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### **Old Believers' Embroidery in the Baikal Region**

**Abstract.** This article presents the results of a study focusing on a traditional form of applied art – domestic and object embroidery practiced by families in the Zaiglyazhets district of the Buryat Republic. The study focuses on the embroidery practices of the Old Believer community residing in compact settlements within the republic. The classification of embroidery patterns and their symbolic and protective meanings are discussed. Detailed methodical outlines and multicolored embroidery compositions are included. The findings are relevant in design, event planning, and educational settings.

**Keywords:** Old Believers of the Buryat Republic, family embroidery, domestic embroidery, embroidered vessels, bouquets, circles, rosettes, floral arrangements.

The Transbaikalia is home to many nationalities, whose creativity forms the diversity of Siberian and Far East culture. The group of Russians, who have lived in this territory for about 250 years, includes the Old Believers [2, p. 5]. They are known as Semeiskie – a traditional name given to a distinct group of Russian Old Believers who were resettled from various regions of Russia to modern-day Buryatia and parts of Zabaykalsky Krai during the 18th century. According to one version, they received this name because they migrated to Siberia with their entire families [4, p. 59].

After relocating to Siberia, the Semeiskie began forming their own communities, adapting to the harsh Siberian environment while striving to live isolated in separate streets or villages. They are characterized by strong spirit and faith. To this day, Old Believers prefer traditional farming practices, engaging in agriculture, gardening, hunting, and fishing [3, pp. 65-82]. The culture of the Old Believers remains authentic to Russia.

This article focuses on studying the painting traditions of the Old Believers in the republic, which differ from well-known crafts in Russia and serve as a vivid material embodiment of their culture. According to G. I. Ilina-Okhrymenko: “The Altai and Ukrainian folk art influenced the painting style of the Semeiskie in Transbaikalia” [6, p. 57]. This influence is linked to the places where Old Believers were exiled and relocated during periods of persecution.

During the research, materials were collected in areas of compact settlement of the Semeiskie in the Republic of Buryatia: in the Tarbagatai district, specifically in the villages of Tarbagatai, Nizhny Zhirm, Desyatnikovo, Burnashevo, Bolshoi Kunaley, at the Ethnographic Museum of the Peoples of Transbaikalia in Ulan-Ude, and at various exhibitions of decorative and applied arts.

The painting tradition of the Old Believers is symbolic, vibrant, and was used both as a protective charm and decoration in everyday life, adorning everything that surrounded people: interior items, household objects, and daily necessities. In this way, these displaced people embellished and softened their difficult lives in Siberia, while also protecting them. The courtyard, gates, fence, and house facade formed an outer circle meant to protect the dwelling from evil forces. The inner circle of protection included domestic paintings, significant objects within the home, and children's toys. Protective symbols in the paintings not only served their primary function but also simultaneously decorated the object-spatial environment and daily life [4, p. 59].

In the Old Believer homesteads, nearly every element was painted: the gates and the house façade with propilnaya overlay carving, yard fences, sheds, and other structures were all ornamented. On the houses themselves, window frames were primarily decorated with paintwork, which complemented the carved elements. Gates and window frames had protective functions since they guarded the entrance to the estate and the house against malevolent spirits and the evil eye. Consequently, even today, rich propilnaya carvings or paintings can be found on these features, imbued with protective meanings that adhere to specific requirements. For instance, the symbolism of the window frame is read from top to bottom. At the very top is a circle—the "all-seeing eye," intended to detect evil—followed by an ornament representing heaven, life, or water (Fig. 1). Birds or flowers are often depicted on shutters, and rainbow motifs are also common. These patterns on the shutters were believed to bring wealth and good wishes, and it was thought that bright colors would ward off evil spirits [4, p. 60] (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1. Window frame upper part (ochélie) from the village of Nizhny Zhirm. Museum of Old Believers' Culture in Tarbagatai village



Fig.2. Window frames and shutters. Homestead-Museum in Tarbagatai village

Gates, being an integral part of the homestead, also feature individual systems of protective signs and symbols characteristic of the Semeiskie culture. A common form includes gates with a roof shaped like a hogback, the protective symbolism of which is arranged as follows: the upper part represents the heavens (decorated with ornamental propilnaya carving and often featuring the Sun symbol), below is a bird or animal as a symbol of fertility, followed by life or earth (depicted

through zigzag lines or rhombuses in the carving) [4, p. 60] (Fig. 3, 4). The entire homestead is brightly painted and adorned with various motifs.



Fig. 3. Samples of gates with "hogback" roof painting. Homestead-Museum in Desyatnikovo village



Fig. 4. Residential gate decorated with propilnaya carving, Bolshoy Kunaley village

House painting, with its symbolism, plays a crucial role in protective charms and the decoration of life. Currently, this aspect of culture can be considered lost, as expeditions revealed that only 1-2 houses with 19th-century paintings remain in each village [1, p. 24]. New drawings in traditional Semeiskie painting are no longer added by homeowners, who instead opt for contemporary finishing materials. The extent of house decoration depended on the family's prosperity and the mistress of the house, who executed the painting. Wealthier estates featured more elaborate decorations, which were frequently updated and made more colorful. Inside the dwelling, walls, partitions, ceiling beams, internal window frames, ceilings, floors, stoves, and furniture were all painted [6, p. 21]. Within the house, the main protective elements are the red corner with icons and the hearth—the stove—which are often painted along with the walls [4, p. 61].

Inside the house, predominantly plant-based designs fill the space with endless branches, flowers, and birds. The most striking example of such wall painting inside a residence in the Tarbagatai district is the Piskunov V.F. house in the village of Desyatnikovo (Fig. 5-7).



Fig. 5-7. House painting in the Piskunov V.F. house, Desyatnikovo village

Upon entering the house, examples of geometric painting, grids, and diamond-shaped elements are commonly seen. Such use of geometric elements symbolized agriculture and abundance in harvest (Fig. 8, 9). Various objects and even small architectural forms within the dwelling were filled with vibrant patterns.



Fig. 8. Geometric painting in the entryway of the Ivailovskii house, Desyatnikovo village



Fig. 9. Geometric painting on the front door of the Ivailovskii house, Desyatnikovo village

Plant-based designs consisting of flowers and leaves were typically applied to household items and kitchenware. Brightly preserved samples of wooden stoves can be found in the collections of the Old Believers' Culture Museum (Tarbagatai village) and the Ethnographic Museum of the Peoples of Transbaikalia (Ulan-Ude city) (Fig. 10, 11).



Fig. 10. Stove bench in the collection of the Old Believers' Culture Museum, Tarbagatai village



Fig. 11. Stove bench from the collections of the Ethnographic Museum of the Peoples of Transbaikalia, Ulan-Ude city

The most prominent and essential item for decoration was the spinning wheel. Rich bouquets, rosettes, or trees of life were painted in the center, while the lower part of the canvas depicted the underworld—earth—and the upper part represented the upper world (sky) (Fig. 12-14). Plant-based designs predominated on spinning wheels.



Fig.12-14. Drawings on spinning wheel blades from the collections of the Old Believers' Culture Museum, Tarbagatai village.

Like similar paintings in Russia, the Old Believers' ornaments in Buryatia can be divided into three categories: floral, zoomorphic, and geometric.

The first category comprises floral designs, including various bouquets in vases composed of curved branches with leaves and flowers. Floral motifs symbolize the vibrancy of life and emphasize social status: the richer the painting, the higher the family's affluence. Floral compositions are based on images of tulips, rosehip flowers, lilies, sarana, zharki, combined into bouquets. Different colors were used, with individual petals and leaves highlighted with contrasting color strokes.

Flowers and bouquets are often depicted as a "tree of life" and supplemented with symmetrically positioned images of animals or birds beneath them, enhancing the protective value of the painting [4, p. 62].

The basis of the floral pattern consists of curved branches drawn in a single line with smaller branches extending from it. Leaves are densely placed along the branch. A common element in the Semeiskie floral design is the "kosachi" or "kosari" [1, p. 24] – a teardrop-shaped leaf attached to the branch with its pointed end. Other leaf types include sharp-pointed petals and multi-petaled leaves inspired by nature. Leaf painting should be free-flowing, often uneven in contour and shape (Fig. 15).

Branches are further adorned with berries. Berries are depicted by drawing circles with a brush or finger. They are painted individually or in clusters, filling spaces between leaves or arranged in bunches at the ends of branches. Berries such as cranberries, blueberries, currants, and bird cherries—motifs found in the local environment – are common. Berry images are detailed with fine tails and dots (Fig. 16).

Flowers were often depicted using inverted "kosary" (scythe-like shapes) positioned with their rounded sides facing each other and their curling tips pointing upwards. Droplet-shaped elements resembling stamens were added in between. Flowers composed of kosary could be arranged in multiple rows, with each subsequent row smaller than the previous. Alternatively, flowers were depicted with simple droplet-shaped petals radiating outwards. As a floral motif, one might

encounter a circular image with dots around the perimeter, reminiscent of Dymkovskaya-style flowers. The number of petals or dots varied. Four-petal flowers shaped like stars with pointed edges were frequently depicted. Outlines of flowers were sometimes traced, and droplet-shaped strokes (called "ozhivki") were added between and within the petals to enhance the visual effect. Additionally, flower patches could be nested within each other, decreasing in size like concentric circles, with each layer distinguished by a different color (Fig. 17, 18). From a variety of floral elements, bouquets were created, symbolizing the tree of life and abundance. Some floral arrangements were placed in vases. Vases were depicted as pots on legs with handles on either side.

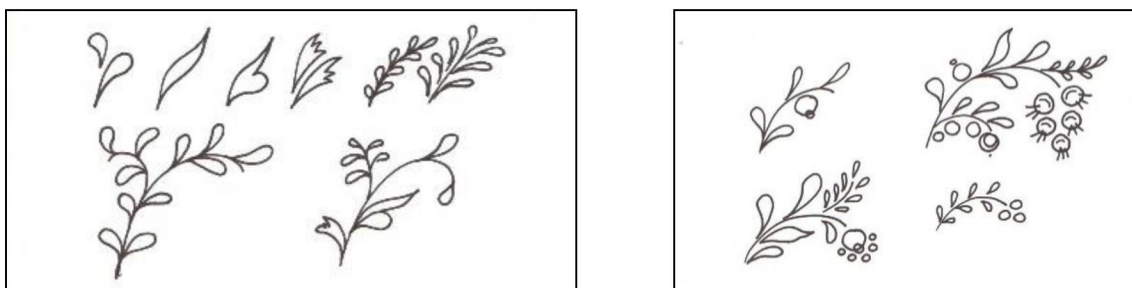


Fig. 15, 16. Painting elements: leaves on a stem and berries.

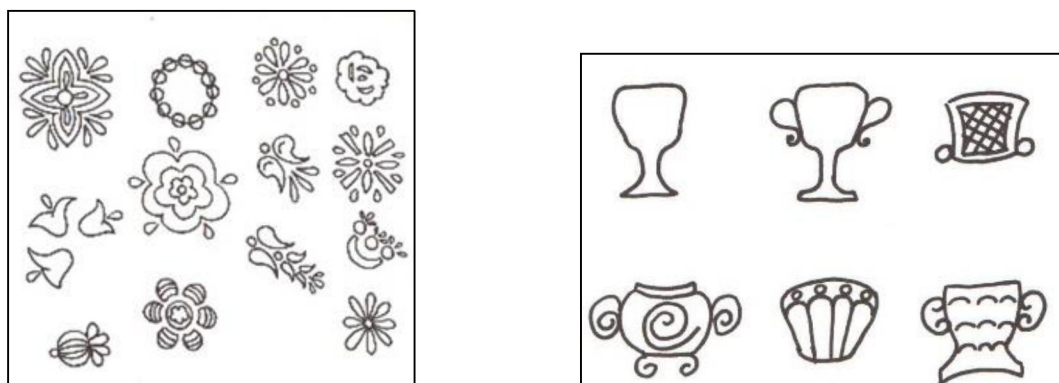


Fig. 17, 18. Elements of flowers and vases

The group of zoomorphic motifs includes depictions of birds and animals. Animals that were present in everyday life, integral to the people's livelihood, and wild game hunted for sustenance – such as sable, deer, and roe deer – were portrayed (Fig. 19). Animals were rarely depicted due to their complex imagery. There is an example featuring a mythical lion resembling a Buddhist creature. It is likely that the influence of neighboring Buryat culture is evident here, especially considering some sources mention that outsiders, including Buryats and Buddhist monks, participated in the painting process [6, p. 44].

Among the most frequent zoomorphic motifs are images of birds: ducks, geese, doves, and roosters (Fig. 20). White-colored pairs of doves and ducklings symbolize family happiness and love, often serving as wedding motifs. Wild birds such as black grouse and grey partridges are also depicted. According to surveys conducted in several villages, doves represent warmth, light, and freedom, whereas chickens, roosters, ducks, and geese signify abundance, wealth, and harvest. These

images adorn shutters and appear on the branches of the "tree of life" inside homes [4, p. 62].

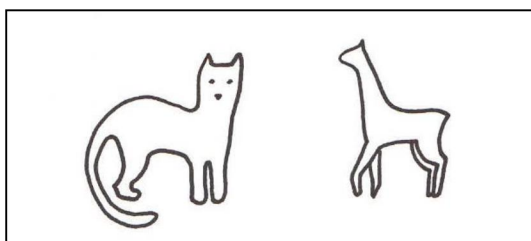


Fig. 19. Depiction of animals (sable and deer)

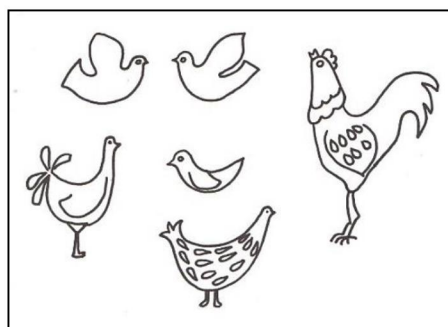


Fig. 20. Depiction of birds

Geometric ornamental motifs include grids composed of diamonds, squares, and triangles. Diamond patterns symbolized plowed fields, and when a dot was added inside the diamond, it represented a seeded field [7, p. 157]. However, there are also references to the diamond shape having masculine connotations and the circle having feminine ones. Grids may take the form of rectangles, diamonds, or triangles. Sometimes, within these "cells," so-called "cucumbers," sprouts (or flowers), circles, or unusual figures representing humans and others are depicted [7, p. 157] (Fig. 21). Placing such a pattern in the entryway serves to guard the entrance to the home and promises a bountiful harvest.

Geometric patterns were also used to frame compositions. These frames could be simple outlines consisting of several colored layers (stripes) or intricate borders made up of geometric designs. Corners of such frames might be adorned with corner compositions, and a rainbow could be painted in one of the corners. Similar framings were observed on doors, chests, and beds (Fig. 22).

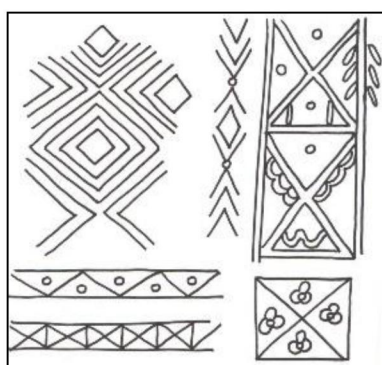


Fig. 21. Elements of grid, various ribbon decorations

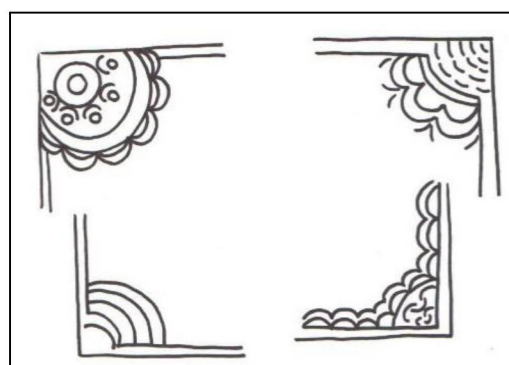


Fig. 22. Elements of corner compositions

In Semeiskie painting, a separate group of geometric and semi-floral motifs, such as circles and rosettes, stands out. These patterns symbolize the Sun and eternity, functioning as solar signs of various shapes that carry purifying properties within the home (Fig. 23). According to Maslova G.S.'s research: "Circular figures on Slavic artifacts from the 10th to 13th centuries suggest they were symbols of fire, solar deity, and pagan cleansing and protective signs" [7, p. 155]. One form of the solar sign is the circle, and circular motifs have been present in Russian culture since

pagan times, with the use of the circle originating from ancient times as a representation of the Sun [5, p. 400]. Circles are depicted nested within each other: from 3 to 10 or more. Around the circumference, circles are decorated with ornaments or simply curvy and broken lines. Similar patterns were also executed in oval shapes (Fig. 24). Motifs akin to rosettes and circles included symmetrical geometric designs with a central part in the form of simple geometric shapes (circle, square, or diamond) and several bands surrounding the central element (Fig. 25). These bands themselves consisted of geometric elements or colorful stripes adorned with simple details (for example, chevrons or dots alongside zigzag lines). Such elements decorated wall sections, resembling carpets, and were also found on furniture and chests.

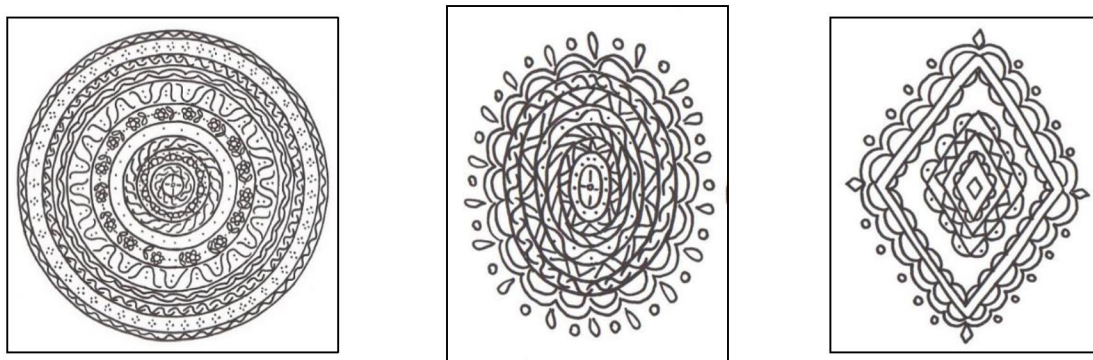


Fig. 23-25. Drawing of a circle, oval, and diamond in the form of a rosette

The simplest element of semi-floral painting is a monochrome circle or floral rosette. This flower is surrounded by elements resembling circular patterns, with additional elements arranged in several rows emanating from the center. Such designs were placed at the center of compositions on spinning wheels, chests, or as the focal point of an entire composition (Fig. 26, 27).

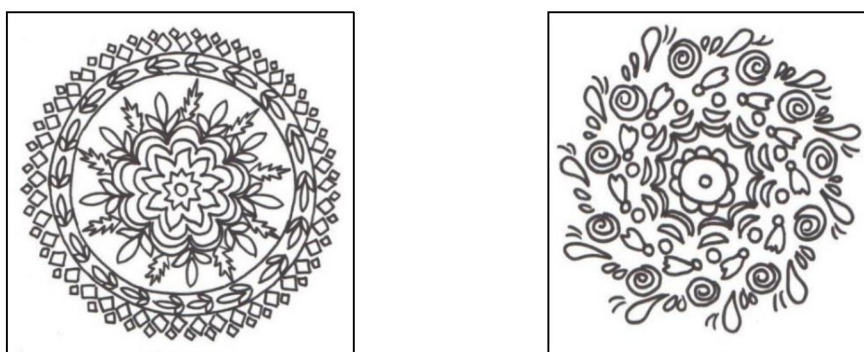


Fig. 26, 27. Motifs of a floral rosette

Based on the identified samples, compositions of Semeiskie painting were created using popular patterns. The author has produced images of a bouquet in a vase (Fig. 28) and a tree of life with birds at its base (Fig. 29). The floral bouquets are adorned with flowers and berries as symbols of prosperity, while the images of a rooster and hen symbolize well-being and abundance in the home. Both compositions are framed with a baguette and corner patterns.





Fig. 28. Image of a bouquet in a vase



Fig. 29. Image of the tree of life

The following compositions feature rosettes with multicolored strips embedded within them. Figure 30 depicts a circle (representing the female principle) composed of colorful ribbons with intricate patterns, symbolizing the movement of the sun and the universe. The composition is enhanced with bouquets and a baguette border. Such decorations symbolized the well-being and prosperity of the family and were mainly applied to walls or doors inside the home.

A geometric centric pattern showcases a diamond as the key figure, symbolizing the male principle, consisting of bands adorned with simple geometric elements (Fig. 31). Corner elements in the form of similar bands are located at the corners of the composition. This type of decoration symbolizes a bountiful harvest and was used to adorn entrances to the home (entryways, verandas).



Fig. 30. Image of a rosette in the form of a circle



Fig. 31. Image of a rosette in the form of a diamond

Overall, the painting of the Old Believers is quite diverse in its execution, influenced by several renowned centers of Russian folk-art craftsmanship in the places of exile. Visually, the painting resembles the North Dvina group (Boretskaya and Rakulskaya), yet it possesses distinctive elements contributed by the mistresses of the households. Therefore, the surviving motifs are attractive in their naïveté (irregular forms and images), application techniques, and authenticity. Among the distinguishing characteristics are polychromatic abundance and profusion of details

and elements, as well as saturation of the entire painted surface with ornamental elements.

It is worth noting that the painting was usually done on a prepared colored background, although there were also rare instances of painting directly onto wood. Often, the paintings combined geometric, zoomorphic, and floral motifs. Pigments were initially made by the women themselves from mineral and organic components (dried flowers, berries, and leaves); later, ready-made dyes were purchased. Thus, the colors often came directly from the surrounding world—cherry, iris (purple), carrot, beetroot, etc. The patterns were executed with fingers or wrapped cloth.

The house and object painting of the Old Believers constitutes a vibrant identifiable aspect of their culture. It encapsulates protective meanings, symbolic knowledge, and decorative aspects of everyday life. Even today, villagers strive to paint their belongings in bright colors, though the unique house painting itself has largely been lost among the culture bearers and survives only in museums and abandoned homes.

This study of the Old Believers' painting can serve as an educational resource and methodological aid in exploring traditional crafts and trades, decorative-applied arts of the Republic of Buryatia, and the culture of the Old Believers

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