

## The Artistic Value of Urban Albania dress in the 19th and 20th Centuries



### Cultural and Social Anthropology (Ethnology-Folklore)

**Keywords:** Urban dress, Urban attire, Artistic value, Artistic Characteristics and features.

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### Abstract

The aim of this study is to speak about the artistic value of urban Albania dress in the 19th and 20th centuries. Specifically the quality and artistic value that the urban dress contribute in the quality of development for the cultural heritage of Albania. We have studies dedicated to the dress of the rural population whereas we have none for the urban populations and their artistic value. This isn't to say that the urban dress hasn't been developed during this time. Therefore in this study we will depending on a bibliography of different scholars—historians and ethnologists that have done analyses of the rural dress; or, in other cases, a piece of writing has mentioned the origin and production of the different fabrics, that were produced for a special person or the attire of those in the cities in general, by those in the village. This happened because the consolidation and institutionalization in general, and specifically for the art and culture that were shaped and consolidated over 900 (nine hundred) years after the declaration of independence on November 1912. This is why the studies in this field are rare and don't specifically speak about the urban dress and their artistic value. This study will focus on the value of the special artistic features of the attire of the urban population.

### Introduction

The cultural and artistic value of the urban Albanian dress in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century are rich and precious for Albanian Cultural heritage because the heritage supports the development of the textile industry. This artistic value is shown to us through the artistic elements and their cut and needlework, in the composition and color of their pieces, and the decoration and ornamentation of their embroidery. In this daily urban dress the artistic value lies in the perfect unity of the artistic elements and the unique features of their style and form, in the harmony of the composition of their pieces, and the richness of the colors that gives them genuine spiritual vivacity.

We will look at this artistic value by treating the most important components as we said before; its form and elements. Secondly we'll look at the composition of the component parts. Third we'll take a look at the colors used in dyeing the pieces of the outfit and their decoration as well. Finally we'll do a summary of the importance or the artistic value of the urban dress at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>.

### Artistic Form of Urban Dress

The Artistic form of the urban dress of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is conceptualized on the surface and the linear limits of the human body for women and men. See Fig. 1-4.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Within this form of life values the artisans have expressed their artistic creativity and fantasy for each piece of the outfit in the classic graphic form, either in the aesthetic perception of the material used or in the masterful knowledge of the unique functionality of the material in clothing for each season if and when it was used for the clothing. Over the surface of the fabric and the linear borders defined by master cutters, tailors, and embroiderers they have used their knowledge of their craft for the aesthetic and functionality in all aspects and contexts. So we see the special artistic qualities in the type and manner of their production. Andromaqi Gjergji, speaking of popular art, mentioned the urban embroiderers as professionals, assuring us of the artistic value of this characteristic work, she said, “another group embroiderers, along side the popular embroidery pieces, do the work of master professional embroiderers, which have worked for centuries in oldest urban centers of the area or near the monasteries of the time. A clear testimony that show that in the centuries of the Middle Ages in Albania embroidery was practiced as its own craft, from the very specialized master embroiderers who sometimes signed their great work.”<sup>2</sup> During this time they didn’t have masters specialize in the profession of style and mode and types of clothing for different uses. This shows that the authorship of the artisans as the creators of the models of dress after an artistic uniqueness; they have been stylists for the pieces of the clothing each in their specific craft, working toward the completion of the outfit: the cutters, the tailors and the embroiderers. They were the creators and the decorators of these outfits for the people of the time of our study. Garments in figures 1, 2, and 3 per of the upper part of the body.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

These artisans had artistic value in the character shown through their individual work, which they have known how to use their knowledge for beauty and to understand the aesthetic unity between their aesthetic and functional, in connection with universal taste for artistic beauty. Regardless that each worked in their own workshop, they met this unity of aesthetic taste and they knew and understood that this was appropriate given artistically and functionally to the society by showing the unity of taste, for the dress of people of their time. Andromaqi Gjergj, speaking of the work with metallic gold thread shows the artistic finesse of the city masters and said: “a special refinement is shown in this filigree work, that is more a speciality of master jewelers of the

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north (Shkoder, Prizren etc.) than those of the south.”<sup>3</sup> From this perspective if we take the artistic form of the clothing it is achieved through work that we can truly call artistic putting into practice aesthetic principles of the materials and the artistic sense of beauty, clearly reflecting the lifestyle developed in the Albanian cities of that time. These masters that lived and worked in the cities of Albania in their workshops, cutters, tailors, and embroiderers, have shown a great talent and understanding of form, respecting each other’s work and boundaries in the chain of the process as cutters, tailors, and embroiderers that completely cover every piece of the outfit with decorations.

### Artistic Composition of Urban Dress

When speaking of the artistic composition of the urban clothing it is understood as all the pieces of the outfit in unity of type and artistic character such as creativity and fantasy, taste for beauty, and the aesthetic principles of the materials for the production of the outfits of their time that are different from today’s dress which gives us a special testimony of their lifestyle verses ours. Taste and lifestyle define composition of the pieces of the outfit in the time that they live. This outfit and its pieces are worked in two directions by the housewives and in a special way, during the time of the study, by specialized craftsmen for each piece of the outfit and also by specialized embroiderers for their decoration. The completion of the outfit or rather its composition develops from the taste and talent of each artisan that contributes his/her specialized work: cutters, tailors, embroiderers, fez makers, goldsmiths, cobblers, etc. All of these had a part in the production of the different pieces of these outfits consistent with their lifestyle and taste of the people of those days.

Figure 1 shows the center of Tirane during the time of this study, in a clear view development of the relationship of life at that time. In figure 2 it shows a woman in Shkoder.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

In figures 3, 4, and 5, specialized craftsmen complete the composition of the pieces of an outfit.



Fig. 3

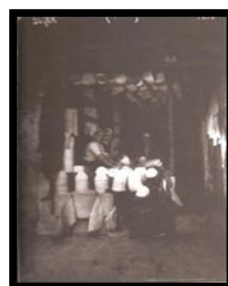


Fig. 4



Fig. 5

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In connection with the ornamentation, beautification, and motifs used by the embroiderers, Andromaqi Gjergji said: “as it pertains to the ornamental motifs in this work it is clear that, as it is in other parts of the Balkans of this time, and we feel impact of the styles of the East (Turko-Persian) and the West mixed with many symbols of the Byzantines, but naturally there’s a wide stock local motifs as well. The double-headed eagle, known from the time of Byzantine period, takes on its significance as a national symbol in this century.”<sup>4</sup>

In figure 1 the dress of an Orthodox woman in Elbasan. In figures 2 and 3 the dress of a Muslim woman in Gjirokaster and Elbasan. Figure 4 Durres. Figure 5 shows an aristocratic outfit from the city of Tirane.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Speaking of the taste of the embroiderers Andromaqi Gjergji said: “in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries we find the master embroiderers located in the developed cities of the time.” And just a little later he says, “The virtuosos of Shkoder, Prizren, Tirane, Elbasan, Berat, and etc. are distinguished for their exquisite embroidery. The work not only for the rulers of their own cities but also for clients from other provinces.”<sup>5</sup> Whereas in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a decrease of artistic craftsmanship. This is affirmed in her writings researcher Andromaqi Gjergji said, “The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century we find the almost complete downfall of the artistic craftsmen. The period from the declaration of independence to the liberation of the country (1912-1944) only shows their further degradation.”<sup>6</sup> This happened as a result of the development of the tools of production from handwork to machinery.

### The Artistic Colors of the Urban Dress

Color is an important component of the structure and artistic value. They speak for the preferences and taste of the urban population that used these outfits and the taste of the master artisans that produced and decorated the clothing of the time. In a very professional way and with refined aesthetic perception they artistically reflect all manner of social relationships and lifestyle in all its development. So for the selection of color and hue of the ceremonial clothing from master embroiderers, ethnologist Ikbale Bihiku said, “The colors

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of the embroidery are contained in a limited range. In embroidery, when you use gold metallic thread or teheria and cotton, the colors are close and without much contrast: usually red is faced with black, ochre with brown, blue with black etc. We have these combinations in the photographs below.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

In the case where gold or silver thread is used it makes a sweet contrast and pleasing to the eye. The background of the gown and vest are usually black, light green, lilac and purple motifs embroidered with gold or silver with different nuances create an attractive appearance and give character to the ceremonial dress.”<sup>7</sup> Examples of embroidery with gold and silver thread decoration on red, brown, black, and ochre are illustrated in figures 1-4.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

The most inventive parts of the decoration of the clothing are the overcoat, vest, the sleeves of the shirt, the wide cummberbund, the woman’s apron, house shoes, etc. In reference to the importance and the use of invention in color and decoration on parts of the body, Andomaqi Gjergi said, “ the pieces that are more decorated most are those that are more obvious. The chest and sleeves of the shirts, the outer vest, cummberbund, aprons, house shoes, etc.”<sup>8</sup> The colors that are used have been the primary colors such as red and blue; the complimentary colors like green, purple, ochre, and orange; and for the highlights gold and silver were used. In connection with the colors used by the master of production of these clothes, as we have mentioned above, they were put according to the taste or preference of the tailor and the embroiderer ethnologist Andomaqi Gjergi said, “In its totality, generally the popular costume appears as a harmonious entity with decorations in the same dominant color, on the vest, cummberbund, apron for the women, etc. Favorite colors change from one area to the other, but there are colors that are favored everywhere, for example red, and the color gold or yellow as its replacement.”<sup>9</sup> Colors are a clear reflection of the taste and preference of the population of these cities, but they also show an ability and artistic finesse of the artisans. This finesse is reflected in this urban attire, that are to this day a living testimony of the artistic value that they show us. This clothing is important as an heirloom today and for the future.

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## Conclusion

Urban dress of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is an important component of life, as important as food and shelter are extraordinarily valuable in Albanian cultural heritage material because they present a valuable contribution in the quality of artistic education and development of textiles for today and the future. Artistic craftsmanship in Albanian cities during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was in its full development, whereas in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was almost a complete downfall of the artistic craftsmen because of the rapid development of capitalism and the impact of external trade that were made possible by the introduction of machinery. Gjergj in her writings claims the supremacy of the manner of production saying: “The craft of embroidery faced the same fate because the new style of dress—especially after the First World War—made many of the embroidered clothing of the past obsolete. The use of the embroidery machines had a big impact on this craft.”

All these facts point to a craft that cannot be separated from the work of art and the final conclusion of the study we can say that all these crafts are based their taste, artistic creativity and fantasy bearing witness to the tastes and lifestyles of that time.

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