



WOMAN FROM HUNEADOARA, 1922. PHOTO R. VUIA, COURTESY TRANSYLVANIAN ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUM, CLUJ

TO HOLD YOUR HEART IN YOUR TEETH

From its Neolithic roots to the present day, the traditional Romanian blouse has told stories of identity and resilience, stitched into every thread.

Text by Simona Bortiş-Schultz



Simona Bortiş-Schultz, third grade school photo, c. 1981

The stitches endure, recounting cosmic stories and wishes that women have long held close

My mother stayed up all night drawing a map of the world when I was seven. It was intricate and featured the borders of Romania with all its regions. Her hands spelled out the shape of my universe.

Similarly, Neolithic mothers in this corner of Eastern Europe explained the world and its mysteries through symbols painted on ceramics and figurines. These craftswomen carefully added bold lines of chevrons, spirals and all-seeing eyes to objects that were sacred to them, calling out to a god who took the shape of a woman. These matriarchs prospered, created detailed designs with red, black or white pigments, and wove textiles. They were a community of makers who must have been free and well-nourished enough to have the time and resources to create.

Peaceful periods without war, in north-eastern Romania and western Ukraine, allowed space for craftsmanship to flourish in this peaceful culture of subsistence farmers and salt harvesters. Indo-European nomadic warriors may have eclipsed this pacifist, matriarchal culture, which had the luxury of peace to develop

visual communication through objects. This visual language, dating from around 10,000 years ago, endures and resurfaces in the stitches embroidered on the Romanian folk blouse.

‘To hold your heart in your teeth’ is a Romanian proverb that means to move forward without fear. My publication *To Hold Your Heart in Your Teeth, Women’s Work: The Visual Language of the Romanian Blouse* is a cultural-historical biography of the blouse, from its Neolithic beginnings through the period of folk revival, the communist era, and the post-communist emigration from the region. Through fierce changes — from farming cultures to nomadic warriors, the ravages and conquests of the Romans, hardline communist propaganda, and the accelerated identities of today’s Romanian diaspora — the stitches endure, recounting cosmic, omnipresent stories and wishes that women artisans have long held close.

The blouse evolved from agrarian practices that trace back to the archaic femi-nine or nature-worshipping ‘goddess’ culture. The process of making was directly linked to what Mother Nature and her



Postcard with greetings from Romania, date unknown



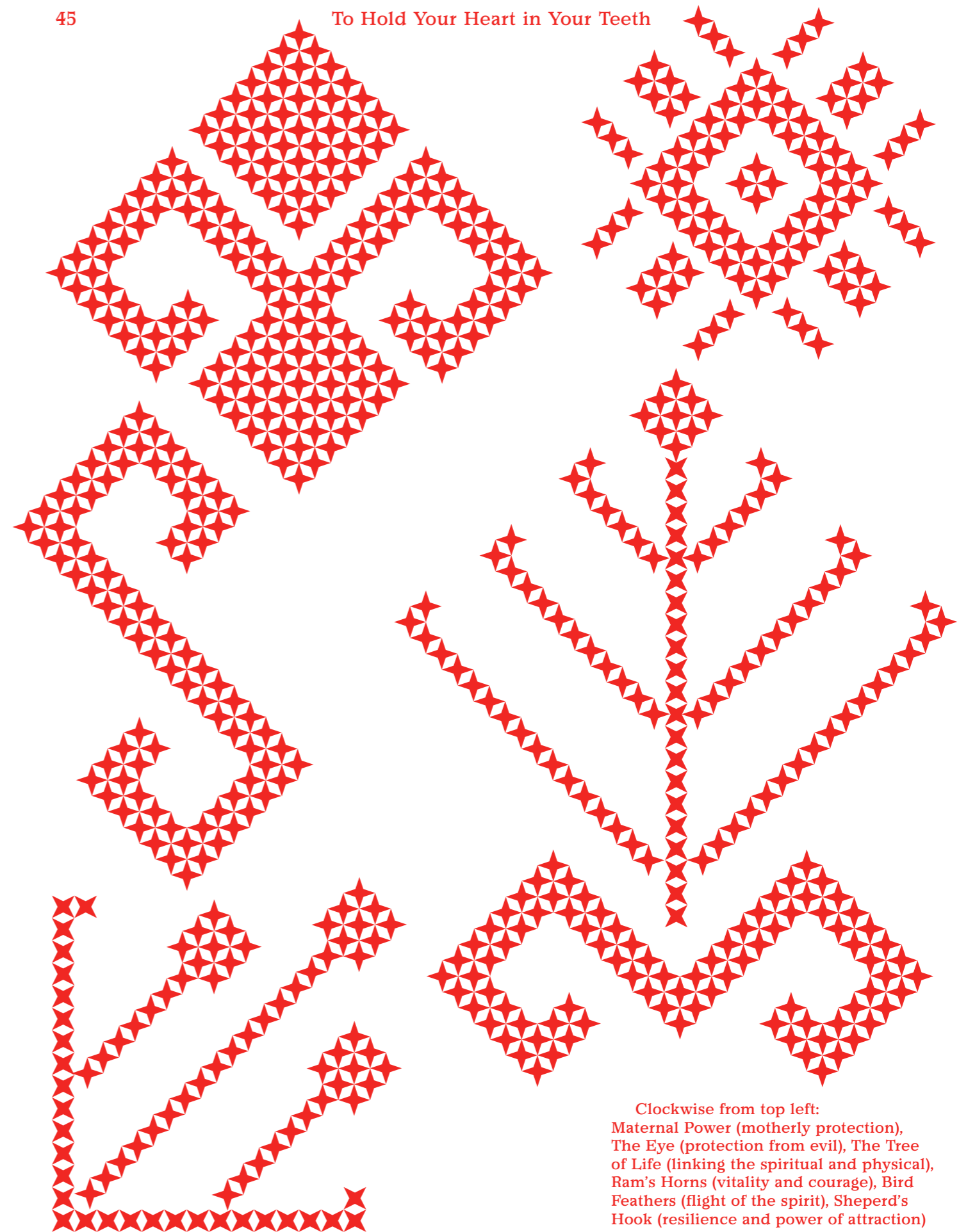
Folk singer Maria Tănase, 1942. Photo Willy Pragher

cyclical seasons provided. With yellowing leaves ripe for the picking in the late July sun, and crisp yellow flowers in early autumn, women gathered the stems of the cannabis plant. After days of drying in sunshine, the stem would begin a retting process, in which soaking helped to separate the woody stalks from the usable fibres. Bunches of golden strands were then further refined through a process called hemp braking or scutching on a dry, warm day. This sturdy plant hair was combed to make it finer and more malleable. The traditional Romanian blouse takes shape from this homespun, plant-based fabric drawn from the Earth.

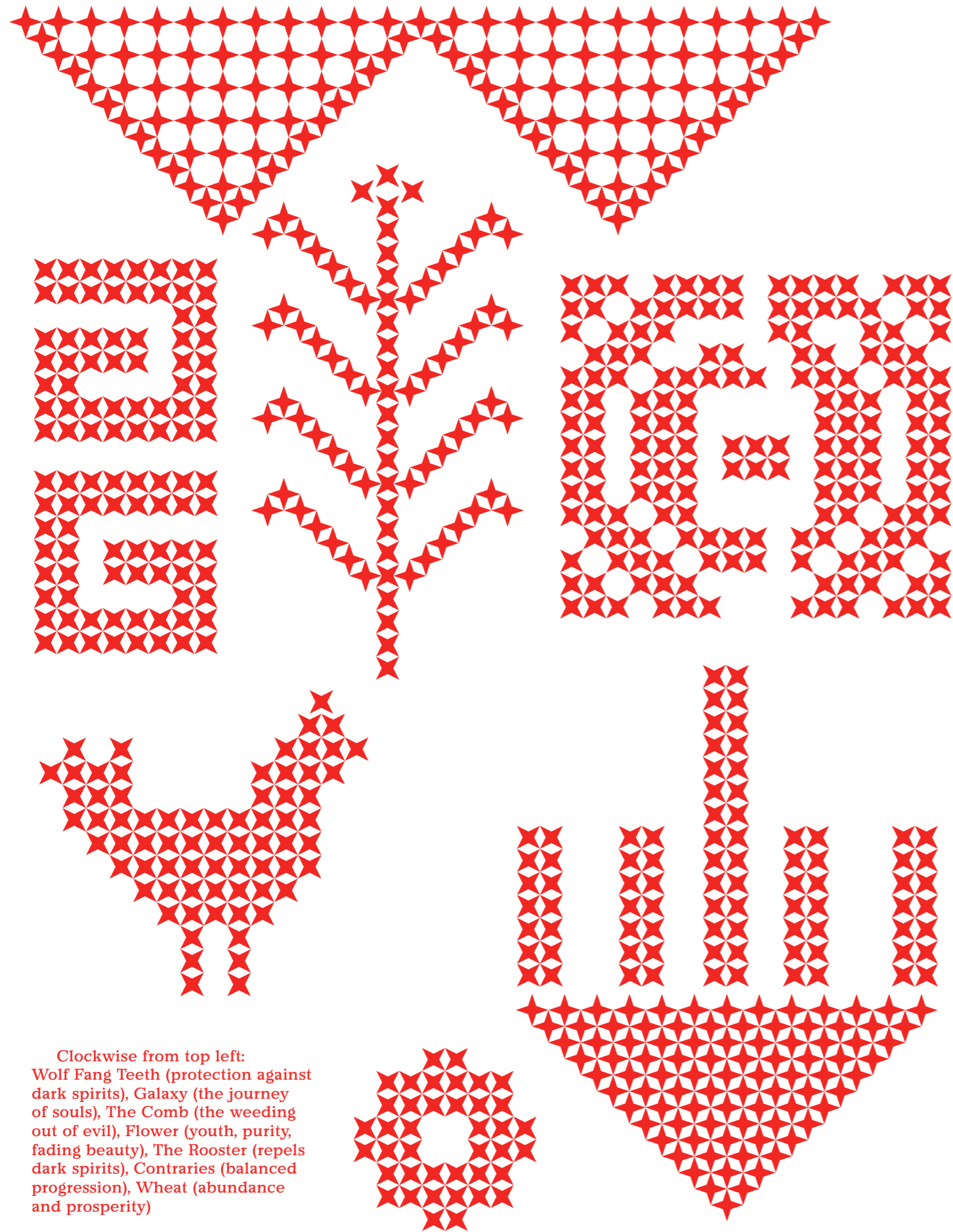
Spun and wound into skeins, the hemp yarn was bleached in a solution of boiling water and beechwood or plum ash, repeated six times. After drying for a couple of days in good weather, the hemp thread was ready for weaving. Typically, in late autumn and winter, cloth was woven on a loom. Stored in rolls, the hemp fabric was then brought in baskets to the river in the spring. In knee-deep water, the women of the village would bleach the woven cloth, just as they had done with the yarn, to be ultimately softened and lightened by the sun's rays.

Looking at the collection of heirloom women's work in my possession, I see the ragged edges of this homespun, time-intensive material left unhemmed — ready to be let out if one gained a few pounds or tucked beneath voluminous peasant skirts. Nothing was wasted. This native shirt took about a year to complete, from the weaving of its fabric to the threading of its iconographic adornment. It is a blouse built to outlive its maker.

Metal is forbidden from touching the fabric because the traditional construction of the blouse predates the discovery of metal. Hence, no scissors are used. Instead, the cloth is singed with fire to divide the pieces of hemp into four parts. This process continues, so to speak, the legacy of our Neolithic mothers and sisters. Everything is intentional in the creation of the Romanian blouse, as ancient peoples wore these special garments on holy days when they believed the heavens opened and touched the Earth.



Clockwise from top left:
Maternal Power (motherly protection),
The Eye (protection from evil), The Tree
of Life (linking the spiritual and physical),
Ram's Horns (vitality and courage), Bird
Feathers (flight of the spirit), Sheperd's
Hook (resilience and power of attraction)



Clockwise from top left: Wolf Fang Teeth (protection against dark spirits), Galaxy (the journey of souls), The Comb (the weeding out of evil), Flower (youth, purity, fading beauty), The Rooster (repels dark spirits), Contraries (balanced progression), Wheat (abundance and prosperity)



Șezatoara in Tismana. Al. Bădăuță, Images Roumaines, București, 1932

There is an order and a reverence for the inscribed layout of the garment. The area on the shoulders, closest to the heavens, is called the *altița*, alluding to the Most High. A woman wearing the blouse is literally holding up the world on her shoulders. Symbols embroidered on this area evoke celestial visions and wishes. The sun, shooting stars, galactic patterns, and a field of crosses commonly make up this skyward scene. It was believed that the creators expressed their hopes through the symbols they stitched, or simply continued a custom taught to them by their mothers and grandmothers.

Some chose to wear their folk blouse to their final resting place on Earth, completing an unrelenting cycle. Embroidered in white and devoid of colour, these symbols prepare older women for the journey beyond. Talismans of safe passage and regeneration offer a proper and peaceful send-off in a blouse that becomes eternal.

Symbols located lower on the sleeve are devoted to our woes and struggles, and our survival on Earth. The diamond shape, with seeds inside, bestows fertility and conveys

wishes for continuity and survival. The all-seeing eye may also appear here as a powerful charm to ward off evil. The lower sleeve commonly ends in simple wolf fang teeth, echoing the ancient Dacians, as a shield against the ravages of wild animals in the dark. The stitched rooster symbolizes a path out of the darkness by announcing dawn and offering an escape from nocturnal spirits. Traditionally, all our mortal needs for survival, and the codes used to combat life's struggles, were transcribed here.

Across the chest run one or two patterned 'rivers', depending on regional customs and the time constraints of the maker. Botanical and wildlife symbols pay homage to the life and abundance found near rivers leading to the sea or fringes of our world. Wheat, grass, flowers, birds and animals sprout here. Wheat speaks to wishes for prosperity and plenty. Flowers allude to the vibrancy of youth. Birds reach upwards and animals protect us here on Earth. It is no coincidence that this adorned area, teeming with life, is located near the breasts, where rivulets of milk nurture the young.



Queen Elisabeta of Romania wearing peasant garb, 1882. Photo Franz Duscheck

In some regions, the absence of embroidery is deliberate — a warning. In the troubled area near the Dniester River in Moldova, near Ukraine, where upheaval has raged for centuries, this white space is left starkly empty.

Women's work conjures a derogatory term of demeaning and menial labour tied to cultural gender roles. Industrialization progressed at a snail's pace in this part of the world, where literacy remained low — especially among rural women — until the 1950s. However, the power of myth and the steady practice of traditional craft flourished. Illiterate rural women in Romanian villages, often perceived as primitive, stitched codes into the sleeves and chests of traditional garments and established a visual language. Through these stitches, the makers' wishes and dreams preserved a legacy.

I can only imagine the warm glow of conversation in a tightly packed room filled with chattering women as they wove or embroidered. Meticulous and tedious women's work: female hands worked busily indoors while on leave from the sweltering summer's labour in the fields. As they care-

Through these stitches, the makers' wishes and dreams preserved a legacy

fully assembled garments for dowries and wedding ceremonies, these women formed sanctuaries of female kinship with their own social codes. They became queens of making within their patriarchal society and family circles.

It was a social dance within the rules of a community of women. These circles of mainly unschooled craftswomen were diligently building what would become the ethnographic map of Romanian artisanal folk wear. Over millennia, this consistent and customary work and its visual language would come to define a country and its people.

The symbols of the Romanian folk garment echo their Neolithic beginnings as protective signs that map out stories of preservation, fortitude and survival. The tradition forges ahead and continues to this day, creating a momentous canon of design that unveils the power of the feminine and serves as an unwavering anthem of ethnic and international pride.

S. Bortiş-Schultz, *To Hold Your Heart in Your Teeth, Set Margins*, San Francisco, 2024

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BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO BOOKBINDING

Ever wanted to make your own book? It's easier than you think. Whether you're binding a zine, starting a journal or recycling scraps, bookbinding turns loose pages into something special.

Materials needed: paper for pages and cover, a sharp needle, thread, something to make holes (a pushpin works well), ruler and pencil to mark hole positions, and scissors.

Text and drawings by Maya Strobbe