

FRONTIER DISCOURSE IN THE CONTEMPORARY PAINTING BY ARTISTS FROM THE DANUBE REGION OF UKRAINE

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Introduction

Definitions. The concept of the frontier reflects a space with movable boundaries; a contact zone of interaction that, under certain conditions, leads to the integration of the Self and the Other. “Frontier Discourse” is presented as a model for studying the culture of ethnic communities located within the geopolitical influence of various powers. The name of the region is a component of frontier discourse. In both contemporary academic and widespread usage, the multiple names of the region coexist:



- *Southern Odesa Oblast* (administrative);
- *Ukrainian Danube Region; The Dniester and Danube interfluve* (geographical);
- *Southern Bessarabia* (Moldovan, Romanian);
- *Budzhak* (Turkish).

The region's ancient history is a kaleidoscope of different states: Scythians, Greeks, Dacians, Romans, Visigoths, Proto-Bulgarians, the Moldova principality, the Golden Horde, and the Ottoman Empire. *The region's modern history* starts after the deportation of the Nogai Tatars and the arrival of colonists to settle and develop the region: Old Believers, Germans, Bulgarians, Gagauzes, Greeks, Russians, Ukrainians, and others. The paintings of South-Bessarabian artists are a vivid example of local art and a separate trend in the Ukrainian school of painting. It was formed under the influence of the Moldovan, southern Ukrainian, and Bulgarian schools of easel painting.

Migration and the formation of Modern Local Society

In Alexander Kara's painting *The Colonists* (2002), the life drama of the first migrants who set out into the unknown is encoded. The family on the cart is a generalized image of a community embarking into the unknown, accompanied by an angel as a spiritual guide. The compositional division of the painting into two color layers – dark blue (the past) and light blue (the future) – serves as a marker of transition from one state of being to another. The double arch, where one leads to

emptiness and the other to a home and cultivated space, embodies the dilemma of choice and, simultaneously, a deep faith in providence and the future.



Budzhak as a Zone of Ethnocultural Interaction

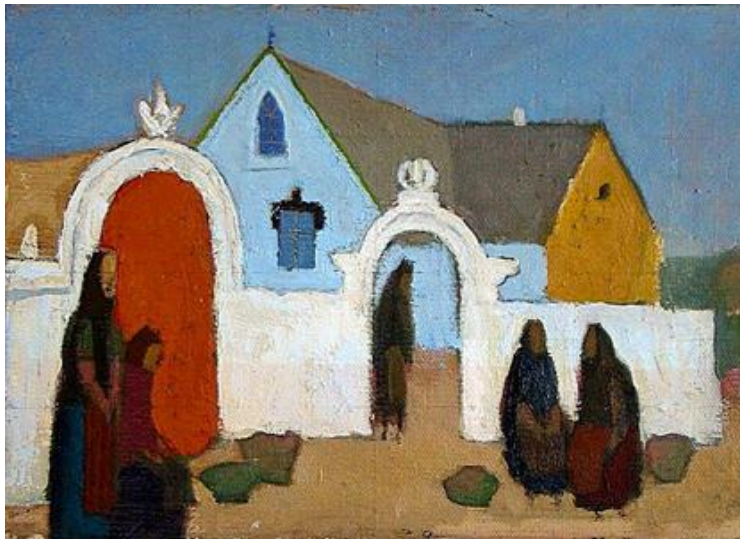
The artists of Budzhak draw inspiration from traditional Ukrainian cultural concepts: the embroidered shirt (*vyshyvanka*), the fair, the decorated Easter egg (*pysanka*), the viburnum (*kalyna*), and others. They celebrate the beauty of the Ukrainian woman (Mykola Fediayev, *Ukrainochka*, 2013). The pulse of Bessarabia can be felt in the depictions of regional culinary culture (smoked fish, peppers, pumpkin, corn, onions, a glass of wine) set against colorful hand-woven towels, as well as in the size of a bottle wrapped in bulrush (Halyna Sapunzhi, *Bessarabian Motif*, 2010).



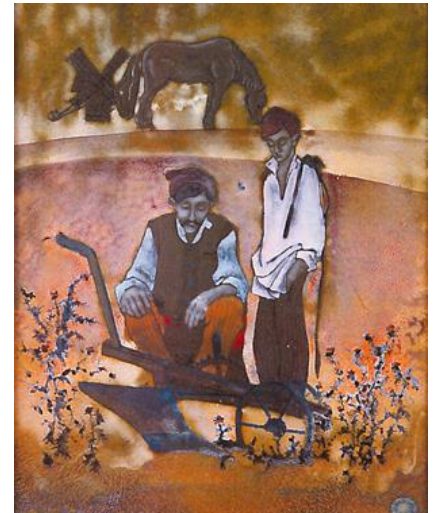
Alexander Kara's painting *The First Furrow on Bessarabian Land* (2005) embodies a synthesis of the arts, combining painting, folklore, and decorative-applied elements. The lines from a Bulgarian folk Christmas song that reflect the settlers' faith in divine support while cultivating the wild steppe inspired the author. Christian saints (The Mother of God, Peter, and George) appear as protectors, while God's Son is depicted as plowmen. The four oxen convey the hardship of working the firm soil of Southern Bessarabia. The background and the frame of the painting incorporate the elements of Bulgarian weaving.



A concise technique distinguishes the painting of Pavlo Balamadzhi. His canvases depict the archetypes of the patriarchal life of Bessarabian Bulgarians: homes, courtyards, cultural objects, and the people themselves (*Bessarabian Motif*, 1989). In this artistic minimalism, every detail acquires deep symbolic meaning. The architecture of the houses includes archaic decorative elements with Bulgar roots – weather vanes in the shape of dragons (See painting fragment).



The enamels of Petro Chakir (1931-2012) are based on the culture of the Bessarabian Gagauzes: everyday scenes, weddings, holidays and memorial days, characters from folk legends, shoemaking, weaving, cattle breeding, a modest home dinner, folk festivals, wedding themes, including the famine years of drought in the region.



Olena Andreeva-Sichova was inspired by Romani culture. Music is the main narrative of the painting, which “plays” with colors and conveys the energy of dance. The image of the Romani has an effect of chaos and harmony, characteristic of the nomadic, free spirit of the Romani people.

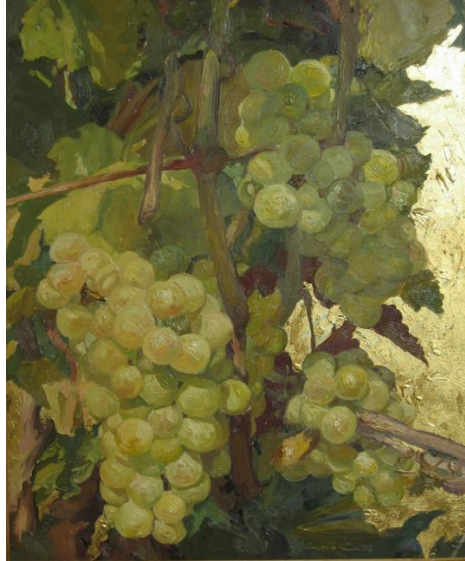


The unifying symbol of Bessarabia is the grapevine, a regional emblem of prosperity. In his painting *Shabo Grapes* (1978), Volodymyr Afanasiev portrayed the cyclical nature of viticulture in parallel with a woman's life: the early pruning of the vine (adolescence), the formation of young leaves (youth), the harvest season (maturity), and the result of viticulture labor (old age).



Women during grape harvesting are usually portrayed as slender and graceful as the grapevine (Alexander Kara, Tamara Tkach). Since the grapevine is a common

symbol of Jesus and the Church, in Sergiy Kostov's work, *Fragment of Pristine Nature* (2008), the golden iconographic fragment against the canvas background testifies to the sacralization of grape symbolism.



Mental frontiers

Balkan



The idea for Ivan Shishman's painting *The Golden Song of Orpheus* (2010) originated in Bulgaria's Rhodope Mountains, the birthplace of the legendary singer. With downcast eyes, Orpheus conveys an intuitive sense of divine truth in a pagan world. His song is a prophecy of the Savior's coming. The painting lacks shadows and depth, creating an effect of eternity, while gold symbolizes the divine light. The dark background represents the darkness of the pagan night, and the golden figure of Orpheus and the Tree of Life symbolize the golden song of salvation through faith.

In the paintings *Madara Rider* (2009) and *Horo* (2008), Alexander Kara draws upon the cultural heritage of the Proto-Bulgarians. The artist recreates the Old Bulgarian bas-relief from the 8th century (Madara village), which depicts a horseman (likely Khan Tervel) striking a lion with a spear, accompanied by a dog and an eagle. A seven-pointed rosette with runic signs, including the Tangra symbol, emphasizes the connection with ancient Iranian heroics, complements the composition (*See more details: Шеевук 2018*).



Kara interprets the traditional dance of Horo as a symbol of national unity. The dance circle is united around an artifact – the Bulgarian rosette. The artist gives special significance to symbolic geometry. The painting is square (70×70 cm), with a disk in the center as a focus point around which the image revolves. Seven figures in the dance form a double circle that repeats the seven-pointed shape of the rosette. This structure carries mythopoetic symbolism: the daily and annual movement of the sun, the cyclical nature of time, the unity and infinity of existence. At the center of the disk is the Tangra sign (IYI), a pictogram of the deity widespread from Mesopotamia to the Balkans. Thus, the painting establishes a connection with the deep cultural layers of Eurasia.

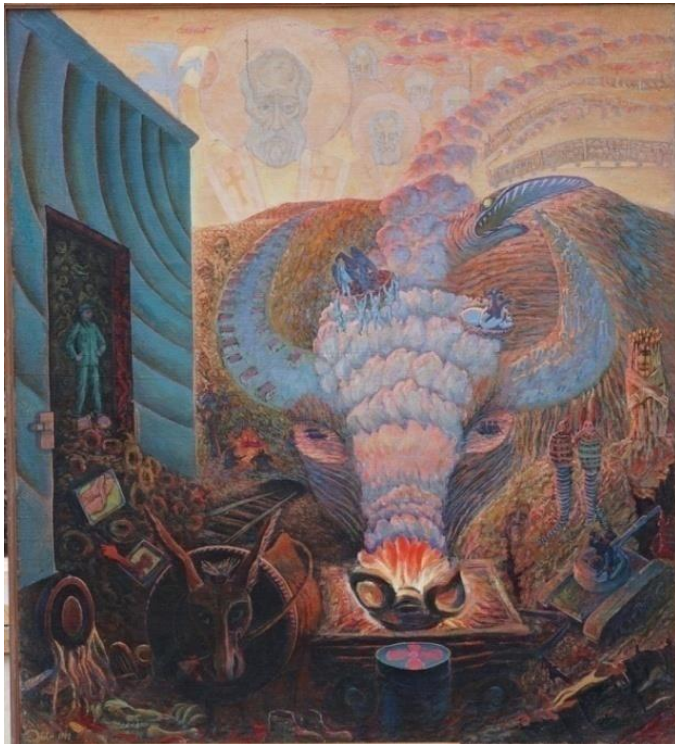
Greek

The region is closely connected with ancient Greek and Byzantine culture. For Budzhak artists of the early colonization period, Orthodox iconography remained the primary source of inspiration. Tetiana Mitaki's triptych *Through the Years* and the diptych *This Holy Island of Pontus* represent the artistic concept of the Danube Delta's ancient past, a strategically important center of Greco-Roman culture.



At the center of the triptych is the Snake Island, located 35 kilometers from the Danube Delta in Ukraine's Black Sea territorial waters, which was home to one of the oldest ancient temples with a cult of Achilles Pontarches with an oracle, indicating its exceptionally high status.

Latin



The bull is a heraldic symbol of Moldova (northern Bessarabia), which symbolizes this historical region as the edge of the Latin world. In Pavel Guțu's painting *The Margin of the Latin World* (1993), the bull is wrapped in heavy chains, and its mouth is scorching hot. A barrel of combustible mixture stands under the bull, ready to explode. The micro-narratives reflect the Soviet chains, the defeated Romanian eagle, Russian tanks, rivers of blood, and freight trains carrying skulls of deported citizens. St. Nicholas looks sadly upon the picture of national decline and degradation.

Post-Soviet

Pavel Guțu's creative composition, *Imperial Piggy Bank* (2012), depicts the questionable achievements of Russia, built on the blood and bones of conquered peoples. Instead of hooves, the pig has tanks, and the surrounding space is covered with barbed wire.



The piggy bank is overflowing with money collected by the country's leaders. The image of the pig-bank is repulsive – it's bloated with fat, and its snout is stained with blood. In the windows of the imperial house, carefree people can enjoy very real benefits obtained through bloody means, not thinking about their cost. So much blood has flooded the entire lower space and spilled from the painting onto the frame.

The modern anti-Russian

The modern war has influenced the formation of anti-Russian sentiments. In his work *Warriors of Light* (2022), Alexander Kara depicted symbols of Ukrainian culture: the Saint Sophia Cathedral, the fresco of the Virgin Orans, the Ukrainian flag, a folkloric guardian spirit, and three Ukrainian warriors from different eras. Saint George helps to overcome another “serpent” – the double-headed Russian eagle. The golden background and decorative elements create an iconographic foundation for this subject, in which all positive characters are warriors of light.



In Alla Chakir's painting *Keys to the Home... We Will Return* (2022) depicts a young woman with Marian attributes (halo, wings, hands folded in prayer). A stone arch with keys to lost homes symbolizes the new reality. In the idyllic perspective space, there is a small rural house (as a dream). In the foreground is a ritual towel with the Tree of Life and modest dishes, but there is no table beneath it... The dreamy houses, like birds, are frozen in the air, symbolizing lost dwellings.



Valeria Leventsova's painting, named after the defiant statement by the defender of Snake Island on the first day of the invasion, symbolizes Ukraine's farewell to the “Russian world”...



Conclusions

Balkan, Greek, Latin, post-colonial Soviet, and contemporary *anti-Russian discourse* represent the poetics of the frontier in the paintings of artists from the Ukrainian Danube region. The *Balkan mental frontier* is represented by regional cultural motifs: Orpheus, the Madara Rider, the Bulgarian seven-pointed rosette, the horo dance, and Tengriism signs. The *Greek frontier* is recognizable by symbols of ancient Greek and Byzantine culture (ancient temples, amphoras, and iconography). The *Latin frontier* – by reflecting the northern Bessarabia (Moldova) as Latin oikumene; the *post-Soviet frontier* – by attempting a post-colonial rethinking of its history; and the *contemporary anti-Russian frontier* as mental resistance to ongoing unjust war.

References:

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