

MARTOR



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**REDÉCOUVRIR LA MUSÉOLOGIE
REDISCOVERING MUSEOLOGY**

The Short History of a Big Award

Irina Nicolau

The Museum of the Romanian Peasant, Bucharest

With films, whoever wins an Oscar may hope for yet another one, and, anyway, there are other awards as well. For a European museum, after being dubbed European Museum of the Year, there's nothing left to aspire to. It has reached the highest peak.

The European Museum of the Year Award is granted by the EMYA Committee, functioning under the umbrella of the European Council. For a whole year, the thirteen members of the international jury, tour the museums running for the award, and evaluate them in accordance with certain criteria – quantifiable to a greater or to a lesser extent. For instance, they are as interested in the amount and quality of the exhibits, in the way the museum is run, in the exhibitions organized, in the services offered to the public, as they are in the state of mind characterizing the museum staff, the warm reception of the public, etc. As Kenneth Hudson, Head of the EMYA Committee, once said, a museum is good, when the visitor leaves it in a state of happiness.

The profile of the museum does not matter. It can be an art museum, an ethnography museum, a natural history museum, a science and technics museum. The only condition is that the museum should be recently established, or subject to major extension and reorganization. What

is actually intended through this award is the popularization of new museum formulae. Interest for the new is genuine. Though more frequented than ever, museums do go through an identity crisis. Those lucid enough to admit it will, therefore, pay attention to all new solutions.

In 1996, 64 museums from 21 countries have been running for the award. „After long and often passionate discussions, the Committee eventually decided that the winner of the European Museum of the Year Award for 1996 should be the Museum of the Romanian Peasant in Bucharest. The museum, it was felt, reached the highest European standard of planning design and presentation, and expressed a rarely equalled quality of imagination in its concept. The collections were considered to be outstanding and their preservation during the years of Communist rule deserved great credit. The Director of the museum, Horia Bernea, is felt by the Committee to be one of Europe's leading museum personalities, of whom much more is certain to be heard in future“ (The EMYA Bulletin, pp. 120-121).

We further quote from a letter signed by Kenneth Hudson:

„The Director is greatly loved and respected by his colleagues, and his background as an artist has been invaluable in creating a museum



The Mayor of Barcelona, Queen Fabiola of Belgium, Horia Bernea and the European Museum Forum Director, Kenneth Hudson during the awarding ceremony.

wich rises above traditional levels of presentation, and wich creates a whole which is much greater than the sum of the parts. Horia Bernea is an exceptional man, and we are sure that the European museum world is going to hear much more about him in the future. He, like his museum, is destined to have an international influence, and we congratulate him very warmly on his achievement."

Thus, on the 18th of May 1996, the EMYA Committee granted their highest award – for the first time – to an Eastern European museum. On the same day, Queen Fabiola of Belgium handed Horia Bernea the diploma and the trophy consisting in a small sculpture by Henry Moore. Founded on the 5th of February 1990, the Romanian Peasant's Museum had entered its seventh year of existence, and, so to say, gloriously went out into the world.

The ones deciding to make the Romanian Peasant's Museum, just one month after the revolution of December '89, could hardly expect such recognition. They were performing, nonetheless, a double act of politic justice: they reinstated a museum arbitrarily dismantled in 1948, and, in similar vein, reinstated the Romanian peasant, whose image had suffered serious damage during 45 years of com-

munism. At the same time, they were joining a new current, timidly taking shape in Europe over the past decades – that is, appointing an artist as director of a museum. In the case of the Romanian Peasant's Museum, this artist happens to be a painter.

Each society has the museums it orders and, ultimately, the one it deserves. Through museums, society expresses its attitude and strate-

gies regarding its past. The most efficient way to dispense with the past is having it enshrined. Hermetically sealed, air-conditioned and placed under a cold light, the witness-object becomes an exterior fact. The museums following this approach are the order of societies laying their bets on the future. In my opinion, Romanian society at the end of this century needs a healing museum to address its ailing present. In the rooms of our museum, the visitor is not lec-

tured on how our ancestors used to live. He is offered elements from a heritage he has to perceive as his own.

We have been granted an award which, upon the burden of our worthy ancestors, adds yet another burden. Old honours and new honours weigh our shoulders down.



Note

Translated by Florin Bican. Reproduced from „The Golden Bough“ (1996), by courtesy of the Romanian Cultural Foundation.