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Urban Globalism versus Rural Artisans: Sustainable Practices of Making

This discussion looks at the revival of crafts and their role as sustainable methods of production in the Romanian counties.¹ The focus is on: *craft production* as a cooperative system of making, sustaining traditional ways of life (where home is self-sufficient model of production and consumption); the regeneration of the *handmade culture* as a means of sustaining the cultural heritage and identity of Romanian artisan communities; and the concept of the *folk market* as a potential mechanism for elevating the production and circulation of craft products in a 'closed economy'.

The coming into being of the Romanian counties determined characteristic ethno-folkloric manifestations visible in material and spiritual culture. As a major component that made-up the material culture specific to each geographic region, Moldavian, Maramuresan and Transylvanian craft production has *marked* and *preserved* in time the identity of the counties. Having evolved within the socio-economic changes of the country, the Maramuresan, Transylvanian and Moldavian *village* constituted the basic structure for regional craft development. Whilst associated with popular beliefs and traditions and being dependant on domestic structures of living, *the crafts* have endured historical changes and acquired historical permanence.

The development of *the crafts* within the entity of the village was a result of an ethno-genetic process conditioned by specific historical, political and economic factors. Regional techniques, traditions and materials determined site-specific differentiations in the evolution of the hand-made.² This regional craft specificity has been preserved from architecture to costume, from woven or embroidered textiles to ceramics and local activities and traditions; it relayed on a self-contained economy based on sustainable practices of living.

Before communism, *the home* was a self-sufficient model and place of production: the making of costumes, domestic tools or decorative objects, of interior furnishings and pottery depended on local materials obtained within a circular agricultural regime.³ Indeed, the village production of goods was based on *home crafts* which represented a co-operative craftsmanship structure that enabled relational networks of interconnections between makers. Their respective trades were based on a system of values preserved in objects crafted with skill and knowledge; *craft production* was at the core of all rural centres, and manual labour was the mainstay of society. Despite of political and historical changes the entity of the village has remained as a structural unit, being little altered by architectural planning, social or economical shifts. Villages have endured in time as a result of adapting to the surrounding nature, using its resources within an agricultural system of production. Regional crafts (pottery, woodcarving, embroidery, weaving) flourished in villages which based their production on *internal sources*, cultivating a natural sense for materials and an inherent awareness of the environment.

For example, local potteries made domestic ware using the wheel and local clays (varying from region to region) fired at low temperatures in clay-kilns. Potters' workshops, active in Horezu, Marginea, Vama and Radauti, preserved indigenous techniques for making ceramic ware decorated with local glazes. In Bukowina and Maramures the local culture of woodwork, visible in the carved porches of most

churches and houses and that of domestic utensils used local hardwood. The domestic textile industry was self-sufficient, relying on the home-production of wool and linen, on hand-made embroidery, and the use of vegetable dyes (for ornamentation).⁴ Peasant rugs were woven on the loom at home and were used as decorative pieces for floors or interior walls.



Each county distinguished itself by a whole repertoire of ornamentation, its own style, colour, geometry and symbolism, visible in dress, interiors or pottery.⁵ Regional articles of clothing, pottery and woodcarving differentiated between work, mundane and ritual occasions and were adapted to occupation, geographical zone, gender, age or social status⁶. The typology of these artifacts were essential in the preservation of traditions, rites of passage and social activities in which people participated and kept -according to known rules evolved in time⁷. Hand-made artefacts combined technical efficiency with functionality, ingenuity, beauty and simplicity; they epitomized high artistic standards and proficient workmanship. As such, the village crafts imposed no demarcation between the utilitarian and beautiful, the material and symbolic (Alison Clarke),⁸ erasing the dividing line between popular culture and 'high art'. Supporting immediate needs and established models of living - weaving, embroidery and pottery - were the result of a '*closed domestic production*' and market system. Their artefacts reflected the culture of the individuals who made and used them, reverberating the cultural history of the society of which they were part.

Industrialization modified the integrity of village regional production, opening its borders to manufactured products. However, at the beginning, these didn't overpower the well-established production of the village, where domestic crafts have continued to be led by popular masters and specialized makers. Even the ideology of communism did not submerge the morphologic characteristics of the hand-made popular costume or pottery, which were preserved where villages have kept their traditions, rituals and religious beliefs. But, the technological development of the *city industry* slowly modified local making, thus opening *the 'closed', self-sufficient economy* of the village. The structural change of a new social order, political restrictions and class tensions; and on the other hand the circulation of industrial products and product exchange on national markets enabled the introduction of new manufacturing and technological improvements. The influence of the industry was mostly perceived in mass-produced goods which start to substitute handmade articles, whilst new materials slowly replaced the ones provided inside the village domestic economy. Thus industrial production started to influence craft production *value*.

The affluence of new materials influenced the making possibilities for crafts - and as such, the beginning of communism saw a series of cooperative centres which maintained the craft practice, still generating region-specific domestic artefacts.⁹ Local manufacturing centres adapted craft skills, creating hand-made products that found both an internal and external market teaming-up traditional craftsmen to develop new products as a valuable strategy for local empowerment and social sustainability. At first, the designed did not replace the crafted in all its sensitive and semiotic dimensions. However, with the raise of the communism regime, and as a result of drastic political changes, the country was dominated by a social programme that supported the *uniformity* of urban living, diminishing the value of the village as a self-supporting entity. It propagated industrialization, technological processes and mass-production in all counties, causing the proliferation of goods. These factors *dis-embedded* craft and living practices developed and evolved traditionally, slowly effacing the popular individuality preserved in cooperative centres of production. Further on, the political chaos and subsequent social transformations ensued after the 1989 revolution accelerated at first the production of commercial goods dictated by outside markets, leaving without resort the local cooperative craft centres supported within the village structure¹⁰. The mass-uniformity imposed in urban living by an equalitarian system has thus diminished the hand-made practices evolved by makers as viable forms of production and product circulation.

After the 1989 revolution many factories catered products for an international commercial market, whilst the import of goods and adoption of Western styles invade the market's *cultural valuation*. In the following years many industries failed their production of goods as a result of an internal economic crisis, which in time enabled the raise of small studio-based initiatives relaying on modest means and thus making use of more traditional manufacturing methods. These co-operative craft centres diversified various craft techniques and materials, adding authenticity, skill and tradition alongside the intuitive, contemplative process behind their fine artisanship.

Traditional techniques, like those of weaving, hand-throwing or hand-building are re-practiced by young makers who relay on craft skills evolved by previous generations. Many craft practices start to reinvent their value: old processes are regenerated. Not only that these forms of making are practiced by local and indigenous people following tested traditions, but their reappearance starts to contribute, in new forms – to the redefinition of craft practice. At the same time, beginning to relay on self-sufficient means and local resources, the hand-made production signals the return to the *socio-economy of community* life. In a few regions of Moldavia, Transylvania and Maramures, the production of ceramics and textiles, for example, is re-practiced in pre-industrial form, when hand-woven and hand-decorated cloth and ceramics partook in everyday or ritual affairs within the local community. As a result, the hand-made (re-valued in pattern, colour, style, decoration, use and functionality) - marks the transition to a field of 'aesthetic enjoyment', becoming a production that 'preserves the meanings related to life, use, and symbolism thought.'¹¹ In embodying principles of beauty, craft objects defy contemporary changes of aesthetic criteria, distinguishing themselves as cultural markers that have reinvented their symbolic value, acting as cultural vehicles for regional identity in a culturally divided society. They stand as tangible proof for the civilization of the village in diverse regions in Romania, representing key components of a collective national identity.



Thus, the hand-made starts to be slowly reappraised in many regions, and the incipient return to hand-crafted models of making and craft production is supported by a growing internal market which disseminates hand-made products towards the cities. Artisan works resurface in folkloric markets held throughout the country at different times of the year. These cultivate human-to-human relations, social engagement and cultural recognition. If in the past the village market performed a function of simple exchange, where goods interchanged according to equivalent values and immediate uses; the contemporary folk market proposes a different form of 'consumption'. Namely, it perpetuates a cultural inheritance that has been diluted by the communist regime. It retraces the cultural identity of the various parts of the country, remaking their cultural image; it preserves the knowledge of the crafts involved in the production of the artefacts together with the knowledge of their value.

The increased interest in the regeneration of the crafts and the handmade is visible in many festivals held all over the country; these revive old rituals, promoting hand-crafted objects for domestic use that act as cultural signs and symbols, responding to both aesthetic and functional necessities.¹² As such, by circulating its hand-made products, folkloric markets determine a return to initial object cultural values in a culturally hybrid society. They promote a different attitude towards artistic patrimony through the production of new relationships to culture in general.

In the current climate of change, the objects generated by contemporary craft communities are only marginally adopted in domestic practices of living, becoming expressions of fine artistry. Whilst fulfilling a symbolic rather than practical role, they acquire the status of art objects and are collected by those who know their history. Thus whether craft objects re-enter practices of domestic use (especially in rural households) thus re-producing sustainable forms of living and traditional practices of making; or whether they are elevated to art objects (becoming an expression of cultural capital), craft products begin to permeate the rehabilitation of cultural and social forms of everyday life generated by craft.

It can be concluded that the current circulation of craft objects allows traditional folkloric practices to regenerate the *social* and *economic* life of local communities. The internal folk market system promotes the intrinsic value of the hand-made and repositions the '*closed economy*' specific to rural areas of Romania. The re-evaluation of local techniques and materials, regional styles and skills that are centuries old also revalidate sustainable modalities of production that involve sustainable practices of *making* and *living*. Because folk culture, rural knowledge and craftsmanship involve sustainable methods and processes of production and socialising embedded in nature, they can bring 'slow' value into the material world. Thus, the rehabilitation of an Eastern-European culture generated by craft can develop potential forms of inhabiting global culture.

End-Notes

¹ As Grace-Lees Maffei said, the production of 'home crafts' is relevant in "engaging issues of public and private domesticities"

² Like pottery or woodcarving, of woven or embroidered costumes

³ The leather, linen and wool obtained in the home were used for making domestic woven cloth.

⁴ Banateanu, Tancred. 1977. Romania, din Tezaurul Portului Popular Traditional. Introduction by Mircea Malita. Bucuresti: Sport-Turism

⁵ Dancing, weddings, funerals followed an established practice and code for clothing marking gender and age. For example head decoration for women were extensively varied, even from one village to another in the same region, and these finely woven or embroidered head-pieces completed the rest of the costume.

⁶ For example, villagers of lower social status wore simple articles of costume and used simple ware for food consumption; whilst those of important status and wealth wore colorful and rich ornamented costumes of high quality fabric and used expensive and well-crafted ware.

⁷ Interestingly, the names of the varied dress elements, as those of the pottery utensils used traditionally have been lost once the artifacts ceased to be used (i.e. opregul, catrintele, fota, valnicul).

⁸ By dividing forms of domestic living, contemporary civilization has lost the link between decorative arts in interior and costumes.

⁹ For example, imported fabrics (cashmere, lace, wool) influenced the making of costumes; new glazes offered new chromatic combinations to local potters.

¹⁰ For Siegfried Giedion, the form of the object-world articulated the social structure of the past.

¹¹ Phillip Rawson - In de Waal, E. 2003. 20th Century Ceramics. London: Thames and Hudson. p.175

¹² For example the Maiden's Market (Gaina Mountain), an ancient pastoral festival (held every year on the 20th of July on the day of Saint Elijah).