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Slaves to the Beautiful Village Collections in Recent Romania

Adi Dimcea, Dan Turcu

Taking shape in the village of Tisa from the historic area of Maramureş, Maria and Nicolae Pipaş's collection can be considered a synthesis of the cultural life of the region. Made in an area abounding in traces of traditional culture, the collection comprises both folk and cult art objects. The owners' wish to live among the objects they collected turned their house into an inhabited museum which erases the boundary between private space and collection exhibits. Those who cross the threshold of this house enjoy the aesthetic value of the collected objects and, what is more, they benefit from its hosts' competent guidance and erudition.

The house of the Pipaş family imposes itself from the very entrance by simplicity, vividly coloured walls, plants and hedges. A closer look reveals different collection objects unobtrusively scattered around the yard: a few stone sculptures are hidden among the branches of a magnolia, a few wooden sculptures lie a little further and, if you look at the garden, you discover two eye-catching electric-blue frescoes. The hosts welcome you in a warm voice and show you each and every object burdened with time and history.

The yard shelters a wooden arbour where the Pipaş family welcomes on sunny days their guests, occasional visitors and different persons

with whom they collaborate in developing the collection. Surrounded by costume pieces, ceramics and peasant dowry chests arranged both on the walls and on different supports, **Nicolae Pipaş** shares impressions on the manner in which he arranged the pieces, exchanges objects or sets a price for new things. *'Usually, if the weather is fine we drink our coffee here and chat with the visitors, in case there are any.'* (**Nicolae Pipaş**) Now and then a villager brings old objects from his home with the intention of selling them.

An attic and a shed in the yard add to the six rooms in which all objects are exhibited. Different types of visitors, from average people, Romanian and foreign tourists, to high officials and heads of state, have crossed the threshold of these rooms along the time and written down their impressions in the notebook lying on the table near the bookcase. *'We have four notebooks full of signatures [...] over a thousand visit cards'* (Maria **Pipaş**)

The collection took shape in different ways. The pieces belonging to the rural milieu were collected during the Pipaş family's trips to the villages of Maramureş, where they bought and sometimes received various objects from the locals. A major part comes from exchanges made by small groups of collectors who carry out their

activity in the area of Sighet and Baia Mare. Nicolae Pipaș is part of such a group. Regarding the matter of fine art, the Pipaș family exchanged hand-made or purchased textiles for paintings collected from their very authors.

More often than not, the two collectors confess that the objects have been selected according to aesthetic criteria: *'I've never collected objects I dislike because it's very difficult to accommodate a tenant you dislike; the same happens with an object. I don't need what I don't like [...] We've always been slaves to the beautiful.'* (Nicolae Pipaș)

A notary by trade and then a teacher until 1969, Nicolae Pipaș has been keen on collecting objects ever since he was a child. *'I started collecting things when I was 10: stamps, illustrations, postcards, coins, old books and documents....'* Then I started to collect icons, which my wife initially disliked. *'I was fond of collecting icons, but my wife didn't like it.'* Maria Pipaș could talk hours on end about lace, chinaware, painting and graphics, which make up her favourite collection. Nicolae has a soft spot for ceramic objects and the philatelic collection. *'I have been attracted to ceramics and God knows how long I've wandered through the villages of Maramureș to collect them! Philately gives me a lot of pleasure. I get bored when I watch TV, so I'd rather look at some stamps.'* Touched by her wife's weakness and love for chinaware, he gradually started to collect it too. *'My wife is fond of chinaware and so am I. [...] She has treatises on all chinaware...in the world.'*

The lace and old embroidery collection made up of pieces dating from the 18th century is one of the most beautiful and well represented. There are over 2000 complete pieces, fragments or samples in different styles and techniques and made of a wide range of materials. Clothing pieces like dresses, blouses, scarves, aprons and lingerie are the highlight of the collection. All are made of fine lace which is either genuine or combined with fine fabric and habcarciefs with *entredeux*. The pieces are part of the Torchon,

Brussels, Bruges, Binche and Ducece de Chardinal types. Most embroidery pieces of the Riche-lieu, Madeira and Toledo type were bought from different collectors or from the embroidery workshops in Sighet.

The *piece de resistance* of the engravings collection in the attic is the series of seventeen works of the famous artist Marcel Chirnoagă that represent scenes from the Apocalypse. We can also find here drawings and engravings by Nicolae Apostol, Ștefan Dumitrescu, Octav Grigorescu, Vasile Kazar and Corneliu Baba. The Pipaș family started to exchange objects with Romanian artists around 1971 when they mounted the first exhibition of carpets woven in vegetal colours at the Culture House of Baia Mare.

The collection of books and documents has been one of the old passions of Mr. Pipaș: volumes by Tolstoy, Eminescu, Creangă, Alecsandri, Sadoveanu's complete works in 24 volumes, numerous history, art and old religious books. Part of them were donated by a priest from the village, others were bought from a teacher in the village and from second-hand bookshops in Bucharest. Many Maramureș diplomas are neatly ordered next to them. Real miniature family histories, the old documents bring to light the local past that is still living in the memory of the collectors that own them. The Pipaș spouses' stories about the noble families of the past are one more proof of their refined taste for the collected objects, of the accuracy of knowledge and historical narratives and of the style and composition of these objects.

'We show them and tell their story... for instance, in the case of painting, we briefly present the biography of the painters in question, then in the case of folk art, we explain to people why glass-painted icons were made, who made them and why they are artistically valuable, then, for example, we tell people about the wide range of wooden objects in the yard.' (Nicolae Pipaș)

After spending a few hours in the Pipaș family's house, many visitors ask him: *'How come that you know so many things?'* Mr. Pipaș gives

a natural answer: *'I've read about them and talked to the elders. I've always had a weakness for the elders who have told me stories about such things.'*

'We tell people all that we know, we want them to be delighted and to gain some knowledge when they leave our house because we want them to know what we have read for years on end, since there are many who have no idea about it. I managed to learn about a lot of things because I had access to specialised materials, to an old book, to the history of...lace, for instance. People are not familiar with the styles and techniques, so I explain to them! [...] This also implies teaching skills. That's what I think, you know? Teaching skills, putting your soul into it and sharing what you know with your fellows!' (Maria Pipaş)

A certain connection with the local past and the space in which the collection took shape is revealed by some exhibited objects which are continuations or transformations of the local artistic creation, as is the case of the textiles handcrafted by the two spouses who started from local motifs that were later on reshuffled function of aesthetics needs: *'An old woman lived in the village [...] and my wife taught her the skill. I didn't know about that. Then she taught me,*

she showed me how to do it [...] She was taught by another old man, that's how the craft is handed down from one generation to another [...] There is no alien decorative element' (Maria Pipaş)

Apart from the obvious need of *what is beautiful*, this endeavour and endless work that has been done since youth relies on the collectors' slightly imperious desire to store the things collected for decades in a local village museum: *'Everything, absolutely everything must be preserved, these things must not be lost or alienated because making a collection is no easy thing to do [...] in order to preserve and show the future generations how people lived before.'* (Maria Pipaş)

The Pipaş family is currently searching for new premises meant to store the objects they possess and want this way to set up a private museum in their village. Though their passion for collecting objects and knowing their past is still alive, despite their advanced age, they betray a shadow of a doubt when talking about the future of their objects. *'We do not alienate these objects but we'll left them in a will and they will be given to...'* [Maria Pipaş]. *'We crave for a museum here... I'd like that... I'd like to come back here after 20 years to see it'* [Nicolae Pipaş].











