

## Traditional Crafts: Incentive of Sustainable Rural Development. The Contribution of the ASTRA Museum

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### Abstract

Although there is a renewed interest in contemporary society in the simple and natural life in rural areas, the rural intangible heritage, including the traditional crafts, is slowly disappearing. Craftsmen get old and the younger generations seem not to be too open to continuing the craftsmanship. Therefore, stimuli of various types are necessary to action for the revival of traditional crafts. The present contribution presents the strategy of ASTRA Museum, one of the most important open-air museums in Romania, regarding the sustainable development of traditional crafts. It argues how a museum could educate and stimulate cultural tourism through crafts, but also determine and support entrepreneurship in the domain of traditional crafts.

### Keywords

Traditional crafts; sustainable rural development; cultural tourism; craftsmanship; ASTRA Museum.

### Introduction

Traditional crafts are essential to the development of high-quality offerings in the area of cultural tourism. In fact, cultural tourism cannot exist without this component, especially in rural areas. The major challenge is to develop the appropriate infrastructure, create markets, and encourage craftsmen to develop quality products associated with activities that are open to the general public.

Since 2012, the ASTRA Museum has developed a new approach to its mission and vision. Up until 2012, the museum had focused on expanding its collections, restoration campaigns, and monument reconstruction. However, since 2012, we have been implementing programs aimed at valorizing, communicating, and mediating the tangible and intangible heritage, developing opportunities for source communities, building bridges between the museum, the community, and our visitors, as well as ensuring that the community and our visitors assume the museum as their own. We have focused on developing high-quality programs to communicate and mediate our heritage. All these materialized in participative cultural education and animation projects, themed fairs, and craft workshops for all visitor categories.

The two years of the COVID-19 pandemic and the difficult international context have prompted the inhabitants of highly developed urban areas to look for recreation and leisure in rural areas across Romania. An important attraction is the intangible heritage, including traditional crafts. But craftsmanship tends to disappear in the past years. At the moment we are still doing well in terms of the number of craftsmen who live in the rural areas of Romania, be they mountainous, hilly, or lowland areas. The problem is their advancing age and that the younger generation is not inclined to take up crafts, as it cannot perceive any economic benefits. They would need stimuli to continue the traditional crafts. The outlining of a common policy for future funding guidelines for rural areas by the relevant ministries would generate more concrete options for the development of a business based on heritage-related resources.

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### Considerations on the sustainability of traditional crafts

Concerning sustainable development through crafts, the first aspect to consider is the materials used by the artisans. In most cases, the material is renewable, readily available, and located close to the artisan's workshop. The usefulness of craft products is easy to demonstrate, but the intervention of marketing and the initiation of artisans into cultural entrepreneurship would lead to a more practical approach on their part. In 90% of cases, handicrafts have served and are serving a practical purpose, but at the moment many are used as decorative objects.



The hospitality industry would be the main beneficiary of these wares, whether we are talking about cooking and serving utensils made of ceramics, cast iron, or copper, or about textiles used for meals or, on a small scale (guesthouses, small hotels, or family businesses) bed covers, blankets, woolen bed covers, wall-hangings, and floor carpets. In this way, wooden tools used traditionally in rural gastronomy, made by local craftsmen using various types of wood, can bring small-scale contributions to local development, especially in the mountain regions threatened by the massive depopulation of the last 20 years. In fact, by incorporating elements from rural traditions and adapting them to the needs of contemporary society, to the challenges engendered by the pandemic, the international context, and climate change, we can sustainably build the future of society.

The great challenge, from my point of view, is how can we educate society to understand these values that are so easy to embrace and implement to build a better future. How do we make those who have the knowledge, and skills, realize that they are sitting on a goldmine that can secure the future of their offspring? Before analyzing and promoting the contribution of traditional crafts to sustainable development, I believe it would be necessary to help the existing human resource in the field of crafts to understand and acknowledge their value to society. Then it would be necessary to educate society on the importance of the practical value of handicrafts. These two issues are closely intertwined!



Local, county and national authorities could work towards accomplishing the aims of the SDGs, build clear development strategies to this end, and require the relevant institutions to break out of the traditional mode and promote this resource that still exists in large numbers, by positioning each cultural event on the market of quality cultural products.

### **ASTRA Museums supports the sustainable development of traditional crafts**

The ASTRA Museum has understood the importance of this role since 2012. It has started to play this role and has provided examples of good practice. The craftsman is no longer placed on a pedestal as an exhibit, but is the star of cultural events, with the museum specialists ensuring communication with the public through a discourse that provides detailed information, mediation, and interpretation, thus succeeding in creating a bridge between the artisan and the visitor, who is eager to "get a taste" of the craftsman's abilities.



Since 1983, the ASTRA Museum has been organizing the *Folk Creators' Fair* on the weekend closest to Saint Mary's Day. Every year over 200 folk craftsmen participate and offer their products for sale. The quality and originality of the products are verified by the ASTRA Museum's team of specialists. It is the main event held under the institution's brand, and also attracts the highest number of visitors, with around 12 thousand people stepping across the threshold of the Museum during the 3-4 days of the event.

Additional support has been the setting up of a shop managed by the museum through which craftsmen can sell their wares. In the last decade, the number of craftsmen has fallen, as some of them have passed, but diminished public interest in their products, the tax regime, and the appearance of similar products of dubious origin have also played a role. At the same time, the unfair competition practiced by some suppliers, the mixing of traditional and imported products, and how the local authorities perceive their value in the community, have led to a decline in the volume of handicraft sales and reluctance on the part of the younger generation to continue the family tradition develop themselves by learning a craft.

The challenge of reviving craftsmanship and stimulating the demand for traditionally-made objects has been taken up by the ASTRA Museum, which, over time, has developed new events to promote crafts and craftsmen. The first event of national significance is the *Young Craftsmen's Olympics*, attended by more than 300 children, from primary school, lower secondary school, and high school students from all over Romania and the Republic of Moldova. The crafts presented are specific to their areas of origin and are certified by ASTRA Museum specialists, both in terms of the tools used, working techniques, material, and the story behind the object.



In recent years, we have also introduced elements of cultural entrepreneurship, allowing artisans to sell their handicrafts, use the museum shop to display and sell their wares and become involved in the ASTRA museum's education and cultural animation programs while receiving a fee and benefitting from enhanced communication with the visiting public. We intend to further develop the entrepreneurial component, open up a market for craftsmen, and help them understand the value of the items they make and the role the products play in the area of sustainability. We help them understand that through craftsmanship, they can develop a beneficial business in the future. We make them aware of lines of non-reimbursable funding designed to help build specific infrastructure and to turn the craft into a business.

Our institution invests a considerable amount of money into the organization of the fairs and various events, providing accommodation and meals for the participants, as well as ensuring communication with the public. We do not stop at a press release and a few posts on the social media page, rather we invite influencers and other professionals who aggressively promote the event online. Communication is not just about introducing the participant, the craft, and the area of origin, but also focuses on the current practical value of the items. In addition to this investment, we assign qualified staff to provide artisans with training or additional information should they need it. The presentation of related activities to the public attracts almost double the number of beneficiaries, who interact with the Olympiad participants, socialize and purchase their handicrafts. As far as young people are concerned, it is a way of encouraging them and confirming that certain crafts are in demand on the market and can always generate medium and long-term financial stability.



Another event, in fact, an annual program with a 6-month duration, is *Animă ASTRA (Animate ASTRA)*. The program is focused on the presence of craftsmen from the area of origin in the museum's households, and on holding crafting workshops curated by specialized staff (museographer, curator, restorer, museum educator, referents) in which the visiting public can also get involved. In this way, the public can understand the household in the museum, its function in the locality of origin, what it has to offer in the context of the outdoor exhibition and how the craftsman tells the story of the household, as well as his own story. S/he talks about his tools, the working technique, the material used, and the practical value of the item in the context of the 21st century.

The craftsman is paid by the institution, is provided with accommodation and transport, and is free to sell the products he has made, but above all, s/he receives encouragement and support in the development of his entrepreneurial spirit. This creates an opportunity for the craftsman, but also for the future of the craft.

Indeed, in Sibiu county, following a screening campaign, we have identified approx. 274 craftsmen who produce items exclusively for their own use or for neighbors or acquaintances. The maintenance of museum households has become more efficient through the incorporation of specific onsite activities, just like with any inhabited house, the material of the existing constructions is likely to be more durable if there is a daily activity. At the same time, we promote craftsmen and crafts that can be placed on the market. Whether we are talking about gifts, household or domestic items, products that can be put to use in the hospitality industry, clothing, or decoration items, all these are not promoted out of inertia, but rather after discovering the needs of the consumers. The program includes joiners, potters, weavers, woodworkers, and carpenters who spoke about their craft and its usefulness. Some of the pieces that were crafted are sold to the public and some are purchased by the institution as props, mostly used in the museum's cultural-educational offerings.



Another approach to the promotion and dissemination of information related to crafts is demonstrated in the event *Beautiful Ceramic, Useful*. Potters from Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria offer ceramic products, and participate in workshops open to the public, while highlighting the gastronomic component, to emphasize the usefulness of their products in today's world. We are not talking about items that conform to a specific pattern, but items that meet the market's expectations, products adapted to the public's wishes that feature color palettes and decorations inspired by traditional motifs, a normal evolutionary stage that reflects the demands of the customers. The potters are

prompted by the institution's museographers to describe the technique employed, the tools, the practical benefits of the product, how to use and maintain it, and the gastronomic recipe specific to their area of origin. The members of the public attend and actively participate in the event, with specialist staff facilitating communication between them and the craftsmen.



Each year we tackle a different theme, while also looking to somehow revive the tradition of some of the lost ceramic centers, their influence in the surrounding area, and the placement of products and new craftsmen on the market of cultural offers generated by cultural institutions, authorities and the private sector. The event also includes an educational component for children. In fact, by playing with clay, they are led to discover the mysteries of pottery and interact with the craftsman and other participants. Actors from the hospitality industry, owners of local gastronomic establishments, and cultural tourism operators are invited to the event, which allows craftsmen to talk and network with them, all with the assistance of museum specialists.

The *Potters' Fair*, a traditional event in Sibiu, brings together over 200 craftsmen from all over Romania. The ASTRA Museum acts as co-organizer and selects the participants. The items must observe the specific pattern of the pottery centers they represent, and the objects with modern infusions are crafted using the same technique, the decorations draw on the characteristic ornamentation style. Year after year we find that potters who are enterprising and able to adapt to the needs and requirements of the public, especially in terms of utility, achieve a good volume of sales. The archaic patterns, too little sought after, represent a challenge for museum specialists when attempting to open up new opportunities for older potters and identify ways to encourage younger ones.

Another type of initiative is represented by workshop exhibitions, which approach traditional crafts from a creative perspective and include modern methods and means of display, design elements that appeal to the new generations, technology use, object-image-text mixtures, elements of sound and light design that seek to offer a different perspective from that of the classic exhibition that is repeated year after year by faithfully recreating the interiors of the houses or annexes based on that which existed at the time of the transfer to the museum, or of findings resulting from archival research. Obviously, overall, the open-air exhibition preserves the classical mode of display, as the museum's role as custodian of authentic pieces is fully understood and recognized by the staff of the institution. However, we strive to educate new generations of museum-goers, by finding new avenues for imparting knowledge, and avoiding monotony, while providing each year a fresh reason to visit the households. As a tool in the mediation of ethnographic heritage, the workshop exhibitions involve the active presence of craftsmen, thus achieving both continued inhabitation and continued use of workspaces, as well as the opportunity to teach the specific skills of each craft. To avoid incidents that could damage heritage objects, most of the props used in such projects are taken from personal or family collections, or made by the craftsmen in the museum itself during the workshops. A relevant example is the exhibition "The Sun in the Plate", organized in the potter's household from Horezu.



To sum up, the ASTRA Museum has set up a special program devoted to the promotion of intangible heritage. We are targeting not only the scientific or cultural component but also the economic one. We are developing projects within the program which highlight the direct and indirect economic benefits, to ensure that crafts have a future. The cultural-educational projects developed by the ASTRA Museum are examples of good practices which can be used in the large-scale development of quality cultural tourism offerings to boost the sector of quality cultural tourism. We provide education in the spirit of the SDGs, both to the asset which is the craftsman, and to the surrounding communities, the authorities, and the developers of cultural and recreational activities.

The ongoing project, ASTRA Centre for Regional Activities and Resources, will regulate access to the market for craftsmen. We are not only talking about craftsmen who make various objects but also about craftsmen who work in construction. At the moment Romania has no legal mechanism to certify their skills. But there is an ongoing accreditation process, following which our institution will be able to certify the skills of the craftsmen, which will give them further opportunities for development, given their level of skills and knowledge. We will also describe the market for both goods and services in the construction sector. Due to the project Center for Activities and Regional Resources - House of Arts, under implementation at the ASTRA Museum, Sibiu will become the first Romanian region to provide cultural heritage training and competence certification services. The products delivered through this project will be in the interest of the urban and rural communities, supporting awareness-raising about the importance of conservation, exploitation, and the assumption of defining heritage values.

We aim to start a process to officially recognize the status of a traditional craftsman by granting the ASTRA Museum an accreditation as a Professional Competence Evaluation and Certification Centre for Professional Competencies acquired in ways other than the formal ones for occupations such as handicraft wood product craftsman, beam mudbrick, stone builder-worker, and carpentry craftsman. Another aim is to transfer entrepreneurial competencies to these categories of people through the ASTRA Museum accredited as a professional training provider so that the craftsmen are prepared for the needs of the contemporary market or to transfer their crafts to future generations by organizing courses for trainers, fair and exhibition organizer, master-trainer.

## Final thoughts

Thus, we are looking at the phenomenon of traditional crafts in relation to the general situation in the labor market, to the tourism phenomenon, as a cultural landmark with identity value, and, obviously, from the standpoint of economic profitability. By observing the evolution of traditional crafts within communities, we can see the major impact that they have had on their development, both from a socio-economic perspective and in terms of the cultural landscape. Perhaps we are even dealing with an ideal example of man's collaboration with nature, which comes about through the judicious use of existing resources that are shaped by the dextrous hand into structures or objects, and that, over time, have molded the tradition itself. Traditional crafts have always been closely linked to the environment, to the proper handling of the environment, and its impact on the shaping of villages and towns. In recent decades, in many villages and towns, due to unfortunate interventions, often misperceived as 'modernization', these connections have become increasingly difficult to identify, if not completely extinct. Whether we are talking about work practices, types of edifices and resources imported from abroad, or people's desire to constantly seek extra comfort or to flaunt their social status in the illusion of gaining greater respect from the community, we are dealing with a break with tradition, a sudden paradigm shift which is, in fact, a reflection of various identity crises, of the misunderstanding of Europeanisation and globalization, of the inability to adapt smoothly to the pace of the new era, which, for several decades, has been a continuous transition towards a new, largely unknown world.



Inaugurated as a folk technical museum, the core exhibition of the Dumbrava Sibiului Open Air Museum sought to highlight the multiple connections between people living in rural communities and crafts. An important focus of the museum is set on the craftsman's workshop. Traditionally, the workshop was part of the household, either separately as an annex, or as one of the rooms of the dwelling. In many cases, especially in the cold season, the space of the workshop overlapped with the living space. This context created an environment that was conducive to the natural transmission of the craft from one generation to the next, as children were introduced from an early age to the tools, the working methods, and the best way to identify and exploit the resource, and were also made aware of the socio-economic impact of the craft. The objects they fashioned, whether carrying practical or aesthetic value, were added to the inventory of

the villagers' homes and were traded at regional fairs, thus establishing a tradition and occasioning a perpetual exchange of models and resources. The village operated as a microcosm that gradually created its own mechanisms to help it function and regulate the social order. ASTRA museum recreates symbolically a traditional village, including its many different workshops. Over time, this representation within the museum has allowed multiple transfers between communities and visitors. On the one hand, it directs the active human resource towards the museum-going public, intending to provide mediation for the open-air exhibition, and on the other hand, it stimulates the visitors to take an interest in, and sometimes even develop an attachment to, local communities that are still keeping traditions alive.



On a different note, we have used the museum's projects to try to replicate as much as possible the natural model of how craftsmen's skills are handed down, through interactive workshops centered around familiarization and discovery, followed by more extensive projects, which help the participants deepen their knowledge and become more familiar with the working methods. Competitions such as the "Traditional Artistic Crafts" Olympiad have also given us an overall picture of how training takes place across the country, both through the direct relationship between the craftsman and his apprentices and through the institutional centers which have preserved traditional working methods. Field research campaigns have enabled us to constantly keep in touch with the active craftsmen, to observe how they have been influenced by changes in the communities and markets, how the new generations have been trained, and see whether the craftsmen's endeavors have found understanding, managing to maintain or save various segments of the cultural landscape, or have ended in failure.

Fortunately, we have often found that, despite the general impression of the disappearance of traditional crafts, it was possible to identify active craftsmen, who carried out their work independently of the community, through their relationship with museums or fairs, or often by responding to orders from outside the village. This has led us to conduct awareness-raising campaigns within the communities, to let the authorities and the locals know that they still possess active resources with the potential to represent the traditions linked to their identity. We held exhibitions and workshops, got involved in organizing local fairs or anniversary events for some communes, had meetings with decision-makers, and produced materials to promote handicrafts, these being just some of the steps taken at a local level. We have strived to explain the direct

relationship between the local resource and the craft or occupation and how this connection, and the exchanges or trade it has generated, has helped develop the community and the cultural landscape over time.

#### **Author biography**

**Ciprian Ștefan** is the general manager of the ASTRA Museum, in Sibiu, Romania, one of the most important and dynamic museums in the country. He is actively involved in all the museum's activities with the communities. Coordinating the activity of identifying craftsmen (carpenters, woodworkers, potters, bricklayers, weavers) in the large ethnographic areas of Romania is among his responsibilities.

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