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Clay Toys in the Collection of the Romanian National Peasant Museum

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ABSTRACT

The patrimony of the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant contains a special category of objects: clay toys. The almost 2000 pieces constitute a veritable world in miniature. People, birds, animals, as well as copies of traditional kitchen utensils were skilfully shaped by master potters for use in children's games. These toys take the following forms: „primitive” musical instruments, anthropomorphic miniatures (men, women in crinolines), avimorphic and zoomorphic (chicken, hen with chicks, peacocks, dogs, rams, horses, horses with riders, bears, lions), as well as miniatures modeled on traditional kitchenware (pots, cups, jugs, plates, platters, cake pans). Their molding was accomplished either manually, that is on the wheel, or by pressing the clay into templates.

KEYWORDS

Romanian National Peasant Museum, collection, ceramics, toys, games, childhood.

The History of Clay Toys. Toy-Making Techniques

In the traditional village and within the framework of a natural economy where manual labor predominated, peasants produced their own food, tools, and textiles for clothes and household use. Their children were by no means forgotten. Toys were fashioned for their amusement; playthings which gave them joy, familiarized them with the world of adults, and stimulated their dexterity and inventiveness. Most importantly, they helped manage children's emotional state, as they were often left in the care of older brothers and/or elders while parents were away working in the fields or performing other labors.

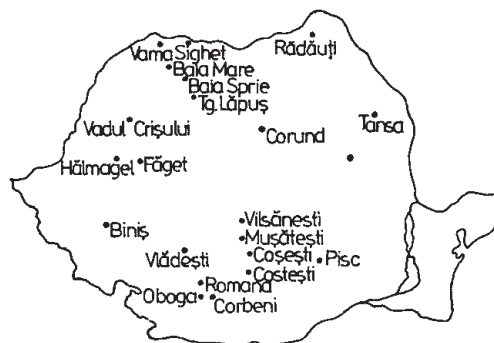
Through play, children gained new experiences, increased their powers of observation, and developed their imagination. Toys were in equal measure amusing and educational, helping children develop initiative.

What kind of toys did children who lived in traditional villages have?

What kind of materials were they made of, and who made them?

Museum collections show that expended materials were frequently utilized in confecting these toys. Fabric from discarded clothes and corn sheathes were transformed into dolls; old socks snuggled together and tied with string were fashioned into balls. Wood was used to carve coaches or carts, weapons (guns or pistols), as well as animals. Most often, the toys were made out of clay.

The Romanian National Peasant Museum assembles in its collections almost 2,000 clay



Harta centrelor producătoare de jucării din lut

Map of the centers producing clay toys

D'ale bucătăriei –
Miniaturi de vase
(Kitchen Matters – Vase
Miniatures), Vadul
Crișului (Bihor), 1/3
sec. XX

toys created by potters from throughout the country. A veritable world in miniature, these clay toys delighted many generations of children, not only in traditional villages but also in times closer to our own. Their history goes back thousands of years. In the quest to uncover the secrets of this fascinating history, we are led to a genuine thesaurus of „signs which traditional man left us by dint of his life, work, and prayer, [that is] simple and unmediated actions on the world which surrounded him, and which deserve to be received and preserved with the care owed to the values created by the Romanian people” (Bernea 1985, 21).

Throughout the years, archaeologists have uncovered numerous types of miniatures. These include:

- The ten zoomorphic figurines representing sheep (Boian Culture), and which were probably connected to the cult practiced by animal breeders (Berciu 1961, 594).

- The figurines dating from the Bronze Age, namely women with bell-shaped dresses and the Tanagre statuettes discovered in the Greek colonies situated in the Dobrudjean area of the Black Sea coast (Dumitrescu 1961, 162).

- The anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines discovered in the Poiana resort and classified as magical artefacts essential to the burial rites practiced by the Geto-Dacians.

- Other figurines found in old burial sites and regarded as having to do with the cult of the dead.

During burial, objects „that had belonged to the deceased and might be needed in the afterlife” were placed in the grave (Dechelette 1914, 985-986).

The technique of preparing the clay in order to be molded into toys and pottery did not vary significantly from one area of the country to another. This represents a significant marker attesting to the unity of traditional Romanian culture. The first step of the technique, still used today, involves the potters bringing clay from nearby hillsides. After transport, the clay is „leavened”, that is wetted repeatedly and left to absorb the water. The leavening of the clay contributes to yielding a



homogenously kneaded paste necessary for a good quality production. Next follows the „treading” of the earth, that is pressing it with the feet. Also known as the „toeing and heeling”, this procedure is repeated several times because it helps render the clay „buttery” and easy to shape.

Thereafter, the clay is once more cut into „pies”. These „pies” are sizeable pieces, which are then watered and drubbed with a wooden beater in order to discover and eliminate impurities. After the removal of all foreign bodies from the mass of clay, the „pies” are gathered into „clods”. Each lump is then wetted, pressed, and pummeled with the wooden beater.

Finally, the clods are rejoined into a large „pie. The „pie” is kneaded once more until the clay becomes light, very soft, and easy to model. The potter then cuts smaller slices and turns them yet again into clods, which are continuously watered in order to preserve their plasticity.

These clods have the requisite size for creating an object (plate, pot, toy...). At last, the toys can be modeled. This can be accomplished through one of the following techniques:

- Loosely, that is when the potter shapes the clay by hand;

- On the wheel, which implies the maneuvering of the wheel combined with the manual modeling of the clay, just as it is done with any other vessel. In this manner, the clay takes the form of a cylinder or a funnel, which is then transformed according to the potters’ individual skill and imagination

- By pressing the clay into plaster molds; a



procedure that makes possible serial production, but which diminishes the expressiveness of the toy.

The toy taxa may be typologically classified as follows:

1. „Primitive” musical instruments (ewer-shaped, human-shaped, and animal-shaped whistles).

2. Avimorphic, zoomorphic, and anthropomorphic miniatures (birds, horses, dogs, rams, bears, lions, women in crinolines, horses and riders etc.).

3. Miniatures patterned after household items (crocks, cups, jugs, buckets, baskets, plates, platters, colanders, cake pans in various shapes).

In order for the toys to emit the sounds so beloved by children, the potter must focus intensely on making the „whistler”. This usually takes the form of a cylinder and must be perforated throughout its length. The toy will not warble if the perforation is not done correctly. In some cases, the „whistler” is attached to the body of the toy. Such is the case with the horses from Pisc and Oboga, the birds from Vlădești etc. In other instances, the „whistler” is part of the toy itself. Examples include the tail of the horses and dogs made in Româna, the mouth of the fish produced in Pisc, and the snout of the piglets from Vlădești.

After modeling, the toys are left to dry and then decorated. The ornamental range extends from a few „glazed spots” splashed with a small broom or dropped from a cattle or clay horn all the way to geometric motifs such as

the „lime juts”. The latter are obtained from the loam efflux and are painted using a finger or a brush. The gamut of geometric forms includes spiral, wave-like, and zig-zag lines, as well as concentric circles traced by dribbling the loam efflux out of a horn.

Next to these, the potters paint phytomorphic motifs (sprigs, branches, leaves, pine branches) and floral patterns (flower buds, wreaths etc.). Alternatively, they apply clay appendages in order to render birds’ plumage or women’s head adornments and/or jewels (Pisc, Oboga).

Some of these remain in a red-burned state, without being engobed or glazed. They are not unlike the burnt, red earth....sometimes with the twinkle of the mica dust mixed into the earth from which they were shaped, and which gives them a special effulgence and beauty in the sunlight. This is precisely the visage of the toys made in Pisc. They comprise hens with chicks, geese, turkeys with fanned tail feathers, little horses, dogs, fish, as well as anthropomorphic stylizations (women in crinolines and men). In sum, they represent a unique gamut of toys.

Others toys, such as those made in Vlădești by Violeta, the daughter of master potter Dumitru Șchiopu are engobed in white. Some of them are speckled with glazed spots colored in ocher or green, the traditional colors used in this unique ceramics center, and which brighten the toy horses, dogs, rams, bears, or birds. However, most of them are glazed in their entirety and for this reason burnt twice; the first time after they are mod-



„Cuci” („Cuckoos”),
Româna (Olt), 3/4 sec.
XX

Cai și călăreți (Horses
and Riders), Pisc (Ifov),
sec. XX

eled and dried, and the second time after their decoration and glazing. In this way, they become more durable.

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The Typology of Clay Toys. Toy-Producing Centers

Toys are a serious matter, particularly if they are regarded from a ludic perspective.



„Cântăreața”, („The Singer”) Oboga (Olt), sf. sec. XIX

This is because children are not unlike their toys. The act of playing fulfills an essential function in children’s lives, facilitating the development of complex relationships between them. At the same time, play expresses age-specific psychological characteristics and enables the accumulation of important experiences regarding social relations (Șchiopu 1967, 144). The universe of toys thus „produces” candor, joy, but also a certain anxiety – just like any other attempt to copy the world. Sometimes the „effect” is comical; other times it becomes dramatic, as illustrated by the fifes made in Pisc

representing foxes with chicks in their mouths or bears stealing honey-laden hives.

This is why toys, being a convenient mean between the simple and the complicated, may be regarded as the first mask people wear. Toys teach people to live their future existence. In this way, by means of the ludic and the fleeting, our spirit discovers the duration and fundamental markers of the human condition.

Urban and rural environments regularly generate play themes that reveal characteristic particularities. Games typically express the mentality of a given society, the customs of adults and their activities in different domains, as well as daily occurrences. Consequently, play has a historical character and is determined by the environment in which children live. (Pascadi 1974, 128).

For one can indeed live fully in the village... a child can touch all household objects, learn and experience them, converting them into object-toys by handling them in certain ways. Play, even if solitary (a solitude without anxiety), is a pure creation, merging with perpetuity...

The motifs of the clay toys, renewed and recreated by successive generations, are inspired by the world surrounding the potter. In regards to the fifes („primitive” musical instruments), the most frequently encountered are avimorphic, zoomorphic, and anthropomorphic themes.

Transposed in the realm of art through the interpretive imagination and skill in rendering beauty of the master potters, the birds are to be found in various hypostases. Gazing upon squatting or pecking bird reminds one of the avimorphic representation of the harbinger of the „water of life”, the „advisor” of those who left in search of the elixir of life. Most times, however, they depict roosters or hens found in most courtyards, or pigeons with a very familiar aspect – such as those made in Pisc (Ilfov), Coșești (Argeș), Româna (Olt), or Corund (Harghita). Other times, for example when crafted by the potters from Vâlșănești (Argeș), Vlădești (Vâlcea), Pisc (Ilfov), they are modeled into the magical plumed birds of Romanian folklore.

The snake, one of the oldest symbols known to humanity, is also frequently represented. The snake represents fertility; he is the knower of life's mysteries and guardian of treasures hidden in the deep. The snake-whistles made by Ilie Dragu at Vălsănești (Argeș) testify not only to the survival of these ancient motifs, but also to the potter's mastery. The potter shapes the body of the snake out of a simple roll of clay, with the slightly elevated head displaying the distinct characteristics of the species by means of incisions made in the raw argil. The snake's mouth constitutes the actual whistle, while the green-brownish color and the expertly applied glazing enhances the beauty, originality, and artistic virtues of the toys.

Dog figurines are amongst the most frequent zoomorphic fifes. The actual whistle is almost always the tail. The folded, tipped, or pricked ears endow the figurines with the most varied expressions: contentment in solitude, joy in seeing the master, and vigilance in the presence of strangers. Full of life, the clay dogs fawn, wait, sadden, and attack – as seen in the figures produced in Pisc (Ilfov), Româna (Olt), and Vlădești (Vâlcea).

Horses are also frequently modeled, images preserved by popular art as a vestige of the myths regarding horses' apotropaic power. The toy horses are either integral representations of this power or complex hypostases, namely accompanied by soldiers or riders. The images are fanciful; the animals' neck being elongated in order to balance the riders' silhouette.

The horse-fifes often depict the magical horses found in popular fairytales. Displaying pricked ears, puffed nostrils, and taut necks, the horses from Oboga and Româna (Olt), Pisc (Ilfov), Vălsănești (Argeș), and Vlădești (Vâlcea) appear to guard a precious treasure. This is the „whistler” which is placed underneath them. The same holds true for seahorses from Târgul Lăpuș (Maramureș). By the same token, their riders are invariably famous and beloved heroes, destined to triumph. The heroes appear in period costumes, sometimes as

cavalrymen, as seen in the pottery centers of Oboga (Olt) and Pisc (Ilfov).

Although men are also depicted in other hypostases, for example carrying a chick or a pumpkin, the representations of women are much more varied. These figures are surprising and impressive because they embody the persistence of an ancient magical tradition. In the world of peasant toys, women are depicted with a „child-fife” in their arms. This is an image connected with the cult of maternity.

Some women are portrayed wearing a long dress splayed in the form of a bell, which also constitutes the base that insures equilibrium. The „women-fifes” almost always hold a child in their arms, either at chest or waist level. In many cases, the child's face is not depicted in full detail. Instead, it is suggested by a small clay curl which constitutes the actual whistle. On the other hand, the visage of the mother is carefully done: the nose line continues the forehead line of a manner similar to that of a bird beak; the eyes are configured by applying two carefully incised clay nubbins, while the hair is rendered by numerous clay tendrils.

One of these toys is known in the scholarly literature as „The Singer”. It dates from the end of the XIXth century and was modeled in Oboga (Olt). The potters overlooked no vestimentary detail that could endow it with savor and charm: the bell-shaped dress, the „rivers” embroidered on the sleeves, the frills around the neck, and the bonnet fastened under the chin are faithful portrayals of Central European fashion.

Miniatures patterned after vases for household use include pots fashioned for the transport of food, wooden buckets, milking pails, plates, cullenders etc.). Their use in children's games recreated a family atmosphere in both urban and rural settings. This is particularly true for girls who, in the process of imitating their mothers, displayed an affinity for household management from an early age. Consequently, there evolved over time a selection of forms according to sex and age. In this way, the use of toys came to reflect the tra-



Caluț-fluier (Horse-fife),
Pisc (Ilfov), inc. sec. XX

ditional sexual division of labor. Dolls and vase miniatures were thereby preferred by girls, while ewe-fifes, cuckoos, colts and horses with riders, together with airplane-fifes and clay guns stimulated boys' imagination, unleashing unsuspected energies in their „outlaw” and „soldier” games.

The collection of the Romanian National Peasant Museum contains toys from all ceramic centers that produce toys: Pisc (Ilfov), Coșești, Piscani, Vâlsănești (Argeș), Balș, Corbeni, Româna, Oboga (Olt), Vlădești (Vâlcea), Halmăgel (Arad), Corund (Harghita), Biniș (Caraș-Severin), Făget (Timiș), Baia Mare, Baia Sprie, Târgul Lăpuș (Maramureș), Vadul Crișului (Bihor), Poiana (Iași), and Rădăuți (Suceava).

Potters such as Marin Nicolae (Pisc), Trușcă Marin (Româna), Dumitru Șchiopu and his daughter Violeta (Vlădești), Ionica Stepan (Biniș), Alexandru Bogossy from Târgul. Lăpuș, Ilie Dragu (Vâlsănești), and Florin Colibaba (Rădăuți) created toys that are widely appreciated, enriching in the process the national patrimony preserved in museums.

The toys' very existence is testimony to the efforts of the Romanian people to

transcend the monotony and pettiness of daily existence by means of the soothing smile of art. The Romanian people experienced beauty as an integral part of their daily deeds, thereby ennobling the products of their labors (Oprescu 1922, 17 – 18).

Although children nowadays skilfully handle computers, iPads, and other electronic toys, the peasant toys in the museum collection still touch a chord in their hearts.

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