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Inside the Creative Traditions Workshops

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ABSTRACT

The interviews that make up this section of the journal illustrate some of the particular challenges facing recent initiatives to recover, in a creative way, a range of artisan products. These are projects that go beyond the standard efforts at re-activation and re-animation that created a cultural landscape generally characterised by inertia. Mention should also be made here of two other equally interesting projects, Mesteshukar ButiQ, a Bucharest-based social enterprise working at giving new value to traditional Roma craftsmanship, and PATZAIKIN Design, which grounds its inspiration in the fishermen's traditions of the Danube Delta, the name being a tribute paid to the world-famous canoeist Ivan Patzaichin.

KEYWORDS

Creative traditions, design, craftsmanship, knowledge.



In conversation with Mihai Sibianu, co-founder, along with Marlene Stanciu, of the DELTACRAFT project

DELTACRAFT is a project that aims to revitalise traditional crafts in the Danube Delta region by means of collaboration between craftsmen and designers in the creation of a collection of objects that draw their inspiration from the culture, history, resources and techniques that are typical of that area.

1. What were the circumstances that led to the birth of the DELTACRAFT project?

Two organisations were involved – KraftMade, of which I am a co-founder, and Ecopolis, an association that deals mainly with environmental projects in the Danube Delta region but also has some social and conservation ones. They wanted

to do something more outside the box in the area of handicrafts, while we already had several years' experience of combining crafts, using traditional methods of working, with contemporary design. So Ecopolis suggested that we form a partnership and apply jointly for Norwegian funding, which we duly received. We helped them with the writing of the project proposal and subsequently drew up a curatorial concept, chose the designers who would be involved and co-ordinated the entire creative and production process. So the circumstances were favourable.

2. What do you think makes this project stand out from the other (not to say the floods of) craft revitalisation initiatives that have sprung up over the past decade?

Well, in the first place our principle was to give prominence to a very large number of craftsmen. On equal terms with the designers. That was one thing. Besides that, our collections have always been based on

painstaking research. This is the principle we have followed in all our projects. So we're not talking about let's make a cool little wooden chair 'cos we've seen one in the museum and we'll change the shape of the legs slightly and



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DELTACRAFT.

put our talented-designer name on it. Giving prominence to the craftsmen, getting them directly involved in the process, searching for solutions together – if you do that you give a somewhat more authentic and substantial character to things and everyone learns something new, the craftsmen from us and we from them. If you involve the craftsmen in this way, the results of their work will often surprise even them.

3. What stages did you go through in developing the project, and which were the most difficult/challenging parts of them (and obviously, how did you overcome the problems)?

I don't want to say a great deal about our style of working in terms of how it was developed and structured in stages. There were certainly many shapes to the approach with which we researched the area, then we drew up a curatorial concept and formed the design team by taking account of certain considerations. I remember having in front of me a list with the names of about 30 designers on it, and working on it. The most difficult parts of the process – and this was a surprise to me – came not from the outside, from the craftsmen, but from inside the team when – the perennial disease of the Romanian boss, who thinks he knows everything and is good at everything – our partners began to interfere in the creative process by entering into face-to-face discussion with the designers, the day

before we were due to begin work, regarding a concept that had already (and not even recently) been fixed and committed to paper. This naturally led to a mini-chaos, with opposing factions forming on the spot. I could go on about it for two hours, but to cut a long story short, this interference had a considerable influence on the flow of the project; the pointless tensions and posturing it generated certainly did not help things develop well. We didn't really succeed in smoothing out the divergent positions; what we did manage to do, from our point of view, was to focus on results.

4. Is this a project that could be replicated by using the methodology you employed? If so, now that a number of years have passed, what do you think could be added if someone wanted to start something similar?

It could certainly be replicated. The working methodology came entirely from KraftMade, I've used it several times. But I'm not convinced that just anyone could replicate it. You need somewhat of an overview and then hard work and patience. What would I add? More time in the field, more time with the craftsmen both on the job and over a glass, chatting. We were always in a rush, we had less than two weeks in which to devise and produce an entire collection – quite an achievement really.

5. You say in your written description of the project that "the designers and craftsmen worked together, influencing the process by which the object is created and influencing each other". Could you give an illustration of situations of this kind / the dynamics of a balance of this kind?

There are objects that all of the three designers have worked on equally, and yes, as I said, we encourage the craftsmen to become involved in the process; we have asked our designers to be open to this as well. Experienced craftsmen with a vocation for what they do have a kind of wisdom in finding all manner of instant solutions that we who have had too much education lose along the way. The best example in this regard is the

craftsmen with whom we have worked on the leather part. The chair and that large tassel are objects that have come to look as they do precisely because we have fitted in, with and drawn inspiration from, the craftsmen's way of doing things. For the tassel we used a simple method of decorating the strips of leather which resembles the way they do the same thing for horse harnesses or even for the small tassels used for horses' ears. The leather on the chair, likewise, has a plaited motif that I have seen them use on other objects. So these items would not have existed in their present form if we had gone to them with a sketch and said "Make this". The designers got their inspiration from the craftsmen and the craftsmen turned out something that they had never made before, even though it was so close to what they were making day in, day out.

6. *What happened later to the objects produced as a result of the workshop? Are some of them being produced in limited batches, or did they remain at the stage of temporary experiments?*

Sadly – you know how it is in Romania – everything good is either only good on paper, or only in a declaratory way, but if it manages to be good for real then it's sure to die speedily. The things we made there were meant to be prototypes and the partner organisation had initially taken responsibility for continuing to make (in small batches, to order) the objects that had been created. We had agreed this together specifically so as to create a sustainable project, with the purpose of giving the



community of craftsmen with whom we had been collaborating a genuine opportunity to become rather more visible and in the second



Photo credits:
DELTACRAFT.

place to put some honestly earned money into their pockets. It seems that our partners didn't have the capacity to implement it, so it stayed at the stage of a temporary and even transitory experiment.

7. *Based on your experience with this project, to what extent do you believe that creative industries can contribute to the promotion of Romania's material and immaterial cultural patrimony (at the empirical level there seems to be a tension between the idea of small batch artisan work based on repeated actions and a limited range of objects, and the idea of design, focused rather more on unique objects or a limited series – I may be mistaken here)? And, why not, perhaps you could tell us what pitfalls they need to avoid when they decide to dovetail these two approaches? (Here you can also make some useful critical observations about what you can see happening, without necessarily going into precise details if you don't think it's OK to do so.)*

If we did this with TATAIA as far back as 2009 it is clear that it can be done. So creative industries can make a significant contribution to promoting Romania's cultural patrimony, both its material and its immaterial aspects. In the first place they can do this by not promoting what is not genuine. And they can also do this through methods of good practice, by carrying out thorough research in particular directions, they can promote our cultural patrimony by involving people who have know-how in their projects, they can write about our patrimony, they can stage performances that combine the old and the new, they can do all kinds of things. They can

Photo credits:
DELTACRAFT.

invent ways of doing this, because that's why they're called creative industries. They only need to want to do this and they must do it



Exhibition view Romanian Design Week.
Photo credits: The Institute.

properly, deontologically speaking. There are all kinds of initiatives out there that on the face of it are thoroughly laudable, but I can't see any genuine and sincere promotion going on if you don't bring into play real generators and suppliers. You can make things on a production line for profit, traditional chairs using lasers and CNC (Computer Numerical Control) or Romanian blouses by the ton on a sewing machine, naturally you can. But as I have said, the real wisdom lies in the hands of people who have done this all their lives and have done it as a vocation and with love, they've done it for the sake of tradition and meaning, for folklore, not just because it was financially advantageous or because it was the current trend. Taking crafts as an example, if you don't involve these people in the process, if you don't give them the opportunity to have plenty of work so that they can take on apprentices to learn the craft and keep it going, everything gets lost, becomes redundant, becomes fashion and nothing more. So my advice is that we should avoid production lines, because there are enough people using them and very successfully too, and concentrate on short production runs and maybe even on one-off production, the things are more expensive that way I admit, but each one tells a story of the hard work that's gone into it, tacks stuck

in your fingers and calloused palms. That's the only way we can keep a little bit of history alive.

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In conversation with Marlene Stanciu, co-founder, along with Alex Herberth, of the SOXEN 2.0 project

1. What were the circumstances that led to the birth of the Soxen 2.0 collection?

The Soxen 2.0 collection came into being as the result of a meeting between two creative people with Saxon roots who were interested in the cultural heritage of the Saxons of Transylvania, Marlene Stanciu (founder of KraftMade, anthropologist, textile designer) and Alex Herberth (wood restorer, furniture design and production, traditional and modern wood preparation techniques). Both are involved in exploring the harmony and natural balance that exist between time-honoured wisdom and contemporary usefulness, with an emphasis on sustainable materials and the narrative potential of the objects. The concept had a natural birth from their mulling craft lore acquired over the years, and this is reflected in the objects in the collection: the rocking chair ½ 7B, the loom-woven carpet T3, Schemel – the three-legged stool that draws its inspiration from milking stools and the shoemaking tradition of the Transylvanian Saxons, and the Stamm bench. What this process of creation and production brought to the surface was that the stories objects have to tell are always subjective and extremely personal, springing from the social significance attached to them and a specific understanding of history and cultural heritage. And when the heritage is a shared one and the understanding goes deep, it is natural that the result should be harmony.

The Soxen 2.0 collection draws its inspiration from the craft techniques and cultural consciousness of the Saxons of Transylvania, both being expressed in the objects in the collection, some of which are one-offs while others have short production runs. The interior design items are made using traditional carpentry and loom-woven

fabrics. These techniques are intended to draw attention to the carefully-worked details that echo the practical and forward-thinking spirit that is part of the culture of Saxon craftsmen. They also examine the sources of Saxon aesthetic harmony and the reasons why things were made following a particular pattern, while testing out the contemporary practicality of archaic ideas of natural materials and a slow circuit of design, production and consumption (slow design). Like his grandfather, a *Sas* carpenter from the village of Ormeniș in Mureș County, Alex Herberth has been processing the wood in a sustainable way, using old-fashioned tools and traditional joints, wanting to show that perfection does not depend on modern technology but that patience, skill, and a thorough knowledge of the materials you are using are more important. The woven fabrics are created, also by hand, by Marlene Stanciu – as her Saxon great-grandmother from the village of Cincu, Brașov County, used to do – on a loom dated 1808 and using materials that were typical ones in that period – nettle stem fibre and wool. The process of building up the fabric millimetre by millimetre is a painstaking and laborious one, beginning with the retting of the nettle stalks and ending with the finished fabric; it involves patience and rhythm, like a kind of ritual or meditation in which the thoughts and feelings of every day are mirrored. For this reason, objects worked in the slow design manner age gracefully and will endure as a legacy for future generations, just as those who fashion them inherited the wisdom of things made in aesthetic and practical harmony with nature.

2. *What do you think makes this project stand out from the other (not to say the floods of) craft revitalisation initiatives that have sprung up over the past decade?*

In 2013, when we thought of KraftMade, the idea of returning to the sources of Romanian culture and rediscovering our identity was already in existence, but there were not as yet projects like ours. So we set out with a wish to discover what craftsmen there still were in Romania, what they knew

how to do and what problems they faced, and we looked at designers too in the same way. It was only after a year of research in which we covered an enormous amount of ground, going into dozens and dozens of houses in the country and talking with village people, and another year of exploratory production together with designers, that we came up with viable solutions and projects that could express with precision the problems and ways of solving them in which we believe. In brief, what we do is genuine craft, by encouraging traditional techniques, that is, the how and why of the way good, sustainable things were made by the craftsmen of old. This is a truly fundamental difference between us and the majority of projects that market themselves as restoring value to Romanian identity but in fact just stick symbols on to their objects to tap into a kind of nostalgia that is patriotic or harks back to an idealised long-lost country childhood – without ever facing up to the issues of the sustainability or ethics of their production.

The fact that we promote the concept of *slow design* means that we are interested in



Schemel.
Photo credits:
KraftMade.

making a sustainable object that can tell a story, that has cultural roots that can be deciphered in the key of the region from which it comes. We are interested in the conditions in which the craftsman works, his being paid fairly, the local and sustainable sourcing of materials used, the quality of finish for the design market, promoting the fact that a person with a name and an identity and not someone anonymous is producing the object concerned using traditional techniques that come from our immaterial patrimony, and the object's

potential for ageing well. In addition, we are concerned that traditional techniques should not be lost, which means that we emphasise the transfer of skills to younger people, and we live this out in the first place by practising craft activities with our own hands.

3. What stages did you go through in developing the project, and which were the most difficult/challenging parts of them (and, obviously, how did you overcome the problems)?

The Soxen 2.0 collection is atypical compared with the other collections we have produced up to now. The fact that we have been both designers and craftsmen, and that the *Sas* cultural terrain into which we have launched ourselves is part of our roots, has meant that this collection has come to us naturally and has been for both of us a rediscovery of our identity – these objects into which we have put our labour and emotions and feelings over the several months during which we have planned, experimented with and produced them. So it has been a delight at every step.

At KraftMade we have always relied on short production runs and one-off objects, because we believe that this is the area of production a craftsman should be involved in. Thus it is that in the Soxen 2.0 collection too we have objects that can be reproduced, but they will never look the same. For example, because the wood we use is sourced locally and seasoned naturally in the air for three to five years, we offer clients the varieties of wood we already have in stock, so that one Schemel can be made of apple wood, another from pear and a third from oak, and this diversity of theirs tells the sustainability story. And the motifs of tulips and triangles woven into the T3 carpet are always a bit different, because we wanted them to express the beauty of imperfection, to be guided by what felt right when they were made, and to bear the mark of the hand, which is different from the perfection of machinery. These are things it is still difficult to explain to clients on the Romanian market, but right from the beginnings of KraftMade we have ensured

that every project included educating the client and the public, because we have built up a market that did not exist before.

4. Is this a project that could be replicated by using the methodology you employed?

KraftMade has implemented a methodology that functions well in the area of projects that involve collaboration between traditional crafts and contemporary design; we have tested and optimised it and also put it at the disposal of a variety of partners who have sought our advice as consultants over the years. We are committed to the authenticity of the final product, which depends on the respecting of cultural significance, and to a rigorous application of the process of research-grounding-creation-production and of the concept of slow design, all of these being steered by constant mediation between the two worlds. That is, you need a genuine and as profound as possible knowledge of the cultural area from which your objects draw their inspiration and of the materials and techniques you are going to use, then you need to distil and put in general terms the concept that tells the story of your object, and only then do you define and produce an object that will have meaning and functionality in this cultural ecosystem. When these principles are strictly followed, things work and are sustainable.

5. What are the ingredients of the balance between the work of the artisan (a series of precise actions repeated over the years during which the same objects are produced time after time) and the direction given by the designer?

Ideally, in order for things to function and for these two worlds of craft and design to produce something coherent, the craftsman and the designer ought to spend time together and effectively to work together. In this fast-moving world KraftMade makes up for the absence of this through production mediation. Because we know our craftsmen extremely well, we know who to call on for each project and we know what will work and what will not, depending on that particular craftsman's

personality. But if a designer is going to enter into a working relationship with a craftsman for the first time he needs to understand in advance what his abilities and limitations are and – this is very important – to find a language they can both speak, one that goes beyond lines on the computer screen or digital utopias.

Our experience has shown us that not all craftsmen have the ability to initiate a design, that is, to apply known techniques to a product that from a cultural point of view is foreign to them. For this reason, taking account of the Romanian cultural context, it is the designer's job to make an extra effort to ensure that the craftsman has understood the product from both a technical and an aesthetic point of view before he sets to work.

We have summarised our advice to craftsmen in a little guide, "Made with my own hands. The good craftsman's guide", published in 2013 and available online [in Romanian] at https://issuu.com/kraftmade/docs/facut_cu_mana_mea.

6. *What happened later to the objects you made for the collection? Are some of them being produced in limited batches, or did they remain at the stage of temporary experiments?*

The Soxen 2.0 collection has done well this year. After its launch at the "Redesign Crafts" exhibition during Romanian Design Week, it went on to the "Threads of Tradition" exhibition at the Madrid Design Centre, "Creative Traditions" at the Museum of the Romanian Peasant and then to Vienna Design Week. The collection is fully up and running and available for orders.

7. *Based on your experience with this project (and also with DELTACRAFT), to what extent do you believe that creative industries can contribute to the promotion of Romania's material and immaterial cultural patrimony? And, why not, perhaps you could tell us what pitfalls they need to avoid? (Here you can also make some useful critical observations about what you can see happening, without necessarily going into precise details if you don't*

think it's OK to do so.)

Designers can play a vital role in promoting the immaterial patrimony if they are willing to do so. Based on our experience, we can say that those who have tried this method of production that involves craftsmen in the design process have found that the products have sold extremely well, as long as the principles we discussed earlier were respected. This was due to the added value conferred by the traditional techniques employed and by the fact that the items were handmade; these features were made a marketing point and increased their sales when compared with other products that they had designed. The only preconditions are that they should respect the people, employ traditional materials and techniques, and not make pseudo-products in which the marketing is full of hype but ethical and aesthetic content is lacking. I believe that the work of designers in Romania is affected by two issues. One is a lack of quality finish – and I cannot understand quite why, but perhaps they do not know how to request it or have not been able to find suitable producers. The other problem is that the story a product should have to tell is often absent.

These two missing features can be put in place if designers acquaint themselves with our immaterial heritage, because what gives products their defining quality is not a symbol or an image or some shape taken from artisan folklore but, we cannot say it sufficiently often, the way in which experience of materials and place produces a particular wisdom, defines an object's function and story. In the same way, we need to become aware the so-called "popular/folk craftsmen" who produce artisan wares, that is, decorative items, are an artificial invention of the last 60 years and are very different from the craftsmen who produce items for use, and it is this latter kind of immaterial heritage that we regard as valuable. In brief, what designers stand to gain from a process of collaboration with craftsmen is authenticity and quality, while Romania's immaterial heritage thus has an opportunity, via designers and their promotion networks, to live on and to become a necessity once more.