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## Pre-Christian and Christian Symbols in Ukrainian Folk Art: Sign-Letter System

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*Pre-Christian and Christian Symbols in Ukrainian Folk Art: Sign-Letter System*

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### Abstract:

Symbols for centuries keep their semantic load and are transmitted to descendants; they are placed on interior items, clothing accessories, household items, and many other products. Folk embroiderers include symbols into compositional schemes on *rushnyky* (Ukrainian traditional towels) and *vyshyvanky* (Ukrainian traditional shirts). Using comparative, semantic, and semiotic methods, we highlight the semantic meaning of the sign-letter system in Ukrainian folk art and the prospects for its functioning in modern design. The results of the research can be implemented in the modern design of products, focusing on the decorative and semantic meaning of the sign-letter system in the modern environment.

**Keywords:** *rushnyk*, *vyshyvanka*, sign system, symbolism, letter, number

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### Introduction

In the process of analysis of sign-letter systems used in the decoration of the works of Ukrainian decorative arts and traditional Ukrainian embroidery, in particular, we observe that the vast majority of signs and symbols associated

with ancient religious and ideological ideas of the Ukrainian nation, including ancient rituals. With the arrival of Christianity on the territory of Ukraine, the sign-letter system is modified and filled with Christian symbols.

Letter graphemes, in particular monograms in the system of traditional decoration, and text messages, mainly in Cyrillic font, have an iconic meaning and illustrate certain historical events, memorable dates, and are abbreviations of the owners of works or masters.

Changes in the sign-letter system in the decoration of traditional items of decorative and applied art over the years affect only the sociocultural context, the relevance of semantic content, partly related to political events that are often updated in the Ukrainian environment, but the formal characteristics and methods remain traditional and unchanged.

There are a number of researchers who have touched upon the problems of the sign system of Ukrainians of ancient cultures namely B. Rybakov<sup>1</sup>, S. Vysotskyi<sup>2</sup>, O. Naiden<sup>3</sup>, N. Chymkhov<sup>4</sup>, Ya. Bondarchuk<sup>5</sup>, Yu. Kulish<sup>6</sup>, and L. Otroshko<sup>7</sup>. The evolution of sign-letter systems has been carefully studied in the context of studies of Ukrainian folk fabrics and costumes by M. Bilan and H. Stelmashchuk<sup>8</sup>, T. Kara-Vasyliieva<sup>9</sup>, S. Kytova<sup>10</sup>, and Yu. Melnychuk<sup>11</sup>. In the context of the women's movement of the XX century this scientific problem was

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<sup>1</sup> Boris Rybakov, *Yazychestvo drevnikh slavyan* [Paganism of Ancient Slavs] (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo "Nauka", 1981); Boris Rybakov, *Yazychestvo Drevney Rusi* [Paganism of Ancient Rus] (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo "Nauka", 1988).

<sup>2</sup> S. A. Vysotskiy, "Ob azbukakh, otkrytykh v Kieve i Novgorode" [About the Alphabets Discovered in Kyiv and Novhorod], in *Drevnosti slavyan i Rusi* [Antiquities of the Slavs and Rus], ed. B.A. Timoshchuk (Moskva: Nauka, 1988), 211-215.

<sup>3</sup> O. S. Naiden, *Ornament ukrainskoho narodnoho rozpyssu* [Ornament of Ukrainian Folk Painting: Origins, Tradition, and Evolution] (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 1989), 41.

<sup>4</sup> Nikolay Chmykhov, *Istochniki yazychnichstva Rusi* [Origins of Paganism in Rus] (Kiev: Lybid', 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Yaroslava Bondarchuk, "Vynyknennia symbolu meandru yak vidobrazhennia relihiinosvitohliadnykh uiaвлен paleolitychnoi liudyny" [Emergence of the Symbol of the Meander as a Reflection of Religious Worldviews of Paleolithic Man], *Kulturolohichna Dumka* 15 (2019): 83-89; Yaroslava Bondarchuk, "Symboliko-semantychne navantazhennia obrazu ptakha yak vidobrazhennia relihiino-svitohliadnykh uiaвлен u mystetstvi paleolitu" [Symbolic and Semantic Load of a Bird Image as a Reflection of Religious and Ideological Ideas in the Art of the Paleolithic], *Naukovi Zapysky NaUKMA. Istoria i Teoria Kultury* 2 (2019): 53-63.

<sup>6</sup> Yu. O. Kulish, "Poniattia symbolu: symboly v ukrainskii kulturi" [The Concept of Symbol: Symbols in Ukrainian Culture], *Visnyk Kharkivskoho Natsionalnoho Pedahohichnoho Universytetu Imeni H. S. Skovorody. Filosofiia* 45, no. 2 (2015): 106-110.

<sup>7</sup> L. Otroshko, "Symvolotvorennia v etnokulturnomu prostori Ukrainy: postanovka problemy" [Symbol Formation in the Ethnocultural Space of Ukraine: Problem Statement], *Ukrainoznavstvo* 3 (2015): 63-71.

<sup>8</sup> Maiia Bilan, and Halyna Stelmashchuk, *Ukrainskyi strii* [Ukrainian Folk Costume] (Lviv: Instytut narodoznavstva NAN Ukrainy, Lvivska akademiia mystetstv, Ukrainska akademiia drukarstva, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Tetiana Kara-Vasyliieva, *Ukrainska vyshyvka* [Ukrainian Embroidery] (Kyiv: Mystetstvo, 1993); Tetiana Kara-Vasyliieva, and Zoia Chehusova, *Dekoratyvne mystetstvo Ukrainy XX stolittia. U poshukakh "velykoho styliu"* [Decorative Art of Ukraine of the XX Century. In Search of Great Style] (Kyiv: Lybid, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Svitlana Kytova, *Polomiany litopys Ukrainy: Semantika ornamentu ukrainskoho rushnyka* [Linen Chronicle of Ukraine: Semantics of Ukrainian Rushnyk Ornament] (Cherkasy: Brama, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Yu. Melnychuk, "Derevo zhyttia u vyshyvках" [Tree of Life in Embroidery], *Artania: Almanakh* 4 (1998): 51-52.

studied by O. Kis<sup>12</sup>. Traditional Ukrainian ornaments were studied by M. Selivachov<sup>13</sup> and H. Naiden<sup>14</sup>. Some researches like N. Chouprina et al.<sup>15</sup> and L. Tsymbala<sup>16</sup> devoted their works to the introduction of ethnic motifs in the modern Ukrainian design space.

The sign-letter system in the decoration of traditional items of Ukrainian decorative and applied art is a compound complex of ornamental compositional schemes that have been crystallized in Ukrainian traditional culture for thousands of years. Despite the fact that most of the signs, graphemes in the decoration of decorative arts items were closely related to a particular form of art or historical, cultural, religious context, today we can distinguish iconic grapheme signs (literal) that are easy to read and directly reproduce the object, symbolic, that when reading the image reflect a different content and index signs, graphemes, the image of which is not related to the content. The complex system of quantitative coding, formed over many years in Ukrainian art, remains incomprehensible to the consumer-recipient of folk art.

The main purpose of this research is to identify the semantic meaning of the figurative-letter system, its meaning in traditional works of folk art and the prospects of its reading and functioning in modern design on the basis of a retrospective review of famous monuments of traditional Ukrainian art.

To achieve this aim, such tasks should be unraveled:

1. To define signs and letters that are intertwined in the decoration of folk items are today aesthetically valuable and understandable, and which are perceived today as a purely decorative element.
2. To analyze the semantic meaning of the sign-letter system in the monuments of ancient traditional Ukrainian art.
3. To identify the importance of sign-letter system of ancient Ukrainian art in modern design.

The research is based on a scheme of consistent historical and

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<sup>12</sup> Oksana Kis, *Ukrainky v HULAHu: Vyzhyty znachyt peremohty* [Ukrainian Women in GULAG: To Survive Means to Win] (Lviv: Instytut narodoznavstva NAN Ukrainy, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Mykhailo Selivachov, *Leksikon ukrainskoi ornamentyky* (ikonohrafiia, nominatsiia, stylistyka, typolohiia) [Lexicon of Ukrainian Ornamentation (Iconography, Nomination, Stylistics, Typology)] (Kyiv: ANT, 2005); Mykhailo Selivachov, ed., *Narodne mystetstvo Karpat* [Folk Art of the Carpathians] (Kharkiv: Oleksandr Savchuk, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> Naiden, *Ornament ukrainskoho narodnoho rozpyssu*.

<sup>15</sup> N. V. Chouprina, I. L. Gaiova, and K. I. Palamar, "Etnodyzain ta yoho realizatsiia v suchasnomu proektuvanni kostiuma ta industrii mody" [Ethnodysign and its Realization in the Modern Planning of Suit and Fashion Industry], *Tekhnolohii ta Dizain* 3 (2016).

<sup>16</sup> Lada Tsymbala, "Natsionalni tradytsii u dizaini kostiumu: Aspekty metodyky mystetstvoznavchoho analizu" [National Traditions in Costume Design: Methodology Aspects of Art Criticism Analysis], *Visnyk L'NAM* 39 (2019): 170-180; Lada Tsymbala, "Transliatsiia natsionalnykh tradytsii v suchasnykh ukrainskykh dizain-praktykakh" [National Traditions Translation in Modern Ukrainian Design Practices], in *Aktualni Problemy Suchasnoho Dizainu* (Kyiv: KNUITD, 2020), 1:95-99.

comparative analysis of the formation of the sign-letter system in Ukrainian cultural discourse from ancient times to the present day, taking into account the typological analysis of letter systems at the synchronous level. The methodology of the research is based on the analysis of well-known monuments of traditional Ukrainian art, which are decorated with signs, graphemes and letter schemes. On the basis of comparative, semantics and semiotics art analysis of the source base the key motives of the sign-letter system of decoration of the products of traditional Ukrainian art and the possibility of their reading and functioning in the modern national design model will be identified.

### **Universal Signs-Symbols in Ancient Archeological Cultures**

The sign system in the works of Ukrainian folk art refers to those extraordinary cultural phenomena that are most open to all, familiar and accessible, widely used, and at the same time remains the least studied, attractive and mysterious. Sign and ritual symbolism play an important role in the history and culture of each nation. Mykola Chmykhov, the Ukrainian scientist, emphasized that studying the cosmology of the ancient population of Ukraine is necessary to consider the cosmic symbolism of ancient civilizations of Western Asia and the Mediterranean. The data from the main research sources of the ancient cosmology of those civilizations often not only complement each other but are identical and almost equivalent in their significance<sup>17</sup>.

Signs-symbols are cultural, state, religious, mythological, pictorial determine the vital coordinates of the culture of each nation<sup>18</sup>. Unfortunately, in the countries of Western Europe, the meaning of symbols, under the influence of the rapid development of the economy, industry and other factors in the development of society in the XIX century is already lost. But in Ukraine, in particular in the Carpathian region, they still serve as a kind of condenser of the collective memory of culture about itself, asserting its originality and antiquity<sup>19</sup>.

The signs-graphemes of folk art reflect long-standing collective ideas about the well-established, well-ordered universe. This is a system of the oldest

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<sup>17</sup> Chmykhov, *Istochynika yazychnichestva Rusi* [Origins of Paganism in Rus]; Mykola Chmykhov, *Vid yaitsia-raitsia do idei Spasytelia* [From Yaitse-Raitse to the Idea of the Savior] (Kyiv: Lybid, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> Kulish, "Poniattia symbolu: symvoly v ukrainskii kulturi" [The Concept of Symbol: Symbols in Ukrainian Culture]; Otroshko, "Symvolotvorennia v etnokulturnomu prostori Ukrainy: postanovka problemy" [Symbol Formation in the Ethnocultural Space of Ukraine: Problem Statement].

<sup>19</sup> Selivachov, *Leksykon ukrainskoi ornamentyky* (ikonohrafiia, nominatsiia, stylistyka, typolohiia) [Lexicon of Ukrainian Ornamentation (Iconography, Nomination, Stylistics, Typology)]; Selivachov, ed., *Narodne mystetstvo Karpat* [Folk Art of the Carpathians].

traditional mythological ideas about the creation of the world—cosmogensis. Ukrainians have such universal signs of the creation of the world as the world tree (tree of life), meander, trident, octagonal stars, solar signs, spiral, *svarga* (swastika), triquetra (Figure1). The composition of the World tree in the form of vases smoothly passed from pre-Christian times and is used on folk art items, in particular, on the *rushnyky*, carpets, and certain parts of clothing in our time<sup>20</sup>. On many household items of Ukrainians, we see an endless, incoming wave. Meander is known on the territory of Ukraine since the late Paleolithic.



**Figure 1.** Trypillia goddess with a sign of fertility. Oleksandrivka area, Odesa region (Romania). About 5000 B.C.<sup>21</sup>.

An example is two bracelets found in the village of Mizyn in Chernihiv region, which are unique examples of applied decorative art of Ancient Europe. The bracelets are made of mammoth tusk. One of the bracelets is solid, the other consists of five separate plates; both are covered with complex carved meander ornaments (Figure 2). A well-known researcher of ancient art in Ukraine, Dokiia Humenna, comparing it with the prehistoric pre-European theme, says that the people of the Paleolithic believed that the meander is a labyrinth, a road from the

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<sup>20</sup> Rybakov, *Yazychestvo drevnikh slavyan* [Paganism of Ancient Slavs]; Rybakov, *Yazychestvo Drevney Rusi* [Paganism of Ancient Rus]; Naiden, *Ornament ukrainskoho narodnoho rozplysu* [Ornament of Ukrainian Folk Painting: Origins, Tradition, and Evolution].

<sup>21</sup> Hanna Skrypnyk et al., eds. *Istoriia dekoratyvnoho mystetstva Ukrainy* [History of Decorative Art of Ukraine], vol. 1 (Kyiv: IMFE im. M. T. Rylskoho NAN Ukrainy, 2007-11).

real world to “that world” (to the south). In her book “Bless Me, Mother!”<sup>22</sup>, Dokiia Humenna draws attention to the fact that the motif of the labyrinth in Ukraine is so strong that it has come down to our days in ethnography and folklore. In particular, it is still present in the grove dances “Viburnum bridge,” “Curvy dance”<sup>23</sup>. On the opinion of Yaroslava Bodnarchuk, if the meandering ribbon was perceived by Paleolithic man as a sign of an infinite stream of existence, then the infusion of a swastika—a sign of the Sun’s rotation—meant the presence in natural life processes of supernatural power, grace, which became the dominant things in every period of human life<sup>24</sup>. Until now, the Ukrainian masters use in their works the signs known since the time of the Trypillia culture, in particular, the sign of fertility, the sign of the sown field. This is a rhombus or square divided into parts with a dot in the middle.



**Figure 2.** Mammoth tusk bracelet. Late Paleolithic. Mizyn site, Chernihiv region<sup>25</sup>.

Signs, in particular their semantic meaning, were not always fully disclosed to all members of the community. They were the silent keepers of

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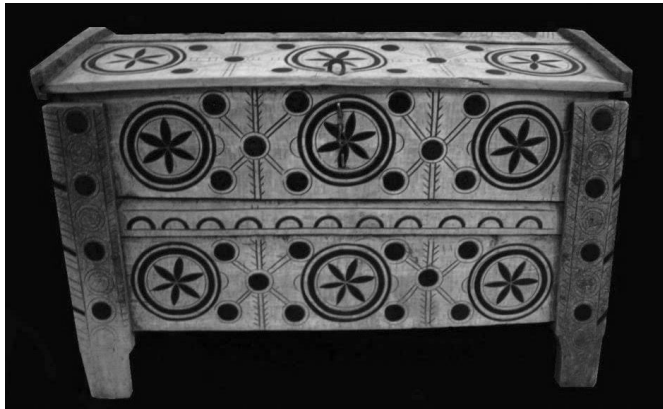
<sup>22</sup> Dokiia Humenna, *Blahoslovy, maty!: Kazka-esei* [Bless Me, Mother! Fairy tale-Essay] (Kyiv: Vyd. dim “KM Academia”, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> Humenna, *Blahoslovy, maty!: Kazka-esei* [Bless Me, Mother! Fairy tale-Essay].

<sup>24</sup> Yaroslava Bodnarchuk, “Vplyv relihiino-svitohliadnykh idei na formuvannia obrazu zhinky v mystetstvi paleolitu v dominantnykh systemakh znakov Zodiaku” [The influence of religious and ideological ideas on the formation of the image of women in the art of the Paleolithic in the dominant systems of zodiac signs], *Visnyk Lvivskoi Natsionalnoi Akademii Mystetstv* 37 (2018): 42-56; Bodnarchuk, “Vynykennia symbolu meandru yak vidobrazhennia relihiinosvitohliadnykh uavlenn paleolitychnoi liudyny” [Emergence of the Symbol of the Meander as a Reflection of Religious Worldviews of Paleolithic Man].

<sup>25</sup> Skrypnyk et al., eds. *Istoriia dekoratyvnoho mystetstva Ukrainy* [History of Decorative Art of Ukraine], 1:44.

certain esoteric information that touched many of the secrets of primitive society. Signs were decoded within certain limits by their creators and initiated mainly in calendar, family and household rites and rituals among their kind, tribe. The alien observer could not perceive or understand them. The meaning of individual signs may differ from one nation to another. For example, the swastika (*svarga*), which dates back to ancient times, Ukrainians interpreted as the marriage of heaven and earth, the sign of the sun. Over time, its semantics has expanded, in China it is a symbol of good luck, region, country, in Ukraine it is still a sign of the marriage of a Prince and a Princess (so in Ukraine they call newlyweds who marry). Direct swastika is East, reverse is West, evolution (direct), involution (reverse)<sup>26</sup>.



**Figure 3.** Solar signs on the chest. Hutsulshchyna, Ukraine. Early XX century (photo by the authors).

The interpretation of signs changed depending on the historical period, the object on which it was applied (housing, household items in the interior, clothing, ceramics, fabric, religious buildings, etc.). The swastika sign has gone through the millennia and has come down to our time on works of folk art (especially on the *vyshyvanky* and *rushnyky*). Many signs appeared as a stage of the transmission of information related to ancient inventions (in particular, those related to the processes of spinning threads, twisting of textile intersecting)<sup>27</sup>. These signs were first recorded on cave walls, tablets, bones, and dwellings. All these minted signs are the ways of transmission of the first knowledge. Over time, the sacred signs (ancient knowledge) that were transmitted from generation to generation became traditional. On the territory of Western Podillia in the early

<sup>26</sup> Kulish, "Poniattia symbolu: symvoly v ukrainskii kulturi" [The Concept of Symbol: Symbols in Ukrainian Culture].

<sup>27</sup> Bilan, and Stelmashchuk, *Ukrainskyi strii* [Ukrainian Folk Costume].

XX century on the bottom of the hat four-petalled rosette-cross using woolen threads was embroidered, in order to protect the space around the head: “from four corners of the world”<sup>28</sup>.

Until now, we can observe solar signs on the ceiling beams in the houses of Hutsuly and on many household items<sup>29</sup> (Figure 3). For centuries, for various historical reasons, the tradition was violated, and the meaning of signs was forgotten, and many of them became a decorative element. Over time, geometric elements or stylized plant, zoomorphic and other motifs began to repeat rhythmically and they were already perceived as an ornament, pattern.

### **Changes of the Sign-Letter System after the Implementation of Christianity in Rus'-Ukraine.**

In the course of the evolution of society, arise new elements and motives of decoration of objects and the subject environment. Folk masters complement the ornament with symbols that are clearer. In particular, many signs and symbols are associated with the adoption of Christianity. In many works of art, we see images of fish, vine, eagle, lion, key, etc. (Figure 4).

In some regions of Ukraine, on household items made of wood, ceramics, leather, *rushnyky* and *vyshyvanky*, the ornament is supplemented with texts, individual letters, numbers, which complete the overall composition of the work. At the beginning of the XX century, encoding symbols and texts were most often found on the *rushnyky* and *vyshyvanky*, and even on the walls of houses. Halyna Stelmashchuk managed to record interesting facts in the 1980s of the XX century on the territory of Ukrainian Polissia. On the polished wooden panels in the room, the owners recorded important life events: “On June 5, 1957, was born Stepan,” “On February 16, 1959, was born Adam,” etc. We consider such text messages to be iconic.

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<sup>28</sup> Halyna Stelmashchuk, “*Kvitka na kapeliusi*” [Flower on a Hat], *Nashe Zhyttia. OUR Life* 6 (1998): 7-9; Melnychuk, “*Derevo zhyttia u vyshyvakh*” [Tree of Life in Embroidery].

<sup>29</sup> Naiden, *Ornament ukrainskoho narodnoho rozplysu* [Ornament of Ukrainian Folk Painting: Origins, Tradition, and Evolution].





**Figure 4.** Plate. Maiolica. 1905, Dybyntsi village, Kyiv oblast. National Museum of Ukrainian Folk Decorative Art. Foto by O. Klymenko<sup>30</sup>.

The prevailing texts are wishes for a better fate, happiness, the name of the embroiderer, the year of creation of an item, the initials of the newlyweds. Texts on decorative and utility objects have their roots in the first centuries of the second millennium. On the fragments of embroideries of the XII century, found in St. Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv, the letters of the Ukrainian alphabet are found<sup>31</sup>. In the X–XII century, Ukrainian princesses created embroidery workshops. Working in them, Ukrainian women embroidered on precious fabrics with gold or silver threads and gems figures, faces of saints, decorative plant design and individual texts, letters, numbers, confirming the essence of the image<sup>32</sup>. Works embroidered in workshops were used in the design of Christian worship and in the decorative design of churches (shrouds, patrons on Church armor, clothing of priests, icons, and covers).

#### **Letter Alphabet on Traditional Ukrainian Towels**

At home Ukrainian women did not have valuable fabrics. But they could produce high-quality canvas. During non-working hours they transferred the

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<sup>30</sup> Hanna Skrypnyk et al., eds. *Istoriia dekoratyvnoho mystetstva Ukrainy* [History of Decorative Art of Ukraine], vol. 4 (Kyiv: IMFE im. M. T. Ryl'skoho NAN Ukrainy, 2007-11).

<sup>31</sup> Kara-Vasyliieva, *Ukrainska vyshyvka* [Ukrainian Embroidery]; Kara-Vasyliieva, and Zoia Chehusova, *Dekoratyvne mystetstvo Ukrainy XX stolittia. U poshukakh "velykoho styliu"* [Decorative Art of Ukraine of the XX Century. In Search of Great Style].

<sup>32</sup> Kytova, *Polotnianyi litopys Ukrainy: Semantyka ornamentu ukrainskoho rushnyka* [Linen Chronicle of Ukraine: Semantics of Ukrainian Rushnyk Ornament].

ornaments that they saw on the precious materials in the churches on this canvas. This can also be explained by the proximity of monasteries where “monastic” *rushnyky* were embroidered in order to replenish the monastic treasury<sup>33</sup>.

On folk items, the letters were often embroidered in the frame of various plant motifs. Usually, this was a simple composition of twigs, stems, and buds. Four to five five-petalled flowers and simple, cherry-like or more complex oak, viburnum, and hop leaves were often placed on the stems. Ornamental rows often consist of clusters of red fruits that resemble grapes or viburnum. In the vast majority of cases, letters occupy the center of the composition in the form of separate ornamental rows. It is also common to arrange letters in wreaths embroidered at the top of the compositions. Sometimes the letters were embroidered separately as a monogram, around which we observe only minor ornamental additions. In the XVI century in Ukraine, a manuscript made at a high artistic level was cultivated and revered in every possible way. Further and with the arrival of the printed book, the masters did not separate the words, which merged into decorative rows, without paragraphs and indentations. On the *rushnyky* we also find texts in which words merge into single lines, and only the first letters are highlighted. The first (capital) letter of the text was more luxuriously decorated with plant-geometric decor.

In Ukraine, at all times, parents have tried to give their children an education. Since childhood, they learned to read and write in schools attached to churches. Therefore, it is not surprising that women embroidered the alphabet on the *rushnyky* so that children could learn it more easily. Since XIX century, poems of Taras Shevchenko have been embroidered as well as the words of the poem that became the basis of the Ukrainian anthem<sup>34</sup>, written in 1862 by ethnographer and folklorist Pavlo Chubynskyi (Figure 5). The letter “Ж” was particularly respected. It was decorated or accentuated only with a small horizontal line, which, crossing the middle vertical of the sign, creates a clearly defined cross<sup>35</sup>.

Looking at the embroidered letters “Ж,” some embroiderers point out their similarity to temples. Some embroiderers pointed out that with this letter begin words “live” (Ukrainian word “жити”) and “life” (Ukrainian word

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<sup>33</sup> Kytova, *Polotnianyi litopys Ukrainy: Semantyka ornamentu ukrainskoho rushnyka* [Linen Chronicle of Ukraine: Semantics of Ukrainian Rushnyk Ornament].

<sup>34</sup> Antonina Hurbanska, “Znak, symbol, mif u tvorchosti Tarasa Shevchenka: kulturolohichniy aspekt” [Sign, Symbol, Myth in the Works of Taras Shevchenko: Culturological Aspect], *Kultura i Mystetstvo u Suchasnomu Svitii* 19 (2018): 111-119.

<sup>35</sup> Kytova, *Polotnianyi litopys Ukrainy: Semantyka ornamentu ukrainskoho rushnyka* [Linen Chronicle of Ukraine: Semantics of Ukrainian Rushnyk Ornament].

“життя”). The letter “Ж” is a witness to the existence of the Ukrainian ancient script before its registration by the Thessaloniki brothers Cyril and Methodius. Among the four other Ukrainian letters (Б, Ж, Ш, Ц), which are most common in Ukrainian folk art, the letter speaks to us today as graffiti from the walls of St. Sophia Cathedral of the XI century in Kyiv, from the seven oldest alphabets discovered by archaeologists for the last 10 years. The letter “Ж” is found in architecture<sup>36</sup>. Both in architectural decoration and in the ornament *rushnyky*, the letter plays a significant role, outlining a wide range of concepts: life (Ukrainian word “життя”), live (Ukrainian word “живить”), alive (Ukrainian word “живий”), life-creating (Ukrainian word “животворний”), and belly (Ukrainian word “живіт”). In this case, the letter-sign takes on a symbolic meaning.



**Figure 5.** Words from the poem “Testament” by Taras Shevchenko embroidered on a *rushnyk*. Ukraine, XX century (photo by authors).

Like every form of art, the decor on the *rushnyky* is perceived not separately, but through the prism of their own life impressions, through the comparison of what unknown masters wanted to convey to us, with our own

<sup>36</sup> Rybakov, *Yazychestvo drevnikh slavyan* [Paganism of Ancient Slavs].

experiences.

The custom to embroider letters on ritual *rushnyky* was particularly widespread in the early XX century. Often, icons were decorated with the *rushnyky*. After the establishment of Soviet power in Ukraine in the 1920s, religion was banned. Holy banners, icons, and iconostasis were on fire. Ukrainians are a religious nation, so they resorted to tricks. Peasant women embroidered coded Christian symbols on the *rushnyky*, hung them on the walls, and prayed. While there were no icons in the houses, a *rushnyk* played a role of an icon. The letter “B” embroidered on a *rushnyk* indicated the symbol of the Christian faith and meant “I believe” (Ukrainian word “вірю”).

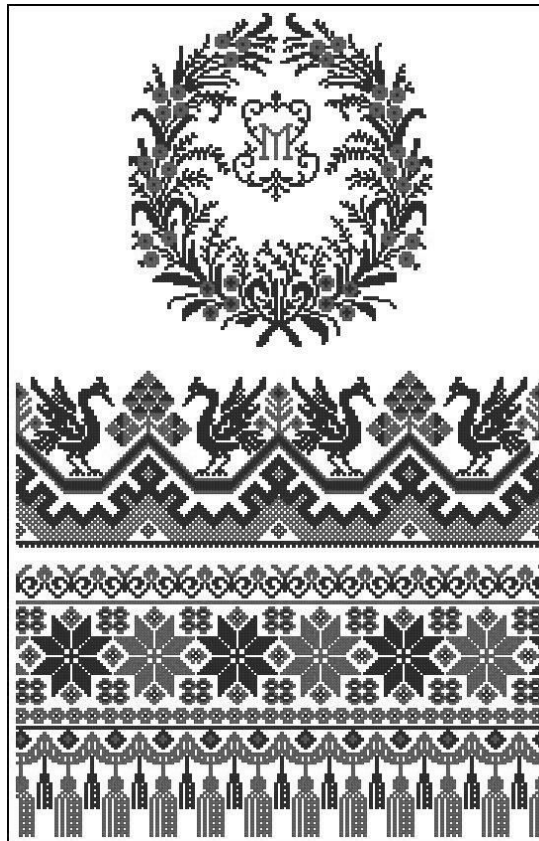
The *rushnyky* were marked with the monogram of Jesus Christ, his initials, and quotations from the Holy Scriptures were arranged in wreaths of plant motifs. An unusual desire to decorate the letter with flowers, plants, and life-giving spirals enriched the ornamental compositions. The letter is the dominant of the background of a *rushnyk*, and, as a rule, it is embroidered with red threads to be emphasized expressively.

The letter “M” is also common on the *rushnyky*. Like Ukrainian embroidery, folk art of other nations places the letter next to the octagon. The octagon means the Christmas star, the star of the Virgin Mary (Figure 6). The initial letter of her name was also embroidered by European embroiderers as a favorite sign, full of respect and love for the great woman—the mother of Jesus Christ—since the middle ages. The letter “M,” embroidered on Ukrainian *rushnyky* next to roses, symbolized submission, patience and silence. The Virgin Mary herself is sometimes called “the rose without needles:” in the Christian tradition, the rose is a flower that reminds people of the existence of paradise and its needles—about the fall of man. Ferguson believes that the Virgin Mary, free from original sin, can be compared to this flower, devoid of needles<sup>37</sup>. The letter “M” can be among the embroidered signs that bring happiness. In the *rushnyk* ornament of Ukraine, this letter looks like a talisman on a talisman (a *rushnyk* was also considered a talisman). It is interesting that near the letter “M” you can often see the Roman numerals I, II, III. Perhaps the symbolism of numbers coexists in the popular vision with the three main holidays in honor of the Virgin Mary. The first is the feast of Mary’s birth, described in the Gospel of James, which connects her name with the name of Mary, the sister of Moses. The second feast in honor of the Virgin Mary is the Annunciation, the third—the

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<sup>37</sup> Dzhordzh Ferguson, *Khristianskiy simvolizm* [Christian Symbolism] (Moskva: Assots. dukhov. edineniya “Zolotoy vek”, 1998).

Assumption<sup>38</sup>.



**Figure 6.** Letter “M” on a modern *rushnyk* with the symbols (octagonal Christmas star) of the Virgin Mary. XX century (photo by the authors).

The letter “X” is an ornamental spelling of the initial letter of the name—Christ (Ukrainian word “Христос”). Ukrainian women widely use only one letter “X,” the sanctity of which is emphasized by its masterful execution and decorations in the form of flowers and leaves.

The letter “A” is not as common as the above-mentioned letters.

It exists quite independently: sometimes in the form of one large sign, then in the form of two signs, separated by a large anchor. If we take into account the quality of canvas, *zapoloch* (colored cotton threads for embroidery) and dates embroidered on the *rushnyky* (works belong to the 1920s of the XX century), the writing on a *rushnyk* of the letter “A” is a result of Cyrillic, where “Aз” is a pronoun indicating the priority of a person. The letter “A” on a *rushnyk*

<sup>38</sup> Kytova, *Polomianyi litopys Ukrainy: Semantyka ornamentu ukrainskoho rushnyka* [Linen Chronicle of Ukraine: Semantics of Ukrainian *Rushnyk* Ornament].

means a certain event that is very important in the life of the family of the embroiderer.

Ukrainian women were familiar with the numerical symbolism of the Cyrillic alphabet. On one of the *rushnyky* in the wreath is embroidered a large letter “B,” and under it the word “year.” This is not a manifestation of absent-mindedness of the embroiderer who forgot to put a date and the year of manufacture or dedication of the *rushnyky* to a certain event. She just knew that the Cyrillic letters also had a numerical value: “B” also meant “two”. Thus, “two years” of a certain event in the life of the master means the literal decoration of a *rushnyk*. On the occasion of the “two years” of a child, married life, or, say, some other joy or sadness<sup>39</sup>.

Three letters “T” embroidered on the *rushnyky* meant the feast of the Trinity (Faith, Hope, Love). They were often arranged under a large vase, from which grows lush greenery and flowers<sup>40</sup>.

Of particular interest are the letters of the *rushnyk* alphabet, which preserve the unusual for modern times spelling of individual signs. This applies to the letters “З”, “Ф”, “H”, “Є.” Embroidered palaeography becomes clearer when referring to the traditions of Cyrillic writing. The letters with the names—“Zelo,” “Fita” were removed from the alphabet in the XVIII century, the letter “H” changed its spelling (the middle oblique line became straight), but “Є” in the Ukrainian alphabet has retained the traditional graphics, while, for example, the Russian language has departed from the original Cyrillic script and uses this letter only as a printed sign<sup>41</sup>.

Ukrainians have always treated churches with respect and worship. Therefore, often in the riot of flowers we see embroidered on the *rushnyky* images of churches, chapels, which were confirmed by inscriptions.

There are a lot of frames on the *rushnyky*—“banks” of the central composition, which were decorated with floral motifs formed by four petals. These cruciform flowers were embroidered on “monograms,” but they were most clearly perceived separately from other embroidery elements when they filled in the bottom of a *rushnyk*. There are *rushnyky* that have floral motifs, or the motif of a tree turned the tops down “to the other world.” These *rushnyky* were used

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<sup>39</sup> Kytova, *Polotnianyi litopys Ukrainy: Semantyka oramentu ukrainskoho rushnyka* [Linen Chronicle of Ukraine: Semantics of Ukrainian *Rushnyk* Ornament].

<sup>40</sup> Kytova, *Polotnianyi litopys Ukrainy: Semantyka oramentu ukrainskoho rushnyka* [Linen Chronicle of Ukraine: Semantics of Ukrainian *Rushnyk* Ornament].

<sup>41</sup> Kytova, *Polotnianyi litopys Ukrainy: Semantyka oramentu ukrainskoho rushnyka* [Linen Chronicle of Ukraine: Semantics of Ukrainian *Rushnyk* Ornament].

during funeral rites. It is interesting that the inscriptions on the funeral *rushnyky* were located in a mirror image.

For example, signs such as a quadrilateral, rhombus, rectangle, and cross are associated with the number 4 in Naddniproianshchyna region. Similar motifs, characteristic of other works of folk arts and crafts, are found by archaeologists in excavations dating back to the time of the Trypillia culture. Through the millennia, these signs, embroidered *vyshyvanky*, *rushnyky*, and ceramics, have survived to our time. Their symbolism is explained in many works<sup>42</sup>.

Very often, dates were recorded on the *rushnyky*, almost all the embroidered dates belong to the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, including during the difficult years of the Second World War, as well as in the 1950s and 1969s of the XX century and up to the present day. Modern works testify to the strong preservation of the tradition of the previous centuries.

The desire of embroiderers not just to put initials on a *rushnyk*, but to “sign” it in full: “The *rushnyk* is embroidered by Pilepenko Varia,” “The *rushnyk* is embroidered by Plyhun Motria,” “The *rushnyk* is embroidered by Anna Mykhailovna,” etc., is surprising. Signed *rushnyky* have a specific purpose, they could not be sold, given into the wrong hands. These works are original monuments-testaments for the next generations of Ukrainian families, they were intended for children, grandchildren, they were passed on in certain “closed” family circles, and therefore they were kept as ancestral relics<sup>43</sup>. According to texts on *rushnyky*, the process of their embroidery is interpreted by masters as an unusual, ceremonial activity, an action on which the future and the fate itself depends:

*Embroidering the rushnyk, I was praying to God  
To give me a good faith, no matter what*

The text echoes the Ukrainian heresy: a woman prays to God to give her a good fate and already expects a reward from her.

In Ukraine, mothers and mothers-in-law encouraged girls to embroider, gave them lessons, and checked work done. Along with labor, there was also a Christian upbringing: “Work and pray,” “Give, God, Happiness,” “God is not in power, but in truth,” “Save God.” Such texts convey respect for the faith and

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<sup>42</sup> Humenna, *Blahoslovy, maty! Kazka-esei* [Bless Me, Mother! Fairy Tale-Essay].

<sup>43</sup> Kytova, *Polomnianyi litopys Ukrainy: Semantyka ornamentu ukrainskoho rushnyka* [Linen Chronicle of Ukraine: Semantics of Ukrainian *Rushnyk* Ornament].

sound like carol-Christmas wishes, majestic New Year and spring motifs. Sometimes they are intertwined with embroidered holiday greetings like: “Merry Christmas,” “Christ is Risen,” “Happy Holy Trinity.” The *rushnyky* with holiday greetings can be seen in rural homes, in museums, and in currently operating churches. On many items we still see such embroidered texts as: “Christ is Risen–Ukraine will be resurrected,” the monogram of Christ “X,” “Merry Christmas.” Among the floral ornaments in which such greetings are woven, there are early Christian symbols: peacocks, doves, fish, images crosses, angels, vines. On some *rushnyky* there is a letter “Б,” encoding the word “God” (Ukrainian word “Бор”) (Figure 7).

Some masters embroidered words from songs, poems of Taras Shevchenko, expressions that encouraged neatness. With these embroideries, folk masters departed from traditional subjects and created new ones, which are a monument of primitive art. The text “Long live freedom” was embroidered by women in Soviet camps in Siberia<sup>44</sup>.



**Figure 7.** *Rushnyk* ornamented with embroidery, with an ornamental motif in the shape of the letter “Б,” embroidered over the tree of life. XIX-early

<sup>44</sup> Kis, *Ukrainky v HULAHu: Vyzhyty znachyt peremohty* [Ukrainian Women in GULAG: To Survive Means to Win].



XX century (photo by the authors).

Inscriptions on Ukrainian national *vyshyvanky* spread in the 1920–30s of the XX century on the territory of Hutsul region. On wedding *vyshyvanky*, the letters were placed under the embroidery that frames the cut in the front of the *vyshyvanka*. Ornithomorphic or zoomorphic motifs were embroidered between the letters. Most often it was 2 doves (male and female), symbolizing the marriage relationship<sup>45</sup>. Such compositional schemes and their semantic meaning are still preserved in Ukrainian rites today.

In modern decorative and applied art of Ukraine, the sign-letter system loses its semantic meaning. It retains only formal characteristics and is transmitted to consumers through direct citation, stylization or creative interpretation<sup>46</sup>. Thus, the prospects of imagination of the ethno-code in the future projection of Ukrainian folk art are outlined only by formal features.

## Conclusion

So, Ukrainian embroiderers and masters of decorative and applied art showed extraordinary talent and intricacy, writing texts as the part of the composition of folk products. For the most part, initials, numbers, and texts were iconic and were read literally by recipients, and were understandable to the general public. Letter initials and texts associated with traditional Christian symbols for Ukrainian culture were mainly based on the established system of signs-symbols of Christianity. A separate group of text messages that for many centuries were transmitted by folk masters were quotes of instructive content, borrowed from Ukrainian folklore, the poetry of Taras Shevchenko, which is undoubtedly relevant today. Despite the fact that most of the letters and text messages in the works of Ukrainian folk art organically fit into the ornamental compositions or plot images, in part they marginalized, simplified the decor and diminished the artistic and aesthetic qualities of works of folk art.

The readability of the sign and symbol in modern folk art is sometimes lost and is perceived exclusively as decoration. Therefore, it is important for

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<sup>45</sup> Bondarchuk, “Symboliko-semantychne navantazhennia obrazu ptakha yak vidobrazhennia relihiino-svitohliadnykh uiaavlen u mystetstvi paleolitu” [Symbolic and Semantic Load of a Bird Image as a Reflection of Religious and Ideological Ideas in the Art of the Paleolithic].

<sup>46</sup> Chouprina, Gaiova, and Palamar, “Etnodyzain ta yoho realizatsiia v suchasnomu proektuvanni kostiuma ta industrii mody” [Ethnodesign and its Realization in the Modern Planning of Suit and Fashion Industry]; Tsybala, “Natsionalni tradytsii u dyzaini kostiumu: Aspekty metodyky mystetstvovnavchoho analizu” [National Traditions in Costume Design: Methodology Aspects of Art Criticism Analysis]; Tsybala, “Transliatsiia natsionalnykh tradytsii v suchasnykh ukrainskykh dyzain-praktykakh” [National Traditions Translation in Modern Ukrainian Design Practices].

modern professional masters of decorative art or designers to “decode” the traditional sign-letter text of folk ornament for its further creative interpretations in contemporary Ukrainian art and ethno-directions of Ukrainian design.

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