

THE COLOURS AND SYMBOLISM OF BULGARIAN EMBROIDERY

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present an overview of the symbols embedded in Bulgarian embroidery. The research methods include comparisons and analyses based on data from bibliographical sources and face-to-face interviews with experienced masters of the embroidery craft. The main results demonstrate the closeness and similarities of embroidery on both banks of the Lower Danube in Bulgaria and Romania.

Keywords:

Bulgarian embroidery, symbolism, colours, folklore, art

Introduction

The roots of Bulgarian embroidery can be traced back to the traditions of the tribes that created the Bulgarian state in the 7th century A.D. (Baeva, 2020). Even before the establishment of Bulgaria, the peoples that inhabited the area of present-day Bulgaria were influenced by Roman, Byzantine, and oriental cultures (Veleva et al., 2018). The first and the second Bulgarian state have introduced a more pronounced national character (Koev, 1982). The adoption of the Christian Orthodox faith has added the cross as an important symbol alongside the typical floral symbols. The 5 centuries of conquest by the Ottoman Empire have impacted the lives of Bulgarians, and non-Christian elements can be seen in Bulgarian embroidery (Drăgănescu & Vulpe, 2024). This period is also characterized by a more intensive exchange between the Balkan peoples that borrow and introduce elements from their neighbours.

Thus, Bulgarian embroidery shares common elements with embroidery found in Romania, Serbia, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, etc. (Drăgănescu & Vulpe, 2024; Ursachi, 2024). Many of the stitches, patterns, shapes and colours symbolize the sun, family, the cycle of life, etc. (Kazlacheva et al., 2023; Sivova & Hristov, 2025).

The tradition on Midsummer's Day or the Christian Orthodox day of St. John the Baptist (24 June) is shared on both sides of the Lower Danube in Bulgaria and Romania. "Enyovden" in Bulgaria or similarly "Sânziene" in Romania says that unmarried young girls look for their "chosen one" as they wear long white shirts richly decorated with embroidery around the sleeves and the bosom (Borcoși, 2023). Evidence of cultural cross-pollination between Bulgarians and Romanians dates back centuries. It was more intensive during the

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Ottoman period, when rebellions South of the Danube forced migrations, and Bulgarians settled in towns and villages between the Danube and the Carpathian Mountains. One such example is the village of Băleni-Sârbi, Dâmbovița, Romania, where popular costumes have preserved the traditional Bulgarian embroidery symbols and colours (Cristică & Cojocariu, 2025). The traditional colours have specific meanings. Usually, embroidery is found on the openings of shirts, coats and trousers, as a guard against external evil spirits and curses. On a subconscious level, embroidery serves as a blessing and protects the person who wears embroidered clothes.

Nowadays, embroidery can act as a link to our ancestors and provide meaning in the lives of the current and future generations (Zaharieva-Stoyanova, 2019; Drumeva, 2024). The interest in “Bulgarian embroidery” and its sustainable preservation and digitalization is increasing. This fact is demonstrated by the number of Scopus-indexed papers, as 18 of 21 have been published since 2019.

This paper presents an overview of Bulgarian embroidery, and the colours and symbols associated with it.

1. Shapes, motifs and symbolism

The Bulgarian presidency of the Council of the European Union (1 January – 30 June 2018) featured a logo that symbolized Bulgarian culture – the embroidery (“shevitsa”), the colours of the Bulgarian flag, and the Cyrillic alphabet (Fig. 1). Interestingly, 29 of the projects for the competition contained elements of Bulgarian embroidery, 21 – with Cyrillic letters, 20 – the rose flower, and 9 – the Bulgarian tricolor (Bulgarian National Television (BNT), 2017).



Figure 1. Embroidery featured on the logo of the Bulgarian presidency of the Council of the European Union (Bulgarian Presidency Council of the EU, 2018).

This new interpretation of ancient and traditional shapes and symbols reiterates and reminds us of their original meaning (Chakardakova, 2024; Keredchieva, 2026). Table 1 summarises various shapes and motifs, along with their meanings and symbolism.

Group of shapes	Shape and/or motif	Meaning and symbolism
Geometrical shapes	Diamond	Fertility, earth, feminine.
	Cross	God, the cardinal directions (East, West, North, South), balance, order.
	“Elbetista” (double cross)	Harmony, health, protection, equilibrium; the Goddess Mother; the eight elements (seasons and cardinal directions): winter/North, summer/South, spring/East, autumn/West.
	Swastika	Life, positive energy.
	“Makaz” (two triangles)	Engagement, marriage, family, kin/clan.
	“Kanatitsa” (extended “makaz”)	Connection, movement, continuation of life, generations.
	“Babitsa” (two triangles touching at their bases)	Union of two families; tribe, people.
Floral motifs	Rose	Beauty, love, vitality.
	Tree of Life	Life, perpetuation of life, the connection between the heaven, the living beings, and the underworld.
	Vine and grapes	Youth, abundance, fertility, success, peace and love.
	Trilobite palmette or tulip	Protection, fertility.

Animal motifs	Bird	(a single bird) the soul, freedom, connection to the Heavens; (two birds) A couple, family, harmony.
	Horse	Strength, freedom, movement.
	Dragon/Serpent (“zmey”)	Master of the four elements (earth, water, wind (air), fire).
	Cosmic turtle (three intersecting 8-s)	Perfection, eternity, infinity,
	Rooster	Male fertility,
	Bear paw	Healing power.

Table 1. Shapes, motifs and symbolism

The embroidery shapes and motifs explained in Table 1 are usually decorated on cotton “kenar” fabric using a needle and coloured thread, floss or yarn.

2. Colours and symbolism

The red colour is characteristic of Bulgarian embroidery. Similarly, red threads intertwined with white threads (strings) comprise the traditional Bulgarian “martenitsa” (and the Romanian “mărțișor”) that symbolizes good health and rebirth of nature, the male (Pizho) and female (Penda), the balance of good and evil, life and death.

Table 2 lists some colours frequently used in Bulgarian embroidery and their symbolism (Belcheva, 2024; Chakardakova, 2024; Keredchieva, 2026)

Colour	Symbolism
Red	Life, health, blood of the mother, love, energy, bravery, war, protection (especially from curses and bad magic).
Black or brown	Mother Earth, fertility, stability, seriousness.
Blue	Water (rivers, lakes, seas), sky, tranquility, nobility, trust, truth, respect.
Green	Nature, (eternal) life, resurrection, joy, hope, growth.

Yellow or golden	Sun, fire, abundance, optimism, light; the afterlife, the dead people.
White	Youth, purity, innocence; Divine light and spiritual enlightenment.

Table 2. Colours and symbolism

Conclusions

Bulgarian embroidery can be seen on various elements of clothes – the collars and necklines, the sleeves and cuffs of shirts, the aprons and pinafores, the hems of legs, etc. (Keredchieva, 2026). Naturally, there are many similarities and yet, some specific regional differences – in Northern Bulgaria and Dobrudzha, Shopluk, Pirin, Rhodopes, Thrace, and Strandzha, are evident in the colours, motifs, techniques, and locations of embroidery (Dimitrova, 2022).

Knowing, comparing and passing on this cultural heritage will ensure the sustainability of our traditions and the future of our nations.

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