he was paying the breast that his bride had been fed from.” “When they got home, the groom’s mother would pull (n.n. with the huckaback towel) the bride and groom into the house. At the door, the godfather and the groom’s father would sit on a chair and pour them water three times, and gave them a towel.”³⁷

These practices are also confirmed by the answers to the questionnaires of

³⁵ Bărbuceanu M.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ Mușă E.

the *Romanian Ethnographic Atlas*, recorded by the specialists of the “Constantin Brăiloiu” Institute of Ethnography and Folklore in *Sărbători și obiceiuri, vol. V, Dobrogea, Muntenia, [Holidays and customs, vol. V, Dobrogea, Muntenia]*: “the groom’s mother would receive the young couple when they came from the civil marriage, tie them with a napkin around their necks and lead them inside the house so that they would be inseparable”³⁸.

Returning to the answers obtained by us within the field research:

“Even now, until two thousand years ago, they were woven, they didn’t make them like that anymore, they were woven black in little stripes, handcrafted, and they would use that one, because, you know, everyone said that the groom should have the most beautiful towel... and one of those was used, and they no longer used (n.n. one of these sewn on homemade cloth) because they no longer had these...”³⁹.

Also,

“With the groom’s towel one would go on the road, to church, to the wedding, then, as far as I know from my mother-in-law, one would go to the groom’s mother’s house, and she would lead them inside the room where they were both going to live... she would lead them with this huckaback towel, she would hold them both. When one of them would die, for the first one to die, half of it would be cut (n.n. from the huckaback towel), put under the pillow and bury the person like that. Each one would be buried with one half. My mother-in-law used to say, for the moment when the other one came, to reunite the family”⁴⁰.

At the funeral,

³⁸ Ghinoiu, 2009: 156.

³⁹ Bărbuceanu M.

⁴⁰ Dima R.G.

“in our area, the huckaback towel is still put, on the tray, on the cross, on the flag, on the candlestick, on the bucket, on the gravediggers, on the ox cart they would be put, now we put it on the car”⁴¹. “One would make a stop and throw money. With the cloth, at the grave, the dead person is descended with it. They would put string, but it's also the cloth. Now they would buy the cloth, then they had homemade cloth, woven cloth for the gravediggers. When we left home with the dead person, we burned her. We put four meters or two meters of cloth and burned it at the ends, so that we would know the half. The gravediggers, over the grave, broke it after (n.n. the procession) ended. That cloth is torn over the grave, one takes one piece, another one one piece, another one one piece, another one one piece. This tradition is kept in our area and it is said that this cloth is the baptismal cloth. When you baptize the child, you take it out in white cloth, so also at the funeral this is the cloth ... with which one must be laid... (n.n. in the grave) ”⁴².

Regarding the role of the handkerchief and the pillow (or *perinița* [cushion]):

“the bride, her bridesmaid and their friends made handkerchiefs for the boys. A week before (n.n. of *vedre* [seeing = a party held in the honor of the young couple]) they sewed and gave handkerchiefs, to give to the boys at the “vedre” (pre-wedding party). And when they danced the *perinița* (cushion) or *batista* (handkerchief) dance, they would give it to their boys, who they thought was their lover. It was also an ambition in eager rivalry that each one would make hers more beautiful. So that the boys would brag: «Look at me!» When the *perinita* is danced, the groom holds the cushion in his hand, kneels, puts down the cushion for the girl, the girl sits on it, the groom kisses her, stands up, and the cushion remains with the bride. The bride invites her groomsman. They dance, sit down, she leaves, then the best man invites his bridesmaid. And so on until daybreak. For all the youth to dance”⁴³.

⁴¹ Bărbuceanu M.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ Tănăsescu L.

Also, at the wedding, a pole was erected,

“which was a huge tree (...) up there a cross was made and in each end of the cross there was a fir tree with a hen, a sweet bread, and in one a fir tree with a handkerchief. On the pole the groomsman had to cling, but the groomsman couldn’t do much, and someone else had to go up and he paid the man who went up. From there that man had to bring him the fir tree with the handkerchief, with which he had to go to the church for the wedding. In the fir tree one puts the handkerchief and the flask”⁴⁴.

The mentioned traditions are also emphasized by the answers to the questionnaires of the *Romanian Ethnographic Atlas*: “Special marks of the groom: (...) a flower and a beautiful handkerchief on the right side and flasks adorned with flowers and handkerchief.” Or “traditions during the week of the wedding: on Saturday they would hold the *vedre*, both at the boy’s house and at the girl’s, separately. It was a youth party. Handkerchiefs, sewn by the girls during the bride’s *clacă* (gathering = voluntary collective work performed by peasants to help each other and which is often accompanied or followed by a small party, jokes, stories), were given to each boy”⁴⁵.

According to a field report,

“the groom’s handkerchief (for who kept it), was put on the child’s face (n.n. newborn), so that it would catch the evil eye”⁴⁶.

Regarding the arrangement of the images of the ethnographic pieces in the album, we chose to highlight, from the very beginning, the huckaback towels sewn with red thread and black thread (about one hundred years old)⁴⁷, followed by the

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ Ghinoiu, 2009: 94,134.

⁴⁶ Tănăsescu L.

⁴⁷ p. 33, huckaback towel dated 1904.

woven ones, *alese*, *nevedite*, so that towards the end to highlight the ones treated in a multicolored manner (it is known that they were made much later, as compared to the first category). Although, in the case of the latter, not all of them come to the fore because of a special aesthetic value, some being in a fairly advanced stage of degradation, they were included in the album, so that to provide a diachronic perspective. In fact, it is known that after this multicolored stage, the “fashion” of the time imposed the “wearing” of handmade handkerchiefs, made in cooperatives, or, less often, even made by some weavers in the village, who kept the loom in the household. We also reproduced the details of some parts, in order to better emphasize some motifs, and to make it possible to distinguish, in equal measure, some working techniques, necessary in the event of attempting to perform some restorations. I also included in the album a sample known under the popular name of *tișlaifer*⁴⁸ or *tișlăifăr* (an embroidered narrow tablecloth), introduced later by the fashion of the time, compared to the huckaback towel, which practically makes the transition from towel to *mileu* (doily).

During the incursions made in the Starchiojd commune, the team of the Prahova County Cultural Center included: Anișoara Ștefănuță – manager (coordinator of field research, of the interviews and of the shooting session of the ethnographic pieces); Radu Sidoriuc and Teodor Constantinescu (responsible for video recording and photography of ethnographic pieces); Georgiana Sidoriuc, Dragoș Grigorescu and Ana Maria Pătrășcioiu-Copceag (responsible for registering the files of the photographed pieces); Ștefania Anghel and Ana Maria Pătrășcioiu-Copceag (transcript of interviews).

In conclusion, we express our hope that, by compiling this album, we contribute to the knowledge, promotion and to putting a value on these elements of heritage, which define the identity of the people of these places, also thanking all those who, under one form or another, they made the issuance of this editorial possible.

⁴⁸ p. 170.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Fruntelată, Ioana Ruxandra și Cristian Mușă, *Starchiojd: moștenirea culturală, (Partea a doua) Sărbători, obiceiuri, repertoriu folcloric, tradiții locale reprezentative*, [*Starchiojd. Cultural heritage. (Part two) Holidays, customs, folk repertoire, representative local traditions*], Ploiești, Editura Mythos, 2015.
- Ghinoiu, Ion (coord.), *Atlasul etnografic român [Romanian Ethnographic Atlas], Vol. 4, Portul și Arta Populară [Vol. 4, Folk Clothing and Art]*, București, Editura Academiei Române, 2011.
- Ghinoiu, Ion, Cornelia Pleșca și Emil Țircomnicu, *Sărbători și obiceiuri: Răspunsuri la chestionarele Atlasului Etnografic Român [Holidays and customs: Answers to the questionnaires of the Romanian Ethnographic Atlas]*, vol. V, *Dobrogea, Muntenia*, București, Editura Etnologică, 2009.
- Holban, Eugen și Angela Holban-Tomaselli, *Arta populară din județul Galați [Folk Art from the Galați County]*, Galați, Centrul Județean de Îndrumare a Creației Populare și a Mișcării Artistice de Masă, 1974.
- Papa, Elena, *100 de ștergare românești din colecția Muzeului de Artă Populară și Etnografie: motive zoomorfe și avimorfe [100 Romanian Huckaback Towels from the Collection of the Museum of Folk Art and Ethnography: Animal and Plant Shaped Motifs]*, Constanța, Editura Dobrogea, 2007.
- Petrescu, Paul, *Motive decorative celebre [Famous Decorative Motifs]*, Editura Meridiane, București, 1971.
- Simache, N.I., *Ștergarul Prahovean [The Prahova Huckaback Towel]*, Casa Creației Populare a Județului Prahova, Muzeul de Istorie al Județului Prahova.

Anișoara Ștefănuță