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The Constantin Nițu collection

Costion Niculescu

The peculiarity of Constantin Nițu's collection stems from its belonging to an artisan. He is particularly a costume and texture maker: embroidered peasant shirts, thin silk handkerchiefs, homespun skirts, belts, waistbands, wall carpets, pillows, etc. Craftsmanship is the main *raison d'être* that gives him a sense of existence. Before 1989 he was a most assiduous participant in the „Cântarea României“ (Song to Romania) Festival, often admitted to the superior (inter-county and national) phases, winning important awards and thus being one of the county's pieces de resistance. This does not prevent him from being bluntly ironic when he says: *‘Well, the „Cântarea României“ Festival implied real mass movements! That was not a joke! At some point, the participants in the Cântarea României were so many that they exceeded the number of Romanian inhabitants.’* Numerous diplomas and medals are now part of the collection because *‘I worked for them’*.

Constantin Nițu used many collection objects as props for his own exhibitions. He also used collection objects to dress up his students with whom he paraded within different cultural events to which he was invited.

Constantin Nițu's collection does not have a specific name. He calls it ‘collection’ and regards it as a step or a stage towards the fulfilment of the museum of his dreams. It is partly stored,

partly exhibited in his own house in the village of Cornățelu (Poboru commune, in the northern part of Olt County). A great part of these objects are scattered over the three rooms of the house, in the kitchen as well as in the extensions, mixed with household objects that do not belong to the collection. Because of space constraints, another part, especially large-size objects, are scattered around the yard or piled up in the attic. Only the porch, initially open but now closed on purpose, is specially designed for collection objects, being also a repository of garments.

No country-lane signs advertise the collection. It is only occasionally visited on request by reputed guests from Poboru commune or from the town of Scornicești, brought or sent here by local officials. It is also visited by students from schools in the surrounding villages.

The collection is heterogeneous, comprising a wide range of unequally valued objects. Thus, we can find: geological objects (local natural semi-precious stones – *‘not even the stones have remained unasked’*), paleontological objects (small mammoth fossils, nummulites, etc.), archaeological objects (primitive stone tools), religious objects (icon lamps, icons – some of them quite old – one of them dates back 400 years ago altars – one dating from 1821, garments, liturgical vessels, etc.), a few old books (from the latter half of the 19th century), glass objects (from the

first half of the 20th century), postcards, numismatics, philately, photos, old gas lanterns, military objects (two bayonets, a grenade) and many other trifles (some of them ‘curious things’). Nevertheless, the essential feature of the collection is given by ethnographic objects and, among them, costumes. *‘The folk costume remains an icon to me’*, he says. Most of the collected objects belong to the local ethnographic area (*‘the north of Olt County’*, as the collector calls it) and, to a lesser extent, to some neighbouring areas (Argeş, the southern part of Olt County, Romanaţi/Mehedinţi, Vâlcea). The collection also includes several objects made by the collector himself. Constantin Niţu sees himself as an artist, practically the best Romanian artisan in this field (more than that, even a universal artisan: *‘the man who knows all folk art techniques’*). This is why his collection also contains personal objects which are part of his biography: childhood, the school years, performance (diplomas, medals, publications or cuttings of reviews or of personal articles, brochures, newsletters, catalogues, etc.).

He confesses that the first collected object was *‘my grandpa’s wedding shirt, which he did not wear because he missed the chance to be a bridegroom, being sent to the front and dying on the German front’*. He chose the collection objects according to their authenticity, age, beauty, and sometimes because of their strangeness (*‘Look, this strangeness made me buy them’*).

Two are the reasons why he introduced fragments of objects or deteriorated objects into the collection: beauty and their self-testimony, particularly from the point of view of craftsmanship and symbols. *‘Poor things’*... is the endearing term used to refer to these objects.

It is particularly his relatives who helped him make the collection. The whole family seemed to be talented and keen on weaving and sewing. They had the most beautiful carpets painted in colours made of *‘weeds’*. Apart from his family, it was his teachers who encouraged him. He refused to receive some objects because *‘they were*

not a document whereby generations can communicate between them’.

Constantin Niţu’s collection includes a few objects that have *‘a history’*, as he puts it: a towel woven by a grand-grandmother for Alexandru Ioan Cuza in order to pacify him when he came to destroy the local monastery, a gift which he refused, finally destroying the monastery; a table where *‘Octavian Goga drank his coffee’*; objects (not ethnographic) which belonged to doctor Carol Davilla; a Murano glass bead necklace brought from Venice by Costache Negri for the wife of General Magheru; a fragment from a very old embroidered peasant shirt retrieved from the coffin of a priestess who was exhumed at some point (he designed a shirt according to this model); an icon *‘which did not want to leave the country’* and was quite badly burnt when retrieved from the customs; an *‘opreg’* (apron) from Banat *‘woven with golden threads and Banat woman’s hairs’*.

The most exquisite ethnographic objects of the collection are: *‘the north-of-Olt blue homespun skirts’*, *‘a godfather’s „şervete“ (towel)’*, a male suit called *‘Dacian’* (a two-piece suit with an extremely simple cut and a rough hemp weave, without adornments), *‘bridegroom handkerchiefs’*, *‘pomneată de mort’* (a handkerchief with a coin at one end and a candle at the other end used for commemorating the dead) (generally woven beforehand); his grandmother had made it 57 years before she died at the age of 91 – her husband had died in the battlefield of Mărăşeşti; no such handkerchiefs are woven today etc.

He discovered similarities between the motifs embroidered on old homespun skirts and those on objects belonging to Sumerian civilization – therefore, a time span of 5000 years; as a matter of fact, he wrote an article on this topic, accompanied by proof illustrations. He is an aficionado of the *‘tricolor’* (*‘the sweetest three colours’*).

He does not know how many objects are in the collection because *‘I have never cared about that’*. He did not make an inventory of the ob-

jects, but he drew up detailed record cards for some of them, according to the model used in specialised museums.

As regards the responsiveness of the surrounding people to his desire to collect, he found that there are three categories: few are good and help you; some are more suspicious and can hardly be convinced to do it; finally, the great majority that will not help you, though they could.

The vice-mayor of the commune appreciates Constantin Nițu first and foremost as a teacher and then as a collector. He promised to give him *'all his support'* if elected mayor. As for the collection, he sees it displayed in a hall of the Cultural House of the commune rather than in a specially designed building which, together with others, would turn into a small *'village museum'*, as Constantin Nițu would like to see happen.

The village priest views him as the right man *'at the right time, in the right place, probably not together with the right people or between right people'*. In other words, he realizes that his village fellows experience certain feelings of mistrust mixed with envy materialised as gossip, defamation and offensive words. This also hap-

pens because, as a man, he deals with a trade considered by the villagers to be eminently feminine. The priest also seems to value his quality of an artisan more than his quality of a collector: *'he could have dealt more with art, he did not want to be more than just a collector; I think it would have been more interesting if he had dealt more with art'*. *'Our Lord did not leave museums behind Him'*, adds the priest. He thinks that Constantin Nițu's work is valuable especially because it awakens the villagers' memory and conscience of a cultural and spiritual heritage whose richness and value is also explained by its closeness to the Church.

Constantin Nițu dreams of setting up a sort of local village museum in Poboru, on a territory which, once granted by the City Hall, should put together the remnants of old village houses, some of them with different functional roles in the past. The mayor (the former vice-mayor who has been elected in the meantime) seems to be more realistic at the moment: he thinks of finding a place where Constantin Nițu's ethnographic collection, which consists of many remarkable pieces, should be exhibited in decent conditions and appropriately preserved.







