

Project Report:
the National 'Human Living Treasures'
Programme of the Astra Museum, Sibiu,
Romania

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The city of Sibiu, on the southern margin of the Transylvanian region of Romania, is one of the European Union's two Capitals of Culture for 2007, (sharing the honour with the city of Luxembourg). The 'Astra' National Museum Complex of Sibiu, traces its origins to the 19th century, is one of the most important of its kind in south-eastern Europe. The 96 hectares in area Astra Museum of Traditional Folk Civilization is believed to be the largest open-air museum ('skansen') in Europe, and other museums within the service include the Museum of Transylvanian Civilization, the Franz Binder Museum of Universal Ethnography, the Emil Sigerus Museum of Saxon Ethnography and Folk Art, the projected Museum of the Culture and Civilization of the Romany. Important supporting departments include the Cornel Irimie Memorial Cabinet, Conservation & Restoration, the Astra Film Studio, Marketing and Public Relation Office, and the Astra Publishing House.

Now, in the 21st century, the Astra Museum Complex is recognised as in the vanguard of the development of a new concept of museology, replacing the fetishism of the object of traditional ethnographical museums with a museum of the history of culture and civilisation, serving also as a national academic centre under the patronage of the Romanian Academy for modern interdisciplinary research on the history of Romania's folk civilisations. In

all this the Complex has based its policy and practice on modern theories of the 'living museum' in which the best of traditional folk culture can be preserved, beginning with the establishment with approval of the Romanian Academy of the open air museum of folk technique in 1962. These concepts and policies have been further developed over the years, and particularly since the adoption of the present objectives and priorities in 1980. They have been based on a national system for researching, valorising, strengthening, energising and handing on to the younger generation all the activities concerned with understanding, preserving and promoting the nation's tangible and intangible heritage.

The Astra and other museums in the Complex regard folk techniques as fundamental to an understanding cultural history, and this field is very well represented through the impressive collections of types of tools and equipment, of homesteads and workshops, of artefacts more generally, all representing and illustrating the tangible cultural heritage-the technical and creative gifts and skills of the Romanian people. The Museum Complex also serves as a national centre for the revival and support of the traditional folk crafts, and for folk costume, and for the literary, dance, musical and food folklore of Romania, as well as of the customs associated with traditional festivals and feasts associated with

particular times of the year, with the life cycle of people, with everyday life, and with labour in the fields.

Alongside this ambitious research and collecting programme the Museums are concerned to hand down to new generations and to preserve in authentic forms the cultural traditions and an awareness of the national cultural identity that was totally ignored, damaged or even suppressed during the long period under the Communist system. Now within the European Union, the museums are looking towards comparative trends within Europe. A national centre for making and archiving anthropological documentary films is also part of the Complex. These films focus on recording and explaining traditional culture and civilization, and the Astra Film Studio organises a biennial International Anthropological Film Fest. There is also a national centre for the training of restorers and conservators from all the museums and types of collection.

Because of its rich collections and heritage the Astra Museum of Traditional Folk Civilization is regarded as the 'national Pantheon of folk culture' and thus is able to develop and lead strategic cultural programmes for preserving and safeguarding in the national conscience Romanian cultural identity. At the national level the Astra Museum was the first to establish and develop a national school for education in ethno-identity values, and offers and continuing and convincing demonstration of how to sustain the European and universal values of our history and culture.

The present Director of the Astra National Museum Complex, Prof. Dr. Corneliu Bucur, was one of the experts who took part in a UNESCO Workshop in Venice in February 1989 which developed the initial UNESCO *Recommendations upon the rescuing of the traditional and folk culture* adopted by the November 1989 General Conference of UNESCO, and this policy led in turn to the

Decision concerning "Living Human Treasures", adopted in 1993 by the 142nd session of the UNESCO Executive Board, and then the *Guidelines for the Establishment of National "Living Human Treasures" Systems*.

Since 1990-91 the Astra Museum has adopted a large, well-defined and formally organised system for promoting public recognition across the whole world of the exceptional intangible cultural values of both traditional and contemporary Romanian culture and folk art, and of the other ethnic groups living in present-day Romania. In 2000 UNESCO published a report reviewing the way in which the 1989 Recommendations were being adopted and applied across the Member States of UNESCO around the world. In this review four Asian countries : Japan, Thailand, the Philippines and South Korea were highlighted for their progress in developing intangible cultural heritage programmes, together with just two European countries: France and Romania.

The Romanian system developed at the national level by the Astra Museum in cooperation with many other ethnographic and folk art museums around the country has a number of different elements. Some other countries have built their national 'Living Human Treasures' programmes around a perhaps quite small number of named masters of particular intangible cultural practices, often just one representative 'Living Treasure' for each form of traditional art, craft or performance. In contrast with this, the Romanian system regards all important practitioners of the country's intangible cultures as Living Human Treasures within the terms of the UNESCO policies, not just those specially named and financed by the State, and all are therefore supported by State policies and programmes, and especially through those of the Astra Museum.

A particularly important early initiative in support of Romania's Living Human Treasures was the founding in



Figure 1, 2: The Fair of Romanian folk artisans 2003

1992 of the Romanian Folk Artisans' Association. This organisation covers all folk crafts and is permanently open to new members, and also participates in the organisation by the Astra Museum of the Romanian Folk Artisans' Fair, which is held every year around the national feast and holiday of the Virgin Mary (15th August). This is open to both members of the Folk Artisans' Association and to other folk artists, and 23 Fairs have now been held.

In 2006 over 250 folk artisans from all over the country took place by invitation, and these represented many different ethnographical areas and craft genres, all coming from well-known centres of craftsmanship. All the traditional Romanian folk crafts were represented, including embroidery, weaving, pottery, painted Easter eggs, wood and bone carving, wood and glass painted icons, mask making, leather and furrier's trade, making dolls and toys, making musical instruments, furniture, knitting with natural vegetable fibres, and the making of hats and other personal adornments and ornaments. In order to provide permanent high quality outlets for sales of original crafts, the Museum also provided and manages two Folk Art Galleries, one at the Folk Museum and the other in the City centre (see below).

The Museum also supports the 54 year old Traditional Folk Art Academy of Romania, which has six sections (folk literature, folk music, folk dance, folk crafts, folk studies techniques, and traditional Romanian cookery). The Academy is also a living organisation to which new members are continuously nominated and elected. Following the election of new members following a rigorous system of selection, the organisation now totals over 220 folk artisans covering most of the famous craft workers of the country, selected by specialists in ethnology including other members of the Academy, and

also serves as "the national forum of the best and well known folk artisans". The members hold analytic and democratic dialogues about the past (tradition), the present, and the future of folk culture.

From 1992 the Museum organised four annual Romanian Children Folk Artisans' Competition. In 1996 approaches were made at the Ministry of Education and as a result it began to be included in the official calendar of Extra-Curricular Educational Activities under the new name 'National Traditional Folk Crafts Olympiad'. Children aged between six and eighteen may participate in this competition providing they can prove that they are genuine folk artisans with skills acquired at school or in the family. The Olympiad is a unique event within which those taking part become acquainted leading adult craftspeople whom help to hand down the secrets and skills of their crafts to the young generation.

2006 saw the 11th event which was held between 24th and 30th August 2006, and was organised in collaboration with Sibiu County Council, the Ministry of Education and Research and the County Inspectorate for Education from Sibiu. Part of the 'Living Human Treasures' programme initiated by the Astra Museum draws in artistically gifted children from all cities and villages across Romania selected after local preliminary competitions in each county across Romania, with the aim of promoting traditional folk crafts, and the two winners of these finals are declared Romania's Folk Olympics Champions. In 2006 35 counties plus Bucharest City took part, and 140 child winners at the county level progressed to take part in the national event, accompanied by their instructors and teachers. The finals of the 2007 (12th) Olympiad have been announced for an eight day period from 23rd August 2007 in the Open Air Museum. During the week competitors will, as in previous years, create traditional

arts and crafts, wearing their national costume, under the guidance of master artisans and folk artists.

Beginning in 2001 the Museum has organised a new kind of event - an annual National Festival of Folk Traditions modelled on the annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, DC, USA, (at which Romania had been an invited participant in 1999). The Festival is considered to be the most important of the cultural events organised by the Museum, while the annual Anthropology and Documentary Film Festival, established in 1993, is recognised as one of the best in Central and Eastern Europe.

The National Festival of Folk Traditions is centred on performances in the open air on a very large stage, with authentic performances that reflect the many different genres of folk culture performance across the whole country. This is an interactive performance event with live demonstrations, illustrating the everyday life or the spiritual (religious) life, and offers a direct dialogue between the artistes and craftspeople and the visitors to the Festival. Soon all are singing, dancing, story-telling, working or cooking traditional meals altogether. Each folk artisan presents the traditions of the area that he or she comes from. The festival has a cycle of live performances and activities developed in the Open Air Museum. At each Festival there are also invited performers and craftspeople from different Romanian counties illustrating different historical-geographical and cultural traditions, including Transylvania, Muntenia, Moldavia and a county with an ethnic Romanian tradition now in the Republic of Moldavia (former part of the USSR), while in 2006 guest participants were invited from Romanian communities in Serbia and Hungary.

The Festival presents over 450 participants all dressed in their original folk costume as indications of

their ethnic identity. The event has the following structure including seven thematic sections: religious arts, folk literature, musical arts, choreographic arts, traditional folk crafts, folk technique and traditional folk meals. There is a six day programme for the Festival with seven to eight hours of activities and performances every day. The objectives and aims are (1) to preserve Romanian contemporary folk culture, (2) to promote the value of the heritage which is nowadays seen to include rural traditions in addition to the traditional concern with the physical heritage, and (3) to encourage the younger generation to know, to save, to become acquainted with and to carry forward the values of the national heritage, as a mark of the country's ethnic identity.

In the Autumn of 2006 the Museum Complex inaugurated the House of Arts in the historic city centre of Sibiu - a new and better location and facility for the Folk Art Galleries of the Museum, and complementing the Gallery at the entrance to the Astra Open Air Museum. The new city centre Folk Art Galleries have six ground floor rooms within the House of Arts, one room displaying for sale each major category of traditional artifacts made by contemporary folk artisans. From time to time there are working demonstrations by expert artisans for the general public, which are very good opportunities to show their skills and demonstrate how they are preserving the authentic tradition in folk art. Also, in the gift shops the goods for sale are displayed and arranged by type as in an exhibition, thus enhancing and enriching the image of Astra as a living museum, with the contemporary products of traditional crafts serving as a direct link between the living folk artisans and the public.

Eight annual International Anthropological Documentary Film Fests have now been held, the most recent in October 2006. The Film Fest is now well known



Figure 3: National festival of folk traditions



Figure 4, 5: National Olympiad for children traditional folk crafts





Figure 6, 7: Traditional folk art academy from Romania

and appreciated not only in Romania but more widely, and is now regarded as one of the best documentary film festivals in Central and Eastern Europe. As copies of the entries are deposited with the Museum the collection has become a rich film archive, with a special emphasis on traditional cultures and civilization.

The Romanian 'Living Human Treasures' programme developed and implemented by the Astra National Museum Complex now comprises a series of major annual cultural events, together with measures aimed to support and promote the work of traditional craftspeople, performers and other inheritors and transmitters of the intangible heritage. All are interlinked to provide a programme for safeguarding and promoting the intangible cultural heritage, which has placed Romania among the leading countries of the world within the field. The policies and their implementation are also important in helping to oppose the universal globalisation which is threatening national and local cultural identity around the world.

This policy and programme is particularly important because of two further developments. First, Romania ratified on 20th January 2006 the new UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which then came into force internationally on 20th April 2006. (In June 2006 Romania was also elected to the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Heritage established under the Convention to guide its implementation.)

Second, as already noted Sibiu is the European Union's joint European City of Culture for 2007. All the many institutions involved with this are concerned to assert and promote the cultural identity of the Sibiu region and Romania as a whole, in the context of the new Millennium and the new greatly enlarged European Union, which Romania joined on 1st January 2007. The

main theme for the City of Culture year is inter-cultural dialogue: promoting dialogue between the host and guest communities generally and in particular between Romanians and ethnic groups living in Romania, with indigenous populations more widely, and among people of different nationalities, races, denominations and professions. The aim is to know and celebrate each other's cultures, to cultivate mutual respect and esteem, and to strengthen inter-community relations and friendships.

In both of these developments the Astra Museum generally, and its work in support of Romania's many hundreds of 'Living Human Treasures', is seen to have a most important role. 🇷🇴