

LOCAL CREATIVES SUSTAINING SMALL COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

“Măiastra” (also known as “Magic Birds”) identifies itself as a multidisciplinary program for contemporary art and design. It was initially built around the exploration and the influence upon contemporary creation and lifestyle of the traditional “Romanian Blouse”, perceived as an identity symbol, as well as an art piece, and the ancestral practices and crafts developed throughout. It was later established as a platform that aims to explore the past and future of cultural identity, with focus on art and design, both Romanian and international. This paper analyses the influence that the “Măiastra” program had alongside Romanian craftsmanship, sustainable living, as well as the emerging artists and designers involved in the process. The program’s innovation lays in the impact it had on the sustainable creation produced in Romania, whilst showcasing collaborative and multidisciplinary contemporary art and design practices, which highlights the ongoing tradition – future cycle. The projects and the exhibitions produced over the years came to support artists and designers who found their creative resources in ancestral symbolism, local materials and crafts, only to innovatively transpose them in the present, through various artworks, design objects, installations, sustainable house projects or sustainable creative processes. This paper introduces three representative projects, found at the intersection of sustainability and local culture, art and design, science and technology, all taking the form of collaborative exhibitions. Supporting local art, design and crafts leads to sustaining local communities, the ground root that could potentially prevent migration to the bigger cities, perhaps even promote reverse migration.

Keywords: crafts, sustainable living, multidisciplinary, sustainable houses, Romania, craftsmanship.

1 INTRODUCTION

A common thread throughout my research endeavours has been my grounded interest for heritage, inherited traditions that are preserved and transmitted amidst generations and different world cultures. It started with a growing interest for my own culture, only to continuously looking to extend to as many others with time. Because to sustain legacy not only in the region, but worldwide, both as the basis for the local economies and heritage preservation, it is necessary to seek alternatives to engage older craftsmen while attracting younger generations and introduce these types of collaborations internationally. It is important to create opportunities that enables the transfer of knowledge and know-how, through multidisciplinary initiatives meant to showcase these endeavours, such as “Măiastra” (“Magic Birds”) program, initiated in 2013 by Galateca art gallery in Bucharest, Romania. It was one of the first programs built to inspire the new generations of creators, towards discovering and recontextualizing traditional crafts, symbols, and ancestral practices.

I invited Andreea Sandu, the founder and coordinator of Galateca art gallery to be a part of this paper and to convey her journey, as we share a common interest for heritage, as well as the desire to bring a contribution to its preservation. Together with a team of artists, architects, anthropologists, and communication experts she started “Măiastra” program, back in 2013, by curating the first exhibition in a contemporary art gallery focusing on “IA” or the “Romanian Blouse” perceived as a symbol of Romanian identity. The first exhibition of the program, entitled “Măiastra: The Untold Story of the Romanian Blouse”, showcased a selection of museum standard traditional blouses, presented in the form of an art installation.



The project became the focal point for a newly developing platform that had as aim the exploration of the past and future, with focus on art and design, both Romanian and international. It traced new aesthetics for the approach towards multidisciplinary installations and contemporary projects that recontextualize the crafts in Romania.

Craftsmanship is rooted within the rural, ancestral times, rising as a testament of authenticity throughout the years. Historically, crafts were associated with a bucolic way of living and a rural habitat. Consequently, craftsmanship takes place in a suitable environment, following a natural rhythm of nature and community, part of a traditional maker's lifestyle. Crafts are part of a whole, a system, inside which each element is interconnected, and one could not survive and strive without the other, and these believes, and practices have been proven to be effective for generations. Their preservation and perpetuation are essential in transmitting to future generations ones' cultural identity. And although hard to achieve in the present, these practices and believes are being explored by displaced people like myself all around the world in our strive to evoke the homeland and a sense of belonging, or to recreate our familiar. Together with sustained efforts from creatives and cultural initiators like Andreea Sandu, who are taking the lead internally, our actions are gradually finding a voice.

The aim of this research is to introduce examples of notable initiatives in the field of art and design that come in support of our cultural heritage. Presented as a case study, one such example is "Măiastra" ("Magic Birds"), the multidisciplinary program for contemporary art and design. The program not only offered a voice to local and international creatives who aimed to collaborate with local makers, using ancestral crafts, materials, practices or believes, but also understood quickly that the projects introduced had the potential to become an instrument that could possibly lead to real changes within the local outlook. Starting with an archival research in order to set the program's structure, several field explorations followed, in order to discover local creatives and makers that would become part of the program. An ongoing research preceding each edition, helped in tracing the themes and participants' selection, as well as the overall layout. The program raised visibility and awareness towards local crafts, practices and believes, having both a physical and a virtual configuration, therefore a qualitative analyses was considered as the best approach. Throughout the creative communities and not limited to those, elements of material and immaterial culture has been increasingly adopted, being implemented within an array of multidisciplinary art and design projects. The population at large started to integrate parts of the traditional costume (precisely the "Romanian Blouse") more and more often into their daily attires, leading to an increased interest for traditional items, produced by local makers. Such examples include the renowned potter from Maramures, Daniel Les, Virginia Linul from Bistrita Nasaud, working together with over 50 women based in rural settlements around the region, or Dana Dobrai, a weaver from Maramures County, Romania.

2 METHODOLOGY

This research takes a qualitative approach to explore case studies concerning multidisciplinary art and design projects, having as focus, collaborations between artists, designers, and local makers, in an initiative to sustaining small communities. As such, it introduces three case studies, within different spheres, like crafts, design, and arts, all gathered under one umbrella entitled "Măiastra" (also denominated as "Magic Birds"). A multidisciplinary program built as a showcasing platform, as well as a tool for the creatives involved to raise awareness and therefore gather likeminded people, from different generations, who share the same interests towards heritage, sustainable living, and authentic values. The founder of the program, Andreea Sandu, together with her team, started with an archival research in order to trace the program's outline, in respect to ancestral values,



followed by recurring field studies, in order to discover and select creatives and makers that would become part of this journey. An ongoing research preceding each edition of the program helped in tracing the themes and participants' selection, as well as the configuration, overall layout and communication strategy. For each edition of the program, the creatives selected shared the same voice, as well as a common approach towards recontextualizing heritage within contemporary projects, which was concluded through individual interviews. The results of their work, lead to an increased awareness towards heritage amongst the community and together with the development of the digital platform it reached a wider audience. Through their creative endeavours, they have managed to sustain local makers, initiating more lucrative opportunities, showcasing their work throughout communities and online, hence contributing to the economic development.

Consequently, "Măiastra" program positions itself as a showcasing platform for multidisciplinary creatives looking to find and share their ideas in order to potentially trace a new paradigm that conveys the intersection of sustainability and local culture, art, design, science, and technology.

3 "MĂIASTRA" AS A MULTIDISCIPLINARY PROGRAM

The inspiration for "Măiastra" ("Magic Birds") denomination came from Constantin Brâncuși, the renown Romanian artist who once said that borrowed clothes have a different smell and they never accurately match your own body, or being. I firmly believe one's distinctiveness is rarely disconnected (on different levels) from the heritage and ancestral values. Inspired by the Romanian identity, the "Magic Birds" program bears the name of one of Brâncuși's iconic sculptures and it represents the first identity platform that brought the traditional back into the public eye in Romania.

Andreea Sandu, founder, curator and coordinator of the program, started this journey 9 years ago, a journey that explores the influences of traditional crafts and art, and the ancestral believes upon the contemporary art scene, artists, designers, architecture and lifestyle. When initiated, back in 2013, "Măiastra: The Untold Story of the Romanian Blouse" program, focused on "IA" or the "Romanian Blouse" as a symbol of Romanian identity. The popular "Romanian blouse" represents the upper part of the traditional costume and can be catalogued in two categories, a daily (more casual), generally used for work, and a second type, more complex, dedicated to a different array of holidays. The second is enhanced by heavy embellishments, having been used for ceremonies, religious holidays, and other types of community celebrations. Despite the end use, the "Romanian blouse" remains a constant garment that accompanied women throughout their life since early times. The traditional "Romanian blouse" is the seductive conclusion of centuries of craftsmanship and chromatic imagination. The installation of blouses was accompanied by an array of archival photographs of her excellency, Queen Marie of Romania, wearing the traditional Romanian costume, as well as a series of 35 mm black and white negative strips featuring images taken in Romania by Beryl de Zoete in the mid to late 1930s. de Zoete photographed folk dance and costumes worn by villagers in villages between Bucovina, Transylvania and Oltenia.

The negatives were donated to the Horniman Museum in 1962 after de Zoete's death and were first printed up and shown to the public in 2000 at the University of Brighton [1]. Amongst the partners of the program, we can mention distinguished institutions, such as Horniman Museum and Gardens (London, UK), National Museum of the Romanian Peasant (Bucharest, Romania), Astra Museum (Sibiu, Romania), Bucovina Museum (Suceava, Romania) and Mircea Dinescu collection (Bucharest, Romania), amidst others. The logo of the program was inspired by the figurative representation on traditional blouses of "Măiastra" bird, a symbolic or allegorical bird from Romanian mythology, with a royal rank. Created by



the Romanian architect, Andrei Găleata, the logo followed the idea of line representation of “Măiastra” bird, alongside the column and the magic eye, all common symbols in Romanian heritage (Fig. 3).



Figure 1: Image from Galateca gallery archive “Măiastra: The Untold Story of the Romanian Blouse” exhibition. All rights reserved, 2013.



Figure 2: Image from Galateca gallery archive “Măiastra: The Untold Story of the Romanian Blouse” exhibition. All rights reserved, 2013.



Figure 3: Măiastra logo, created by architect Andrei Găleată for Galateca gallery.

4 CASE STUDIES

4.1 “Măiastra: Visual fairies” exhibition and identity platform

The 2016 edition of “Măiastra: Virtual fairies” (Fig. 4) project marks an important step in the program’s evolution, moving further from the traditional Romanian blouse to taking



Figure 4: Image from Galateca gallery archive, all rights reserved, 2016 “Măiastra: Sânzienne virtuale” exhibition, part of the show’s video mapping.

inspiration from crafts and ancestral practices and beliefs, populated by an eclectic blend of the traditional and the innovative.

The digital platform launched on this occasion supported artists and designers who found their creative resources in heritage and innovatively transposed their findings into the present. This year’s concept was placed under the sign of innovation and inspiration in the field of design, my part of the exhibition together with the French designer Philippe Guilet and the Armenian designer, Aram Nikolyan. This came not only as a collaboration between creatives with a diverse cultural background, but also as a confirmation that the foundation of any culture is essential, and could often represent the birth place for many contemporary design-based projects. The project opened its doors on “The International Day of The Traditional Romanian Blouse”, 24th June, with an installation that combined the traditions with the technological innovations. The last ones translate into augmented reality applications, film screenings, video mapping and the launch of “Măiastra” digital platform. There were a series of artists that joined this multidisciplinary dialogue, such as the sculptor and illustrator Ana Zoe Pop that recontextualizes into metal sculptures, abstract, sublimated, and high expressiveness forms inspired from ancestral signs. Another artist invited was Maria Cioată, with her fragile and yet strong ceramic pieces, inspired by the “tree of life” symbol and the signs embroidered on the traditional blouses. In the product design area, we introduce the architects Peter Constantinescu and Oana Mureșan (QuestDome) that have designed the exhibition stands for the items I displayed. Alongside, master’s students from the University of Arts and Design in Bucharest, Romania, Irina Irimia and Răzvan Mureșan had shown their graduation thesis, focused on augmented reality, a project coordinated by Dr Ioana Sanda Avram and the Pink Strip Productions. (Fig. 5)

Trying to convey the core idea of my professional practice throughout the installation displayed (Fig. 6), I have created items using upcycled traditional fabrics, as well as ancestral crafts, that have been reimaged as contemporary pieces. Our traditional arts and crafts



Figure 5: Image from Galateca gallery archive, exhibition “Măiastra: Virtual fairies” item by Aram Nikolyan. All rights reserved, 2016.

represent our most valuable and authentic feature, a belief that followed throughout my professional path and could be seen translated my work. The ethnographic study of my childhood surroundings became the starting point of my creative path, and it took a permanent leading role when I understood that only through exploring this unique heritage would I be able to pursue making of design that would acclaim the national identity and consequently, my deepest values. I firmly believe one’s distinctiveness is rarely disconnected (on different levels) from the heritage and ancestral values. As Ana Iuga quotes in her paper, entitled “Contemporary traditional clothing in Maramureș”, “The gifts of this argument reveals that clothes do not merely communicate aspects of cultural and social belonging, but they are active agents in creating a person’s identity, in relation to one’s gender and broader sociality”. “If people from one village go and settle elsewhere, either in Romania or abroad, they also recreate their community symbolically by means of material culture” [2].

Philippe Guilet, the French designer joining the 2016 exhibition with a selection of couture items (Figs 7 and 8), shares the same believes and great passion towards craftsmanship, himself being the mind behind “100% RO.PREJUDICES” project. An amazing couture collection produced with the contribution of over 50 Romanian artisans



Figure 6: Image from Galateca gallery archive, all rights reserved, 2016 exhibition “Măiastra: Virtual fairies” items by Andra Clițan.

from different regions in Romania. The collection consists of 34 outfits, reinterpreting the Romanian cultural patrimony such as the wooden roofs in Maramureș, the painted “Easter Egg”, the “Endless Column” of Constantin Brâncuși, the traditional crafts in leather, ship skin, pottery, glass, embroidery, metal – using a modern artistic expression. The collection was part of a wider project initiated by the 100% RO NGO, in a move to promote Romania’s cultural patrimony and image abroad, defying the negative stereotypes against Romanians at a national and international level.



Figure 7: Image from Galateca gallery archive, all rights reserved, 2016 exhibition “Măiastra: Virtual fairies” items by Philippe Guilet.



Figure 8: Image from Galateca gallery archive, all rights reserved, 2016 exhibition “Măiastra: Virtual fairies” overall image.

Aram Nikolyan, the third designer invited to join the exhibition, is another creative that shares a common interest towards heritage and craftsmanship, being a previous collaborator back in 2010–2011, within the project “Fashion Road: Dialogue across Borders”, a 2-year collaborative project aimed at promoting intercultural dialogue and cross-border collaboration through which fashion designers from Armenia and Europe researched the past for ideas and inspiration. It was an EUNIC (European Union National Institutes for Culture) project organized by the British Council, the Czech Centers, Goethe-Institute, the Danish Cultural Institute, and the Romanian Cultural Institute, in partnership with the Armenian Fashion Council. The project received the support of the European Union through the Culture Program (2007–2013). The project brought together young fashion designers from Armenia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Romania, and UK which studied the traditional costumes and art of the participating countries and explored the role of the findings in contemporaneity. Each Armenian designer was paired with a European designer that worked together towards designing a four-item capsule collection, myself being elected to team up with Aram, marking our first collaboration. Our works had to reflect the cultural heritage, values, and traditions of the participating countries which we explored during the residencies. Following this collaboration, Aram Nikolyan was invited to present his work in Romania, in a wish to not only enforce the idea of this multidisciplinary program, but also encourage further and deepen the multicultural collaborations between designers and creatives.

4.2 Architecture

The case study presented as a best practice in using sustainable materials and aiming to link the sustainable houses of the future to the arts and crafts of the past is Sustainable EFdeN House [3]. EFdeN is an interdisciplinary team with over 40 members from several universities in Bucharest that over the last two years has designed, raised the necessary funds, and built the EFdeN Signature house prototype. EFdeN was born in 2012 and in 2014 became the First Research Center for Comfort Conditions in Romania. This organization is also a

partner of Galateca Gallery, and together they've collaborated on a series of sustainability art and design events, included "Măiastra" program, 2021 and 2022 editions. We have chosen this example, as the EFdeN House incorporates natural features, local materials and design items created by local craftsman and designers, therefore the impact this project had upon community is important. Their aim was to create an atmosphere which is complementary to the human behaviour and his activities. The focus is on the concept of interconnectivity with nature in a symbolic way and beyond, because human life has always been linked to nature. The house was presented for the first time in "Solar Decathlon", an important competition in the Middle East, and even though the EFdeN team had to face the challenges of the Middle East's climate, which is not always so friendly, they have managed to integrate the European technical standards in the prototype. The green element was their strong point, as it plays multiple roles in the architectural overall concept. It acts both as passive strategy and as an ambient element, and most importantly, a strong reference to the Romanian rural landscape, where life transpires in harmony with all natural elements of the environment.

The large glazing allows the house to establish a visual relationship with the surrounding vegetation, therefore the green element becomes a significant part of the interior's setting. Apart from that, the terrace is a special and intimate space, protected by the outer perforated skin, where the occupants are encouraged to spend their time.

Wood is very well integrated in the house, since not only it is sustainable, but also is one of the most used materials in the traditional Romanian houses, one of the first natural material people learned to use, and it never lost its popularity. These days, it's particularly prized for being a natural and environmentally friendly product. Forestry is a rare example of something that has the potential to be completely sustainable: if you plant a new tree for every old tree, you cut down, you can go on using wood forever without damaging the planet. Growing trees remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and planting more of them is one way to reduce the effects of climate change, the material is one of the oldest, but the construction is innovative.

From an urbanistic point of view, the house is designed to create micro-communities and provide all the necessary resources. In Romania it addresses young people, oriented towards nature and sustainability, with an average income. This is an important study case, as it is impacting not only the local community by including local creators and materials in the process, but also has an important education role in creating a link between the modern ways of using sustainable concepts and implement them by taking into consideration traditional local crafts and traditional way of life of coexisting with the natural elements that surround us.



Figure 9: Image from EFdeN archive, all rights reserved, The simulation of the EFdeN Signature house prototype.

4.3 Arts

The 6th edition of “Măiastra” exhibition, held in Galateca art gallery, back in 2018, was shaped around the theme of traditional inspiration and feminine energy, observed from a visual art perspective. A collaborative art installation, was created by three artists from Cluj Napoca, Romania, winners of the “IA-Otherwise/She-Otherwise” open call program, Ioana Olăhuț, Elena Ilash and Alexandra Mureșan. Having different artistic expressions, we can encounter a series of spectacular metal pieces created by Elena Ilash, paintings using vibrant colours by Ioana Olăhuț and glass sculptures imagined by Alexandra Mureșan, all linked through a connect–renew collaborative vision that inspires creatives to rethink craftsmanship and ancestral heritage. Following this path, the works produced retain the soul of the nation in the form of history, local materials used and cultural identity.

This exhibition is an example for multidisciplinary art installations created by artists united by the same values. The works of art presented explore artistic expressions, such as induced force, undisguised fragility, displayed intransigence, malleability of forms, transparency and opacity, seduction by presence, vivid colours, deformed shapes.

Ioana Olăhuț, the first artist introduced, manifests a special interest for everything that is well thought out, rigorous expressions, as well as a continuous affection towards handmade approaches. Her art oscillates between painting, scenography and installation, causing the intimate coexistence of elements from seemingly diametrically opposed worlds, which creates by association new conceptual, emotional and aesthetic spaces of articulation. Relevant to the contemporary dimension of the concept of metamorphosis, her latest works are visual reflections on the fragile border between natural and artificial, on passing rites, regardless of whether they are of biological, psychological or of social nature, on limited experiences that freezes or accelerates development, revealing a world of existential edges.

Alexandra Mureșan uses glass as a central material for her artistic endeavours, as she believes that “glass stands under the sign of transparency, like democracy and love. She believes that transparency allows sight into an object, but does not guarantee a full discovery. The guarantee of looking outside is looking inside”.

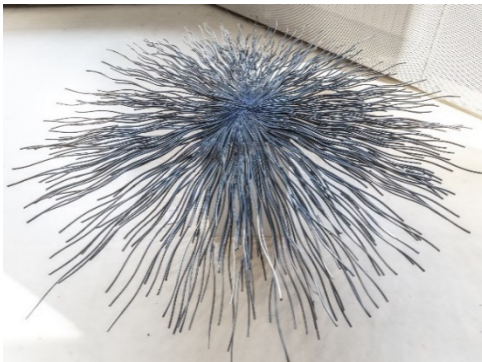


Figure 10: Image from Galateca gallery archive, edition “IA-Otherwise/She-Otherwise”, works from Elena Ilash and Ioana Olăhuț. All rights reserved, 2018.



Figure 11: Image from Galateca gallery archive, edition “IA-Otherwise/She-Otherwise”, works from Elena Ilash and Ioana Olăhuț. All rights reserved, 2018.

The third and last artist selected for the exhibition is Elena Ilaş, who says: “I make objects and forms, in which the tumult of connections, the meetings between planes and matters represents a fusion of formal elements, which are suspended in space in a gravitational descent or in an ascending direction. My transpositions are most often a denial of the full, an absence of an actual body, anatomical details that draw organic shapes in space. There are fragments of ideal creatures, an expression of being, of existing otherwise. It is the need to search for identity, the search for the whole, in fact a personal experiment of approaching the sensory plasticity of space and time”.

After introducing the artists involved in the project, it is fair to say that the 2018 “Măiastra” exhibition stands as a good example for a multidisciplinary collaboration, where artists from various parts of the country come together, united by the same inspirational path, themes, uses of materials, as well as methods and practices inspired by ancestral symbols and heritage. Alongside the common approaches, the desire is to make also a statement highlighting the importance of women in local communities, rural and urban, then and now.

The three case studies introduced, while different in creative focus, share the same outcome, that of sustaining cultural heritage spreading beyond the community where it started. It shows that it is possible to use heritage, whether material or immaterial, to sustain a small community, making sure it is protected from an environmental point of view, whilst insuring a positive social and economic impact. All projects discussed have an undeniable contribution to the resurgence of material and immaterial culture, through few points: the designed objects have been produced using locally sourced materials, together with local makers, in order to become the basis for the exhibitions showcased throughout the program. The items displayed utilizes symbols and ancestral elements from different regions in Romania, having therefore a direct impact on spreading awareness on a national and international level. Architecture and arts, as well as design projects have a direct contribution on reimagining the natural living and giving a purpose to all the communities that lost their traditions because of industrialization.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Throughout the mentioned case studies, we show that heritage elements and ancestral practices are adapted and integrated into contemporary design and art projects, that could provide relevant models to be acquired by the younger generation. Local crafts and practices must be integrated within contemporary initiatives, as well as discussed and presented to the world, in order to insure their perpetuation to future generations. This will not only provide awareness towards them, but also exposure, attracting more lucrative opportunities and therefore a sustained development.

By generating and discussing initiatives that lead to sustaining local creatives (artists and designers) as well as makers (craftsmen), we are not only offering support to the ones involved, but we could potentially create new collaboration formulas to be adopted on a national and international level. By introducing interdisciplinary exhibitions and open call project-based interactions, we believe we have succeeded in highlighting the links between these spheres and drawing the public’s attention towards the following:

- The impact that multidisciplinary initiatives have upon communities, opening the path for new perspectives.
- The necessity in promoting local crafts, materials, or symbols to better understand and apply them by creatives from different fields.
- The importance of establishing interaction platforms for creatives, within national and international visibility.



- The continuous adoption of authentic and traditional crafts as means for modern inspiration, while sustaining local economies is essential.
- The necessity of integrating ancestral crafts into contemporary designs to ensure continuity of local aesthetics.
- Support local craftsmen for art and cultural projects, in order to keep alive local heritage and promote them to the world.
- Discuss similar case studies within international frameworks to exchange know-how and best practices.

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