

MARTOR



Title: *Reclaiming the Visual Archive of the Furniture Factory in Iași*

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How to cite this article:

Bârză, Călina. 2019. "Reclaiming the Visual Archive of the Furniture Factory in Iași." *Martor* 24: 203-212.

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

URL: <http://martor.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/archive/martor-24-2019/>

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Martor is indexed by:

CEEOL, EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Anthropological Index Online (AIO), MLA International Bibliography.

This issue of *Martor* has been published with the financial support of the National Cultural Fund Administration (AFCN Romania).

Reclaiming the Visual Archive of the Furniture Factory in Iași

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ABSTRACT

After the fall of the communist regime, many Romanian archives were destroyed, dismantled and sold on the black market, while others were neglected or abandoned. A particular case is the photographic archive of a furniture factory in Iași, a city in the northeast of Romania. In 2016, when some of the remaining buildings were rented, a series of objects, photographs and other materials were found on the premises, standing as visual evidence of the history of the Factory. In this context some questions arise, such as: What happens to an archive once a factory has been closed? How can the archive be restored and valued? What measures can be taken to ensure the future of such visual documents?

Based on my work with archives, I have undertaken the study of this material by managing the photographs to obtain an overall image of the archive and its visually recorded contents. The archiving process brought to light valuable information about the activity of a factory that during the communist period was at the forefront of the furniture production in Romania. In the following case study I will describe the context of the archive, the history of the Factory during and after the communist period, the steps involved in restoring the archive, and the results of the research.

KEYWORDS

Archive, photography, documentary, communism, factory.

After the fall of the communist regime, many Romanian archives were destroyed, dismantled and sold on the black market, while others were neglected or abandoned. A particular case is the photographic archive of a furniture factory in Iași, a city in the northeast of Romania. In 2016, when some of the remaining buildings were rented, a series of objects, photographs and other materials were found on the premises, standing as visual evidence of the history of the Factory. In this context some questions arise, such as: What happens to an archive once a factory has been closed? How can the archive be restored and valued? What measures can be taken to ensure the future of such visual documents?

Based on my work with archives, I have undertaken the study of this material by managing the photographs to obtain an overall image of the archive and its visually recorded content. The archiving process brought to light valuable information about the activity of a factory that during the communist period was at the forefront of the furniture production in Romania. In the following case study I will describe the context of the archive, the history of the Factory during and after the communist period, the steps involved in restoring the archive, and the results of the research.

The place where the Factory stands to this day has a rich history rooted in carpentry and furniture production. Moldomobila was the first furniture factory founded in the





Figure 1. Street view of the Wood Manufacture Enterprise Iași building.

city of Iași in 1928. The name is an abbreviation of Moldova, the northeast region of Romania, followed by the Romanian word for furniture. It operated until 1944, when it burned in a fire, and the remaining premises were converted for lumber storage in 1946. On the same foundation stone, from 1953 to 1954, a new carpentry workshop was built, subordinated to the Iași Upholstery and Furniture Cooperative. In 1960, the workshop was administered by the Ministry of the Wood Processing Industry that established the IPROFIL—Iași Furniture Wood Processing Company [*Întreprinderea de Prelucrare a Lemnului IPROFIL "Mobila Iași"*], giving continuity to the local carpentry tradition.

In the twenty-five years following its opening, the Factory developed at a high speed, constantly expanding by being modernized with advanced technology, machines, innovative designs, efficiency in the production, reducing costs, minimizing

waste, improving the overall production and profit. By this time the Factory had in total ten departments in the county of Iași as follows: I. Furniture Pieces and Carving; II. Style and Art furniture; III. Seating; IV. Small Furniture; V. Furniture; VI. Chairs and Furniture Pieces; VII. Semi-finished Elements and Centralized Cutting; VIII. Mechanics and Engineering; IX. Plywood; X. Plastics; XI. School Workshop. In 1985 the Factory's output reached impressive numbers: over 28,500 conventional furniture sets, 10,000 art and style furniture sets, one million conventional chairs, and 45,000 small furniture items and sets, while employing over 4,000 trained and skilled employees (Fig. 1). The high quality products were sold all over the country, but most of the production was exported. Over 80 percent of the production was exported to more than twenty-five countries, some of which were: the United States of America, Russia, England, France, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands,

Belgium, Switzerland, Spain, Italy, Hungary, Canada, Mongolia, Japan, Israel, and Australia.

The Factory manufactured a variety of finished products such as parquet, barrels, panel or upholstered furniture, chairs, tables, bookcases and furniture sets designed for the living room, kitchen or hallway. The raw materials consisted of a diversity of timber made from beech, oak, ash tree, mahogany, walnut, fir, cherry or maple. The designs accommodated many tastes and functions; besides traditional and classic furniture, the offer also included modern furniture, French, German or Romanian rustic styles. The Factory took part in international and local fairs and also won the first prize at the national contest with the “Iași 85” model released in 1985. After the first furniture set, “Iași 60,” the Factory had gone on to produce 250 different types of furniture, creating each year ten new designs on average (Fig. 2). For example, there were seventeen types of chairs that came in twenty-five versions, depending on the upholstery and variations in the basic design.

In this golden era, the Factory was the most successful, productive and relevant both nationally and internationally, being the national market leader until the 1989 Revolution that brought down the communist regime. In 1991 the former state-owned enterprise was privatized, and the S.C. Moldomobila S.A. Iași was established.

Figure 2. Display panel showing the new products made in the Second Department - Style and art furniture.



The new factory was producing the same high quality furniture, but there was a lower demand on the national market. At the same time Romania started to import furniture from Italy, France, and Germany. The most destabilizing factor that influenced the Factory's decline was the loss of a large part of the international market, to which it used to provide almost 90 percent of its production. It continued to export furniture, but on a much smaller scale to countries like Germany, France, Italy, England, Japan, the Czech Republic, and Hungary.

Over the last three decades, the Factory has been relying on a reduced number of international orders, lower demand from the national market, while facing competition from international companies. In this context, it has become increasingly difficult to continue to operate, maintain sales, and increase profit. Out of the eleven fully functional departments it used to have, there were only five left: I. Furniture Pieces; II. Rustic and Art Furniture; III. Chairs; IV. Mechanics and Engineering; V. Prefabricated and Plywood. By 2015 the Factory was working with a couple of employees, had only three departments left, an even lower production, and was threatened by bankruptcy.

In these turbulent times, in 2016, an independent group of architects, designers, street artists, carpenters and craftsmen rented the former furniture design workshops and converted them into working spaces and studios. Access to the space is not restricted to the public, on the contrary, it was also intended to function as a platform to gather and grow the local community, to interconnect individuals from different fields, to raise awareness on local issues, and to develop initiatives towards resolving them. In this context Hubrica was formed, a combination between a hub and a factory (*Hub + brica* from the Romanian word for factory, *fabrica*), continuing thus the tradition of production, with the people being now the resources and ideas, the raw materials. After they refurbished the space, Hubrica



was opened in September 2016 for the White Night of the Art Galleries event when they displayed some of the photographs, posters and some other recovered objects for the public to see.

After 1989, when the Factory was privatized, it continued to operate with only a reduced number of departments, while those that fell into disuse remained mainly untouched. Bits and pieces of the former manufacturing plant are still present in the buildings and the surrounding courtyard. Many traces of its activity were left behind and some exist to this day. Machines, tools, metal signs, items of furniture, books, personal objects, registers, furniture blueprints and sketches, posters, albums and photographs bear witness and are palpable proof of its glorious past. The machines deteriorated in time and the photographs were preserved under the dust. In the 1990s, after the old factory was closed, the photographs were not collected by the state authorities because they were not relevant at that time. Since the state authorities were only interested in the financial records, the archive was left behind and forgotten in time. Under these circumstances, the photographs were saved from being destroyed, lost, or misplaced and remained sheltered in the Factory until their rediscovery in 2016.

In collaboration with Hubrica, I undertook the initiative to archive and digitize the photographic material as an independent research project, to reconstruct the narrative of the Factory and make its story more visible. Initially, there was a box of approximately 400 photographs that were found scattered in the main building. The second box was found untouched and contained more than 500 black and white prints. Along with these, cardboard instructional photomontages depicting workplace safety procedures, albums, and only one roll of black and white negatives were found. Gradually more material surfaced, including color images that exclusively depict furniture items, rolls of projection film, color and black and white film slides, booklets that present the

Factory over the years, and product catalogues. Based on the compiled material, more details about the Factory were brought to light, and it was possible to visually restore a fragment of its history.

The photographic archive consists of mostly mixed photographic prints, and in this particular case most of the negatives were not found; a large share of the photographs are copies or test prints. The photographs were sorted and regrouped into series following the reconstruction of the rolls of the negatives from which they were printed, in order to establish the original sequence, context and time when they were taken. In the archiving process, relationships and connections were established between the photographs both as physical objects and what they depicted, to provide more coherence to the visual archive. In this manner more series of photographs were reorganized by the type of the paper of the print, size, format, nature of deterioration and annotations. The prints vary in size, and they were done on thin or thick paper with a matt, shiny or textured surface. In terms of image printing options there are bleed prints, with white margins, while others have jagged edges. The black and white gelatin silver prints were developed manually in a dark room between the years 1970 and 1985. The 1990s color negatives were developed using a machine in a studio and were printed on standard size Kodak and Agfa photographic glossy paper. There were also a number of copies of these latter images printed on regular office printer paper.

The type of print was a reliable clue in tracing the sequence of the photographs, but in other cases the connection between the pictures was more accurately determined with the help of the annotations and markings made on the front or back of the photograph. Some images had numbers marked with the same handwriting revealing that they were part of an established sequence (Fig. 3). More series of a single sequence were printed, other photographs were missing, so by putting all the copies together the



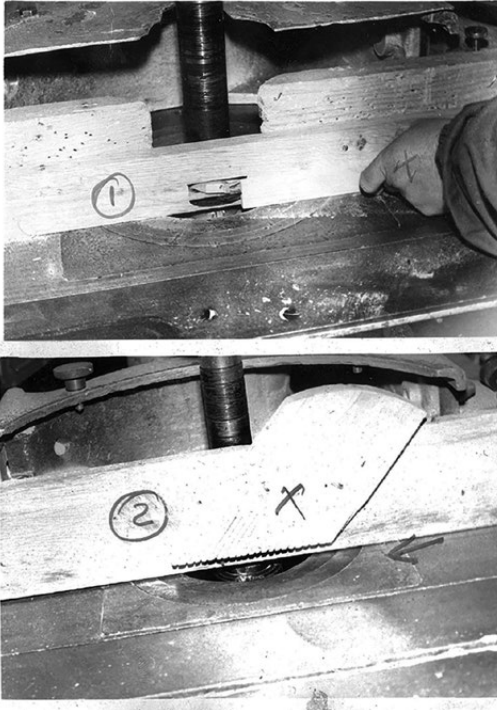


Figure 3. Numbers and marks indicating a sequence.

full sequence could be completed. Most of the color analogue photographs present handwritten standard information about the furniture item such as name, dimensions, and weight on the back. The annotations that were done on the front of the photograph included X signs, circling of objects or parts of the image, pointing arrows or actual handwritten text (Fig. 4). Besides the physical photographic object and its distinctive markings, the image itself presented minor details that would point to a connection between the disparate pictures. For instance, the pictures of furniture items were taken on the premises, in a setting using a limited decor and set of props. Another indication was the use of the same carpet or flower pots in arrangement with different furniture items that could be traced in more photographs.

In the sorting and classifying process the photographs were arranged into fifty-eight black and white series and twenty-three color series. After the archiving process was over, a final inventory was made with the following results. There are four albums,

six labor safety photomontages, seven rolls of projection film, one roll of negatives, 530 slides, eight booklets and catalogues. Including the 1,031 print copies, the total number of loose photographs is 2,129, out of which 931 are black and white and 1,198 are color. Altogether there are 338 photographs in the albums and twenty-four in the photo collages. The total number of the photographic images in the overall visual material is 3,021. Including the back of the prints, the total number of scanned images is 1,783. From the furniture product photographs, 259 designs of sets and individual furniture pieces were identified. Considering the timeline and dating, based on the available material, the markings on the back of the photographs, the printed images from the published booklets and the photo albums, the photographs have been made between 1970 and 2000.

Photography played a very important role in the activity of the Factory and was mainly used for documenting, commercial product display, and to illustrate the evolution of the Factory. In terms of themes and subject matter, what really connects all the images at a basic level is the purpose for which they were made, and how they were used. The photographs were taken by the assigned photographer in order to visually record, illustrate and promote the production of the Factory. The black and white photographs depict the many aspects of the manufacturing plant, describing the production process that was carried out with precision

Figure 4. Notes that say "What rules are observed? What rules are not observed?" referring to the work procedures.





Figure 5. View of the Wood Manufacture Enterprise, the building that hosts the Design Workshops and where later Hubrica rented space for their studios.

Figure 6. View from the site of the wood deposit.



Figure 7. Aspects of the production process.



Figure 8. Varnishing with lacquer the furniture parts.



by skilled laborers in the Factory's various departments and workshops (Fig. 5).

The technological process of furniture production was complex and started with logging in the nearby forests; the logs were then carefully selected and transported to the Factory where they were processed into timber that had to pass a quality assessment (Fig. 6).

The next step was drying the wood, a process that could take up to a month and a half. The timber was then smoothed and cut into the basic components using predefined dimensions, and then the pieces were put together in the assemblage department (Fig. 7).

The finishing process consisted of gluing, staining of the wood, upholstering, painting and varnishing to transform the product into its finished version (Fig. 8). After an item of furniture was completed, it went through a final quality control. These images show the forest, the timber storage, how the wood is shaped into furniture, as well as the departments with the machines that were operated by the workers. Besides documenting the production process, these photographs were also made to promote and display the activity of the Factory in anniversary brochures and furniture catalogues (Fig. 9, Fig. 10).

One of the basic and most important purposes of photographic documentation was to illustrate workplace safety, i.e., correct and incorrect practices. This was part of the standard mandatory training of the employees in using the machines and following the right steps to avoid accidents. The images along with descriptive texts were used in instructional photo collages that were mounted on panels or appeared in the factory brochures. Similar pictures accompanied by instructions are found in the slides. A large portion of the photographic material depicts accidents or their re-enactments because it was crucial to visually document these occurrences and their circumstances. In this case the photographs were used as actual visual records of the accidents that occurred at the Factory. The most common



Figure 9. Workers operating the machines.



Figure 10. Dusting the furniture corps.

ones involved broken limbs, cut fingers, loss of a hand or arm, eye and head injuries, but there were also cases of deadly accidents caused by lack of attention, misuse of the machines, and non-compliance with the correct workplace safety procedures. These images would make their way in the official reports, and they would be also used in the re-enactment photomontages that described the circumstances of the accident (Fig. 11).

Events that took place in the Factory and outside of it were also part of the photographic documentation process. The photographer was present at staff meetings, employee evaluations and exams, celebrations, contests and parades organized for national holidays or the Factory's anniversary. These images show the Factory's head offices in Iași, including other departments of pro-

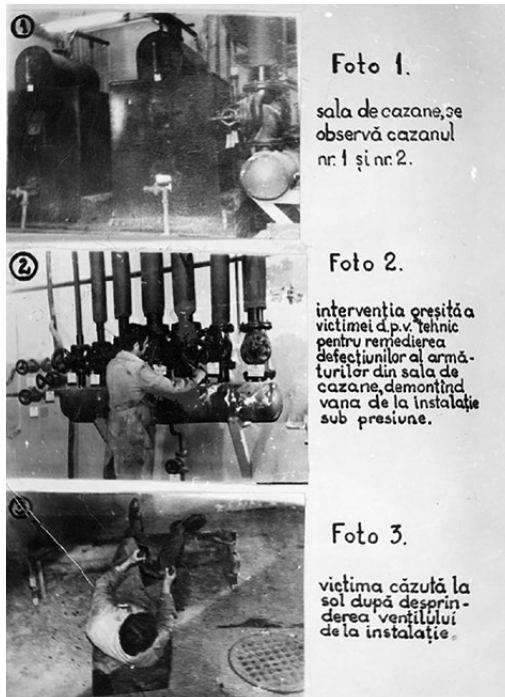


Figure 11. Accident re-enactment photo-collage.

duction in the county, as they were meant to promote its overall success. Other pictures show the city of Iași and a large portion of the workers holding banners and flowers as they attended parades celebrating events like the 1st of May, Labor Day, or the 23rd of

August, the National Day (Fig. 12). Among the black and white photographs, there were also random and mixed loose photographs with portraits of the employees or personal family photographs that got left behind.

The color photographs represent another large portion of the visual material, depicting the individual products such as chairs, tables, bookcases, dressers and furniture sets designed for the living room, kitchen, bedroom and hallway (Fig. 13). The photographs of the furniture pieces were actual commercial product photographs that were made in order to be printed in catalogues. The photographs were taken inside the building and sometimes in the courtyard. The indoor images were done in a couple of spots in the Factory, in an improvised décor, using two Persian rugs or a plain carpet with a few props. Often flower pots or fresh flower bouquets were used in order to display items of furniture or to decorate the frame. Because the flower pots and carpets were in a limited number, there were few combinations and the props appeared in more images, indicating that the photographs were taken during the same photo session, especially when fresh flower bouquets were used (Fig. 14). Fewer black and white photo-

Figure 12. Parade for 1st of May Labor Day in 1979.





Figure 13. Kitchen corner set.

graphic prints were found that depict the furniture products, but thanks to one remaining catalogue more designs are visually available.

Apart from the photographic prints there are also both black and white and color slides that illustrate first aid instructions, standard workplace safety procedures, and mandatory training on the use of the machines, the production process, and safe work practices. The photographs from the slides are different from the ones in the prints, expanding the visual collection of the archive and showing new images of the Factory and workers.

The four photo albums differ in terms of contents. One, for example, looks like an incomplete presentation album because it is almost blank, has just a couple of pasted photographs showing aspects of the production process and lacks text or captions. Two albums stand out because they were specifically designed to record the accidents that took place from 1974 to 1975 and then from 1978 to 1979. This was another way of keeping track of the accidents, but in this case there were no explicit images from the scene or re-enactments, only small identity card photographs of the injured employees. The record included a brief handwritten description of the circumstances, causes, those involved in the accident, and the person(s) responsible for the accident. It was also mentioned how those responsible for the accident were penalized. Besides document-



Figure 14. Images that show the same flower pot.

ing purposes, the albums were a means to illustrate incorrect practices so that the staff of the Factory would pay more attention and take all the correct steps to avoid accidents. The last one is a presentation album from 1982 of the cigarette factory in the town of Sfântu Gheorghe.

The activity of the Factory and its separate departments was presented in the eight brochures published from 1970 to 1988. In these booklets, some of the images can be traced to the paper photographs that depict the activity of the Factory. They were made to promote the progress and successful completion of the five-year plan, providing a retrospective overview of the Factory's evolution, complete with actual numbers, statistics, graphs, lists of names of the employees and heads of departments. The brochures were issued by the Propaganda Department of the Iași County Committee of the Romanian Communist Party. Considering the large amount of photographs that were taken at the Factory, only two of them show the photographer in the frame, appearing as a shadow (Fig. 15).

For almost thirty years the visual archive was frozen in time until it was rediscovered and brought back to light. Unfortunately, in 2018 the threat of bankruptcy worsened, making the future of Moldomobila and the archive uncertain. The fact that the archive managed to survive untouched in the same place for all this time is remarkable, but now it was facing the risk of being left behind





Figure 15. The shadow of the photographer.

once more. In this context, at the initiative of the Hubrica community and through a collective effort, the archive was taken to the State Archives in Iași. In this way the visual documents are now in a secure place and under the guardianship of a state institution that allows the public free access to this reclaimed piece of history.

The trajectory of the photographs is impressive because they started as documentary photographs, then became significant due to their contents and shifted their status to historical photographic documents. The timing and context were fortunate considering that in the last years photographs and archives all over the world are receiving more and more attention and appreciation from institutions and the public. With their new found glory the photographs from the Factory are part of the official state archives and officially acknowledged as visual historical records.

In addition to their initial use as documentary photographs, they now also represent a means to see and rediscover the past. The images show the role of photography, and how it was used for documenting accidents, the production process, marketing of the furniture items, and even for propaganda. Apart from documenting the activity of the Factory, the photographs also present the workers in different contexts and depict what it meant to be part of the factory work-

force in the communist period. Because the events featured in the images are relatively recent, some of the former workers can relate to that reality since it is still part of their own personal history.

The contents of the archive can also be relevant for the general public because of the rich information they provide, which can be used for research on topics as diverse as history, social studies, communism, industrial architecture, wood processing industry, furniture factory, machines and technical aspects, workplace safety, economics, marketing, furniture design, and documentary photography. This photographic heritage is valuable because it represents actual fragments of history that illustrate the evolution of a prominent furniture factory during the communist regime in Romania. By recovering this forgotten visual material the traces of the furniture Factory are saved from being erased from history, and its glorious past is preserved for the future.

Note: Images courtesy of the National State Archives of Iași County.

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