Decorativa: The Monopoly of Visual Production in Socialist Romania. The Centralized Organization of Museum Displays in the 1960s and 1970s

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Abstract

This article considers the making of simple and routine ethnographic displays in 1960s and early 1970s Romania, as part of the communist project to construct a new social and political order based on modest consumption and collectivized subjectivities. The opening of new cultural institutions employing working-class cultural workers, 'mass provision' of welfare, class emancipation and highly regulated production and consumption helped form new interior design in public cultural institutions. From 1964 onwards, a newly-established factory called Decorativa standardized both the form and content of displays. Composed of more than 7,000 artists, architects and manual workers, hired, trained and given responsibility for public displays in any location considered 'cultural', Decorativa was at the core of national aesthetics and design throughout its existence under communism. Analysis shows how Decorativa specialists, collaborating with museum curators, made visible the introduction of bureaucratic intelligentsia into the arts. This cooperation, taking the form of

adaptation and improvization, allowed the dispersion of design knowledge outside museums among other technocrat workers. In the case of interior design in Romanian public cultural institutions under communism, regulations encouraging minimalism and neutrality did not impede innovation, but in fact fostered it. Speed, improvization and transparency were three characteristics of interior design.

Keywords: communism—ethnography—exhibition design—folklore—modernity—Romania.

Introduction

Kenneth Hudson, the founder of the European Association of Museums, and one of the founding members of the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), once remarked that socialist museums operated with the idea of temporary and travelling exhibitions more than equivalent institutions in Western Europe.[1] This simple but astute observation points out a series of complex mechanisms which were at work in the running of socialist museums. It is important to note that the difference sensed by Hudson is based on how Eastern and Central European states, as well as the USSR, understood and experienced modernity. Several points are worthy of particular attention.

As has been extensively argued, socialist modernity in Eastern Europe aimed at ensuring the mass provision of welfare and levelling social inequalities in almost every aspect of life, from work conditions, time management and consumption practices, to providing access to basic services such as health and education.[2] The pursuit of reducing social inequalities also assumed numerous material forms. For example, Virag Molnar and Kimberly Zarecor have documented how housing conditions in socialist Hungary and Czechoslovakia respectively were meant to effect redistribution.[3] Molnar has shown the contradictions implicit in the work of Hungarian architects who were contracted to design housing estates for the masses, but instead built individual private homes. Zarecor showed the more programmatic attempts of the Czechoslovakian state to provide equal housing conditions for its newly proletarized population. Following the Czech model, vast dormitory-neighbourhoods began to appear around cities in Romania in the 1960s and 1970s; these were intended to house the workforce, who powered everything from the industrialization of the country to collective exhibitions and national shows.[4] 'The emancipation of the masses', a phrase frequently

reiterated during those years, implied not only making cultural products available to much larger audiences than in previous periods, but also the rapid transformation of individuals (mostly peasants) into a uniform mass of collectivized workers.

From the beginning of the 1960s, the Romanian communist party started to adopt an increasingly nationalistic discourse to mark economic and political independence from the USSR. As various historians have argued, the acceleration of the industrialization process was seen as the best way to obtain this independence.[5] There were major internal problems for this process, such as the rapid opening of new factories, the internal relocation of the working population between different regions of the country, migration from rural to urban areas and the need to rapidly deploy infrastructure and services required to cater for new and ever-changing needs. Enlarged cities became not only accommodation for millions of workers from different regions of the country, but also sites of cultural dissemination.

In this context, the numerous exhibitions of folklore displayed in newly-opened museums, and also in schools, factories and houses of culture, played an important role in the dissemination of an official narrative about the transformation of the country from a monarchy into a People's Republic. Folkloric displays were easy to make, had mass appeal and were also politically useful in distancing the newly emancipated peasants from their own past.[6] Display methods were powerfully embedded in the ideology of the state and gave material form to socialist ideas of work, innovation and progress. Such methods demonstrate how planning was central to the methodology of artistic creation.

Focusing on the means of display employed in ethnographic exhibitions highlights various concerns, including the high number of exhibitions organized during the period and the impact of these exhibitions on their makers and those who visited. In the context of the first years of the regime, when sociology was marginalized and ethnology carried fascistic connotations, ethnography and folklore were the only two social sciences accepted by the socialist regime.[7] They were essentially rethought by the new authorities in order to promote a formalized study of objects, which was conceived in order to help convey communist ideology in new social and cultural spaces by focusing on objects and customs, and by brushing over the social dimension associated with ethnological or sociological research.[8]Very often the terms—and artefacts—of folk art and ethnographic were interchangeable, mostly because Romanian researchers were funded to conduct research only within Romania's national borders. Research was associated with covering all the

ethnographic regions of the country. All the ethnographic collections coming from outside the borders of the country during the communist period were received as diplomatic gifts, and never exhibited near folk art from Romania. But folk art was not always limited to beautifully-decorated old peasant objects. When folk art encompassed the broader definitions of 'popular'/'of the people' that were so dear to the communist agenda, the meaning of 'ethnographic' and 'folkloric' become even more entangled with each other.[9] These definitions implied a particular paradox: new and collective identities were affirmed that followed the precepts of the proletariat, but which were required to draw on peasant sensibilities. In this context, the authorities required displays of folk art to link the new socialist modelling of society with the peasant past and its long-standing agrarian tradition.

Following anthropologist Katherine Verdery, I argue that peasants and peasants' objects were taken as 'tropes' of the nation by the communist regime, as well as by several others in Romania.[10] It is for this reason that state authorities during the socialist regime struggled to mark out a difference between themselves and past institutions. Knowing that socialist realist displays during socialism were preceded by other forms of realism in art made any attempt at differentiation even more difficult.[11] Design and planning were two key aspects of marking the split with past displays and of constructing 'new' people.

The 'scientific' museification of Romania; on rush and vulnerability Before the socialist period, ethnographic and art museums in Romania were supported by private patrons and located in buildings created specifically for these purposes. Exhibition design would vary according to the private tastes of the collectors, art historians and artists who worked in the museums and who often themselves drew inspiration from Western and North European ethnographic displays. Typically, an inter-war museum exhibited in the same room and on the same wall objects made from widely differing materials—for example textiles, clay, paint and canvas [1].[12]

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Fig 1. Image of the Museum of National Art in the first half of the 1930s; this museum was closed down in 1950 and its collections given to other institutions, including the Museum of Folk Art. Image Archive of Muzeul Național al Țăranului Român, Fonds C.S./ Image 1170. Reproduced with permission from the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant

In the first years after the fall of the monarchy and the communist regime's accession to power in Romania, most of the existing museums were closed. New ones replaced them, often in different locations, and important changes of taxonomy were made, in the old collections, while keeping the collections; religious objects were removed from display. In particular, the socialist authorities proposed new methods; displays were promoted as 'scientific' and were meant to express the superiority of the socialist ideology over the previous one.[13] This was also the case with Muzeul de Artă Populară (hereafter the Museum of Folk Art), the main site of my research, which was established just four years after the Romanian Communist Party came to power in 1947.[14] This institution was charged with recovering 'folklore' from the romantic and nationalistic logic existing in the previous political regime, and placing it at the hub of the proposed new socialist society. In this institution, the display of peasant objects collected from all regions of the country corresponded to the desire of the communist leaders to create and promote a coherent narrative of the unity of the Romanian nation and its territory, through social homogenization and further amalgamation of items coming from different regions of the country.[15]

Employees from the Museum of Folk Art were responsible for curating exhibitions to be placed in the museum itself, and for opening hundreds of displays of folk art in factories, schools and houses of culture throughout Romania and abroad. They were tasked with guiding group visits in order to disseminate knowledge in a collectivized form. For example, files 34, 35 and 36 from the Archives of the Museum of Folk Art list the exhibitions organized in other local museums across the country and abroad in a single year (1961) by a team of nine muzeografi (museum curators) from Bucharest. What is noticeable is the urgency of the entire endeavour. Evidence provided in these files supports Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov's argument on the marked sense of urgency that characterized many of the exhibitions mounted during socialism.[16] In his description of the making of the exhibition 'Birthday Gifts to Stalin', in Moscow in 1949, Ssorin-Chaikov describes how the exhibition, which displayed gifts received by Stalin himself, was completed in just ten days by a team of dedicated museum curators. The same kind of sense of urgency was apparent in the five-year plans, as well as in the Stakhanovist obsession for breaking national work targets. Ssorin-Chaikov characterizes this sense of urgency as a gift in itself, offered first by the workers to their managers, and then by the managers to their own superiors and other agencies: 'Stakhanovism took the form not merely of the fulfilment of plans—on time, in theory—but of their "over-fulfilment" in terms of the quantity of what was produced or, more importantly,

of the time necessary to fulfil the plan. The over-fulfilment of a plan of industrial output was its fulfilment "ahead of time" [dosrochno].'[17]

By this logic, this over-fulfilment introduced a time-gap into the cycles of the socialist planned economy and transferred the meaning of labour to a higher semiotic plane, which contributed ultimately to defining the Stakhanovite rush as material fragility and vulnerability.[18] Ssorin-Chaikov calls this process a 'leap forward' in the value of labour, where the labour itself could be seen as a gift.[19]

In the Romanian case, the immense stream of exhibitions could be seen as adding to the supreme effort that was thought by both simple workers and managers to project them into the glorious communist future, as could the stream of gifts in the Soviet case. Therefore, it was perfectly plausible that a relatively small team of just nine museum curators employed in the Museum of Folk Art organized in a single year seven exhibitions in Romanian factories and houses of culture across the country, three exhibitions abroad and numerous radio transmissions and conferences, while also publishing in dedicated journals and being responsible for supervising group visits to the exhibitions curated in Bucharest.[20]

In this context, the intensive rhythm of work and the balancing of many responsibilities were also supposed to mark a clear distance from pre-socialist work practices in Romania.[21] However, it equally indicates a lack of certainty about the present on a setting in which most energies were dedicated to build the future. The gift-like nature of over-work and the high number of curatorial activities precluded muzeografi from being given any criticism about the quality of their work. Indeed, accounts of visitors' perceptions from socialist museums are limited. In a system which was concerned with the production of things outside of the free market, it was the making of displays that was registered and not viewing statistics. The archives from the Museum of Folk Art demonstrate that state officials and museum curators were not concerned with the reception of exhibitions and other cultural products. Their worries were about inspections carried out by the Party Apparatus of the Ministry of Culture, or with denunciations to the Security Office made by their own colleagues.

In the midst of such frenzied production, dozens of specialized museums and specialized sections within regional museums were dedicated to folk art in all the major cities; muzeografi in Bucharest also played an important role in this dissemination. Between 1960 and 1970, nine completely new folk art museums were opened. Whereas in 1960 in the whole

of Romania there were only nineteen art museums that included sections of folk art, by 1970 there were fifty-one, and one decade later, ninety-one.[22]

This relatively rapid growth was accompanied by three major transformations. First, a new category of museum curators was established—muzeografi. They were trained in historical materialism and replaced the previous museum curators, who were mostly artists and art historians who supported a different political regime. Muzeografi complied with the rules prescribed by the Ministry of Culture, which stipulated, for example, that only objects made of a particular material should be displayed in the same glass case or on the same wall. But these rules were also profoundly political. In the early 1950s the Manual of Museography was published in Russia and was translated into Romanian in 1957 and circulated 'internally' to all museums in the country.[23] It was seen as the norm that all museographic institutions should follow. It contained ample explanations on how to set up exhibitions, display photographs, design labels and organize group visits for workers, bureaucrats, students and soldiers. Recommendations stipulated that, for example, glass cases should be exhibited chronologically in order to facilitate comprehension, and that 'all contents of visits [. . .] should be profoundly and ideologically targeted, in order to be truly scientifically and politically oriented'.[24] The idea of 'scientificity' was used as proof of progress in mainstream media, in scientific journals, in conferences and in particular in the Museums' Magazine and the relatively numerous books that were printed in the 1960s on the importance of research and display of folk art.[25]

The second transformation was related to the making of these exhibitions, which were only partially done locally. Not only most of the means of display but also the objects and scenography of the display were delivered from 1964 onwards from a central institution named Decorativa. This was thought by authorities not only to increase efficiency and their control over displays, but also to disseminate official ideology to a broad spectrum of people. Without central control and distribution of ideas and materials, it would have been extremely difficult for the local institutions, which lacked training and resources, to display the progress of Romanian society at the pace that the communist party leaders wanted them to.

A third transformation concerned the adoption of simple materials and exhibition techniques in museum displays. As elsewhere in the communist countries, the promotion of radically new and more 'efficient' materials and the adoption of modern designs that favoured simple structures, large plain surfaces and a limited colour palette was meant to mark a fundamental

shift from the pre-communist past. New cultural workers saw flamboyant and complicated shapes, massive structures and complexity in architecture and design as enduring signs of an old and decadent regime.[26]Wood, plaster and rope were considered to be bourgeois materials, whereas wrought iron, glass and lighter structures of wood such as prefabricated melamine, were seen as modernist and compatible with the powerful discourse concerning 'hygiene' and efficacy. Mannequins or plaster heads were also avoided because they were abstract representations of peasants, and were considered to be remnants of the 'decadent' taste prevalent before the Second World War.[27] It is important to note that these aesthetic justifications were marking 'discontinuity' and rupture from the previous period. The high numbers of exhibitions accomplished in short periods of time were completed with limited economic resources.

Centralized production of design

Figure 2 shows a glass case displayed in a museographic fair from 1964 [2]. In this case, museum specialists explain six consecutive phases of exhibition-making in ethnographic displays. The first case presents an empty white rectangular room containing a simple ladder, and the last case shows the same white cube now filled in with folk objects on display. The case promotes the idea that all cultural workers should know how to organize such displays and that sequential explanations were not only specific to a historical–materialist understanding but also an accessible form of making knowledge available and effective as broadly as possible to other museum curators, and to visitors themselves.[28]

Ethnographic displays were believed to have efficacy as manifestations of the historical materialist doctrine just by being made according to the preset plans. Leszek Kolakowski explains 'the materialist interpretation of history' as 'the genetic dependence of the history of ideas on the history of production'.[29] According to Karl Marx, it is production which determines ideas. In the case of museum displays, it was production which was monitored and analysed.

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Fig 2. Glass case entitled 'The Phases of Exhibition Making' in the exhibition '20 years of activity of the Ethnographic Museum of Transylvania', organized in 1964. The Archives of Muzeul Naţional al Ţăranului Român, Fonds M.A.P., File 34. Reproduced with permission from the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant

The glass case displayed in Figure 2 also introduces the idea of planning into the socialist understanding of design [2]. Decorativa constituted a key institution for socialist planning in the field of art. Its name can be literally translated into English as 'the Decorative'. It was a factory responsible for what we might today call the interior design of public venues. One of the former directors of Decorativa, architect Şerban Goga, asserted in 2010 that at its opening in 1964, the factory was filled with employees from the recently dissolved Romanian Association for the Friendship with the Soviet Union (ARLUS).[30] ARLUS was dissolved following Romania demonstrating its loyalty to the USSR by invading Hungary in 1956. If the Red Army remained in Hungary, it withdrew from Romania. Where ARLUS had the task of promoting the cultural model of the Soviets,[31] Decorativa instead had the important role of empowering the national agenda in the context of the de-Russification of Romania.[32]

In the late 1980s, more than 7,000 architects, painters, textile artists and manual workers were employed in the factory's departments: they specialized in iron work, wood carving, stage design, costume design and embroidery, and the organization of interior settings for workshops and conferences. The company was designed so as to have the workforce, materials and means to provide all the display materials for virtually all of the cultural institutions in the country. Consequently, it manufactured glass cases, cupboards, mannequins, stage scenography and the interior fittings for theatres, cinema houses and festival venues. It basically produced everything, from maps, pictures and labels for museums, to the grandiose scenography for Shakespeare plays, or the front cover designs, graphics and typography for mainstream journals such as Femeia [The Woman] or Cinema [The Cinema].

As Goga has confirmed: 'Decorativa was a state monopoly; [f]or anything you wanted to do in a museum or theatre you were not allowed to work by yourself. It was a visual control. Our solutions and our materials were imposed. People in museums were passive.'[33]

In this context, the quote above might easily be read as indicating that a form of aesthetic dictatorship was in operation. As various authors have argued, the elimination of the market also eliminates change and adaptation in the design of products.[34] But Goga's affirmation is followed by others which highlight specific kinds of freedom: 'The design for exhibition was not the same; we were inspired by what we were seeing abroad. [. . .] The vision of the architect of the exhibition was important.'[35]

My interview with Goga raised two important points: on the one hand, state propaganda controlled the Decorativa exhibitions; on the other hand, these exhibitions were innovative, new and modern, and the architects were in constant contact with the work of their colleagues in other countries. As is the case with most muzeografi, architects of exhibitions were accompanying exhibitions mounted for museums in other countries. If there was very little exchange in certain contexts,[36] in others muzeografi and Decorativa specialists collaborated extensively.[37] These collaborations were not only products of 'friendships' between socialist countries, but of profound similarities of practices of conservation, indexation and display, existing in ethnographic museums throughout the world.[38]

However, Decorativa specialists were not necessarily designers. At the beginning of the 1960s it is better to talk of professionals 'preoccupied with design', rather than of 'designers' as recognized professionals.[39] A wave of artists, architects and 'artists of the people' who had been trained in the completely restructured Şcoala de Arte Populare (The School of Applied Decorative Arts) began to be given positions of responsibility in design jobs almost before completing their training. These people were employed by newly established state companies such as Decorativa (The Decorative) and Fondul Plastic (The Plastic Art Fund), who controlled the entire flux of exhibition making, from acquiring raw materials to writing and printing out the labels for objects on display. If Decorativa was responsible for the interior design of most public cultural institutions, Fondul Plastic was responsible for producing paints and tools for all state institutions. Still, after a section of industrial design was opened in the Institute of Art in Bucharest in 1969 and other sections were opened across the country at the beginning of the 1970s, the term 'designer' gained much more attention and was included in the official record of professions.[40] The situation of 'designers' in Romania was described in the following terms:

Following their graduation, however, young designers were forced to accept jobs within the design centres affiliated with state-owned factories or the so-called 'creation centers' affiliated with various ministries such as the Braşov Plant for Wood Processing, the Industrial Center for Leather, Rubber, and Shoes, or the Institute of Industrial Creation and Aesthetics of Products at the Ministry of Light Industry.[41]

The architect Mirela Duculescu shows how this group of dedicated practitioners (especially architects) worked with leading figures of the moment, such as architect Paul Bortnowski (who taught at the school's stage design department), the art historian I. Haidoroc

Constantinescu and the painters Vladimir Şetran and Ion Biţzan.[42]My research in the museum shows that Şetran and Biţzan also painted the main entrance hall in the Museum of Folk Art and that they helped with the arrangement of the displays from the early 1970s onwards, mainly by working in close collaboration with muzeografi. Similar cooperation happened in museums across the country. With the help of Decorativa specialists, local ethnologists and historians who were willing to be trained in museology became museum curators, a factor which contributed significantly to the expansion of the field. I suggest that this collaboration between incipient designers and other state employees represents the manifestation of the nationalization of aesthetics and of taste, which is not a unique imposed form, but which comes rather from repetitive practices and working in constant alliances. As the next section will indicate, such collaboration produced the design of ethnographic exhibitions which became dispersed in many other settings outside the museum walls.

Technocrat dispersion

This section discusses the collaboration between the artists and artist–decorators employed in Decorativa and specialists from various cultural institutions such as theatres, cinemas, exhibitions, festivals and museums, as well as those producing specialized publications.

In parallel to the way in which light and flexible materials were replacing heavy baroque design elements, graduates from 'art schools' trained in the new historical materialist paradigm were called upon to replace the artists and art-historians who had dominated the museographic scene until the end of the Second World War. The new museum professionals, known as muzeografi, were regarded by the communist regime as technocrats with fixed and quantifiable bureaucratic tasks. The production of such a particular category of practitioners which mediated between the standardized care of objects and artistic display, contributed to the formation of a group specific to the socialist modernities of Central and Eastern Europe. These practitioners were dubbed 'technocrat intelligentsia' by George Konrád and Ivan Szelényi.[43]They describe how, during communism, the national intelligentsia in this part of Europe constituted two main groups, the technocrat intelligentsia and the humanist intelligentsia. Technocrats were a product of the 1960s and 1970s, possessing technical and bureaucratic expertise and political power, whereas the humanist intelligentsia originated from the former aristocracy and bourgeoisie, and were in control of the more liberal professions and arts.[44]By putting artistic production into the hands of Decorativa, the socialist state managed to produce technocrats and bureaucrats even within the field of the

arts.[45]Throughout this process, the socialist state also kept other major promises on its agenda, such as giving unprecedented opportunities for the employment of women. Decorativa had an important section dedicated to sewing traditional costumes for stage use.[46] Most muzeografi were women. This makes us see how women were an important component of the bureaucracy of the socialist states.

Muzeografi depended on Decorativa specialists to organize their exhibitions. The result was the creation of a 'middle', 'lukewarm' taste which combined the desires and practices of the artists and architects employed in factories such as Decorativa with the taste and practices of those historians and muzeografi who actually worked in museums. One can identify two consequences of this collaboration between the professionals from Decorativa and the museum specialists. On the one hand, there was the attempt to constrain artistic creativity and freedom but also to subordinate individual subjectivities to the state-run initiatives relating to art and cultural production.[47] On the other, the recurrence and speed of this activity led to a powerful dilution of these norms.

This transmission of knowledge from one profession to another was possible also because the display format used in ethnographic museums was predictable, with most exhibitions following the same 'theme of exhibition'. As numerous exhibition catalogues attest, structuring the display by themes usually resulted in the physical separation of objects on display according to their materials; there would be separate glass cases or rooms for ceramics, textiles, wood and iron. Such divisions were mainly due to reasons of conservation and to a rather vulgar understanding of historical materialism. Muzeografi did not necessarily involve themselves critically with Marxist texts, and Western Marxism was very different from the ideology of Marxist–Leninism. In fact, 'the general Soviet public did not read Marx himself', as is affirmed by BuckMorss.[48]In contrast with Boris Groys' assertion that '[t]he Socialist State became the only remaining consumer of art',[49] I argue that the simplicity of the display allowed for independent interpretation and adaptation. The reworking was contained within limits: the deployment of exhibition design methods established a sense of certainty and collectivized homogeneity around socialism.

Figure 3 shows an example of this simple and somewhat austere means of display [3]. Uninitiated observers in collective visits could easily read from which ethnographic regions the costumes came, and the gender with which they were associated, as well as any other properties that were clearly printed on the labels attached to each object on display. The

costumes were stuffed with newspapers to take the shape of a body, and some parts, such as women's dress and headscarves gave the impression of movement. However, each costume was secured with at least forty to fifty pins each, onto a grey background fabric. This display represents, as do many others, a paradoxical combination between absolute fixity and silent positive dynamism specific to socialist realist representations.

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Fig 3. A temporary exhibition in Bucovina from the late 1960s. The image was published in a book on folk art from 1975

This effect was obtained through the juxtaposition of a series of very simple rules and relatively cheap materials. An example is the 'golden rule' which stipulated that every object on display needed 3 m2 of space. In the case of smaller objects, as in the example shown above, objects were to be ordered in very strict ways; costumes should be pinned onto boards and traditional bags and leather shoes should be placed on plinths at the base of these boards.[50]The accompanying text, in small type on a rectangular piece of white paper, also had to be clear, precise and to the point about different attributes which could be easily identified, such as geographic region, time period and to which gender the objects originally belonged. Sometimes, objects were presented by themselves, taken out of any context, as Figure 4 indicates [4]. These formulaic rules could make audiences regard such ethnographic displays as exemplary of a variant of socialist realism, and its characteristic sense of optimism.[51] At the same time, these displays indicated a particular kind of formulaic aesthetics which was the result of much repetition and dissolution within a general plan.

In this respect, Decorativa entered the history of socialist design in the 1960s not just because its professionals started to build a national school of design, but more because it produced a nationwide school of ubiquitous practice which involved both designers and non-designers drawn from all cultural fields.[52] Most curators of ethnographic museums in socialist Romania regarded Decorativa's directions and the aid of muzeografi from the Museum of the Folk Art in Bucharest as helpful and easy to implement.[53] They were happy to respect formulaic rules which made their work most effective in a context in which they had to curate dozens of exhibitions every year. They were operating also many improvisations where the rules and the specific demands of the many institutions they were collaborating with were put into balance. This move from ideals to models on a daily basis shows the particular way socialist

design dispersed, and became a multiplicity of standardized practices for setting up simple exhibitions, not only in museums, but in shops, factories, schools and anywhere design was manifested. This is reminiscent of how Lefebvre described design as an everyday activity in which aesthetic processes are not to be seen as separate from participation.[54]

The 'atomization' of objects

My ethnographic material suggests that the simplicity and predictability of ethnographic exhibition making, which was based on flexibility and often remaking, was also meant to relay to the observer a certain objectivity and a lack of ambiguity concerning objects and ideas on display. A fundamental feature of this endeavour was the presentation of objects which were separated from one another. To a certain degree this rendered them mutually interchangeable. I call this characteristic of the 1960s–1970s Romanian ethnographic exhibition design the 'atomization' of objects. 'Atomization' was the norm and it ensured that displayed objects were detached from the social context in which they were originally produced or used. Most of the ethnographic objects were collected by a team in one museum and donated to other museums for targeted displays. Even within the same exhibition, objects could replace one another or be used in rotation so long as the material constituency of each object was respected (textiles exhibited near textiles, woodcarvings near woodcarvings). These principles of display were very different from the diorama type of exhibition making in other European ethnological museums. If dioramas presupposed the existence of a context and directive meanings imposed on the objects, in the socialist ethnographic museum this did not apply. I suggest that both folklore and folkloric displays had a political 'neutrality' that allowed them to function in a manner similar to an empty vessel that can be filled with any kind of ideological content.

In a German context anthropologist Regina Bendix affirms that the methodology of folklore argues that 'the expressive culture is being culled from the flow of everyday life'.[55] I suggest that it is exactly this apparent retreat from the everyday life that allowed folklore and ethnographic displays to operate above suspicion, often in spite of their role in political projects.[56]

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Fig 4. Pinned textile from the Image Archive of Muzeul Naţional al Ţăranului Român, Fonds Oroveanu/Image O–413. Reproduced with permission from the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant

Such decontextualized objects and neutral design were, to a large extent, the design of the society as a whole. The frequent permutations of people who followed state jobs and assignments in different parts of the country made it seem as though the individuals themselves were interchangeable. Anthropologist Victor Buchli describes this process as part of a specific socialist subjectivity that was sought by the communist party to ensure collective forms of organization:

'This is a socialist subjectivity that, through highly individualized, is nonetheless socialized within a wider socialist collective by virtue of the dematerialization of daily life. The immaterial here—as produced under the particular conditions of Soviet socialism—secures this subjectivity through its productive effects. [. . .] [T]he scale at which such a dematerialization takes place is inherently bodily [. . .]'[57]

Similarly, the atomization of objects made different permutations possible and showed objects stripped of a surplus of materiality. This allows various forms of socialist objectlessness, which will be discussed in the following section. It also relates aesthetical minimalism to the idea of modest consumption.[58] Art historians Susan Reid and David Crowley assert that: '[T]he people's taste had to be disciplined both on ideological and aesthetic grounds, as well as to keep aspirations within limits state industrial production might feasibly satisfy.'[59]

The desire to 'keep aspiration within limits' is what made design during socialism a collective and collaborative enterprise that managed to provide high numbers of displays with limited resources. Arjun Appadurai calls 'design with a social conscience' an enterprise which stays under the auspices of planning and exploits the seriality of objects. 'Where design can be caught up in an immediate need, trend, or material opportunity, planning aspires to be design with a social conscience and to connect the world of goods to the world of politics, justice and long-term resource constraints.'[60]

In contrast, Svetlana Boym argues that a similar seriality of objects represents 'state-guided common place of stagnation'.[61]

Disembodied

Figures 5 and 6 show examples from the late 1960s of stuffed and pinned costumes and textiles [5, 6]. The socialist archives of ethnographic museums contain abundant images of such empty costumes which can be seen as a different technique of disembodiment. In the epistemology and methodology of the ethnographic and folkloric research of the time, people had to be excluded from displays and only the qualities and design of materials were considered important. There are primarily three reasons to explain this absence. First, disembodied objects could be better analysed in terms of their function. The study of objects was prioritized and real efforts were made to keep well away from the study of people.[62] Secondly, stripped of any traces of human presence, objects could be more easily reinterpreted and invested with meanings. Finally, it was difficult to display the lived reality of peasants; their modern objects from collectivized villages and agricultural farms were not displayable.

Fig 5. Exhibited folk costume; from the Image Archive of Muzeul Naţional al Ţăranului Român, Fonds Oroveanu/ Image O–503. Reproduced with permission from the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant

As my ethnographic material suggests, in the photographs, in which profuse white light invades the picture and erases the human presence, one sees no peasants, but muzeografi dressed with folkloric costumes in non-contemporary peasant clothes.

The technique of disembodiment in the display of objects was taken a step further during the next decade. In 1974, a major exhibition, 'Folk Costume in Romania', opened at the Museum of Folk Art aiming at presenting peasant costumes from all the ethnographic regions in the country.[63] After three years of hard work curating the exhibition, muzeografi remember their experience of work as extremely 'fulfilling' and 'unique'. What they praised most highly was their collaboration with specialists from Decorativa and their use of new materials.

As one of the muzeografi responsible for this display remembered:

It was a beautiful and very modern exhibition. The walls were painted in black, as well as the interior stairs and very tall and imposing mannequins constructed from transparent glass, lit from inside, were used. These mannequins had no feet, but stood on a structure of glass blocks that gave the impression of height. One could admire the folk costumes on these mannequins by looking upwards.[64]

The translucent bodies lit from inside respected the rule of the disembodied figure of the peasant, but also it was this impeccable transparency that allowed for Socialist dreams such as mass provision and bright futures to be made present and enacted through peasant costumes. This noted objectlessness and translucency in display evokes arguments raised in other ethnographies of Soviet space concerned with the refurbishment of domestic interiors[65] and public housing architecture in the USSR and Hungary.[66] Each ethnography in its own way reveals how socialist regimes struggled with the sheer material weight of objects, and also to prohibit anything that was thought of as prospectively threatening to the socialist order—namely opulence, petit-bourgeoisie ornamentation, and the new fetishism of capitalist consumption. But the glass mannequins also show opulence realized through the means of socialist materials, which indicates how muzeografi and designers found ways to innovate inside the relatively 'neutral' set of rules and narrow standards.

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Fig 6. Exhibited folk costume; from the Image Archive of Muzeul Naţional al Ţăranului Român, Fonds Oroveanu/Image O–1199. Reproduced with permission from the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant

Conclusion

Decorativa was a state monopoly which controlled design and production for the interior settings used in virtually the entire Romanian cultural scene. Its power and influence to structure the design of public spaces were immense. However, I suggest that despite this omnipresent control, the atomization of objects, the drastic simplification of exhibition design and the dispersion of technical knowledge allowed for continual innovations. The paramount idea which the design of exhibitions managed to convey was that objects were atomizing workers themselves as egalitarian subjects to a formulaic uniformity and state prescribed

collectivity. By presuming that the audience would attempt to access a 'truth' through the objects, the exhibition-oriented approach in Romania in the 1960s and 1970s encouraged divergent interpretations and discussions. Officially, this 'truth' was the socialist doctrine, but the disembodiment of objects on display and their atomization allowed curators to make use of displayed items for different purposes.

I conclude that the socialist regime sought to effect a momentous reinterpretation of social history through the medium of design. This idea is reminiscent of the work of the design historian Penny Sparke and her followers who saw objects not as aestheticized things arranged in different ways, but as reflections and parts of different social narratives. However, the ethnographic evidence shows that most architects and officials were not necessarily propagandizing the official socialist ideals, and were not proselytizing and promoting bigger issues. Rather, some wanted to 'catch-up' with the so called 'more evolved' Western practices, some others had personal ideas about how culture should be represented, while others wanted to combine Western ideas with socialist materials and forms. As a consequence, virtually all professionals working in the field of culture contributed to the dispersion of socialist design while managing to play within the limits of centralized rules.

The design of ethnographic displays during socialism was meant to deliver its cultural products outside the museum's walls in dispersed and multiplied forms. This was achieved through collective work by which individuals were bonded to each other in a social organization that left ways to express individuality and tastes while assembling the state's ideology on a day to day basis.

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[1] K. Hudson, A Social History of Museums, Macmillan, London, 1975.

[2] See for example V. Buchli, An Archaeology of Socialism, Berg, Oxford, 2000; D. Kaneff, Who Owns the Past? The Politics of Time in a 'Model' Bulgarian Village, Berghahn Books, New York & Oxford, 2004; K. Verdery, National Ideology under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceauşescu's Romania, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, & London, 1995; and S. E. Reid & D. Crowley (eds), Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-war Eastern Europe, Berg, Oxford, 2000.

[3] V. Molnar, 'In Search of the Ideal Socialist Home in PostStalinist Hungary: Prefabricated Mass Housing or Do-ItYourself Family Home?', Journal of Design History, vol. 23, no. 1, 2010, pp. 61–81; and K. E. Zarecor, Manufacturing a Socialist Modernity: Housing in Czechoslovakia, 1945– 1960, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, PA, 2011.

[4] See, for example, the 'Singing of Romania' National Festival. For details, see V. Mihãilescu, 'A New Festival for the New Man: The Socialist Market of Folk Experts during the "Singing Romania" National Festival', in Studying Peoples in the People's Democracies II. Socialist Era Anthropology in South-East Europe, V. Mihãilescu, I. Iliev & S. Naumović (eds), LIT Verlag, Berlin, pp. 55–80.

[5] T. Gilberg, Nationalism and Communism in Romania: The Rise and Fall of Ceausescu's Personal Dictatorship, Westview Press, Oxford, 1990; G. Ionescu, Communism in Rumania, 1944– 1962, Oxford University Press, Oxford & London, 1964.

[6] The idea that folk exhibitions were seen as markers of distancing of socialist workers from their own peasant past is mostly based on the analysis of temporality of the folk art objects on display. Usually, old antique objects were placed near images of industrialized settings. The difficult present that was put on display is not discussed here but is explored in G. Nicolescu, 'Displaying Historical Materialism in Socialist Romania: The Ventures of Commanding Temporalities', in J. Aimée et al. (eds), TENSES. New Graduate Writing, Goldsmiths, University of London, London, 2014, pp. 35–55.

[7] C. Pălãşan, '"Organizarea ştiinţifică" a societăţii sau Ştiinţele sociale în România primilor ani ai regimului Ceauşescu. Cazul judeţului Iaşi 1970–1972' ['The "Scientific Organization" of Society or the Social Sciences in Romania in the First Years of the Ceausescu Regime. The Case of Iaşi Region 1970–1972'], in Structuri de partid şi de Stat în timpul regimului comunist. Anuarul Institutului de Investigare a Crimelor Comunismului in Romania, vol. 3, Institutului de Investigare a Crimelor Comunismului in Romania, Bucharest, 2008,

pp. 119–154; and Z. Rostás, Sala Luminoasă. Primii Monografişti ai Şcolii Gustiene [The Lighted Room. The First Monographers of the Gustian School], Paideia, Bucharest, 2003.

[8] See, for example, O. Hedeşan, 'Doing Fieldwork in Communist Romania', in Mihăilescu, Iliev & S. Naumović, op. cit., pp. 10–40.

[9] The Romanian art popular was often translated into English as 'folk art'. For more analysis on how 'popular art' during socialism can be translated as both 'people's' and 'popular', see D. Crowley, 'People's Warsaw/Popular Warsaw', Journal of Design History, vol. 10, no. 2, 1997, pp. 203–23.

[10] Verdery, op. cit. In Romanian țăran, translated into English as 'peasant' or as 'countryman', does not have a derogatory meaning.

[11] M. Cârneci, Artele Plastice în România 1945–2000 [Fine Arts in Romania 1945–2000], Editura Meridiane, Bucharest, 2000, p. 41.

[12] The National Museum of Art was managed and curated by Al. Tzigara-Samurcaş under the auspices of the Royal Family. The style of display was heavily influenced by Artur Hazelius' displays of Swedish ethnographic folk objects.

[13] T. Bănățeanu, critical answer to Viața Culturală a Capitalei [The Cultural Life of the Capital City], [editorial board], De ce avem nevoie de muzee noi [Why Do We Need New Museums], vol. 6, no. 2.24, 10–16 January 1953, unpaginated.

[14] My research focuses on material coming from the archives of different institutions such as the Museum of Folk Art [MFA] or the Museum of National Art (before the Second World War), hosted by Muzeul Național al Țăranului Român (the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant). The main site of Decorativa, partially privatized, was during my research still located near Piața Traian (Traian Square), but access to its still existing and very valuable archives was denied during my research in 2010 and 2011.

[15] Unlike how historian Francine Hirsch has discussed the role of ethnographic displays in the Soviet Union as amalgamation of nations, in this case, one can see the desire of state officials to promote the amalgamation of peasant objects coming from different ethnographic regions of the country. For further reference, see F. Hirsch, Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge & the Making of the Soviet Union, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2005.

[16] N. Ssorin-Chaikov, 'On Heterochrony: Birthday Gifts to Stalin, 1949', Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, vol. 12, no. 2, 2006, pp. 355–75.

[17] Ibid., p. 362.

[18] Ibid., p. 372.

[19] Ibid., p. 361.

[20] The detailed plan of the activities of the muzeografi is included in the File 208 of the MFA Archives, which documents a thorough inspection organized by the Ministry of Culture in 1961.

[21] A story of the director of the Museum of National Art during the inter-war period is evocative. In one of the files in the Museum's archives one can read about his expensive trip in a carriage for almost 200 km in order to collect only one wooden spoon (see Golden Archives, Muzeul Național al Ț ranului Român). The inter-war museum and the practices of art historians and artists can be seen as totally bohemian when compared with the hyperactivity of muzeografi during the socialist period.

[22] I. Opriş, Transmuseographia. Oscar Print, Bucharest, 2000, p. 219.

[23] P. I. Galkina et al., Bazele Muzeologiei Sovietice [The Basis of Soviet Museology], Ministerul Culturii, Bucharest, 1957.

[24] Ibid. p. 245. 25 Amongst the writings are T. Bănățeanu, Catalogul Muzeului de Artă Populară al RPR [Catalogue of the Folk Art Museum of the People's Republic of Romania], Muzeul de Artă Populară, Bucharest, 1957; and P. Petrescu & E. Secoşan, Arta Populara. Îndreptar Metodic [Folk Art. Methodical Manual], Comitetul de Stat pentru Cultură şi Artă, Bucharest, 1966.

[25] Amongst the writings are T. Bănățeanu, Catalogul Muzeului de Artă Populară al RPR [Catalogue of the Folk Art Museum of the People's Republic of Romania], Muzeul de Artă Populară, Bucharest, 1957; and P. Petrescu & E. Secoşan, Arta Populara. Îndreptar Metodic [Folk Art. Methodical Manual], Comitetul de Stat pentru Cultură şi Artă, Bucharest, 1966.
[26] Authors who have written about the use of new materials in socialism include Buchli, op. cit.; and S. Boym, Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA & London, 1994.

[27] In a letter from the Archives of the Museum of Folk Art from the early 1950s, one muzeograf complains that the 'old' style of glass cases made out of wood and the use of mannequins 'becomes more and more upsetting and disturbing' (MFA Archive/File 202).

[28] There was no school of museographic practice, but mostly a practice-based apprenticeship, following manuals of museographic and regulations from the Ministry of Culture. Even so, most muzeografi working in ethnographic museums did their undergraduate degrees in history in the 1960s and 1970s (Nicolescu, 'Displaying Historical Materialism in Socialist Romania', op. cit.).

[29] L. Kolakowski, Main Currents of Marxism: The Founders, the Golden Age, the Breakdown, W. W. Norton & Company, New York & London, 2005 [1978], p. 125.

[30] Transcribed interview with Ş. Goga, male, Bucharest on 26 April 2010, c. 1 hr 10 min [in the possession of the author].

[31] ARLUS was opened in 1944 to foster relations between Romanian intellectuals and Soviet culture from the USSR. This organization needs to be seen in relation to the closing down of other important institutions that had existed before the Second World War, such as the Romanian Academy. ARLUS had different sections: army, social sciences, economy, sports and tourism, arts, propaganda, journalism, radio and photography. For further analysis on ARLUS, see V. Frunză, Istoria Stalinismului n România [The History of Romanian Stalinism], Humanitas, Bucharest, 1990; A. Cioroianu, 'ARLUS, o poveste cu intelectuali' ['ARLUS, A Story with Intellectuals'], Revista, vol. 22, October 1996; and R. Negrescu-Şuţu, 'ARLUS şi bătrânii friguroşi' ['ARLUS and the Cold Old People'], Asymetria— revue roumaine de culture, critique et imagination, 17 September 2006 <http://www.asymetria.org/modules. php?name=News&file=print&sid=201> accessed 19 May 2015.

[32] Certain authors argue that Romania was one of the countries where the process of Stalinization continued even after the death of Stalin: for example, V. Tismăneanu, Stalinism for all Seasons. A Political History of Romanian Communism. University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2003.

[33] Ş. Goga, interview with the author, op. cit.

[34] B. Kaminsky, The Collapse of State Socialism, the Case of Poland, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2014, pp. 22–3; and Duculescu, op. cit., p. 6.

[35] Ş. Goga, interview with the author, op. cit.

[36] L. Formagiu tells the story of how she mounted the same exhibition in Vietnam and Korea in 1961. She recalls that In Vietnam her colleagues in the museum were not allowed to talk to her. L. Formagiu, transcribed interview, female, ninety year old muzeograf in the Museum of Folk Art, c. 1 hr 45 min.

37 When muzeografi mounted an exhibition in 1968 in Switzerland they collaborated extensively with their colleagues in Neuchâtel. For further reference see J. Gabus, Roumanie Trésors d'Art [Romania, Art Treasure], exhibition catalogue, Musée D'Ethnographie Neuchâtel, Neuchâtel, 1968.

38 Many modern ethnographic and anthropological museums around the world have adopted the temporal evolutionary narrative and believe in their capacity to educate through material forms. See A. Coombes, Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, & London, 1994. There is growing recognition of the general importance of looking at the articulation of local forms of design with globalism as evidenced by a recent special issue of the Journal of Design History, vol. 27, no. 4, devoted to the topic.

39 See further M. Duculescu, 'Avânt şi energie! Designul socialist în România' ['Upsurge and Vigour! Socialist Design in Romania'], Zeppelin, vol. 97, 2011, pp. 96–101.

40 Ibid. p. 99.

41 M. Duculescu, 'Mapping the Narrative of Romanian Design', Design Museum Holon, 2012 <http://www.dmh.org.il/pages/ default.aspx?PageId=413&catid=-1> accessed 22 May 2015.

42 The last became the school's dean between 1971 and 1997. Vladimir Şetran and Ion Biţzan were also among the first members of the Industrial Forms/Design Sections opened in 1969 in the Institute of Fine Arts in Bucharest. For more information about this department and for the history of design in Romania, see M. Duculescu, 'Romanian Design between the Problematics of Democratic Design and Socialist Practice (1970–1990)', Ph.D. thesis, National University of Arts, Bucharest, 2014, p. 8.

43 G. Konrád & I. Szelényi, The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power, Harcourt Brace
44 Ibid. 45 The bureaucratization of the artistic field needs to be seen in relation to the creation at similar moments in different Eastern European countries of the Union of Artists and Architects: in the Czech Republic in 1948 (see Zarecor, op. cit., p. 73) and in Romania in 1950 (see C. Vasile, Literatura şi Artele in România comunistă: 1948–1953 [Literature and Fine Arts in Communist Romania], Humanitas: Bucharest, 2013).

45 The bureaucratization of the artistic field needs to be seen in relation to the creation at similar moments in different Eastern European countries of the Union of Artists and Architects: in the Czech Republic in 1948 (see Zarecor, op. cit., p. 73) and in Romania in 1950 (see C. Vasile, Literatura şi Artele in România comunistă: 1948–1953 [Literature and Fine Arts in Communist Romania], Humanitas: Bucharest, 2013).
46 Especially after the opening of the nationally important festival, 'Cântarea României' ['The Singing of Romania'], which began in 1968.

47 The idea of the subordination of individual subjectivities to state-run initiatives during the socialist period is also developed by K. Pence & P. Betts, Socialist Modern: East Modern Every Day Culture and Politics, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI, 2008, pp. 8–9.

48 See S. Buck-Morss, Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2000, p. 220.
49 B. Groys, Art Power, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2008, p. 145.
50 Recorded interview with M. Netcu, female, sixty-eight years old, muzeograf in the NMRP, on 15 December 2010, the NMRP, c. 1 hr 40 min [in the possession of the author].

51 Groys, op. cit.
52 For a more detailed use of the term 'school of practice', see Y. Lee, 'How Old is Old? Designing Participation Tactics to Nurture the Ingenuity of Aging for our Future Selves', in Art + Care: Future, Serpentine Gallery, London, 2007, pp. 35–40.

53 For an account of when a passionate collector and selftrained curator opposed the norms imposed by Decorativa specialists, see C. Iosif, 'The Politics of Tradition: Practices of

Ethnological Museology under Communism', in Mihăilescu, Iliev & Naumović, op. cit., pp. 81–112.

54 See H. Lefebvre, The Urban Revolution, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MI, 1970 (cited in Lee, op. cit., p. 38).

55 R. Bendix, 'The Uses of Disciplinary History', Radical History Review, vol. 84, Fall 2002, pp. 110–14.

56 I take the idea of neutrality as politics from Slavoj Žižek. He explains the principle of the empty centre which can be refilled by multiple contents. See The Pervert's Guide to Ideology, director Sophie Fiennes, screenplay and acting by Slavoj Žižek, The Pervert's Guide to Ideology Production Company, USA, 2012.

57 V. Buchli, An Archaeology of the Immaterial, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, 2015, p. 141.

58 D. Crowley, 'Warsaw's Shops, Stalinism and the Thaw', in Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-war Eastern Europe, S. E. Reid & D. Crowley (eds), Berg, Oxford, 2000, pp. 25–44.

59 D. Crowley & S. E. Reid, 'Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe', in Reid & Crowley, Style and Socialism, op. cit., p. 14.

60 A. Appadurai, The Future as Cultural Fact. Essays on the Global Condition, Verso, London, 2013, p. 266.

61 Boym, op. cit., p. 218.

62 Hedeşan, op. cit.

63 The exhibition opened on 17 August 1974. There are no pictures of this exhibition in the archives of the Museum, nor in any published articles, but a document in the archive shows that images from the display were screened on the news, on the national TV Channel on the very day of the opening.

64 Transcribed interview with G. Roşu, female, Bucharest, on 9 August 2010, c. 50 min [in the possession of the author].

65 Boym, op. cit.

66 Buchli, An Archaeology of Socialism, op. cit.; and Molnar, op. cit.