

# MARTOR



---

Title: "A Sense of Past: Usages of Objects in Naïve Museology"

Author: Anca-Maria Pănoiu

How to cite this article: Pănoiu, Anca-Maria. 2017. "A Sense of Past: Usages of Objects in Naïve Museology." *Martor* 22: 149-164.

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

URL: <http://martor.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/archive/martor-22-2017/>

---

*Martor* (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Journal) is a peer-reviewed academic journal established in 1996, with a focus on cultural and visual anthropology, ethnology, museum studies and the dialogue among these disciplines. *Martor Journal* is published by the Museum of the Romanian Peasant. Interdisciplinary and international in scope, it provides a rich content at the highest academic and editorial standards for academic and non-academic readership. Any use aside from these purposes and without mentioning the source of the article(s) is prohibited and will be considered an infringement of copyright.

*Martor* (Revue d'Anthropologie du Musée du Paysan Roumain) est un journal académique en système *peer-review* fondé en 1996, qui se concentre sur l'anthropologie visuelle et culturelle, l'ethnologie, la muséologie et sur le dialogue entre ces disciplines. La revue *Martor* est publiée par le Musée du Paysan Roumain. Son aspiration est de généraliser l'accès vers un riche contenu au plus haut niveau du point de vue académique et éditorial pour des objectifs scientifiques, éducatifs et informationnels. Toute utilisation au-delà de ces buts et sans mentionner la source des articles est interdite et sera considérée une violation des droits de l'auteur.

*Martor* is indexed by EBSCO and CEEOL.



# A Sense of Past: Usages of Objects in Naïve Museology

**Anca-Maria Pănoiu**

*MA, Centre of Excellence in Image Studies (University of Bucharest) and Assistant curator of the Image Archive (Museum of the Romanian Peasant)  
anca.maria\_p@yahoo.com*

---

## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to establish a theoretical framework for the analysis of what I propose to call “naïve museums” by making reference to three actual instances of the phenomenon in contemporary Romania. All these naïve museums – as I venture to call them – are quasi-anonymous, private collections, mainly ethnological in character, set up out of passion by people few of whom have any specific expertise. What unites them is the enthusiasm and creativity they bring to the task of gathering, selecting and displaying objects they consider representative of the local culture. Thus, naïve museums must be approached from the perspective of their creators’ intuitive museological discourse, as they most often emphasise one particular type of local identity and are pervaded by their founders’ biography and tastes and strongly marked with their own creative touch.

In something of a contrast with the culturally composite character of the mainly rural areas where such museums are springing up in contemporary Romania, their creators configure a local identity that makes strong references to an undefined, remote and idyllic past. Taking as a guiding principle Eric Hobsbawm’s understanding of tradition as a social construct and practice of modernity, I will subject to analysis three such naïve museums by using the principle of the “syntax of objects,” a theoretical framework designed to reveal the meanings enshrined in these museums by their creators, themselves merely agents who constantly interpret and transform, through verbal and object discourse, both their local culture and *their* museums

## KEYWORDS

Naïve museums, syntax of objects, local identity, temporality, tradition.



## Posing the question: how can a museum be naïve?

“Museum” and “naïve” are words that would seem at first sight to be mutually exclusive. All the more so when they are intended to evoke, in combination, a space that the European culture of recent centuries has accustomed us to conceive of as a “temple of the Muses,” an area by definition embodying high culture. One of the many definitions that can be given to a museum is that formulated by Eugene Dillenbourg in his attempt to reach the inner essence, the specific difference that a museum

embodies: “an exhibition is a physical environment designed for the experience of embedded knowledge” (Dillenbourg 2011: 13). This means that in a museum the space itself, its physical and dimensional givens, is significant; that the choice of objects, their juxtaposition, the angles at which they are arranged, the order, the built environment – all this contains a significance that the visitor comes to through experience (Dillenbourg 2011: *loc. cit.*). On the other hand, the word “naïve” evokes senses that are negative and seemingly unwelcome in the ensemble of positive qualities of a museum display, since a museum exists as the fruit of a process of distillation of concepts and wrestling with issues that has in view the generation of knowledge. Thus, to describe

1. Two of the museums studied in this article are to be found in areas that, although from the administrative point of view they belong to the urban environment, have features that tend to propel them towards its margins, in different ways. Agnita, where the House of Dolls Ethnographic Museum is located, is a town that has experienced economic decline in the period since the 1989 Romanian Revolution. The Schei neighbourhood of Braşov, where we find the Museum in the Attic, has over the centuries had a marginal status in the multi-ethnic melting pot of that city, because it preserved a homogeneous Romanian identity in a region that historically extended to Romanians no more than toleration.

2. "A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment." (Definition according to the ICOM Statutes, adopted by the 22nd General Assembly in Vienna, Austria on August 24th, 2007, available at <http://icom.museum/the-vision/museum-definition/>, last consulted on July 31st, 2017).

3. My translation.

a cultural phenomenon by putting together these two words is likely to give rise to wry looks and raised eyebrows, especially if the person reacting is an authority and of high status. And yet a museum can be naïve. All you need is a different conceptualisation, another way of viewing it, and you can grasp that the term "naïve" is being used not to indicate the absence of value but rather to give a name to a form of artistic expression that does not keep step either with the time period in which it is produced, or with an artistic tradition that has been fixed ever since antiquity, or with the expectations and demands of elites. Such a view cannot but be a fresh one.

The examination I am proposing is directed towards a cultural phenomenon more and more frequently encountered in Romania during the past few decades, chiefly in the rural environment and in peripheral areas of towns<sup>1</sup>: quasi-anonymous private collections, preponderantly ethnographic in character, that their creators call "museums". These have been put together by people of different levels of culture and education, lacking any experience of museum work but united by the enthusiasm and creativity they put into the effort of collecting, categorising and arranging – in ways and tonalities that can be entirely unexpected – objects that they regard as representative of their own cultural identity. The collections are housed either in premises that they own or, more rarely, in buildings provided by the local authorities. As a consequence of an intuitive grasp of how to proceed, of simply not asking themselves certain questions and of having limited practical means at their disposal, such extremely lively cultural spaces do not even consider trying to meet the strict requirements of such definitions as that given to museums by the International Council of Museums<sup>2</sup>. First hosts and then guides, their creators are more eager to preserve than to conserve, to take care of objects than to restore them, to display than to explain, to share than to educate.

Naïve museums can therefore be seen as variants, with a strong affective touch, of classic museums that conform to the already-standard definitions. However, they do not lack any of their essential features – even when they are not fully aware of them – but simply choose a different route to embody them, the route of intuition. Or, in the words of Kenneth Hudson as cited by Thierry Bonnot in a work devoted to attachment to objects, they belong to the category of single-parent museums, "where the charm counts for everything and the rules for almost nothing" (Hudson *via* Bonnot 2014: 106)<sup>3</sup>. All the same, in the spontaneity and variety that characterise them, these cultural spaces have an expressive and community cohesion potential that merit the attention of specialists – rather than their being consigned to official obscurity. In fact, as cultural phenomena that defy definition and exist in the debated area of a "between," they are in need of some conceptualising and defining if they are to be made accessible to research.

In proposing that they be grouped together under the heading of "naïve museums," I am retaining the word "museum" in my definition out of a desire for an emic attitude towards the cultural phenomenon under investigation, involving looking at these museums together with their creators, with the purpose of seeking to understand their spontaneous action in the very personal tonalities of the discourse that envelops it. At the same time, I add the word "naïve" – emptied of any value judgment – not in order to push it to the bottom of a hierarchy in which it would not even find a place, but in order to underline its candour. In order to define its theoretical boundaries and position it deliberately in an area of freedom of expression, of fresh, natural action, of spontaneously displayed feelings and of involuntary expressiveness. The tension between the terms we started off with – "museum" and "naïve" – thus subsides into agreement about a definition. Yet a little of the initial contradiction

survives to prefigure the emergence of the subject of our study in an area that lies off the beaten track and outside the realm of customary meanings, along with the cultural potential that flows from the meeting of opposites.

There is an inherent ambiguity in the naïve museum, due to the tensions that exist between it and the classic, institutional museum; these issue from the resemblances and borrowings that show it is making a cultured reference, when these encounter a freshness of expression that pays little attention to rules. The profile of a naïve museum becomes all the more individualised and hard to categorise to the extent to which its creator's personal stamp is stronger. In a stage setting of identity in which, as Oana Mateescu underlines, "the owner is an intrinsic part of the installation" (Mateescu 2009: 54), the interpenetration between their personal biography and the objects makes the collection a whole and gives it cohesion, even though there is no rigid classification system (Mateescu 2009: *loc. cit.*). In order to find room for the wide range of forms of expression and to discover a common thread that runs through them, it makes sense to resort in the first place to looking at a small number of examples that may illuminate what the naïve museum has and does not have, to bring us a step closer to understanding what it is.

The naïve museum does not operate within an institutional (local, county or national) framework and in most cases is not even dependent on financial or logistical support from any institutions. The setting up of a naïve museum is not grounded on curatorial expertise or backed by specialist studies in the area of museography or patrimony but is characterised by the non-raising of issues of this kind. In practical terms, and this too from a lack of expertise and resources – financial, logistical and regarding information – the naïve museum does not possess the infrastructure that is the order of the day in an institutional museum, that is, appropriate conditions

for the conservation and protection of its collections. Finally, it does not have behind it a range of coherent public policies, nor is it generally given visibility by means of strategies designed to promote it or make it part of a regular tourist itinerary. If it does have a Facebook profile or a website<sup>4</sup>, these follow the same intuitive line that informs the display itself.

The naïve museum starts from a powerful desire for personal or community self-representation that is sometimes poorly focused in the sense that there is not always any clear idea of who its public will be. The naïve museum demonstrates an effervescent discourse, in terms both of associations between objects and of the narrative that presents them, translates them and interprets them for the visitor, along with great spontaneity of representation. Both of these traits flow from the absence of the constraints and self-criticism that an academic approach to the issue would have imposed, as may be seen in the following pages in which I give an analysis of the three such museums at which I have carried out fieldwork. The naïve museum is a cultural phenomenon that is spontaneous, organic and endogenous, with a discourse directed on the one hand at an otherness whose contours are frequently diffuse<sup>5</sup> and on the other hand at itself, thus reinforcing in a circular way a particular feeling about identity. Finally, the naïve museum flows from a passion for collecting – most often ethnographic in nature – and attempts through objects to preserve and transmit customs, crafts, traditions and ways of life whose disappearance or alteration is felt as an imminent threat. However, the criteria that underlie the choice and arrangement of objects are either affective ones or have more to do with taste and preferences than with any specialist scheme, since they are in the final analysis an unsystematic attempt to preserve cultural identity and memory. This is the source of the unexpected inclusions of objects and the "accidents" in the representation that give the naïve museum

4. See the profiles of Florin Filipescu and Mircea Drăgan and the website [www.casacupapusi.ro](http://www.casacupapusi.ro).

its colour and strongly personal stamp and make it a deposit of meanings and a fertile territory for exploration.

The areas of abundance and of dearth that the naïve museum thus displays are an indication of the most promising way to construct it as a subject of study: in a border zone. Between the discourse of the classic museum – something that it feels after – and the popular discourse that it embodies, there is room in the naïve museum even for error. The choice of this word is not fortuitous but intended to indicate that we are distancing ourselves from any value judgment; where error can be identified in the naïve museum it seeks to rescue the term from the sense in which it is generally used and to reveal its bright side, so that it becomes a deposit of unconscious expressiveness, of new meanings that can be seen because the rules have been relaxed. If we look at it from this angle, acknowledging the liminal status of the naïve museum can move it from being ambiguous to being disambiguated. The conceptual “wobbliness” characteristic of it thus becomes the raw material for the distilling of a different kind of knowledge, from which a new epistemic awareness can take shape.

In the field study described in this article I combined semi-structured interviews with creators of naïve museums with direct observation of how objects were arranged in them, using photography as a recording method. I focused on three such museums: the *Museum across the Water* in Podul Nărujii (Vrancea county), created in an old-style house dating from the earlier half of the twentieth century by Maricica Hanu-Mare, from the village of Nistorești, who had only elementary education and has never been to a classic museum; the *House of Dolls Ethnographic Museum* in Agnita (Sibiu county), opened in their own home by a retired teacher couple, Mircea and Maria Drăgan; and the *Museum in the Attic*, set up in his parents’ old home in Scheii Brașovului by the retired engineer Florin Filipescu and containing exclusively

family items dating from the past century and a half. My reason for selecting these three naïve museums from the large numbers I discovered all over Romania was that each of them, through the objects in it, actualises a different dimension of temporality. Grasping and analysing these hypostases of time – and implicitly of the past – as an integral part both of the objects and of the choices underlying the way they are arranged in space, constitutes the core purpose of the article.



### **A framework for understanding some “wobbly” museums: the syntax of objects**

“All museums are a stage, and all artifacts merely players; they have their entrances and their exits, and one artifact in its time plays many parts,” writes Wolfgang Ernst in a study of the way museums are laid out (Ernst 2000: 18), shifting the Shakespeare quotation to the area of museums in order to highlight in an expressive way the fact that objects, in the role of exhibits, cannot convey, unless they are linked in reciprocal relations both with each other and with the space in which they are deployed, the meanings built up with their help. What kinds of relationships become established between the objects in a naïve museum – given the ways in which it does and does not resemble a classic museum – while they are functioning as (unconscious) bearers of identity-related references? Directing our attention to the links created between objects can provide us with the key to constructing a theoretical path to structuring the meanings invested in their own creations by those who found museums – meanings that most often exist on an identity-related register.

We may borrow an initial theoretical tool for this enterprise from the reflections of Horia Bernea, in 1994, when the Museum of the Romanian Peasant was still in an

embryonic form and was looking for a unity of style and a formula for its existence. At that point its founder enunciated two vital concepts, “strong articulation” and “weak articulation” (Bernea, Nicolau, Huluță 2001: 88), both concretised in objects, but with the objects having different roles. Strong articulation would be a powerful object that would make an impression through its materiality, through its coherent form and through its function being evident. Such an item would be capable, through its powers of expression, of giving structure to “a complex of sub-assemblages” (Bernea, Nicolau, Huluță 2001: *loc. cit.*) – a series of objects in the same register, more fragile in form and material but which, by being in the orbit of the powerful object, could construct a single meaning. Its counterpart was “weak articulation,” a single object, intentionally fragile, which was counted on to evoke more subtle registers. For example, while a loom was an example of “strong articulation,” one part of it, such as the warp frame, could be used to organise a space around the idea of construction or of hierarchy.

What is being aimed at, therefore, is a relation that is constructed not merely through juxtaposing exhibits but through their syntactic disposition, the focus being on the connections that have to articulate the items into a scenography of their own, into a semantic construction. Furthermore, an aspect that Horia Bernea mentions and that Jean Baudrillard had earlier developed is that such a semantic construction is very closely related to the space which it activates by conferring on it a morphology and a rhythmic quality of its own: “Without connection, space does not exist, since space exists only if it is open, challenged, given rhythm, broadened through a correlating of objects and through transcending its function in a new structure” (Baudrillard 1996: 13)<sup>6</sup>. We must therefore keep in mind not only the links that could be made between objects from different registers, which have become exhibits as the result of an act of selecting and displaying on the part of the

creator of the museum, but also the type of space in which they are placed, their actual arranging with regard to aspects such as the type and shape of the room, the function this space had prior to museification and the path taken during its conversion of use, along with physical characteristics such as light, textures, colours or any other features with which objects can enter into semantic relations.

This theoretical tool borrowed from Horia Bernea’s museography can be further strengthened by appeal to the principles formulated by Jacques Hainard<sup>7</sup> to describe what he calls “a well-tempered art of creating an exhibition” (unpublished lecture)<sup>8</sup>. The link between the two giants of European museography is no merely bookish and theoretical one but exists at a biographical level too: Jacques Hainard maintained a close connection with the Museum of the Romanian Peasant in the early ’90s, when he held a series of seminars that forged its future style and manner of expression. Less theoretician and more museum practitioner, with great experience in mounting exhibitions covering the disputed area of post-colonial anthropology, this Swiss expert stresses the fact that a good exhibition can never be a stringing-together of objects accompanied by descriptive labels that overload us with dry, repetitive information. The greatest risk is that the viewer will become bored – Hainard says this with humour and without mincing his words. Once boredom sets in, significations become unclear and the visitor is no longer prepared to invest effort into constructing bridges of meaning between the culture being showcased by metonymy and the culture within which it is constructed and received. Consequently, Hainard maintains, to avoid information overload and the danger of coming up against a failure in communication, there must exist in the exhibition – in the form of an object or a group of objects – “a syntax, a style, a pen” (unpublished lecture)<sup>9</sup>. An element that can function as a semantic motor for the entire

6. My translation.

7. Former curator of the Neuchâtel Ethnographic Museum and subsequently Director of the Geneva Ethnographic Museum.

8. My translation.

9. My translation.

construction, pulling the display together into an idea with a life of its own, intelligible to the viewer, into a position that the whole exhibition adopts. To identify such a semantic motor in a naïve display means finding that ferment of characteristically unconscious expressiveness that moves it on from a mere inventory of heterogeneous objects to an individual, subjective staging of its creators' personal, local or regional identity.

Consequently, the theoretical route I have been describing in the preceding pages is one that emerges from the meeting of Horia Bernea's concepts of "strong articulation" and "weak articulation" with the principles of Jacques Hainard. It is from this meeting of concepts that I have distilled the expression "museum syntax" to describe the unity of meaning that can be extracted from the things brought together in a naïve display, on the basis of connections identified between the objects and the space in which they are put and which they transform. It should be noted that such borrowings from theory in no way aspire to make the naïve museum fit into a bed of Procrustes by forcing it into a frame of thinking that obviously belongs to elevated registers that are the fruit of the distillation of concepts. The enterprise has a different role, that of extracting from the way a classic museum is put together concepts that will provide clues to grasping the ways objects in a naïve museum are organised in space. In other words, what I have been aiming for in advancing the term "museum syntax" has been to fashion a theoretical framework with the aid of which I can penetrate in an analytical way into the magma of unconscious and not wholly open-to-categorisation expressiveness found in naïve museums. By using it I will be able to trace the manner in which the objects in the naïve museum group themselves semantically, making themselves available to be looked at and understood.

It is just this magma, shot through with the unforeseen, that the naïve museum offers

– extremely varied in the shapes, materials and textures of the objects that articulate themselves in space, dense as the network of meanings – that causes the syntaxes that can be deciphered from the whole to be many in number. They can be drawn out and organised in a diversity of typologies, depending on the criteria that serve a particular line of research or that match a particular sensitivity on the researcher's part at a given moment. The purpose of using this theoretical instrument need not be to fully explore the phenomena we meet on the ground but – distancing ourselves from any extravagant ambitions or aspirations to be exhaustive – to underline the polysemy and polyphony that characterise the naïve museum. Consequently, from the palette of possibilities that use of this instrument opens up, I have chosen to employ in the pages that follow a type of syntax that concentrates on the temporality bound up in objects and actualised in the discourse of the naïve museum. A temporality that is itself polysemic and that frequently refers to tradition as an equation between culture and identity.



### **"An object left behind by the older generation": the traditional syntax of objects**

"We made use of the location, as it's quite isolated, we made use of the building, as it's an old one, and we brought together traditional objects, from our area, from here, so as to keep tradition up to date!" says Cornel Bercariu<sup>10</sup>, the initiator and financier of Maricica's *Museum over the Water* in Podu Nărujii, Vrancea county, of his enterprise in opening a little museum that would present the daily life of the people who formerly lived in that area: "To keep and remember the old customs of our grandparents!"

However, by contrast with the usual way the expression is used – one which Cornel

10. Interview conducted on May 1st 2017, Podu Nărujii, Vrancea county.

Bercariu shares – the meaning current anthropological discourse attributes to tradition is not that of a slice of the past detached so as to be brought into the present but – exactly the opposite – a response communities make to a present situation. This response is only projected into an *illo tempore*, but in reality it represents an existential solution for the future, which, as it is most often perceived as problematical, needs a legitimization, a normative explanation given in the present, an identity-related point of orientation (Mihăilescu 2004: 181-205). Or, as Henry Glassie puts it, tradition represents “the creation of the future out of the past” (Glassie 1996: 395), “the means for deriving the future from the past, [thus] a volitional, temporal action” (Glassie 1996: 409). Along the same lines, Russel W. Belk emphasises that “we tend to be especially concerned with having a past when our current identity has been challenged” (Belk 1990: 670); this is in an article in which he illustrates how objects have the capacity to flesh out an idea about the past and to transfer it into the present, where it can act as a support as we face an uncertain future (Belk 1990: 671).

The villages of Vrancea exist on shifting sands of this kind. Still bearing deep scars left by a Communist regime that systematically dislocated their ethos and peasant identity – born from a close connection with the soil – then having experienced a post-Communism that overwhelmed them with new possibilities and the high-speed invasion of urban, media-influenced, alien socio-cultural models, weighed down by the burden of their differentness and archaic character, painted in the colours of legend, to which present reality purely and simply no longer corresponds – a Vrancea village is a living cultural node, a crucible of identities seething with diverse references, paradigm shifts, reconfigurations and often disturbing quests for meaning. Yet an old object has the power to build a bridge over the shifting sands of the present. Leon Rosenstein writes that an old object

functions, at a psychological level, as an antidote to the insipidity of mass-produced objects and as an escape from present reality (Rosenstein 2000: 26), because, due to the enduring nature of the material and through its beauty, it has the ability to transpose the past into the present, to root existence more strongly in time and to communicate an image about the past (Rosenstein 2000: 27). It is a bridge that draws its stability from the past and stretches towards the future in such a way that the changes we sense it will bring become bearable.

However, the *tradition* that detaches itself from a socio-cultural dimension of this kind is not characterised by the organicity apparent in the practices of those archaic communities with their cosmocentric vision of the world (Mihăilescu 2004: 187), in which things were *given* by God and their ongoing development was governed by *order*. Rather, it belongs to an anthropocentric vision (Mihăilescu 2004: *loc. cit.*) the seeds of which germinated in the Renaissance and then in the Enlightenment, in which the human being is conceived of as separated from the will of God and as having descended from a cyclical time, which could be restored through custom and ritual, into the implacable linear progression of his own will and of a forward-looking logic that is characteristic of modernity. *This* tradition, however, has no room for cultural mobility but expresses an abstract permanence, a “frozen” time from which history has been evacuated and which refers to a past that is formless, uncertain, an *illo tempore* in the accents of myth. It bears traces of reification, just like a museified object, and falls here within the meaning that Jean Baudrillard ascribed to mythological objects: “We might be tempted to see in it a survival of traditional symbolic order. But these objects, however different they may be, are also part of modernity and derive their twofold meaning precisely from it. [...] They have a specific function in the system: they signify time. For in just the same way as naturalness is the refusal of nature, so



historiality is the refusal of history via the exalting of its signs – a rejected presence of history” (Baudrillard 1996: 53).

What is the situation where Maricica is concerned? Leaving aside any bookish explanations, the first point to make is that the museum she has put together bears the marks of the *naïveté* of her spontaneous action. More than that, the pattern of traditional occupation of a home that she has used as her criterion in arranging the rooms in her museum cannot be modelled on open-air ethnographic museums, since she has never visited an institutional museum. Her organisation of space and arranging of objects are a demonstration of choices that spring from her own life-experience and evoke memories of a childhood passed in the home of her grandparents Ion and Ilinca Cornea. That being so, where can we locate Maricica’s discourse? In the historic past of her own community, or in that *illo tempore* of perennial tradition? Between the two. Maricica lives and creates her museum in the fluid, adaptable space of memory, in the sense attributed to it by Pierre Nora (1989:8)<sup>11</sup>. For this reason, two kinds of past are interwoven in the discourse of the *Museum over the Water*. One is that of concrete memories, involving precise details about the characters who enlivened her childhood and about the events she lived through then – a relatively recent past, however, in relation to the old village the museum attempts to evoke, given that Maricica is not old. The other is a past time that is formless in texture, uncertain, a non-historical time, a time of tradition, in fact a non-time that assumes concrete form in her discourse through the use of the imperfect tense. Employed by Maricica when she is talking about people of olden times or about archaic practices, the imperfect is a tense of continuity, a tense that makes up for discontinuities by generalising past actions, but at the same time a form of the verb that has to do with imprecision and an idyllic vision. The use of the imperfect makes it easier to avoid fixing a cultural detail or a

practice in a specific moment in the past and shows up to a point that we are looking at a reconstruction of the past that eliminates history and sets up in its place an idea about the past – a comforting, even a gratifying one. And to the extent to which the objects in the museum are anonymous – without known former possessors and without a story, their trajectory and biography having been lost due to the haphazard way in which they were collected, with a lack of any interest in identifying their owners – the formless time expressed through the imperfect tense is also the time in which the objects exist.

How can this be seen in the syntax of the museum? Let us first focus on the two sets of peasant costume, male and female, suspended on coathangers – an intuition of display panels or mannequins – on the left-hand wall of the bedroom, which is partly draped with a decorative cloth (Fig. 1). On my first visit to this museum two years ago, the female costume was displayed in a way that stirred my curiosity, given that there were no signs of a physical body supporting it; Maricica had used pins to attach the sleeves of the blouse to the belt of the peasant skirt to suggest the graceful appearance of the women of long ago, who used to pose in this dress outside their gates on festival days. Things have changed a little since then: some of the articles of dress have been replaced, with the present ones evoking bridal attire, a proof of this being the banknote attached to the front of the



Fig.1. Bride and groom's costumes in Maricica's naïve museum.  
Photo credit: Anca-Maria Pănoiu.

11. "Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer."



Fig. 2. The cradle in which Maricica chose to put the “cocuța” – a plastic doll representing a baby girl. Photo credit: Anca-Maria Pănoiu.

man’s shirt, reflecting local custom. As for the sleeves of the woman’s blouse, which are now crossed over her belly, Maricica says, with a chuckle: “Well... *she’s standing there waiting to be married!*” The staging is a little different, but the reference remains: we have here, beyond doubt, a kind of concrete attachment to her forebears’ gracefulness, fed, probably, by childhood memories, but equally we cannot fail to notice a theatrical reference in the positioning of the costume, like a minimalist version of a diorama. And the syntax is not a simple juxtaposition of bridal costumes but also includes a “semantic ferment” that pulls it together into the desired idea, that of evoking the traditional life of a peasant couple in days gone by: the ceramic plate of the “blessing on the house” type, placed there not only because of its words about protection and plenty for the home, but, in a deeper sense – according to what Maricica says – intended to reinforce the idea of the union of the masculine and feminine principles. In this “strong” articulation it does not matter that the plate is far from being a peasant object;

it is one of the mass-produced ones that we can find by the dozen in fairs selling so-called traditional ware in Romania.

The syntax of tradition recurs in the *Museum over the Water* in the morphology of space: the criterion governing the arrangement of the rooms was that of following in detail the topology of a peasant home in that region, although the act of museification causes the variations found in real life to be smoothed out and the general effect to become somewhat typological. However, restoring the layout of the rooms and trying to give them back their original functions produces in the *Museum over the Water* exactly what the term “museum syntax” describes: the space is activated via the objects. The space covers the objects and contains them by suiting itself to their functionality, while they punctuate it, give it rhythm and shine light on their former uses so as to confer solidity to the network of archaic meanings and provide clues about the purposes of different areas in an economy of the dwelling that does not entirely match the function-based distinctions found in modern dwellings. In the traditional house the purposes of spaces interpenetrate, and the various museum syntaxes formulated in accordance with utilitarian criteria configure an architecture that is symbolic and to a degree fuzzy, with “alveoli” of objects that add themselves to the physical limits of the house and effect a parcelling-out of space, enriching it semantically.

Thus, two beds with straw mattresses have been positioned in the bedroom as an echo to some extent of the bridal costumes hanging on its left-hand wall. Following the same pattern of inserting a cycle-of-life time into the “frozen” time that belongs to the museum, beside the hearth in this room Maricica has placed a kneading-trough in which she has put to bed the “swaddled baby,” a plastic doll wrapped in a scrap of black skirting with a banknote pinned to her diaper (Fig. 2) to bring good luck. This is an allusion to the germination that the



Fig. 3. A part of the “big room” in Maricica’s naïve museum: the syntax comprises objects somehow elitist for rural culture, in order to stress the value of the place. Photo credit: Anca-Maria Pănoiu.

marrying of the bridal costumes promises by means of the words on the “blessing on the house” plate. The meaning conveyed by the placing of the cradle close to the hearth is not merely a naïve evocation of the link between warmth and sleep; in the proximity to each other of these two objects may be read, at a deeper level – albeit unrealised by Maricica during the creative act – the symbolic connection between hearth as a holy place of germination, the germination that the child embodies, and the “germination” of bread in the kneading-trough now become a cradle. The coal-heated iron on the hotplate of the wood-burning stove adds an everyday touch to a cultural equation in which sacrality is a frequent reference.

Following the same pattern of the morphology of the traditional dwelling, Maricica has assigned the largest space in the house the role of the “big room” (Fig. 3)

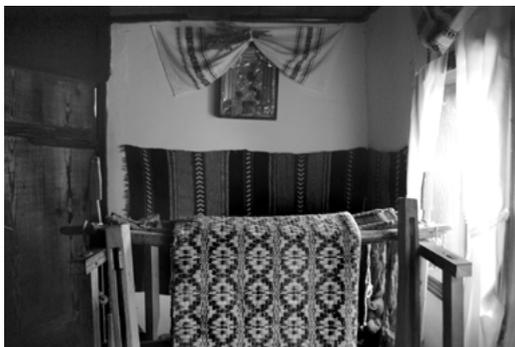


Fig. 4. The loom’s corner in Maricica’s naïve museum: the syntax of objects suggests as well a “sacred” atmosphere, in contrast with the daily routine. Photo credit: Anca-Maria Pănoiu.

– a place strongly charged with values (Iuga 2011) – in which she has placed the loom very close to an icon in a silver frame, which is hung on the wall with a towel and a handful of dried basil (Fig. 4), along with a small woven rug that forms a background for old framed photographs of the former owners of the house. Of the “big room” Maricica says that it is “like a kind of day room, a... *living!*”<sup>12</sup>, which gives proof of her presence of mind and spontaneity in adapting her language to what she intuitively feels will be her interlocutor’s cultural code. This is an act of cultural mediation through which she demonstrates that she is no stranger to the urban references she uses and that she is in fact half-way between the universe of the visitor from the town and the purely rural tradition that she has showcased in the museum.

From the “big room” one descends not only in the scale of values but also literally – down a steep step – to the secular everyday level of the “dairy”. This is the “summer kitchen,” as Maricica once again translates, in which she has put mainly the equipment used in the making of dairy products, to testify to the pastoral farming on which the local economy was based in the past (Fig. 5). Here, probably more than in any other room, the objects “help” each other reciprocally to configure the whole by drawing tight the connections of the syntax in which they are organised. In fact these objects illustrate, in sequence, the stages of a local occupation, from sheep-shearing



Fig. 5. A part of the “dairy room” in Maricica’s naïve museum: a traditional syntax in which objects are organised in a way inspired by the utilitarian purposes in a typical ancient peasant home. Photo credit: Anca-Maria Pănoiu.

12. The word “living” is a neologism for “living room” in Romanian (translator’s note).

time, suggested by the placing side by side of the sheep-bell and the shears – also linked to each other by the hard solid metal of their construction – to milking and the making of dairy products, suggested by wooden troughs and bowls of different sizes, and then to the actual consumption of the food products: the placing together of strainer, stirring-stick and slicing block in the immediate vicinity of the stove – source of fire – and of the “blind” table, with crockery ready on it and in the drawer of which visitors who do not hold back from touching objects can discover cutlery, prepared (this too) *as if* to be used. A grouping such as that shown in Fig. 5 can function as a summary of the part of the room devoted to pastoral pursuits, like an extended syntax that contains a set of specific micro-syntaxes, all of which conform to the same criterion of use. This part is semantically completed by the other area of the room – the space for conviviality – in which objects such as the bed, the “blind” table and the stools evoke the rest, free time and conversations that in old peasant homes used to punctuate the rhythm of daily work. There is a breath of life in the syntaxes in this room, achieved through the placing of objects as if the activity they are used for is either poised to begin or has been suddenly interrupted. The placing of objects in the space of the room indicates a note of imminence; they seem to show signs of recent use and, in their reification, to encapsulate a unit of life.

However, in this pattern of the morphology of space there are also breaches in the syntax. There are areas in which the siting of one or more objects breaks the traditional configuration made up in accordance with the criterion of use. Such areas are breaches in the field of semantic connections that up to now have been very strongly linked together; they lift the veil on that freshness and freedom of naïve action that, because it is not over-anxious not to err, mobilises an unconscious expressiveness of its own. Fig. 6 puts before us a syntax of this kind, in which references to the

traditional mode of life no longer ring true. In a standard old-style house the place of a high-days-and-holidays apron skirt would never have been *on* a door but rather in a chest or storage box. The decision to place it where it is puts us in mind of the deliberate planning involved in a theatre stage set; the object is no longer eloquent through its functionality, through the matching of form to purpose or by the way it mimics



Fig. 6. A rupture in the traditional syntax in Maricica's naïve museum: the way of exhibiting the cloth carries a theatrical meaning, therefore implies a non-peasant reference. Photo credit: Anca-Maria Pănoiu.

a body that is absent but suggested – as in the syntax of the bridal costumes – but has become an example of the beautiful for the sake of the beautiful. A display. One which departs from the traditional ethos in which the aesthetic and the functional were to be found in close mutual interdependence, but manages to say something through this very departing: an apron skirt draped over the wooden door of an old-style house that has become a museum can speak, involuntarily, about the distance between the village world it wishes to evoke and the



Fig. 7. Scenography of a traditional wedding in the *House of dolls* Ethnographic Museum in Agnita, comprising contemporary elements.  
Photo credit: Anca-Maria Pănoiu.

contemporary village as we find it, in which the act of museification was born and which cultivates a specific idealised image about its own roots.

In the Agnita naïve museum I met a different way of constructing a stage set for tradition. Of the three museums investigated, the *House of Dolls Ethnographic Museum* is the one that makes the clearest references to the institutional museum and aspires most rigorously to reproduce its practice. This can be seen in its wish to organise items according to category and in its concern to make clear their provenance and date and to describe and document them. Due to the Drăgan's academic training and Mircea Drăgan's interest in studying the folk music tradition of Valea Hârtibaciului, their museum shows evidence of basic principles of method in the way the rooms are laid out following ethnic criteria – the “Romanian room” and the “Sas room” – and in the efforts made to organise each room into a number of areas

or sub-assemblages of items.

For example, the “Romanian room” has a traditional wedding syntax (Fig. 7) in which the object that constantly recurs in the museum, the plastic doll, is brought into relation with other objects that belong to the same ritual register so as to suggest, even in a freeze-frame way, the acted-out nature of such occasions: the groom's and bride's costumes and the wedding flags. This is one of the places in which the discourse of objects is matched by the verbal discourse of the hosts; when I ask about the flags I learn that they are in fact replicas made by Mr Drăgan following the accounts given by the old people from whom he was collecting musical folklore. More than that, he tells me in detail how he hung from the flags a wooden spoon and a miniature cradle – the household tools of the trade for women – as an allusion to the good-augury customs practised by village women in olden times when “initiating” a newly-wed young girl. This way of instructing through the use of an evocative object derives its effectiveness from the meaning conferred upon it by its being linked to a ritual. Here, however, the traditional wedding is not left a prisoner in an imperfect/past continuous time, as it is in the *Museum over the Water*. All at once, in an anticipatory tone in which one can discern a touch of nostalgia and disappointment, Mr Drăgan feels the need to add a chronological detail to his description of the custom by emphasising that weddings in the area no longer follow the pattern that held sway for many decades but are changing visibly as a result of contact with Western influences, and that this has led to an ironing-out of specific local features and to their being “melted down” in a global magma. And the museum syntax of the “Romanian room” succeeds in hypostatising this movement in historic, datable time by showcasing the tradition in its sense of “dynamics of culture,” of “swing term between culture and history” (Glassie 1995: 399); the left-hand side of the room evokes the weddings of former days

by having the polystyrene mannequin that fleshes out the bridal costume wear a coif – made of artificial flowers (Fig. 8) – a local custom that the Drăgans tell me went out of use around 1938. Less than a metre away and part of the same syntax is a plastic doll still dressed in old local costume but culturally hybridised in that it is wearing a white veil (Fig. 7, left side), in line with the urban model that gradually came into use after the 1938 watershed. There is something else that most probably belongs to the same logic of temporal dynamics, although the decision does not necessarily reflect a deliberate intention: the wedding flags placed behind the wedding mannequin with the bridal coif are only partially a replica, as the crosses at the top are original, while the culturally hybrid part of the syntax, the one that refers to a style closer to the present, has been

whose miniature garments have been sewn from scraps of cloth found by the Drăgans in the possession of the Gypsy tentmakers of the Valea Hârtibaciului. The two of them explain to me that there are no differences in decorative style between Romanian and tentmaker garments. Their intention here is subtler than a simple typological differentiation, and this in at least two ways. On the one hand, making use of fragments speaks about the age of the object, about use, discarding and keeping, about a scrap of cloth as witness to the whole and about perpetuating the memory of the whole by inserting the remnant into a logic and a function that are both entirely other than the original garment – from a woman's blouse, for example, to a simple discarded rag, and then to a miniature shirt clothing a doll in the heart of a museum about the past



Fig. 8. Scenography of a traditional wedding before 1938 in the *House of dolls* Ethnographic Museum in Agnita (the chronological clue is given by the head adornment of the bride). Photo credit: Anca-Maria Pănoiu.

Fig. 9. A part of „The Saxon Room” in the *House of dolls* Ethnographic Museum in Agnita. Photo credit: Anca-Maria Pănoiu.

given the replica flags as its background.

The division of the display in the *House of Dolls Ethnographic Museum* along ethnic lines is a further clue that it aspires to the rigorous typologies used by classic museums. I am not referring here simply to the above-mentioned division into “Romanian room” and “Sas room” but to a procedure that shows even greater attention to detail: in the many dolls in the “Romanian room” there are some, mixed in with the throng,

of the multi-ethnic villages in the area. On the other hand, the inclusion by blending of the tentmakers in the “Romanian room” is designed to suggest the amicable coexistence of the two ethnic groups and their closeness even despite their differences, in contrast to the Sas of the area, who maintained their unitary cultural profile over the centuries, aided by their practice of endogamy.

It is the ethnic criterion once again that underlies the layout of some sub-

assemblages in the “Sas” room (Fig. 9). Besides their cultural homogeneity, certain registers of the daily life of the Sas of the area are hypostasised: for example, the “Lole” costumes hanging from the wardrobe in the right-hand side of the room highlight a ritual occasion in the community’s life, the first week of February, when the custom is enacted – and the sight of the equipment used then reminds Mr Drăgan to include in his discourse descriptions of how the local Sas were organised in former times. Similarly, the tool with which the fat pork they kept hanging in their church roof was marked Sunday by Sunday after every cutting-off of a piece prompts him to give details about the Sas’ particular kind of community solidarity.

In consequence, the naïve character of the *House of Dolls Ethnographic Museum*



Fig. 10. A part of the “big room” in the *House of dolls Ethnographic Museum* in Agnita: eterogeneity and subjectivity of the exhibition, given by the congestion of objects. Photo credit: Anca-Maria Pănoiu.

does not necessarily reside in the exhibits being freely associated; indeed there is an evident concern for categorisation. Rather, its deviation from the norm – and it is this that gives the collection its appeal – flows from a practical deficiency: because of a lack of space, which the Drăgans mention repeatedly and with regret, the great diversity and abundance of the items ends up by overloading rooms that were already cramped. The rooms are so dripping with objects that at times it seems that you can no longer see the edges of them, as if beyond the visible objects there were nothing but more and more objects. From this flows a kind of heterogeneity. Quite apart from the physical boundaries of the house, the space is not so much activated by objects as actually suffocated by them. That which in the *Museum over the Water* constituted a delimitation that was invisible but could be perceived through the syntaxes of objects, gathered together and extremely contained from a semantic point of view, here becomes pervasion, fusion, mixture. Thus in the midst of the agglutination, due to the force of circumstances and in spite of the owners’ concern for categorisation, we can see certain breaches in the syntax of tradition. Of the four thousand vinyl records they own, the Drăgans have put several hundred – all of German music – in the “Sas room,” following the ethnic criterion, although the overwhelming majority of the objects there revolve around an idea of the village and olden times. In a similar way, in the “big room” – the meaning of which is a suggestive reference to rural life – space has been found for two solid nineteenth-century wooden cupboards of urban provenance inherited from an uncle of Maria Drăgan’s. There is no room for objects to be delimited from each other except by their own edges, which means that their trains of association come into collision; items of town furniture such as the cupboards, the pendulum clock and the mirror are placed in the immediate neighbourhood of folklore dolls, components of a syntax

that evokes the display of traditional woven fabrics in the “big room,” kept for times for showing off one’s finery in the village; or – here too, as in the *Museum over the Water* – not far from a doll tucked up in a cradle, which refers specifically to the traditional rural upbringing of children (Fig. 10). When syntaxes interpenetrate each other in this way, the unintended message is a consequence of the space constraints, while the amalgamation functions as a naïve lowering of the rigorous tone of the ensemble, like a scent that subtly reminds the visitor that they are not in fact in an ethnological museum but in a house-museum that is home to an impressive ethnographic collection brought to life by the hard work and passion of the Drăgans.

In the *Museum in the Attic*, any explicit discourse regarding tradition is entirely absent. In the highly personal style of construction of this museum, in which Florin Filipescu cultivates a deep attachment to each object, each photograph and each document, the things are the emanation of a full, precise biography, rich in details that cause them to be laden with meaning. There is no explicit concern with ethnography beyond the fact that the household equipment is so archaic and rooted in the local culture that it could in fact be studied from an ethnographic point of view. However, Florin Filipescu’s approach is too personal and interiorised to need to be supported by a display of tradition in the sense of construct, fiction and projection into *illo tempore* that we raised as an issue at the beginning. The objects belong to a time that is datable, they have individual profiles and stories that bring them close to the sense that Russel W. Belk attributes to old items that form part of one’s family inheritance, which help their collector’s self to extend through giving it “a sense of familial self continuity that extends beyond death” (Belk 1990: 676) and a “sense of past essential to the sense of self” (Belk 1990: 677).



## Conclusions

The three naïve museums to which I have devoted attention in this piece of research exemplify three different ways of understanding and showcasing tradition. In the *Museum over the Water*, the syntax of objects that are anonymous and refer to a past without fixed points approaches the meaning that Eric Hobsbawm attributed to “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm 2012: 1-2): attempts to establish, in a constantly changing modernity, points of continuity with a preferred historic past. Essentially artificial – as Hobsbawm underlines – these attempts are nevertheless interesting when seen in terms of the identitary need to establish desirable reference points in places where memory perhaps records features of decline, along with points of continuity where reality is most often characterised by breaks in sequence.

The syntaxes of the *House of Dolls Ethnographic Museum* remove references from the generalised time of tradition and tend towards a kind of cultural memory of that ethnographic area and of its multi-ethnic community, with the objects configuring what Belk calls “aggregate reified past” (Belk 1990: 674): a hypostasis in which the extension of the self via objects that encapsulate identity rises to the higher level of a collective, community self. Finally, the time that the items in the *Museum in the Attic* evoke seems, of the three, to be the most personal, the most subjective. The time showcased there is a time of interior rhythms.

Thus, these three naïve museums differ to some extent in the distinct ways in which they understand the past and embody it in objects. What unites them, however, is their existing in the fluid space of memory, before whose spontaneity, as Pierre Nora highlights, history has always maintained a critical, suspicious attitude (Nora 1989: 9). Sharing – though in different ways –



the features that I grouped together at the outset of this article under the heading of “naïve museum,” the three of them do not allow themselves to be troubled by the critical discourse of history, which in Nora’s words evacuates memory. Since they are living cultural spaces steeped in orality, bearing the powerful personal stamp of their creators, along with their subjective recollections and discourses, memory is far less constrained here than it would be, for example, in a classic institutional museum dependent on a particular official discourse demanded by national or regional history.

Through the way they reassemble the past out of objects, naïve museums have the potential to become places of memory for the community in which they come into existence, while for visitors from outside they could evoke a certain exoticism linked with a generalised past. Both in the first case and in the second, what emanates from the disposal of objects in space and, in the final analysis, what the spectator takes away with him when he crosses the threshold of the museum once more and re-enters the outside world is a deeply subjective sense of past.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baudrillard, Jean. 1996. *Sistemul obiectelor* [The System of Objects]. Cluj: Echinox.
- Belk, Russel W.. 1990. „The Role of Possessions in Constructing and Maintaining a Sense of Past”. *NA – Advances in Consumer Research*, eds. Marvin E. Goldberg, Gerald Gorn and Richard W. Pollay, Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research, Vol. 17: 669-676.
- Bernea, Horia, Irina Nicolau and Carmen Huluță. 2001. *Câteva gânduri despre muzeu, cantități, materialitate și încrucișare. Dosar sentimental* [Some Thoughts on the Museum, Quantities, Materiality and Crossing. Sentimental File]. București: Ars Docendi.
- Bonnot, Thierry. 2014. *L'Attachement aux choses*. Paris: CNRS Editions.
- Dillenburg, Eugene. 2011. “What, if Anything, Is a Museum?”. *The Exhibitionist* (Spring): 8-13.
- Ernst, Wolfgang. 2000. „Archi(ve)textures of Museology”. In *Museums and Memory*, ed. Susan A. Crane. Stanford University Press: 17-34.
- Glassie, Henry. 1995. “Tradition”. *The Journal of American Folklore*, American Folklore Society, Vol. 108, No. 430, Common Ground: Keywords for the Study of Expressive Culture (Autumn): 395-412.
- Hainard, Jacques. “Une expologie bien tempérée” (texte de conférence). Unpublished.
- Hobsbawm, Eric and Terence Ranger (eds.). 2000. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge University Press.
- Iuga, Anamaria. 2011. *Valea Izei îmbrăcată țărănește* [Valea Izei in Peasant Garments]. Târgu Lăpuș: Galaxia Gutenberg.
- Mateescu, Oana. 2009. “Evidence in the Museum: Subjects, Objects and Memories in Vrancea”. *Sociologie românească* Vol. 7 (3): 51-71.
- Mihăilescu, Vintilă. 2004. „Dificila deconstrucție a sarmalei: discurs despre tradiție”. In *Cercetarea antropologică în România. Perspective istorice și etnografice*, eds. Cristina Papa, Giovanni Pizza, Filippo Zerilli. Cluj-Napoca: Clusium.
- Nora, Pierre. 1989. „Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire”. *Representations*, No. 26 (Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory), (Spring): 7-24.
- Rosenstein, Leon. 2012. „The aesthetic of the antique”. In *Museum Objects. Experiencing the Properties of Things*, ed. Sandra H. Dudley. London & New York: Routledge („Leicester Readers in Museum Studies”): 26-35.