

# RAW SILK MARAMA, BETWEEN THE ART OF DRESSING AND PICTURAL ART

OLIMPIA URDEA<sup>1</sup>

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*Manuscript received: 10.02.2011. Accepted paper: 17.04.2011.*

*Published online: 10.06.2011.*

**Abstract.** *Raw silk marama is outlined through its continuous presence in the Romanian costume, as an element that gives continuity to the art of the Romanian traditional costume. In the paintings from the Romanian monasteries and, later on, in the easel paintings, the fragility of the marama's texture has gained aesthetic expression through representation, thus adding intrinsic, physical and sensorial qualities to the painting's value.*

**Keywords:** *marama, raw silk, the Peasant with Marama*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In a vaster, diachronic research on the natural silk garments within Romania, which I have previously undertaken, one question persisted: Is or isn't the marama the one garment element that insures the continuity to the richness of the Romanian costume at princely courts, where silk prevailed over any other textile materiality as a sign of distinction and social status?

Within the hierarchical societies, there was always a tendency of the wealthy peasantry to imitate the garments of the noblemen. Therefore, the influence of the nobleman's costume reaches the peasants' space with two aspects: through the more exquisite raw materials the garments are made from and through the adoption of the garments' shape to the typology of the peasants' activities.

The raw silk marama is the result of centuries during which the Romanian peasant woman extracted on her own the precious thread which afterwards was weaved into ii (Romanian blouse) or marama. Garment peace used mainly in Muntenia, Oltenia and Moldova, the marama is an identity component of the Romanian traditional costume. These are the spaces where the aulic costume was more present, rich, made of imported or, sometimes, local silk. The aulic environment has always been preoccupied not to be out of fashion, more than interested in wearing the national garment.

In the Romanian handicraft environment, the preoccupation for silk making and the raw silk use was the consequence of the use of this materiality by representatives of higher social statuses, higher to lower, encouraged through the process of the democratization which was visibly manifested through garments. Due to the high demand for silk garments at the noblemen's courts, the procedure for obtaining and processing the raw silk was developed; this "interesting procedure of the textile handicraft, at the limit between a specialized

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<sup>1</sup> University of Oradea, Faculty of Visual Arts, 410067, Oradea, Romania. E-mail: [urdea\\_olimpia@yahoo.fr](mailto:urdea_olimpia@yahoo.fr).

occupation and a home handicraft” [1]. Thus importing it implies higher costs, the Romanian peasant made her own silk; growing the silk worm and afterwards obtaining the raw silk, the peasant obtained the raw material by herself. In the highly hierarchical societies, golden and silvery silk, tailored in a certain way, would produce a garment worn during ceremonies. Later on, the marama, also made of raw silk, became components of the traditional costume worn during celebrations.

The popular costume is part of the traditional, popular culture and is a permanent element. This is why, the popular costume cannot be understood like a phrase or an evolution stage, but as a perennial structure for all cultural epochs until present day. This and the raw silk marama, after centuries of existence, have become popular, emblematic art creations without being entirely separated from the evolution of the Romanian silk garment.

## 2. DISCUSSIONS

### 2.1. RAW SILK MARAMA – AN ELEMENT OF IDENTITY AND CONTINUITY

Going back to the starting point of my paper and to the initial question regarding the raw silkmarama used by Romanian peasant women on special celebrations, the history of the Romanian garment for women brings countless evidences to remind us of this garment element. Al. Tzigara-Samurçaș remarked “On the contrary, on the *Columna Traiană*, women, just as children, are wrapped inside rich curtains over long sleeve shirts clasped around the wrist; and on the head they have curtains which could represent the today’s maramas.”[2]

The raw silk *ia* (Romanian women’s traditional shirt), the successor of the embroidered shirts worn at the princely courts, today is less present than the marama, even in the garments used on celebrations. The later one though, an important element for the wedding celebrations garments in the rural areas, where traditions are long kept, remains for centuries to perpetuate the image of its forerunner which can be admired in the votive paintings in the Romanian monasteries. During the 15th – 17th centuries, the adornment worn by women on their heads at courts was comprised of a hat and the mesalul or marama. During the 15th – 16th centuries, the ladies at courts wore on their heads a long, thin, silk veil, on top of which their crown was placed. The veil used to be hemstitched with golden thread and had pearls on the margins [3]. The votive painting of the Ieremia Movila family, from the Sucevița monastery (Fig. 1), which was amply described and commented upon by Vasile Drăguț, stands as an evidence to this fact.



Fig. 1. The votive painting of the Ieremia Movilă family from the Sucevița monastery.

Raw silk started being largely produced at home as it was being used for decorating maramas and shirts, especially in Muntenia and Dobrogea, while before the 15th century it was only accessible to the rich [4].

The adornment of the head [5] has always been a way of accessorizing the garment, having a symbolic value [6] depending on the materiality, the shape and the moment in which it was used. Whether we talk about *ceapsă* or marama, in the popular costume worn in different zones, they always match the whole of the garment. Perpetuated until present times, the raw silk maramas – worn by women during the Phanariot period as well [7] – received an unmistakable aesthetic purpose. Such costume elements become a sign of identity, of our cultural inheritance rather than being an expression of luxury and opulence. Ethnography allows the people to distinguish itself through a distinct dress code which contributes to the identity of its members.

## 2.2 THE BIPOLARITY OF THE AESTHETICAL VALUES OF THE RAW SILK MARAMA

The arts have expressed their interest towards the beauty of the Romanian popular costume, towards its richness in decorative and constructive elements. The materiality of the raw silk, dressing the brides' heads, was expressed in paintings, keeping its characteristic transparency. The raw silk, translucent marama is the evidence of the impact of silk in the garments worn during celebrations. „Tying of the bride” is a wedding ritual during which the raw silk, in some areas, whereas in other the materiality was different, symbolized the passage of the young women into the category of married women [8].

In the Romanian art gallery from the Brukenthal National Museum, Sibiu, Romania, the masterpieces „*Women from Bârsa Country*”, signed by the painter Arthur Coulin, one of the most prominent, Transylvanian artists of the 20th century, and Robert Wellmann's painting the „*The Trimming of a Saxon Woman*” (Fig. 3) may be admired. In both paintings, the artists emphasise on the costume; the viewer's interest shifts from the human visage onto the costume which complements it.



Fig. 2. Arthur Coulin - *Femei din Țara Bârsei*.



Fig. 3. Robert Wellmann - *Gătirea unei săsoaice*.

In this sort of portraits, the garments in the painting and the technical solutions adopted by the artists are inter-conditional. The costume is integrated in the ambiance of the painting through the compositional solutions of the painter leading to a coherent visual discourse. In both paintings, the accent falls on the marama as a garment signifier. The prevailing role of the visual in the representation of the materiality of raw silk is evident. The

visual discourse of the painter regarding the translucency of the marama reminds us of the intrinsic properties of natural silk: suppleness, transparency, delicacy. The artistic value of the marama, as a garment element used for dressing the head, is multiplied through its value in paintings.

Nicolae Grigorescu is one of the painters who immortalized on canvas the Romanian marama – made of raw silk or linen – as a permanency element in the Romanian traditional costume (Figs. 4-6). There are differences regarding the way the marama is worn by young women and married women, concerning the way in which it is tied around the head, the way it is secured to the hair or left to hang on the back; differences which exist in different ethnographic areas.



**Fig. 4. Nicolae Grigorescu –  
*Peasant Wearing Marama.***



**Fig. 5. Nicolae Grigorescu –  
*The girl with Marama.***



**Fig. 6. Nicolae Grigorescu –  
*A Girl's Portrait.***

The maramas, treated by Grigorescu in his paintings as big stains of colours and shadows, become central pieces in his works by dressing the face of the Romanian peasant in a dialog of textile materialities and concrete texture, with pictorial line.

In Carol Popp's masterpiece, the *Milkwoman from the Tunari Village, Ilfov County* (Fig. 7), kept in the National Museum of Romanian Art in Bucharest, we reencounter the raw silk kerchief twisted around the neck, accompanying a garment from the 19th century. In the same museum, another painting, *Peasants from Argeş*, by Amedeo Preziosi (Fig. 8), from 1879, the women have their heads adorned with raw silk maramas worn in different ways, just as in Theodor Aman's painting, *Hora* (Fig. 10 – Romanian traditional dance), danced in Aninoasa, most probably sometime during the second half of the 19th century.



**Fig. 7. Carol Popp de Szathmari –  
*Milkmaid from the Tunari village  
Ilfov county.***



**Fig. 8.  
Amedeo Preziosi –  
*Peasant from Argeş.***



**Fig. 9. Theodor Aman –  
*Hora.***



In the bust portrait of Princess Elisabeta from 1873, by George Peter Alexander Healy and kept at the National Museum of Romanian Art, the physical of the princess is completed by the Romanian traditional costume, together with the raw translucent, silk marama.



**Fig. 10.** George Peter Alexander Healy – *The Portrait of Princess Elisabeta*.



**Fig. 11.** *Mocancă with Raw Silk Marama* [9].

Earlier a sign for a woman's marital status, the marama, a raw silk strip used by women peasants [10] to cover their head, is today only an adornment. The emancipation of generations, as a contemporary social phenomenon, drives this element of the Romanian traditional costume towards the passive memory. The raw silk maramas, once part of a bride's dowry, will probably become, for future generations, garment elements to be admired in museums, thus becoming symbols in our passive memory. The social significance of the marama has nearly disappeared, today representing only a documentary interest.



**Fig. 10.** Elena Grecalesi - *Peasant with maramă*.

The Romanian artist from Suceava, Elena Grecalesi, in her portrait the *Peasant with Marama*, surprises the viewer with the transparency and pearly shine (detail) of raw silk, in a concert of optical effects which, among all natural, textile materialities, can only be created by silk. The role played by the garment in the portrait, defining the personality of the wearer more than its face, is probably the reason why so many artists named their paintings after the clothes worn by the person in the painting rather than the person itself. This is the case of the *Peasant with Marama* by Elena Grecalesi or the painting with the same name, by Grigorescu. The technical and artistic virtuousness of the painter extends the bidimensional plan of the canvas, recreating the vibrant volume of the marama.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

The raw silk marama is an original piece of the Romanian garment, worn at special celebrations. It is within this context that we can attribute it with the definition of the original, formulated by Achiței: „which insures the shape with that emphasis on the unmistakable, which will make it unfold alike a spectacle, as a presence which cannot be replaced or equaled by another.”[11]

With its pearly shine, “diaphanous as a spider’s web”[12], the marama remains the pearl of the traditional Romanian celebrations garment. As a remarkable piece in the Romanian history and art of the costume, the representation in paintings adds to its aesthetic value through the creation of complex, visual shapes, finally leading to „aesthetic satisfaction”[13].

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