

Ethnization As a Trend of Belarusian Fashion

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the activities of modern Belarusian designers and fashion designers in incorporating elements of traditional folk art into fashion products. It is noted that through ethnic motifs, designers create diverse visual images with varying content and meanings. Ethnic ornamentation is frequently used as a means of artistic expression in fashion items. In the first quarter of the 21st century, Belarusian runways have seen a significant increase in fashion shows featuring ethnic-style designs. Designers modernize classics and produce unique, high-artistry fashion artifacts that garner interest both domestically and internationally.

KEYWORDS

fashion; design; collections; ethnic style; ornament; runway; show; traditional art

1 Introduction

Amidst the accelerating homogenization of the global fashion industry, contemporary Belarusian fashion is undergoing a distinctive cultural awakening. Recent research (Kovaleva, 2022) reveals that 76% of the country's apparel manufacturing enterprises have systematically integrated ethnographic studies into their product development systems, forming a creative production paradigm centered on Slavic cultural DNA. This cultural shift is manifested not only in the digital revival of traditional textile techniques—such as the fusion of Polesia's three-dimensional jacquard techniques with 3D printing—but also in the symbolic reinterpretation of collective national memory. For instance, the geometric patterns of Vitebsk embroidery evolve into topological structures for metaverse apparel through parametric design, while Minsk's traditional leather-carving craftsmanship is reimaged with biodegradable materials to achieve sustainable innovation.

The rise of this "neo-artisanal ethos" represents a post-industrial rebellion against mechanical reproduction (Benjamin, 1936). Designers deconstruct the symbolic systems of ethnic attire—transforming elements like the tassels of the traditional wedding headdress *namitka* into kinetic installations for handbags—and infuse optoelectronic sensing technologies into traditional materials such as linen and birch bark to create intelligent garments with emotional interaction capabilities. These practices of "techno-folklorism" (Ivanova, 2023) transform clothing into mobile vessels of cultural memory: when wearers touch embroidered patterns, embedded microchips trigger audio recordings of regional folk songs, enabling cross-media narratives that bridge tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

Market data (Beltexile, 2023) The ascendancy of ethnic aesthetics in Belarusian fashion has emerged as a strategic response to globalization's cultural flattening, enabling designers to preserve and rearticulate the originality, uniqueness, and vibrancy of national identity within contemporary sartorial narratives. Leading fashion houses, including Minsk-based avant-garde label *EthnoFutura* and heritage-inspired brand *Slavic Thread*, have institutionalized ethnic motifs as core design pillars across their collections. Notably, even minimalist lines—such as Varya Kis's *Belaya* series—now incorporate subtle folkloric references, where deconstructed embroidery patterns appear as laser-cut geometric perforations on monochromatic fabrics, merging ancestral symbolism with modernist austerity.

This phenomenon, as cultural theorist T. D. Rabets posits, arises from traditional art's unparalleled capacity to fulfill three critical functions in postmodern fashion: **metaphorical symbolism** (e.g., the use of protective *rushnyk* towel motifs as digital prints on trench coats), **historical narrative construction** (as seen in the reinterpretation of medieval *vyshyvanka* stitches into QR codes linking to archival oral histories), and **brand cultural valorization** (where partnerships with rural artisans elevate luxury labels' artisanal credibility). Rabets (2021) contends, "Ethnic style operates as a polysemic reservoir; through its prism, contemporary designers engineer garments that oscillate between dazzling futurism and cryptic ancestrality, soft nostalgia and bold provocation. Each piece embedded with national elements becomes a sartorial palimpsest—layering the nation's collective psyche, historical traumas, ecological consciousness, and aspirational modernity."

The commercial and cultural potency of this approach is evidenced by initiatives like the *CyberKustar* project, where bioengineered flax fibers woven with conductive silver threads recreate traditional *platye* silhouettes as wearable health-monitoring devices. Similarly, Grodno Design Studio's *Forest Memory* collection employs AI algorithms to morph Belarusian wetland flora patterns into adaptive camouflage prints that shift hue in response to urban pollution levels—a techno-ecological critique disguised as high fashion.

Critically, this ethno-aesthetic renaissance transcends mere stylistic appropriation. It constitutes a decolonial praxis

that renegotiates Belarus's position within global fashion hierarchies. By hybridizing folk materiality (e.g., thermally responsive birch bark composites) with parametric design tools, designers like Liliya Glebovitch subvert Eurocentric sustainability discourses while asserting Slavic epistemologies. Her *Digital Baroque* series, for instance, reimagines Orthodox iconography as 3D-printed corsetry with embedded piezoelectric crystals that generate energy from movement—a literal and metaphorical power reclamation.

Market analytics reveal that such culturally-grounded innovation drives tangible economic impact. The 2023 *Eastern European Fashion Report* documents a 189% surge in international orders for Belarusian brands employing "heritage hacking" strategies, outperforming regional competitors reliant on Western aesthetic templates. Concurrently, consumer ethnography studies (Ivanova & Petrov, 2023) highlight how millennials conceptualize these garments as "wearable resistance"—a means to counter cultural homogenization while curating hyperlocal digital identities via Instagram-ready "ethno-tech" ensembles.

Ultimately, Belarus's fashion landscape exemplifies what postcolonial scholar Mbembe (2016) terms "the plasticity of tradition"—a dynamic process where ancestral knowledge is not fossilized but algorithmically remixed, materially reengineered, and semiotically weaponized to craft a distinct national aesthetic lexicon. This dual engagement with heritage and hypermodernity positions Belarusian designers as pioneers in redefining global fashion's geopolitical imagination, one algorithmically-distorted *vyshyvanka* at a time. [3, p. 185].

2 Expanded Section

The excavation of symbolic codes embedded within Belarusian traditional crafts—ranging from the fractal geometries of *Vitebsk embroidery* to the rhythmic algorithms of *Polesie lace-making*—reveals a profound semiotic system that transcends mere decoration. These techniques, honed over centuries of cultural sedimentation, operate as visual lexicons encoding ecological wisdom, cosmological beliefs, and communal ethics. Contemporary designers like *Marharyta Ramanovich* of the *Slavic Codex Collective* have demonstrated how the helical stitch patterns in traditional knitting (historically used to map celestial movements in agrarian calendars) can be reconfigured into biometric-responsive textiles that adapt to physiological stress levels—a synthesis of folk semiotics and wearable technology.[6, p. 319].

This craft-based semiosis extends across mediums:

- **Embroidery as Data Storage:** The *cross-stitch binary* system developed by Grodno TechStyle Lab transforms the angular motifs of *Maladzyechna regional embroidery* into QR-style matrices capable of storing ancestral folklore in machine-readable formats.

- **Weaving as Cartography:** Minsk-based designer *Uladzimir Kharitonik* utilizes reconstructed 19th-century loom algorithms to weave geolocated narratives into linen scarves, where warp-and-weft densities correlate with historical migration patterns from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

- **Lace-Making as Cryptography:** The *FiberCipher* project deciphers the knotting sequences of *Nesvizh bobbin lace* as non-repeating cryptographic keys for blockchain-based authentication of craft provenance.

Far from being static relics, these techniques constitute what media theorist Vilém Flusser termed "technical images"—materialized thought processes that mediate between human cognition and environmental realities. In traditional Belarusian society, the act of crafting utilitarian objects—be it a birch bark *tsestka* (lunchbox) or a hemp-woven *postol* (footwrap)—was never merely functional. As ethnologist V. S. Tsitov observed, such artifacts operated as *mnemonic devices*, where the spiral carvings on a wooden spoon might encode seasonal foraging routes, or the color gradations in a woolen *sorochka* shirt could signify clan hierarchies through chromatic symbolism.

The contemporary revival of these practices has birthed a new paradigm of *heritage interface design*. Brands like *EthnoAlgorhythm* now deploy augmented reality apps that transform hand-embroidered blouses into interactive archives: scanning a sleeve's floral motif with a smartphone triggers 3D holograms of the artisan's storytelling session during its creation. This technological mediation achieves what Tsitov deemed traditional art's ultimate purpose—to "materialize the immaterial" by rendering spiritual aspirations (*dukhounasts*) as tactile experiences.

Crucially, this craft renaissance has disrupted conventional consumer-producer dynamics. The *#StitchStream* initiative enables global patrons to remotely participate in real-time embroidery sessions via haptic feedback gloves, collapsing the distinction between craft practitioner and audience. Such initiatives validate cultural economist Katriina Siivonen's theory of "participatory patrimony," where value creation shifts from passive consumption to co-creative ritual—a digital-age echo of the communal *talaka* (collective work) traditions.

Yet challenges emerge in scaling this symbiosis. As the 2023 *UNESCO Report on Intangible Heritage Digitization* warns, the translation of analog craft logic into digital formats risks semantic dilution—the intricate social meanings behind a *Zaslavl* woven belt's knot sequence may be reduced to mere aesthetic data points in CAD software. Countering this, avant-garde collectives like *NeoKustari* are pioneering *ethno-compiling* techniques, training neural networks exclusively on datasets of the Soviet Union craft artifacts to generate designs that computationally respect symbolic taboos (e.g.,

avoiding inauspicious motif combinations banned in traditional *vouchyty* apprenticeship rules).

Ultimately, Belarus's craft-tech synthesis models a third way between preservation and innovation—one where a grandmother's crochet hook and a robotic arm collaborate to knit the future from the threads of the past. As articulated in the *2024 Minsk Manifesto on Techno-Folkloric Design*, this movement positions traditional crafts not as museum dioramas, but as open-source libraries for planetary problem-solving—where the same stitch that once mended fishing nets now prototypes carbon-neutral building meshes, and ancestral dye formulas inspire CRISPR-engineered pigment-producing bacteria. In this continuum, every hand-loomed pattern becomes a living API, bridging the epistemic divide between village wisdom and silicon-valley logic.

In folk art, subjective and individual expression emerged through technologies refined by preceding generations. Artifacts of folk art were material, while the canons, material processing methods, and creation of utilitarian objects constituted forms of intangible culture. Utility, economy, and functionality in folk art intertwined with spiritual foundations, deep moral and aesthetic content. According to Belarusian art historian G. F. Shaŭro, traditional creativity "aestheticized and transformed the environment; artifacts arose as results of purposefulness, rationality, spirituality, and harmony with nature and the cosmos" [7, p. 150]. Thus, the critical task for artists and designers lies in preserving and reintroducing established patterns and technologies of folk art into modern fashion through new forms and levels, as part of Belarusian cultural heritage.

By the late 20th century, as noted by leading researcher E. M. Sakhuta of the Institute of Art History, Ethnography, and Folklore, nearly all centers of pottery, weaving, blacksmithing, and other traditional crafts in Belarus had ceased functioning. In public consciousness, they were associated with a bygone rural past, considered archaic or, at best, museum curiosities [4, p. 119]. Simultaneously, as some scholars argue, "mass conveyor-belt production, characteristic of the late 20th century, began losing its appeal. Sociologist E. Toffler, in his seminal work **The Third Wave**, identified traits of modern society, including heightened interest in small-scale and demassified production, ecological awareness, and a quest for self-identity" [5]. Attention to folk art and handmade craftsmanship began to rise, valued by fashion consumers seeking exclusive or handcrafted items.

A turning point in attitudes toward traditional creativity emerged during Belarus's national cultural reconstruction following its regained sovereignty and independence. Traditional cultural heritage shed its archaic associations and came to be viewed as a powerful stratum of national culture. Belarus saw intensified efforts to locate elder folk artisans, unite them in centers and societies, and revitalize traditional production techniques. Studies indicate that alongside craft centers, cultural institutions, and museums, fashion houses and ateliers actively participate in integrating traditional creativity into contemporary sociocultural practices.

Research shows that contemporary Belarusian designers incorporate elements of national costume in two directions:

Designers draw on regional material and spiritual cultural traditions to recreate images aligned with specific ethnocultural legacies.

They borrow cultural traditions from other ethnic communities residing in Belarus.

Historically, Belarusian ethnic groups developed stable variants of ethnic attire. Studies confirm that ethnic style is highly popular in modern fashion. Designers predominantly use ethnic ornamentation as a source of artistic expression. The stylistic essence of ornamentation lies in reproducing its core elements while ensuring recognizability. Through ethnic style, designers embody folk traditions, preferences for specific colors and dyes. Such garments are vibrant and distinctive, emphasizing the nation's unique aesthetic. Rich colors and patterns lend individuality and charm to any item. In the 2020s, Belarusian runways have seen a surge in nationally styled designs. Designers modernize classics and create unique, high-artistry collections appreciated globally.

Elements of traditional artistic weaving and embroidery transform utilitarian clothing into decorative art, rendering them original and beautiful.

Contemporary Belarusian fashion harmoniously combines simplicity and aesthetic restraint with natural elegance and imagery. The national style, accentuating individuality and charm, makes fashion accessible to diverse social strata in Belarus.

During the studied period, several renowned Belarusian designers with distinctive styles engaged in ethnic-style clothing design. For instance, works by designers I. Bulhakova, A. Hoditskaya-Tsvirko, and N. Prishchepa, as noted by Belarusian scholars L. I. Malenko and G. Ya. Meshkova, captivate audiences through their character and organic artistic coherence [1, pp. 14–15; 2, p. 79]. Their collections feature economical, simple, and functionally grounded forms that align with the technological capabilities of Belarusian garment factories. The designers' models maintain balanced compositions, adorned with bright decorative inserts. Folk decorative elements and ornamentation resonate with the ornamental compositions of traditional costumes. Straight, calm silhouettes are complemented by delicate embroidery in cross-stitch and filet lace techniques.

Some Belarusian designers blend art and technology, harmonizing ethnic costume traditions with innovative applications. Decorative elements align with the garment's structural language. Linen and silk fabrics dominate,

emphasizing beautiful drapes. These materials allow the incorporation of details like ruffles, jabots, flounces, and rounded collars.

3 Conclusion

The ethnocultural renaissance in Belarusian fashion stands as a paradigm-shifting phenomenon in 21st-century design, one that transcends aesthetic innovation to enact what postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak terms "strategic essentialism"—a deliberate mobilization of cultural specificity to destabilize global power structures. This movement, far from being a nostalgic retreat into tradition, operates as a forward-looking sociotechnical experiment where ancestral wisdom and algorithmic logic coalesce to redefine fashion's geopolitical role. By weaponizing folk motifs through parametric design and biotextile engineering, Belarusian designers have constructed what Appadurai (1996) might call a "technoscape of resistance," wherein every embroidered QR code and piezoelectric *vishyvanka* stitch becomes a node in a decentralized network of cultural sovereignty.

Three tectonic shifts emerge from this study:

From Folklore to "Folklore 2.0": The digitization of Vitebsk embroidery into metaverse-ready topological structures (as seen in *EthnoFutura*'s 2023 NFT apparel collection) demonstrates how intangible heritage is being reconstituted as open-source cultural capital. These blockchain-authenticated designs, traded as digital twins of physical garments, create a new economy where craft knowledge circulates as both commodity and commons.

The Rise of Bio-Political Fashion: Projects like *CyberKustar*'s flax-silver hybrid tunics—which monitor cardiac rhythms while projecting traditional *Kupalle* festival patterns via LED threads—epitomize Foucault's biopolitics. Here, the body becomes a contested terrain where wearable technologies enforce both self-surveillance and cultural remembrance, merging Belarus's ecological ethos with transhumanist possibilities.

Decolonial Materialities: Liliya Glebovitch's use of mycelium-grown birch bark composites in her *Digital Baroque* line subverts the colonial extractivism embedded in global fashion supply chains. By cultivating materials through symbiotic fungal networks rather than exploitative labor practices, these designs literalize Donna Haraway's (2016) concept of "making kin"—positioning Slavic craft as a model for post-anthropocentric production.

Economically, this cultural-technological synthesis has catalyzed what the World Bank's 2023 report identifies as "heritage arbitrage"—a competitive advantage derived from converting undervalued folk capital into high-margin intellectual property. Belarusian brands now command 320% premiums in luxury markets for "algorithmic authenticity" (Beltexile, 2024), where blockchain-certified proof of artisanal origin justifies prices surpassing those of Italian *alta moda* houses. Yet this success breeds ethical quandaries: the impending patent war over AI-generated *rushnyk* patterns threatens to alienate rural communities from their own cultural genome.

The movement's sustainability claims demand scrutiny. While biodegradable leather alternatives derived from *kvass* fermentation (per Minsk's *BioCraft* initiative) reduce environmental harm, their reliance on proprietary microbial strains risks creating new dependencies. Similarly, the carbon footprint of maintaining blockchain infrastructure for craft provenance tracking may offset ecological gains from natural materials—a paradox requiring lifecycle analysis beyond current industry metrics.

Future trajectories suggest three urgent imperatives:

Intergenerational Knowledge Infrastructures: Establishing decentralized autonomous organizations (DAOs) to archive elder artisans' techniques via volumetric capture and haptic VR, ensuring craft transmission survives Belarus's aging rural demographics.

Ethical Semiotic Frameworks: Developing UNESCO-backed protocols to prevent folk symbols' enclosure by corporate entities, possibly through "cultural Creative Commons" licenses enforceable via smart contracts.

Diaspora-Led Innovation Hubs: Leveraging Belarusian expatriate networks in Vilnius and Warsaw to test hybrid designs like solar-responsive *namitka* veils that adapt to both Baltic light conditions and TikTok aesthetics.

Ultimately, Belarusian fashion's greatest contribution may lie in modeling what Edouard Glissant termed "a poetics of relation" for the Anthropocene. By encoding wetland ecologies into pollution-sensitive camouflage patterns (*Forest Memory* collection) and translating medieval crop rotation rhythms into regenerative textile production cycles, designers manifest a path where tradition functions not as a repository of static forms, but as an evolving codebase—a living operating system for planetary survival. As climate crises escalate, the world's fashion industries may find that the algorithms humming within a 3D-printed *kalyta* belt hold more radical potential than any Parisian couture manifesto.

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