Local Museums?
Village Collections in Recent Romania

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Local museums? In fact, it was us, a team of specialists from the Romanian Peasant Museum who have attached this label to a broad variety of patrimonial initiatives across Romania. Hidden as they are most of the time in their 'locality', such 'museums' are, for instance, self-labelled as 'Irene's museum' and sublabelled as 'The museum of the X commune', as I have recently seen in a hamlet near Brașov. Oana Mateescu has also recently described three such 'personal museums' in Vrancea County that 'are presented, at least initially, as a personal creation, with collections that index incremental identity-formation processes' and where 'the owner is an intrinsic part of the installation' (Mateescu, 2009: 54).

Whose museums are they in fact? In most cases, these individual initiatives are not shared by the community – even less by the local authorities – and their managers are perceived more or less as lunatics even if their present ambition is to display '*our* local heritage'. In another 'locality' we discover 'The straw-hat museum', a collection open to all kinds and origins of straw-hats. In what sense is it a 'local' museum, what does 'local' stand for in such a case? To say nothing of the fact that in most cases these 'museums' are not legitimated as 'real' museums because they do not play according to the institutional rules of the game: they are just 'could-be' museums.

Despite all that, they do exist and they are mushrooming across rural Romania[1]. Thus, we particularly adopted an institutional approach in order for these museums to gain recognition: the fact that they exist without (almost) any institutional and official support is a good thing, we claimed, and it is worth being legitimised. It is also a proof – and a premise – of grass-roots decentralization of heritage which allows us, a central national institution, to challenge the mainstream of museography ('big museums' usually become aware of such petty collections only when picking up selected items in order to enforce their own collection). Helping them to move to the front stage was also a way of self-legitimating our own 'democratic' approach and status by 'voicing the locals', instead of exploiting them in a domestic-colonial kind of supremacy.

What came out was a *collection of collections*, a selection made from a large number of such initiatives according to rather implicit then explicit criteria, allowing us to put some order in their apparent disorder. Further on, with the help of an AFCN grant, we presented these collections in our museum[2] and helped their initiators find their own way through a professional network. The whole project was – and still is, to a certain degree – a rather unquestioned goodwill for an 'evident' good cause. It thus tells a lot

– if not even more – about *us* and then about *them*. Anyhow, both to us and them, it was the starting point of a long journey to debate and re-flexivity, taking the step from what Duncan Cameron called many years ago 'the museum as temple' to 'the museum as forum' (Cameron, 1972). The present volume is an attempt in this respect.

On 'collecting ourselves'

'Some sort of „gathering" around the self and the group – the assemblage of a material 'world', the marketing-off of a subjective domain that is not 'other' – is probably universal. All such collections embody hierarchies of value, ex-clusions, rule-governed territories of the self (Clifford, 1988: 218). Children's collections are revealing in this respect – James Clifford stated in his celebrated essay on 'collecting ourselves'. And so are all kinds of 'gatherings' practiced by 'primitive cultures'. In this broad sense, 'patri-monial' practices can thus be considered to be spread all over the world.

In an equally broad sense, such 'patrimonial' practices can be identified in all known human groups along history. Communities always 'patri-monise' some goods or symbols as self-collec-tions that have to be negotiated in gift exchanges with other self-collections. But there are also goods that have to remain in the kin groups, as identity markers of these groups (Weiner, 1992). From the 'primitive' bronze artefacts described by Marcel Mauss (1924/1997) to grand-grand-mother's silver spoons inherited by present li-ving grand-grand-daughters, they are all part of the customary and defining *heritage* of these family groups, going on along generations and helping them to be safely rooted in space and time.

Confronted with these shared and loose prac-tices of mankind, the specific idea – and subse-quent practices – of heritage are rather new and mainly European. Clifford goes on in his analysis by stating that 'the notion that this gathering in-volves the accumulation of possessions, the idea that identity is a kind of wealth (of objects, knowledge memories, experience), is surely not universal. The individualistic accumulation of Melanesian 'big man' is not possessive in Macpherson's sense, for in Melanesia one accu-mulates not to hold objects as private goods but to give them away, to redistribute. In the West, however, collecting has long been a strategy for the deployment of the possessive self, culture, and authenticity' (idem). And it was so in collec-tive and rule-governed ways or in individual, sometimes compulsive ways, closer to madness then to heritage.

The making of heritage in and by this West-ern tradition is far beyond the stake of this for-ward. One can just remind how it started with the 'curiosities' of the new worlds discovered during the 16th century, how the private collec-tions became more and more public and rule-governed, how time itself began to be patri-monised due to the *Alterswert* (Riegl, 1903/1984) old artefacts ascribed to it, how 'primitive' artefacts were moving in and out the 'art' category, how all these collected objects were elaborated into a coherent 'system of ob-jects' (Baudrillard, 1968) standing for and final-ly taking the place of the systems of social rela-tions (Stewart, 1984), and how individuals and collectivities came to be obsessed today with a 'patrimony duty' that turns patrimonisation into excess (Nora, 1992)[3]. Across all these paths and changes, one thing is sure: patrimony is a pro-cess revisited by each meaningful new context, not by a given wealth.

On time: heritage and patrimony

What we call 'patrimony' has 'the double and marvellous power of rooting its public in space and time' (Choay, 1992: 140). But it does it in many different ways, so that if we want to map and describe this diversity we first have to look at the underlying time and space frame a given patrimony is ascribed to.

Taking a look at the brief sketch above, one can notice that these complex trajectories parallel some major shifts in the way people experience time, some changes of 'social temporalities' (Mercure, 1995). It is the shift from the living time of kin groups and communities to the ideological time of nations or human evolution. It is also the shift from never-ending legacies flowing over from an objectified past to a permanently revisited remembering of alternatives pasts. It is what Maurice Halbwachs had probably in mind when stating that 'history begins only where tradition ends' (Halbwachs, 1950: 50) and what Pierre Nora has more recently rephrased as an opposition between (social) memory and history (Nora, op. cit.). It is what many scholars have nuanced in many different ways.

In the context of the present issue, these differences in temporality may be reshaped, for this purpose, as an opposition – procustian as any such dichotomy – between *heritage* and *patrimony*. It does not stand for an evolutionistic shift from one to the other, but just frames a space of possibilities having a living chain of filial memories at one end and, at the other, elaborated histories of worthy events and artefacts, with many possibilities of displacement and movement from one case to the other[4]. One may collect because the items at hand are some leftovers from some beloved ancestors and it is one's duty to preserve their memory – thus rooting oneself in this living tradition too[5]. Someone else may collect because the past as such has to be reminded in illuminating (or just entertaining) stories – the collector becomes in his turn part of this on-going history. And others will build new patrimonial collections claiming that they are just an uninterrupted legacy. It was the case, for instance, of most of the classic ethnographic museums – and it still is the case of Romanian museums: their make-believe of having just inherited their carefully selective patrimonial goods, with no other involvement but their care for preservation and classification. Patrimony in this case is what it is because it is what it

is, it just stands 'out there' and has to be brought 'inside' in order to avoid its erosion; there is no trace of intentional patrimony-building in this kind of discourse. Such collections are thus experienced closer to the heritage temporality, product- rather than process-oriented, rooting the objects and their public rather in the timeless time of tradition than in that of changing history: it is not just by chance that museum curators in Romania speak just about 'patrimony' but almost never about 'patrimonialisation'.

On space: local and universal patrimonies

'Collecting ourselves' also raises another question: who are these 'selves'? Where do they come from, what is their spatial belonging and what is the spatial reference of their collections? The answers are scattered along a wide range of possibilities, from domestic to world-wide spatial frames, figuring different scales of *spatiality*.

In its broad and unspecific sense, patrimony was initially kin-based, 'collecting ourselves' concerning kin-groups or the larger community, usually kin-shaped too. It was 'local' insofar the life space was 'local'. European modernity and political construction opened 'our' space along the two mainstreams of 'empire-building' and 'nation-building anthropology' (Stocking, 1986): collecting ourselves turned to national collections of the Self or to collections of the Other. Further on, this Other was changing his status. First and most important, in the 16th century he was granted the right of being human too (Todorov, 1999), changing his status from a non-human *Savage*, object only – and eventually – of mere 'curiosities', to a *Primitive* of a different human kind but human, nevertheless. The 'primitivist ideology' (Paul-Lévy, 1986) that invented this *Primitive* further equated the primitives with the origins of mankind and ended by considering present primitive societies as a living presence of our own past: collecting them was also collecting ourselves because it was only by looking at them that we could understand our past and

value our present. Metropolitan museums started to collect artefacts from colonies in order to present the whole natural history from amoeba to full scale (civilized) Man via the Primitive. Items from all over the world were classified as 'primitive' and displayed in the same space figuring this precise 'stage' of human evolution.

With the criticism of early evolutionism, this way of displaying the Other was also questioned: it was, for instance, the battle won by Franz Boas, arguing that exotic artefacts should not be placed according to the abstract and misleading belonging to a 'stage' of primitivism, but replaced in the 'local' context of their own particular culture, each 'culture' deserving its own room in the museum. A mask, for instance, will turn now from a metonymy of the primitive stage of all mankind to a metonymy of a particular culture (Stewart, op. cit.). The Other is thus changing faces again, becoming an *Aboriginal*, an *Autochthonous* or, later on, a *Native*.

Prisoner of time, the Other is now imprisoned in space. His collections stand for his own culture, but his culture alone. Other disputes arise. 'The polemic opposing Férussac and Jomard in 1826-1828 concerns two antagonistic conceptions about non-European objects: 'historical monuments' of dead societies *versus* 'products of industrial arts' of living people, meaning 'documents'. Two radically different ways of classifying non-European artefacts are at stake: the geographical order proposed by the baron (Férussac), committed in this respect to the classification practiced by the Louvre, is challenged by an ordering of the objects 'according to their usage and their scope'. Stressing the functional criteria instead of the geographical order (...), Jomard points out the importance of the *comparative* approach, the only one in his view to disclose the documentary and testimonial value of the non-European objects' (Dias, 2007: 70). Jomard lost this battle, but his challenge of a comparative display instead of a mere spatial, geographical one still works.

As regards 'nation-building anthropologies', the collections focused, almost by definition, on the political space of the nation and its autochthonous people (usually identified with peasantry), and served as the political stake of unity and continuity. The spatial scale was drawn by the borders of the nation-state, effacing the local and omitting the global.

But the local strikes back, it seems, in recent times. It is the case of the eco-museums and their militant ideology. For Hugues de Varine, for instance, the founder of Creusot eco-museum, 'the public, that is the community, was the museum and the museum was the public'. In this trend, 'all new institutions were committed to the idea of *in situ*, praising the everyday life and banal status of their objects and the involvement of the project communities (even if this one was rather rhetorical)' (Poulot, 2009: 180, 181). Some regional museums, such as the one opened at Rennes in 1957, also claim to present 'the time and space around a given territory' – Bretagne in this case (qtd. in Poulot, op. cit.: 174). At a different scale, it is also the case of the mushrooming museums of 'native people', trying to bring their artefacts closer to their local initial context. The Kwagiulth Museum in British Columbia, for instance, 'exhibits material in conventional glass-cases, but arranges it according to original family ownership (...), and the U'mista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay, British Columbia, (...) displays artefacts in a traditional big house and arranges them in the sequence of their appearance in the potlatch ceremony' (Karp and Lavine, 1991: 6). A strong emic approach is adopted in all these cases.

New regulations, such as those of the 'ethnological patrimony' in France or the UNESCO's convention on 'immaterial heritage', also back up this trend. 'Collecting ourselves' concerns, in this respect, more and more *we, the humble people*, in our particular space of life.

On meaning: the ethnographic object between art and society

But to what extent should these 'humble people' and their artefact 'go to the Louvre'? – as Felix Fénélon asked in 1920, i.e., to what extent are these collections worth being considered 'high' patrimony (*grand patrimoine* as French people use to say) or even patrimony at all? The question is an old one but still haunting the academic world.

'Since the turn of the century, objects collected from non-Western sources have been classified in two major categories: as (scientific) cultural artefacts or as (aesthetic) works of art.' (Clifford, op. cit., 222). The art category was sooner – and in a way better – defended as referring to artefacts that 'have a value in themselves', and thus self-offering to the admiration of people as highest expressions of the human genius, as Viollet-le-Duc stated in the late 19th century (qtd. in Dias, op. cit., 71). The recent Museum of Quai Branly is still rooting its approach in such a perception of universal *enchantment* that art objects would produce in any kind of society: 'We intended to express with due respect and admiration, by introducing the notion of aesthetics, the equality of cultures beyond their present political power' (Viatte, 2007: 69). On the other side, 'scientific artefacts' would rather be *signs* of an absent reality to be evoked or represented by such signs. They don't have a 'value in themselves' but just *stand for* something else. For what?

What does the ethnographic object stand for, for instance? Different answers show that it has been placed closer to the 'science' or to the 'art' category. It could stand for the *evolution* of the whole mankind or for the *history* of certain living people; it could stand for their *social* life or for their *cultural* worldviews; but in some cases, some of these ethnographic objects could be also shifted towards *art* insofar they produce *enchantment* too. Different societies, different epochs or institutions have given different answers according to their stake and values. The 'art' pole thus seems to be the rather stable and shared term[6] of the equation while the 'science' category appears to be the rather flexible and debated one. The French kind of lasting dispute between *musées d'art* and *musées de société* is not the only kind of partition in this respect.

In the case of Romania, the ethnographic object initially stood for the *history* of the Romanian people, being a sign of a legitimated past. The romantic nationalism that accompanied the Romanian nation-building added expressions of the ethical and aesthetic virtues of the Peasant (i.e., of the nation) and the ethnographic object started to be collected for its own sake. It offered what Ioana Popescu, taking over a distinction by Mondada et al. and speaking about the ethnographic photography of the period, considered to be a 'performance-image' (Popescu, 2002: 143). Later on, in 1930, when the Gusti School launched the Village Museum, it was a real *musée de société* that they were firmly bent on designing: the ethnographic object was expected to offer now a 'truth-image' of the 'real' peasant society. However, their dream was too ambitious and ethnographic museums went on offering 'performance-images' of the peasant's life and mind. Since then the main implicit partition has been between social life and cultural heritage or, briefly stated, between *society* and *culture*, art itself being most of the time embedded in the larger category of 'culture' or being just another name for it. *Musée de culture* seems to be the prevailing category, mixing *sui generis* 'art' and 'society'. The partition – if any – is then particularly between *formal* and *contextual* or, what in other spaces was framed as *anthropological* versus *artistic* approach (e.g. Dias, op. cit.: 73). For instance, when dreaming of the 'anthropology of peasant aesthetics' in Romania, Ioana Popescu is closer to the holistic approach of Mauss and charges this discipline with the 'study of the „artistic" object, but only in its context and in its sequence of creation and use, from the choice of the material to the circulation, reemployment

and disappearance. In this way, this new discipline will have to care not only about *masterpieces*, but also about the *things* that belong to village life.' (Popescu, op. cit.: 162) In this view, our ethnographic museums should also be closer to this kind of 'context'; in fact, they are usually much closer to the 'formal'.

A possible frame of interpretation

At the end of his analysis, James Clifford suggested a scheme of 'the art-culture system'. We would like to proceed in a similar way, but without claiming it to be a 'system'. What we have in mind is rather a methodological frame of reference, based on the statement that every patrimonial object/event is always positioned at least function of time, space and meaning dimensions, which are not always and everywhere the same, i.e., in different contexts they will figure different time, space, and/or meaning partitions.
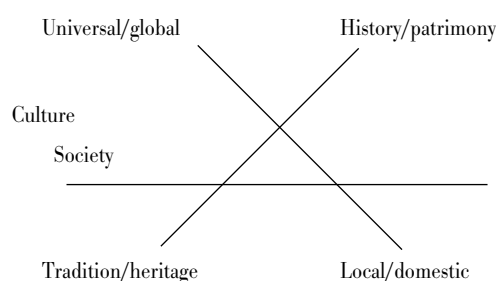
We can follow now on this diagram a suggestive dynamics of the position the ethnographic object was attributed in different contexts. In the period of the evolutionistic approach of the Primitive, for instance, non-European 'primitive' collections were placed towards the extreme of 'universal', 'history' and 'society', figuring the 'origins' of human societies in general. Challenging this view, Franz Boas claimed, as we have already mentioned, the need to reframe these collections in their particular time and space, i.e., in their 'local culture'. But the 'inner

local', what the French people call the 'ethnological patrimony', had to fight for legitimacy for many decades, still being suspected as 'ignoble' by the curators of 'noble' art patrimony, as George Henri Rivière used to say. On the other hand, the debate about 'primitive art' shifted – and is still shifting – some of these collections back to the universal scale, but also towards the 'culture' (art) pole and, in a way, closer to the timeless temporality of 'tradition' – thus also allowing a strategic amnesia of colonial histories. The political, institutional and personal stake is incessantly reframing patrimony all over the world.

In the case of Romania, the 'subject' of the ethnographic object has not been the *Primitive* but the *Peasant* – who was not the 'inner primitive', like in France, for instance, but usually a good *Native* (Hedeșan and Mihăilescu, 2006). The ethnographic museums in Romania have staged – and still stage – their collections according to this mainly romantic and nation-building representation of the Peasant: the 'ethnographic object' was thus placed in the time of 'tradition' as venerated heritage, unchanged and unchangeable, and in the political space of the nation, in-between the universal and the local and disregarding both of them. In this respect, ethnographic museums were and still are, in the nation's own image, an *illustration et défense* of the nation's unity (in space) and continuity (in time). At the same time, the meaning of these artefacts has been perceived and interpreted in the framework of 'culture', an inherited culture that deserves at least a permanent *admiration* and *devotion* – and sometimes even *enchantment*, as in the case of 'pure' art objects. Most of these „ethnographic objects" thus entered almost from the beginnings in „popular art" – eventually „national art" – collections.

The change in the stand taken by the Peasant Museum in this respect can be suggested, according to this diagram, mainly as a shift towards the 'universal' pole of the dimension of spatiality, this 'peasant' being presented as an

'anthropological type' (the pioneers of the museum spoke, in this respect, about an 'anthropological museum'), an expressive prototype of universal peasant spirituality. It also changed, to some extent, the positioning on other dimensions, going deeper into the timeless temporality of 'tradition' (a tradition of mankind that is still present in our souls – and thus 'authentic' and 'eternal') and in the *beauty* of this 'culture' (but without accepting to become an 'art museum' because of that).

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Does the present search for 'local patrimony' and the present project on 'local museums' go in this same celebrated direction of the Peasant Museum? It seems that it does not.

In a way, this interest in 'local museums' corresponds to an earlier respect for 'context', as Ioana Popescu put it in the quoted volume. But it also contradicts the spiritual ('cultural') and 'universal' stake of the Peasant Museum: it is obvious that whatever these museums really are or should be they are not local embodiments of the Universal Peasant's Spirituality, that they are not and should not be small-scale clones of our museum!

The personal motivations behind this undertaking are diverse, but their common social meaning seems to be an emerging phenomenon of de-centralization – both an intellectual and a political one: *patrimony* loses its exclusivist national representative character and has to be accepted in its much more modest and various local forms; the *nation* itself is thus losing its unique and indivisible frame of reference; the *state* and its institutions are also losing their monopoly. Ordinary individuals are thus able to care for and display patrimonial items too; furthermore, they can express their own subjective creativity independently of any national and/or professional canon.

For the time being, it is still difficult to properly describe this mushrooming of so-called 'local museums' and even harder to predict their future – or if they share the same future. But it is already clear that they are challenging in a rather unconscious way the establishment of Romanian ethnographic museums, experimenting the 'local', the 'social' and sometimes even the 'historical' (or, on the contrary, the subjective memory) against the 'national', 'cultural' and 'traditional' unproblematic positioning of the mainstream museographic discourse. This is probably what we love best about these museums!

Notes:

[1] A good question would be why these collections are flourishing only in the rural milieu or why we looked for them only in villages.

[2] The two exhibitions organized in this respect have been closer to a spontaneous self-presentation by the collection owners then to the highly reflexive 'Collections passion' exhibition performed by the Neuchatel 'Musée d'Ethnographie' in 1981 in order to disclose the strategies of desire that fuel any kind of collecting activity (Hainard and Kaehr, 1982). We are just starting to think about the meaning of what we have done and should be done in this respect in the future.

[3] Romanian law includes another category above patrimony – *thesaurus* - producing a rush of most of the experts to classify as many objects as possible in this prestigious category – that is almost impossible to display any longer, but just to 'preserve'.

[4] Daniel Mercure's empirical account of social temporalities identifies five such current types, ranging from the 'fatalist' (dominant conservative approach of life and a passive expectation of future in the absence of a long-term life project different from the mere reproduction of the past and present state of affairs) to the 'possibilist' one (dominant constructivist approach of life and long-term

carefully designed projects of life in the future). In a more discursive register, the temporalities of heritage and patrimony parallel these empirical and rather individual extremes of 'conservative' versus 'possibilist' experience of time.

⁵ In some cases temporality can be just personal 'memory', the collector's subjective reminder of a collective heritage turned to a personal legacy, as in most cases of the 'personal museums' I referred to at the beginning of this introduction.

⁶ It is – or may be – shared rather in an Eurocentric approach, neglecting the fact that even in Europe 'art' has replaced 'beauty' rather recently. In this respect, Marcel Mauss asked almost a century ago the young ethnographers never to ask on their 'exotic' fieldwork about 'art' but just about what was 'beautiful' and concluded that 'we are really to much inclined to believe that our classifications are fatalities of the human spirit' (Mauss, 1947/2003: 108).

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