



Pl. 1—An especially fine example of smocking at the neck and cuff of a blouse from Bukovina. The edge of the collar is in the true Romanian stitch. From the Dunham collection—a gift to Dr. Dunham from Dr. Georges Oprescu.

ROMANIAN EMBROIDERY  
A Dying Folk-Art

*by*

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Photographs by NORRIS W. HARKNESS

**T**HE urge to decorate is as old as man, yet its expression is always controlled, or at least affected, by the circumstances under which the man — and especially the woman — must live. The kind of decoration man has created and even the basic materials of which he has made it have followed his economic and social evolution and have been altered by climate, his own mode of life, as well as that of his neighbors and their attitude toward him, and his national security.

The more nomadic his life, the less he has been able to gratify his desire for beauty of his own creation; the more sheltered and secure he became, the more ornate, elaborate, and permanent his decorations could be. In the same way, men living in areas subject to frequent wars and invasions tended to make their treasures more portable, and often turned to articles of fabric and/or clothing for the gratification of the desire for decoration.

Romania became a great center of embroidery because of a combination of these reasons, but to understand more clearly the subtle differences between Romanian embroidery and that of the neighboring states it is necessary to know some of the historical background. To realize only that Romania is a Latin country surrounded by Magyars and Slavs is not enough.

Historians theorize that all the peoples living in southeastern Europe are descended from the Thraco-Illyric race, despite the great linguistic differences that exist among them today. One branch of the race was called Masagetae or Dacian, the people so vividly described by John P. Haskins in his study, "Pazyrik, The Valley of the Frozen Tombs," in this Bulletin in 1956. They were well known by the Chinese as the "Ta Yueh-chih," meaning the greater Getae, who dominated the slopes of the Altai Mountains in Asia between 526 and 161 B.C.

The Dacians were first mentioned by Herodotus in 512 B.C., but there is historical evidence of their existence almost 1500 years earlier. They vanished as an independent race in 106 A.D. when they were conquered by the Romans under Trajan, the first Roman Emperor who was not Roman but Spanish. The conquerors occupied the country for 165 years and in that time the great majority of the Dacian men were either killed



Pl. 2—(Above) Map of Romania. (Below) A delicate black-on-white blouse from Transylvania with extensive use of satin stitch and the rather rare stylized flowers. From the Dunham collection.

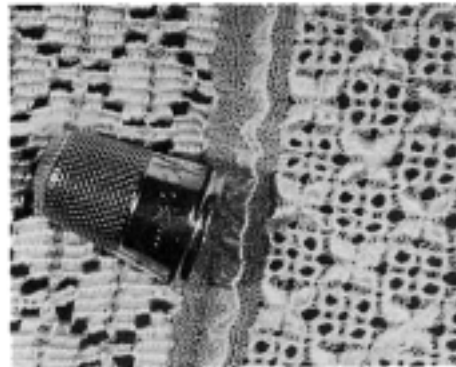
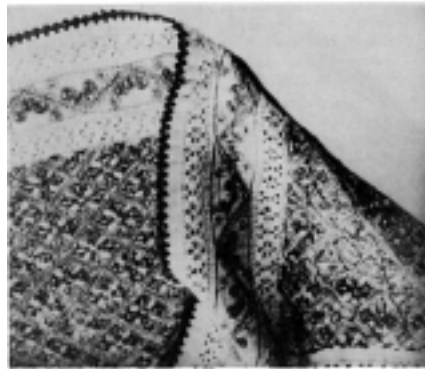
or sent back to Rome as laborers, while the Roman soldiers remained to give Romania its Roman background and language. The conquest of the little country, which had been paid tribute by Trajan's predecessors, is commemorated by "Trajan's Column," a tall pillar carved with many figures in Dacian costume, a form of dress that changed but little right up to the Russian occupation.

As a result of this long union, which continued until the Goths drove the Romans back across the Danube, "The Romanian people," says Miss Juliet Thompson in her book "Old Romania" (Charles Scribner's Sons — 1939), "though separated from Rome by force of circumstances felt and still feel themselves ardently Latin. . . . The isolation afforded by the mountains successfully protected the Carpatho-Danubian area from every trace of the Teutonic invasions, and the lack of a common religion also helped to preserve intact Rome's heritage. Unlike western Europe, no single Teutonic institution or word has survived in Romanian civilization."

This ancestry of Rome and Dacia has left the Romanian a heritage of certain almost pagan customs and beliefs which seem rather curious when we consider his deeply devout following of the Greek Orthodox Church. Even before the peasant learned to read and write, he studied the stars and was guided by them in the times for planting and harvesting, and for the picking, and even the use of, the various materials that were his sources of dyes.

To return for a moment to history, Wallachia and Moldavia, the two principalities that were united as Romania in 1859, furnished an easy passage through the gap between the Carpathian Mountains and the Black Sea, a passage that became a major invasion thoroughfare for Goth, Greek, Turk, Hungarian, Pole, Roman — every tribe, nation, or race that sought wealth by conquest (Plate 2, map). Because of this repeated invasion and occupation, the Romanians were the first to make "the scorched earth" a national policy intended to discourage any invader from remaining to enjoy their fertile plains.

These invasions continued well into the nineteenth century — and in a sense through the World Wars of the twentieth — and served to give the Romanians the reputation of nomads, when actually they were a home-loving, peaceful, agricultural folk, fleeing frequent enemies and carrying with them into mountain refuges all their little treasures and household possessions. Obviously rugs, embroideries, and other fabrics were the things that could be transported most easily and with the minimum of damage,



Pl. 3—(Above, left) Small table-cover with two shades of green silk on white *pansa* with pulled work, paillettes, and gold thread. (Above, right) White-on-white Wallachian blouse with silk embroidery on cotton *pansa*, with pulled work and smocking at the neck. The enlarged section of the shoulder band (below) with the thimble for scale shows the delicacy of the *pansa*. Courtesy of Dr. Dunham. (Below, left) White-on-white tea-cloth with geometric satin stitch and pulled work.

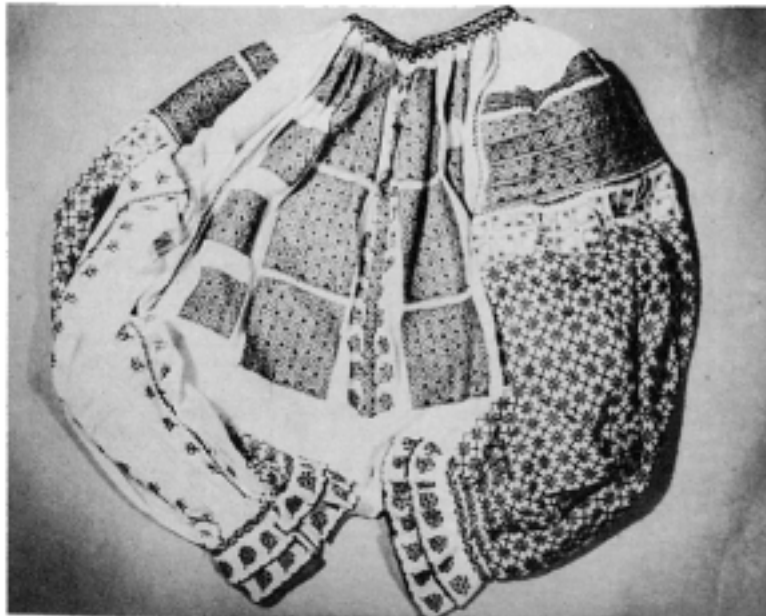
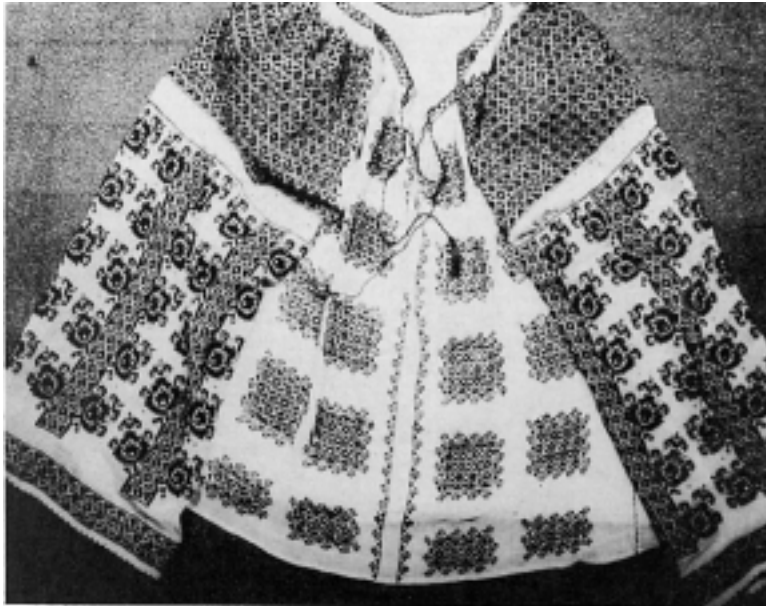
so it was this general type of decoration that became characteristically and nationally Romanian.

There was still another reason for the Romanian's special interest in embroidery; the women who had to share in earning the family living could spin the thread and do the needlework while tending the flocks and doing the innumerable jobs out of doors that required some attention, but in a large measure only presence and occasional activity. The dyeing and weaving were done at home, of course, but these demanded comparatively little of her time.

The Romanian home, then, was profusely decorated with large rugs and embroideries on the walls, and towels or scarves over windows, ikons, and even candlesticks and lamps. Table covers, (Plates 3 and 5 above) bed spreads, and doilies of every kind and size filled all the available spaces, and each was made at home by weaving in an intricate pattern or by embroidery. Most of the fabric used was white (Plate 3 below, right), but occasionally brown or black wool was used without dyeing and sometimes the thread was dyed before the weaving. Dyeing the whole piece was exceedingly rare if it was practised at all (Plate 5, lower left, lower right).

It is of special interest to note the great differences in materials, coloring, styles, and embroidery techniques to be found in a country which extends less than 325 miles from north to south and 450 from east to west, but ranges in climate from the almost semi-tropical to snow-swept plains and frigid mountain regions. At the same time, there is evidence that inter-marriage between Romanians and their immediate neighbors has had less effect than might have been expected, though in certain areas this influence has obviously extended in both directions. Some of this variety is probably caused by the fact that, though the embroidery patterns were traditional designs handed down with the techniques from generation to generation, each woman used her own interpretation and added her own individual touch. Despite the endless variations this brought about, the characteristics of each district, and indeed of each town, were so strong that it is frequently possible to identify not only the area but even the village from which the embroidery came.

It is simple to trace the invasion routes, which were naturally the trade routes as well. Following the passages around and through the mountains as did the armies, the peddlers brought their wares from Italy, Turkey, Russia, and even Egypt, and the use of different materials and ornaments points out the easier travel roads. The appearance of Venetian glass beads



Pl. 4—(Above) Richly embroidered blouse from Oltenia showing black and gold thread and paillettes on very fine *pansa*. From the Dunham collection. (Below) Red and gold blouse from Oltenia with double ruffled cuffs. The sleeve is turned to show the work on the seams and the under side. From the Dunham Collection.

(Plates 8, 10 above) shows the trade route from Italy, and sequins and small strips of silver and other metals folded into the designs of various localities trace the course of peddlers from Turkey and Egypt (Plates 6 above, 4 above, 9 below).

While all these factors had their effect on designs, colors, and materials, geography and climate were of even greater importance. In Wallachia, the rich, fertile area between the Danube and the Carpathian Mountains where the climate is mild, the workmanship is finer, the *pansa* (the hand-woven, crepe-like cotton or linen material on which practically all Romanian embroidery is done) is thinner (Plates 3 right and below, left, 6 above, left), and there is more evidence of the effect of imports and of Greek and Bulgarian influence. Here one finds much use of the flat metal bars folded into the design (Plates 1, 6 above, right), and more colors appear.

In Oltenia in southwestern Wallachia the stitching is more delicate and the fly stitch is often found (Plate 4 above). Here bright red is used more often as a basic design element while its chief purpose in Banat, to the northwest, is to emphasize metallic thread as part of the stronger color and bolder design of the Turkish and Hungarian influence.

In Moldavia, to the east and along the Russian border, one finds many of the embroidered head-dresses and the leather jackets that are worn to some extent all over the country. Brightly colored wool is embroidered on the leather and there are occasional examples of inserted black borders and panels of leather strips. According to Dr. Donald Dunham in his "Romanian Profile," greater use is made of darker colors on blouses than is common in Wallachia, with dark red and black, bright red, or touches of yellow or olive green to brighten other colors. The materials are heavier, especially the *pansa*, and there is less delicacy and sophistication in the workmanship.

In Bukovina, in the extreme northern part of the country in the wind-swept area of the Russian plains, the blouses are much heavier and thicker thread is used than in Wallachia. In general the designs are more conservative, but there are occasional spectacular examples of the juxtaposition of dramatic colors (Plate 5, upper left).

Transylvania, almost separated from the rest of the country by the rugged Carpathian Mountains, is the most conservative district of all in its use of color. Black and white is extensively used with heavy wool embroidery on felt or on the leather side of coats worn with the fur inside. The embroidery on men's blouses is often so heavy that the background material can scarcely be seen at all (Plate 5, lower left; Plate 6 below).





Pl. 5—(Below, right) Small table-cover on black wool from Bukovina or Transylvania with buttonhole stitch over the rolled edge. (Above, right) Table-cover from Oltenia, using various colors of thread on the white *pansa* that is a major factor in the design. (Above, left) Man's heavy shirt from Transylvania with almost solid embroidery on sleeves and shirt front. The diagonal stitches are embroidered over the red. (Below, left) An apron of black wool from Muntenia. Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.

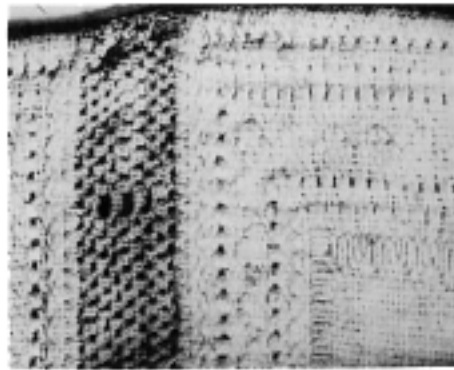
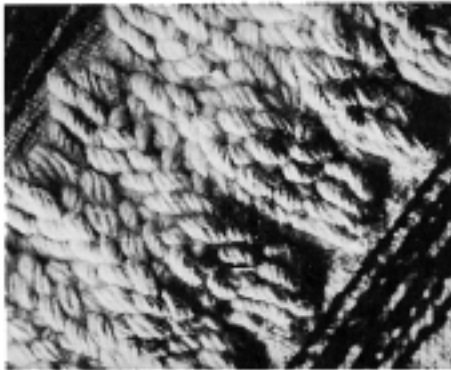
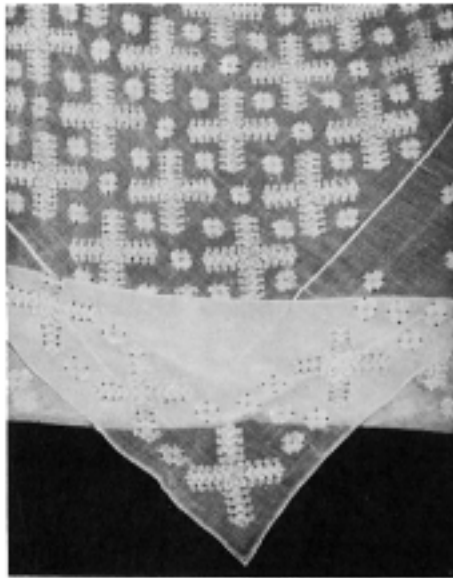
Obviously some of these color differences were caused by variations in climate, tradition, and local availability of the raw materials used in the dyeing, as well as by the influences mentioned above. Until about 1870 when aniline dyes were first introduced, the coloring depended upon the natural color of the raw material (as black wool from black sheep) and the vegetable dyes which each woman prepared for her own use.

Black dye was made from walnut husks or alder branches, with gallic acid added as a fixative; red from the bark of wild apple trees; orange by adding saffron to the red; yellow from young green wheat, apple peels, saffron, or the tops of pussy willow trees. Other familiar herbs, barks, and vegetables were used to produce other colors or to control the shade of the principal ones (Plate 7, above). It is most unfortunate that the making of the dyes, together with much of the processing, the traditional design, and the art of embroidery itself are rapidly falling into the category of lost arts.

All the material — with few exceptions — was made at home. Since the raising of sheep was one of the most important occupations in the early history of the country, wool was plentiful and, with flax and hemp, was the base for much of the work. Later, silkworms were raised and both cotton and silk were produced and imported. As before noted, the small metal strips, glass beads, paillettes, and gold and silver thread were brought in by peddlers from as far away as Egypt.

Throughout, the preparation of the embroidery materials involved the near-superstitions of the people. Women engaged in any stage of making or using dyes had to be happy, healthy, and unworried, and the work had to be done in the proper phase of the moon. St. Constantine's Day, May 21, was the day for shearing the finest early wool from the belly, neck and tail of the sheep, a time selected to avoid the coarser, heavier wool that came several weeks later. Since the final product was so important to their lives, Romanians treated each step in its production with due deference.

The wool was washed in soap and hot water, soaked to rinse in streams, and dried in the sun. It was then combed to separate the fibers and eliminate insects, and then spun into thread. Flax was handled in similar fashion after soaking and rotting the fiber out of the stalk. The fibers and occasionally a woven piece were bleached repeatedly in a strong solution made by boiling straw in water. The series of bleachings, each followed by drying in the sun, produced a strong thread of a warm white shade. The lighter thread was often given an extra twist in the spinning to add to the almost



Pl. 6—(Above, left) A splendid example of the fineness of *pansa* in a banquet-cloth embroidered with white and light yellow silk highlighted with gold paillettes. From the Dunham collection. (Above, right) Enlarged view of part of one of the stylized flowers on the lower chest of the blouse in Pl. 1, showing the metal strips, a great variety of stitches, and silk thread not twisted. (Below) Elaborate seams in men's shirts. The one on the right is from the shirt on Pl. 5.

frothy, crepe texture of the woven material, the *pansa* (pronounced pun-zuh). Woven on home looms, the *pansa* ranges in weight from the sheer delicacy of lawn or organdy to the strong heaviness of sailcloth, or even the heavy canvas used for men's shirts (Plates 5 upper left, 9 above, left) and household objects.

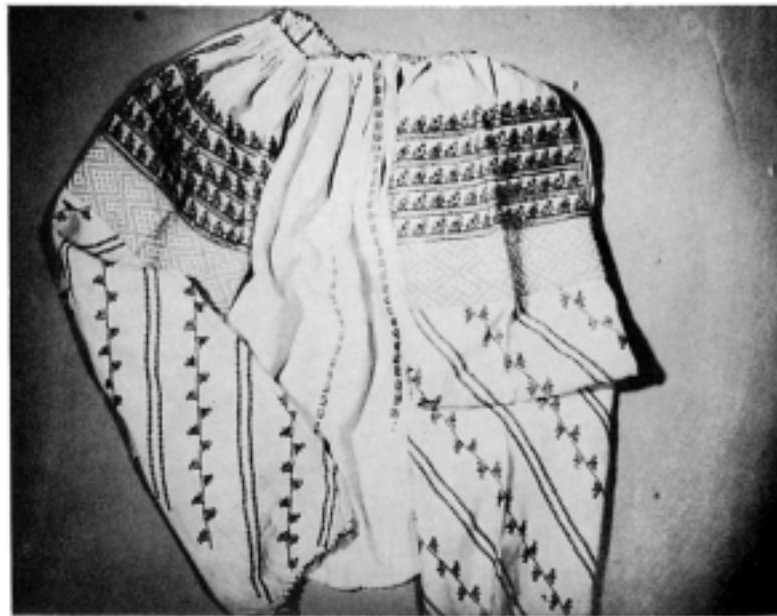
In his already mentioned "Romanian Profile," Dr. Dunham says, "The profusion of color, the intricacy of design, the differences in each pattern, the quiet harmony of wild tonal relationships, the easy juxtaposition of geometric designs and those taken from nature, all with a quality of finish, in the writer's opinion, make Romanian embroideries the most vitally beautiful in the world" (Plate 7).

We have noted some of the influences that have brought about this interesting perfection of highly skilled hand-work created by a people whose educational standards were extremely low until the early part of this century, and whose history is more marked by strife than by what we might expect to lead to high artistic achievement. Much of this perfection undoubtedly springs from their Roman blood and the traditions of art and ability in many fields.

A curious reminiscence of a Roman design can be seen in the spirals that encircle some Romanian sleeves of blouses and shirts; they recall the spiral decoration of Trajan's Column in Rome. It will be remembered that it was this emperor who conquered Dacia, and it has even been suggested that the extraordinary idea of placing sculpture on a column in this way was derived from the embroideries brought back from his new province (Plate 7, below).

In studying the embroidery designs, the striking elements, as commented upon by Dr. Dunham and others, are the sensitivity and refinement of both color and pattern. Even when highly unlikely color combinations are used, the innate good taste of the Romanian peasant is always noticeable. A great many symbolical signs were used in the patterns — the snail-like circles of "life and death," the wall of Troy, the plain circle for the sun, the swastika, and many varieties of crosses are only a few of them. On rare occasions there may be stylized flowers and birds (Plates 1, 6 above, right, 7 below, 2 below)—each the choice of the individual woman expressing the combination of her inherited pagan superstitions and her devout Christianity.

An outstanding characteristic of Romanian embroidery design is its reliance on the background's showing through the worked pattern to form



Pl. 7—(Above) Unusual blouse with brilliant coloring reminiscent of stained glass windows and more pattern in the white-on-white separating band than is usually found. (Below) One of the rare blouses using stylized ducks and a diagonal striped pattern on the sleeves. Made in Oltenia. From the Brooklyn Museum.

a distinct design in itself. It creates somewhat the effect of a cameo, with the nearby almost solid embroidery often seeming to be a background for a main design in white (Plate 10, upper left). Color masses are broken or softened by using white or cream silk on the light *pansa* (Plates 4 above, 8, 7 above, 2 below), and shading with white or lighter shades of the principal color is common.

Even remembering that the basic patterns and designs have been handed down from generation to generation, and although each part of the country has imprinted its own identification on the finished product, the symphony of color and the refinement of the pattern are the result of the individual woman's imagination. No pattern is ever exactly repeated and no design is ever transferred to the *pansa*. For the most part it is a matter of the precise counting of threads to make the various elements fit the pattern in the geometrically accurate way which is proverbially Romanian.

These embroidery techniques are to be found in all the many useful and decorative articles in homes everywhere in the country, but the clothing of both men and women received major attention. Simple in their cut and style (almost unchanged throughout the nearly two thousand years of which we have definite knowledge), only the profuse, colorful embroidery lifted them from the drab and the ordinary.

Outstanding as examples of the use of striking color and ingenuity of design are the *iiã* or blouses for women and shirts for men. Shoulders and sleeves naturally received most emphasis with horizontal bands at the shoulder seam of squares, medallions, or emblems influenced greatly by the area in which the maker lived. There is almost always a separating break of white between the shoulder and the mid-arm patterns, often of the type called "embossed" by Dr. Georges Oprescu in his book, "Peasant Art in Romania." The term indicates a method of stitchery by which the material is raised, or puckered, not an embroidery design in relief (Plate 9 above, right). The band, whether "embossed" or not, may be from half an inch to several inches in width and serves to soften the design contrast between the two areas, while acting as a transition from one to the other. Dr. Oprescu says, "The design of the upper area runs at right angles to that of the lower . . . and the embossing is usually in silk—either white like the *pansa* or faintly grayish or yellow (Plate 10). The silk is generally used alone or—especially in Bukovina—sometimes combined with other colors or with glass beads."



Pl. 8—(Above) A blouse from Muntenia with unusual blending of colors in a striking design accented by glass beads. (Below) Detail of the shoulder patterns with lower horizontal section separated from the higher shoulder patch by a narrow strip of drawn work. Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.

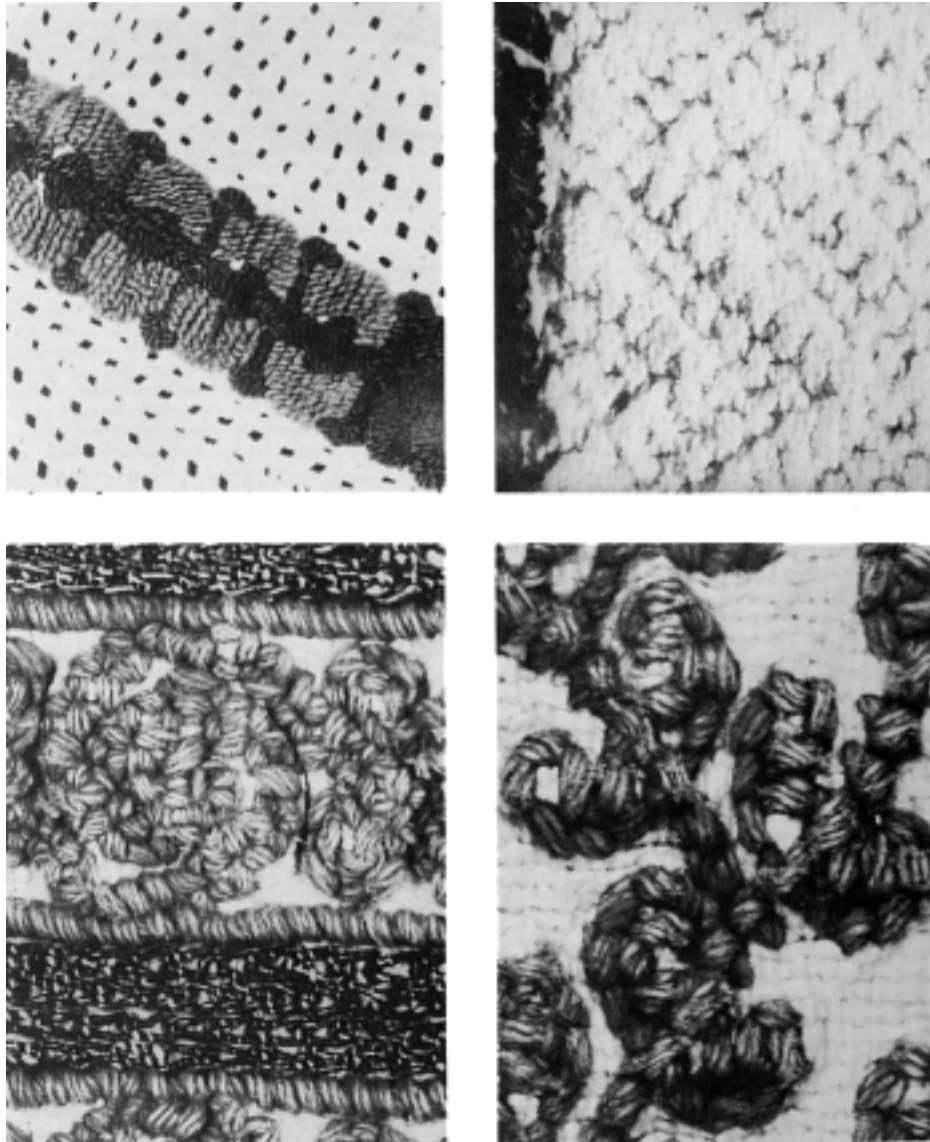


Down to the cuff, perpendicular or diagonal lines repeat, though never exactly, the color and pattern of the shoulder design. The opening down the front of the blouse, and sometimes the back as well, was decorated with medallions or other bits reminiscent of the shoulder pattern, and the seams, rather than being hidden, were featured by open work in one or more of the colors of the main design. The herringbone, or a fancy derivative of it, was frequently used for the purpose (Plate 6).

Although Mme. Enachescu-Cantemir, in her book "Popular Romanian Dress," says that a great variety of stitches were used, from what I have been able to determine, only a very few were arranged and rearranged to obtain many different results and effects. Including all those used in cut work and drawn work, as well as the types most characteristically Romanian, not more than twenty different stitches can be identified and more than half of this number are rarely used.

Those most frequently seen are the cross stitch, the Romanian, the fly, the Holbein, the line, the straight — either single or double — the chain, the satin, and the Dodecanese, while the buttonhole is sometimes used to finish off an edge. They are worked in many combinations with some even done from the reverse side. Many instances are found of the use of double or triple threads, while a single strand produces a spidery, lighter effect. Often the fullness of the material is gathered into a band at the neck or cuff by smocking, which may be done in the European or English style from the front of the work (the honeycomb) (Plate 1, 3, 2 below) or in the typically Romanian fashion with extremely long stitches from the wrong side of the material.

In recent years, Romanian embroidery, with all its loveliness, all its beauty and strength, and all its value as one of the world's great folk-arts, is fast becoming a lost art. The generation of women who are now in their middle age, the women who learned embroidery from their mothers and grandmothers and who proudly practised what had become a truly national art form, can no longer pass on their skills and their traditions to their daughters. They are engaged in doing men's work in the salt mines and the railroad yards, or other forms of heavy labor that leave little time or strength for more delicate hand-work. Few hands are attuned to the gentleness of spinning and weaving and needlework. Only in the rarest instances has the present younger generation learned any of the art of embroidery — and who knows whether the next will have more than heard of it!



Pl.9—(Above, left) The shoulder band from a very old blouse from Hateg, Transylvania. The extremely heavy wool is olive green and khaki, and the entire sleeve is pulled work. (Above, right) Detail from a separating band of heavy wool embroidery on the sleeve of a blouse. The material is raised throughout by the stitches, a type of work called “embossing” by Dr. Oprescu. (Below, left) A section of a small part of the shoulder strips from a Bukovinian blouse, with silver and gold threads in alternate bands and heavy red floss thread in the Dodecanese stitch in the others. (Below, right) An enlargement of the stitches in the red bands. From the Dunham collection.

### Epitaph

Let me quote once more — this time from a new book, “Folk Art in the Romanian People’s Republic,” published by the USSR State Publishing House for Literature and the Arts, page 27:

“The rich colors of the decorative designs are made with dyes extracted from various roots, stems, and flowers from the fields and woods of our country. Today, however, this practice has almost disappeared. Chemical dyes have replaced vegetal dyes, adding new hues to the range of colors. Dyeing is generally done nowadays in towns, in dye-shops.”

And once more — “We should also mention the more and more frequent use of the sewing machine, even for embroidery.”



Pl. 10—(Above) Striking *iia* (Blouse) from Moldavia, with a corn-colored separating band in geometric satin stitch, highlighted with glass beads both white and colored. (Below) Strong, heavy blue combined with gold thread on delicate white *pansa* and the repeated shoulder bands make this blouse unusual and striking. The needle in the enlargement at the right indicates the size of the thread. From the collection of Mrs. Frederik Rutgers.