

THE NATIONAL FAIR OF CRAFTSMEN FROM ROMANIA

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The "ASTRA" Museum of Traditional Folk Civilization initiated, 21 years ago, a large event of Romanian folk culture and civilization that wanted and managed to accomplish a real dialogue between traditional and contemporary folk handicrafts: The National Fair of Craftsmen from Romania. Even though, then, in the 1980s, associating a commercial activity to a cultural approach seemed to be, at least, too bold, the longevity of the event proved that a fair of craftsmen was a successful recipe, that later became an example for the majority of ethnographic museums all over Romania.

For the Romanian traditional village *the fair*, the market, the mart represents the defining element of the rural community cohesion: to the fair we sell and buy, we make exchanges in products and all kinds of goods, but first of all it is an opportunity for people to meet, to establish contacts. It is the place where natives or foreigners, producers, buyers or visitors come into contact and socialise. The fair is the real collector of all the problems and needs of the village, the place where the rich and the poor are bargaining. In the "whirlpool" of the fair there is enough room for everything and for everyone.

The idea of organising a craftsmen's fair has started considering these very reasons. All over the country, countless craftsmen carry on the essence of the Romanian spirit itself: the ancient tradition of the village. Beyond any doubt, the mission of an ethnographic museum was to become the economic and cultural connection of these wonderful people, to supporting, guiding and promoting them in the most respectable cultural forum.

It was very important that the vivid city of modernity to interpenetrate, at least for a few days, with the rural world, with its origins and traditions.

Where would it have been a more appropriate place for this cohesion to happen, if not in the place which stands as a synthesis of the ancient Romanian village, by the entire structure of the traditional folk civilization? And when would it have been a more appropriate time for these craftsmen to meet if not on the Holly Mary's Day, a day of spiritual celebration, a day of fair all over the country? That's why, year by year, during three days, by the 15th of August, craftsmen from everywhere meet at Sibiu, in the "ASTRA" Museum of Traditional Folk Civilisation, in order to enter, together with the public, in the "whirlpool" of the fair.

The National Fair of Craftsmen of Romania gathers over 250 folk craftsmen, representing the majority of the ethnographic areas of the country, rendering the image of the entire typology of traditional handicrafts: weaving, embroiling, pottery, egg-painting, bone and wood sculpture, icon-painting, processing of leather, making masks, adornments, dolls, musical instruments and hats, processing of vegetable fibres, etc. The specific atmosphere of the traditional fair is completed by puppet-shows and ginger bread stalls - "the token" of the fair - which, along with the practical demonstrations of the craftsmen and the musical interpretation, real ad-hoc shows of the participants, make the public exhilarate.

In the wonderful environment, created both by the exhibitions of the open-air museum and by the nature itself, by the picturesque of the folk costumes and by the variety and the quality of the products in sale, the fair became a major attraction point as well as for the public of the city and for the Romanian and foreign tourists. Another secret of the successful recipe is the uncompromising selection of the quality

of the invited craftsmen and their products, trying to respect tradition, the revitalisation of handicrafts, eliminating the non-values and the *kitsch* by introducing in the circuit of trade only the true values of folk art. This way, we manage to preserve and carry on the Romanian traditional heritage as a mark of our own ethno-cultural identity.

The National Fair of Craftsmen of Romania intends to realise a direct dialogue between the participants (the folk craftsmen) and the public, interacting by singing, dancing and practicing the handicrafts in the workshops, encouraging this way the young generation to be aware and protect, learn and perpetuate their cultural tradition. The target group of this event is very wide and diverse: the general public - uninitiated in folk art, the Romanian and foreign tourists, pupils and students in arts, history, sociology, collectors of art objects and owners of art galleries, specialists in folk culture and civilisation. The impact on the target group counts on increasing the interest of the public for authentic objects, awakening and maintaining the consciousness of the wide public for protecting the Romanian traditional cultural heritage, growing the importance of the trade handicrafts objects - through the Folk Art Galleries -, scientific researches on this ethnographic phenomenon, rendering a general image up to date of the spreading and practicing handicrafts on national level.

For the folk craftsmen, the fair functions as a real market study, the direct contact with the visitors allowing them to objectively analyse the request and evaluate the relation quality-price. The meeting of the craftsmen (during the session of the annual meeting of the Association of Folk Craftsmen of Romania, founded by the ASTRA museum and, also, during the fair) has, as result, a permanent and creative dialogue regarding the technical and qualitative innovations of the products, leading not to the preserving of a dead tradition, but to an innovation in the spirit of tradition. The fair is thought to

be the nucleus that promotes creativity at all levels and conversion of traditional handicrafts to the nowadays requests of the folk arts consumer.

The National Fair of Craftsmen of Romania was, from the very beginning, a dynamic event, developing continuously. The means of evaluating the efficiency of the fair are the constantly growing number of visitors, compared with the preceding editions, inviting new valuable craftsmen in order to represent every part of Romania (the last editions hosting craftsmen from the Republic of Moldova), dealing lately with new situations when craftsmen applied for participation in the fair having strong recommendation and portfolios of their previous activity.

The fact that the last editions of the fair reached a high rate of participation of the craftsmen (from 28 in the first edition to more than 200 in the last 2 years), and more than 7400 visitors on the three days of the fair does not make us believe that the limits are settled. The museum's event is expanding continuously, trying, year by year, to make the fair of the museum to look more and more like the traditional fair of the villages. Comparing to the first editions, when the craftsmen came only to sell their products, now they come to demonstrate in front of the public how these are made, the skilfulness and hard work, which are the secrets of each craft. The fair gains in originality by



introducing those elements, which used to create the atmosphere of the ancient fair: ginger bread stalls - "the token" of the fair couldn't miss because, isn't it, if you left the fair without ginger bread it would be as if you hadn't bargained anything; the puppet-shows "Vasilache and Marioara", full of humour and irony, found their place in the fair, having the same success as ever.

Reminding the past editions, we realise that our institution's courage, 21 years ago, to assume and manage such a

cultural and economic activity, proved its double utility: cultural (by preserving and revitalizing traditional handicrafts) and economic (by assuring the craftsmen with the necessary income for the development of their activity). Since 1984, the fair has tried to be the mirror which draws, line by line, the portrait of the Romanian contemporary folk art, opened to the world, full of possibilities, a strong, distinct voice, in the "concert" of all European folk arts.