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Title: "Museums and Village Collections of Romania. A Pleading for Initiative"

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How to cite this article: Mihalache, Carmen. 2009. "Museums and Village Collections of Romania. A Pleading for Initiative". *Martor* 14: 123-131.

Published by: *Editura MARTOR* (MARTOR Publishing House), *Muzeul Țăranului Român* (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant)

URL: <http://martor.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/archive/martor-14-2009/>

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*Martor* is indexed by EBSCO and CEEOL.

## Museums and Village Collections of Romania. A Pleading for Initiative

Carmen Mihalache

A walk around Romanian villages enables you to find small and modest ethnographic museums administered by city halls or just poorly funded 'museum corners' organised by state institutions, particularly by schools. A part of these museums are recorded in the database of CIMEC (the Institute for Cultural Memory), others benefit from the partial support of the County Departments or Centres for the Preservation and Capitalisation of Folk Tradition.

However, when you least expect it, you can often come across **collections of ethnographic objects, small museum-houses** or even real **private museums**, open or accessible only under certain circumstances to the local public or to tourists. Designed by enthusiastic persons who lack specialised knowledge, they are sheltered in their own households or in spaces acquired by personal funds.

These extremely passionate and patient people have collected priceless objects and endeavoured to highlight their value accordingly. The praiseworthy act of retrieving various objects is poorly or wrongly understood by their villagers.

Such collections emerged from the need to preserve objects that tell their own story about ancestors (of a family or of a community), customs, crafts, traditions and extinct ways of living. They stand for a generally incoherent and

unsystematic attempt to make them survive or to turn them into something acceptable.

Initiatives of this kind do not always enjoy the organised support of the local authorities or the help of specialised institutions able to offer them advice on the preservation, protection, registration and capitalisation of culturally important heritage goods. They do not benefit from institutional protection and no cultural policy seems to take them into consideration.

These enthusiastic people we are talking about create small and vivid cultural spaces, doing their best to capitalise on their own past and on the past of the community to which they belong because they cannot ignore the history, customs and occupations typical of their region and of their fellows they do care for. Retrieved testimonies, old objects, historical documents, archive photos, local manufacturer products gathered from the villagers and arranged in different ways and tonalities help them give a meaning to some spaces where local culture, which bears the mark of a single man's personality and thinking, acquires original, strong or ingenuous forms and interpretations.

The relations between the collectors and their public (heterogeneous, made up of locals, pupils, journalists, local high officials, visiting personalities, native or foreign tourists) in such

cultural spaces are different from those established in museums as public institutions. The visitor enjoys a warm, familiar and personalised welcome, has a friendly, informal conversation with his host and is 'contaminated' by the host's passion for objects, which makes him come back with other people who will experience the same feeling. The exhibits not only show, but also tell a story because they are the fruit of a single person's hard work and enthusiasm. In this context, the means of expression sometimes become equally important or even more important than the message conveyed by the collection. The access to the beauty of certain goods that have become part of the heritage, to information relevant to the culture of the community to which the collector belongs and the agreeably spent leisure time are due to a completely involved mediator who is first of all a host, then a 'museum' creator (a concept understood in different ways) and finally a repository of collective memory. Function of every collector's personality, they can also play other specific roles in these spaces: preservers and promoters of immaterial heritage and various cultural values, but also local information (re)sources, hosts and initiators of cultural, educational and recreational activities. Many initiators of village collections or local museums have brought other contributions to keeping local identity awareness alive: they write monographs, cull folklore material, initiate and train the youth in different culturally specific fields.

These small 'author museums' and repositories of heritage and cultural memory alike can be regarded, at least at first sight, both an element of identity, originality and local specificity of a community and a cultural development for local communities and a premise for the development of cultural tourism. Due to a coherent cultural policy they stand the chance to become communal means of access to information and culture, with the respective communities as primary beneficiaries of their capitalisation.

Starting from these findings and premises, the Romanian Peasant Museum made a cultural

experiment in 2008 when it unfolded a pilot-project that aimed to find such collections in the Romanian villages, to visit them and to try to provide them its own support. In other words, the museum tried to offer consultancy, national visibility and future opportunities to collection owners: they can become professionals and develop their collections if they observe a few basic (scientific, aesthetic and economic) criteria in compliance with the ICOM norms (the International Council of Museums) and do their best not to lose the ingenuity and originality which make these collections unique. From such a perspective, these collectors could become managers and promoters of culture and quality as well as private cultural operators. The museum's experts who took part in the project established a dialogue with members of local communities in order to find out how the locals perceive and value the collections' existence and also with representatives of the local authorities and public institutions in order to know how they relate to these initiatives.

The project *HERITAGE AND LOCAL IDENTITY: Identifying and promoting a few village collections of Romania* had several major objectives: fieldwork in eight rural localities selected due to a(n) (unfortunately quite short) probing campaign, a debate meant to bring the results of the research and the problem in question to the attention of specialists and of all people interested in them, the dissemination and promotion of the phenomenon by a volume and an exhibition and the support of a training workshop that provided the collectors basic knowledge of cultural heritage, heritage legislation, preservation means, capitalisation, promotion of collections and fund-raising for cultural projects.

The selected collections were studied by mixed teams comprising researchers and curators. They tried to outline the profile of the collection (the history of its making, the inventory of objects, their preservation condition, heritage value, the social history of objects, etc.) and of the collector (professional background, his moti-

vation to make a collection and open it to the local public or to tourists, his status within the community, his relation with administrative, local or central institutions, etc.) The teams also considered the impact of these collections on the local community (the manner in which they influence the community's life from the point of view of cultural consumption and identity construction, the way in which the community values the cultural initiative of a fellow citizen, the community's readiness for support and involvement in this respect).

Apart from the collection's scope and its intrinsic value or its capacity to represent the local community, the selection process also considered the owners' interest in developing and capitalising on the collection as well as their willingness to become partners of the museum in this approach. The collectors participated in a one-week training session at the Romanian Peasant Museum, benefiting from a workshop-course made up of five modules (*Cultural heritage, Legislation: museums and collections, The Fundamentals of Preservation, General Museology, Museum promotion and marketing, Cultural projects funding*) and visits to the museum's collections, laboratories and exhibition halls. Guided by curators, they worked in parallel on the organisation of a representative exhibition where they brought their own objects. Consisting of an installation of objects and photos, this exhibition was conceived as 'a training period' or rather as a workshop for collectors whose representative objects promoted their own collections and the initiatives of this kind and, indirectly, the initiatives taken by the communities apparently represented by such collections.

The experiment was successful. Our fieldwork showed that the project met the requirements of a category of beneficiaries who did not participate in coherent cultural programmes pertaining to a national cultural policy, that it was relevant to the local cultural context and that it

can become a model of good practice for the cultural heritage field.

Only apparently acting both as a *museum* and *cultural establishment* (as the Ministry of Culture and Religious Affairs defines them), the collections are well-known at local level and very often sought-for and visited. However, no one has so far studied their status within the context of the current cultural heritage legislation, the way in which their existence blends with the cultural life of the communities and the extent to which these communities consider themselves represented and recommend themselves by such initiatives.

The problems raised by local cultural heritage in the rural environment (significance, preservation and capitalisation) and the relation between the village collections of some private initiators and local communities could not be solved by a single modest project – like the one initiated by the Romanian Peasant Museum – if we take into account the importance of the phenomenon as such. Nevertheless, the institution's involvement in a vast medium-term action would have been conducive to a debate on the phenomenon meant to allow people to find solutions to the problems that the collections are facing and to assess the impact they have on local communities. As cultural resources, their impact should have been assessed at national level too.

Therefore, the project has become a cultural programme in 2009.

The attempt of a strong institution to professionally support the efforts of those collectors eager to get involved in the long-term preservation and promotion of an important cultural heritage that is ignored, inappropriately managed and badly capitalised is both difficult and risky. Some questions have not been answered yet: are these collections culturally relevant to the local community or are they simply the fruit of the passion for old things, for the past and for 'traditions'? How can their owners develop and promote their cultural offer if the collections are

relevant? What is the best way to include their owners in a national heritage development policy?

Thanks to the structure of the programme called 'Village collections of Romania', the National Romanian Peasant Museum has taken the first step in providing collectors steady and coherent support in order to organise, preserve, promote and better fund their collections. This fact is likely to have a greater impact on the communities and will give a boost to other collections. Local cultures will thus be on the winning side. These collections can be included, in one way or another, in local development activities performed by the communities to which they belong. Some of them can become part of the present stage of these unsystematic activities, particularly of cultural tourism policies. The programme can offer better medium and long-term visibility to some substantial cultural collections which can successfully fit into cultural and rural tourism networks.

The general objective of this programme is first of all the monitoring of private local/regional ethnographic collections (in order to build a database) and the stimulation of their development in parallel with the need for encouraging rural collectors to manage and promote local heritage as private cultural operators. Secondly, the programme focuses on their professional training and especially on the support provided to their freely expressed intention to become part of a national network as an efficient cooperation and communication tool. This associative formula will lead to a connection between individuals, institutions and organisations with common interests and/or activities.

The collections we are referring to – some are already regarded as 'museums' by both initiators and the community and strive to become authorised in accordance with the current legislation in the field – raise a major problem pointed out by the pilot-project. They are the outcome of personal initiatives, which made every collector face a lot of difficulties. Supported only

by their family, they have gone their own way and used all their skills to set up collections and museums. The collectors deprived of consultancy on the management of some common problems became deeply aware of the lack of dialogue between people from different areas of the country who share the same interests.

We decided to build a national network of still unauthorised museums and private ethnographic collections of Romania. Such a network will establish both a platform for social cohesion between rural independent collectors and the premise of a better relationship with institutions and organisations with common interests. These institutions can meet their needs regarding the relationship with the local, regional and national authorities, with the purpose of improving the development of this sector by a series of efficient cultural **practices**. The network in question would connect its members by sharing consultancy, know-how and experience. It will thus manage to meet the private collectors' needs and to engage them in activities related to the cultural heritage field, cultural tourism and professional training. Also, the network could become a source of solutions for the change of national cultural policies, laying stress on the compliance with the EU's cultural priorities and policies.

We started from the premise that any significant cultural heritage should be promoted as an identity mark and also as a civic cohesion factor. The cultural heritage of a specific community is a direct consequence of its (socio-cultural, political, economic and historical) evolution and helps it define its own identity. A component of local culture, a symbol of the values created by the community, a potential solidarity and social cohesion factor, a point of reference and also an information source, material and immaterial cultural heritage should actually be a reason for pride. The reason should be strong enough for a community to value this heritage in all its aspects and to capitalise on it in order to become an effective means of promoting the commu-

nity's values and image across Romania and abroad. Be it local or regional, a valuable heritage can turn a long forgotten area into a culturally relevant tourist attraction provided that it is intelligently and appropriately promoted. Such an attraction – particularly in the rural milieu – can more easily reveal its specific identity and prestigious values and become richer due to certain economically developed branches tightly connected with tourism.

Nevertheless, an intelligent capitalisation on heritage presupposes solid knowledge of its current state, which is by far more important than investment. The available financial resources are quite unlikely to support the elements of this heritage. They differ from the heritage elements administered by various public institutions for the good of society because they benefit from more responsible management, a fair and motivated use of resources and a creative approach.

These cultural spaces have not been monitored at national level yet, though this is not a long, costly and complex process. These collectors are generally known in the county where they live and they do not even know each other. They cannot exchange experience, practice and information on how to get/generate funds. Also, the lack of communication prevent them from thinking of a potential association that will enable them to build a network meant to support and promote their initiative and specific approaches in relation to the authorities or to different factors. The lack of communication and common policies as well as the application of disparate or divergent solutions to common problems make everyone's often remarkable efforts have little impact on the goal they want to achieve. Even at regional level, cooperation might offer solutions to many problems these collectors are facing (under funding, scarce technological equipment, poor promotion, etc.) in their effort to open their collections to the public. Thus, they would also contribute to

bringing to light some priceless pieces which, unfortunately, are mere warehouse objects at present.

Such museums and collections open to the public are extremely relevant to cultural life because they offer a certain view – personal and fragmented as it is – of history and of the traditions of a community and a familiar leisure and entertainment place which includes an educational component that meets the community's needs. Even if these collections were not always extremely valuable in themselves, some pieces are special and *de facto* components of the national heritage. The very building that shelters the collection is one of the most important values of such a museum which, more often than not, is an outstanding monument of peasant architecture.

The village collector's major problem is the lack of a system able to attract funds for maintaining and developing the collections or for the cultural projects they aim to unfold. Their only chance is to become official museums of the community which they indirectly promote via their collections. This means that they should be officially recognized as promoters and catalysts of the cultural energy of the locality. All the museums that we have examined (in Chişcău, Galoşpetreu, Peşteana, Slătinoara-Petroşani, Jina, Şiviţa, Cobadin) have no admission charge. Material support is provided under the form of donations. The exhibits are generally received as donations or purchased with personal funds, which sometimes implies substantial financial efforts.

Promotion or at least more info on the cultural offer that these museums propose is another thorny issue. A website (like that of the museum of Chişcău or Crişeni) is a rarity. Most collectors avoid a more aggressive promotion even in the few cases when they know how to do it and as long as their private space is not divided from the museum proper. Even if this drawback were solved, they would still grapple with the insurmountable problem of creating convenient

means of access for tourists. It very much depends on the infrastructure of the villages where they live and on their economic development.

There are rural areas where certain communities dismissed the perspective of losing their specific 'traditions' that stand for their revival and establishment of cultural houses meant to back up this process. A telling example is Alba County, where over the past years the county council has set up 32 village museums of a total of 66 that it aimed to build by means of a funding project with a view to finally creating a network of village and parochial museums all over the county. Other county councils have gradually taken over this model which may lead to an inflation of local museums, with all its consequences. Such an important action which nobody should underestimate is a kind of awakening solidarity of the locals for a common purpose that is neither economic nor political. In such cases the community's involvement may contribute to the development of the museum's educational potential, to its promotion, to the (direct or indirect) attraction of financial resources and even to some employees' work substitution (ensuring documentation, guidance, security, management and object records, etc.)

As regards private initiatives, the community's unwarrantable interference in the creative act would change the outcome and, consequently, we could no longer talk about 'author museums'. Such initiatives cannot be successful without – well-balanced – support provided both by the authorities and the community. It is hard to understand that there is no profitable involvement when we talk about the organization of cultural events and particularly the promotion of local culture and the preservation of heritage objects possessed even by a single member of the community. Long-term cultural investment will become part of the social and economic revival of all localities.

Unfortunately, these initiatives have not been understood at national level, either. They do not rely on a specific cultural policy, the legislative

frame is ambiguous, there are no adequate formulas for a large public to have access to this treasure. Valuable pieces are stored in inappropriate conditions. Objects belonging to collections designed according to scientific criteria might be deteriorated over time. Their owners invest as much energy and money as they can in order to create a minimal preservation frame. Passionate state museum experts support the village collectors' activity and are very much concerned about them. However, such collections run the risk of being alienated after the death of their initiators or, even worse, of disappearing. The founders of many collections and village museums died or are very old and are no longer able to take care of them.

The decision factors generally ignore the evidence of the past or they do not rank it as a top priority because they have to solve social and economic problems. The communities themselves are no longer so fond of traditions and the heritage of the past or they can no longer find a way to include them in their life. It is very sad that they simply prefer to adopt other people's more recent traditions.

The cultural heritage of a community, **including the private one**, is both culturally and economically important and this changing perspective imposes a long-term reevaluation of both national and local cultural policies and strategies. The government administrators, the local public authorities or the organizations engaged in various cultural programmes play a decisive role because good cultural management can turn into an important local economic development factor in accordance with the needs and demands of different communities and of society as a whole.

We hope that our programme will provide long-term support for decentralizing heritage and cultural actions and contribute to strengthening local ethno-heritage initiatives. It will also enable us to develop new ties between metropolitan museums and village collections

according to the ICOM norms and objectives, to instrument and consolidate the relationship between heritage and the collective identity of the targeted communities and, last but not least, to offer a model of good practice that might underlie a national cultural programme.

The identification and study of new collections every year in order to monitor the phenomenon and create an archive of specialized information, their promotion (both by means of annually organised classic exhibitions and multimedia – photos, text, film – and publications – leaflets or brochures on collections and their collectors), the collectors' professionalization (by means of annually improved training workshops organized by the museum), the collectors' mobilisation to set up a guild (starting from their intention and freely expressed option of becoming part of such a professional organisation), the advice and support offered in this respect have been our priorities for 2009. This approach will continue in the coming years and will be doubled by the dissemination of our programme and research results.

Due to its successful outcome, the programme launched by the Romanian Peasant Museum can contribute to finding efficient solutions to the present cultural needs of Romania and table the Romanian peasant's current heritage problems for public debate. The outcome will be of great use to both *village collectors* and *local communities* that are indirectly stirred to become aware of the importance of their cultural heritage and identity as a valuable and prestigious source within the context of European cultural diversity and of local and regional development programmes. By publishing fieldwork scientific results (case studies, analyses), the *cultural heritage experts* will benefit from precious data on local heritage and the way in which a local community relates to its specific heritage. Thus, it can choose to participate in the endeavour to capitalise on this potential at national level.

As main beneficiaries of this programme, the collectors will be informed on a set of accessible professional methods that will allow them to manage and promote their collections appropriately, to develop future projects on their own and even to become professional private-sector cultural operators. The opportunity to become part of/join a national network that will represent their interests and help them find efficient solutions to their real needs is one of the major stakes of the programme. **The collectors' professionalisation, their awareness of the role of private cultural operators and a high percentage of authorised museums/private collections, on the one hand, and the creation of a national network and its active involvement in the cultural life of the community, on the other** are the expected long-term results when the five-year cultural programme is over (projects will be unfolded every year in order to support the initial undertaking). The network will thus be able to approach institutions which elaborate and enforce cultural policies (government, Parliament, local authorities) with a view to changing the legislative frame in order to capitalize on local cultural heritage in an appropriate and efficient manner.

It would be a pity if these generous and enthusiastic initiators – voluntarily interested in preserving, developing, knowing and capitalizing on the national heritage – became indifferent little by little and no longer motivated by their contribution to the cultural development of society and to the preservation of cultural values due to a lack of results or to their activity burdened by the lack of knowledge of management (because they often rely exclusively on their good intentions).

The heritage possessed by these disinterested collectors should be appropriately preserved and studied and should become accessible to a large number of people. They should fulfil their self-assumed mission to collect and disclose traces of the past and the artistry of their fellows whom



they serve in a particular manner. People ought to know and have access to these traces. The promotion of these traces and of the special heritage they manage is vital to ensure visibility, attract funds and visitors and, implicitly, fulfil their socio-cultural mission.

I think we can define the collectors and initiators of private village museums not only as people fascinated by old, beautiful and valuable objects, but also as local cultural 'institutions', in

a nutshell. In order to accomplish their mission they need a permanent contact with the public, communication and cooperation both with each other and with heritage organizations, cultural institutions, authorities able to support them without denting their ingenuity, for such vivid cultural spaces are sources of unique aesthetic experiences and emotions so much needed by modern society.

