

# MARTOR



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#### **IV. Traditions in dialogue**



## **Atelierul de creativitate. A Sentimental Dossier**

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### **ABSTRACT**

9 stories about people, relationships, creativity, communication;  
9 stories about how the educators and artists at the Romanian Peasant Museum open up the museum for adults and children alike, translating its contents into colours, sounds, happenings, and objects.

### **KEYWORDS**

Romanian Peasant Museum; Irina Nicolau; Atelierul de creativitate; museum education.

### **Cosmin Manolache**



### **A knitting-a-stocking kind of project**

Every time she'd start tinkering based on an idea she'd come up with that very night, Irina [Nicolau] would say she was "knitting a stocking." Maybe this was her way of downplaying the aesthetic aspect, choosing to describe it as a little more than an everyday domestic chore – something that could be accomplished by anyone just bold enough. She would launch into the new thing impetuously, making use of bits and pieces of pretty much everything: words said or written, fabrics, paper cuttings, leftovers, colourful yarn, patches, coins, beads, lace, buttons, an array of knick-knacks so varied that it would be almost impossible to list them. They all came together into a coherent whole due to enthusiasm, inspiration, team work, and, most of all, naturalness. Irina would wear clothes she had sewn herself, clothes that other people couldn't even dream of. It was on a daily basis that she came up with all sorts of projects – she hated this word, which was only beginning to make its way

into our lives back then in the late 1990s. She sometimes found people to help her make them come true, sometimes she didn't. *Atelierul de creativitate* [The Creativity Workshop] was one of those lucky projects – it goes on to this day although there were times when, as with any wonderful creative endeavours ran by a Romanian institution, it came under the threat of bureaucratic lack of imagination.

But what would this creativity workshop look like? Nobody had done it before in Romania. We would hear of similar things done in Western museums, but there was nothing like that in our museums. No, I'm wrong, the Romanian Peasant Museum had organized something at the Orizont Galleries, in the 1990s. Irina would tell us how, as a child, she would spend her afternoons at the Bulandra Theatre where her mother worked as a seamstress – sewing, modifying, patching the characters' costumes to fit the actors. An imagined world tailored to the bodies of people you could meet in the streets of Bucharest. This kind of childhood can only make you keep your dreams alive into adulthood. Irina imagined the workshop as a space of absolute freedom, where adults and children would sit side by side, with age being not an issue. A luxury turned into a privilege for both groups.

In fact, *Atelierul de creativitate* is just one expression of what Irina understood by "the encounter." For her, the encounter, coming together to make something, was, so to say, a theme. No, a fixation. An obsession? Maybe. Though this is not the right word either. Another such encounter happened back in the early 1990s when she managed to convince a few of the young people protesting in Piața Universității to come to the Museum "to eat clouds together." This was the way she went about things. And this was a good thing, making sure that the Museum got a makeover every two or three years, as if to mirror a concept she had invented, namely *museo-para* – from Greek, to make a museum together, in company. Sharing an office with Irina every day, I understood what "together" meant for her. There was a constant exchange of words, of ideas, we came together to do things – a proper workshop. Most of all, she wanted a museum that was alive, open, not one that stuck to immutable, virtually unquestionable rules. So she fought the pressure of this other way of doing things – according to which the sole purpose of a museum is to turn things into heritage. The workshop or laboratory atmosphere, with constant experimenting going on, re-imagining the past, was the state of grace that I experienced in the Museum, a state that would often protect us from excessively bureaucratic thoughts or actions. Since I have no idea what her logbook contains – but I like to think that she kept one, scribbling down her ideas – I can only speak of my own experience working with her. Besides the *Atelierul de creativitate*, she came up with the *Noah's Ark* project and team; then there were the weekend *Mornings at the Museum*, inviting the visitors to take part in "Lazy Saturday," "Expert Saturday," and "Busy Saturday" events that we'd organize. Some of these ideas couldn't survive without Irina. *Atelierul de creativitate* was the exception.

Irina only got to see the workshop grow for one year, between 2001 and 2002. But *Atelierul de creativitate* went on for many more years, in the basement whose walls she had padded with pages from a German encyclopaedia – where children created experimental museums (the Museum of the Peasant Child, for example); they played with clay turning it into animals; they did their own weaving; they imagined and performed shadow stories; they listened to sounds being born out of ideas, words and instruments that had become their friends; they tamed dragons made out of the Museum's old rusty gutters by painting them in bright colours; they became expert papermakers. They learned new ways of learning than those taught in school. We did so many things together, which would fill much more than a few pages. We did the impossible, we saw that we had done well, and we were all very happy!



Ana Pascu



## Atelierul de creativitate: the beginnings

Knowing Irina Nicolau, ethnologist, researcher, and later director of the Romanian Peasant Museum, was an extraordinary opportunity for me. As a professor at the Ethnology and Folklore MA program in Bucharest, she gave us more than information. Her charming, original and spontaneous personality transformed the professor–student relationship into a master–disciple one. As first-year MA students, we fell in love with her, the Romanian Peasant Museum, which she helped design and build with patience and passion, and with ethnology.

That’s how I started working for the Museum, in 1996. Irina trusted young people and the enthusiasm of youth. She helped them discover their talents and find the right path. Since I had experience as a teacher, in 1999, I followed her suggestion and started working with children. She felt it was very important to bring the children to the Museum and closer to the peasant culture, its values and its beauty, especially since, as the generations passed, fewer and fewer children would have grandparents in the countryside, the direct contact with the village being thus severed.

Irina wouldn’t force her suggestions on anyone. You came to see that she was right on your own, and you willingly took the next step to put her suggestions into practice. That’s how I ended up going to the local education authority and talking excitedly to some of the inspectors there, explaining why it was so important to bring the children to the Museum and what we could provide. Before long, the Museum was teeming with children. I would give them ethnology classes at the Village School – a friendly space, furnished with old desks, maps, and colourful images. I would tell them stories about village life, show them blown-up images, sometimes screen interesting films from the Museum’s collection of ethnological films. I had many chats with the children, trying to get them to remember what life in the countryside felt like, to make comparisons between the objects in the Museum and those they had seen in their grandparents’ homes. I tried to give them an understanding of the village, to bring them closer to it.

The program was designed for elementary school children as I was afraid that it would appeal less to older ones. Some school groups came only once; others came back. My best collaboration was with Mrs Alice Andreescu, who ran a private school for children with severe disabilities, between 1999 and 2000. For a while, they would come every week. I would prepare lessons that they could understand, and then we would draw together and go for walks around the Museum. Gradually, the children came to trust me. When a little girl with autism rested her head trustfully and affectionately on my shoulder, I was extremely moved and I felt like I had made a difference. Village School hosted a small exhibition with the objects created by these special children: knitting and stitching pieces, drawings, photographs. For as long as the exhibition lasted, I would often go and look at them; I’m not sure how much these children learnt from me, but I sure did learn a lot from them!

I started writing. The first piece of writing I did was for children, *Carte cu îngerași pentru copilași* (Book with little angels for little children), and I showed it to Irina. She encouraged me to write more, so that text was followed by *Cartea spațiului* (The book of space) and *Cartea timpului* (The book of time). I typed them on a typing machine, and Irina made the illustrations. At the beginning of the year 2000, some men carrying a heavy box showed up at the Museum. Inside, there were several publications of the Museum. Among them, my writings turned into toy-like little books. This was typical of Irina – she knew how to encourage you with both words and actions; and she had this way of coming up with ideas



that only added value to your own, making them shine, making them complete.

In 2000, Irina Nicolau, Carmen Huluiță, myself and Matei Cerkez, professor, we co-authored an alternative textbook, *Lecții cu povești despre facerea lumii. Carte pentru școala mică* (Lessons with stories about the creation of the world. A book for elementary school). This was an original textbook, with short cheerful texts, well researched but appealing, with funny illustrations done by Cristian Topan.

My work as a pioneer of the children's program ended in 2000, when I started my maternity leave. On my return, in 2002, Irina had done wonders, improving the program, creating *Atelierul de creativitate*. The offer was much more diverse, and children could learn through art. Other colleagues, Ciprian Voicilă and Ruxandra Grigorescu, were looking for new ways to reach the children's hearts. But Irina Nicolau had passed away...

### Ciprian Voicilă



### Once upon a time...

Before *Atelierul de creativitate*, there were the ethnology lessons at the Village School. In 2000, Irina asked me if I'd be willing to take over what my colleague, Ana Pascu, had started a year before. Around the time of important celebrations, Christmas, Easter, I was to tell the children visiting the Romanian Peasant Museum stories summing up the main legends, beliefs and customs occasioned by these celebrations, veritable explosions of the sacred in the profane. Irina's long-term thinking was that tomorrow's museum-goers must be familiarized early with this world – the seeds of traditional culture would then grow and bloom in their hearts, making them come back to the Museum.

In 2000, Irina Nicolau, Daniela Alexandrescu and myself published a book about professor Dorel Zaica – an artist who, following to some extent into the footsteps of Jean Piaget, had conducted a survey of sorts among children during the Ceaușescu era, asking them Socratic questions, some funny – Where do microbes live? – others right down subversive – What is the [Communist] Party? The book included thirteen out of one hundred thought experiments. Getting to know Zaica, going over the manuscripts and the drawings he had saved from dust and oblivion, and later reading a few books on drawing as a way to explore children's personalities expanded my perspective on the creative potential of children and on the methods to investigate the imagination.

So, in time, my meetings with the children – who would come daily, weekly or every now and then from various Bucharest schools and kindergartens, but also from private institutions such as Radio Itsy Bitsy or Worldvision – would unfold along two conceptual lines. First, at the School Village or right in front of the Museum – as it was the case on June 1, 2002, when Irina drew with us and the children, on huge cardboards placed on the sidewalk, and Marius Caraman photographed and filmed the crowd of children eager to draw and listen to the stories – the children would learn how the hedgehog helped God create the world, with more than a little help from the bee; the names of the *ursitoare* [the Fates] who came to decide their fate the third night following their birth; how the Sun fell in love with his sister the Moon; how a serpent coming into the peasant's household is a good omen because it is said to bring him good luck; how women used to give birth in the villages; how they lived; how the Rohmanies<sup>1</sup> would learn that people were celebrating Easter; and so on. Second, we would come up with topics just for fun: *Parent for a day, just for a day; An upside-down world; The story of the hand; On the inside; Questionnaire about old men with long white beards*<sup>2</sup> – we'd ask them why there were so many old men coming up in December, and how were they related to each other. In addition, there were some

1. The Rohmanies or *Blajini* (approx., the meek) are a mythical people who, according to Romanian folklore, live on the edge of the earth and are a righteous people. They would learn that it was Easter time by seeing the shells of the Romanians' red-dyed Easter eggs coming down a river. (translator's note)

other topics meant to bring out the children's personalities and how they related with their social environment – *My family*, they would draw each family member in a little house doing whatever that member would normally do at home; *Diary entry*; *Self-portrait*, on the back of the drawing, they would write their main qualities and defects as learnt from their parents or other social interactions. As the years passed, the children's creations kept piling up in our office – writings, collages, drawings. Around 2001, our new colleague Alecu, under Irina's supervision, produced a series of postcards which used some of the children's creations. Later, Martor Publishing printed booklets with some of the topics we had imagined accompanied by the children's drawings. And after that, Cosmin, Carmen, Ana and myself published a short encyclopaedia of Romanian mythology for children – *Îngeri, zmei și joi-mărițe* (Angels, ogres, and evil witches) – written and illustrated in the same playful-serious spirit. One important note: Ruxandra Grigorescu's joining us at *Atelierul de creativitate* made the interactive meetings with children even more exciting. Open-minded, ready to take on quirky challenges, Ruxandra was a consummate artist who knew how to challenge the children, offering them different materials that they could use to transpose their fantasies.

These were beautiful, romantic years, as we would call them nostalgically today, the *mot d'ordre* being openness – for both the children and the not all-knowing adults. We really enjoyed escaping for a while from the dull restrictions of space and time that come with adulthood, awakening, from under layers and layers of years passed, the inner child. In turn, the children would enjoy listening to our extraordinary stories, would easily join in the playful-educational atmosphere, and not once interrupt us (the way it happens today if you persist in trying to convey some information to them).

My rather long journey with *Atelierul de creativitate* ended with a project aimed at high-school students. Together with Călin Torsan, we went around Bucharest – he would introduce them to the art of musical instruments and the stories that brought them to life, and I would share with them some of our national mythology. I remember, for instance, how well-received our stories were at Caragiale High-School. I also remember their astonishment learning the origin of the word *Abracadabra*, and how it might be connected to *Avestița*<sup>3</sup> and her apotropaic names. This project was built on yet another of Irina's ideas – *the missionary museum*. We would not limit our work to the children visiting the Museum. We would reach out and find them, sharing with them our knowledge – whether it was little or a lot, I cannot say, but it certainly was exciting.

## Ruxandra Grigorescu



### Spring to summer 2002

Before I joined the Romanian Peasant Museum, *Atelierul de creativitate* had already started the Village School program. Two rows of desks, with polished tops that made the pencils roll (zuhrrr), and chairs that clanked (clank clank, I guess), and holes for inkwells (who can still remember those?). Coming to think about it, this was *Atelierul de creativitate*, with its specialized employees and a special status. As early as 1990, before having a chance to start work on the actual Museum building, they organized an exhibition hosted by Orizont Galleries, *Toys of Clay* – the ground floor contained artefacts recovered from the old Museum collection, while in the basement they set up a workshop for children. The exhibition was curated by Irina Nicolau and Ioana Popescu. I remember that, to the right of the staircase going to the basement, there was a Christmas tree (which was brown and

2. According to Romanian tradition, in addition to Santa Claus, there is also Saint Nicholas who comes and brings either gifts (to good children) or a stick (to bad children) on December 6. (translator's note)

3. According to Romanian mythology, an evil spirit who targets pregnant women and small children making them ill or killing them. (translator's note)

dry because it was June) beautifully decorated with walnuts and pretzels. As I looked away from the tree, I met Irina's eyes – big, brown, smiling at fair-haired Dimitrie whom I was carrying on my shoulders.

That, at the Orizont Galleries, was the first *Atelier*, if you were to ask me. Later, there was chalk drawing on the asphalt in front of the Athenaeum, maybe some other places too. All these very “busy and important” researchers – ethnologists, ethnographers, including Horia Bernea himself, the painter-director of the Museum – were dreaming of an *Atelier de creativitate*, but it was only in 2002 that it was officially created.

When I joined the *Atelier* team, Filo (Ciprian Voicilă) and Răzvan Alexandrescu (aka Alecu-I'll-be-right-with-you) were already working there. Filo was in charge of Christian beliefs and celebrations, while Alecu, who was an artist, would challenge the children with drawing projects such as *Portrait of an important figure* (and he got a very good portrait of Traian Băsescu who was back then mayor of Bucharest, and later became President); *Gardens for four seasons*; *The Story Tree*; *Fantastic and Domestic Animals*. I was their apprentice for a while, and then I moved on to painting, stitching, and shaping pottery in the new space of *Atelierul de creativitate* – opposite from “CIUMA” hall, to the left of the Museum's main entrance.

We would all improvise, testing this new ground, trying to be as faithful as possible to the Museum's materials, trying not so much to teach the children “the craft of stitching” or “the craft of pottery” but rather to introduce them to the village world coming from the city world, starting from our – and their – experience as urbanites. Of course, there was their encounter with *matter* – the paint in the tubes (back then children were kept away from any artistic methods that would stain or make a mess), the prickling needle and the slippery thread, the clay that sticks to your hands, and the modelling paste that smells like the dentist's office.

On June 1, 2002, we organized the “Drawings on a Rope” exhibition. It was dubbed the *June 1 Operation* because it was more than an exhibition. The children passing by on Kiseleff Road could stop to draw or paint on large sheets of paper stuck to the trunks of the trees lining the sidewalks. This was a beautiful madness, involving lots of buckets of clean water and countless brushes that needed cleaning. The space was put under the protection of the event's “mascot,” Anton the Scarecrow, which Irina had made especially for the event – two faces, one with his eyes closed, the other with his eyes open, one blue eye, the other green, wearing his name written on his forehead, and filled with rustling plastic bags.

This was the last “happening” that Irina coordinated. One day, a little before that, I was taken aback to hear her say: “Know what, Rux? Last night, when I couldn't go to sleep, I was thinking about... what new things we could do at *Atelier*.”

Many things have happened since – both in her name and her memory.



### Some of the children

There were the blond Arbăr, an Albanian from School 11, the one who drew Traian Băsescu's portrait; the talented Capsali children (first Maria and Teiu, then the twins); Alexandru Paleologu's overly polite and overenthusiastic storyteller grandson (who was sent to us to teach him peasant dances but who had instead to make do with me, walking around the museum, and drawing and telling stories). Then there was the little genius – four years old and “mum will tell you how many” months – who drew in no time a view from above of their kindergarten tables, with the children sitting on their chairs, leaving me flabbergasted



by his mastery of the *racourci* perspective; when I asked him: “What can you see through the window from outside?”, he drew the desk, the computer, mouse, and keyboard, with an astonishingly mature technique. Then there was freckled blue-eyed Victor whom we had aptly nicknamed “Victor-pictor” [*pictor*, Romanian for painter]; a three-year-old girl who would sew standing up on her chair, beautiful, perfectly aligned stitches, like a machine; a tiny first-grader who would murmur to himself constantly, as a way to work up his courage, the jingle of the TV commercial [for painkillers]: “Bye, pain! Paduden!”

And today, there are Iana whose fingers are so fast and so skilled; Eliza always ready to take on a challenge and complete it, hard-working, determined, and incredibly talented; the same for Maria the serious one, and Tamara who draws a little and then does a little dancing. Not to mention Grig, and his triangle rooster – an illustration for Ion Creangă’s story – and Nora, his sister who is still learning to speak and loves dots of all colours and sizes, both brought to the Museum by their brave Grandma. Because you need to be brave to handle such grandchildren and to cross Bucharest with them in tow, braving storms and heat waves.

And these are just a few of the children – give me a sec, and I’ll remember more names. For them, it was worth putting into practice Irina Nicolau’s idea to create *Atelierul de creativitate* then, and it is now worth making sure that it goes on.

Are they the future public of the Romanian Peasant Museum? I couldn’t say. What I can say is that we are giving them a new perspective or at least some nice memories.

**Mirela Florian**



### 10 years of *Atelierul de creativitate*

I have worked for the Romanian Peasant Museum’s *Atelierul de creativitate* for ten years, from its early days, when it was just beginning to grow from a seed planted by Irina Nicolau, and up until it grew famous and won awards. I had thus the opportunity and privilege to be part of this growing process, and I can testify to the transformation that took place before my eyes year after year, thanks to the hard work and patience of a few big-hearted people, who spared no effort and fought for funding. As hard a job as raising a child.

Ten years slip by, and many things happen in between, making it impossible to sum them up in a few lines. Among the beautiful things that happened as this unusual child grew up were the firing sessions in the Museum’s kiln – starting early in the morning and ending late at night, in a magical atmosphere that, like any magic, is hard to capture on film. After twelve hours of continuous fire, the pots and figurines crafted throughout the year by contemporary Bucharest girls and boys at the *Atelier* would shine bright red in the kiln – visible only in the dark. The magic would fade away in a couple of minutes, under the eyes of the master fire whisperer, Dumitru Constantin. Uncle Mitică, as we call him, the Romanian potter from Piscu who actually built the Museum’s kiln, knows exactly how high the flames are supposed to be and the secret correlation between the fire, the temperature (he doesn’t need a thermometer for that), and the perfect firing of clay.

At the end of these ten years, I am left with at least two priceless things: the joy in the children’s eyes and the friendship of a few people who still work for the *Atelier* or were just passing through.

As of late, *Atelier* is entering a new stage of its life, gaining more and more experience, making its debut on the Internet – it looks like it has finished growing up. Happy birthday and many more to come!



## Beatrice Iordan



### Bringing animation theatre to the museum

“Beatrice, come to the Museum to perform a *Mărioara și Vasilache*<sup>4</sup> [puppet show].” This happened in 2001 – having been freshly admitted to the “Actor puppeteer” section of UNATC [National University of Theatre and Film “I.L. Caragiale” in Bucharest], I had spread the happy news around to all my friends. Irina Nicolau was one of the people I loved, so I told her about my feat. She received the news with this advice. I didn’t take her words seriously back then, but, as the years passed and I became increasingly attached to the Romanian Peasant Museum and the people who brought it to life, many of them being currently my colleagues, I started contemplating bringing *Mărioara și Vasilache* to the Museum as she had advised me.

And that’s how the story of the Romanian Peasant Museum animation theatre started in 2006. Since then, together with many groups of cheerful children, we have performed various folk puppet shows: Mircea Vulcănescu’s *Vicleimul*, performed right in the centre of a Christmas market at the Museum; *Lăzărelul*, performed at yet another market at the Museum on the occasion of *Mărțișor* celebration in 2007; many shadow theatre shows with Păcală as the main character; but also performances based on the stories written by children during the animation workshops.

In 2009, together with a team of museum educators, we started a series of training workshops for colleagues from other museums. The outcome of the workshops was a book, *Shadow Theatre at the Museum*, meant as a *guide-helping-hand* to those who wanted to diversify their museum education methods.

That year we created the Museum’s animation theatre troupe, *Tropăiele* – 10-15 children who would come to the Museum every week to play, perform and grow. In 2014, several adult volunteers joined the troupe, helping us perform the shadow theatre show *The Story of a Piglet*. Children learn here not only how to perform theatre shows and to tell stories, they also pick up the complex craft of building the puppets and the stage setting, with their grandparents and parents sometimes joining in.

The animation theatre workshop is growing with each generation of children who attend it – as they become familiarized with traditions and folk stories, but also with classic and contemporary authors, as they bring them to life with the help of puppets and silhouettes in the shadow theatre.

## Lidia Stareş



### Following the yarn of encounters across age

Whether stitched or woven, the yarn defines us as we use it. It works like the bow that helps the sound come about. Stitching and weaving help us manifest the sound of the spirit that animates us.

So here I was one July, with a bunch of loud children between 4 and 16 years of age, eager to stitch or to play with fabrics. My bunnies – I cannot call them otherwise – were taken aback to discover that they could actually cut clothes for dolls, hamsters, etc., and then decorate them with beautiful stitches, or even print on them with fabric paints. The little ones (4-5 years old) made dolls from tree branches picked in the Museum’s courtyard,

4. *Mărioara* and *Vasilache* are both characters of a folk puppet show. It used to be performed by itinerant performers at fairs and on the edge of towns, sometimes accompanied by folk religious shows. These puppet theatre shows would parody prominent figures in society, the mores, but they would also target taboos, they would tax various faulty human traits. In addition to *Vasilache* and *Mărioara*, other characters such as Napoleon Bonaparte, the grave digger, the Turk, the Kazakh, the Jew, the cantor (or priest), the hunter, the yoghurt seller, etc. would feature in these shows.

and were very proud to draw the Museum's exhibits in front of visitors who praised them.

In time, as there was plenty of room, we started weaving on the vertical loom, in addition to the horizontal loom we had used thus far.

Then one day I get a phone call, a man's voice saying to me he would be interested in weaving on the vertical loom; when I asked him how old the child was, he said he was the one interested in learning how to weave. Before I met him, all sorts of thoughts crossed my mind – he had told me he studied philosophy. What kind of experiment did he have in mind? When we finally met – he was an ascetic-looking, lanky guy, with long messy dark hair – we talked and agreed on the techniques, what we could achieve with them. I had no idea I was entering a funny stage of my life. Two days later, the young man and two other friends of his called me – they were in the Museum's courtyard. So the four of us started spinning – the two friends were complete beginners.

And that's how, completely unawares, we got caught up in this amazing enterprise. A secret yarn was being woven around us. Their excitement was contagious, so some other friends, boys and girls from very diverse fields of study and work, joined us. They started coming to the Museum's workshop, learning all sorts of things, so that, little by little, we came up with the idea of putting together a Spinners' group. We researched all the steps of the process of obtaining wool yarn. This is how we learnt that, after the sheep were sheared, the wool would end up on the fields, in the forests, or even on the side of the rivers. Having been away for a while, our friend showed up one day with a huge load on his back. He had made a trip to Northern Moldova, to his grandmother's, and had brought us back a treasure: prime quality sheep wool already washed. Next, we got together to start combing and carding the wool.

After several failed attempts, the young man strapped the wool load to his bicycle and, following the advice of several people, took it to a man who owned a wool carding machine as old and time-worn as himself.

When our wonderful wool was returned to us, it was as fluffy and soft as clouds from heaven, and we were all very excited to begin spinning it. So we got on the train to Bucovina (to visit Domnica and Veronica in Gura Humor). In two weeks' time, we had learnt how to hand spin, had taken notes and filmed, had done the weft and the warp on the horizontal loom. The hand spinning, we learnt ourselves, and the rest we recorded.

The best yarn (thin and even) was made by the boys. So now we had all this yarn – what should we do with it? As the *Mărțișor*<sup>5</sup> celebration was approaching, we dyed some of the yarn crimson, with pokeweed berries, and the boys felted the remaining white yarn.

Last but by no means least, this experience has marked our lives two-fold: two of the young people gave up studying philosophy and passed the entrance exam to study anthropology with flying colours, and I came to put into practice an older idea of mine, namely dying with plants (flavonoid dyes).

The group has more or less dispersed, but we still see each other on both happy and sad occasions. The young people in the group got married, some of them have children, others have made a purposeful life for themselves abroad. This experience has been a blessed "potion" – until this day, people of all ages and nationalities stop by the Museum to learn how to stitch and weave. Also, along the years, we have been gifted a wonderful horizontal loom, fabrics, and countless other things.

5. On March 1, Romanians celebrate spring by wearing red and white string as a sort of luck charm – for health and long life. *Mărțișor* was originally made with wool yarn. Similar traditions can be found all over the Balkans (Bulgaria, Greece, etc.). (translator's note)



**Valentina Băcu**



***Atelierul de creativitate – as I saw it, as I knew it***

On my first encounter with *Atelierul de creativitate*, I was behind my photo camera – I was volunteering at the Romanian Peasant Museum and I had a passion for photography. I liked to sit in a corner and watch – hands, eyes, lips, faces going from smiling to frowning, and intent, half-smiling or dreamy eyes. And then I'd hit the button, trying to capture it. What I was trying to capture exactly, I didn't understand at first, it only dawned on me later, when I started teaching workshops myself.

It still happens to me to be behind my camera, looking and trying to capture *it*. The sense of well-being that I experienced as a child, in the company of my grandparents, looking for something to do, playing with yarn, fabrics, but also around the hearth, watching delicious meals being cooked in clay pots, or around the oven that smelled of bread made with love. The sense of well-being that I feel in my own home, with my children playing under the table, or around me. The sense of well-being that I get during the workshops, watching and capturing emotions. Some of these emotions are: the emotion of handling your first piece of handmade paper or the pieces of canvass or glass on which a story about a musical instrument is going to be printed; popping balloons and jumping to find (again) the freedom to express yourself; cushions filled with dreams about kittens and baby dolphins looking for a home; the needle that prickles the fabric; but also that far-fetched imagination belonging to a time when life felt like an endless summer day.



**Raluca Oprea-Minoiu**



**Atelierul de creativitate or playing around the museum**

Some might find it strange that we chose the ‘sentimental dossier’ form for our presentation of *Atelierul de creativitate* at the Romanian Peasant Museum. Today, in 2017, the *Atelier* also has a(n overly serious) bureaucratic side to it – bylaws, an organization chart, projects equipped with budgets and deadlines, acquisition procedures (a ton of them), annual reports.

That might be precisely why, as a form of protest, but also an act of justice, I wanted this article to be not rigid and didactic, but a meeting place for thoughts, emotions, and people.

Therefore, I will start by saying that I haven’t actually met Irina. But, strangely enough, listening to all these stories about her, being surrounded by all her quirky things and ideas, my own playfulness found a place in the Museum.

I put pieces of papers with riddles about museum items in inflated balloons, and the children wasted no effort to find them and read them! Boom, bang, bang, boom! And, all of a sudden, the big serious Museum turned into the best place for searching, hiding, or getting lost in thoughts.

One day, as the children and I were searching for dragons and white horses, we stopped and wondered in front of the icon of Saint Charalambos and the plague (what a frightening strange animal!?!). That’s where I got the idea of a workshop on fears. Who doesn’t have fears? Small or big, well-defined or vague, understandable or coming at us from some immemorial dark time. How did the peasants deal with these fears? They would appease





them, trick them, with an entire array of props designed to deal with each kind of fear – using their skills to keep them in check. Starting from here, together with the children, we created a made-up world where fears are tamed with words, with gestures, or colours. Drawing a little inspiration from peasant life, a little from psychotherapy, we (re)invented our world. A fear-free world.

I had long chats with the children at the Museum – about what it’s like to be a guest or how we could live without holidays or how the painters’ “fast of the eye” (yes, you read that right) would help them create beautiful sacred icons. Together, we invented a time of conversing about ‘celebration’ and ‘celebrating,’ including stories about how it was back then, stirring memories and desires to make up stories about how it is now. And since not all of us were skilful conversers, we used everything we could get our hands on – colours, flour, kinetic sand, all sorts of cereals, wet earth, cinnamon and lavender, water and feathers, clay.

We went through the Museum’s archive drawers containing thousands of photographs, the rule being that we got to choose only two. Do you think that’s easy? Which one would you pick? The one with the children and the swing, the one with the soldiers and the street sellers, or maybe a horse and a dog? And in what kind of a story would these images feature? A science-fiction or a contemporary story, a tale with ogres or with characters from the latest computer game? Choose carefully, because next you’ll have to perform that story...

We played with fantastic animals and we waged wars, our main weapons being sounds, and we built imaginary shelters, hanging the sun and some wolf teeth by the door to protect us from evil spirits, the way Romanian peasants would do. We made up stories, which we would then perform with gusto – the windmill in one of the Museum’s halls became a prehistoric helicopter, while the reed of the loom became in turn a Lego ladder and a magic comb whose teeth the hairs would willingly and magically enter one by one.

We also demolished many preconceived ideas. The guided tours for children on the autistic spectrum that lasted over two hours – they wouldn’t want to leave the Museum. Intense workshops with blind children, where colours would be brought to life with the help of spices, sounds, and movements. Teenagers who would forget about phones and tablets for hours on end. Parents and grandparents who – at first a little embarrassed then happily – would stain their cuffs with clay and flour, promising themselves to play more often.

One day, as the workshop was about to start, a little girl asked me: “Was the peasant good or bad?” She thought that the peasant was nothing more than a made-up character from a fairy tale. As the workshop was about to end, I asked her if she had found her answer. She had – “The peasant is alive, for real.”

That’s exactly what I feel about *Atelierul de creativitate* at the Romanian Peasant Museum. It is for real – alive, energetic, full of character; it has a beautiful history, materialities and languages as diverse as its people – ethnologists, artists (painters, puppeteers, musicians, potters, photographers), museum curators, researchers, museum educators, psychologists, craftsmen.





