

## **FURNITURE DESIGN AND DESIGNERS IN ROMANIA AFTER 1990 DESIGN AND CRAFTS. POSSIBLE EVOLUTIONS OF DESIGN IN ROMANIA (Part IV)**

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper discusses a subject which became increasingly visible starting with the second decade of the 21st century: the relationship between design and crafts. Following the work hypotheses adopted, a question appears to be natural: are the traditional crafts able to inspire a trend in the evolution of contemporary Romanian design? Several design actions that highlight the opening up and the interest of the designers concerning crafts shows an affirmative response. Designers and design organizations give consistence to the subject and seem to prefigure the evolution of Romanian design in the near future. The relationship between design and crafts is able to articulate in its meaning also the vernacular sense. Romanian designers who created objects together with specialized craftspeople may have a confirmation of the value of their work in the similarity with a contemporary Japanese approach.*

**Key words:** crafts, contemporary design.

### **METHODS**

The paper is based on investigations more than three decades long that were synthesized in the author's PhD thesis (Sabău 2017). The subsequent study turns to good account the results of two investigative methods: the direct one – dialogues and interviews of designers, with which their personal stories and opinions are blended, the other one using specialized texts published in professional design journals and magazines.

### **OBJECTIVE**

The main objective of this study is to present work hypotheses aiming at configuring predictions for the future evolution of Romanian design, starting from several actions that highlight the relationship between design and crafts, increasingly stronger after 2010.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Historical and theoretical design research concerning the decades 1990-2020 revealed a series of conclusions, some of which were able to be used as starting point for future research work. It is useful to dwell up upon one of the conclusions that raises interest through the apparent opposition of terms: design – crafts. But even before approaching this relationship, it is necessary to nuance the sense of the word craft, in order to give it more precision. The British researcher Paul Greenhalgh (Greenhalgh 1996), cited by Peter Dormer (Dormer 1997) uses the term *vernacular* and defines it: "The vernacular refers to the cultural produce of a community, the things collectively made, spoken and performed. It is as close to nature as a culture can get". The same sense is used in Romania, even if it is not defined as such.

Starting with the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, in Romanian design we notice a new stage, triggered by the financial crisis that started in the autumn of 2008. One could feel a revaluation of local creative potential, part of an ample reconsideration attitude towards design. Designers start to restrain their creation and recalibrate the production volume within the supply-demand relationship. Compared to the previous decade there is a real demand for products manufactured in craft-type small series, a few tens or hundreds of them. This demand is actually visible on a European level. The change is an answer to finding ways to customize products intended for a larger public.

The advantage of smaller series is that it is easier to monitor their manufacturing process, their cost is lower and production losses diminish. The manufacturing activity requires less personnel, moderate investment and is easily adaptable to various changes. With this background, the crafted product starts to be valued and gets its adequate place in the buyers choices.

### **FROM INDUSTRIAL TO ARTISANAL PRODUCTION**

One of the advantages of artisanal manufacturing is the small number of resulted products, confirming the consecrated formulas "small series" or "artisanal production". It would accentuate quality, an attribute which was altered in the communist era, affecting for a long time the perception of the "well made" object and preoccupations would be focused on the careful and controllable way of finishing the object. An example

is the collaboration between the designer Dragoș Motică and the small company Ubikubi, established in Bucharest in 2014. Regrettably this kind of collaboration is rare and the designer as well as the manufacturers need governmental support, following the example of the support given to agricultural producers. Without support, very few designers succeed to manufacture their creations and to sell them, thus remaining practically unknown to the public.

After 2010 several exhibitional events point out the interest to reevaluate traditional crafts from various areas of Romania. The common idea of these events was to revigorate community life through design projects, adding value to the local cultural heritage: traditions, crafts, techniques, materials.

Designers start from identifying design themes, selecting those types of objects that are able to be made by local craftspeople, using local resources. This way the objects are inspired by those in use in the local communities, in a process of updating traditional crafts by making everyday objects, for preparing and serving meals, objects adapted to contemporary needs and requirements. These projects have an important social component, becoming a strong measure to improve life in the area. The results show that communities start to recover their prestige and redefine their place in the supply and demand system, suited to the present moment. This way design knits a social meaning into the work process and awards prestige to the community, as it was foreseen by the project organizers.

### THE CASE OF THE ASSOCIATION IVAN PATZAICHIN – MILA 23

The community of the Danube Delta is a relatively recent target of the ever increasing interest of several NGO's which generated specific projects. The Association *Ivan Patzaichin*\* – *Mila 23*, which became known by its projects branded *Rowmania*, is a significant example. The Association is preoccupied by the creation of models of social partnership and local development that include design, seen as a component with a creative role. There are now two visible types of approach: one which seeks the conservation and perpetuation of traditions, crafts and local techniques, highlighting the values of the local heritage, while the other is the creative one, contemporary product design based on inspiration taken from the Delta region culture.

Belonging to the first type of approach, the *Canotca* boat was designed in 2011. It is a recreative boat which aptly combines the canoe form – the sports boat with a dynamic line, with the well-known *lotca*, the Delta fisherman's boat, with its supple shape and the inside keeping the natural wood color. The *canotca* is built manually by local craftspeople and is widely used for local sustainable tourism carried on the Danube canals (Fig.1). It proved to be a success.



**Fig. 1.**  
***Canotca, built by local craftspeople in the village Mila 23, Tulcea county;***  
***Canotcas floating on a Danube Delta canal, 2019.***

The second type of approach is illustrated by the sustainable fashion and accessories collections released starting with 2012 by Oláh Gyárfás, designer of the brand *Rowmania*. He is turning into good account traditional Romanian fabrics made of linen, hemp and cotton, aiming at updating local weaving crafts and styles. For example the collections "Plug to nature" (2015) and "Powered by nature" (2016) have

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\* **Ivan Patzaichin** (1949 - 2021), born in the village Mila 23, Tulcea county, was a Romanian canoe racing coach and sprint canoeist. He won 7 Olympic and 22 world championship medals, including four Olympic gold medals. He was awarded the Olympic Order for particularly distinguished contributions to the Olympic Movement. He founded the association *Ivan Patzaichin – Mila 23* and launched the national project *Rowmania*, promoting eco-tourism and other outdoor activities, as well as a line of clothing made from natural fibers. (<https://www.romania-insider.com/romanian-athletes-international-success>).

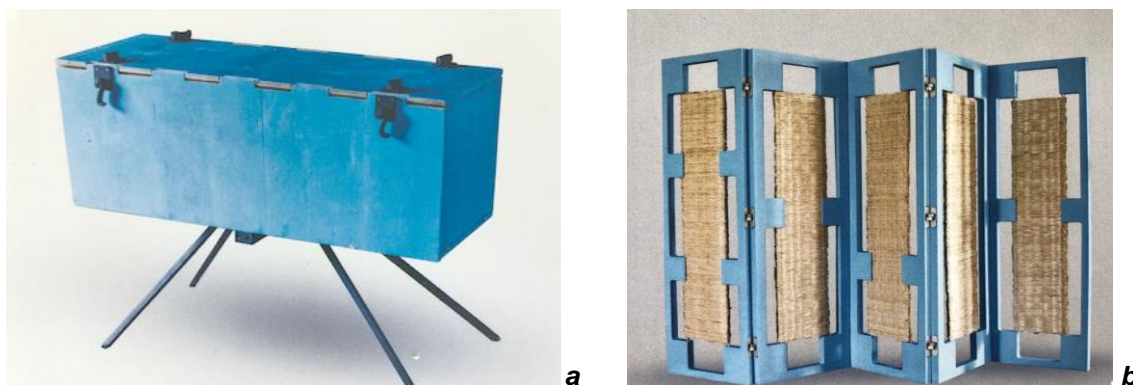
the authentic linen and hemp texture, the way the various fibers are joined, their color ranges, the updated tailoring of new and comfortable urban clothing with extended combinative opportunities (Fig. 2). Since 2017, the collections include also domestic objects made of traditional black ceramics (Fig. 2) and enameled tin cups and plates.



**Fig. 2.**  
*Linen garment and hemp fabric, 2016; pottery, black ceramics, 2017*  
Designed by Oláh Gyárfás.

### THE CREATIVE STUDIO **KRAFTMADE**

Initiated in 2012 by Marlene Stanciu and Mihai Sibianu, *KraftMade* is a creative studio which generated design projects inspired by traditional crafts, aiming at integrating traditional skills and techniques into daily life. They created the project called *Deltacraft* – Contemporary Crafts and Design, building up groups of three designers – in 2016: Ana Botezatu, Pop Emese, Ciprian Manda (Fig. 3 a, b) and in 2017: Ana Botezatu, Dragoș Motică, Magda Vieriu (Fig. 4), teaming with ten craftspeople.



**Fig. 3.**  
*a. Delta dowry chest, Ciprian Manda; oak, wrought iron, 2016; b. Folding screen, Emese Pop; mace reed, oak wood, 2016.*

The teams used local materials and their due techniques. For example mace reed, a rich resource of the Delta, was used to make a foldes screen or a table and a coathanger; wood was used for a cabinet inspired by a dowry chest; limestone stood at the base of a water filtration system; cowhide was used for a chair seat. The designers used to say that from such a collaboration Romanian design has the benefit of an "authentic source of inspiration" able to contribute to the definition of its own "identity and personality", influencing the preservation of traditions.





**Fig. 4.**  
**Table and coathanger, series InLete(a), Dragoş Motică;**  
**mace reed, iron, glass, leather, 2017.**

#### CRAFTS BEYOND THE RIVER PRUT

A similar interest towards traditional crafts has to be noticed among young designers from the Republic of Moldova. The project *Quintessence* of Mihai Stamati and Maria Bubuioac, which was displayed and presented in France, at the Saint-Étienne Design Biennial was based on the declared intention to revitalize traditional techniques and natural materials (linen, hemp, wood, mace reed) and, last but not least, to support local production and creating new durable products with a message, telling a story. Considering that design is able to assume this kind of mission, the two creators researched and reevaluated crafts, technical skills and local materials in a collection of design objects: a rocking chair, a floor lamp, a coffee table, a pouf-stool, a carpet and a sofa. As the name of the collection aptly suggests, the project was initiated by the idea of returning to the origins, by preserving and transmitting the emotion evoked by the crafted objects (Fig. 5 a, b, c).



**a.**



**b.**

**Fig. 5.**  
**a. Bench; b. Pouf-Stool; c. Rocking chair, Mihai Stamati;**  
**hemp fabric, mace reed, feathers, wood, linen thread, 2017.**



**c.**

## DESIGN AND CRAFTS IN DESIGN EVENTS

Due to the annual event Romanian Design Week (RDW) created by the organization *The Institute*, through the exhibitions visible since 2013, the interest for reevaluating traditional crafts through design was brought to the forefront of design. At the 2017 RDW edition, the central program called *ReDesign Craft* promoted the revitalizing of traditional crafts, reuniting six collections of objects created by designers and made by local craftspeople. The key concept of this edition was expressed by the adopted symbol: the tripod stool. The theme was assigned to Dragoș Motică, whose own idea was the minimal intervention upon the traditional tripod stool specific to Wallachia. The stool was submitted to re-creation by updating, as a result it became a demountable barstool with an iron leg-support, thus able to get packed up in a flat box (Fig. 6).



**Fig. 6.**  
**Tripod chair: Wallachian shepherd stool and barstool; demounted bar stool.**  
**Dragoș Motică, ash, iron, 2017.**

RDW was invited to organize Romanian design exhibitions within international "Design Weeks", all of them involved in promoting events displaying the relationship between design and crafts. Spain, Sweden and Austria hosted them with remarkable success. Within the Stockholm Design Week, RDW became a constant presence. In 2014 its contemporary design exhibition *Wood and Wool* displayed the works of 23 designers. Natural materials were highlighted as alternative resources in manufacturing design objects, where wood and wool are given new functions when becoming clothes and/or shelter. In 2015, the works of 37 Romanian designers were reunited under the title *Play&Rewind*. The exhibits revealed playthings from the past, toys as a result of collective inventivity, and contemporary toys, books, illustrations and contemporary design objects created by *Meștешukar ButiQ* and inspired by nomad life, crafted by Roma craftspeople together with Swedish designers from Glimpt Studio. The Swedish designers enjoyed this working together and understood the need to preserve artistic crafts like modelling copper and integrating them in contemporary design objects.

## CONCLUSIONS

The examples commented in this paper show that the Romanian crafts represent an authentic and valuable resource and designers can turn them to good account in their projects. The collaboration between designers and craftspeople, supported by these examples, holds an essential icon: the tripod stool. This powerful symbol highlights an emblematic approach, a new design creation which, with minimal intervention, turns a traditional object into a present commodity.

The co-working of designers and craftspeople is highly visible in Japan also, where since 2012, the Association Japan Creative chooses three small manufacturers each specialized in a certain craft, to work specially conceived design projects by a guest designer from abroad. For example Peter Marigold or Stefan Dietz, British and German furniture designers, were among those invited (Japan Creative, est. 2011). The Japanese model is a guide mark for encouraging the idea and the practice of the crafted object, seen as a valuable asset of a local and national economy.

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