

## THE ASSOCIATION OF FOLK ARTISANS OF ROMANIA - INITIATED AND COORDINATED BY ASTRA MUSEUM

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The need for artistic education of the public in the spirit of authentic/traditional values, as well as the necessity of helping the craftsmen - who miraculously have saved and continued the practice of traditional crafts - to promote their products and survive in a harsh, global competition, generated by the free market, has never been more urgent than in these years of transition, when the fundamental problem of the nation, aiming for its historical destiny on a long term, is the preserving of the cultural national identity, in the conditions of globalisation.

Random House Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines the term "guild" as "an organization of persons that have common aims and interests, specially founded for providing protection and mutual help of its members". The craftsmen's guilds are originated in Germany, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The founding of the Guild Unions dates from the mediaeval period, more precisely in England, the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> c<sup>ies</sup>. A modern definition would compare guild with an association or organisation, which serves the craftsmen's interests from various domains and from specific geographical areas. Most of these unions have started with a limited number of craftsmen, gathered due to economic and communicative needs, promoting their products and sharing problems specific for the people outside the community.

In Romania, the craftsmen represent a socio-professional group that is still closely connected to the traditional - conservative way of life. This group benefits of a small amount of information and is characterised by a huge inertness of adapting to the

nowadays socio-economic conditions, dominated by the transition to the free market. A dramatic decreasing of traditional folk craftsmen was registered after 1989 on the background of a general regression. The temporary or final desertions are and were also justified by the lack of direct contacts with the market. Many of the folk craftsmen live in isolated or far away located rural areas with limited access to the free market, for most of them still unknown. The massive penetration of industrial products as substitutes of the traditional ones, "home-made", has often diminished them, to disappearance, from the local and regional market. The few left craftsmen ask themselves where they can find their buyers, otherwise their production is not justified. Very often, being put into contact with the buyer, the producers cannot correctly estimate the prices of their own products, selling their products under the market price. Another problem is the difficulty in providing the raw material.

The production of the traditional artefacts is based on raw material of high quality. The isolation from the market limits their access to the necessary materials (especially in the case of woven and embroidered textiles, painted icons, masks etc.). When the materials are found, they are bought in small quantities at *en detail* prices, which are very high. The lack of contractor and managerial training are conditions that stop any effort of adapting and modernising. The acquiring of practical abilities, of an actual production is usually taught in the family, passed from one generation to another. The ability through which a simple producer can develop a successful business is absent. Without these abilities, the craftsman has

difficulties in evaluating and selecting the alternatives of producing and selling the products on the market.

The ethnographers signalled, eight years ago, the existence of the same problems with the Romanian folk artisans: the need of assistance, of associating them for solving common problems. At that time, the target group did neither know its rights nor its obligations. There was the idea of a group and the need of collective action, but the organizing and action skills were missing.

This was the moment when the ASTRA Museum has assumed the role of catalyser in the process of founding the "Association of Folk Artisans from Romania". At the beginning of the 1990s the Sibiu museum itself was involved in a major challenge, that of renewing its functions (without abandoning the classical ones), it has initiated for the first time, following a precise and coordinated process, the task of protecting, encouraging and valuing the "living" national cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible.

On August 1992, in Sibiu took place the Fair of Folk Artisans from Romania. The fair is organised each year and has as participants the most famous Romanian folk artisans. During this cultural event the meeting of the Association established its' purpose of activity: promoting the official statute of contemporary artisans; protecting and encouraging authentic folk creation and discouraging kitsch; promoting authentic

folk creation on the national and international commercial and tourist networks; promoting the most representative folk artisans in official cultural events, organised in Romania and abroad; defending the moral and material interests of folk artisans.

Initially, the Association had 195 members (today, are approximately 250), representing all the traditional folk crafts from all over the country, adults and children, Romanians and other ethnic minorities, no matter the religion or gender. Affiliating the Association is based on a selection made by a group of specialists, considering respect of the tradition's craft. An important activity of the ASTRA Museum is to update and upgrade the national network of folk artisans' database. This was made possible by co-operating with the most important ethnographical museums from our country. The response was over 1,000 folk artisans who were interested to join the Association. The great number of artisans interested in the Association confirmed that it is only a matter of time and of financial and technical possibilities to complete all the formalities for becoming a member.

The first years of the Association revealed difficulties in assuming the managing responsibilities. The President and the managing Committee have been replaced three times. It is true that neither the financial nor the human resources did allow large projects. A change of the way of thinking was also required from an individual one to a collective one. Authentic leaders, formed in the spirit of the new democratic values, were also needed.

The ASTRA Museum has assumed the role of the "engine" in developing the Association's activities, following with consistency the accomplishment of its objectives.

Promoting the products on the national and international market had as starting point the opening of the museum's first permanent sale exhibition, "The Folk Art Galleries", in 1993. The success of this first initiative, both cultural and commercial, led to the opening of a second "shop", in 1999, in



the Open Air Museum from Dumbrava Sibiului. Both of them are exhibiting products of the Association's members - an important source of income for folk artisans and for the museum, too. The ASTRA Museum was an example for other Romanian museums. The activity was also focused on the marketing of contemporary folk art products, exhibited in the shop, so that the opportunity for export developed (in the Netherlands, Italy, Japan and Germany) and it is still developing. Many potential buyers became interested in the folk products, which were also promoted on the national and international market, as well as on non-conventional events such as: festivals, international meetings and Internet.

Promoting the most representative folk artisans was a main goal, right from the start. They were invited to cultural events that took place abroad, as a result of ASTRA Museum's partnerships. Members of the Association, adults and children, were Romania's true "cultural ambassadors" in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Bulgaria and U.S.A.

When cultural events are organised in Romania, the museum is always ready to offer, on behalf of the Association, the database that is permanently updated and developed.

The folk crafts are passed over to the next generations, encouraging fairs for craft-children. Annually, the National Contest of Crafts for Children is organised in our museum, being financially supported by the Ministry of Education; the jury is formed by curators and adult craftsmen. Participants are school age children, brilliant continuers of folk art traditions. The winners are awarded with special prizes (camps on ethnography organised by the museum).

The members of Traditional Folk Arts Academy are regarded as members of the highest national "traditional" forum, representative of the utmost cultural values.

The folk artisans are not, yet, recognised as having an official socio-professional statute. It is up to the

common effort of the members, together with the museums, to take up measures for improving the legislation, the awareness of the public opinion concerning the necessity of an active preserving of the ethno-identity fundamental values.

In 1995, Aid to Artisans Foundation started, together with the ASTRA Museum - the only Romanian Institution that agreed to take the challenge, offering logistic and scientific support - the project "Romania - Artisans & Enterprises". The project is developed with the Association's members and the crafts trade unions. The project is in its fifth year of developing and is focused on the marketing of the traditional products (assistance of production, the study of the market, the promoting on the American and Western European Market), the training of the artisans for the free market (two seminars are taking place, yearly, at the ASTRA Museum; exchanges of experience are organised in the US), encouraging the group activity with the help of non-governmental organizations. The efforts, both of the "Aid to Artisans" team and of the ASTRA Museum's specialists are obviously rewarded by the huge success of this programme, by the great number of direct and indirect beneficiaries, by the partnerships abroad and by the substantial increasing in income.

The Association of Folk Artisans, the Academy of Traditional Arts from Romania and the activities for safeguarding and promoting the "living" cultural heritage, initiated and developed by the ASTRA Museum, followed the UNESCO 1989 and 1999 Recommendations concerning the safeguarding of traditional cultures, and the ASTRA Museum has implemented the "Human Living Treasures" programme.

The activity of the Association is positive and encouraging. However, its members did not find the proper and stimulating motivation, yet, though, the Association has chances to become a strong, mature, efficient and well known organisation.