



Essay

## A Stitch in Time: Ancestral Memory and Images of the Future in Ukrainian Embroidery Traditions

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### Abstract

*This essay explores Ukrainian embroidery traditions as living practices of ancestral memory, cultural resilience, and futures thinking. Placing vyshytya in dialogue with strategic foresight, the author examines how folk traditions cultivate images of the future, carrying hope across generations through embroidered symbols, family heirlooms, and community practice. Through personal narrative and engagement with futures literature, the essay traces connections between the tree of life motif, inherited textiles, and the roles of soul and magic in imagining flourishing futures. A community rushnyk project extends this inquiry, showing how shared stitching can foster belonging, continuity, and inclusive futures across difference.*

### Keywords

Ancestral Memory, Images of the Future, Spiral Time, Folk Traditions, Cultural Resilience

*“As long as a society’s image is positive and flourishing, the flower of culture is in full bloom” – Fred Polak, *The Image of the Future* (1961)*

### Introduction

It’s May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022. I’ve just stepped into Schneider Haus, a community museum located in the heart of Kitchener. The smell of warm wax and candles fills the air, and friendly chatter can be heard down the hallway. I’m here to take part in a *pysanka*, or traditional Ukrainian Easter egg decorating, workshop. I grab a seat and chat with a fellow learner beside me. I’ve dabbled with the wax-resist method for dyeing eggs on my own, but there’s something special about engaging in this craft in community.

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**Fig. 1:** Photos provided by author from pysanka fundraising workshop led Marichka Galadza, May 1, 2022

There's a feeling of hope in the air, but also precarity under the surface. It's only been sixty-six days since the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion in Ukraine. I'm welcomed by an enigmatic yet magnetic woman, Marichka Galadza, someone I would later learn is a lifelong community facilitator (Folk Camp, n.d.) who has convened us to uplift and share this sacred folk practice and raise funds for relief efforts in Ukraine. What I didn't know then was that spontaneously finding and participating in this workshop would lead to a journey of discovery (and rediscovery) of the roots of anticipation in my family (Figure 1).

I am a strategic foresight practitioner based in Canada with Ukrainian roots on my father's side and Belgian and Irish roots on my mother's. I grew up in a home where creativity was celebrated. My mother is an avid crafter. She would take my sister and I to local craft shows where she would sell hand-sewn and painted decor, volunteer to lead holiday crafts in our classrooms, and encourage me to take part in arts and crafts contests. Later, I encountered strategic foresight as a discipline and have never looked back. I've been fortunate to have spent the last decade curiously exploring and honing *my* craft.

Much of my work has centered around facilitating and creating the conditions for my clients and colleagues to think critically, creatively and openly about the future and make choices today informed by future conditions and possibilities. Often this happens in in-person workshops where folks are invited to work across siloes, leaning into complexity and sensemaking together to surface trends and drivers, develop scenarios, and generate strategic choices. Occasionally, this includes an experiential futures component where I either generate physical artifacts of those futures or craft them collaboratively with the client to help, as *Stuart Candy (2010, p.3)* says, "enable a different and deeper engagement in thought and discussion about one or more futures." Yet, alongside my formal role as a foresight practitioner, I've been nurturing my desire to connect with my roots. This started with learning of distant cousins in Kherson, Ukraine and traveling solo to meet them in January 2018, and expanded to a curiosity towards Ukrainian folk arts and traditions. As *Ivana Milojević (2024)* writes in *The Hesitant Feminist's Guide to the Future*, "understanding our futures and presents—where we want to go and where we are—requires knowing where we have been. After all, the very distant ancestors of the modern futurists were not soothsayers but historians."



**Fig. 2:** Left – National Costumes from East Europe. (Tilke, M, 1925). Right – Martynivka Treasure depicting man with Embroidered Blouse. 500-700 CE. (Ancestral Glory, n.d.).

### Embroidery as Ancestral Memory

Embroidery, the art of decorating fabric with needle and thread, is an ancient tradition that has flourished in every population across the globe (My Modern Met, 2022). *Vyshytya* (refers to the act of embroidery) is the Ukrainian folk tradition (Figure 2) that centres on embroidered blouses (*vyshyvanka*) and ritual cloths (*rushnyk*) with each article invoking positive wishes and energies individuals want to invite into and amplify in their lives (University of Kansas, 2023). From the color of thread to the motifs, these coded garments are imbued with symbolic meaning – stitched with intentions of health, wellbeing, protection, prosperity and good fortune. In the recent past, women would dedicate a great deal of their time creating these garments and textiles with the intention of passing them on to the next generation. In *Rushnyky: Ukrainian Ritual Cloths*, Chrystyna M. Nykorak (2016) calls *rushnyky* "mirrors of a nation's cultural ancestral memory" emphasizing they "have a language of their own — cryptograms that have been forgotten but not lost." Today, the *vyshyvanka* is celebrated by Ukrainians, the Ukrainian diaspora, friends and allies as a symbol of resistance and cultural identity (Figure 3).



**Fig. 3:** Symbolical features of Poltava Ritual Rushnyk. Tree of Life Rushnyk (Ukrainian Museum of Canada, n.d.)

I had started to craft my very own *vyshyvanka* in February 2023 (Figure 4) and landed on a tree of life design

borrowed from a traditional *rushnyk*, drawn to the generational significance of the motifs (Shevchenko, 2025). Ancestors are represented by the fruits of the tree, the living represented by flowers, and future generations symbolized by buds (Ukrainian Museum of Canada, 2021).



**Fig. 4:** Early days of my first vyshyvanka. Photos from author.

As I began my process to construct the garment and develop my design, my Aunt Lori had realized I had taken an interest in Ukrainian culture and gifted me her stash of embroidered items my great-grandmother stitched (Figure 5). The moment I came across her stylized tree of life *rushnyk*, it dawned on me how deep these roots run. Vyshytya is embroidered with durable thread on high-quality linen, made to last for generations. This sacred tradition highlights anticipation at a family level – bestowing hopes and dreams for our loved ones and the futures they will inherit.



**Fig. 5:** Left - Patty Kornet c. 1960s wearing vyshyvanka stitched by Anna Todaychuk. Right - “Tree of Life” rushnyk, stitched by Anna Todaychuk. Photos from author.

While working on my vyshyvanka, I kept encountering unexpected connections from futures thinking literature and started to see a correlation between these ancient traditions and the (relatively new) fields of futures studies and strategic foresight. First, revisiting Fred Polak's (1961) visionary work on the connection between the rise and fall of images of the future and the rise and fall of cultures. It's also worth acknowledging how fiercely personal this message was for Polak. In Elise Boulding's (1973, p VIII) preface to *The Image of Future*, she writes about how, in spite of living in hiding as a Jewish man in the Netherlands during WWII, Fred emerged with a vision of humanity as "a future-creating being" and channeled "his own intellectual and spiritual energies to communicate this vision to precisely that generation of young men and women who need desperately to know that it is possible to create other and better futures."

### ***Juxtaposition #1: Soul***

Looking back to the work of Fred Polak I'd like to offer *vyshyvka* as a means of cultivating images of the future, articulating positive and flourishing images for future generations. As demonstrated by these juxtaposed quotes, first from Jim Dator: that "images of the future are the heart and soul of futures studies." (Candy, 2007) and second, by Ukrainian art historian Tetyana Kara Vasilyeva (2008): "the soul of the people was vividly and completely revealed in the embroidery." There's a deeper meaning behind this practice that speaks to the heart and soul of the Ukrainian people imbued stitch by stitch. While many families have lost touch with this tradition in their lineages as a result of forced displacement, dispersal of families and political repression intercepting this ancient practice, it has endured and continues to be celebrated as an emblem of resilience.

### ***Juxtaposition #2: Magic***

The second juxtaposition illuminates the role of magic and mystery across these practices. Thread and cloth frequently serve as a link between the spirit world and the living, evoked in this quote from historian Nadiya Pontiashin (2016): "embroidery was not considered work or study, but magic and mystery." While developing a presentation on this topic, I found myself reading an article from a late corporate foresight mentor, Napier Collyns. I was taken aback to see his specific call for the role of magic in the work of scenario planning, "look long enough, hard enough, and the pieces will fall into place. Magic is a very difficult thing – most people spend their whole life cutting magic out" (Sharpe, 2015, p. 21). Whether through thread or thought, both practices weave tangible form and insight from intuition, inviting hidden forces to guide us in imagining different *and better* tomorrows.

### **Sharing with the JFS Community**

On World Vyshyvanka Day 2025, I joined the Journal of Futures Studies Community of Practice to share my musings on the connections between craft and foresight, and open a dialogue with the community to share their perspectives. I was moved by how organically folks wove in their stories, cultures, traditions and hopes. From serendipitously unearthing photos of late grandparents to acknowledging that past generations often leave "bread crumbs of inspiration and imagination" in plain sight (Epps, 2025), should a willing receiver of these breadcrumbs be open to the call. And also a tension, looking at craft as a channel to push for unity instead of separation by identity groups. As Ivana shared in the JFS session, we might take a more inclusive "spatial" perspective with the intention of "restitching to create more inclusive futures and more peaceful futures" across National identities, followed by an invitation from Zabrina Epps for us as futurists to have "ancestral confidence" and acknowledge the power we have within us that "doesn't actually come from us in the realm that we see, but comes from the realm that we don't," acknowledging the truth of our lineages and roots that can be felt but not seen (JFS Community of Practice, 2025). In our hour on the call together, the seventeen of us intentionally cultivated hope together. It has been an honor to see Anisah Abdullah and Ivana Milojević draw inspiration from this gathering and extend the invitation to explore threads of hope to the broader JFS community in this symposium.

## Spiral Time

“But to create alternative futures, we must also create alternative pasts.” - Ivana Milojević (2025)

Throughout this journey, I have intentionally followed the threads of the past to look deeper at our family’s roots and understand how our identity has evolved over time. From the discovery of artifacts crafted or handed down in the 100+ years my family has been in Canada, to conversations with the dozens of aunts, uncles and cousins I am fortunate to have living nearby in my hometown. At times, I have felt weighed down by regret for the cultural connections that have faded—from language and traditional dance to spiritual practices. But I’ve also been inspired and humbled by the privilege of stability and an enduring sense of community and family bonds. We now have five generations established from the roots that my great-grandmother Anna Todaychuk and her husband Jackov established. Every year we gather over Christmas to celebrate the holidays together and inevitably I learn more from my relatives, building up my sense of collective belonging, continuity and cultural memory with each conversation. While completing this article, I was exhilarated to learn that the thread of the embroidery tradition in my family was in fact, still intact. My Aunt Janet (while technically a first cousin once removed) has maintained an embroidery practice that she first picked up as a child. Ordered to stay home from school when sick with the chickenpox, my Aunt Janet spent weeks with my great-grandmother and took the opportunity to learn the craft directly from her. She continues to stitch, though infrequently, for her loved ones. It’s in these moments I’m reminded of the magic Napier spoke about (Sharpe, 2015).

While I never had the privilege of meeting my great-grandmother Anna, my interpretation of her work, the motifs, and her intentions have evolved, informed by teachings from those better versed in this ancient craft. In hindsight, mirroring a process Ukrainian-Canadian artist Sasha Shevchenko (2025) describes, “I consider embroidery motifs to be anything but static. They are made to change and adapt to the viewer’s representation... Like a fading memory, the abstracted motif carries traces of its origin, while the mind begins to fill its fragmented parts through creative guesswork.” Through this process, perhaps I’m engaging in spiral time, a concept surfaced by Sohail Inayatullah (1993) which speaks to “a return of the past but onward into the future.”

## The Collective Rushnyk

I didn’t know then, but the generous woman stewarding a sacred tradition would become a close friend and folk mentor, generously guiding me with her knowledge of sacred traditions.

Marichka has also been stitching, but in a collective, forward-looking sense. As a community organizer who acts in big and small ways to welcome newcomers of all nationalities and experiences to our community, my friend Marichka has embarked on a beautiful embroidery project to create a community rushnyk (Figure 6). Throughout the year, Marichka has been inviting community members, one at a time, to contribute stitches to a rushnyk. Each individual is welcome to add as many or as few stitches as they’d like along a template. Collectively, these contributions are revealing a tree of life motif, a modern variation on an ancient emblem that subtly reflects (stitch by stitch) the diversity of our community. Hands young and old, new to our region and well-established, new to the craft and deeply skilled have all played a role in crafting this sacred cloth. At a time when differences are being weaponized for political gain around the world, and division over unity has become a dominant rallying call, this act of cultivating multicultural ties and resilience is at once ancient and new.



**Fig. 6:** Photos from Kultrun Music Festival, Kitchener, Ontario. Collective Rushnyk by Marichka Galadza. July 13, 2025.

#### Note

Microsoft Copilot was used sparingly for clarity and cohesion of text in this essay.

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