

IA AS AN IDENTITY ELEMENT AND AESTHETIC MATRIX IN NICOLAE GRIGORESCU'S CREATION

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ABSTRACT. *THE STUDY HIGHLIGHTS THE RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE IA IN THE WORK OF NICOLAE GRIGORESCU, WHERE IT EXCEEDS ITS DECORATIVE STATUS AND CONSTITUTES AS AN AUTONOMOUS PLASTIC SUBJECT, THE VISUAL VEHICLE OF NATIONAL DIGNITY AND EXPRESSION OF A MODERN AESTHETIC PARADIGM.*

KEYWORDS: *IA, IDENTITY, TEXTILE ARCHETYPE, NICOLAE GRIGORESCU.*

Introduction

Romanian art, in its vast complexity and depth, has offered, over the centuries, countless reflections of the nation's soul, its aspirations and its rich heritage. Among the countless elements that have contributed to defining this visual identity, the *ia* occupies a place of masterly importance. This traditional piece of clothing, of intrinsic beauty and layered symbolism, has long transcended its purely practical role, becoming a true standard of belonging, refinement and the Romanian spirit.

Nicolae Grigorescu's (1838-1907) fascination with the rural world and its defining elements, among which he occupies a leading place, is closely linked to the historical context of his era. In the midst of modernization and Westernization, the artist felt the need to defend and promote national identity, believing that it was best preserved in rural areas, away from foreign influences. Through his paintings, he offered an idealized, yet profoundly authentic image of peasant life, making the *ia* a symbol of this authenticity, of manual labour, of simple beauty, and of traditional values.

In this historical and cultural context, the work of the painter Nicolae Grigorescu stands out as an essential point of reference, through the way in which he capitalized on and transfigured the *ia* into a central piece of his creation, giving it a new artistic and identity dimension.

In art history studies dedicated to the 19th century, the folk costume has often been analysed as a secondary element, a decoration meant to ensure the "national specificity" in portraiture or genre composition. A careful reading of Nicolae Grigorescu's work, however,

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reveals an inverse reality: in his canvases, the *ia* does not dress the model, but the model is chosen to wear and enhance the *ia*.

This study proposes a paradigm shift in the reception of Nicolae Grigorescu's work, placing the *ia* not in the position of a simple clothing accessory of the rural universe, but in the role of an autonomous plastic subject, formal matrix and identity pivot. In Grigorescu's work, the *ia* ceases to be a background ethnographic detail; it becomes a projection screen of Romanian pictorial modernity and an instrument for conceptualizing national dignity. As mentioned in the Braşov Art Museum album, Nicolae Grigorescu Collection, "Nicolae Grigorescu's work has been assimilated with the idea of national identity since the 19th century, becoming a benchmark for young painters, to whom he revealed new ways of plastic expression of the values of Romanian spirituality."²

Main text

The Romanian rural world, before the great socio-economic transformations of the 20th century, was a universe rich in traditions, customs and a strong community consciousness. In this space, the *ia* was not just a clothing item, but carried a profound meaning in itself, being a pillar of local identity and an indicator of social status, age, marital status and, above all, of belonging to a certain geographical and cultural area.

Each region of the country, each village, even each family, could have its own particularities in terms of the models, sewing techniques, materials used and chromaticity of the *ia*. This diversity created an extraordinary visual treasure trove, which attracted the attention of artists, and among them, Nicolae Grigorescu was, without a doubt, one of the most sensitive observers and transfigures of this symbol.

Nicolae Grigorescu had a profound vision of the surrounding reality, managing to capture in his paintings the essence of rural life, the beauty of simple but dignified faces, and landscapes full of light and colour. At the centre of many of these representations, we find the *ia*, gracefully worn by peasant women in Romanian villages. The artist understood that the *ia* represented more than cloth and thread; it was an expression of spirituality, ancestral craftsmanship, and a deep connection with nature. The painter was fascinated by the complexity of the embroideries, the variety of patterns – geometric, floral, zoomorphic – and the ingenuity with which they were adapted to the body space. He observed how different sewing techniques, such as the cross, cross-stitch, key, rice grain, or belt, were used to create

² Dumitrescu Sînziana, Popica Radu, *Muzeul de Artă Braşov. Colecția Nicolae Grigorescu*, Editura Muzeului de Artă Braşov, Braşov, 2021, p.4. Available: <https://www.muzeulartabv.ro/assets/pdf/Repertoriu%20Colecția%20Nicolae%20Grigorescu-web.pdf>

textures, reliefs, and light effects of particular beauty. Moreover, Grigorescu understood the role of the *ia* as a bearer of symbolic meanings. Many of the traditional patterns contained elements with a protective or fertilizing role, associated with ancient beliefs. Although he did not directly explain these meanings in his paintings, the constant presence of these decorative elements suggests that the artist was aware of their cultural depth.

In the early period of his career, Grigorescu attached particular importance to portraiture and scenes of peasant life. Here, the *ia* frequently appears as an essential element of the clothing of female characters. The painter was attentive to the faithful rendering of textures and the complexity of the embroideries. His *ia* patterns from this period suggest a knowledge of regional variety, capturing details specific to different areas of the country.

The colours used are often temperate, inspired by the chromatic palette of rural nature: shades of white, cream, ochre, beige, with accents of red, blue or green in the embroideries. This approach, through its realism, emphasized the role of the *ia* as an object of everyday use, but also as an expression of local identity. Masterful examples of this period are the works *Peasant woman spinning*, *Peasant woman from Muscel* (Figures 1, 2).



Figure 1. *Peasant woman spinning*,
N. Grigorescu

Source:
<https://dk.pinterest.com/pin/525936062733974047/>



Figure 2. *Peasant woman from Muscel*,
N. Grigorescu

Source: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:NicolaeGrigorescu_005.jpg

In these works of rare finesse, Grigorescu meticulously renders the texture of the canvas and the dense embroidery, specific to the area. The *ia* is treated with profound documentary respect, becoming an element of sovereign nobility.

In the same vein, the works *Logothete's wife*, *Peasant girl with jug* (Figures 3, 4) can be mentioned. Both works capture the Romanian *ia* as a central element, not only in terms of clothing, but also symbolically, through a carefully calibrated technical and stylistic construction. In both works, the *ia* not only dresses the character, but defines him. It is the visual and symbolic centre, around which the entire composition is organized.



Figure 3. *The Logothete's wife*, N. Grigorescu

Source: https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fi%C8%99ier:Nicolae_Grigorescu_-_Logofeteasa.jpg



Figure 4. *Peasant girl with jug*, N. Grigorescu

Source: https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C8%9A%C4%83ranc%C4%83_voioas%C4%83_%28pictur%C4%83_de_Nicolae_Grigorescu%29#/media/Fi%C8%99ier:Nicolae_Grigorescu_006.jpg

As Grigorescu's style evolves, influenced by his Parisian experience and contact with modern artistic movements (the Barbizon School and Impressionism), the painter begins to distance himself from meticulous detail in favour of a more synthetic and expressive approach. Even at this stage, the *ia* remains a subject of interest, but it is rendered with broader, more vibrant strokes.

The emphasis shifts from the faithful representation of the seams to suggesting the presence and volume of the *ia* through the play of light and shadow and the way the material sits on the body. The chromatics become bolder, the colours intensify, and the contrast between the deep blue of the sky or the raw green of nature and the white or light shades of the *ia* becomes an essential component of the composition. This freedom of brushwork is perfectly illustrated in the masterpiece *Girl with red beads* (Figure 5).

Here we can see the transition to plastic modernity: strict ethnographic details give way to the suggestion of volume through rapid strokes. The white of the *ia* acquires subtle reflexes and vibrates under the incidence of light, contrasting strongly with the bright red of the beads. Barbu Brezianu noticed that, in his paintings of peasant women, the *ia* is not just a traditional garment, but becomes the main reflecting agent of light. The white of the Grigorescian *ia*, obtained from smooth and sure strokes, gathers all the shades of the sky and the earth. His girls, captured in the grass or at the well, wear the national costume with a natural, unaffected pride, extracted from the intimacy of authentic rural life.³



Figure 5. *Girl with red beads*, N. Grigorescu

Source: <https://www.romanianmonasteries.org/cea-mai-scumpa-opera-de-arta-romaneasca-expusa-public-la-muzeul-brukenthal-din-sibiu>

In an era when Romanian urban society imported its cultural and clothing forms from the West, Grigorescu operated a spectacular movement of aesthetic resistance. He isolated the *ia* from its purely utilitarian context and treated it as an object of high spirituality and visual refinement. The white canvas, rough or fluid, decorated with ancestral motifs, became the nucleus around which the painter organized his composition, volume and, above all, the equation of light.

For Grigorescu, the major challenge was not to copy the embroidery patterns, but to translate plastically the texture and physical properties of the *ia* under the incidence of sunlight (plein-air). Depending on the material from which the *ia* was made, the artist recalibrated his entire brushwork technique.

The revolutionary element brought by Grigorescu to Romanian painting is the treatment of the white of the *ia*. Influenced by the Barbizon experience and impressionist tendencies, the

³ Brezianu Barbu, *Nicolae Grigorescu*, Editura Tineretului, București, 1959.

artist refused to see white as a non-colour. The white of the *ia* becomes a hypersensitive reactive medium.

Instead of using white as a simple value of brightness, Grigorescu loads it with reflexes. In the shadow areas of the wide sleeves, he introduces bluish reflexes (taken from the sky) and discreet ochres (reflected by the earth). The *ia* thus functions as a mirror of the entire surrounding macrocosm, integrating the character into nature through the fabric.

Another important aspect is the way in which Grigorescu used light to accentuate the shapes and textures of the *ia*. Whether it is the strong light of midday, which highlights the reliefs of the embroideries, or the diffuse light of the morning or the warm light of sunset, the artist knew how to capture the special effects that they produce on the material and colour of the *ia*. This technique gives his works a sensation of vibration and freshness, transforming the *ia* from a static object into a dynamic, living element. One of the most famous works that synthesizes this craft of light is *Cheerful peasant* (Figure 6). In this emblematic portrait, direct sunlight breaks down the white of the canvas into warm reflections. The ample sleeve of the *ia* becomes a real screen on which shadows and lights play, giving a sensation of movement and overflowing vitality. Another work, in which the atmosphere matters more than the realistic detail, is the study *Peasant reading* (Figure 7). The chromatic palette is warm, which creates a feeling of intimacy and tranquillity. The background is treated abstractly, through large areas of colour, which fade around the character, emphasizing the centrality of the figure. The *ia* from this work sacralises the intimate moment of the peasant woman, transforming it into an image about cultural continuity and the discreet beauty of tradition.



Figure 6. *Cheerful peasant*, N. Grigorescu
Source: https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C8%9A%C4%83ranc%C4%83_voioas%C4%83_%28pictur%C4%83_de_Nicolae_Grigorescu%29



Figure 7. *Peasant reading*, N. Grigorescu
Source: https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C8%9A%C4%83ranc%C4%83_citind_%28pictur%C4%83_de_Nicolae_Grigorescu%29

Grigorescu was a master at rendering the expressiveness of human faces, and the *ia*, through its central positioning, contributes to complementing and underlining these feelings. The pure white and fine embroidery of the *ia* can suggest purity, innocence, and youth. In paintings of young girls, the *ia* becomes an element that emphasizes grace and fragility, complementing the shy smile or dreamy gaze. The contrast between the immaculate white of the *ia* and the ruddy skin of the face, or between the bright colours of the embroidery and the pastel shades of the skin, creates a visual tension that draws attention to the character and her emotions. On the other hand, the *ia* worn by mature or elderly women can evoke other feelings. In these cases, the embroidery can be more sober, the colours darker, and the material can seem more robust, suggesting a life of work, experience, and resignation. A frown or a tired look, associated with a less ornate *ia*, can convey a special sensitivity, a burden carried with dignity. Grigorescu knew how to create a correspondence between facial expression, body posture and clothing, and *ia* plays an essential role in this ensemble, contributing to the creation of a complex psychological portrait. In his paintings, Grigorescu did not render *ia* in a static or academic way, but integrated it organically into the lives of his characters. Whether it was a young woman weaving her own patterns, a girl with braided hair smiling shyly, or a mature woman bent over field work, it appeared to him as an essential component of their identity. The valorisation of *ia* in Grigorescu's painting goes beyond the simple rendering of clothing

details. The artist transformed it into a narrative element, into a carrier of emotion and meaning. Each stitch, each floral or geometric pattern, each fold of the material becomes a note in a complex visual symphony.

One of the most interesting aspects of the use of the *ia* in Grigorescu's work is due to its integration into the landscape. "The theme of characters integrated into the landscape has preoccupied Nicolae Grigorescu since the period of his artistic training in Paris and its surroundings, then perpetuating itself throughout his entire creation".⁴ In his artistic maturity, the painter excelled in rendering Romanian landscapes, but they are rarely devoid of human presence. The silhouettes of women dressed in *ia* become organic elements of nature. They are part of the environment, emphasizing the deep connection between man and the earth. Thus, *ia* acquires a new chromatic dimension, adapting to the bright and vibrant palette of the landscape.

In his landscapes, Grigorescu uses *ia* to emphasize the seasons and moments of the day. A white *ia*, bathed in the golden light of the sunset, suggests an atmosphere of peace and melancholy. A darker *ia*, worn by a peasant woman on the threshold of winter, can emphasize the sobriety of the landscape and the resilience of man in the face of hardship. Chromaticity becomes a language through which the artist communicates states of mind and associates *ia* with different aspects of human existence and nature.

For example, in paintings with the theme of harvest or field work, the *ia* can be rendered in warmer shades, almost integrated with the colours of the wheat or the earth, while in scenes of rest or contemplation, the pure white of the *ia* can contrast strongly with the surrounding elements, drawing attention to purity and grace. The *ia* as a carrier of emotion is also manifested by the way it is integrated into the landscape. When the characters are painted in the middle of nature, the *ia* becomes an extension of it, a component of the harmony between man and the environment. Examples in this sense would be the works *From the fountain (Peasants)*, *Peasant spinning* (Figures 8, 9). The white of the *ia* can contrast or subtly integrate with the chromatic palette of the landscape, creating visual effects that can evoke feelings of peace, tranquillity or, conversely, melancholy.

⁴ Artmark, *Licitația internațională de artă România – Republica Moldova*, Duplex București-Chișinău "Descoperă p piață nouă! Piața de artă!", C.N.I. Coresi S.A., București, 2012, p.76.



Figure 8. *From the fountain (Peasants)*,
N. Grigorescu
Source: <https://curatorial.ro/arta/grigorescu-in-premiera-la-muzeul-de-arta-arad/>



Figure 9. *Peasant spinning*, N. Grigorescu
Source: https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fi%C8%99ier:Nicolae_Grigorescu_-_Taranca_torcand.jpg

Spirituality is also an important aspect of Grigorescu's use of *ia*. In many of his works, female characters appear to be in a state of contemplation, prayer, or communion with divinity or nature. The *ia*, through its pure white, sometimes associated with religious vestments, can suggest a connection with the sacred. Embroideries with specific motifs, such as floral or solar, can be interpreted as symbols of life, spiritual rebirth, or universal harmony. A certain aura of sacredness seems to hover around his characters, contributing to the creation of this atmosphere.

Conclusions

By reinventing *ia* in various chromatic and compositional contexts – from intimate portraits to grandiose landscapes, from sober to vibrant colours – Nicolae Grigorescu demonstrated a deep understanding of its artistic and symbolic potential. He transformed the *ia* from a simple piece of costume into an essential element of his visual language, a tool through which he explored and expressed Romanian identity, the beauty of the rural world and the harmony between man and nature.

This continuous and adaptable valorisation of the *ia* in his work marks a crucial moment in the history of Romanian art, conferring a new status and new recognition to a traditional piece of clothing. Through his careful study of the *ia*, Grigorescu not only documented a

tradition, but actively contributed to its definition and preservation in an era of rapid social and cultural transformations. He understood that art has the power to immortalize and give presence to elements considered, at first glance, simple and common. Thus, the *ia*, through his brush, acquired an increased aesthetic and symbolic value, becoming an ambassador of national identity to a wider audience, including the European one, through the international exhibitions in which he participated.

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