

Simona Bortiş-Schultz. *To Hold Your Heart in Your Teeth, Women's Work: the Visual Language of the Romanian Blouse*. Eindhoven: Set Margins', 2023. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. 196 pp. \$25 (paper). ISBN 978-90-833501-6-5.

Simona Bortiş-Schultz's *To Hold Your Heart in Your Teeth, Women's Work: the Visual Language of the Romanian Blouse* transcends the boundaries of ethnographic discourse, presenting a richly illustrated memoir. In this work, the Romanian blouse emerges as a textile sign that weaves Bortiş-Schultz's identity into Romanian history and womanhood.

In the initial section "History + Origins," Bortiş-Schultz undertakes a semiotic analysis of the blouse, tracing its origins from Romania's tribal prehistory through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and examining its appropriation as a symbol of communist populism. This garment, she argues, serves as a complex cultural signifier, encapsulating the experiences, identities, and work of Romanian women. The author highlights the blouse's dual semiotic components: the woven hemp fabric and the embroidery. These elements—crafted by women—function as a visual language, encoding and transmitting cultural information and values across generations.

In the second section, "Sewn Codes," Bortiş-Schultz delves into the iconographic visual signs embroidered onto Romanian blouses, which are like stamps on an "ethnographic passport" (62). Through detailed descriptions and illustrations, the author elucidates these ornamental sign systems, drawing upon both her scholarly understanding and the traditional wisdom imparted to her through her family upbringing. She also emphasizes the localized nature of these signs, comparing them to regional dialects; they are distinct and unique to their specific cultural communities and vary from woman to woman rather than universal and widespread. For example, when Bortiş-Schultz references the western region of Romania where she is from, she notes that regional peculiarities, such as black threaded geometric designs with bursts of vibrant colors and intricate lace collars, are due to the dialogic nature of embroidery—it changes over time while also incorporating influences from other women, both in their communities and further off. This chapter, much like a finely stitched pattern, intricately maps the landscape of Romanian embroidery through historical and contemporary imagery, philately, museum and private collections, and personal experiences.

In the concluding section, "A Symbol of Home," Bortiş-Schultz intertwines her narrative as a migrant to the United States with the broader context of the Romanian diaspora, noting that "Romania is the fifth largest diaspora in the world in relation to its national size" (138). She underscores the significance of these blouses as vital threads that maintain connections to the homeland, accompanying Romanian women wherever they may find themselves. This personal connection is poignantly illustrated through the inclusion of her grade school photos in Phoenix, Arizona. Bortiş-Schultz reflects on her adaptation to American life and the new opportunities it afforded her while articulating the *dor* [heart-felt longing]

she feels for the home she left behind. Thus, the blouse becomes a textile symbol of cultural continuity amidst the dislocation of migration, contributing to the ongoing construction and adaptation of Romanian cultural identity.

Initially conceived as a graphic design MFA project, Bortiş-Schultz's book manifests as a small press-produced artist book with the author herself responsible for its design and illustrations. The book as a physical object engages the reader aesthetically: the white cover is embellished with embroidered design elements and subtle white work debossing. The thread-stitched book block, highlighted with red thread, ensures the book lies flat when open, facilitating an enjoyable reading experience. However, the trendy choice of exposed Swiss binding reveals a structural vulnerability; during my initial reading, the minimal strip of glue securing the envelope to the book block failed, detaching two-thirds of the way through the first read.

This book, akin to the Romanian blouse itself, serves as a testament to the resilience and continuity of Romanian identity. Bortiş-Schultz intertwines the exploration of personal experience with broader cultural significance, presenting the Romanian blouse as a resilient symbol that transcends time and place. Through her scholarship, she applies a cultural semiotic framework to reveal the blouse as more than a garment—it is a nuanced communicatory system that signifies the complexities of Romanian womanhood.

Through vivid storytelling and in-depth exploration, Bortiş-Schultz demonstrates how the Romanian blouse serves as a conduit for cultural memory with its embroidered motifs and craftsmanship reflecting the collective experiences of Romanian women and offers readers an understanding of how cultural identity evolves over time.

Ultimately, the Romanian blouse becomes a powerful cultural text, encapsulating personal stories and broader historical shifts. Bortiş-Schultz invites readers to consider the enduring power of textiles in shaping collective identities and maintaining connections across time and space. By examining the intricate semiotic nature of the blouse, she celebrates the richness of Romanian heritage and underscores its lasting relevance in contemporary discourse.

A. M. LaVey  
New York Public Library  
New York, New York  
AMLaVey@gmail.com