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Title: "ARCA Museum in Dumbrăveni. Armenian memory in suitcases"

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How to cite this article: Neamu, Dragoș (interviewed by Simina Bădică). 2011. "ARCA Museum in Dumbrăveni. Armenian memory in suitcases". *Martor* 16: 198-206.

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

URL: <http://martor.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/archive/martor-16-2011/>

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## ARCA Museum in Dumbrăveni. Armenian memory in suitcases



**Dragoș Neamu** (interviewed by Simina Bădică)

*Dragoș Neamu is president of the Romanian National Network of Museums*

On July 15th 2010, in the recently rehabilitated Apafi Castle in Dumbrăveni, the ARCA museum collection was inaugurated. The Romanian National Network of Museums brought together artists, museum specialists, and the local Armenian minority to create a museum which speaks of lost communities, migration, and forgotten histories.



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**The opening of a new museum in Romania is a bold and intrepid undertaking. What do we have at Dumbrăveni? Is it a museum, a collection of curated artifacts, or an incubator for new projects?**

I never understood why there is such a desire in Romania to establish a distinction between a museum and a collection of curated artifacts. This is especially so if we consider that a museum, by its very nature, contains by virtue of necessity collections that it presents, exhibits, and in fortunate instances interprets them. Consequently, what is the difference between the two? Although because we do not wish to transgress all established conventions, we will say about the castle of Count Apafi in Dumbrăveni that it is the host of a curated collection regarding the Armenians of Transylvania. I wish to emphasize, however, that I will accept only this concession towards a Museol-

ogy that in Romania must be rethought from its very foundations. This reconceptualization must range from the mode curatorial visions are projected all way to the manner exhibits are conceptualized and analyzed.

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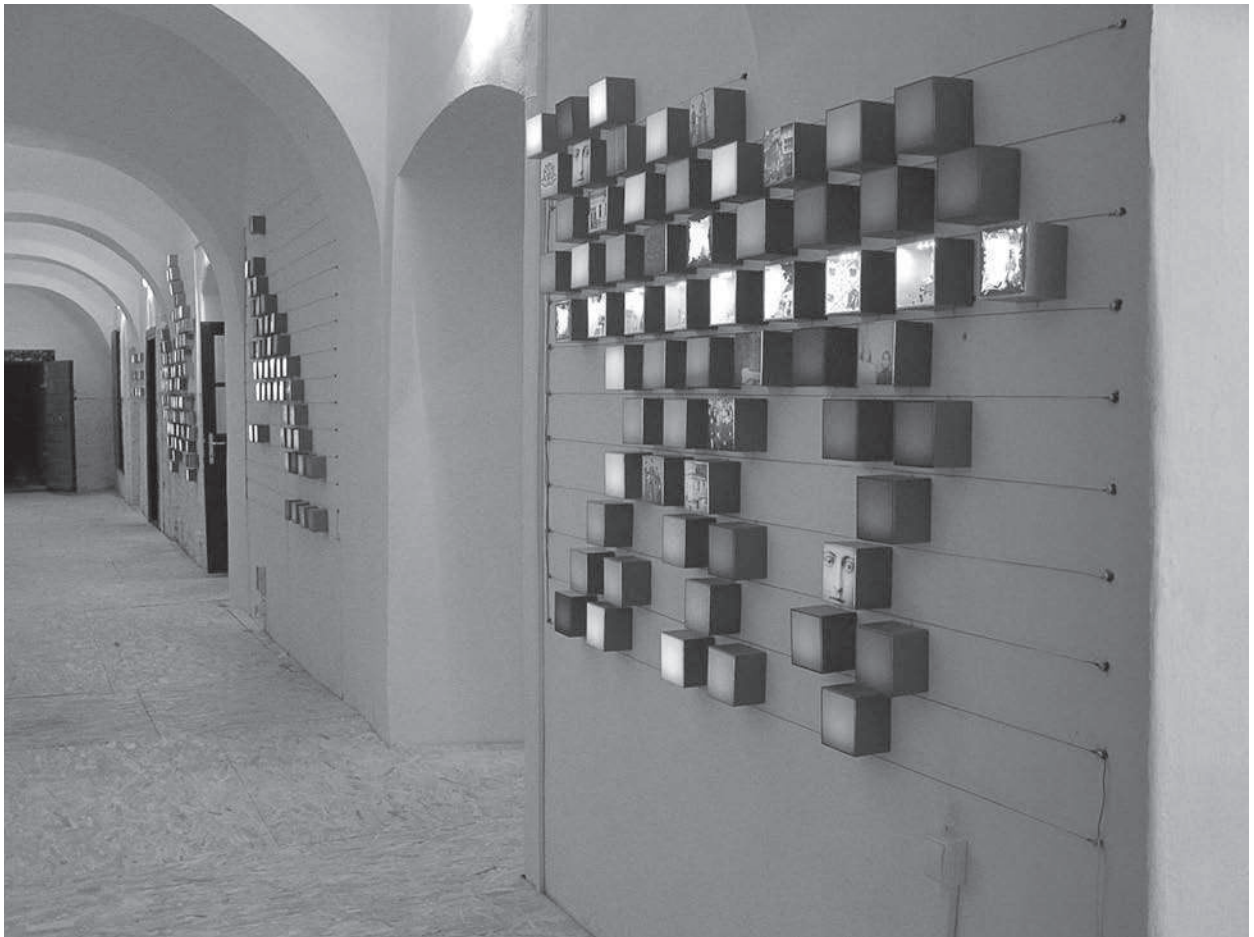
**How did the idea of this museum/project come into being? Why choose the Armenian Community?**

I wish to share something from the very beginning. Before the National Network of Romanian Museums intervened in

Dumbrăveni, I, personally, in my capacity as President of this organization, was neither sympathetic nor averse toward the Armenian inhabitants of Romania. Simply put, my cultural and professional interests did not include the cultural history and civilization of this community, except insofar as these influenced certain historical situations or events that elicited my curiosity and focused my attention.

I cannot say that I developed a passion, not even at this point. Yet the contradictions, controversies, and historical unknowns that mark this community have begun to interest me a great deal. With increasing frequency, I find myself in the midst of discussions regarding the private lives, religion, and men-

tality of Transylvanian Armenians. I thus came to realize how compelling this quest for knowledge becomes. It is a detective chase that implicates all those involved in an attempt to piece together events, situations, or fashion together scenarios about realities that still remain under a veil of silence. Or they might ask how things really were in regard to these people who were in perpetual motion? This is how I came to have a revelation about a fact that I had never thought of before. The curated collection of the Armenians is also in perpetual motion. It is fated to change alongside the evolution of research and the problematization of certain themes pertaining to Transylvanian Armenians in general and those of Dumbrăveni in par-



ticular. We are therefore dealing here with a mobile collection in a state of continuous motion and which, in turn, “migrates” in the same manner as those who now justify it.

The introduction I just made is rather long, but it is very important for conveying to readers an understanding of why the subjects are the Armenians, and specifically those in Dumbrăveni. Why these them in particular? Before the Network of Romanian Museums, there were several enthusiastic people, for long dangerously enchanted with the areal of Sibiu and with its patrimony – about which we say that it is so beautiful and wonderful. Unfortunately, this often did not go beyond talk. Well, these people eventually met other individuals, that is an Armenian horrified at

the loss of the historical memory of his folk, as well as several householders in the city outraged at the potential collapse of an architectural patrimony situated in their very own neighborhood. These householders had witnessed the nowadays-faded glory of what was once a royal city.

The fact that these people met in Dumbrăveni may or may not be a coincidence. What is certain, however, is that their collaboration yielded a project of revalorization and refunctionalization of this astonishing patrimony; a project to which the Network of Romanian Museums was invited to participate. To this formula one must add another essential ingredient, namely one of predilection or “taste” for what might be called “Armenianism”. It





must never be forgotten that it was these people who erected the glory of this city, which we have just recalled. They were God-fearing merchants possessing a great deal of tact, who were compelled by imperatives of adaptation and/or survival to renounce or lose many traits having to do with their identity and way of life. It may therefore not be coincidental that nowadays we have a fascinating, Hungarian-speaking Catholic minority, for whom the Armenian language is but a beautiful story told by grandparents.

**What is the curatorial concept of this first exhibit and of the artifact collection of Transylvanian Armenians?**

**T**he concept is extremely inspired, and one which admirably describes the history of Armenians in Romania. This is a history extending throughout the span of an almost



uninterrupted migration. The visual display attempted to specifically capture that intermediate stage, meaning the phase suspended between the moment of packing and/or unpacking the luggage – which the Armenians had been forced to carry with them for almost their entire lives.

This is an exhibit full of classic, wooden, red suitcases. They are purposefully distributed in a disorderly fashion in all the spaces and hallways of the collection, although in a manner that ultimately makes sense. This

is in order to stimulate the imagination and opinion of the visitors, who are being confronted with a dilemma. The visitors will have to decide, and then only if they want to, which moment they are witnessing. Is it the moment of packing the luggage in anticipation of a new adventure in search of a new home? Alternatively, is it the moment of unpacking, of repose, during which the Armenians begin to build new purpose in a town – Dumbrăveni – about which they know nothing.





**The exhibition opened in 2010 has several authors. What does the author of an exhibition represent, and how did you arrive at the final curatorial concept?**

You astutely remarked that this was an exhibit that several authors “conspired” to organize. I can now answer in general terms what the author of an exhibit corresponds to, with the proviso that we talk about the role of a single author and not several. I shall dispense with the “correct” explanations encountered in specialized books on the subject, especially the

chapter on planning exhibitions. I will tell you that the author of an exhibition is very much like an orchestra conductor who directs the orchestra towards the perfect harmony specified by the musical score. Yet the author is more than a conductor, because she or he also composes. In this case, we are talking about the exhibition concept. The author will thus be permitted to improvise, experiment, and to re-touch. At the same time, he or she will benefit from the encouragement and decisive help provided by the other members of the orchestra.

Returning to the overall concept, I realize in retrospect that it was not difficult to arrive at its final formula. Great ideas are born spontaneously from daily life: a lecture, from the interpretation of things, or their





understanding. For us, the inspiration came quicker. The architects from the Cluj-Napoca “KimBuçaDiaconu Studio” gathered the essential historical details about the Armenians of Transylvania. This data was furnished by those responsible for this task on their team and confirmed by us, who know how an exhibition is put together. They came forth with this idea, which we accepted after adding some finishing touches to the overall concept. Among all people involved in the project, the architects were the ones who best captured what truly defined the Armenian community of Transylvania. If I were I asked how I define the lives of the Armenians from Dumbrăveni, I would answer without hesitation that it was an arduous migration yet prolific from a so-

cial and cultural standpoint. Wherever the Armenians went, they revitalized their new community and won the right to represent it by virtue of their contribution to its prosperity and aestheticization. The Armenians have always succeeded, albeit at great cost to their collective identity. But they have lost a struggle with potentially even higher stakes: the permanence of their existence. There are increasingly fewer Armenian souls in this country, and continue to disappear ever so slowly.

The visualization of this solution, on the other hand, was subject to protracted negotiations. This is because the staging of the idea was the most visible and exposed to criticism. Consequently, it had to be flawless. It is still not perfect, but we are heading in the right





direction. There was also a significant shortage of donors (the reticence of the Armenian community to contribute remains difficult to understand) and the overall financing was insufficient. We were acutely aware that the idea had to be the driving force behind the exhibition; the rest had to follow and improve along the way. The idea has received the most investment, and the reaction of the public and of the community of scholars confirmed that the strategy was a success.

**The Museum at Dumbrăveni is, nonetheless, a museum that represents an absence. The Armenian part of town has disappeared along with the increasingly shrinking Armenian community. How did you choose to display/discuss this absence, this disappearance?**

I chose neither the absence, nor the disappearance. Rather, I avoided it by means of this museum-like collection. As long as one single Armenian exists in Dumbrăveni, we will have to help her, to make her feel represented, and her historical memory salvaged and retold. If, however, we join this game proposed by you, this disappearance becomes in our case extremely attractive. It is a detective chase in which all those implicated attempt to piece together events, situations, or fashion together scenarios about realities that still remain under a veil of silence. Professional challenges make our lives more interesting and we always need this sort of intellectual stimulation. I hate to walk on well-trodden, domesticated paths.

**From a museological standpoint, what are the strengths of this new museum?**

I would first say the concept itself and its articulation from an artistic and exhibition-design standpoint. Not coincidentally, this concept won the Grand Prize at the “2010 Architectural Biennale” in the area of scenography and décor – in any case something connected to the interior design.

Another strong point, although one that is less visible, is the type of labor and coordination that went on in support of the exhibition project. This work conformed perfectly to the appropriate recommendations and theories of modern Museology. The labor put into this project went on for more than a year; an effort characterized by mature ideas reexamined from all sides, backtracking, and conceptual reversals. Fortunately, we never came close to neurosis. Yet the last word belongs to the team of architects, to whom I thank for the proposed solution, and which I feel obliged to describe once more as brilliant.

In this incubator of ideas, there entered – singly or together – true curators, genuine experts in all facets of museum studies, cultural managers, architects, artists, creative marketing professionals, historians, as well as a family of genuine Armenians – the Călinescu family. It only remains to mention that the team of skilled people responsible for the practical deployment of the exhibition furniture seriously engaged with the artistic details.

