



Journal
of Danubian
Studies
and Research

**Estudentiana (Students,
MA & PhD Students)**

**Representation of Symbolism in Women's
Scriptions by Bulgarian, Moldavian and
Ukrainian Artists**

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Abstract: This article explores the symbolic representation of women in the art of Bulgarian, Moldavian, Romanian, and Ukrainian artists in Bessarabian region. Through a comparative analysis of works by artists such as O. Kara, P. Makedonskyi, M. Radulescu, and A. Baranovich the study highlights female imagery as a profound symbol of cultural identity, resilience, and continuity. Women are portrayed not merely as aesthetic subjects but as archetypal figures deeply embedded in folklore, spirituality and communal memory. The article emphasizes the convergence of national artistic traditions and the shared cultural motifs that unite Bessarabia's diverse ethnic landscape. Symbolism emerges as a key artistic strategy, allowing artists to convey complex cultural and political narratives often challenging dominant ideological norms, such as Socialist Realism, and affirming national uniqueness. The study also illustrates how personal histories, everyday life, and ancestral memory are encoded in depicting women, positioning them as individual and collective icons. By analyzing these artistic representations, the article contributes to the understanding of gender, symbolism, and national identity in Eastern European art while shedding light on the broader role of visual culture in saving and transmitting heritage across generations.

Keywords: cultural motifs; archetype; individual and collective icons; heritage; labor;

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1. Problem Statement

Although there is a wealth of research on Eastern European symbolism, the specific ways women are depicted in Bessarabian art and those images have carried and conveyed the region's cultural identity, remaining underestimated. Bessarabia is a region in the southwest of Ukraine which borderland influenced by Bulgarian, Romanian, Ukrainian, and Moldavian traditions, boasts a richly layered visual heritage. Yet, the symbolic importance of female figures in shaping collective memory has not been fully explored. This oversight not only leaves a lacuna in our understanding of Bessarabia's art history but also obscures how gendered imagery served as an archive of tradition.

2. Critical Overview

Artistic expression has been integral to the forming and preserving cultural identity throughout history. From ancient visual traditions to sacred imagery, artworks reflect societal values, customs, and aesthetic sensibilities.

Symbolism appears across diverse artistic disciplines – sculpture, photography, and painting and offers countless avenues for creating meaning. While some symbolic techniques follow traditional conventions or draw on established emblems, their possibilities are virtually limitless.

MacBean (2013, p. 4) stated in his article *Art and symbolism: The technique of applying hidden meaning and communicating specific ideas through art* that Merriam-Webster defines symbolism as "the art or practice of using symbols, particularly by endowing objects with deeper significance or conveying the unseen or immaterial through tangible or sensory forms; as an artistic approach to unveil or imply abstract, ideal, or otherwise intangible truths or states." The term itself can be traced back to at least 1654 and has been adapted in myriad ways over the centuries.

In the Bessarabian context, the representations of women have emerged as central symbols in regional art, outlining cultural narratives and comprehending notions of identity, resilience, and tradition.

In his article, assistant professor Nilonthpal has considered that grasping the function and resonance of symbols and visual codes within artistic traditions is fundamental to interpreting both the overt and nuanced messages embedded in works of art (Nilonthpal, 2022). In the Bessarabian artistic context, such understanding becomes particularly significant as the region's art, especially in its depictions of women,

frequently employs symbolic language to express cultural, social, and political narratives.

Women appear in art mainly as sacred figures, mothers, or folk maidens from the Middle Ages. In church frescoes and icons, they appear as the Virgin Mary or female saints like St. Catherine and St. Barbara. The innovator Zahari Zograf was the first painter who placed Bulgarian women in the center of art alongside holy figures in his ground-breaking «Portrait of Christiania» (Bulgarian National Radio, 2011).

Later in the early twentieth century, painters also idealized women: E. Karamihaylova created allegorical mother-and-child scenes in «Optimism» and «Spring II» with a symbolistic implication (Archives of Women Artists, Research and Exhibitions, 2022).

Tsankova (2017) stated in the article for Bulgarian National Radio that in the middle century, avant-garde artists like Lika Yanko eschewed Socialist Realism and drew on folk Byzantine themes: she painted Madonnas adorned with Bulgarian embroidery, and her work evokes archetypes of motherhood, the Annunciation, sun, love, and destiny.

As it stated in online gallery Moldovenii.md (2010) the creative work of Moldavian artists laid the groundwork for the development of modern Moldavian art and played a significant role in shaping its evolution during the 1960s and 1970s. The contributions of artists such as K. Kobizeva, B. Nesvedov, D. Sevastyanov, P. Piskaryov, A. Klimashevsky, L. Dubinovsky, M. Gamburd, V. Ivanov have formed the core of postwar visual arts, ensuring a continuous artistic tradition across generations.

In the article for Media-Birlui – Uniana Media stated that the painter M. Greku demonstrated national colouration in his picture «The Girls from Ceadir-Lunga», representing three young Gagauz women from the town of Ceadir-Lunga in southern Moldova. These women were not fictional creations but real individuals: E. Cojocari, I. Kondrat, and L. Novachli. At that time, they were active members of the Kirov collective farm (kolkhoz), contributing significantly to the agricultural advancements in the region. E. Cojocari was elected as a deputy to the Supreme Soviet of the Moldavian SSR and Liuba Novachli was recognized for her exceptional work as a dairymaid, earning mention in the Soviet magazine *Ogonyok* in 1957. Upon its exhibition in 1960, the painting sparked considerable debate. Soviet cultural officials criticized Greku for an overemphasizing national characteristics, viewing the work as a deviation from the prescribed norms of socialist realism. Despite its

initial suppression, «The Girls from Ceadir-Lunga» later gained recognition for its authentic portrayal of Moldavian rural life and its subtle challenge to artistic conventions of the time. In 2002, the painting was commemorated on a Moldavian postage stamp, symbolizing its enduring cultural significance (Cebotari, 2023)

The painting «The Girls from Ceadir-Lunga» by M. Grecu serves as a powerful visual and historical testament to women's central role in Moldavian society.

By portraying real Gagauz women: hardworking, dignified, and socially active, the painting challenges the uniform depictions of women in socialist realism and instead highlights individuality, ethnic identity, and civic contribution. Eventually, these women were not passive symbols but leaders in their communities, labor heroes, and political figures. Through them, the painting reflects how women were both celebrated and politically instrumental yet scrutinized with ideological boundaries. As it stated by Cebotari (2023), their representation in art preserved their legacy and signaled a quiet resistance to artistic conformity. In the broader context of Moldavian and Eastern European art, this work underscores how female figures often carried symbolic weight – embodying tradition, labor, identity, and resilience.

Artists from Izmail have gained recognition both in Ukraine and internationally, with their paintings featured in worldwide galleries. Their expressive works embellish prominent churches and treasured historical sites. They frequently participate in national and international exhibitions, plein air sessions, and symposiums where their art is often awarded and highly regarded. Izmail's painters also foster active collaborations with artists abroad, particularly in Bulgaria, where they exhibit almost annually, as well as in Romania, Hungary, Austria, and Germany.

The development of the artistic style of Bessarabian painters was greatly influenced by direct interaction with prominent figures of Ukrainian, Russian, and Moldavian art. Equally important was their deep, inherited connection to the spirit of their people expressed through folk art, songs, fairy tales, and legends. These cultural roots became a vital source of inspiration for Bessarabian artists such as M. Todorov, P. Chakir, D. Peychev, V. Palamarchuk, P. Balamadzhi, O. Kara, P. Makedonskyi and A. Trufkin.

3. Purpose of Investigation

The article's aim is to analyze the symbolical elements of Bessarabia in the women's depiction by artists and indicate features that integrate Ukraine with Bulgarian, Romanian, and Moldavian peculiarities.

The object of this research is the symbolic significance of female images in national identities.

The subject of this research is the symbolic representation of the female figure as depicted by a selection of Bessarabian artists.

4. Research Course

In this research, we have evaluated the series of paintings by such authors as O. Kara who is both a Ukrainian and Bulgarian artist; Ukrainian painter with Bulgarian roots, P. Makedonskyi; Romanian drawer M. Radulescu and Moldavian paintress A. Baranovich. We have considered the symbolic significance of their paintings in Bessarabian culture and compare the national features that unite the people of Bessarabia.

Professor Shevchuk (2022) wrote in her article that O. Kara's encaustic compositions draw inspiration from Bulgarian folklore, history, and a deep reverence for cultural traditions. Kara skillfully employs the symbolic and regional significance of colour, along with the lyrical rhythm and fluidity of line, to create distinctive and harmonious imagery of women named by him «Bessarabian Madonnas», combining contemporary trends with the traditions of Orthodox Kyivan Rus and Bulgaria.

The artist comments on his works in the interview for Odessa life (Terzivets, 2023) as he finds greater harmony in the female form. This preference, he noted, stemmed from his childhood, when he spent a significant amount of time with his mother and was often surrounded by women. He recalled seeing groups of women attending church or the cemetery and remembered that women mostly did household chores. He saw grace and harmony, looking at the women carrying buckets of water, which later inspired his composition «Mysticism of Water», featuring five young women. He emphasized that the overall image was more important to him than the face, so he had chosen not to depict faces on his «madonnas», allowing them to appear more mysterious and profound.

The interviewer Terzivets (2023) stated that in «Mysticism of Water», the artist elevates women as living embodiments of national identity and cultural continuity. Drawing on memories of his mother and the community of women he observed in childhood – carrying pails of water, tending to home and ritual sites, he infuses each female figure with a deep sense of grace and historical resonance. By omitting facial details, he emphasizes the universal, timeless spirit they represent: not individual portraits but archetypes of Bulgarian and Kyivan Rus' heritage.

The five women become symbolic carriers of tradition and communal memory, their poised postures and fluid lines reflecting the harmony of their national roots and the music of collective cultural identity. As the research has demonstrated, «Mysticism of Water» uses the feminine form to show ancestral narratives, reminding viewers that cultural identity is maintained not just through myth and ritual but through women's everyday grace and labor.

The painter P. Makedonskyi has written about himself in the article that he portrays women as powerful symbols deeply rooted in folklore, cultural traditions, and communal life. Whether depicting legendary figures: hardworking rural women, or elegantly nude forms, he employs a variety of techniques to present femininity as both lyrical and emblematic of national identity. His female subjects transcend individual portrayal, assuming the role of repositories for communal memory and symbolic cultural value (Kyiv Gallery, 2024).

In his work «Women and the City» (the name of this picture is not explained by author), the main composition feature is a female figure setting against an abstract urban skyline, reflecting Makedonskyi's exploration of the dynamic between human presence and the city.

Makedonskyi (2024) regards the city not merely as a backdrop, but as an active participant in the narrative: a living, breathing space shaped by its inhabitants. Feminine identity is portrayed through a cubist-influenced aesthetic, rendered via layered geometry and graphic outlines, rooted in a blend of impressionism.

By placing a woman at the center of an urban abstract, Makedonskyi portrays city life through a female lens, emphasizing how women shape the rhythms of urban culture.

In conclusion, the minimal facial detail and abstracted setting invite viewers to project collective experiences, making the figure emblematic rather than individual. Like his other compositions, ranging from mythic to rural themes, this work centers a female figure within a broader environment, reinforcing his recurring motif of

women as symbolic agents of cultural narratives; the city in this work of art becomes a stage where feminine presence narrates a modern, culturally aware story: the woman and the metropolis in dialogue.

In the art of M. Radulescu's, Romanian paintress, the depiction of women in collective movement dancing, parading, and performing is a striking pattern. In such work as «Calusari Dance» she captures female figures in fluid, expressive gestures, often simplified into rhythmic, mask-like forms. J. Lassaigne noted that her use of Romanian folklore is not decorative but structural: «forms architectural... return to essential harmonies,» suggesting a universal rather than anecdotal vision (Artwork Archive, n.d.).

These ritual scenes do more than present women as folkloric actors; they affirm their role as carriers of communal memory and cultural vitality. The women seem to pulse with the «accelerated inner rhythm» of ancient myths and collective consciousness.

Anna Baranovich's painting «Portrait of Efimia» uniquely depicts an original compositional solution in her work. Senior researcher A. Pashchenko of the Transnistrian State Art Museum has commented on her work in this article for Bendery Gallery as the painting depicts a young peasant woman in simple clothing. For Baranovich, as a true romantic, the personality of the rural laborer was always a genuine interest. In such people, she saw a «natural» human being as someone living outside the vices of society and possessing untainted personal virtues. The female image is rendered with striking expressiveness and authenticity. Rather than relying on photographic realism, the artist employs stylized means to enhance the subject's simplicity, sincerity, and inner dignity; everyday objects such as a jug, bagels, and a traditional Moldavian bag serve not as distractions but as subtle complements to the composition. The contrasting colour palette and muted background further emphasize the woman's presence, highlighting her as a vivid, natural figure momentarily lifted from the flow of daily life (Bendery Gallery, 2016).

In conclusion, «Portrait of Efimia» exemplifies Anna Baranovich's nuanced and conceptually grounded approach to the female image. The peasant woman is not merely a subject of representation but a central expressive force within the composition, embodying sincerity, inner strength, and natural dignity. Baranovich constructs a portrait that elevates the female figure as a symbol of uncorrupted humanity through stylized forms, carefully selected domestic objects, and a restrained expressive colour palette.

According to the analysis performed, we have found unifying characteristics that reflect a collective Bessarabian consciousness despite stylistic and cultural differences: Kara's women evoke Orthodox sacrality and folk piety, Radulescu's modern-symbolist visions of communal joy, Makedonskyi's lone muse among the abstract modern city, and Baranovich's merge seamlessly into a folkloric pastoral harmony. Thus, all these women create a shared Bessarabian visual culture that venerates the feminine as a source of life and continuity.

In Bessarabia, cultural resilience is not displayed through grand historical scenes but through everyday life: a woman in a field, a group of dancers, a figure against a cityscape. These modest subjects carry epic weight because they anchor identity in lived experience. All four artists frame women as guardians of survival through labor, ritual, or memory.

5. Results

The symbolic portrayal of women in the works of O. Kara, P. Makedonskyi, M. Radulescu, and A. Baranovich reveals a shared visual recollection rooted in Bessarabia's multicultural identity. These artists converge in treating the female figure as more than a subject: she becomes an archetype of cultural memory, resilience, and continuity despite their varied national backgrounds.

Whether positioned within sacred, rural, urban, or mythic contexts, the woman emerges as the symbolic heart of Bessarabian identity, grounded in tradition and responsive to change.

The unifying power of this artistic approach lies in the synthesis of folk elements with modern technique, the reverent focus on everyday life, and the use of colour and form to convey emotional and spiritual depth. These artworks reflect not only individual national traditions but also the essence of Bessarabia itself: a region of coexistence, transition, and deep-rooted cultural memory. Together, these painters construct a visual narrative where womanhood encapsulates a complex borderland heritage's strength, beauty, and endurance

6. Further Research

There is much potential in connecting art with other forms of culture, such as Bessarabian music, storytelling, and dance. Since many of the women in these

paintings seem connected to folk traditions, it would be valuable to study if the same female archetypes appear in songs, fairy tales, or rituals. This could help create a fuller picture of how women carry cultural meaning across different forms of expression.

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