

# MARTOR



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## Second-hand bookshops

Vlad Manoliu



One of my colleagues used to notice the fact that the social flusters bring to the surface the weirdest, most interesting and unexpected habits. After lying for decades in the owners' houses they seem to fight to get to the surface, bringing with them the possessors' feeble hope for winning.

Right after the '90s, every Romanian who had an old item, even if it wasn't high quality stuff, felt like sitting on a treasure and used to ask you for an eye if you wanted to buy it. All the more as the first so-called 'antique shops' were more consignments of goods, meaning that the owner of the item set the price which, in many cases, didn't represent the object's real value but that subjectively assumed by the owner. They used to ask for a fortune on junks or ridiculous sums on amazing things whose value they completely ignored. Hence, during this first faze of the antique shops, one could buy extraordinary things for very low prices. The best example was that a decoration or a Romanian inter-war medal, or let's say one from the first World War which was available in hundreds or thousands more pieces, was sold for more than a republican denar or roman imperial. That was that! You very rarely find such big mistakes today.

Social movements bring to surface new, rough, even unprincipled people, hungry for money and power, sometimes talkative and al-

most always demagogical. They want to display their newly achieved social position, purchasing huge houses where they gather old and expensive objects, meant to give brightness and prestige to the new type of parvenu and to prove the thickness of the wallet. Hence, the antique shops went on mushrooming all over the place. At the beginning, small rooms, stuffed with furniture, paintings, chandeliers, adornments, old coins, carpets... Step by step, the owners of such rooms whether extended their shops or went bankrupt.

I remember a broadcast TV show about the artistic preoccupations of the Romanian rich people. A fat, fussy, middle-aged lady, was fretting her gizzard in front of the camera, exposing the way she used to relax when contemplating one of Nicolae Grigorescu's paintings- of course- while at the same time sipping from crystal glasses. 'I cannot remember its name now... something with B...' said the lady, referring to the newly purchased Bacarras.

Till 1990, the word second-hand bookshop used to define a shop selling old books. Usually, the workers were book-lovers and the shops always pertained to the state. Since the '90s, the term started to be redefined, first of all in Bucharest, then, feebly, in the entire country. The second-hand bookshop ended up meaning, like in any other civilised country, a shop where old and beautiful things were sold, in other

words an 'antique shop'. The owners of such a place and the shop assistants are usually great fans of beautiful things and they sell and buy everything which is able to enchant your eyes and your soul, from nick-knacks to wonderful objects. Bucharest is now full of dozens of antique shops and I have started to visit them, especially in weekends. If you wander around the antique shops in the Capital every fortnight, this is like a walk through the museums. Sometimes you can look for art-nouveaux objects, some other time you can go and see paintings, furniture...

At the beginning, the prices didn't exactly match the value and, with a bit of luck, you could find very cheap things. But, gradually, things have fallen to their place. Now you can very rarely find the famous bargain. At least in what regards the antique shops in Bucharest, you rather visit them for doing a bit of window-shopping than for buying very beautiful but expensive objects.

As I was saying, buyers are today's new upstarts, crazy for big names, the majority of them remembered from school time or from newspapers. Yet, in the antique shops you can also find

the real art-loving people. They watch, enjoy, have a word with each other or with the shop assistant and thus, gradually, these shops turn into some sort of clubs for those who love the beautiful. They very rarely buy because it very seldom happens for them to be rich. Intellectuals had never had much money and this has always happened everywhere in this world. Our situation is a bit different because we have also had the switch of political regime with its post-revolutionary chaos. So that the inveterate fans talk to each other... and very rarely buy something for their soul collection.

Till the end of the decade the auctions for art objects also appeared. What is being auctioned can be seen displayed in some antique shops or specialised halls. You can attend these auctions, you can withhold certain objects, and you can come back.

No matter the evolution, the antique shops are one of the most pleasant manifestations of the Romanian society after 1990.

*Translated by Raluca Vîjăiac*