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From Cultural Symbol to Fashion Narrative: A Semiotic Framework for Translating the Slavic 'Tree of Life' Archetype into Contemporary Fashion Design

Mironova Ekaterina*
Donghua University, Shanghai, China
***Corresponding author, E-mail: mironovakate654@gmail.com**

Abstract:
This article examines the methodology for transposing traditional cultural symbols into contemporary fashion design, through the case of the Slavic Tree of Life archetype. It addresses the semiotics of the mythological code and proposes a three-level model for its deconstruction. The article responds to the need for a more conscious engagement with ethnocultural heritage, taking the Dior Haute Couture Fall/Winter 2022–2023 collection as a case study that shows how the proposed framework can be applied to contemporary fashion design without direct stylization.

Keywords:
fashion design, cultural code, Tree of Life, fashion semiotics

1.Introduction

Engagement with cultural heritage has become one of the more persistent trends in contemporary fashion, yet how to incorporate it into design without oversimplification remains a matter of methodological debate. As the mass market globalizes, elements of national costume increasingly risk decontextualization: traditional meanings are stripped from their original setting and reduced to visual elements. Costume has largely lost its function as a direct marker of national identity and regional belonging, becoming instead an object of fashion discourse [1]. Ethnic style, which once conveyed the culture of a specific people, now more often reflects a superficial relationship to its source material, as ornaments extracted from context are applied to modern silhouettes as abstract decoration [1]. Fashion swings to the opposite extreme as well — ethnographic replication, where details of historical costume are copied directly. This approach confines tradition to a museum display and keeps the symbol from developing as a dynamic system [2]. Both strategies point to the same unresolved gap between the semantics of the traditional symbol and current design methods, one that can only be closed by moving from surface-level decoration toward design grounded in a deeper analysis of cultural heritage.

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2.Pathways for Translating Cultural Symbols into the Fashion Narrative

The translation of cultural heritage in design takes several distinct forms. Traditionally, designers work through replication, reproducing costumes on the basis of historically accurate symbols. Contemporary fashion moves in the opposite direction, where direct copying of a traditional cut gives way to deconstruction, myth-making, and conceptual reinterpretation, distancing form from archaic solutions. Here heritage functions as the semantic foundation, the brand's DNA, without imposing rigid constraints on silhouette, which leaves room for the designer's own interpretation.

Work with cultural code typically rests on three methods: cleansing and recoding of symbols, deconstruction of patterns with a reorganized rhythm, and reconstruction and symbolization of the color palette [3]. Each sets out a strategy linking cultural context to how form, color, or a reworked structure of recognizable patterns is perceived. In graphic design and branding these principles operate mostly on a flat plane, but in fashion narrative they have to adapt to the three-dimensional architectonics of clothing. For a fashion narrative to hold together, the traditional symbol must work as a structural-semantic generator of form, setting the properties of materials, the parameters of cut, and the spatial silhouette of the garment. Analyzing a sign's internal structure makes it possible to consciously translate its semantic characteristics into material form when designing clothing.

3.The Relationship Between the Structure of the Slavic Mythological "Tree of Life" and the Methodology of Clothing Design

3.1. Structure and Semantic Content of the "Tree of Life"

In cultural and semiotic studies, the image of the Tree of Life (the World Tree, Axis Mundi) varies by national context, yet a single underlying archetype remains consistent [4]. In the Slavic mythopoetic tradition, the World Tree serves as a spatial axis organizing the universe into a coherent system, where crown, trunk, and roots form a sacred vertical that joins the celestial world, the realm of the living, and the domain of the ancestors.

At a deeper level, the elements of the Tree encode a continuous temporal flow, aligning a cyclical perception of time with human anatomy and the primary elements [5]. What makes this image valuable for a methodology of clothing design is that, as a clearly structured, three-dimensional system, it integrates the categories of space, time, and corporeality into the structure of costume.

3.1.1. Three-Dimensional Structure

Unpacking the three-dimensional system embedded in the Tree of Life requires tracing this symbol's genesis within the Slavic tradition. In the pagan era, the image of the World Tree first emerged as a protective amulet and only later, as mythopoetic thinking developed, turned into a universal model of cosmogenesis linking everyday life to the spiritual realm [6]. This archaic system was built on a vertical division of space into the celestial world, earthly reality, and the underworld, encompassing the key triads of existence through natural elements (fire, earth, water), zones of the human body (head, torso, legs), and temporal categories (past, pres-

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ent, future) [5].

The crown and branches, the upper zone of the Tree, correspond to the celestial sphere, spiritual development, and higher powers. The trunk, as the middle zone, symbolizes the human world, embodying earthly existence, social bonds, and the course of life. At the roots, in the lower zone, lie the underworld, ancestral memory, and the primary sources of being.

This three-part structure should not, however, be read as a formal visual scheme meant for direct copying onto costume. Its value for contemporary design lies in its conceptual potential, functioning as a universal archetype and semiotic framework that allows the cultural code to be reinterpreted without losing its sacred meaning.

3.1.2. Visual Codes

In semiotic analysis, identifying a symbol's visual codes matters because these are what link its outward form to its cultural content. Unlike an isolated graphic element, a visual code serves as a complete system of expressive means that shapes sign structures and conveys meaning. When working with cultural heritage, this toolkit makes it possible to determine which properties of a symbol are most representative and can be adapted into a contemporary design language.

When developing a clothing collection, isolating visual codes is a necessary step to avoid transferring only the outward attributes of a historical symbol, as mechanically reproducing a motif without analyzing its meaning strips away its sacred content and reduces it to an ordinary stylistic element. The transformation of a cultural image and its code therefore requires understanding how the target audience will read it.

Two processes are at work here — decoding and recoding. Decoding isolates the basic semantic components that form the image's semiotic structure, and recoding adapts them to a contemporary visual language. Gao G. describes recoding as isolating the most recognizable elements and then reconstructing them through the means of current design practice [3].

To correctly interpret the image of the Slavic Tree of Life in clothing design, its visual codes can be organized into four interrelated categories (Table 1): compositional-spatial, formal-plastic, figurative-symbolic, and material-decorative.

Table 1. Categories of the Tree of Life's visual codes and their translation into design

Visual Code Category	Key Characteristics and Elements	Semantic Meaning / Cultural Context	Design Interpretation in Clothing
Compositional-spatial	Vertical orientation, central axis, hierarchy of elements	Unification of the spheres of being; movement from base to summit; the idea of a stable world order	Scale, silhouette lines, proportional divisions, relationships between volumes, accents, and compositional center
Formal-plastic	Branching, rhythmic repetition, a combination of stasis and dynamics	The natural principle of growth; development and continuous movement of form	Line qualities, the plastic expressiveness of folds and draping, cut shapes, silhouette contours

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Figurative-symbolic	Silhouette of a tree, birds, plant motifs, fruit and natural symbols	Connection between worlds; continuity; the spiritual principle; fertility and renewal	Signs, color symbolism, cultural markers, mythological archetypes
Material-decorative	Traditional ornament, embroidery, color combinations, surface texture	Cyclicality (through rhythm), connection to nature (through texture), cultural associations (through color)	Texture and finish of materials, ornaments, prints, trims, hardware, fabric properties

3.1.3. Symbolic Meaning

The symbolic meaning of the Tree of Life lies in the idea of continuous cyclicality, vital force, the continuity of generations, and the integration of opposites. At its core, the image reproduces the universe, with its vertical axis organizing chaotic space into an ordered cosmological system. Projected onto human existence, the Tree appears as a sign linking the individual to their origins — ancestors and future generations alike — and stands for the flourishing of the lineage. In folk art it was traditionally shown with birds on its branches, "messengers of the gods" who bring happiness and protect life [7].

Alongside its cosmological function, the Tree embodies the chthonic force of the earth and the idea of continuous natural growth. In Slavic wedding folklore it signifies abundance through a three-part spatial structure: nightingales sing in the crown, bees dwell in the trunk, and new life originates at the roots [8]. According to traditional belief, human souls grow within its flowers and fruit, from where they then pass into the world of the living. In this interpretation, the Tree of Life expresses the triumph of order and harmony. An incantatory formula accompanying its depictions on artifacts reads: "Let life flourish and evil perish!" [9]. Semiotically, this formula fixes the symbol's function as an invariant cultural code standing against chaos.

3.2. A Three-Level Dimension of Cultural Symbols in the Fashion Narrative

Fully integrating a cultural symbol into a design solution cannot stop at describing its functions and semantics, even where the symbol's subtext and cultural-historical context have already been analyzed. When building a collection, the designer faces the specific task of determining how a symbol's mythological structure can be systematically converted into the structural and material elements of a garment without losing its sacred cultural significance. To avoid cultural appropriation, the design process needs to rest on a staged methodology that converts a historical symbol into a contemporary fashion object step by step.

3.2.1. Semiotic Analysis

The first level of the methodology focuses on deconstructing the original cultural symbol and stripping away later ethnographic accretions. At this stage, the designer acts as a semiotic researcher, tasked with moving past a literal, surface-level citation of the pattern's outward form to engage with the deeper semantic layers of the mythological narrative.

The process of deconstruction unfolds as a sequential translation of the abstract idea embedded in the symbol into material form, working through three key categories: archetype, structure, and visual code. The first step isolates the archetype, uncoupling its unchanging semantic core to uncover what truly determines the symbol's cultural status. This rests on Carl Jung's concept of universal images, symbols, and motifs perceived

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identically at the unconscious level by people across any culture or era [10]. The archetype sets the ideological and mythological task of the collection, or of a single look.

Next comes the analysis of the symbol's structure, namely the internal framework and spatial logic that hold the sign's entire system of relations together. This step draws on Yuri Lotman's concept of the semiosphere, defined as a single "living" space of signs and communication outside of which culture cannot exist. Lotman held that meaning is always born at the border, where different systems collide, and that culture divides the world along key oppositions — "own/other," "order/chaos," "sacred/profane," "center/periphery" [11]. This brings the symbol into order, fitting it within the cultural field and mapping its spatial connections.

The analytical phase closes with the isolation of the visual code. The meanings embedded in the symbol are converted into abstract guidelines, silhouette lines, color combinations, and volumes, ready for design realization. The theoretical basis here is Roland Barthes's semiotics of fashion, which treats costume as a textual, sign-based system operating through the mechanisms of denotation and connotation[12].

3.2.2. Design Interpretation

The second level of the methodology forms the practical core of the entire model, whereby the abstract spirit and semiotic codes identified at the first stage are translated into the physical structure of the finished garment. To keep form-generation from collapsing into intuitive chaos or surface-level decoration, the process of design translation follows a strict causal chain known as Material–Technology–Form. This logic rests on the classical triad of technical aesthetics developed by VNIITE and the Stroganov School of Design, where each preceding element determines and physically conditions the one that follows [13].

The first step works with the category of Material, the initial point of entry into design. The choice of textiles relies on tactile and visual properties like weight, texture, density, and translucency, which dictate how the fabric drapes and responds to volume. Fabric is selected here as the material carrier capable of conveying the semantic states identified at the first level, thus allowing the physics of the material to set the natural limits of its shape and define the material vector of the collection.

Next comes the category of Technology — the link connecting the fabric's properties to the garment's engineering structure. This is where specific construction methods, principles of three-dimensional spatial structure, and surface-treatment options are chosen, ranging from rigid frame systems and layering to seamless draping. Following V. F. Sidorenko's concept of "technological form," technology itself is treated as an active, full-fledged instrument of form-generation [14], one that determines the range of possible constructive solutions.

Closing the chain is the category of Form, encompassing the final three-dimensional silhouette, proportions, and plasticity of the garment. In this model, form emerges naturally from the interplay between material and spatial assembly, consolidating their structural potential.

3.2.3. Cultural Reading and Dissemination

The third level of the methodology integrates the designed garment into the contemporary socio-cultural and industrial space. At this stage the audience reads the object as a current fashion product that retains a se-

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mantic link to the original cultural symbol. The translation and contextualization of meaning runs along three vectors: visual identity, atmosphere (the spirit of the sign), and the formation of a new cultural sign.

Visual identity sets the object's outward presentational structure, its stylistic coherence, and its fit with the industry's aesthetic codes. It rests on a principle of controlled variability, wherein the collection's recognizability depends on communication design's ability to hold the viewer within a field of dynamic semantic fluctuation. Here, the embedded cultural code is read through the garment's materialized tectonics, ensuring the original symbol remains recognizable even under a high degree of authorial deconstruction.

Atmosphere, or the spirit of the sign, determines the object's emotional and semantic state. A traditional cultural symbol was historically a functional instrument — protective, sacred, mythological — so its retranslation in fashion cannot be reduced to surface aesthetics. In this methodology, fashion is conceptualized as "moving architecture," revealing its semantic depth through the body's interaction with the garment, whether on the runway, in performance, or in daily wear. This level determines the psycho-emotional state communicated to the viewer.

The vector of the new cultural sign closes the model, establishing the object's final positioning within contemporary culture. The garment moves beyond the status of a historical replica or ethnographic copy to become an independent artifact that regenerates cultural memory and carries it into a contemporary fashion context.

3.3. Constructing a Model for Transforming Cultural Symbols into a Fashion Narrative System

To move cultural symbols consistently into the system of the fashion narrative, all three levels combine into a single model (Figure 1), whose task is to translate a traditional symbol from its mythological background into the language of contemporary design while preserving its original semiotic meaning and archetype. Unlike a spontaneous or purely decorative use of ethnic motifs, this model turns the design process into a working chain of decisions, where each step follows physically and logically from the one before it.

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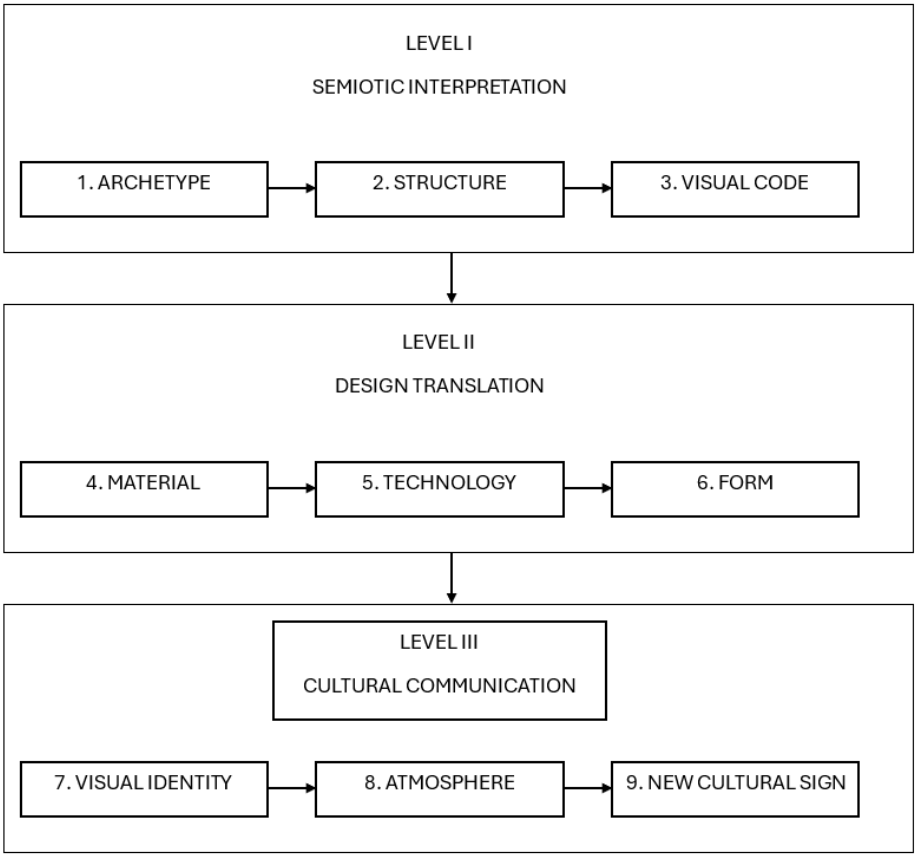


Figure 1. Three-level framework for translating the cultural code

The model rests on a principle of "from the inside out": without deep cultural analysis of the symbol at the first level and its physical interpretation at the second, a new cultural reading at the third level becomes impossible. When successfully executed, however, the model does not preserve the traditional sign as a mere stage-prop imitation; instead, the sign becomes organically embedded in the contemporary fashion narrative, generating new meanings for future collections.

3.4. Analyzing Design Methods and Their Application within the "Tree of Life" Concept

To test the methodological framework, useful both for design practice and for art-historical analysis of finished fashion objects, this section takes as its case study the Dior Haute Couture Autumn-Winter 2022–2023 collection, created under the direction of Maria Grazia Chiuri. The collection's central semantic core is the universal archetype of the Tree of Life, interpreted here as an archetype of Unity and Connection, unfolding through intercultural dialogue, continuity between generations, and the ongoing cycle of life [15].

The move from archetype to real production proceeds through building a sign system consisting of several stages. The Tree of Life surfaces in the collection through the binary of "own" (representing national craft) and "other" (aligned with the global context of haute couture), with the symbol's three-part vertical division determining the three-part construction of form and the choice of elongated, vertical silhouettes on the runway. The "roots-trunk-branches" structure materializes in the free arrangement of branching patterns across

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the fabric's surface, drawing on a piece of embroidery from 1900 as its graphic basis, which the creative team, working with artist Olesya Trofimenko [15], transforms into the image of a fantastical plant [16]. The color scheme rests on a restrained palette of white and pale beige, lending a sense of softness despite the elaborate execution. In this way, the semiotic stage carries the abstract semantic core into a precise set of visual and material means, preparing it for physical translation at the second stage.

The choice of material rests on physical, visual, and gravitational properties, with the collection's material base dividing into several types. Dense fabrics, including cotton, wool crepe, silk, and cashmere, serve as the foundation of the "canvas" and hold it together, their density and shape retention supporting the multilayered hand embroidery as well as the strict architectural framework of the garments, a framework that itself references the mythological source. For the Tree of Life embroidery, the team relied mainly on matte cotton threads with a small addition of silk, together with soutache braiding and metallic galloon, deliberately matching the decorative elements to the fabric's own color so as to avoid a distracting sheen and keep the decoration restrained [16]. A workshop operating hand looms was specially sought out to produce galloon of the required width and pattern, the wider braid going toward finishing the jackets and the narrower galloon toward individual coats [16]. Light, gravity-responsive materials, silk chiffon above all, set the dynamics of the silhouette, their lightness and drape carrying the abstract graphic lines into moving, flowing volumes. Alongside these, a third group of materials carries the archaic code through texture alone: hand-worked fabrics with an uneven surface, guipure lace, woven details in bronze and black lace, and textile ribbons.

The construction methods tie these fabric properties to the garment's engineering. To achieve variable gathering on the pleated dresses, artisans developed a specialized pleating and cording technique executed directly on the mannequin, which allowed them to control volume by hand rather than by pattern [16]. Wherever it is applied, this localized crimping converts a flat panel into a three-dimensional surface. In this collection, the same method reinterprets the rigid silhouette of the classic Bar jacket, stripping away its traditional fitted waist and peplum to align the garment with the organic, fluid symbolism of the Tree of Life [17]. Other technological solutions bridge assembly and symbolic expression just as directly: in the coats, pre-treated cashmere patches are hand-split and joined via organza-supported openwork stitching [17], while the collection's narrative panels, produced in collaboration with the Chanakya atelier, employ threads of varying weight, cotton soutache, and relief embroidery to give the Tree of Life motif physical texture [15]. This high-density manual labor is not decorative in the ordinary sense, since it is what holds the complex composition together [17].

What results is a free, plastic silhouette built from light silk panels and rhythmic gathering, a reimagined "peasant" dress, while the embroidered lines run through it like tectonic accents tying the garment back to its mythological subtext. As Trofimenko herself put it, the Tree of Life "symbolizes time, the endurance of tradition, and the invincibility of nature and light" [15]. This personal reading by the artist aligns with the archetypal interpretation of the symbol discussed in section 3.1.3, confirming that the article's theoretical model holds up against the material of the case itself.

The visual identity is expressed through a synthesis of ethnographic motif and couture aristocracy, with the archetype of the Tree of Life reimagined here as an opposition between "peasant" folk cut, marked by abundant hand embroidery and straight or A-line silhouettes, and the high standards of haute couture. That identity

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is preserved through the recognizable New Look silhouette, embodied in the Bar ensemble that Christian Dior presented on February 12, 1947 and that Harper's Bazaar editor-in-chief Carmel Snow named [17], yet in this collection it is carried into a new register, as the iconic jacket loses its signature fitted waist and peplum for the first time, giving way instead to pleating and embroidery [17].

Dense wool and cotton materials, embroidered with the raised ornament of the Tree of Life, create the effect of an amulet, and their placement on the cuffs, collar, and hem is historically grounded, tied to the protective function clothing once served. The show engages the body's memory through craft skills passed down across generations: the couture object stops being a passive luxury item and instead accumulates hours of manual labor, its technical subtlety visible only on close inspection, and it is this invisible density of work that creates the atmosphere of the show. The collection is built around the idea that work hidden from the viewer demands more effort than what appears on the runway [16], and in this sense its underlying philosophy matches the logic of the Tree of Life archetype itself, where the visible crown rests on invisible roots.

The folk motifs of the Tree of Life shed their local ethnographic character in the collection and register with the international audience as a universal language of contemporary culture, taking on the status of a new cultural sign. Integrating Olesya Trofimenko's work and engaging directly with the Slavic craft context lends the collection the status of a statement, presenting the preservation of traditional technical skills in an age of digitization and the mass market as a transformative act. Chiuri's own remark that there is no difference between designer and artisan [17] fixes this reading methodologically, since authorship of the collection is distributed between the creative director's concept and the shared labor of embroiderers, weavers, and tailors, which matches the third vector of the methodology: a sign taking shape not as an individual gesture but as a collective one. So the symbol, carefully deconstructed and given material form, becomes what the collection is ultimately after: a way of enriching contemporary culture by restoring to it a historical memory it would otherwise lose.

4.Conclusion

A traditional cultural symbol constitutes a coherent system of signs in which the basic archetypes and values of an ethnos are fixed. The archetype of the Tree of Life makes this system especially productive for design: its multiple levels, from mythological structure to visual code, open up space for interpretation without requiring direct copying of form. The three-level model proposed here allows the symbol's original semantic core to be translated into contemporary design without losing context, through its consistent materialization in texture, technology, and the architectonics of the garment. The analysis of the Dior Haute Couture Fall/Winter 2022–2023 collection confirms that the model works in practice: here the archetype of the Tree of Life goes through the full path from semiotic deconstruction to an autonomous cultural statement, retaining its connection to the original source while showing no ethnographic stylization at all.

The model's further development, as the author envisions it, could proceed along two lines. The first would be to test the methodology on other ethnocultural archetypes, other variants of the world tree in non-Slavic traditions, for instance. The second would be to develop a more detailed set of tools for the "atmosphere" level, the least formalizable of the three vectors of cultural reading.

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