

The destiny of popular art as well as of popular culture in its whole, there where it still holds out at this end of the 20th century, is one of the main concerns of contemporary world and spirituality. Special problems appear with more and more precision, in which the centre of the attention consists not in "saving" the popular art, but in its integration in the context of modern life. The entire present discussion of the so-called "reconsideration" of folklore and of popular art, all the fiery taking up of positions have in fact their starting point in the evident expansion of the folkloric phenomenon and in the successive transfiguration of different themes of the plastic popular art and of the folklore within the culture called "major" or "professional". We must not forget that in historical perspective the evolution of art in the three first quarters of the 20th century will be undoubtedly marked by the impetuous irruption of popular arts too, at the beginning under the forms of extra-European exotism, later on by the imposing of autochthonous folklore sources. The discovery of the negro sculpture, of the fabulous Polynesian hue, of the pre-Columbian artistic cultures have fascinated the artistic knowledge at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th and then, about the middle of our century, especially at present the African, Asiatic, Latino-American artistic valencies are fecundating the very creation of those continents, giving them powerful particular notes in the ensemble of universal art. The turning back, in a new manner, to its own sources of art manifested in the European frame too, the connection with the historical tradition of popular art putting an undubitable stamp on a part of the numerous present orientations. For Romanian modern and contemporary art such stamp is particularly strong. This phenomenon is not specific only for the plastic arts, but also for music and dancing, the so-called "pop" trends illustrating just this

NEW TRENDS IN THE WOODEN AND STONE POPULAR SCULPTURE OF CENTRAL MOLDAVIA

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recent evolution, with inherent shiftings of senses and forms of course. Certainly we cannot superpose exactly the phenomena from all the regions of the Globe, as history itself is different, the same as social-economic conditions are different, but it seems to us that the sense of the evolutive process is the same in its fundamental lines: a turning back towards the sources of popular life and at the same time a penetration of the values of this life into the contemporary art world. But it does not mean ensuring the continuation of phenomena doomed to disappear as a consequence of their obsolete objective-social function, nor copying them slavishly either launching them purely and simply into the modern life course. In other words the discussion does not go about a faithful reconstitution, of an archaeological type, but on the ambivalence of the phenomenon, on a circulation in both senses, giving an essentially dynamic character to the ample, complex process of transformation.

Such transformation is also evident in Romania and refers to the totality of plastic popular arts. Popular architecture changes primarily as a consequence of the passing from wooden architecture, of a millenary past, to brick and stone architecture; the popular costume is transform-

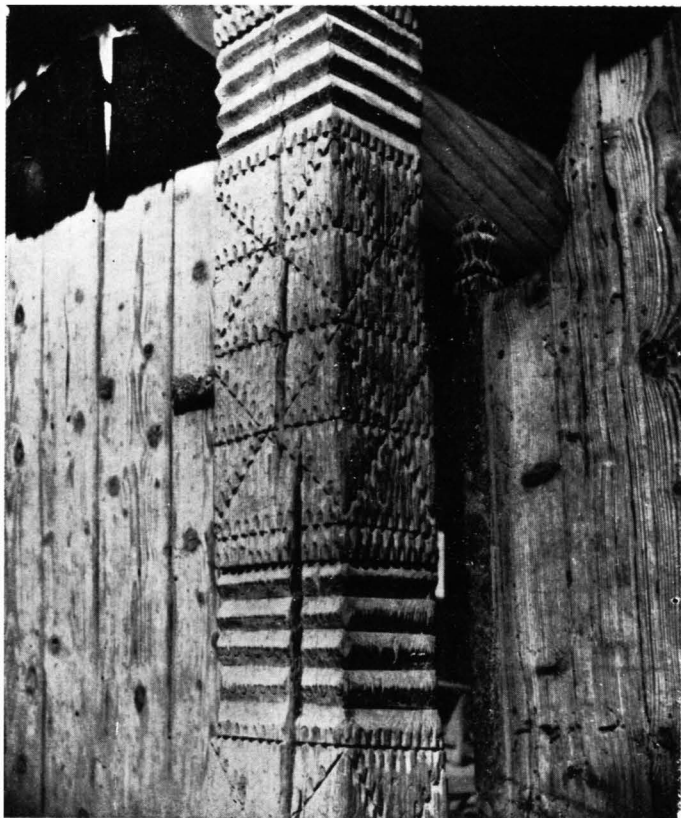


Fig. 1. — Old wooden gate adorned with geometrical notches — Berzunt village (Photo Paul Petrescu)



Fig. 2. — Heraldic Eagle on wooden gate — Cașin valley (Photo Paul Petrescu)

ed, by generally leaving the traditional white with embroidered or woven appli-
 nances national costume, while urban clothing of an international character is adopted;
 the production of traditional centres of ceramics is diminishing and even the number of such centres is decreasing;
 trades are disappearing in turns, by becoming out of use or because of the strong competition of industrial production. In the main, there, in the massive industrial production one finds the explanation of the mentioned transformations. Industrialization and urbanization, corollary of this giant eminently modern process, are the two levers of the profound changes of social order. We must not forget, for Romania, that while in 1970 about 55% of the population was living in the

rural medium, in 1990 the rural population will represent but 15—20%. There is the direction and rhythm of modifications in a country engaged at present in one of the most active processes of industrialization, at a yearly rhythm of 15%, one of the highest over the world.

In the classical studies of popular art as well as in most of ethnographical ones, the transformations and new elements of the popular plastic creation were too seldom under the attention of the researchers who were attracted rather by the archaic aspects of the popular culture in general. There is nothing unnatural in this, but in the last time it seems to us that the interest of studying the traditional elements correlated with the new ones enriches with new senses, tackled

Fig. 3. — Solar symbols and fish image on a gate from 1930 — Helegiu village (Photo Paul Petrescu)

from different angles than those of the traditional ethnography, that are those of the sociology of taste, of the aesthetic opinion currents. A very few of such studies were made in our country, among which a remarkable one can be mentioned *. Such a tackling implies of course a new methodology too, but the new plastic popular creation can also be studied from the known positions of popular art history. It is what we are trying to do in these pages, referring only to a single one of the so manifold fields of the Romanian popular art, that is the wooden and stone popular sculpture, as it could recently be registered in the field (1972) in one of the least investigated ethnographic areas of central Moldavia.

More precisely, we are referring to the Bacău county, a region of notable area, lying on both banks of the river Siret, propped towards West on the mountainous range of the Eastern Carpathians. Out of a poor zone, lacking industry, having in the past a single town, it turned in the last quarter of a century into a strongly industrialized region, where appeared one of the biggest and most modern petrochemical platforms of the country and where four new urban centres developed, one of them, the town of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej being created out of nothing and reaching at present a population of 40 000 inhabitants. Obviously impressive changes occurred in such a region in the way of life of the inhabitants, drawing the disappearance of traditional art and popular architecture aspects, but also the appearance of new ones, sometimes unexpected in the perspective

* Ioana Nicolau, *Cîteva observații asupra gustului. O anchetă în satul Viștea*, in *Arta*, 1972, no. 12, p. 13.

Fig. 4. — Hand, solar rosette and anthropomorphic Sun on the same gate — Helegiu village (Photo Paul Petrescu)

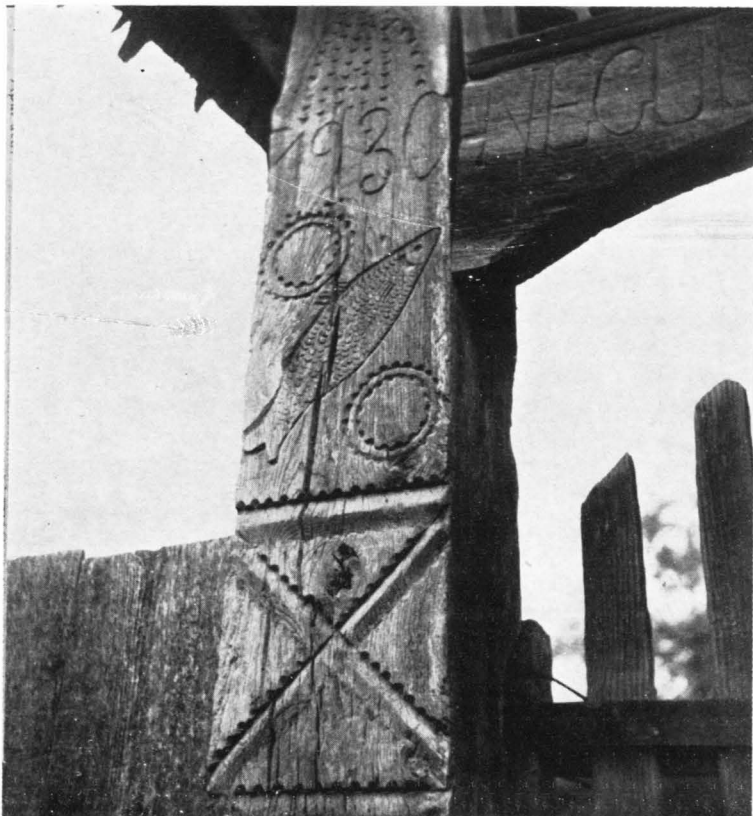




Fig. 5. — New gate pillar with the images of a fir-tree and of a bear — Berunț village (Photo Paul Petrescu)

of the understanding of the traditional popular art, which seems to us as extremely significant for the understanding of the new problems arisen by the dynamics of the contemporary Romanian popular plastic creation.

Wooden sculpture. Alike many other afforested regions of Romania we also find ourselves in central Moldavia in front of a special skill and understanding in wooden work by people living in the middle or in the surroundings of huge forest of yore, quite vast even at present. Fir-tree forests in the mountainous parts of the region, like oaken- and beech ones in the Sub-Carpathian depressions and in the hills have been and still are the main source of raw material, plentiful and of good quality, for house building — especially in the past, but for making all sorts of objects too, beginning with furniture until the most various uses. The natives know how to work wood in different technics, they know to apply remarkable artistic qualities and it keeps not only for the old time but and still more, we could say, for the present, because in Bacău region the wooden sculpture art is not only still alive — a formula which could let presume the idea of just a survival, but which is continuously developing in new forms. It puts very interesting problems related to the actuality of this art and to the modalities of popularizing one or other form or ornaments, arising the question of fashion and taste currents in the rural medium. Indeed, in few regions of our country can be found such a powerful contemporary flourishing of wooden art for the most various objects, but above all for big “objects”

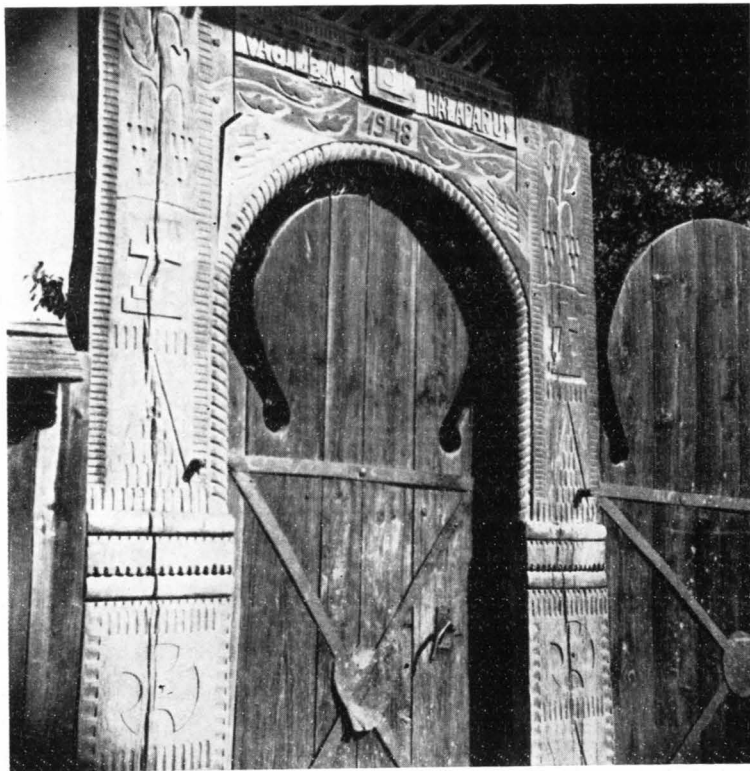


Fig. 6. — Wooden gate from 1948 — Dărmănești village (Photo Paul Petrescu)

Fig. 7. — Wooden gate from 1961 — Berzunț vil-
lage (Photo Paul Petrescu)

belonging to architecture and to what could be named the surrounding art of the Moldavian village, that is those “objects” populating the big space of the streets and yards, some of them being singular appearances in the Romanian popular art, worthy then to be evoked if only summarily in the present lines.

A simple look along the streets of many central Moldavian villages suffices to notice that the people of the place know how to work wonderfully big objects as houses, stables, sheds, gates, wells and know especially how to compose them in vast architectural ensembles of an undeniable harmony. Many times, walking through Central Moldavia villages, I was delighted looking at the well proportioned volumes of the roofs of different constructions, linked with one another in an ordered succession, creating lighted planes and shady depths in a rhythm showing the quietness and calm, the measure and well-balanced force, characteristic features of the Romanian popular art and more broadly of the Romanian peasant spirit. In so many villages on the valleys of the rivers Cașin, Oituz, Trotuș as well as in those below the peaks of Berzunț and Petricica, the streets are going along like a stringing alternating with the vertical accents of the gates and with the horizontal long stripes of the fences immediately supported by the volumes of the houses withdrawn in the space of the yard. Many of these big objects are bearing also the signs of a still more finical inclination to adornment, which can be observed when stopping more attentively, and are following the admiration given by the composition of wooden volumes.

After this longer stopping occasioned by architecture as a whole we enter the

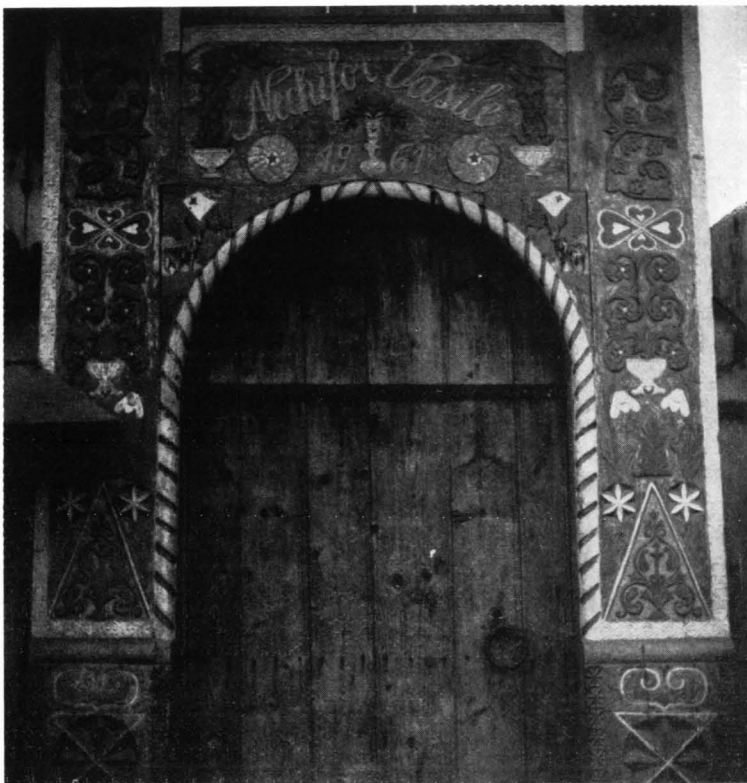


Fig. 8. — New wooden gate with geometrical
adornment — Berzunț village (Photo Paul Petrescu)



Fig. 9. — Small wooden gate — Cașin valley (Photo Paul Petrescu)

beloved and so specific of the Romanian popular art, that of wooden notches and sculpture. And the most impressive “object” and most important as dimensions at the same time is the Bacău peasant gate, which can in all honour be placed near to the other three famous families of Romanian gates carved in wood from the regions of Gorj, Ciuc and Maramureș. But unlike those zones where the gates form particular vestiges of the past, as in Gorj district where the magnificent old oaken have almost disappeared, in the Bacău county they are in full maturity, we can follow their life by generations. At present is flourishing a well developed one but we can also clearly distinguish the future going to a near end. Just this possibility of discerning the history of the local gates makes a characteristic note of Bacău county. At the same time, alike in the architecture field, one can register in the wooden art of gates the differences from a zone to an other, from a valley to an other. Thus, while in the depression zone of Tazlău and Cașin valleys, the high gates are prevailing, in the Oituz river valley the low ones, without a roof, are the most numerous.

There is a village in this district where the art of gates building and generally the wooden art has not only reached the highest level, but also the number of art works is the greatest. I named the village of Berzunț, a large settlement scattered along many kilometers, in numerous hamlets spread in the valleys of the massive bearing the same name, having as main centre a beautiful church, formerly a monastery. Entering the village the traveller is taken aback when seeing the rows of lofty oaken gates, some of them new still, showing their yellowish-brown-

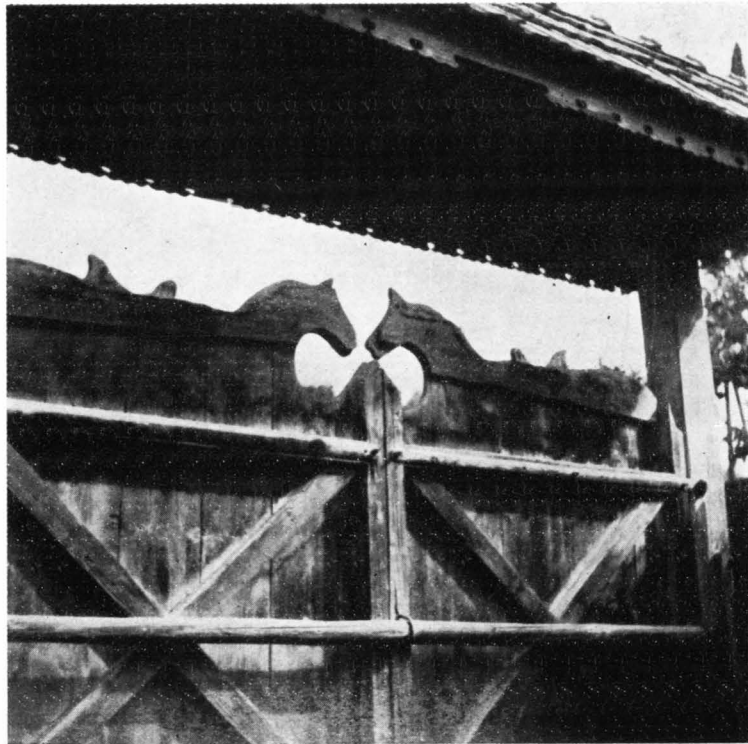


Fig. 10. — Saddled horse image cut on the wings of a gate — Preluți village (Photo Paul Petrescu)

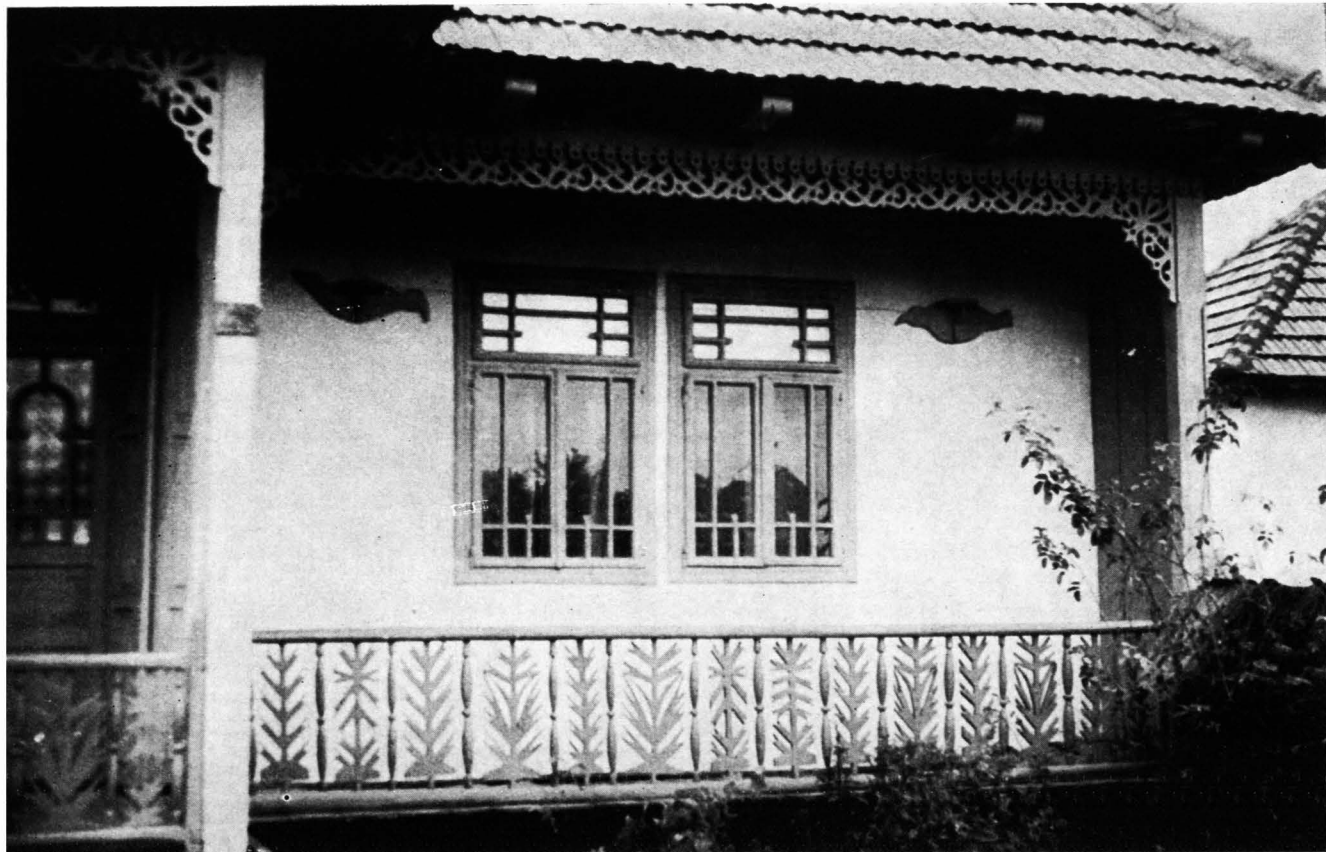


Fig. 11. — Wood carved balustrade — Cașin valley
(Photo Paul Petrescu)

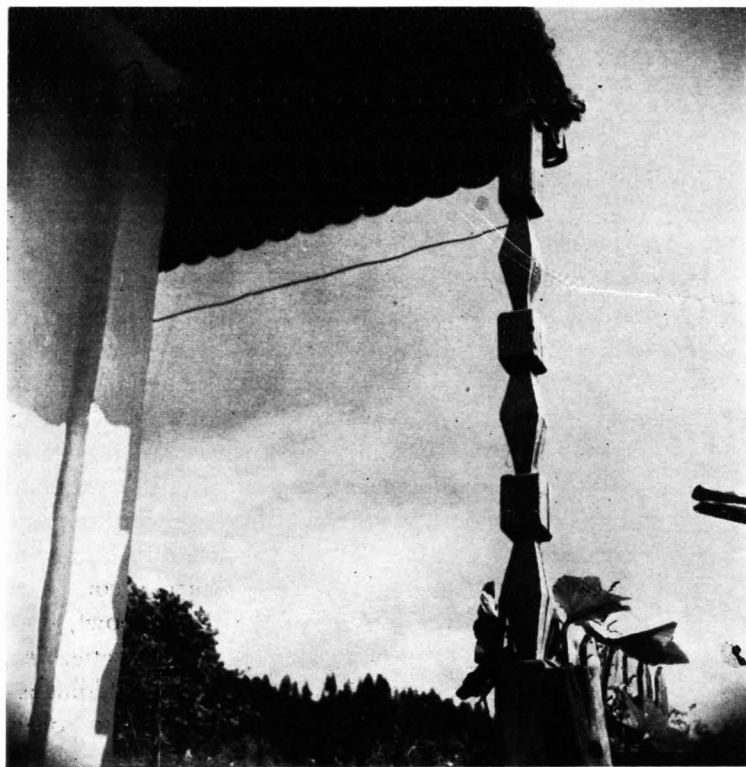


Fig. 12. — Wooden house
pillar — Preluci village
(Photo Paul Petrescu)



Fig. 13. — Wooden casing of a draw well — Brătoaia village (Photo Paul Petrescu)

ish wood, covert with finical notches. Every gate consists of three pillars four meters high, out of which a meter is shoved into the ground, joined by a horizontal beam five to six meters long, supporting a roof of four whole hip roofs of shingles. The prospect of Berzunț streets adorned with those big sculptural “objects” reminds the customary one in Maramureș, with the difference that here the houses are not visible near the line of the street as they are there, but are retired towards the back of the yard, looking towards the street by their longer side, that is being parallel to it, and not perpendicular like in Maramureș.

One can easily reconstitute the history of the gates from Berzunț, representative for central Moldavia, as it still exists today all their “generations” which succeeded, it is right, very rapidly in a few decades. It also undoubtedly exists the very ancient generation of low rudimentary gates, of the sort of those found on the entire Romanian territory, that is

two pillars to which a knitted twig hurdle is attached. But our history of Berzunț and implicitly Bacău gates will leave aside this archaic undifferentiated witness and will only dwell on the lofty gates, with technical and artistic individuality, that is on lofty gates. “*The first generation*” is that of simple lofty gates, consisting of three oaken trunks, cut in four edges, joined on the top by an horizontal beam supporting the roof. This is the common structure of Romanian lofty gates and naturally of those from Moldavia including the Berzunț ones. We must say that the history of gate “generations” is founded mainly on the differentiation of the decoration. The *oldest generation* presented itself under the form of oaken trunks lacking almost all decoration, unless we take into consideration certain fashioning of their silhouettes. A *second generation* consists of gates in which there appear in a geometric ornamental context, similar to that of the first generation (X forms and horizontal bracelets), different symbolic motives among which we have noted — on a gate in Helegiu village this time — the circle and the solar rosette, anthropomorphous image of sun, the fish, the hand. The inscriptions containing the name of the owner and the year of building are never failing. The gate in Helegiu is dated 1930. It could lead us to dating the first generation of Bacău lofty gates about 1880. This second generation is richly represented in Cașin valley too, where we have also noted numerous presences of the symbolic images, among which the most frequent is the tree of life in its autochthonous Romanian form, the fir-tree, combined with the motive of the flower bowl, of a long form, and with the solar rosette. The image of the bird appears more seldom, especially as a heraldic eagle with open wings, with powerful beak and claws.

Fig. 14. — Draw well — Berzunț village (Photo Paul Petrescu)

A relatively new constructive element in the Bacău county appears in the second generation of Bacău gates, namely between the nearest two pillars of the gate, forming the little gate for people, a transversal beam placed at the height of a man, limiting more rigorously the entrance for people. Some various ornamental combinations are connected with the introduction of this short beam, as sometimes this beam is completed with buttresses leading to the formation of an archway, while at other times the space above this beam is filled with fretworked boards, giving a new decorative field. *The third generation* of Bacău gates, dated about the last twenty-five years, represents the richest stage as decoration, the pillars becoming covert on their entire surface with notches forming a sumptuous ornamentation. But the decoration of this third gate generation is differentiated in two big families, one of them of an exclusively geometric style, the other containing the notable appearance of vegetal and animal motives beside the symbolic ones. Naturally we shall also find some gates with transitory decoration we could say, amidst the two big families, where the geometric decoration combines some way or other with the phyto- and zoomorph one. The first family, geometric, is represented by remarkable big and small gates, very beautifully sculptured with a finical decoration of great regularity. We recorded such gates in Berzunț, but in farther villages too, for instance at Dărmănești, where we find one of those currents of fashion we mentioned somewhere above. The carvers and sculptors in wood of Berzunț have asserted themselves during the last three decades as the best known and endowed builders not only of gates but of wells too and, in the last time, of



Fig. 15. — Detail from the same draw well — Berzunț village (Photo Paul Petrescu)



Fig. 16. — Gate with stone pillars — Cașin valley (Photo Paul Petrescu)



Fig. 17. — Gate with ferro-concrete pillars — Berziuț valley (Photo Paul Petrescu)

Fig. 18. — Detail from a ferro-concrete pillar — Sănduleni village (Photo Paul Petrescu)

road shelters for the passengers on bus drives; in the west part of Bacău county you can see numerous works of this real school for peasant sculpture, turned to account — it is the truth — by the knowledge and talent of the professional sculptor Huțanu, a teacher at the school for popular art in Bacău, who achieved together with his pupils the wood decoration of numerous commercial units in the town. Maybe the expansion of Berzunț type of gates is also due to the fact that the masters are supplying their customers with the wooden material, as they are living very near the forests and working autonomously, which explains the choice of their clients. The geometric style of the Berzunț gates is rigorous, traced with the square, carved with good chisels, covering the whole surface of the pillars with the classical carving practised some decades ago and also in the art and vocational schools as well as at the classes for manual training in the secondary schools and consisting of triangular carvings inscribed in squares. The big drawings resulted by adjoining hundreds and thousands of such squares, X-es, rhombs, triangles. The small gate is arching in accolades of different openings, in large archways in full centre. As symbolic images we often find the cross and bunch of grapes, traited geometrically. The wings of the gates are also cut sometimes in vast quasi-circular surfaces and are bound with iron rails, iron being generally an important appendage in the new gates. Roofs are very carefully worked, the big horizontal beam is hidden by roof boarding, with fretted fascia boards and the four whole hips of the shingle roof ending with decorative wooden birds (ciocirlani). The yellow colour of oaken wood signifies the recent construction of those gates. The

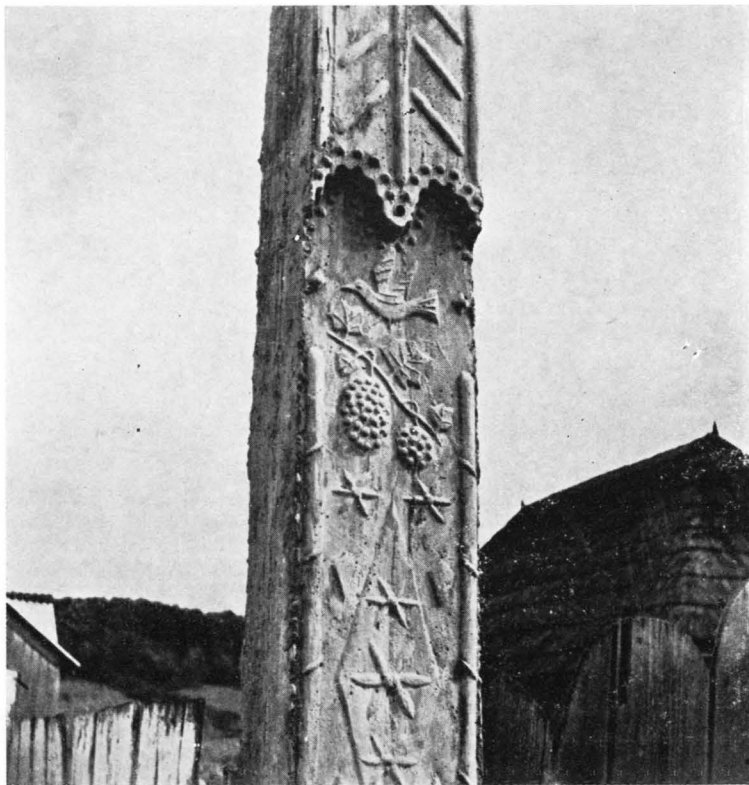


Fig. 19. — Wooden fence with beton foundation and pillars — Sănduleni village (Photo Paul Petrescu)



Fig. 20. — Prefabricated beton wall with « Modern Style » decoration — Cașin valley (Photo Paul Petrescu)

second family is more intricate in decoration, the animal and floral motives adjoining is made in various proportions. The analysis of all these proportions could naturally interest in a study of iconographic analysis and aesthetical preferences or of reasoning the psychology of taste, but here we only confine ourselves to note the very regular presence in the last productions of the Berzunț school of certain figurative motives reproduced almost identically in many exemplaries, showing an obligatory imagistic stereotype for the executant as well as for the beneficiary. The mechanism of these rural fashion propagation, as well as that of stereotypes fixation would constitute an extremely interesting material of concrete study for aestheticians and psycho-sociologists in popular art, with wide echoes and transposable results in the psycho-sociology of artistic taste in modern society. The oak-tree leaf, the fir-tree, the bear, the mountain in the form of a triangle dotted inside, there is an order (from top to bottom, almost irrefragable) of the figurative decoration on the new gates pillars of Berzunț, the whole framed as in a long cartouche enclosed in sculptured triangles, either in a "rope". The solar rosette is not lacking at the base of the cartouche, and above the archway of the small gate the cross is framed in a strange image of the Hebrew seven arms chandelier (the menorah), the cross being the central element.

There is in Berzunț a gate which can be framed neither in the family of "geometrical" gates, nor in that of the "figurative" ones (considered as decoration), making a singular and astonishing exception so much more alluring for the fixation of the problem of motives circular



Fig. 21. — The stone frame of the door from the Cașin church — Cașin valley (Photo Paul Petrescu) 5501 Rev. Rom. Ist. Artei f. 155 Gudy

tion and of styles travelling from west to east in wages differing by centuries. It is Nechifor Vasile's gate, worked by himself, a master of great talent and much skill, although learned nowhere as it seems, a gate made in 1961. It could be placed in a sort of peasant baroque, appearing in the second half of the 20th century in far away regions, below Moldavia mountains. Sculptured very carefully in a meplat technique, the gate is covered with vegetal motives sometimes classic-like, some others baroque-like, in a syncretic agglomeration of a great charm by the naïve utilisation of certain famous themes as that of the ancient Kantharos in the vision of the 18th century Europe. I noted on an other occasion the work of this master, illustrating it just by this motive of the Kantharos on another gate pillar, which we do not know where it can be found at present. The way this gate is looking, entirely polychromous, it can make also a *reflex in the peasant world* of the "Nouveau Style" art of about 1900, with classical vegetal motives finely drawn but complicated with volutes. In this decoration of cultivated origin we also find some echoes of the traditional one, linked to ancient myths and faiths, among them the solar rosette, animal horns stylishly rendered, as well as images realistically treated as that of the stag, the whole melted in a vast decorative ensemble which is suited to the most thrilling studies on the relationships between cultivated and popular art, as they are reflecting themselves in a simple village gate of Bacău. This gate would undoubtedly deserve standing in a popular European art museum not only because the mastership it was worked with but also because of the extraordinary interest of the problems it implies, as a true summary of the so varied history of European art.

The zone of expansion of Berzunț gate ends at the mouths of Cașin and Oituz valleys, another powerful forest basin where the production proper to the natives

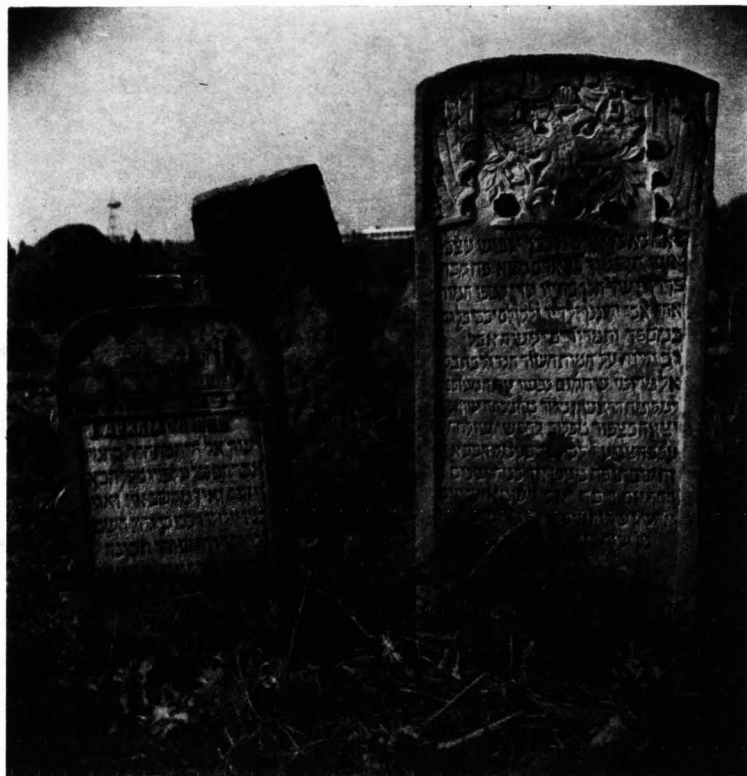


Fig. 22. — Jewish funeral stele from 1888 — Bacău town (Photo Paul Petrescu)

is felt. It is clear that in these cases also we are in front of certain currents propagating fashion at a given moment, fashion which naturally evolves as against the economic possibilities and the changes of the rural population taste, in contact with the visual information more and more spread by publications and lately by television. The specific note in matters of fashion of the gates in these two valleys is given by the massive presence of the low gate types, an almost exclusive presence in the Oituz valley and prevailing numerically in the Cașin valley. In this last one we can still find lofty gates from a not very faraway past, while in Oituz valley lofty gates are a rare occurrence. A question is if lofty gates were not many in the Oituz valley even in the past or if their disappearance is the result of a still more rapid process. In the evolution of low gates, consisting of two or three pillars, we can have a chronological series. The oldest low pillars had a simple decoration representing most often a tree of life very strongly stylized, con-

sisting of a vertical rod as high as the gate pillar (about 2 m), with lateral boughs, representing the fir-tree. Sometimes the fir is planted in a bowl. All amounts to a very simple drawing, consisting of lines not very deeply cut in the oaken wood. The low pillars seem to be somehow newer; they are ornated with two or three rosettes with six rays each enclosed in a circle and surrounded by semicircles of slightly sculptured grooves. In the course of time these geometrical rosettes change into flower corolla with six petals too, which integrate into a completely different decoration, showing the same classic-like and baroque echoes totalizing into a 1900 vision. In this decoration of evident stylistic urban resonance appear girdles replacing the old peasant "rope", ending with immense drapery tassels, hearts, palmettes, transformed but rigorously drawn. The top extremities of the pillars end either by sharp fur caps usually ornamented with an upright heart, or by some discs bearing rosettes carved on their face. The decoration of the newest generation of low pillars, the third generation, is of a more intricate making and of a more complex origin as it often does not represent any more an evolution of the decoration of wooden pillars, but that of the stone ones continued on those in cement. The problem becomes still more complicated as from the cement pillars this decoration goes back modified on the wooden pillars, giving in this way a circulation in a reverse direction, from new materials to the old ones. We shall speak about this new decoration when we effectively pass to the stone decoration and its modern substitute, the cement.

In an other valley, that of superior Trotuş, we find another current of fashion for gates which has spread along some villages, with its irradiation centre the village of Preluci, as it seems. In their structure the gates here are also lofty, belonging to the most simple category as for their construction: three vertical pillars and an

horizontal beam, without any roof boarding at the roof in four whole hips and without a board filling above the small gate. But they are noticeable by the notches full of fantasy on the superior sides of the wings, this part of the gate showing the likings of the natives and the aesthetical habits of the masters. Namely these wings are cut either in the form of huge circles framed by smaller ones and sometimes looking from far like an anthropomorphical silhouette, or in the form of a saddle back, with strong protruding head and saddle.

As one can see the peasant gate has in the Bacău county a particular specific weight in the total configuration of the village, as well as of the local architecture. It is a big sculptural object, ornated by a complex decoration of notches and fretworks, which constitutes at the same time the mark of preferences structured by valleys and villages as veritable currents of aesthetical views, materialized in achievements which are making up "fashions". These ones have their own life, coming into being, spreading and then dying away following laws whose establishing can be understood just through these phenomena of contemporary popular art, as they are offering a rich material for study as well by their frequency, as by their recording possibilities, to be compared with the conditions of an experiment, of a social laboratory.

Gates are the main architectural objects in Bacău county decorated with wooden notches and carvings, a decorative species less present at the houses there. At the oldest houses we have recorded that the wooden carved decoration was wholly lacking. Among the houses of a middle age adorned by such decoration there is one whose veranda pillars are of remarkable beauty. Consisting of a succession of geometrical volumes in which the cubes are alternating with prolonged octahedrons, the pillars of Preluci resemble strikingly to the volumes of Brancuşi's Infinite Column.

It constitutes an additional argument in favour not of Brancuși's imitation of Romanian peasant pillars, but of the identity of decorative-spatial vision of the celebrated artist from Gorj county with that of the modest master from the Trotuș valley, on the unitary background of the Romanian popular art spirit. In this valley especially the carved house pillars, even at some newer samples, are of a notable variety. In the hilly zone, in river Zeletin valley, I could register the existence of a fashion current for veranda pillars. At very numerous houses a type of pillar appears which could be called winding, were it not cut in four edges, which gives a rather zigzag line. It can be also said that the relief of these pillars which seem carved is obtained in fact by sawing, by often changing the angle of the saw. The same as the illusion of sculpture results from the sawing technics, a reverse one is obtained by finically carving some elements of the railing which are giving together the impression of fretwork, a pre-eminently saw technics. That is the case of a railing and of a fence and a gate in Cașin valley, unique of its kind in the new rural architecture, amazing by the patience and time invested in it. Tens of planks, none resembling to another, are carved in the form of a tree of life thrust into a flower vase. The planks are fretted in such a manner that the gaps are bigger than the full spaces, being inserted with thin, round balusters. Shielded by shingle overhanging eaves, painted green, these strange appearances of fretted carvings either of carved fretworks make certainly something rather rare in the field of architectonic decoration, the difficulty of the technical execution inhibiting eventual imitative propensities, in spite of the surprising effect of the work.

Proper fretwork, sawed planks have a great part in the Moldavian rural architecture, especially in the recent one and is in fact the main and more frequent manifestation in wooden art. Present at fascia boards, at railings, house pillars, stables decorative

panels, on fences and gates these fretworks make the general contemporary decoration in the Romanian popular architecture, though it seems that its flowering time situated between the years 1900 – 1950 has begun to fade away in certain zones, the new aspect of the most recent layer of the peasant house using rather the coloured decoration of masonry. The future gradual disappearance of fretwork will be determined not only by the more rational utilisation of wood, but also by the obvious limitation of veranda presence. But at present, for Bacău county, the fretwork still remains an element of first range in the decorative diversification of the peasant home and its various dependencies. By the great variety of its decorative motives, by its diverse location and by the colouring it can adopt it contributes at defining surroundings specific to the Bacău region village.

Among the objects of "surrounding architecture" we have mentioned in the beginning are also the draw-wells. They have in the world of the Romanian village a significant aesthetical presence, either the nostalgic well sweeg of the plain zones, the peculiar "horse well" from Oltenia, or the vast category of the wells with a roll, a wheel, with stone or wooden casing and pyramidal or conic roofs. In central Moldavia we can meet almost all these categories of draw-wells but we find, like in other Moldavian regions, certain rare samples of archaic wells and especially only in Bacău county wells with carved sweegs, unique of their kind in the Romanian popular art. The case looks so much more interesting as it is a work of a very recent date. But let see first the principal categories of draw-wells of artistic qualities in the zones we have investigated.

In the hilly zone, in the valleys of the rivers Berheciu and Zeletin, we went across some of the most beautiful pieces of true surrounding architecture of the archaic layer of the Romanian wooden civilization. Certain of the sweeg wells in these places

had their casing made of a single huge piece of a tree trunk dug in its middle. The dimensions of the tree, the relief of the fibres become old by the passing of the time, maybe the lonely place near a dale and a wooden bridge where I saw one of these old draw-wells, all this was telling about by-gone ages of the history of the people of the Romanian soil, people who have known to find and how to use objects almost "picked up" from nature, bestowing them by their slight intervention with an axe, heavy instrument of processing, aesthetical virtues when considered as such by the people of the 20th century. If these well cases presented themselves in their quasi-natural state, some other sweep wells in the western part of the county, I mean exactly at Berzunț, were showing a profound intervention of man and aesthetical intentions clearly asserted. In that village, at the bottom of a small deep valley I could behold two well sweeps, the like of which I had seen nowhere in Romania. The shaft of one of them was masterly carved, leaving knots in relief and was covered with geometrical motives, alike in all Romanian wooden art. Neither the solar rosette, nor the flower in a vase were lacking, framing the X-es and triangles at an adequate scale. It was looking gigantic as compared to those on the distaff for instance. The other shaft, well chosen from a stout tree trunk, was also using the knots of the former branches but in a very different and unwonted manner for the popular Romanian art, that is to say one of the knots had been realized by the carving master as a little funny nose of an immense face of an old man, bearing a fur-cap, a beard and moustaches, whose form was wholly coming out of the well sweep when looked at from far. Both these well sweeps with the troughs also carved in a tree trunk together with the well cases were making an image full of unexpected, intensified especially by the giant image of the old man staring at the world like one of the near wood crea-

tures, caught and taken amidst the human. Who had made them? Based on what traditions? Such a tradition exists not and he who carved it is a native, Emil Hampău, head manager of the cultural club and graduate of the class of Berzunț of the popular art school from Bacău. A young man, full of imagination who has put his talent in this beginning of tradition, as his work is invested in creating an object still existing in his rural world, is fated to a not very far destiny, as wood well sweeps cannot hope for a long future. And so ancient traditions of wooden art are changing and taking a new life or they disappear, leaving the place to other forms. Sometimes wood gives up the place to stone which also has an apart history in the regions of central Moldavia, as we shall see below.

Stone sculpture. Stone processing has a bivalent position in the ensemble of plastic popular creation in these regions: on the one hand it presents traditional features of an old age, alike in other parts of the Romanian soil — an aspect less investigated till now, because the idea that stone processing was less representative for Romanian art was wrongly prevailing. On the other hand it looks as a new element, we could say a modern one, in the popular art, a circumstance more seldom found, on the contrary, in other different ethnographical regions and zones of our country. Our brief presentation will begin just by this second aspect of a new, contemporary thing, as it is continuing — evidently under different forms — wooden pieces of "surrounding sculpture" as gates, fences and Bacău draw-wells.

I was saying when writing about wooden art that in the succession of Bacău wooden gates generations one can forebode their end. The end I was alluding to is represented just by this new element, the gate with stone pillars. Considered from the raw material point of view, it marks naturally a breach showing the passing from

wood to stone. But from the point of view of the evolution of taste, of the formation of fashion currents process, they only constitute another moment, in keeping with the development of the entire way of life of the rural population at present. The representative character of peasant gates framed in the horizon of social prestige affirmation, is maintained, only its modality of expression bound to a special material is changing. But we shall see that the Bacău peasant gates with stone pillars have only meant a “moment” in the succession of Bacău peasant gates generations, as already at present one can loom their end too, the last generation of gates bearing a concern for beauty being the gates with reinforced concrete pillars. Cement, an industrial subproduct of stone is on the way of replacing stone as well as wood, where it is still employed – and is appearing in Bacău county placed in an unwonted for it apparel of new popular art. Just in this swift succession of materials, displayed in an interval of three four decades, implying the brief existence of stone pillars, caught between the archaic wood and ultra-modern concrete – is the modernity of the process of formation of taste in the contemporary popular creation in general and specially in the limited field of peasant gates.

Stone pillars at the gates are significantly found in the same zones where wooden gates developed in the past, most samples being seen in Cașin and Oituz valleys. In Cașin valley the stone pillars form loft monumental gates, sheltered under tile roofs. The decoration of such gates consists in the pillars themselves, shaped in powerful volumes, with a profile specific to stone processing, and in the sculpture of motives of a bookish inspiration but following the same specific materialized in preferring curve lines, volutes, accolades. The rosette is also present, not rigorously geometric like in the wooden gates, but of a somehow vegetal making reminding rather a corolla of a stylized flower. It

is worthwhile mentioning that beside the decoration sculptured in stone these gates have a richly fretted decoration applied as well on the wooden wings of the gate as on the fascia boards of the eaves of the small tile saddle roof – all exuberantly treated. Fretwork keeps up its favourite place above the small gate, in the space formed by the short transversal beam, often shaped in accolade. This time the beam is also in stone, imitating the stone lintel of the churches from the zone (v. the peasant church in Cașin). The gate wings are often veneered with carved planks forming rhombs, squares, rectangles in an expensive decoration. Finally, these new gates in which stone and tile have replaced wood and shingle have also elements of decorative ironware as well as paint colouring the wood of the fretwork. You can see then how many new elements appear in the peasant gates whose sumptuous aspect in a “baroque” spirit contrasts with the traditional decoration of the “classical” in making wooden gates. Such new gates appear most often in new households forming coherent ensembles proving a conscious concern of building complete units as architectonic decoration, from the house to the stables, from the gates and fences to the wells. Because even the fences have stone pillars, lower indeed than those of the gates, pillars supporting the fence proper made of broad planks, carefully cut and covered with a small roof resembling to eaves in a pent roof, inclined towards the street.

In Oituz valley, the stone pillars follow the pre-existing model of the wooden ones, low and sometimes forming only the small gate. The low stone pillars are treated as monumental pieces in themselves, carved in parallelepiped shape ending by a pyramidal roof towered by a sphere, either by complex forms reminding of baroque models, with double volutes in every corner of the pyramid trunk. These pillars have a sculptured decoration consisting of flowers, bunches of grapes, little bells, everything treated in a naturalistic

manner, or theatrical thick cords ending in huge tassels. More and more often the sculptured decoration of the newest stone pillars is painted, three or four violent colours giving a strange impression of artificiality. The great number of the gates with low stone pillars in Oituz valley, as well as the lofty ones which are more and more gaining ground in Caşin valley, illustrate again the certain existence of "fashion" currents whose spreading mechanism and irradiation centres could make an interesting material of study for a sociology of rural taste, as well for a sociology of the idea of beauty in the same medium, that is in all for a sociology of the contemporary popular art. Still more, the great number of gates could also indicate a statistic study of this rich material, helpful for the integration of its results into a modern conception of interpretation of the popular artistic phenomenon, either appealing to the structuralist method, or resorting to the proceedings of the semiotic research. Maybe a near future will see appearing such a study of popular art, a study to be by its methodological features as modern as are these appearances in the Romanian rural medium. We say "rural" and not "peasant" because we are in zones of Central Moldavia where the proximity of great industrial centres gave birth to new urban settlements -- the town Gh. Gheorghiu-Dej-Oneşti -- whose relationship with the hinterland exceeds the sphere of "influence", so many of the industrial workers living in this hinterland which will little by little consist no longer of "villages", but of "residential peri-urban agglomerations". The mechanism of decorative fashions spreading has then to be investigated with a new methodology, overtaking the tradition of incursions into the popular art history, as much in amplex and complexity of the phenomena, as in the quickness and transformation rhythm.

These new gates are cast in reinforced bronze with finically polished surfaces,

sometimes covered with silvery bronze. On these surfaces are applied cement reliefs made by means of negative moulds carved in oaken wood. The almost omnipresent motive is the bird flying over a bunch of grapes, derived from the very ancient motive of the bird pecking from the miraculous fruit of the tree of life. Naturally a more attentive and of long standing study on the sources of inspiration connected with the appearance of this ornamental archetype in the production of the Bacău masters of cement gates would be of the greatest interest. Even the moulds carved in oaken wood with a great perfection of execution are worthwhile of attention, as they undoubtedly show the intervention of someone who has seriously learned the trade and possesses at all some knowledge got from richly illustrated manuals. Another motive is the stork nest built on a trunk of tree cut at the level where the crown of branches begins, a snake being wrapped round the trunk and striving for the stork younglings. This motive was in great vogue in the neo-classicism epoch and could come to the Trotuş valley villages only by bookish way. The classical vase of the type Kantharos is not missing either, with a long career in the universal ornamentation, starting from Hellenic antiquity, intensely circulating in Western Europe at Renaissance and then at the period of neo-classicism, to appear later on, in the 19th century, on various woven or carved objects, in the Romanian popular art and, a fact not lacking importance for the Moldavian territory, on the Jewish funerary stones, mostly worked by Romanian carvers. In connection with certain of these motives it is to be mentioned the fact that often it occurs a circulation in a reverse sense, one could say, that is they are passing from concrete gates on stone and even on wooden ones; on the new ones these motives come across, for instance, with the five armed chandelier taken up from a grave stone, on the frontispice of a peasant oaken wood gate.

I mentioned that just in order to underline the complexity of the problem as there is no more the matter of a linear circulation, in a single direction, but in fact of irradiation in multiple directions and coming back on ways mounting up towards objects which at the scale of time should stay at the origin of art currents, towards the wooden gates in our case.

But it must be noted that beside the decoration of neo-classical inspiration but melted in a sort of ornamentation more bound with the Modern Style, that is with the 1900 art, the decoration of geometrical tradition also appears though treated in modern forms, without being bound with the traditional ones. On the concrete pillars of a gate and on those supporting a plank fence, I could see at Sănduleni a decoration made of concentric crossing circles, obtained this time by means of a cast iron mould. We find ourselves in full epoch of industrial materials and tools manipulation used in the decoration of the popular architecture. On the other hand I could observe, in the same village, on the socle of the fence some pentagonal motives with an inscribed circle, strikingly resembling, at least as atmosphere, to Brâncuși decoration on the *Kiss Gate* from Tirgu-Jiu.

The penetration of a new element, in our case the gate, attracts, out of the same propensity to coherence and unity, the appearance of other elements of the same sort, as in our case the fences. Nowhere like in the county of Bacău did I see fences built of enormous prefabricated concrete plates (about 2 m long by 1.30 m high) with application of complex ornamental motives of the same 1900 art, with large accolades ending in volutes having a rhomb for a central medallion, with rising suns of the purest 1900 style in the inferior corners, and bunches of grapes and vine leaves in the superior ones. The impression caused by such a parapet fit for a fortification decorated with "suave" motives in concrete was more than strange,

it was disconcerting. It was leading the imagination towards any future possible evolution of what we are still calling "popular art" but with a content and technical proceedings completely changed. Therefore it asks for another way of tackling.

The way of popular art from wood to stone and from stone to concrete is not limited but to gates and fences. As a whole the same evolutive line can be observed in house building as well, the archaic wooden bases are replaced since a certain time by stone and at present mostly by concrete socles. We want to point out for the Bacău county a zone (the river Slănic valley) where the socles in scabbled stone are particularly beautiful by the carefulness the parallelipedic blocks are sculptured.

The same way wood-stone-concrete can be found out at another category of "surrounding sculpture" as we have called it, at wells. The archaic well cases made out of a piece of oak tree trunk have been replaced in the course of time by well cases carved in stone and at present concrete tubes are of general spreading. But the same as for the wooden wells, worked by the masters of Berzuň, at which the decorative note is powerful and of a recent date, clear tendencies of adornment in modern style are appearing at the concrete wells too. We came across a well in Cașin valley, sheltered under a pyramidal roof of iron sheet supported in its corners by four concrete pillars cast – surprisingly – in the octahedral volumes of Brâncuși's Infinite Column. From far these volumes looked pure like those of the celebrated column, but from close by one could see a strange plating of the popular decorative spirit on the Brâncuși's octahedrons: each face of the volumes was adorned with reliefs of concrete applied by means of the same negative wooden moulds, the decoration consisting of gracious floral elements.

In all these transformations, accentuated as rhythm in the last decade, we can easily discern, as we have said before, the for-

mation and spreading of fashion currents by valley and groups of villages, in direct or less direct contact with the urban and industrial centres and with the main channel of communication. But we cannot ignore the existence of a certain traditional context in stone sculpture matter, which made an apperceptive context, important for the modern development of the taste for decorative systems resembling to those we have presented shortly in the field of stone and concrete works. It is about the first aspect of stone processing on the territory of Bacău county, we have mentioned at the beginning of this article. It bears very old traditional features proving when reported to the present development of the stone trade, the existence of a continuity of the skill in stone carving and sculpturing, even if the field of application of this skill is different now. At any rate we cannot pass over without mentioning that just in the stone processing and decorative modelling of concrete are recording the most frequent successes, we find impressive medieval monuments in which stone is wonderfully sculptured. We mention among these monuments the church of the former Cașin monastery, with splendid window frames, with vaults ornamented with blocks sculptured with vegetal rosettes, with stone girdles sumptuously decorated; the same about the church of the former Berzunț monastery as well as about the famous foundation of Ștefan the Great of Borzești. The mastership of the stone cutters who worked at the princely foundations passed to those who have worked later on at more modest buildings, as for instance the church of Cașin village, but which are showing the same high skill in sculpturing the stone framing of doors and windows. The prevailing floral decoration of these monuments is found, in a different register and with a different skill, on the stone and concrete elements of the gates, fences and wells in the villages from the Western parts of Bacău county, making the modern sculp-

tural environment of these rural settlements. We note then on the one hand an evident efflorescence of certain modern modalities of stone and concrete processing, but on the other one we also find the connection with a very ancient fund of stone sculpture.

We should like to mention an other aspect of stone sculpture, never considered until now, but which seems important for the territory of Bacău county, part of the so-called Moldavian central plateau, where the artistic procession of stone manifested brilliantly in decorating a special category of funerary monuments: the steles of Mosaic rite. In many Moldavian towns and boroughs we came across such old cemeteries which are an eloquent testimony of the great aptitudes for sculpture of the stone cutters of famous centres as those from Scheia-Vaslui for instance, who have worked hundreds and thousands of funerary steles. In this way we found in Bacău county, even in the town of Bacău as well in other towns like Moinești, Țirgul-Ocna and in smaller boroughs like Podul-Turcului and even in villages like Livezi, such very beautifully worked tombstones. At first sight one could think that it is a completely foreign aspect for an investigation about the popular art of these places. Of course the iconography of these steles implies a series of images belonging to a symbolism alien to the spirit of our popular art. Though so much more evident appears in certain cases, the bound between these images and some of those used by the popular masters during the last three-four decades. I have already reminded the example of the five armed chandelier and I could remind the example of the Kantharos, the classical vase resembling to a chalice with a broad opening which are appearing not only on stone or concrete gates and fences but even on wooden ones, as there is one in Berzunț, whose models seem to be looked for in the funerary steles. But the circulation of the decorative themes occurred in both

senses. Only in this way one can explain the appearance of certain geometrical motives — specific to our popular art — in the ornamental programme of such steles, especially in their framing. Generally, these funerary steles have been an important chain loop of transmission of classical decorative themes of great circulation, as for instance the image of the bird or of the bunch of grapes, of the cable moulding of different sorts, of the colonettes, as well as they have been a field of manifestation of some images belonging to the “naive” sculpture, I could say, like the image of the train or of the house, appearing unwontedly on the funerary steles at the end of the 19th century. A more detailed study on tombstones could point out the mastership of the Romanian stone carvers who were working of course to the order of those in charge of watching over the reproducing of certain symbolic images but were introducing their own decorative vision and even specific ornamental motives, as we have said. The passing from a category to another, from funerary steles of Mosaic rite to peasant tombstones is much more frequent and more complex than those above mentioned. It can be seen sometimes in Romanian village cemeteries, just in these parts of the Moldavian central plateau, sure traces of decorative contamination, going as far as dotting the letters of the Latin alphabet by signs of the Hebraic one. It is a still unknown chapter of the relationships between town and village art, considered from the angle of aspects completely particular but not lacking of importance in deciphering the currents of fashion and the formation of popular taste, if not of taste in general.

So we are witnessing for a certain time in wooden art, stone sculpture, in archi-

tecture, important fields of popular art, as well in ceramics or textiles, spectacular mutations in the processing of the artistic object as much as in its picking up. The old models of the traditional popular art, fostered in past time by a certain manner of understanding beauty and of achieving it with materials and by technics practised for centuries running, do not seem to satisfy any more the aesthetical requirements of the popular masses either from towns, or from villages. This fundamental difference of the social medium begins to belong to the past. That what can still be named nowadays popular art cannot be judged any longer by the criteria used at a time not very far from us. That is why the studying of contemporary popular art cannot remain any longer at the level of the methods of the past. The creation of new methods, of new conceptions, a new modern, contemporary position in tackling these themes are required at present, having to be forged “on the fly”, to keep pace with the stream of changes.

In fact, we can discern the appearance of new realities in the field of contemporary popular aesthetics, to which are participating the rural world folklore on its way of urbanization as well as that of urban world caught more and more into the gearing of the gigantic industrial production. Thus in the frame of a more and more complex society, popular culture and together with it plastic popular creation forms a category always necessary, changing its proceedings and forms but keeping at the same time its own sphere of application, having then a social and psychological justification. The dynamism of the plastic popular creation is only the reflection in aesthetical horizon of contemporary world rhythms.