

## Notes from the Romanian Peasant Museum...

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### **Carpets and the feminine (hi)story of a village**

In the northern part of Romania, in Maramures, there is an official history that is telling, for centuries, about the brave deeds of the rulers and the peasants. Since the 1300, the Middle Ages documents, the "Maramures Diplomas" tell about rights that the locals have. But there is an "un-official" history of each village, told by the textiles that are present in the houses, especially in the "good room", the festive space of the peasant household. It is a feminine story of the village, told by the wool-threads.

Objects made by women have always been considered as representative for the community: the traditional clothes have particularities in every village, details in ornamentation, and colors, that the locals recognize as different from their own. For example, women wear, in front of their dresses, wool-aprons with black stripes that alternate with the ones in different colors. In each village, there are other colors that alternate, according to the community rules; and in every village, each age group has different variations of colors. Another example is the one of the woven bags, that are different, too, from village to village. This is how, when there are fairs, people, if they do not recognize the person, they can at least tell from which community he/she comes, by looking at his/her bag.

Objects, especially textiles, are representative for the family: in the festive room there are carpets and rugs everywhere, but mainly on the "ruda" (a wooden beam where textiles are exposed in a special order that differs from village to village). Richer in textiles the "ruda" is, the richer the family and well situated socially, too.

The same carpets, though, tell also the story of the family: objects are intertwined with the life of their creators and users. The stories that women tell when talking about the dowry they created themselves give an impression about the importance of all these textiles. Firstly, carpets are inherited; they are transmitted from generation to generation with the dowry. Mainly, the first girl to marry takes the "ruda" that her mother has received from her parents. And sometimes, there are carpets on the "ruda" that have been transmitted on a feminine side for several generations, even from grand-mothers. In one room, one can find the story of two or even three generations of women. Their memory is continued with the dowry and the objects that it contains. Some women start their own history "written" in the carpets: they weave and prepare their own dowry before they get married, without any other help than the one of their mothers or sisters, who is waving together with them.

Also, textiles tell the (hi)story of the native village: women that marry in other villages, in their new "good room" they have the "ruda" exposed with all the textiles that they have brought from their village, often completely different from the way the "ruda" is "dressed" in the community where they live in now.

Although it is an important way feminine story is told from one generation to another, the way it is told and "written" in textiles show a quite ephemeral way of transmitting: when the carpets are

considered to be old and when the threads get apart, or they become old-fashioned, they end up on the floors. The objects created by the hands of the peasants are not thrown away, they just simply live their own life and by the end, they die, quietly.

[Ed note: we've had some trouble with our slideshow technology - please click on the following image to be taken to the photo album]

Carpets

### **SMILING OBJECTS IN THE “GOOD ROOM”**

[Again - click on the image to see the full photo album]

### Smiling carpets

In the “good room”, the festive space of a peasant's house from Maramures, north Romania, there are placed the most beautiful objects: the best rugs, thick decorated carpets, ornamented towels made by hand, woven rugs for tables, the most beautiful icons and ceramic plates. Here is exposed the dowry of the girls, woven by themselves and their mothers; here are received the guests, family and friends who participate here to weddings or funerals. This room, “the clean room” as it is called some times, is “dressed-up” and ready to receive visitors, that why it has to be adorned, with a lot of beautiful and meaningful things done, mainly, by the hand of the women.

This particular room is filled-up with textiles: the beds are covered with thick carpets, pillows and rugs; the table is wearing a table cloth; on the walls there are rugs hanged; the icons and the ceramic plates are dressed with towels; the wall above the beds have the “ruda” (a wooden beam upon which there are placed several layers of textiles, in a special order that differs from village to village). “With towels and rugs on the wall, you feel like that there is a celebration” (Maria, 53 years, 2008); “The house is different with textiles, it is dressed up” (Maria, 50 years, 2008), people say. And their sayings tell us how they perceive materiality and space: objects are seen as living creatures, they are like an extension of the body, so they have to be dressed-up. They also have sometimes human expressions, for example, Floare (62 years, 2008) was talking about a table-rug, and was telling me how “the table was smiling when you were looking at it, it was that beautiful”.

Similarly, a table without a table cloth would be “undressed and ugly” (Florica, 38 years, 2001). In the three villages from Maramures where the research has been done, to have such a “good room” is compulsory, because, as they say, “when an old lady comes in visit, a woman that does not see you daily, she comes once, well, it is natural to show her the good room. She has to see it, otherwise she might tell people that you have nothing in your house, and you would not like this, because, probably you have girls to marry, or you are a young wife” (Viorica, 23 years, 2001).

People are judged by the others according to the things they create and use.

Objects are dialogue-partners for people: they talk about the hard-work that has been done by the women in the house when weaving, but also they talk about the richness and the social position of the family where these objects have been created and where they are used.