(Pre)figuring Physiognomy: Mask Making as an Interpretive Art among Romanian Artisans in Moldova

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ABSTRACT

The present text explores the creativity of mask makers in Romania, particularly with regard refers to their knowledge to envision the figures that populate their art galleries. Indeed, to an important extent, mask making consists of reproducing human facial traits that are prefigured by artisans. Based on the author' ethnographic material collected in the 2000s, this article examines mask making in several areas of Moldavia (Neamț, Suceava, and Vrancea Counties), with particular emphasis on (1) local mask-makers' interpretation of social portraits and self-portraits, as well as (2) their cultural "mission."

KEYWORDS

Mask making; artisans; portraying, Moldavia.

When interviewed today, folk artisans representing various crafts and ethnographic areas of Romania say that they "visualise" in advance, or somehow "prefigure," the artefacts they make. As a creative process, mask making thus appears to be an art of (pre)figuring social characters and even self-portraits. In Romanian, the verb *a închipui* (lit., "to shape a face") may be related to the way mask makers in Moldavia describe their work: they speak of "imagining faces" (especially, human ones) in order to associate them through the masks with various public social roles, attributes, or "endowments."

Folk masks and their contemporary use in Romania continue to be closely associated with ceremonial contexts, which, as will be seen below, seem to constitute the primary reference for authenticity in contemporary ethnographic accounts. Indeed, Romanian ethnologists generally agree in associating mask wearing first and foremost with the cycle of winter celebrations, as documented in various areas of country.[1] Artisans in Moldavia, in their turn, frequently evoke *Revelionul* or the New Year's Eve celebration (ŞT: N) and the "death of the Old Year" (PL: N) as part of a process of collective spiritual renewal. Within this framework, their goatskin or wooden masks representing the so-called "Elders" (*Uncheşi*) are most commonly displayed.

Theoretical remarks on the traditional use of masks in Romania

Mask making (as a traditional craft) and mask wearing (as a customary performance) extend beyond the winter season across the annual calendar and the broader socioeconomic life of

Romanian rural society. Alongside their winter traditions, masks connect to another "[ritual] pole of the year," that of the Summer Ancestors (*Moşii de Vară*) and to the processions related to the cult of the dead in many regions of Romania (Prut 2001, 14). In the Banat area, during the Roman Catholic Lent (*Zăpostit / Fărşang*), masked performers satirise fellow villagers who are subject to public disapproval (Vulcănescu 1970), while in towns with a medieval German guild tradition, such as Braşov and Sibiu, the masked performers known as *Lole* (*Urzlen*, *Lallen*) are said to fight evil spirits but also to whip rebels who disobey civic rules of conduct (Ştiucă 2001, 17). Further examples of mask ceremonies are described in Transylvanian pastoral communities, including the *Blaj*, *Goţoi*, and *Păpăluga*, in which masks and costumes are made of branches and leaves and worn as part of a kind of "bucolic carnival" associated with St. George's Day tradition) (Ştiucă 2001). In the Oltenia region, masking also forms part of the *Căluş,* a male group dance featuring zoomorphic masks of the harlequin-like character known as the "Mute" (*Mutul*) (Kligman 1981).

With no intention to provide an exhaustive account of the rich ethnographic repertoire of mask traditions in Romania, we turn next to the *Chipăruş* (or *Chiperiu*) ritual in the Moldavian village of Nereju,[2] a practice often cited in Romanian ethnological literature and particularly relevant to the discussion that follows. Indeed, as most of the available evidence describes *Chipăruş* as a burial ceremony, recorded as such in the well-known sociological monograph of *Nereju* (see Stahl, Brăiloiu 1939, 273-314), that has disappeared during the second half of the twentieth century century, contemporary researchers,[3] as well as artisans themselves, as will be shown below, tend to regard *Chipăruş* as foundational to the meanings they attribute to mask making in the area.

In the monograph *Nereju*, the *Chipăruş* is mentioned in connection with a "joyful [funeral] wake," the *priveghi*, during which several disguised "Elders" (the *Uncheşi*) dance and drag the deceased around a fire in a peasant courtyard (Stahl, Brăiloiu 1939, 293-5). In a short text, Henri H. Stahl presents such a mask from the *Chipăruş* ceremony, insisting on its "tin-made eyes," its "grin," and the "pagan mystery" it bears "from the bottom of centuries," as testimony to the way in which the *obşte* (the village community) knows how "to stay alive" beyond the funerals.[4]

The *Uncheşi* masks are associated with the "succession of ancestors watching the funerals," with their "austere and hieratic physiognomies" (Vulcănescu 1970), while the presence of zoomorphic traits, such as goat horns, in the making of these masks is discussed in terms of "incarnations of supernatural and ancestral spirits" (Repciuc 2024, 153).[5]

Some of the assumptions in the aforementioned texts on the *Chipăruş* ritual invite, at least indirectly, a necessary discussion of what could be called the historical dimension of mask wearing, insofar as such a dimension can indeed be sustained. On the one hand, given the festive context marking the end of the *Old Year*, masks appear, even within the cultural contexts in which they are displayed, as rather exceptional objects: they are associated with "overturned" roles (Mihăescu 2001), or with a "caricature" of the real world (Ştiucă 2001). Across generations, masks reproduce meanings associated with their mythical ancestors (Prut 2001, 11-2), which may also echo the "temporal return" of the ancestral spirits to the world of the living (Repciuc 2024, 153).

On the other hand, the same masks are understood as resulting from what the anthropologist Franz Boas referred to (1896, 4) as a "process of culture-stage development" moving from "protection from hostile spirits" to the "commemoration of deceased persons," and then to the "theatrical performance of mythological incidents." Re-enacted to mark the eternal renewal of time in the contest between the *Old Year* and the *New Year*, or mobilised within funeral ceremonies, masks retain a historical dimension in their very functioning. In

the Romanian ethnography of masks, Boas' sequence is reproduced in terms of the "magical transfiguration of primitive rites," followed by the "playful transfiguration of mask dancing in family traditions and calendar feasts," and finally by the "dramatic transfiguration from the folkloric theatre" (Vulcănescu 1970).

Historical, rather than purely spiritual hypostases of masks also reflect changes in mask morphology, including the replacement of hunter masks by those representing herders and farmers, and later craftsmen and traders, alongside masks of warriors, priests, and headmen (Vulcănescu 1970). Further interpretations concern, in the case of Moldavian *căiuți*, "little horses," "carnival figures for warriors and riders of the past" (Știucă 2001, 15), as well as "the domestication of goats," in contrast with the wild nature of the stags, as represented by corresponding masks in Romanian folk traditions (S. Ciubotaru [2017] *apud* Repciuc 2024, 167).

As noted above, the centuries-old character of the *Chipăruș* dance in Nereju village, as suggested by Henry H. Stahl, is itself a historical inference that goes beyond the funeral and the private circumstances of the *Uncheși*'s performance, to point instead to the deeper cultural survival of a "pagan mystery" within the norms of a Christian burial practice.

In retrospect, Romanian ethnologists generally agree on the transitional nature of masks and mask-wearing—not only at the level of micro-social and genealogical rites associated with funerals and the winter festive cycle, but also, and perhaps more importantly, as part of an enduring historical trajectory of a community's patterns of representation. In their symbolic functions, masks are transformed, of course, but this process is not linear, as it does not simply mirror more or less clearly defined stages of human history.

In other words, Boasian "spirits," also present in Romanian traditions of wearing masks throughout the winter holidays, are still active today and not only in the distant past of the "magical transfiguration of primitive rites." The "theatrical" traits of what has been interpreted as a later degradation of mask ceremonies may have been a cultural property or constant characteristic of mask-bearers, irrespective of their productive roles of "hunters," "herders," "farmers," "craftsmen," "traders," and so on. The funeral function of commemorating the dead within family or genealogical groups can hardly be chronologically separated from either the "magic" of "primitive" people or the "dramaturgy" of folk cultures.[6]

Mask makers and their work: records from two research projects in the 2000s in Romania

In 2002-2003 and in 2005, we conducted two research campaigns among several categories of folk artisans in Romania including ceramists, icon painters, makers of wind instruments, weavers, and woodcarvers (Constantin 2003, 2007). Among such craftsmen, we focused on mask makers in the Moldavian areas of Neamț, Suceava, and Vrancea. They produced masks from wood and sheepskin (ȘT and PL, Nereju, Vrancea County), cloth, wool, and sheepskin (IA, Timișești, Neamț County), wood (TE, Suceava city), and corn leaves (AG, Tomești, Iași County).

Except for TE, who says that his parents were carpenters, but that he is self-taught in carving his wooden masks, the other artisans have inherited their craft from family members (father and grandfather: ȘT[7]; father-in-law: PL; uncle: IA). Most of our interlocutors began learning the craft during childhood, at the age of 12 (ȘT, PL) or 14 (IA). Today, they work together within their own nuclear families, with relatives assisting them in various activities such as processing sheepskin (IA's wife), painting masks (AG's daughter), carving stylized

wooden spoons and cheese patterns (PL's wife), and weaving traditional rugs on a loom (ŞT's wife).

Beyond learning and pursuing mask making within the family, which provides them an important basis for claiming the traditional rootedness of their work, all the above-mentioned craftsmen are connected with public institutions to assist and promote folk culture. Such institutions include the Sibiu Artisan Association (PL), the Focşani Folk Arts School (ŞT), the Iaşi Ethnographic Museum (AG), the Iaşi Artisan Association (TE), the Târgul Neamţ *Nemţeana* Association and the Neamţ County Centre for Folk-Art Creation (IA).

With the support of such organizations, but relying above all on their own skills to build a clientele for the artefacts they produce, the mask makers included in our study are present at a series of folk fairs organised by ethnographic museums in cities such as Bucharest and Sibiu (ŞT, PL, IA), Oradea (IA, PL), Iaşi (TE, ŞT), Câmpulung Moldovenesc, Slatina, and Suceava (AG), Galaţi (ŞT, PL), Braşov and Caransebeş (PL), and Târgu-Mureş, Sighişoara, and Bistriţa (TE).[8] One of them, IA, was selected by a jury appointed by the Romanian Ministry of Culture to take part in the Folklife Festival organised by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. in 1999.[9]

When asked about the authorship of his work, IA argues that he does not need to sign his artefacts, as he relies on a wide public recognition of his craftsmanship and of the "particular vision" of the masks he makes, which distinguishes them from masks produced in other areas. By contrast, TE regularly signs his work to demonstrate that, although the masks he produces belong to the broader category of folk traditions, he also sees himself as an "innovator" of masks, especially because "he likes to make what he feels, not what is imposed on him." Although AG fears that some counterfeits could affect her rights as maker, she has not yet attached any descriptive label to the masks she makes.

The mask making process

Among our interlocutors, mask making is experienced as part of local ethnographic traditions, although the boundaries of these traditions are not always clearly defined. While artisans agree on the ancient, inherited, and authentic traits of tradition, they also uphold the role of personal "innovation" (TE) and "discovery" (AG) in developing their own working techniques. As a way of reconciling cultural heritage with the individual imprint of craftsmanship, modifications in the making of artefacts are expected "not to change their structure or form" (PL).

In obtaining their wood, especially willow, poplar, and linden, due to their malleability, but also alder and sycamore, mask makers from Vrancea ask for permission from the foresters who guard the woods belonging to the rural community (*obşte*). For his part, TE relates his specialization in woodcarving to the rich woods of the area of Suceava area where he was born and which also allowed his father and grandfather to pursue careers as carpenters. As such, TE shows that he makes use of the wood both in his artistic work and in making furniture. By contrast, IA does not use wood in making his masks because, as he claims, wooden masks are not characteristic of the traditions of his native area of Neamţ.

ŞT and PL complain about the difficulties they face in sourcing sheepskin, as they need the wool from the ţurcana sheep breed, which is longer than the wool of the *merino* breed and is more commonly available in Nereju. PL even learned tanning in a neighbouring village in



The artisan Toader Egnătescu in his workshop. Screenshot from the film "Prelucrarea lemnului–meșter Toader Ignătescu" [Woodwork–the artisan Toader Ignătescu], Centrul Cultural Bucovina, Suceava, 2022, min. 3:20.
Online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ws1_0--0NU, last accessed in October 2026.



Wooden masks carved by the artisan Toader Egnătescu. Photography retrived from the artisan's Facebook page, published on 7th of May 2026.
Online at: https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=4677978959096799&set=pb.100006542237482.-2207520000&type=3,
last accessed in October 2026.



Mask made by the artisan Pavel Lupaşc.
Photography retrived from the artisan's Facebook page, published on 19th of December 2022.
Online at: https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1589860044820672&set=pb.100013900746594.-2207520000&type=3, last accessed in October 2026.



The artisan Pavel Lupaşc with his masks. Photography retrieved from the online journal Ziare.Com, the article (with no author) "Măștile populare devenite celebre peste hotare, pe cale de dispariție. Meșterul din Vrancea care se luptă pentru conservarea tradiției" [Traditional masks that have become famous abroad are on the verge of disappearing. The craftsman from Vrancea who is fighting to preserve the tradition], published on 30th of August 2020.
Online at: https://ziare.com/cultura/stiri-cultura/mastile-populare-devenite-celebre-peste-hotare-pe-cale-de-disparitie-mesterul-din-vrancea-care-se-lupta-pentru-conservarea-traditiei-1627989?uord=MT%3D_WbCvgdR%3DYB5glj4yHRMSTrZxnQusXWY/N%3DOuKGC4h8CiNCSrID2JJRBhQdGYqBRyTswhU%3Db7SWKvgpB2MDerVmoyIkJFHJNxlAy/MWY/YkWrIrfjgdRuMSG7U249IxQVTrBC, last accessed in October 2026.

order to process the sheepskin in the making of his masks. According to ŞT, goatskin is also suitable for mask making given its longer wool and stretched fibres.

AG openly acknowledges that the corn leaves she uses in her craft would actually are in fact "banal," as they are easily available, and yet they prove versatile enough to be used for "everything," including her own masks. She practically adapted the older technique of making rustic floor mats (*rogojini)* from cornhusks to the weaving and shaping of wet leaves into masks and puppets.

In the home workshops of PL and ŞT, once the required wood has sufficiently dried, which may take up to two years, mask-making begins by splitting the piece of wood and hollowing it out with a chisel (*cuţitoaie*), to obtain the so-called *doage* (staves approximately 30 centimetres long). The face of the mask is then sketched in pencil onto this piece of wood, including its various traits and expressions which will be discussed below. According to TE, as long as traditional tools such as the saw, the hatchet and the chisel continue to be used in crafts, as he does, tradition is not "betrayed" even when it is interpreted in a "personal manner," as in his case.

As a result, artisans use penknives to carve some of the mask features, such as the mouth, the eyes, and the teeth, while the nose is shaped separately and attached afterwards. Another stage is dyeing the mask, which occurs before the goat horns and wool are attached. PL says he has to pay nearly one-fifth of the price he charges for a finished mask for a single pair of horns.

Alongside sheepskin facial masks, which are said to be lighter to wear when dancing, one of our interlocutors, IA, also makes more elaborate masking ensembles representing animals such as the *Goat* and the *Bear* at life size.

Based on their lifelong experience in woodcarving (43 years, in IA's case), the interviewed craftsmen are able to complete a mask in a single day (PL) and have no interest in storing many artefacts. ŞT, for instance, used to send five or six or even 11 masks to his clients. An exception was IA, who once sold 60 masks through the Village Museum in Bucharest. In a personal retrospect, TE claims that, in the 25 years of his craftwork activity, he has produced about 10,000 masks.

Conceptualizing mask making

Without doubt, craftsmen like AG, IA, PL, ŞT, and TE are deeply rooted in the ethnographic traditions of the regions where they were born and continue to work. They ground the masks they make within the figurative arts of Vrancea, Neamţ, and Suceava. Almost unanimously, our interlocutors argue that folk masks (including their own) are basically intended "to drive away evil spirits" (ŞT), "to chase away the evil" (IA), and "to instil goodness" (AG). In association with the winter festive cycle, masked groups taking part in the *Goat* and the *Bear* processions are still reported in Moldavian villages (IA), sometimes comprising as many as 60 participants (ŞT). According to PL, key details of the *Chipăruş* ritual as practiced during the interwar period are clearly remembered.

> When I was 5 [in 1969], a grandmother of mine died. I still bear in mind how some masked people came and carried her out of the house. They mourned her, and then lit fire [in the courtyard]. The masked people would break the fences, and they... those *Elders* also used to get drunk... They also took children and threw them over that fire... as the children were not allowed to be there.

Mask making is, in principle, understood as *folk* and *traditional* because it is felt to be embedded in the culture of one's native area (IA) and to represent "Romanian peasants, in general" (AG). Moreover, such a craft is not conceived as a purely imaginative work, nor does it primarily reflect hypostases of otherness or supernatural beings. In shaping their artefacts, as a creative process of *închipuire*, our informants are simply playing with images from their own everyday world—imagery in which they participate and which is, therefore, to an important extent, self-representational.

Indeed, first and foremost, the craftsmen's iconography draws on figures from their familiar social world, including *Moşi* ("Elders"), also called *Uncheşi* ("Uncles"), and *Babe* ("Old Women") (ŞT, PL, IA, AG), as well as *Flăcăi* ("Young Men") (IA). While such figures are represented in their generational framework, other masks refer to roles within the social structure, such as *Călugăr* ("Monk") and *Preot* ("Priest"), or some that struggle with ethnic marginalisation, such as *Ursari* and *Ursărițe*, who represent members of the local Roma population (ŞT). "These are human masks!" as PL puts it: portraits of ordinary people recognizable from the public interaction of Moldavian villagers.

Another repertoire of masks portrays what might be called deviant characters or personalities such as *Omul Rău* ("Evil Man") or *Omul cu două fețe* ("Double-faceted" alias "Liar") (IA). TE's variety of wooden artefacts expresses rather histrionic appearances of what he calls a "fairly aggressive human psychology." Among the same nonconformist masks one could notice *Păcală*, the trickster popular hero whom AG draws from widespread Romanian folk tales, as well as images of *Încornoratul* ("Horned Devil") (PL, IA).

The third category of masking representations consists of animal figures drawn from the local environment, such as the *Goat* (AG) and the *Bear* [IA], which are frequently used during local winter ceremonies, and from more distant and exotic settings such as AG's *Maimuța* ("Monkey"), which has no ritual function.

It must be emphasised that, in their work, artisans do not arrange their masks into the types or categories we described above in a positivistic manner. ŞT and PL attach horns collected from local rams and goats to some of their wooden masks. Such masks are in a sense composite, since they combine anthropomorphic traits of the *Uncheşi*, with their "Elder" faces, with zoomorphic ones such as wool and horns from domesticated animals. At the same time, while ceremonial masks are generally seen as Christian in character (AG), considering the Christmas ritual context in which many of them are displayed, the animal horns instead depict or suggest the dark figure of the "Horned Devil." The horns are said to grow out of the otherwise human physiognomy of such masks, as if they accentuate an evil development in someone's nature. The coalescence of such traits drawn from different existential regimes is perhaps an archaic technique of mask-making as a synthesis between the human and "more-than-human."[10]

Beyond any thematic typology of roles in the production of contemporary mask makers in Moldavia,[11] we may note the manner in which, through their different artefacts, our interlocutors seem to somehow explore different levels of understanding the human condition as such. Galleries of masks representing ordinary people, conflicting characters, and animal figures might, from an external perspective, be contemplated as a natural-history exhibition suggestive of evolutionary thinking. The question is, then: mask-making in the 2000s Moldavia is indeed "evolutionary"? Or, in other words, do masks provide evidence of folk taxonomies with a proto-scientific relevance? If not, how else can we explain the types of objects described above?

Instead of answering these questions for now, let us return to our earlier description of the mask-makers' work in terms of self-representation. In their village workshops and in





Ana Grunzu, at an Artisan's fair organised in 2019.
Photography retrieved from: Buculei (2019).



Dolls made from corn husks by Ana Grunzu. Photography retrieved from: Buculei (2019).



The artisan Șerban Terțiu with his masks. Photography retrieved from the Facebook page: "Măști tradiționale" [Traditional masks], published on 14th of July 2023. Online at: https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=755750109889530&set=a.755750059889535, last accessed in October 2026.



08. Mask made by the artisan Șerban Terțiu. Photography retrieved from the Facebook page: "Măști tradiționale" [Traditional masks], published on 8th of October 2018. Online at: https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2151435785114276&set=pb.100063636440826.-2207520000, last accessed in October 2026.



The artisan Ioan Albu and his masks. Photography retrieved from the Facebook page:
"Ținutul Neamțului, locuri de legendă și povești" [Neamț Region: legendary places and tales], published at 26th of November 2016.
Online at: https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1152395701510560&set=a.1152394301510700, last accessed in October 2026.



Masks made by the artisan Ioan Albu. Photography retrieved from the Facebook page:
"Ținutul Neamțului, locuri de legendă și povești" [Neamț Region: legendary places and tales], published at 26th of November 2016.
Online at: https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1152394951510635&set=a.1152394301510700, last accessed in October 2026.

the folk fairs they attend in Romanian cities to sell their artefacts, our research participants are not only curators of their traditions, nor do they neutrally bear the cultural heritage of their ethnographic regions by making new artefacts that reproduce older ones. As we have already seen, they accept and promote innovation and change in their work.

A primary source for such creativity is "inspiration from one's native area" (IA) or simply "curiosity" (AG). Folktales, in particular, provide these mask makers with figures and themes that the craftsmen need to shape their ideas (*Old Christmas*, AG; *Omul cu multe fețe de apă, vânt, foc și tunet,* ["Multifaceted Man of Water, Wind, Fire, and Thunder"], IA). In each case, tradition is neither entirely forgotten, nor piously reproduced. Rather, it is continuously expanded through the artisans' own contribution to established patterns of execution and ornamentation themes, which they acknowledge as points of departure rather than immobile models in the practice of their crafts.

Another mask maker (TE) claims that the "[folk] art relies on someone's taste and insight into the real meaning [of things], not on [their] reproduction." As shown above, our informant's "taste" and "insight" lead him to perceive, or perhaps uncover, hostile physiognomies in society, which are not necessarily peasant ones. This takes TE once again beyond the original setting of his "wooded region." Unlike AG, who considers cornhusks to be "that raw material suited for representing peasants [in mask making]," in TE's carving wood is actually devoid of an exclusive consubstantiality with the rural world. In the same context, we may remember IA's argument that it is not wood, but sheepskin, that is distinctive of mask making in Neamț area.

In terms of both inspiration and the materiality of their work, our interlocutors know where different types of masks traditionally originate, and which environmental resources are most appropriate for making them. Such knowledge appears to be an important prerequisite for the complex process of shaping masks and associating them with particular social roles. Once these cultural and natural basics of performing crafts have proven to be efficient, artisans may expand their own handwork from simply "keeping ancient tradition alive, from father-to-son" (ȘT), as "it was upon the times of one's childhood" (PL), towards personal "rooting" (TE), "inventiveness" (IA), and "discovering" (AG). Through this process, a new tradition or working style may emerge.

As regards contemporary mask making in Moldavian regions, self-representation arises, in our view, from the encounter between tradition, understood as a collective folk-art heritage transmitted across generations, and individual interest, discovery, revelation, insight, taste, and ingenuity. ȘT, for instance, inherits from his father the template of the *Uncheși* ("Old-Men") masks, which in theory should align with the funeral ambience of the *Chipăruș* ritual. However, in his own workshop, ȘT produces not only sad masks with mouths curved downwards, but also joyful masks whose lips are curved upwards.

Likewise, PL provides his masked characters with "Old Men" traits, such as wrinkles, and deepens their cheeks to make them resemble the physiognomy of an elderly person. At the same time, as he claims to work with human facial expressivity, our interlocutor seeks to instil in some of his masks a "happy and surprised" look, "as if they were astonished by something." PL says that his masks may be made either with "simple eyes" or with "eyelids." In turn, alongside his own "Elder" catalogue and the masks of the "Devil" commonly worn in the villages of his area of Neamț, IA says that he has "invented" masks bearing two pairs of horns. Above all, such innovative artefacts reflect IA's "particular view" of mask making.

Two other craftsmen (AG and TE) similarly assert their originality in (pre)figuring characters like the "Old Men" and "Old Women," as inspired by the local peasantry (AG) or in "fantastic imagining" that develops out of the forms of the wood itself (TE). As already noted,

our informants equally choose their *personae* from folk tales, which once again confirms the extent to which innovation in mask-making remains rooted in the local ethnographic and folkloric background.

To conclude, in practicing their craft, mask makers from Suceava, Neamț, and Vrancea, do not only safeguard and perpetuate their traditions, but also enrich them with ideas and life experiences drawn from the contemporary world rather than from collective cultural memory. When conceiving and creating their traditional masks, our informants actually endow them with the habits, manners, and values of their fellow villagers, co-ethnics, or compatriots. They also represent traits of their own identities, whether generational, occupational, or emotional.

Mask making in artisans' interpretation

What is the artisans' inner "drive" that mobilizes both their devotion to the folk traditions in which they were born, and their innovative or idiosyncratic approach to the art of mask making? In general, our interlocutors are quite reserved about revealing such individual motivations for their craftsmanship and artefacts, preferring instead to invoke the anonymous and established character of ethnographic culture, or (when speaking about their work) to emphasize the results of the adjustments and inputs to the crafts they have, in principle, inherited from earlier generations. And yet, the mask makers in this study do sometimes express a degree of reflexivity about various aspects and stages of their craft.

IA (for example) relates the apprenticeship he undertook, as a child, under his uncle's guidance, to an "ambition" he felt at that time. Such an impulse clearly goes beyond the strict conformity with or technical subordination to the traditions of Neamț or other area. Craftsmanship, in this case, is less indebted to what other artisans have done in the past, and appears instead (in IA's words) as a "God's gift." The same mask maker does not accept a relatively common equivalence of folk artefacts, including masks, with "commodities" sold in marketplaces. Instead, he insists on the "beauty" and the "art" dimensions of such objects, and regards them as truly endowed with a "fine-looking exteriority."

Another craftsman (TE) claims that, in the course of creating his masks, he loves "reading the people," particularly since the "would be" physiognomies he produces are meant to incorporate "personal features." In doing so, our informant implicitly argues that "the people who like this kind of art," that is, his clients, believe the masks he makes really reflect something of themselves. Above all, rather than invariably reproducing old or outdated prototypes of folk masks, TE is aware of the importance of leaving his own imprint on the cumulative development of his creative thinking.[12]

For AG, her craft means both "to strive to be a part [of folk tradition]" and "to make something, even if difficult, as a personal commitment." The characters AG creates are said to potentially "insufflate" something of their peasant character to the people, especially townspeople, who observe them. In our informant's terms, "once [such] an artefact is executed, it will follow its own [public] way." As for her own masks, she pleads for their "singular beauty," a quality that stems from her own soul and the spiritual investment she puts into performing her craft. While AG still remembers the "restlessness" she initially felt when attending folk fairs, she admits that "there's room for better" in the branch of artisanship she practices today and that "it is a matter of personal responsibility that compels someone to do his / her work properly."

Assertions such as those above outline the referential framework within which contemporary mask makers operate, one generally situated between two major sources of authorship, God and peasantry, but within which artisans actively intervene with their own "souls," "ambition," "imprint," and, last but not least, "responsibility." The exteriority of a mask, one might say, echoes such subjective traits in their interplay with public perceptions and with the extent to which either a broad clientele or particular connoisseurs agree on the beautiful and genuine attributes of mask making. If, as one of our interlocutors puts it, "reading the people" is a precondition of (pre)figuring the image of someone, an ancestor, an "evil man," or a "bear," we might equally assign the same interpretive exercise, and acuity, to visitors to a folk fair or a craft workshop, whenever they observe, evaluate, compare, remember, or simply recognize themselves in the artisans' creations.

A few conclusions

What we have previously inquired in terms of the historical "stages" of mask functionality, as reconstructed evolutionarily in anthropological and ethnological literature, may now be compared with the presumptive levels of understanding human condition among craftsmen, as artisan masks are representations of regular people, conflicting characters, and animal figures. Protection against hostile spirits, commemorations of the dead, and theatrical representations interweave with each other in synchrony, rather than unfolding in separate and successive chronologies. Similarly, rather than expressing folk-art correspondences of any retrospective "natural history," masks of "Elders," "Evil Men," and "Bears" simultaneously compose intersecting galleries of self-representational roles and faces, together with composite reflections of the "human" and "more-than-human" regimes of existence.

Beyond any "ritual process," "ethos," and "worldview,"[13] contemporary artisans evoke their traditional heritage in search of a broader recognition of their craftsmanship and the artefacts displayed than village community alone can provide. From this perspective, mask makers' approach is not primarily conservative; it is, so to speak, entrepreneurial. Indeed, ancestral masks become mercantile insofar as artisanship, including mask making, is now pursued with an entrepreneurial spirit[14] that brings together craftsmen and tourists, rural private workshops and urban folk fairs, long-established traditions and changing conjunctures…

In the ethnography of contemporary villagers in Moldavian regions such as Neamț, Suceava, and Vrancea, mask making and mask wearing clearly contain elements of historicity. Although masked performers still appear during winter holidays celebration, *Chipăruș* folklore is only reminiscent of what it was reported to have been one hundred years ago—a funerary ceremony. Mask-displaying traditions like the "Goat Dance" or the "Bear Dance" have declined in frequency and may appear bizarre when still staged in some rural or urban contexts. And yet, such removal of sheepskin or wooden masks from their original functions does not render them simply anachronistic, since they primarily reproduce or *închipuie* "selves," rather than contingent "materialities" of secular experiences of the world.

NOTES

1. In his monograph on the traditions of Christmas carols in Romania, Petru Caraman refers to the "*Walking of the masks*... often in association with the [New Year's Eve] *plugușor* or the little plough ritual, usually within the performance of New Year carols" (Caraman 1983: 8). See also C. Mihăescu (2001, 8) on the "confrontation of Old Year *vs*. New Year (as the main characters in Moldavian folk theatre") as well as N. Ştiucă (2001, 10) on the "Christmas-carol performers of the Birth of the Saviour mystery throughout Romania."

2. Nereju is a village in the Vrancea region (southern Moldavia, in central-eastern Romania). According to the latest Romanian census (2021), Nereju has a population of 4240 inhabitans, of whom 96,7% are of Romanian ethnicity and 96,25% are of the Orthodox Christian faith (see https://www.recensamantromania.ro/rezultate-rpl-2021/rezultate-definitive-caracteristici-etno-culturale-demografice).

3. "In the *Chipăruș* custom from Vrancea, masks are used during funerals [...] echoing perhaps the Dacians' attitude towards death" (Mihăescu 2001, 8); "the ritual meaning of the *Chipăruș* dance, that of marking the separation of the dead from the living and their integration into the uninterrupted chain of the afterlife, is still encoded in the configuration of contemporary masks" (Ştiucă 2001, 18).

4. In Ion Cherciu (2017, 140-1)

5. In approaching the ancestor worship as structured "according to cyclical time," Gheorghiță Geană points out that "[a]mong Romanians, the main form of the ancestor cult is the ceremony of *moși*," arguing that "[f]rom their unseen realm, ancestors play an active role in the world of the living" (Geană 2005, 353).

6. Boas' reconstruction of mask functionality along a "process of culture-stage development" and Vulcănescu's "transfigurations" of masks in "primitive," "family," and "folk" contexts are equally indebted to J. G. Herder's philosophical reconstruction of a "pre-historical" stage of cultural indistinction in the evolution of humankind. This stage precedes the "non-historical" stage of peoples (*Volker*), characterised by their particular languages, traditions, and ethnic character (*Volksgeist*), and, finally, a third stage corresponding to the history of modern civilization (Adams 1998, 278).

7. ŞT's father, Pavel Terțiu, who was born in Nereju village, in 1899, is described as having been "renowned" for his mask-making craft, which he had learned from the village "old men" who used to produce masks for the "local customs of life cycle" (Vlăduțiu 1981, 229-30). Both the raw materials, sheepskin and wood, and the anthropomorphic typology of masks have been preserved and developed by ŞT. Our interlocutor also acknowledges the contribution of his grandfather, Ioan Amăriei, to the local tradition of mask making.

8. Mask making might be differentiated into "main," "secondary," and "tertiary" client types, corresponding to "local-and-regional," "national," and "international" levels, rather than treating all clients as constituting a single "target" audience for their artefacts. The "main" type of clientele would include compatriots travelling abroad and foreign tourists visiting Romania. The "secondary clientele" consists of patrons of "folk" restaurants and shops, as well as folk-music bands and fiddlers. The "tertiary" client type is represented, to a lesser extent, by "collectors" and "connoisseurs of folk art" (Constantin 2009, 151-2).

9. On the participation of more than 100 craftsmen, musicians, and dancers from various ethnographic areas of Romania in the 1999 Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C., see Constantin (2014).

10. Speaking of an "ancient anthropological matrix" of "natures-cultures" (rather than of human society alone), Bruno Latour (1993: 107) reminds us that traditional cultures have always integrated "natural" elements from vegetal, animal, or meteorological "kingdoms" into their mythological and philosophical accounts. The emergence of "multispecies ethnography" (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010) and the debates it generated around issues such as the "intersubjectivity" in exploring the limits of ethnography when issues such as "othering of animals" (Madden 2014) and "more-than-human" representations (McLauchlan 2021) are central to the (re)discovery of such "ontological" unity of the world. As to the paleontological significances of figurative behavior in prehistory, see Leroi-Gourhan's interpretation (1993, 395) of the "sorcerer" from the Upper Paleolithic Cave of Les Trois Frères, in which mural painting details, such as horses, ibex, deer, or reindeer morphology, blend together within a human body, to make a "perfectly symbolical synthetic creature."

11. Across Romania in the 1960s, Romulus Vulcănescu identifies a number of 73 out of 263 ceremonial masked troupes representing "important historical occupations" such as "shepherds, ploughmen, hunters, blacksmiths, healers, monks, priests, soldiers"; masks of saints and demons are also mentioned, whereas "in the case of 25 bands, anthropomorphic funerary masks, which figure the ancestors of the family or village community, maintain their place in the hierarchy of symbolic values" (Vulcănescu 1970, 68).

12. TE's arguments basically describe, on the one hand, how an individual's personal traits are inspirational in the mask-making process though which his or her physiognomy is (pre)figured, and, on the other hand, how our interlocutor prioritizes his own imprint over folk-mask prototypes. Such imaginative and innovative potential of "conceptual thinking" has been attributed to human cognitive behaviour since the beginnings of tool making in prehistory: "People who made tools like [...] axes must have been able to form in their minds images of the purposes they were working towards. Human culture in all its diversity is the result of this capacity for *conceptual thinking*, but the driving factors in its development are tradition-and-invention" (Oakley 1961).

13. Masking ceremonies, such as the *Chipăruș* ritual, are carried out as a "life experience" consisting of "alternating exposure to structure and *communitas*, and to states and

transitions" (Turner 1991, 97). Likewise, masked ritual performers, including those involved in the *Chipăruș*, reveal their "ethos" as "the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood [...] the underlying attitude toward themselves and their world that life reflects," and still their "worldview" as "their picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society. It contains their most comprehensive ideas of order." (Geertz 1973, 127). However, "ritual process," "ethos," and "worldview" are not historical concepts, but ethnographic ones. As a result, they need, in our case at least, to be related to the "conjunctures" of tourism and folk fairs, in which masks are "lived" differently from their traditional life-cycle contexts.

14. Entrepreneurship in the production of folk masks in Vrancea is described as a "fashion" and "mass-production" phenomenon related to "uninformed amateurs" and to the "merchant nature" of Vrancean people, who have no interest in wearing masks during funeral wakes but only in selling them (Stahl 1981, 373). For an approach to Romanian artisanship as an entrepreneurial enterprise, see Constantin (2007, 2009, 2014).



LIST OF INTERLOCUTORS

IA: Ioan Albu (born 1948); Timișești, Neamț County, Romania.

TE: Toader Egnătescu (born 1957); Suceava, Suceava County, Romania.

AG: Ana Grunzu (born 1955); Tomești, Iași County, Romania.

PL: Pavel Lupaşc (born 1964); Nereju village, Vrancea County, Romania.

ŞT: Şerban Terţiu (born 1958); Nereju village, Vrancea County, Romania.

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