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Making of an Exhibition: On the Clothesline. Romanian Dowry
 (Romanian Peasant Museum & Romanian Cultural Institute, London, September 2009)

Simina Bădică & Anamaria Iuga

Hanging precious peasant textiles on improvised clotheslines might not have been a first for the Peasant Museum curators¹, yet it was certainly a first for the London guests attending the opening of an exhibition that forced them to touch the exhibits, bend in order to pass underneath them and even get lost in the labyrinth of Romanian strings, clothes and images.

Early in 2009, the Romanian Peasant Museum received the tempting invitation of exhibiting in London, at the Thames Festival and the Romanian Cultural Institute. Nine months later, in September, the exhibition was born in the sumptuous ground-floor exhibition space in Belgrave Square, London.

From the good room to the clothesline...

... the exhibition changed concept and shape several times. As we left Bucharest, only a few days before the official opening we were still wondering if the exhibition project in our minds could actually become reality.

Our first proposal, accepted by the Romanian Cultural Institute, was an exhibition on the Romanian good room (*camera buna*), a subject of which Ana had just finished writing her PhD dissertation on. We were seduced by the founding idea of the good room, which is very similar to the founding idea of the museum; they are both about exhibiting and showing off hidden treasures.

The good room, the *ruda* room in Northern Romania, is in itself an exhibition, we thought. First, because it is an exhibition of the best and most beautiful items the family possesses, and second, because these objects are the ones used by the family to represent itself in front of the community, they are used as “social indicators”. The exhibiting technique, if one can speak of it, is crowding. All the more crowded the good room is, all the more beautiful it is considered: carpets, pillows, tablecloths, linen, towels, icons, decorated plates, the more, the better!

For a few weeks we worked with the possibilities of representing the good room in an exhibition. We even came up with some clever ideas, which are completely forgotten as we write. The e-mail that was to destroy all our previous curatorial plans contained photographs; photographs of the room that would host our exhibition. We knew it was a big room in an imposing 19th century London mansion; but somehow we assumed it had been neutralized with white walls in order to host exhibitions. We were very wrong; the room was covered with sophisticated wooden carvings all around the walls, while a huge fireplace covered the opposite wall to the entrance. We instantly realized that no matter how good the good room was for the peasant who invested its life energies into it, it would only look poor and shabby in the surrounding 19th century lavish interior decoration.



But how to hide the fireplace? How to ignore the room so heavy with aristocratic atmosphere? How to exhibit peasant beauty in the midst of aristocratic splendour? We certainly did not want our *ruda* room to look like Cinderella.

We finally had to engage in an open fight with the splendid room that would host us. After long discussions with Ioana Popescu, who, the very same day had a personal experience that gave us the final idea of the exhibition, we decided to enact that special moment when the items of the good room are taken out for cleaning and freshening up; that special moment when they are hanging on the clothesline, in all their splendor, for everyone to see and admire. We decided to fill the room with a labyrinth of strings, from one wall to the other, and so we would transform the sumptuous London reception room in a peasant courtyard.

We started preparing the leaflet of the exhibition, for which we used photos from the archive of the Museum, but also drawings that the artist Monika Pădureț made especially for us. We pegged

the papers of the leaflet with clothes-clams. Monika helped us in London too. She had the most beautiful handwriting, so she wrote all the texts that we introduced in the exhibition. She also made the “poster” of the exhibition, hanged at the entrance.

The story we finally told Londoners...

... went like this:

Romanians keep their treasures indoors. Having a treasure room, *the good room*, the *ruda* room, filled with hand-made textile, clothes, carpets, items that are always displayed yet never used, is a must for any well-off Romanian peasant. This is the dowry of the woman and preserving it is a matter of pride and hard work. Twice a year, before important holy days, these treasures are taken outdoors to be cleaned and freshened up. They are washed at the river or at the water whirlpool; they are hung on the clothesline, ironed, treated for moths and arranged again *on*

display in the good room. All these procedures can last as long as a week; as they say, it takes hard work to have a good room.

This exhibition borrows from the village a form of display that the peasant does not consider as such. Hanging the precious family dowry on the clothesline is not a form of exhibiting it; it is only a necessary annual ritual. Still, the foreigner, the ethnographer, is fascinated by the display of textile on the clothesline. There (s)he can see and feel the fine details, the thread, the colored models, the hand-made linen. It is twice a year that the treasures of the good room can be thus observed. For the rest of the year, they are hidden, one on top of the other, in the crowded museum that is the good room.

Some of the objects on display bear stains and marks of old age. These stains are a consequence of them never being used and kept one on top of the other all through the year. It is good to know that even precious textiles need to be worn or used from time to time in order to keep their beauty.

This is your chance to admire them from a close distance. Don't be afraid to touch them if you feel the need to, but bear in mind their beauty is also their fragility and old age.

And we added some peasant words...

...on the subjective importance of the precious items on the clothesline:

"I got married when I was seventeen and I wanted to have my ruda (traditional dowry hung on a thick beam). My mother helped. We were working night and day. We could hear the men going to the woods at sunrise and we were still awake. We were working nights to finish my ruda. My husband waited a year until I finished my ruda so he wouldn't say afterwards I had no dowry."

"I used to live in a city apartment. I didn't have a ruda there and I was very hurt when a neighbour of mine came and looked at my good room. I showed him the glasses, the china, explained how expensive they were. When he went home to my mother, he told her: Oh, Mary, it's all so beautiful, but no thick carpet on the bed and no



carpet on the wall, why did you not give them to her?"

"You cannot buy what we give as dowry. You must make your own, weave it, sew it, and decorate it. A girl must have about ten thick carpets (cerge). Pillows, again ten long and ten square, white and decorated."

"The dowry of a girl must be put on the ruda. It's no use if you say how much she has. It must be seen. You make the ruda, you put the pillows, the carpets, the tablecloths, the sheets, the thick carpets. That's all a girl needs. That's what must be seen in a house."

"It was cold outside; you took them to the river and washed them on stones. You would take them hot, to wash them while they were warm. Then you put them again on the ruda and wash them again, depending on how dirty they got. Depending on how hard working the woman is."

We only stayed for the night of the opening and had to leave London the next day. I remember an English museum professional who congratulated us on totally conquering the room. *You don't see the room anymore*, he said. We had won; the sumptuous English interior had been transformed into a Romanian courtyard.

