

Connected by a thread: Ukrainian embroidery and macro-cultural identity on COVID-19 face masks in Ukraine and Ukrainian diaspora in Canada

by

Kaitlyn J Chomitzky

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Department of Modern Languages and Cultural Studies
University of Alberta

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Abstract

This thesis examines the ways in which Ukrainians have utilized material culture transnationally in order to create a macro-cultural identity, particularly through the revitalization and resurgence of traditional Ukrainian embroidery. The role of diaspora in the preservation of different stages of cultural identity, as well as the ways in which traditions and material culture are adapted to suit the new worlds in which these concepts find themselves, contribute to the prolific nature of Ukrainian embroidery as a cultural identifier. Comparing the resurgence of embroidery in Ukraine and the diaspora within Canada, this thesis examines the roles of traditional patterns and motifs and their modern manipulations in an open/performative display of culture. Through a case study of Ukrainian embroidered face masks during the COVID-19 pandemic, the research examines the different values of and sentiments towards the open/performative and private/personal functions of embroidery and material culture. By proving that the open/performative function is favored in modern uses of traditional embroidery to illustrate and exemplify cultural affinity, this thesis asserts that Ukrainian embroidery is being used to identify and define a macro-cultural identity transnationally.

Preface

Significant portions of this thesis, particularly the second chapter “[Un]Masking National Identity in COVID-19” previously appeared in print in the article “Pandemic, but Make It Fashion: Ukrainian Embroidered PPE in the time of COVID-19.” They appear here with the permission of the editor. It has been published as Chomitzky, K. J. (2021). Pandemic, but Make It Fashion: Ukrainian Embroidered PPE in the time of COVID-19. *Folklorica*, 24. The research for this thesis received ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “Private/Personal and Open/Performative functions of Embroidery”, No. 00105454, December 15 2020.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my family, friends and colleagues who have supported me throughout my extensive university career by proofreading my papers, attending my conferences, and providing endless memes and coffee. In particular, I would like to thank my great grandfather Walter Gresiuk, for always encouraging me to “get that certificate.”

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Introduction

Ukrainian embroidery has acted as a cultural talisman long before the Ukrainian nation emerged as a sovereign state in 1991. The craft of embroidery in its earliest forms within Ukrainian culture can be traced back to the later Neolithic period (5000 – 2500 B.C.E.),¹ and continues to rapidly evolve to accommodate the needs of the community. With a significant number of Ukrainian communities globally, there are numerous diaspora groups who actively preserve the form of embroidery that existed at the time their families left Ukraine. This extension of Ukrainian culture transnationally has led to various iterations of material objects, such as embroidery, which are forced to adapt to the new land and society in which they now exist. Many changes occur in material culture when influenced by outside forces, creating unique and diverse iterations of the once conventional objects. While many scholars continue to study this folk craft in its traditional forms, embroidery continues to evolve with the assertion of a macro-culture of transnational Ukrainian identity and, therefore, we must continue to evolve our understanding and research alongside it.

This thesis examines the cultural trend of Ukrainian embroidery as a transnational macro-cultural phenomenon, as it emerged in the 21st century. This trend continues to contribute to the ongoing evolution of the Ukrainian macro-identity, a globally shared Ukrainian identity uninhibited by borders and pursued transnationally. Ukrainian embroidery acts as a unifying factor among Ukrainian nationals and those living within diaspora communities throughout the world. I argue that the continued development of a Ukrainian national macro-culture has been reinforced through the resurgence of traditional embroidery patterns and their open/performative

¹ Depictions of clothing featuring embroidery patterns can be found in engraved patterns on Trypillian pottery from the later Neolithic period. For more information on this specific example, see Kelly (2003).

function. In order to do so, I specifically focus on national Ukrainian and Ukrainian Canadian communities. The open/performative function of embroidery contrasts, but does not exist exclusively from, the private/personal function, both of which I will explain further in the following section. I approach this research through a framework of material culture studies, while focusing on the social implications of clothing and costume, in the context of their traditional folkloric interpretations and functions. By emphasizing the role of embroidery within the context of the current political landscape of Ukraine, my research explores the modernization and re-popularization of traditional patterns and their value as a form of traditional folk art within the larger context of the creation of this macro-culture and identity. In the first chapter of this thesis, I discuss different techniques of embroidery and examine the meanings and evolution of traditional patterns within the national context of Ukraine. The second chapter presents a case study, which I have conducted between December 2020 and May 2021, which examines the presence of traditional Ukrainian embroidery patterns on face masks during the COVID-19 pandemic. Masks are an ideal form of ephemera to look at when examining the renewed popularity of embroidery and its open/performative function, as they demonstrate how nontraditional utilitarian objects are being adapted to display cultural affinity through the open/performative function of embroidery. I chose to look at masks specifically as they, as face coverings, have seen a significant shift in their function over the last 8 years within the Ukrainian culture and legal system. While nonmedical masks are now used to promote one's-identity, masks served as important protection of identity during the Euromaidan Revolution in 2014. During this time, masks became a symbol of the Ukrainian people, who protested the pro-Russian political course of the Yanukovich government (Kulyk, 2016b). Less than a decade later, masks reentered the public domain to serve once again as a symbol of "Ukrainianity"

(Shevchenko, 2018, p. 121), bearing specific symbols of Ukrainian culture. The function of masks has been altered significantly by the inclusion of distinct embroidery patterns as cultural symbols. Masks have been predominantly used for the purpose of identity concealment in the Ukrainian culture, including for folkloric applications such as for *Malanka* plays and as a prop used by *kolyadnyky*, or carolers, during Christmas time. There are also many negative connotations associated with identity concealment, including the military deception technique known as *maskirovka*, the word's literal translation meaning concealment or camouflage. This technique often involves the identity concealment of national affiliation and is used by many nations around the globe. The use of masks as an outward performance of culture during COVID-19 through the inclusion of symbols of Ukrainian identity subverts the previously held concepts and ideas of masks being used to hide one's identity. Instead, the consumers are proudly displaying their culture and being recognized by other members of the Ukrainian community by these symbols. Through this case study and the information examining the traditional meanings of patterns and their modern uses, I emphasize the utility of the open/performative function of embroidery transnationally to represent Ukrainian identity.

Background and Terminology

Having made a resurgence in popularity during periods of political unrest, such as the Orange Revolution and the Euromaidan Revolution of Dignity,² traditional patterns of Ukrainian embroidery have seen a shift in both their purpose and their meaning. With the increase in

² The Ukrainian Orange Revolution was a period of civil unrest surrounding the 2004 presidential election. Set in motion by election fraud when Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich had initially been declared the winner of the election over Viktor Yushchenko, the Revolution featured a series of protests over a 2-month period from November 22nd, 2004 – January 23rd, 2005. For more information on the Orange Revolution, see Karatnycky (2005). The Euromaidan Revolution of Dignity was a civil revolution. While some argue that the Revolution began in November 2013 when Yanukovich delayed the signing of the European Union Association Agreement, the official dates of the Revolution are February 18-23, 2014. See Shveda & Park (2016) for further information.

commercialization and global connectivity, these diaspora communities are able to reconnect with the national Ukrainian culture and the changes that have occurred in it over time and across borders. When contemplating the role of embroidery in the assertion of a unified, transnational Ukrainian culture and identity, it is useful to consider the theories of cultural psychology as presented by Moises Esteban Guitart & Carl Ratner (2013). Cultural psychology specifically addresses how certain practices are shaped by and influence the cultures in which they exist. Guitart and Ratner (2013) focus on the variety of existing social conditions that contribute to the ways in which a macro-culture is “rooted in historical forces such as government policy, wars, immigration, modes of production, technology, art, industrialization... or consumerism” (p. 3) to name a few. By exploring the ways in which these internal and external factors impact the way cultural practices and everyday life is shaped, as well as how these practices influence the above factors, we are better able to see the relevance and importance of different cultural elements in time. Just as “[macro-cultural] factors are political, formed through political struggle, and impart their politics to psychological phenomena” (p. 9), embroidery has seen its resurgence in popular culture as a political statement in the 21st century, resisting the Sovietization of identity that the country had undergone, as well as the continued attempts of russification prior to and following the collapse of the USSR. Whether intentionally or circumstantially, Ukrainian embroidery has assumed the role of artifacts within macro-cultural psychology transnationally, throughout the various diaspora groups that exist globally. The craft acts as a uniting factor, beyond international borders, as a signifier of cultural identity amongst Ukrainian nationals and those within the diaspora communities, making it a form of transnational folklore. Transnational folklore, in this case, refers specifically to the traditional beliefs of a community that are shared generationally, not limited to a certain geographical location. It is shared by those living within

the geographical borders of the country of origin, as well as in diaspora, and includes material culture as a folkloric object. As the Ukrainian macro-culture continues to evolve into a more visible and distinguishable global identity, the accessibility of both modern and traditional embroidery solidifies its functionality as a transnational object. A variety of designers and artisans embraced the increased popularity of embroidery, along with the general public, leading to a significant increase in products available with these patterns, including high fashion, COVID-19 face masks, and glass or ceramic with decalcomania, a trend I explore further in the first chapter.

In both modern and traditional Ukrainian cultures, embroidery acts as a medium of communication and identification, and the value of recognizing it as such lies within the discussion of the power it retains as an influential factor of macro-culture. As patterns are revitalized, repopularized, and repurposed, they are situated within the political contexts of the necessity to define the Ukrainian identity within the post-Soviet landscape. With pockets of culture and identity existing in various diasporic settings in a form that may no longer be relevant in other circumstances and climates, there exists an evident global disconnect in what it means to be Ukrainian.

To offer a focused discussion here, I have chosen to discuss both Ukrainian and Ukrainian Canadian cultures. Their relationship predates the 20th century and continues to be enriched through the connections formed by various cultural societies. There has been a significant shift in Ukrainian culture in Canada since the first Ukrainian immigrants arrived in Canada in 1891. While the earliest immigrants brought their best embroidered clothing, or fragments of it, to Canada when they first arrived, embroidery as a tradition continued in the community for generations. Material culture is essential when a diasporic community is working

to maintain old traditions in new settings, as the tangible objects can be re-created and used as reference while also carrying meaning about their origins. As years unfolded, Ukrainian embroidery became one of the most common folk crafts of the descendants of immigrants who continued learning it from family and community members. It remained a popular pastime as “no language proficiency was required - [making it] one of the more accessible forms of Ukrainian artistic expression” (Hinter, 2011, p. 34).

One example that has inspired this research is a blouse sewn and embroidered by Mary Kopestynska Komar, who emigrated to Canada from the Stanislavska region in Halychyna. The shirt is hand-stitched, featuring a cross-stitched embroidery pattern of poppies and other floral motifs, as well as geometric shapes around the collar. Mary began stitching the blouse in Ukraine in 1927 and finished the pattern when she arrived in Canada in 1930.³ The blouse is on display at the Musée Ukraina Museum in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

³ Information about Mary Kopestynska Komar is provided by the Musée Ukraina Museum.



Figure 1: Ukrainian Vyshyvanka created by Mary Kopestynska Komar from 1927-1930. From the collection of the Musée Ukraina Museum, Saskatoon, SK.

Mary's blouse perfectly demonstrates the transnationality of material culture, specifically embroidery. While materials to create such an object are widely available and not necessarily specific to one country or region, the knowledge that is required to create the patterns and apply them is what has been passed through generations and across borders. Just as a folktale is shared amongst members of a cultural group, so is the practical knowledge of creating an object such as embroidery. It is through this shared generational knowledge and application of patterns where we see significant shifts in why and how embroidery is used in Ukrainian and Ukrainian diaspora communities.

While embroidery maintains its relevance in cultural modernity,⁴ as seen through the contemporary interpretations of traditional patterns, the craft continues to possess the open/performative and private/personal functions of material culture. Robert Klymasz (1987) uses the terms open/public and closed/personal to describe the operational purpose of embroidery specifically as it existed in the late 20th century landscape of Ukrainian Canadian community. I have adapted these terms to better reflect on the function of Ukrainian embroidery, globally, in the 21st century. The open/performative nature of embroidery functions similarly to performative culture. Maksym Karpovets' (2018) emphasizes that, when we think of performance, we tend to focus on the theatrical elements of what it means to entertain, but the attention to a specific aesthetic and emotional interaction between the artist and the audience (p. 140) which is integral to all performance, is the same focus and interaction which informs displays of embroidery. In embroidery, however, the artist is often removed from the interaction and instead the connection is created between the wearer of embroidery and their audience. The open/performative nature of culture exists when the object in question displays an intentional message to those who view it. Klymasz (1987) describes “the public function of Ukrainian embroidery... as a form of [an] open display to underline a fidelity to ethnic loyalty and origin” (p. 4). With the familiarity of embroidered symbols and patterns within Ukrainian culture, displaying identity is at the forefront of the resurgence of Ukrainian embroidery as a transnational phenomenon. Thus, as identity politics is at the forefront of much of the current conflict within Ukraine,⁵ including the recent Euromaidan revolution and the current war in Donbas, we must consider the use of embroidery

⁴ In this paper, cultural modernity refers to anything that is a modern creation or iteration of a traditional object, that still retains the influence of a particular cultural group. This can be applied tangibly and intangibly, including with material objects and behavioral traits.

⁵ For more information on identity politics within Ukraine, see Rodgers (2008) and Zhurzhenko (2014).

as a powerful tool for identity formation and cultural continuity. Additionally, this effort is reinforced by the private/personal functions that exist surrounding embroidery as a cultural medium. The private/personal function particularly focuses on the ways in which embroidery usage is influenced by ritualistic and protective purposes. These traditional purposes create a strong physical and spiritual connection to culture, as they are done solely for the sake of the wearer and not the observer.

Transnationalism, as referring to the “multiple ties and interactions linking people... across the borders of nation-states” (Vertovec, 2011, p. 447), as a concept applies well to the case of the Ukrainian diaspora with its 20 million members globally (“2017: Ukrainian Diaspora,” 2018). Some Ukrainian diaspora communities such as Ukrainian Canadians can be considered long-established. Their initial immigrants bore multiple generations, retaining traditional bearers of culture as a sort of *pamiatnyk*, or memorial, to the lives they left behind in their home nations.⁶ With increased globalization as well as the commercialization of culture, Ukrainian objects created in Canada are now accessible to those in Ukraine, and vice versa. The global connection as solidified through material culture provides the foundation for the macro-culture, connecting Ukrainians intercontinentally.

⁶ The noun *pamiatnyk* stems from the word *pamiat'*, meaning memory, describing an object that holds sentimental or nostalgic value.

Chapter 1: Traditional Patterns and Modern Manipulations

While the function of an object often influences its role within society, including how it is used, who is most likely to own it, and who uses it for what purpose, it is pertinent to consider the multiple functions which each item can perform. For example, while in some groups the practical application of a particular object is dominant, others may prioritize its spiritual functions. Ukrainian embroidery has been utilized and revered not only as a form of decorative craft, but also ritualistically as a kind of protective talisman, as well as on religious vestments and cloths. It is necessary to understand how the original functions and meanings have influenced and enabled embroidery to act as a form of transnational material culture, promoting a Ukrainian macro-cultural identity. While analyzing the results of a small survey of national and diaspora Ukrainians, completed by 50 participants, it has become evident that not all consumers who wear and purchase embroidered goods associate the patterns with the traditional functions. Rather, the objects are most frequently chosen in order to promote cultural identity and create a connection with others in the global Ukrainian community. In this chapter, I analyze several traditional patterns and their meanings, as well as how they now contribute to the formation of an identifiable and distinct Ukrainian culture transnationally.

Just as Barre Toelken (1996) states that “it is indeed possible for folklorists to overlook, or to avoid intentionally, those very dynamic human elements that make the field an exciting one to begin with” (p. 1), the human elements of embroidery must be acknowledged, or we will no longer be able to understand the folkloric object’s current functions. The human elements of embroidery include the personal influences on style and creation, the manipulation of functions to serve a specific purpose, and the beliefs surrounding objects, to name a few. Both the narrative nature of patterns, where each design carries coded messages and meanings, as well as the shared

knowledge surrounding the creation of embroidery emphasize the necessity to include folk art in the study of folklore. It is an unmistakable truth that some functions will always be prioritized in certain societies. While traditional patterns have been modernized to suit new fashion tastes and to celebrate the macro-cultural identity that encompasses all Ukrainian regions and diaspora groups, they continue to utilize the traditional functions. The distinguishability that accompanies these traditional patterns helps garner further support and recognition of this identity. For the sake of understanding how these patterns are used now, I first explore their traditional purposes and meanings to show how the variances between patterns and styles across regions have evolved into a generalized identifier of Ukrainian culture. Amy Gazin-Schwartz (2001) notes that, from an outsider perspective, there is an intrinsic necessity in understanding how material culture (or more specifically, in this case, Ukrainian embroidery), ritual, and everyday life are “woven together to form the cultural contexts” (p. 263). It is these contexts that enable the display of a macro-cultural identity.

While Ukraine is a relatively young sovereign state, its various regions and ethnic groups that now reside within its borders have existed for much longer, and so has the tradition of embroidery within them. Pre-dating the era of the Kievan Rus’ of 882 C.E., the motifs popular in what is now considered traditional Ukrainian embroidery are seen in the wall paintings depicting the rituals of the time. In the Trypillian culture of the Middle period, dating from 4000-3500 B.C.E., engravings in pottery suggest that clothing bore similar embroidery patterns and in the Paleolithic and Neolithic eras statues were adorned with the motifs of embroidery on the folk dress (Kelly, 2003). It is believed that the inclusion of these patterns was done in order to “evoke a special power, whether to beseech fertility or to protect a child from harm” (p. 43). While these protective symbols were pagan in their original form, the introduction of Christianity in what is

now Ukraine also meant a shift in meanings, but not in the patterns themselves, similarly to the ways in which the meanings have changed once again in modern contexts.

The symbols and motifs can be divided into three main categories, including geometric, zoomorphic and floral patterns. Like many other folklorists before them, Demian Horniatkevych and Lidiia Nenadkevych (2001) attempt to divide these patterns by geographical location, with geometric patterns featured in “the country’s inaccessible areas” such as the Hutsul region and Podilia, and floral patterns in central and eastern Ukraine, from the Buh River, along the Dnipro River, to the Black Sea. Additionally, they have observed a third distinction for geometric floral patterns that are found in the remaining areas of the country. They note that, particularly on clothing, zoomorphic patterns are rarely encountered. These various patterns have the capacity to

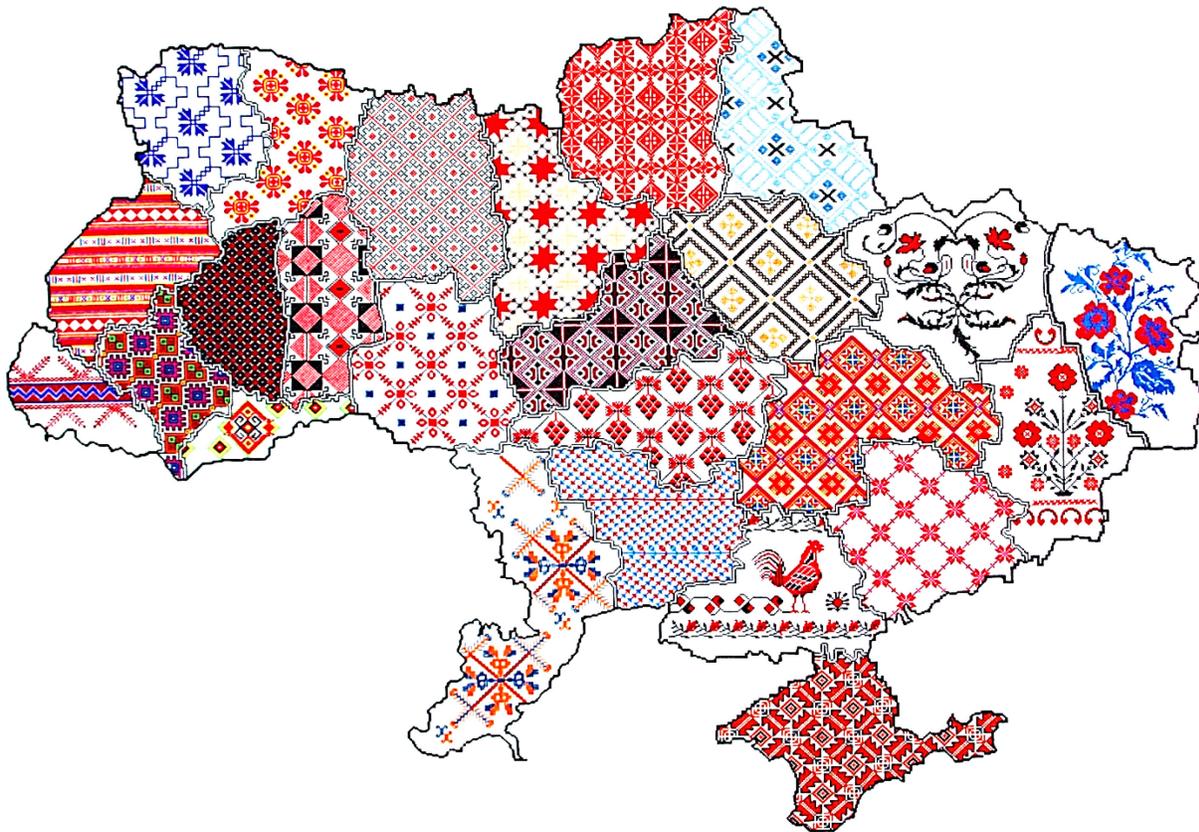


Figure 2: A 21st Century map of Ukraine, including Crimea, with patterns that represent a common style of embroidery in each region. This image is by Qypchak and can be found at Qypchak, CC BY-SA 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3>>

replicate history and distinguish identity, “the costumes are indices of social and family status, age and sex” (Veziat & Veziat, 2008, p. 9), providing clues about who may have worn them and to which communities they belonged.

The image above, which has been cropped to remove the title “Ukraina Vyshyvana,” or Ukrainian Embroidery, by author Qypchak provides a visual demonstration of these described areas. It is important to be mindful that this is an artistic and thus subjectively bound representation of such patterns. While each pattern does not fully depict the styles belonging to each region, this map is a valuable starting point for understanding the breadth and diversity of embroidery and culture across Ukraine. There are several different versions of this map, however I have chosen to include this image specifically because it effectively demonstrates the shift from purely geometric shapes in the westernmost regions towards the floral patterns found in the east.

Found primarily in the western regions of Ukraine, geometric patterns include, but are not limited to, circles, squares, diamonds, triangles, chevrons, spirals, crosses, swargas, sigmas, stars, and the *bezkonечnyk* or an infinite line. These patterns, except for the swarga or swastika, are nearly limitless, with no true beginning or end. Maria Sibirtseva (2017) describes several of the meanings of symbols in the more modern Christian context, while Christine Chraibi (2016) looks at their pagan roots and traditions. For example, the latter describes the use of crosses in embroidery as a symbol of centrality, a talisman against evil spirits, and the harmony of the four elements: fire, earth, water, and air. Further, the straight cross (vertical and horizontal lines) symbolizes masculinity and the sun, while the oblique or diagonal cross represents femininity and the moon. When the two images are combined with eight points in total, it becomes the symbol of unity between two entities. Sibirtseva (2017) notes that, in Christian symbolism, the crosses retain their protective meanings as “powerful tools against evil spirits.” Another

geometric pattern worth examining that is common in 21st century embroidery is the triangle, which symbolizes the “narrow gate that leads to eternal life” (Chraibi, 2016) in the pagan context, later being used to symbolize the Holy Trinity in Christian belief. When two triangles are connected at a single point, resembling an hourglass shape, they symbolize the world and the anti-world, with the point where the two shapes meet representing the liminal space of transition; a place where magic is believed to have been most powerful and likely to occur in the Ukrainian pagan tradition.

Some geometric patterns are created anthropomorphically, combined with floral and plant images, in order to represent Hellenic Goddesses such as Astarte, the goddess of fertility, sexuality, and war, and Asherah, the mother goddess. One such pattern depicts the “fertile field,” (Kelly, 2003, p. 13) a motif that “looks like a diamond with four dots in it, it incised on the stomach of [a statue of a pagan] goddess indicating her pregnancy” (ibid.), likely the goddess Astarte. In geometric patterns, the rhombus is used as a symbol of fertility, sometimes accompanied by small hooks or horns protruding from it. This pattern is still used in both the decorating of *pysanky*, or traditional Ukrainian Easter eggs created with the wax-resist method and coloured dyes, and embroidery on *rushnyky*, or ritual embroidered clothes. Perhaps the most common depiction of a deity is that of *Berehynia*, the hearth mother or the protectress of the home (Lozko, 2007). When used in folk art, such as embroidery, *Berehynia* is depicted with her arms outstretched, often with zoomorphic styles incorporated near her hands (Kelly, 1996). In 2001, a statue of *Berehynia* was erected in the central square, named Independence Square, in Kyiv. This location has been home to many protests and rallies have occurred throughout the history of Ukraine, even before independence, and the placement of the statue demonstrates the continued importance of the traditional symbol of protection within modern Ukrainian belief.

The pattern has also been simplified to follow the geometric style of continuous patterns, resembling traditional Slavic runes. Nearly unrecognizable from the human form, the shape consists of one or multiple diagonal squares on top of two diagonal lines that suggest the legs or arms of the shape.

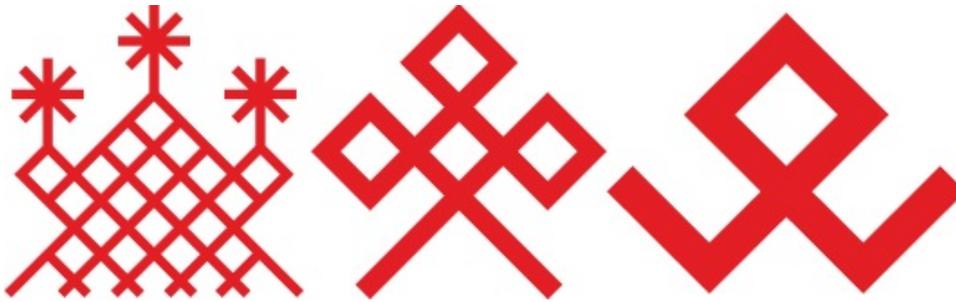


Figure 3: Images of the runic Berehynia pattern used in embroidery and pysanky design. These images are public domain as they consist entirely of information that is common property and contain no original authorship.

These patterns work specifically with the embroidery technique of cross stitch. While *nyz* embroidery was traditionally used for long repetitive patterns, it has fallen out of popularity in recent years due to its complex style. For this reason, among others, cross stitching has become the form of embroidery most commonly used for geometric patterns, as its x-shaped design of each individual stitch is well suited to accommodate images that are tiled or pixelated. Additionally, this prolific stitch has become one of the most notable styles of stitching in diasporic Ukrainian communities, particularly when used in decalcomania, with black and red crosses or number/pound signs (#) organized into patterns that mimic the stitching style. These simulated embroidery designs grace a variety of household items from candy dishes and decorative vases to clocks, phone cases, and a variety of objects that cannot be embroidered. Examples of objects featuring decalcomania can be seen in figure 3. Robert Klymasz (1987) identifies the function of these items as primarily “gift items” (p. 3), yet they are becoming increasingly popular, some 35 years later, as collectors’ items, family heirlooms, and widely

available ephemera used to express affiliation with the Ukrainian culture (pp. 3-4). The ability to easily replicate the patterns, especially in different formats, contributes to the shift towards cross stitch as a macro-representation of national embroidery styles. Decalomania on ceramics is particularly popular in Ukrainian diaspora within North America, as a way to replicate the simplified traditional patterns on nontraditional objects that are better suited for use in the home. The early settlers of the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada had experienced “a contemptuous attitude towards immigrants” (Stechichin, 1980, p. 4) making many hide any visible form of cultural identifier, particularly when outside the home. This led to the consideration of traditional Ukrainian embroidery as “something lowly and backwards and unnecessary in Canada” (ibid.), necessitating many to adopt more westernized traditions and to keep all displays of culture within small communities and within the home through use of ceramics and other more personal objects. This contrasts the open/performative nature of clothing as it is a more public display than objects within one’s home where someone must be invited in order to be witness to them and be a part of the open/performative display of culture.



Figure 4: Ceramics featuring decalcomania, designed to resemble Ukrainian embroidery. The cookie jar reads “Baba’s Cookies.”

Florals, as mentioned, are used more commonly in the eastern oblasts of Ukraine, as well as in most modern representations of a nationalist embroidery style. Stylized flowers in clothing are used as a symbol to “protect against ‘evil spirits’, misfortune and diseases” (Wasin, 2021). One floral symbol which is still commonly found in modern embroidery is the Tree of Life depicting a tree with flowering branches, symbolizing the goddess of fertility, Astarte, which is believed to act as a talisman for the encouragement of crop fertility and production. Intended to ensure the longevity and prosperity of the inhabitants of the household, the “tree of life” is believed to connect the three different spiritual realms, including the underworld, the physical or natural world, and heaven or the home of the gods. Ukrainian scholar Iuliia Nikishenko (2012) emphasizes the importance of the continuation of the floral motifs in modern embroidery, drawing on the history of the symbolism within the culture;

“Рослинний світ—дерева, квіти, трави — міцно вкорінений у традиційній свідомості українського народу... вони є неодмінними атрибутами лікувальних та

магічних дій, родинно-побутових та календарних обрядів.” [The world of plants-trees, flowers, and herbs- is firmly rooted in the consciousness of the Ukrainian people... they are indispensable attributes of healing and magical actions, family and calendar ceremonies].

She continues to emphasize the importance of this symbolism not only in embroidery, but also on ceramic products, *pysanky*, in *petrikov* paintings, and in architectural decoration.

This shared consciousness amongst Ukrainian communities perpetuates the continued use of plants, flowers, and trees in modern embroidery. Additionally, these flowers retain their meaning outside of their functions as embroidery patterns. Common mallow, *malva neglecta*, or *mal'va*, is often embroidered in bright colors such as blues, pinks or vibrant reds. It symbolizes “love for native land, for nation and [the] people that represent it” (Krotenko, 2018, p. 63) frequently found in the Zhytomyr region. It is mentioned commonly in folk tales and songs, and commonly embroidered to resemble the 8-pointed cross mentioned earlier. When depicted in this traditional geometric pattern, the mallow is also referred to as the Mother’s Star and frequently found in icons of the Virgin Mary (Poniatyshyn, 2015). Additionally, it is used in folk medicine for sore throats and dry coughs, yet there is no significant evidence to support the medicinal uses.⁷

⁷ For more information regarding the use of mallow, and other botanicals, in Ukrainian folk medicine, see Kujawska et al. (2015).



Figure 5: Men's shirt cuff featuring mallow in many colours, from the Zhytomyr oblast circa 1920's. From the collection of the Musée Ukraina Museum, Saskatoon, SK.



Figure 6: Kalyna embroidery pattern featured on a shirt sleeve, from Poltava oblast circa early 20th century. From the collection of the Musée Ukraina Museum, Saskatoon, SK.

Another pattern, with similar meanings, that I would be remiss to not mention, is that of the *kalyna* plant. Also known as viburnum, *kalyna* is an ethnic symbol of Ukraine, prevalent in both traditional and modern folk songs such as *Chervona Kalyna* (Red Viburnum) and *Odna Kalyna* (One Viburnum), as well as in folk medicine, poetry, and many other facets of life. According to prominent Ukrainian Canadian journalist Orysia Paszczak Tracz (2001), an avid promoter of Ukrainian folklore, “its beauty cannot be denied; its status in Ukrainian folk life is irreplaceable.” The plant represents beauty, blood, love, womanhood and motherhood, and national resurgence, the *kalyna* is “the color of the ‘nation’s soul’, the core of the Kozak spirit and the symbol of national unity” (Krotenko, 2018, p. 73). The depiction of *kalyna* has become increasingly important within recent years as a national symbol “expressive of Ukraine’s yearning for freedom” (Balan, 2016), reminiscent of its role in the time of *kozaky* where *kalyna* was used as a reminder of the motherland and the “familiar places left behind” (“The Symbolism of Kalyna in Ukrainian Culture”, 2014). See figure 5 above for an example of *kalyna* embroidered on a traditional women’s *vyshyvanka*.

Another popular floral symbol that is frequently used in embroidery is the poppy. Known as the “flower of dreams, fertility, beauty and youth,” (Krotenko, 2018, p. 67), the poppy is important in folk culture, food, and religion in Ukraine. Its bright red colour leads people to believe in it as an effective charm to ward off the evil eye. See figures 6 and 7 below for examples of poppies in embroidery. While all of these flowers can be done in the cross-stitch style, they are more frequently created with long stitches known as satin stitches. With over 80 types of satin stitches, the long threads are used to create a variety of shapes, transcending the limits of geometric patterns. The flowers are given the appropriate round edges and accurately resemble the natural objects they are meant to reflect. Floral patterns can also be created with machine embroidery, which has made them increasingly popular in modern fashion, making easily replicable patterns that can be made quickly.



Figure 7: Woman’s shirt sleeve featuring a poppy pattern, from Poltava oblast circa 1920’s. From the collection of the Musée Ukraina Museum, Saskatoon, SK. **Figure 8:** Face mask featuring a poppy pattern created during the COVID-19 Pandemic. From the author’s private collection.

While many different objects have been historically adorned with embroidery, one of the most notable is the *vyshyvanka*. These embroidered shirts or blouses featured “archaic motifs... along sleeves, hems, necklines and across the arms—as prophylactics—positioned at any opening through which evil could enter... to protect the wearer” (Van Orman, 2013, p. 10). Ellen and Jean-Paul Veziat (2010) describe the different forms of magic that are tied to these symbols, both figuratively and sacredly, exploring the intrinsic magic that is widely believed to accompany each symbol, specifically focusing on the geometric patterns of the Hutsul region. Yet the sentiments they share can be applied to the different regions across the country, as each pattern is rooted in folk tradition, whether their modern applications are sacred or secular.

With the variety evident across regions, it is understandable that diaspora communities would have their own unique variants of embroidery as well, influenced by the different conditions in which they exist. JJ Gurga (2012) describes the importance of these distinctions in embroidery patterns, specifically when displayed on a *vyshyvanka*, as a connection to the local environments in which they are created. She notes that “the knowing eye could detect where a person hailed from by the clothes on their back... [and that] traditionally, the thread was coloured according to local formulas using bark, leaves, flowers, berries and so on. In this way, the local environment is literally reflected in the colour of the embroidery” (p. 190). However, while these distinctions exist, the use of embroidery, particularly modernized patterns, continues to define the space around it, whether socially or politically, as Ukrainian.

Through an examination of folk art, it is evident that each culture and microculture, the culture belonging to diaspora as well as specific regions that make up the larger macro-culture or nation, presents and upholds its own individual standards of taste. Unfortunately, as Michael Owens Jones (1993) describes, there exists an elitist tradition of dichotomizing folk culture

where “many, perhaps indeed most, commentators on ‘folk art’ historically assume that such products are simple, crude, and naïve,” (p. 18). This is done primarily with the intention of differentiating between two traditions, perpetuating the superiority of fine art over folk art. This belief is rooted in, and explained by, Immanuel Kant (2018) in *The Critique of Judgement*, where Kant’s ideas create an elitist atmosphere which surrounds the tradition, its creation, and its intended audience. By insisting that fine art cannot possess a pragmatic function beyond its aesthetic function, Kant elevates the idea of what is beautiful into a class that most people cannot afford to possess, insisting that “art is... distinguished from handicraft” (p. 92). This elitist tradition has segregated folk art for many years as a “lesser” form of decoration. Yet embroidery has been used increasingly in high fashion, making appearances in the collections of prolific designers such as Gucci and Dolce and Gabbana. It has also become increasingly popular for locally renowned fashion houses such as Vita Kin, whose work adapts “ancient heritage into a modern context” (Satenstein, 2015). However, some designers, such as Valentino, seem to have significantly missed the mark in their recreations of these traditional patterns. In 2015, the well-known Italian luxury fashion house declared that the embroidery patterns and clothing designs in their Spring 2015 Couture collection were “inspired by Russian countryside” (Romanyshyn, 2015). Yet the designs more closely resembled the traditional Ukrainian embroidery and folk clothing. The fashion house faced backlash from Ukrainians as the ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia in the War in Donbas and following the Euromaidan Revolution had only just begun. Due to the “Russian state... denying to acknowledge Ukraine’s culture [as] separate and independent from the Russian one” (ibid), the misattribution of the patterns and clothing styles is particularly problematic. This denial and misattribution of culture is currently being combatted by the open/performative function of embroidery, demonstrating a distinct Ukrainian

identity. With the Ukrainian embroidery being shared transnationally among the diaspora communities, this movement towards an identifiable and distinct Ukrainian macro-culture pushes back against these misattributions and the beliefs that Ukrainian culture is simply a part of Russian culture.

With its notoriety and transnational presence, embroidery has transcended the tradition of folk craft into a different realm of material culture. Regardless, as folk art often functions pragmatically in the realm of communication through symbols with shared meanings, this shift towards fashion allows for a wider visibility of these symbols, as well as the availability of cultural ephemera within and outside of Ukraine. Since the Euromaidan Revolution of Dignity in 2013-2014, there has been a conscious shift towards a newly defined Ukrainian identity based on traditions, religion, and language, in order to distinguish the nation from its Russian neighbors. With the increased self-identification as Ukrainian, there was also a stronger attachment to various symbols of nationhood and nationality (Kulyk, 2016a, p. 93), including to the traditional symbols found in embroidery. In her Master's thesis "The Embroidery of Vyshyvanka: From Traditional Technique to Contemporary Technologies," Kseniia Snikhovska (2017) asserts that the popular resurgence of embroidery in Ukraine is due to the use of embroidery as a "manifestation and a symbol of [Ukrainian] national identity" (p. 5). This increased use of Ukrainian embroidery and traditional patterns manifests this national identity throughout the diaspora as well. Following the Maidan, this sentiment of Ukrainian identity demonstrated "greater pride in being a citizen of the Ukrainian state, stronger attachment to symbols of nationhood, enhanced solidarity with compatriots, increased readiness to fight and/or work for Ukraine, and greater confidence in the people's power to change the country for the better" (Kulyk, 2016a, p. 167). By using a symbol that is recognized globally to assert culture,

Ukrainians are able to share identity and ideology with one another, surpassing the personal/private functions of the symbolic meanings of the patterns and embracing the open/performative nature of embroidery as a shared identity.

Chapter 2: [Un]Masking National Identity in COVID-19

As an integral part of Ukraine's national cultural history, embroidery boasts a prolific heritage through its continued use in folklore, traditional costume, and various household and spiritual objects. The newest form of ephemera to be adorned in the traditional stitches and patterns is that of face masks worn during the COVID-19 crisis. The traditional art and patterns of Ukrainian embroidery have begun to appear on face masks and other forms of personal protective equipment (hereafter PPE) recommended by public health officials in order to limit the transmission of the virus.⁸ While this chapter does not explore the effectiveness of face masks in preventing the spread of COVID-19, it does examine why those masks are adorned within Ukrainian culture.

Ukrainian styled face masks featuring embroidery patterns function on least on two levels, from their practical application as a cloth barrier to reduce the risk of respiratory infection, to their theoretical functions. It is the theoretical functions which I focus on in this chapter, specifically the open/performative and private/personal functions of embroidery patterns when applied to face masks. In this chapter, I focus on the cultural functions of the embroidered masks, specifically on their open/performative and private/personal functions. The private/personal function exists on masks here refers to the ritualistic properties, as mentioned earlier, with several patterns specifically designed with the intention of the protection of health. The open/performative function is perhaps the most prominent as it exists when masks, as well

⁸ This research does not study the effectiveness of masks or their scientific properties. For more information regarding the scholarly recommendations and studies regarding the use of facemasks in reducing the spread of the COVID-19 virus, see Chu, et. al (2020), and the advisories shared by the World Health Organization (WHO).

as general forms of ephemera, are used to display cultural affinity and identity, subverting the traditional use of a mask as a form of identity concealment.

Within the sphere of transnational folklore and material culture, masks permeate the realm of cultural ephemera as a necessitated and in-demand object, creating a new form of connection between national and diasporic Ukrainian communities. With face masks and various forms of PPE bearing embroidery patterns as a cultural identifier, a variety of techniques have been used by artisans and designers to create, replicate, and modernize the traditional styles to better fit with regulations and the requirements for face masks, such as the number of layers and types of fabrics that must be used in order to make the mask effective. For example, some artists and designers began using techniques of faux embroidery and decalomania to protect the integrity of the fabric; to avoid creating tiny holes in the top layer of the cloth with embroidery, some favor the use of vinyl transfer on fabric or painted-on depictions of cross stitched styles. See figure 9 for an example of vinyl transferred patterns on a mask. The patterns on masks have been most commonly created using forms of cross stitch or *lyshtva* — also known as a leaf-stitch, a form of two-sided satin stitch with long single lines that appear nearly identical on the



Figure 9: Ukrainian face mask created during the COVID-19 pandemic, featuring an embroidery-like pattern silk screened onto the fabric.

front and back of a project — even when not produced with a needle and thread. These styles are the most commonly, and easily, mimicked forms of embroidery when decalomania or other forms of faux embroidery are employed.

In this chapter I present two related digital questionnaires, the first addressing

designers and artisans who create and sell face masks with Ukrainian patterns on them. The second was answered by consumers, both Ukrainian nationals and Ukrainian Canadians, who have purchased and now wear the masks. By examining the responses to these questionnaires through a method of qualitative analysis, I present the main motivations for purchasing, wearing, and creating masks featuring both traditional and modern Ukrainian embroidery patterns as related to the open/performative and private/personal functions of embroidery. Additionally, to fully understand the popularity and cultural impact of Ukrainian embroidery when worn on a face mask, I examine the political motivations of displaying culturally explicit patterns on an object traditionally used for identity concealment.

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embroidery, a type of cut-and-drawn openwork embroidery which creates gaps in the fabric, would be an inappropriate style for PPE, as it would leave open holes in the fabric, defeating the purpose of masking. The patterns on masks have been most commonly created using forms of cross stitch or *lyshtva* — also known as a leaf-stitch, a form of two-sided satin stitch with long single lines that appear nearly identical on the front and back of a project — even when not produced with a needle and thread. These styles are the most commonly, and easily, mimicked forms of embroidery when decalomania or other forms of faux embroidery are employed.

In this chapter I present two related digital questionnaires, the first addressing designers and artisans who create and sell face masks with Ukrainian patterns on them. The second is answered by consumers, both Ukrainian nationals and Ukrainian Canadians, who purchase and wear the masks. By examining the responses of these questionnaires through a method of qualitative analysis, I present the main motivations for purchasing, wearing, and creating masks featuring both traditional and modern Ukrainian embroidery patterns as related to the open/performative and private personal functions of embroidery. Additionally, to fully understand the popularity and cultural impact of Ukrainian embroidery when presented on a face mask, I examine the political motivations of displaying culturally explicit patterns on an object traditionally used for identity concealment.

Supplying the New Demand: The Early Response to Masks

In order to examine how masks function, we must first understand the events leading up to masks being adorned with decorative patterns. Whilst pandemic wear is not a new phenomenon, with masks having been worn during the 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic,⁹ the

⁹ The use of face masks in both the Spanish Influenza and COVID-19 pandemics is documented in the research of Scerri and Grech (2020) as an effective way to reduce community transmission of these viruses.

prominence of PPE as a fashion object is relatively recent. The availability of differently styled and homemade face masks created by independent creators has increased as global communities share designs and products on digital marketplaces. With the World Health Organization providing videos and informational posters to show people how to create their own masks and instructing what fabrics should be used, many people who had the skillset required to create these masks began doing so to share with and sell to the public. In order to understand how homemade masks became popular, we must acknowledge the unavailability of medical-grade disposable masks at the beginning of the pandemic. In March 2020, many digital marketplaces began enforcing restrictions on the sale of masks and other high-demand objects, such as sanitizer, food items, and toilet paper.¹⁰ Consumers began over-purchasing and “mask hoarding” early in the pandemic (McNeil, 2020). With only 5 cases of COVID-19 confirmed as of January 29th, 2020 in the United States of America, pharmacies and online retailers quickly began to sell out of masks (ibid.). In turn, several of those fortunate enough to have purchased a surplus of face covering began to resell them online in an effort to create a profit. Adam Mosseri (2020), the head of Instagram, commented on the sale of these objects on Facebook Marketplace, in a now deleted tweet, saying “supplies are short, prices are up, and we’re against people exploiting this public health emergency.” This tweet justified the soon to be implemented price restrictions placed on these high-demand objects followed by a full ban on the resale of certain objects, as several members of the digital communities began to overcharge for them, with one user from Sydney, Australia, selling a box of disposable face masks for \$500.¹¹

¹⁰ Documentation on price gouging on digital platforms, including Amazon and Facebook, can be found in digital articles by Palmer (2020) and Hutchinson (2020)

¹¹ See Hutchinson (2020) for further information on Facebook Marketplace pricing and specific examples.

With these new restrictions in place, the increasing demand for the product, and the inability to purchase disposable masks due to product shortages, people began to create and wear hand-sewn face masks as an extra measure of protection. Additionally, many artisans began to sew and create masks to sell on digital marketplaces for additional sources of income when many had lost their jobs due to COVID-19.¹² The digital marketplace Etsy, popular with customers in North America, tracked the sales generated by their artisans, recording “\$346 million worth of masks during the pandemic, accounting for 14 percent of *all* sales across small sellers on the platform” (Hollister, 2020: emphasis in original). On this platform, designer Dayna Konopelny, the owner of the shop EmilkaKono, began to sell Ukrainian styled masks for a number of reasons, including “having people ask about [her] making them since it fit with [her] brand” (Konopelny, 2020: personal communication). As one of many sellers featuring culturally inspired facemasks, Konopelny utilized the digital market as a way to keep busy and generate income when her schooling and work ended abruptly, due to the pandemic.

The unprecedented popularity of face masks has been difficult to navigate, with public knowledge about the objects and their effectiveness changing frequently due to new research into the COVID-19 pandemic.¹³ In the recommendations coming from the government of the United States of America in the early months of COVID-19, there were numerous assertions that “masks actually do little to protect healthy people” (McNeil, 2020). That narrative began to change in

¹² For more information on face masks as a source of income, see Alie (2020), Hinds (2020), Homaid (2020), and Kaushik (2020).

¹³ On February 29th, 2020, the United States Surgeon General, Jerome Adams, tweeted “Seriously people- STOP BUYING MASKS! They are NOT effective in preventing general public from catching #Coronavirus, but if healthcare providers can’t get them to care for sick patients, it puts them and our communities at risk!” (U.S. Surgeon General 2020, emphasis in original). Since this statement, more information has been released on the effectiveness of masks in reducing COVID-19 transmission. For more information, see current WHO recommendations, Scerri and Grech (2020), and Chu, et. al (2020).

April 2020 when the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended that all Americans wear face masks when unable to maintain a distance of 6-feet from other humans, with mask mandates coming into effect in Ukraine as of April 1st, the World Health Organization on June 5th, and in Canadian municipalities throughout the month of June and onward.¹⁴ This shift in policy came after “growing evidence that people can transmit COVID-19 through such droplets before showing symptoms” (Chung, 2020) . While this has caused a lot of confusion among members of the public, different marketplaces have worked to control disputes about the advertised masks. For example, VistaPrint (2020) includes that “reusable face masks are not medical devices or personal protective equipment (PPE)” in the product description for the cloth masks that they sell. With the space to create and sell different patterns and designs on face masks incredibly welcoming in digital marketplaces, demand emerged for beautifully decorated, fashionably unique masks. This includes the introduction of culturally influenced mask patterns, such as Ukrainian embroidered styles.

Many Ukrainian artists began selling various forms of ephemera featuring Ukrainian embroidery or embroidery-like patterns prior to the pandemic. With masks becoming a part of everyday life, companies such as Redbubble, where artists submit their designs and the platform provides the objects on which they are printed from clothing to home wares, began to offer the new medium for the designs. This meant artists who had already created Ukrainian-styled patterns for the site, such as Kateryna Hnieusheva, were able to apply their patterns to the masks and have them made available globally. Additionally, some embroidery shops and high end designers, such as Anna Marchuk, already had masks available for sale in years previous for flu

¹⁴ See Giordano and Calore (2020), Lacina (2020), Chung (2020), and Pylypenko (2020) for more information on COVID-19 mask mandates by the CDC, WHO, Canadian Municipalities, and the Ukrainian Government, respectively.

and allergy season, as donning a mask was not an uncommon practice prior to the COVID-19 pandemic in many parts of the world. However, in order to understand the shift towards the overwhelming popularity of Ukrainian styled masks in both the Ukrainian and Ukrainian Canadian communities, I look to the surveys for further reasoning from the designers and consumers themselves.

Research Surveys

To fully understand the presence and impact of Ukrainian embroidered face masks within the context of the transnational macro-culture used to identify Ukrainianness, both nationally and in diaspora, we must first investigate the two groups responsible for the popularity of the masks: the creators and the consumers. To better analyze these groups and their role within the trend, I conducted two brief surveys. The first was directed towards people who wear and purchase masks with embroidery or Ukrainian symbols. The second was distributed amongst artisans and designers who create and sell the masks. Both surveys were distributed to Ukrainian nationals and Ukrainian Canadians through digital advertising and message boards on various forms of social media, including Facebook and Instagram, as well as through emailed newsletters from the Kule Folklore Centre. Prior to receiving answers, I hypothesized that cultural pride would act as an influencing factor in the choice to purchase or create these masks, demonstrating the dominance of the open/performative function of embroidery when applied to cultural ephemera.

I hypothesize that there are three primary motives that contribute to the overall popularity of culturally decorated PPE. The first is for the sake of cultural recognition and as a sign of patriotism, using the masks and their embroidery to outwardly identify as a member of the Ukrainian community and to bring more awareness to the Ukrainian culture. The second motivation is to wear the mask as a fashion statement, for the sake of the beauty of the patterns

alone. The final motivation, and perhaps least prominent, which I anticipated was the use of embroidered masks as a talisman or symbol of protection within the private/personal function of embroidery. This research is valuable as it not only studies this new phenomenon that the world is currently experiencing, but it explores the different ways in which embroidery and cultural symbols can be used on other forms of material culture, as well as the motivations surrounding them.

Following the resurgence of embroidery in popular fashion in Ukraine there has also been an increase in the presence of traditional and modern embroidery in Ukrainian diaspora, which I continue to explore here through the Canadian example. I was able to examine sentiments held by both national and Ukrainian Canadians on a smaller scale by asking questions pertaining to the private/personal and open/performative functions of embroidery. By comparing these two geographically distant but culturally related groups, the role of transnational folklore becomes clearer, defining the connections between modernized and traditional patterns in both diaspora and national contexts. The sentiments held by both the consumers and creators towards the open/performative and private/personal roles of material culture were collected through a questionnaire, available in English and Ukrainian, in order help explain the transnational phenomenon of Ukrainian decorated personal protective equipment (PPE).

The two surveys collected personal information including first and last name, age at the time of the survey, identifying pronouns, the country of residence and first three digits of the respondent's zip or postal code. All participants were informed of the study in advance and informed of the potential psychological risk associated with a study surrounding culture, particularly one that has faced numerous hardships, wars, and famine over the last 150 years.

When discussing culture, there is a risk of encountering generational trauma that may plague respondents. The response was limited to those ages 18 and older and directed at participants who identified as Ukrainian, residing in either Ukraine or a diaspora community. Several non-Ukrainians chose to participate as well, which I will discuss further when presenting the results. Additionally, respondents were able to request anonymity of any or all personal information. Lastly, the surveys were both available to be completed through email or digital communication, Google Forms, video conferencing, and over the phone. The first survey, distributed to artisans and designers, asked the following questions:

- 1) Do you have experience with Ukrainian embroidery or Ukrainian folk art prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?
- 2) What inspired you to include Ukrainian motifs on your masks, or to sell masks featuring Ukrainian folk art?
- 3) Would you describe your patterns as traditional or as a modern interpretation/style?
- 4) Is your current work on masks influenced by the traditional meanings behind specific embroidery patterns or colors?
- 5) What does Ukrainian embroidery and folk-art mean to you?

The open-scripted questions were designed with the intention to elicit answers which would provide information about each artisan's motivation for creating the designs they have. They were also designed with the intention to reveal a possible shift from other commercial products that feature embroidery to face mask production. In order to find appropriate respondents for the survey, I advertised my research on digital public forums and directly contacted more than 30 designers. The survey for artisans and designers received 12 responses, with the majority of creators residing within Ukraine.

I have had more success contacting and interviewing members of the general public regarding wearing masks, with 40 respondents, primarily from Ukrainian Canadian backgrounds. This survey has been shared through various public forums online and through word of mouth, attracting 34 of the respondents from North American communities, and 6 who were residing in Ukraine at the time of their response. Fewer artisan and designers were reached through the same digital advertisements shared with consumers. Instead, I had contacted the majority through direct messaging through their websites or digital platforms where the objects were being sold and advertised, or through email. See figure 10 for a visualization of the respondents' location for both surveys. The following questions were asked of wearers of Ukrainian embroidered face masks:

1. Do you own any masks with Ukrainian embroidery, embroidery-like patterns, or Ukrainian folk art on them?
2. If so, what were your motivations for purchasing it/them?
3. Do you own other objects with Ukrainian embroidery or embroidery-like patterns on them? If yes, please list (IE embroidered clothing, housewares, etc).
4. Are there any particular meanings that you associate with embroidery?
5. What does Ukrainian embroidery/folk-art/symbols mean to you?
6. How do you feel/react when you see someone wearing traditional embroidery or embroidery-like patterns in person or in the media?

While there is more research to be done, I believe that the results of these two questionnaires will help me to understand the initial reactions to masks as a form of cultural ephemera while they are still relevant and fresh in the minds of respondents. I intend to expand my survey in the future to include more participants and to analyze data by age, more specific

geographical location, and gender, and believe this research could and should be expanded to include the members of other cultures who also use face masks as a new medium for cultural representation through textiles.

Analyzing Responses

In order to fully contemplate the sociological implications of the use of traditional and modern representation of Ukrainian embroidery within the public/performative function, I have analyzed the data collected from the questions above, highlighting specific areas of interest. One of the most effective ways to understand the data I have collected in the context of the overall thesis and theme of this chapter is through qualitative data analysis.¹⁵ By identifying the common words and phrases used by the respondents and evaluating the content of the participant

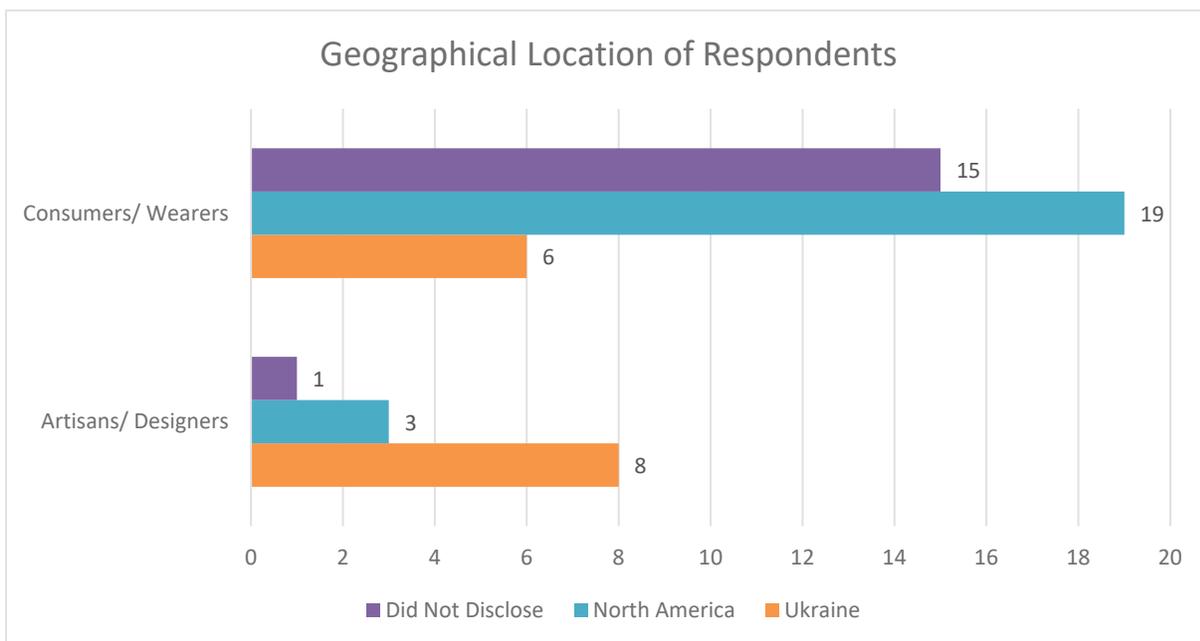


Figure 10: Chart depicting the number of respondents by location for both surveys.

responses, I am able to make preliminary conclusions about the effectiveness of this unique form of cultural ephemera in its applications as an open/performative display of culture.

¹⁵ Based on the theoretical framework set forth by Alasuutari (1995), qualitative analysis allows me to view the wide variety of responses from the broadest lens while examining the various lengthy responses to each question.

As mentioned, most respondents of the general consumer public survey identified their current residency as within North America. However, the survey itself failed to accommodate questions of ethnic identity, using only geographical location at this time. In future research, it would be valuable to have respondents declare a nationality or their generational status within the diaspora, in order to better analyze the connection between nationality, transnationality and material folklore. One interesting trend that can be analyzed from the collected data is that, based on the interviewees who participated, the majority of creators were from Ukraine and the majority of consumers were from Canada. While it cannot be confirmed that the majority of consumers wearing masks with Ukrainian patterns are from diaspora, as fewer national Ukrainians were interviewed, it is valuable to recognize the export of masks from Ukraine to diaspora when considering the role of transnational Ukrainian material culture and folklore.

Due to the open-ended nature of the questions, respondents were able to provide any answer to the proposed questions, many of which confirmed and expanded on my initial hypothesis. When considering the consumer questionnaire, one motivation for purchasing or wearing masks, which I had not previously considered, was the philanthropic efforts to support the community through purchasing the masks. For example, Jana Lalach and Anonymous Respondent #14 purchased their masks from a fundraiser to “support a Ukrainian Orthodox camp for kids” (Lalach, 2020: personal communication). Another motivation which I had not considered is that of masks as family objects, whether it is the patterns evoking memories of mothers teaching their children to embroider or wearing matching masks with family members as a way to bond and demonstrate common interest.

The first, and perhaps most notable, commonality evident with all consumers respondents owned embroidered masks, except for one respondent, owned other embroidered goods prior to

purchasing masks. These objects include clothing, housewares, and other forms of ephemera such as license plates and phone cases. With this commonality existing between both Ukrainian and Ukrainian Canadian respondents, there is an evident role of embroidery within the everyday lives of participants prior to COVID-19. With new forms of embroidery or Ukrainian styles becoming available on masks, for many of the participants it seemed like a “no-brainer to add them to [the] collection” (Anonymous #16, 2020: personal communication) of already embroidered items.

By analyzing the consumer responses, I have compiled the following chart depicting common answers as provided by respondents. The chart represents the different association that the interviewees had with Ukrainian embroidery, both on masks and in general. Each bar represents how many consumers used the exact or variations of the words listed, with some consumer answers being counted in more than one line as they used multiple buzzwords to describe their associations. This method is currently the most effective way to represent the responses to the question “what does Ukrainian embroidery/folk-art/symbols mean to you?” as many respondents provided more than one answer to this question. This chart reflects the adjectives most frequently used by participants, with some participants counted multiple times to best reflect all of their answers. Each bar depicts how many respondents mentioned the listed item as an association with Ukrainian embroidery, both with regard to masks and in general. In the chart, it is visible that most consumer respondents associated culture and heritage. Respondents also frequently commented on the artistry and craftsmanship that is required to create them.

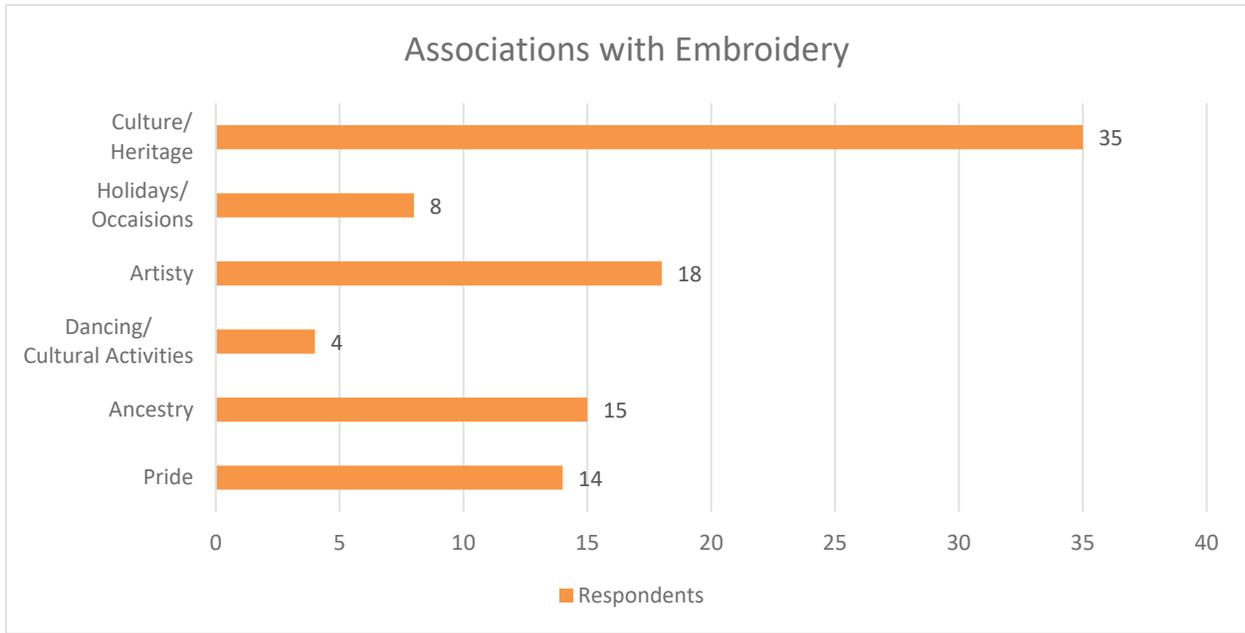


Figure 11: Chart depicting the answers of consumer respondents when asked about associations with Ukrainian embroidery.

In consideration of the open/performative nature of embroidery and face masks, the survey asked, “How do you feel/react when you see someone wearing traditional embroidery or embroidery-like patterns in person or in the media?” This specific question was answered by 30% of respondents using variations of the word “proud.” Associating cultural pride with the outward display of Ukrainian embroidery, participants noted that the display suggested a cultural connection and a sense of commonality between themselves and other wearers. These assumed connections held by those who witness embroidery demonstrate the importance of the open/performative function in asserting a macro-cultural identity. In contrast, only 8% of respondents mentioned that they wore masks or associated them with spiritual protection, whether secular or sacred, showing that fewer consumers recognized the traditional personal/private functions as motivators when choosing masks.

By comparing the answers from both designers and wearers, I have concluded that the element of protection is primarily recognized by the former of the two groups. Franklin Sciacca

(2014) notes, in his article “Ukrainian Rushnyky: Binding Amulets and Magical Talismans in the Modern Period,” that a late nineteenth-century ethnographer observed the creation of *rushnyky* during a time of plague as a ritualistic form of protection.¹⁶ Sciacca also highlights that “at the moment of passing under the sacred cloth the community is protected and born anew, disease is banished” (p. 6), demonstrating that those who have created the ritual objects and patterns are responsible for the protection of their villages. This sentiment carries through to the mentality of artists today. When asked directly about the traditional talismanic properties of the embroidery on her face masks, designer Anna Marchuk responded that behind all of the embroidery created by her business, there exists a meaning and that the masks she had made were only for the use of her employees as a form of spiritual and physical protection.¹⁷

As mentioned earlier, designers and artisans were predominantly residing in Ukraine at the time of the interview for this thesis. When asked about the meaning of folk art and embroidery, all participants mentioned embroidery as a part of their own identity, whether it represented their ancestors, traditions, or heritage. Olena Rudenchenko, owner and designer of



Figure 12: Masks created and sold by Olena Rudenchenko, featuring traditional Ukrainian patterns. Image is used with the permission of the owner.

¹⁶ This is a second-hand account of the information as presented in Sciacca (2014) as the original is not available to the author at this time.

¹⁷ Cited from personal communication with Marchuk (2020). The original interview was conducted in Ukrainian, with Marchuk’s response reading “в кожній нашій вишивці є зміст.” I have provided the translation.

BagRumadi, a digital Ukrainian boutique, creates both traditional and nontraditional patterns on her masks and believes that “Ukrainian embroidery is [the] nation's genetic code” (Rudenchenco, 2021: personal communication). The owner of Fotinia Design echoes this idea, by stating that embroidery is the history, the spirit, and the word of the people. They note the ways in which the tradition has been passed down, generationally – from mothers and grandmothers to their children, evolving patterns throughout the years to reflecting on the times of happiness and sadness in which they were created. For the designer of Fotinia, the inspiration behind creating the masks was love for Ukraine and tradition, as well as faith in cultural roots and traditions, with embroidery being a talisman.¹⁸

Additionally, the owner of Skrynia, a digital shop based in Ottawa, ON, specializing in Ukrainian clothing and accessories, notes that their shop began creating and selling masks for three main reasons: to support Ukrainian producers and artists during the pandemic, to provide an in-demand object (masks with embroidery on them), and for personal interest. Prior to the pandemic, the shop sold both modern and traditional examples of embroidery, on clothing and accessories. However, the pandemic provided a new avenue for designers and artists to express themselves on a unique ephemeral medium, and after having seen others create similar styles and uniquely decorated masks, Skrynia also began to follow the trend, making Ukrainian styled masks more available in the Ukrainian diaspora within Canada.¹⁹

¹⁸ Cited from personal communication with Fontinia (2021). The original interview was conducted in Ukrainian, with Fotinia’s response reading “Любов до свого краю і традицій. Віра в своє корвння і траиції. Це є оберіг.” I have provided the translation.

¹⁹ Cited from personal communication with Skrynia (2021).



Figure 13: Chart depicting the motivations mentioned by designers and artisans when asked why they make embroidered masks.

The above chart depicts a qualitative analysis of the answers provided by designers regarding their motivations to create and sell masks featuring Ukrainian embroidery and/or symbols. Using commonly mentioned words to analyze the responses, some responses are included in figure 13 more than once to best reflect the answers of all participants. With more than 66% of respondents living in Ukraine at the time of the survey, there was a clear distinction between the answers based on the geographical location of the respondents. When asked about the motivation to create the masks, 7 of the 8 Ukrainian designers/artisans who participated in the survey mentioned protection or talismanic properties of embroidery as a motivation. No participants living in North America mentioned this traditional association with embroidery as a motivating factor for creation of the decorated face masks. Instead, they more frequently mentioned that the masks were made for the sake of exhibiting Ukrainian national pride and to maintain an ancestral practice. The shift from the knowledge behind the patterns to the representation of ancestors and nationality when considering embroidery suggests that, within

the larger context of transnational folklore, while the patterns may be the same, their contextual meaning is very important for those who create and wear them. The private/personal function of embroidery, when used as a talisman or protective object, has only been expressed, in this survey, by those who live within Ukraine and create the objects.

More commonly, responses from both designers and wearers reflected on the visualization of national identity. For one respondent, wearing embroidered masks is “a way to show off [her] heritage and pride for [her] Ukrainian cultural background” (Anonymous #2, 2020: personal communication). Seeing these masks and embroidery patterns on others also evoked “a huge sense of pride” (Heather, 2020: personal communication) which “inspired [respondents] to wear [these patterns] as well to showcase... [their] culture” (Senick, 2020: personal communication). Coming across others wearing the masks and various forms of embroidery, whether modern or traditional, also evoked a sense of relatability for respondents, suggesting that they may share similar passions regarding culture, language, and history with these strangers.

Open/Performative Politics

To better understand the utility of masks as a cultural object, it is necessary to first understand the symbols they are decorated with as a form of communicative media. With the performative function of embroidery being strongly attached to the representation of national identity and the requirement to wear face masks in public, the masks themselves have become, arguably, one of the most valuable mediums available to represent culture at this time. While some criticize the use of masks as “capitalism’s newest product... [reducing] the people who wear them to walking advertisements” (Pawluk, 2020), the consumer public’s responses to the mask survey suggest that masks have made a positive cultural impact as another way to advertise

one's affiliation with one's culture and heritage. Using masks as a form of communication fully utilizes the performative function of embroidery, with attention focused, quite literally, in the faces of those within and external to the culture who view these masks. One respondent to the consumer questionnaire from Saskatoon, SK, who was not Ukrainian and did not own a Ukrainian styled mask, noted that seeing the masks encouraged her to learn more about cultures she was not a part of (Anonymous #36, 2021: personal communication). Another commented that seeing others outwardly represent their culture inspired him to do the same (Anonymous #37, 2021: personal communication).

One element that is prevalent when considering the broad spectrum of folk art as a communicative and performative medium is that, while there are links and similar patterns shared between different cultures throughout the world and history, there are an infinite number of variants of patterns which make it nearly impossible to describe folk art in specific terms. Therefore, we must consider masks as a broad representation of a macro-culture to understand their function within these limitless terms. This continuation of the use of traditional motifs and patterns, whether modernized or not, is extremely valuable as a form of performative culture when considering the attempts of cultural eradication and cultural homogenization that occurred throughout the Soviet period. However, the current drive towards the creation of a macro-identity has also culminated in the use of more non-traditional embroidery patterns or masks depicting different national symbols. While these masks are outside the scope of my research, as they do not have traditional embroidery or any embroidery at all on them, they are worth mentioning when considering the open/performative function of cultural ephemera like COVID-19 face masks.

A particularly prominent symbol is that of the *tryzub* or trident, which is the coat of arms of the state of Ukraine. While the pattern can be found in some more modern forms of embroidery and infrequently in pieces from the Soviet period, it is not a traditional pattern. This symbol gained significant popularity during the Euromaidan, which was initially known for being a “nonviolent resistance movement rooted in the memories of the Orange Revolution” (Kozak, 2017, p. 11), as it was featured in many of the political posters and stickers used by the protestors, and the works of art created during the event. Two different styles of masks featuring *tryzub* motifs are featured in figure 14 to demonstrate the variety of patterns and designs. The first features the words *Heroiam Slava*, or Glory to our Heroes, stylized into a cross-stitched trident. The national salute first appeared in Ukraine at the beginning of the 20th century and resurged as a popular phrase within the Ukrainian culture during the Euromaidan Revolution of Dignity. This slogan itself is an example of the transnational connection between Ukrainian and Ukrainian diaspora within Canada, as it was preserved by those who fled Soviet oppression following WWI in Ukraine, where the nationalist saying was then outlawed and radicalized.²⁰ The second mask



Figure 14: Featuring the Ukrainian Tryzub, or trident, the first mask reads "heroiam or slava" Glory to our Heroes. The second features a mask from the shop Skrynia, used with permission of the designer.

²⁰ See Kaniewski (2018) for more information on the resurgence of the phrase *Heroiam Slava*.

features a floral motif surrounding a machine embroidered trident, resembling the coat of arms of Ukrainian People's Republic of 1918.

During the Euromaidan, anti-protest and anti-concealment laws were put in place by the government on January 17th, 2014 that banned the public from wearing masks, helmets, or camouflage clothing during mass events, such as protests, rallies, and demonstrations. This led to a number of protestors opting for carnival masks, similar to those worn for *Malanka*, and others ignoring this order altogether. Artist Natalka Shust-Tsimbalyuk's (2014) poster "Molytva za Ukrainu" or "Prayer for Ukraine," depicting a young woman in a *vinok* and *koraly* with her hands clasped in prayer in front of the gas mask she is wearing on her face, quickly became a symbol seen amongst protestors on shirts and posters.

The prevalence of the creation of a macro-identity through the revitalization and continuation of Ukrainian embroidery trends has enabled mask wearers to embrace the open/performative nature of displaying culture with everyday objects. Through the responses I have received to the survey to-date, the consumers wearing the masks are most frequently doing so in order to support their community and recognize their cultural heritage. Most importantly, by asking the respondents about their associations with embroidery, it became evident that the open/performative function of the patterns as a cultural identifier, has overshadowed the personal/private function of embroidery as a talismanic or protective symbol. With the open/performative function, these masks are being worn for the sake of sharing one's cultural identity, as opposed to concealing it. This is done through the manipulation of traditional patterns by designating new meanings to the performance or display of the item. While this research has provided a preliminary look at the motivations to wear or create masks with traditional embroidery patterns, it has the potential to expand significantly to look at where these trends and

responses are most prevalent and examine trends among different diasporic communities as well as different local regions within Ukraine. As many cultures share the tradition of embroidery, this research could be further expanded to explore how different groups utilize traditional patterns on masks. Furthermore, the idea of understanding the beautification and politicization of personal protective equipment produces numerous questions when considering the approach taken to creating and wearing masks across a variety of cultures.

Conclusion

The essence of Ukrainian culture and identity, or Ukrainianness, is reflected through the modern use of traditional Ukrainian embroidery. By manipulating traditional patterns and presenting them on a variety of objects, from clothing to ephemera, embroidered items have become widely available within Ukraine and its various diasporas. These patterns evoke pride and familiarity for those who identify with the culture and have become increasingly significant in the ongoing attempt to portray a distinct Ukrainian identity. The availability and commercialization of this form of traditional folk art aids in the transnational dissemination and promotion of a macro-cultural identity by creating a material connection between Ukrainians globally. The renewed popularity and interest in embroidery has led to a variety of objects to feature traditional patterns, including face masks used during the COVID-19 pandemic.

When masks, which were once made illegal by the Ukrainian government, became mandatory during the pandemic, designers and artisans adopted this form of ephemera as the newest medium to be adorned with traditional patterns. Global consumers were quick to purchase these masks and use them to demonstrate their pride and cultural fidelity, as well as to support Ukrainian designers during the pandemic. This allowed Canadian Ukrainians to connect with the current material culture of Ukraine, which is significantly different from the Ukrainian cultures that have been preserved and developed in diaspora communities. With the traditional protective properties of Ukrainian embroidery patterns, their use on objects designed for physical protection emphasizes the need to understand the open/performative and private/personal functions of embroidery.

Through the study of masks and embroidery patterns, in general, it is evident that embroidery evolved to become a prominent form of transnational material culture due to its

open/performative function. While many who create the designs are able to speak to their traditional roots, the choice to wear embroidered styles is rarely done for traditional reasons. Instead, the objects are used to display Ukrainianness and an affinity to the culture the consumer or wearer identifies with. In contrast, the private/personal function of embroidery is less prominent in diaspora communities and as a general motivation to wear the patterns. Instead, the private/personal function is recognized primarily by those who create the objects featuring embroidery. While this indicates that both functions are still present and exist within the use of modern embroidery, specifically on face masks, it is evident that the open/performative function is the main motivation and concern for those who wear and purchase objects featuring embroidery.

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