

The semiotics of folk costume

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Together with language, myth and ritual the folk costume most commonly constitutes an integral symbolic system. Peter Bogatyrev was among the first Russian scholars, who had paid attention to this fact. He distinguished in the folk costume several functions (that is, practical, aesthetic, social, gender and moral ones).

For a certain time the studies in the field of the folk dress semiotic function was performed somehow out of the context. At the same time, it was the XX century, when these problems got to be matters of common discussion in related fields, when abundant data on the importance of applied art had been collected and framed the folk dress studies.

The development of semiotics as a discipline about symbols and symbolic systems, at first in the field of linguistic communications and than covering non-linguistic ones, allowed application of the same approach into the field of the folk dress studies. It should be stressed that quite different points of view do exist regarding the definitions of semiotics symbolic system. Those were expressed in the writings of eminent Russian as well as foreign scholars, including those by Michael Bachtin, Peter Bogatyrev, Paul Florenski, Rolan Bart, Claude Levi-Strauss and Umberto Eco.

As a matter of fact the folk dress should be considered as a social code, which records certain characteristics of the specific culture and at the same time serves as mediator between different cultural types in various periods of time.

The significant amount of the folk dress studies of the peoples of Russia was accomplished on the basis of comparative anthropology, which regards the costume as an important source for research of problems related to ethnogeny, national history, and mutual influences between different nations. In this manner, in the context of material culture the costume was scrupulously examined in the XX century as a static item of traditionally utilitarian use and as an object of ethnocultural differentiation perseverance and development. As an informative-functional structure it received much lesser attention.

Meanwhile, the costume, as a unique object itself, provides information about owner's age, gender, nationality, residence, social position, occupation and etc. The dress has many things to tell about the time it was made. The study of psychological and expressive mechanism of physical appearance perception through the appearance of other person demonstrates that costume is an extension of the individual's body. The costume poly-semantics creates a wide research field, dominated by special attention to ethnic symbolism of costume.

We have experienced by studies that in continuity of centuries the semiotic status of dress has kept on to be on very high level. It carried both utilitarian and semantic functions,

corresponded to practical and symbolic requirements. Infancy, adolescence, adulthood, transition from one age category to another, individual's incorporation into kinship network all this was reflected in the folk dress in previous ages, and was recorded in the early XX century, though it assumes is quite different.

As a part of the individual's cultural continuity, costume designated changes in the human existence either on the level of costume conception or on the functional level. Therefore, when we approach a folk dress as a probable structure of the costume traditional complex, the latter turns to be a space for human existence to develop, as well as a field to demonstrate the transformation of the costume types, which is an enacted sequence of different cultural codes. Interpretation and understanding of this sequence require certain amount knowledge. First of all, we consider life circle ceremonies: natal rites, wedding and funerals.

On the level of the costume design and decoration the labeling function achieves a maximum in the wedding dress. Meantime, on the initial (natal rites) and final stages of the life circle the number of ethnically relevant components is minimal. The ways of wearing and junction of the component parts of a dress and details variation depended on season, life situations, linked with labor, daily routine, feasts, and almost in every case reflected local specifics, giving to folk costume its individuality.

Our studies prove that even in the XX century the costume in correspondence with its functional and other characteristics continued to be stratified according to gender, age, was both festival and ordinary, and varied in type, general style and character of decorations. Being a symbol of gender and age position, the traditional costume dress in indirect way links an individual to the nature. It served as a sort of boundary between the body as microcosms and the universe as macrocosms. Its semiotic character manifested in the still existing tradition to decorate plackets, the ends of sleeves hem and belts with embroidery or textile of contrast color, which once had protective meaning.

The semiotic function of the folk dress is typical for traditional costume of every nation, because it always implicitly expressed certain ethnic traditions, through which individuality of their concrete possessor manifested. In particular, the semiotic functions preserved in the largest degree in ritual, festival and wedding garments. Such dresses enjoyed an especial attitude; they were more decorated, more carefully kept, often passing from generation to generation.

So, the overview of the semiotic status of the folk costume of the nations of Russia leads us to the conclusion: during XX century this status continued to be rather high; this is confirmed by the life circle ceremonies, entirely kept or slightly modified. The labeling function was especially relevant in wedding dress and quite minimal in natal and funeral costumes. The ritual costume has such characteristics like complex structure, predominance of traditional materials, fixed combination of colors, specific decoration and preserves significant stability till the very end of the XX century.