

## When Trees Become Art – Wood Carving in Romania

Magdalena-Cristina Stanciu,<sup>a</sup> Elena Bercu,<sup>b</sup> and Carmen-Alice Teacă<sup>c,\*</sup>

Trees represent a cherished treasure for each nation. They provide a living, soulful, and earthly material, wood, which most often survives millennia and embellishes our everyday life. Wood can be transformed into valuable pieces of art under skilled hands and tools through carving. In Romania, wood is omnipresent in each milepost of people's life journey from birth to death. It becomes a true and empathic companion of both happy and sad events. Wood teaches us to focus on the present moment and to let go of stressful thoughts and feelings. It is a real valuable "good" in our life.

DOI: 10.15376/biores.19.4.6975-6978

*Keywords:* Trees; Wood; Carving; Art; Spirituality

*Contact information:* a: Natural Polymers and Bioactive Compounds Department, "Petru Poni" Institute of Macromolecular Chemistry, 41A Grigore-Ghica Vodă Alley, 700487 Iași, Romania; b: Centre of Conservation and Restoration "Resurrectio", Metropolis of Moldavia and Bukovina, Iași, Romania; c: Center of Advanced Research in Bionanoconjugates and Biopolymers, "Petru Poni" Institute of Macromolecular Chemistry, 41A Grigore-Ghica Vodă Alley, 700487 Iași, Romania;

\* Corresponding author: [cateaca@icmpp.ro](mailto:cateaca@icmpp.ro); [cateaca14@yahoo.com](mailto:cateaca14@yahoo.com)

### Wood – A Living and Soulful Material

A strong and almost symbiotic relationship has prevailed between Romanian people and wood over the course of centuries. Woodworking handcrafts and carving are the oldest of traditional Romanian arts. Such art reflects the closest interactive approach between a woodworker's intimate life moments and the wood as support in both its practical and transcendent levels. Shaping and artful design of wood can help us to deal with inherent losses, memories, and with our unbounded sense of wonder (Everett and de Gruchy 2014). We can visualize wood as cooperative and friendly in the way it embellishes everyday life from wooden bridges, roofs, and gates (sometimes showing massive spiral carved wooden columns and humorous carved faces), carvings, masks, spoons, cartwheels, wooden farmhouses, and carriages to modern sculpture pieces of art.

Constantin Brâncuși was one of the most influential sculptors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and a pioneer of modernism. Another artist who worked with wood was Gheza Vida, born in Baia Mare, the first city of Maramureș County (Peasant Art Craft 2024). The most known of Brâncuși's earliest pieces, *Prodigal Son*, was carved in 1914 from blocks of oak. Brâncuși's entire creation can be viewed an expression of his religious beliefs and feelings. He also used the wooden material to mockup earlier versions of some of his most famous stone and bronze sculptures, including *Head of a Child* (Gyalakuthy 2024). In 1966 Gheza Vida completed one of his most celebrated pieces, the *Monument of Moisei* (Maramureș County), a tribute to the twenty-nine Romanian citizens massacred in the town by retreating Hungarian troops in 1944. Maramureș County, a region in northwestern Romania, is called the Land of Wood. This paradise of woodworking is famous for its wooden Orthodox churches. Some date back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century and are UNESCO-protected heritage sites. These buildings are master classes in carpentry, many built without a single nail.

## Wood Carving and Spirituality Art in Romania

The wooden churches of Romania constitute a precious heritage on a national and global level. Up until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Romanian people mainly have created and manifested their civilization from wood. They achieved a remarkable richness, variety, and refinement. The wooden churches reached their peak of expression. Romania preserves over 1400 wooden churches built before the year 1918. Wooden Orthodox churches, which are built faster and at cost less, draw from both the natural richness of the forests, which were once endless, and to a strong tradition in the art of carpenters (Godea 1996; Baboş 2004; Pricop 2004; Ichim and Ichim 2005). They are an integral and defining part of the national identity and symbolize the spiritual warmth of prayer, of people's communion with God, but also the fragility of matter, in our impermanence on earth. The Romanian people did not have a sense of the monumental and grandiose, but rather they manifested an ample sense of distinction, finesse, and elegance, which is well reflected in the small wooden churches. A classic example of a Romanian wooden church is Bârsana monastery, Maramureş County, an UNESCO monument dating back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The monastery church (Fig. 1a), its summer Holy Altar (Fig. 1b), and the Holy Water fountain (Fig. 1c) all are dominantly made of hardwood (oak).



**Fig. 1.** Bârsana's monastery church (a); Bârsana's monastery summer Holy Altar (b); Bârsana's monastery Holy Water fountain (c); door and stained-glass window made of wood and glass of the church from Bistrița Monastery, Vâlcea County (d); Sâmbăta de Sus Monastery, Braşov County - Holy Water fountain (e); Săpânța-Peri Monastery, the world's tallest wooden church building at 78 metres with a non-traditional stone base - Maramureş County (f)

In the Orthodox tradition, the cross (Fig. 2a) is the sign of God's love for people because Jesus Christ the righteous was crucified on it. The cross symbolizes the beginning and the end, heaven and earth, life and death. In the Orthodox church, there are crosses both at the top of the iconostasis (Fig. 2b), the wall that separates the nave from Holy Altar, and also in the Holy Altar, the room where the Holy Liturgy is performed (Fig. 2c). For all above-mentioned religious examples, wood is the base-material, both as painting support (crosses) and as carved items (iconostasis). Outside the church, there are roadside shrines (Fig. 3a), which are large wooden crosses built at intersections of roads to ward off evil.

Additionally, Orthodox cemeteries contain wooden crosses that watch over the graves of each baptized Orthodox buried there. A famous cemetery in Romania is the one in Săpânța (Maramureș County), a real festival of color, dominated by a specific blue.



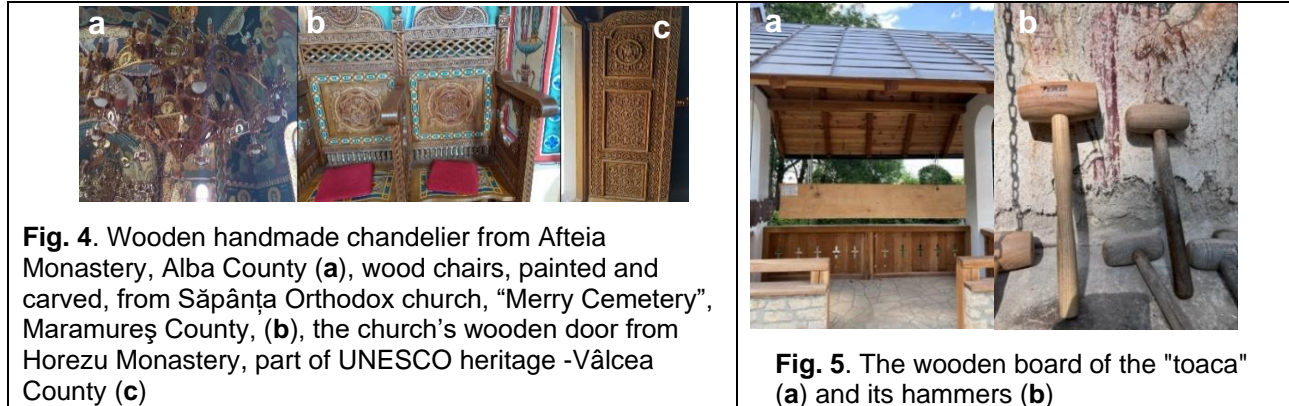
**Fig. 2.** Painted icons (a), iconostasis with the cross on its upper part (b), the Holy Altar's cross (c)

It is also called the “Merry Cemetery” (Fig. 3b). This is because the wooden crosses created by Stan Ioan Pătraș (in fact, blue-painted oak slabs, decorated with floral borders and a riot of brightly colors) of the tombs contain naive paintings depicting scenes from the lives and occupations of the deceased. Some crosses have verses mentioning the individuals, often with humorous nuances. The uniqueness of this cemetery is that they viewed death as a joyful event, as just a passage to another life, drawing inspiration from Dacian culture. All churches and monasteries in Orthodoxy contain icons painted on wood. These are images, representations of the Holy Trinity (God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit), of the Virgin Mary, of the Saints, or of angels. Icons are found both on the iconostasis and on the interior walls of the Romanian Orthodox churches (Fig. 3c).



**Fig. 3.** The roadside shrine (a); a cross from “Merry Cemetery”, Maramureș County (b); painted icons from Dragomirna Monastery, Suceava County (c)

Certain churches/monasteries have wooden chandeliers (Fig. 4a). These are supported by one or three chains in the center of the dome, at the top of which there is always an icon of Jesus Christ who is the center of the Kingdom of God, the Head of the Church. The chandeliers symbolize the triumphant Church of the Saints, the mercy and abundant compassion of God towards people, and the chariot of fire in which the prophet Elijah was taken to heaven. The chairs are placed in the Orthodox Church, to the right and left of the iconostasis, along the walls of the naos, on which the faithful stand during the service (Fig. 4b). The doors of the wooden churches are made of the same material and are decorated with floral sculptures of rare beauty and variety (Fig. 4c).



**Fig. 4.** Wooden handmade chandelier from Afteia Monastery, Alba County (a), wood chairs, painted and carved, from Săpânța Orthodox church, “Merry Cemetery”, Maramureș County, (b), the church’s wooden door from Horezu Monastery, part of UNESCO heritage -Vâlcea County (c)

**Fig. 5.** The wooden board of the “toaca” (a) and its hammers (b)

The “toaca” is a percussion musical instrument from the idiophones class used in Orthodox liturgy. It consists of a wooden board (Fig. 5a), which is struck with one or two small handmade hammers from wood (Fig. 5b), at fixed hours for prayer. Everything described above is part of the soul of the Romanian people, an inestimable treasure of cultural and spiritual tradition that lasts for centuries.

### Acknowledgements

The authors thank Priest Andrei Smău (“The Day of the Cross” Church, Iași, Romania) for providing Figs. 2 (a, c) and Figs. 5 (a, b). The rest of the figures come from the authors’ personal archives.

### References Cited

- Baboș, A. (2004). *Tracing a Sacred Building Tradition, Wooden Churches, Carpenters and Founders in Maramureș until the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century*, Doctoral Thesis (monograph), Department of Architectural History, Lund University, Sweden.
- Everett, W. J., and de Gruchy, J. W. (2014). *Sawdust and Soul: A Conversation about Woodworking and Spirituality*, Cascade Books, USA.
- Godea, I. (1996). *Wooden Churches in Romania (northwest Transylvania)*, Meridiane Publishing, Bucharest, Romania.
- Gyalakuthy, I. (2024). “Măiastra: A history of Romanian sculpture in twenty-four parts,” (<https://miamirail.org/visual-arts/maiastra-a-history-of-romanian-sculpture-in-twenty-four-parts-8/>), Accessed 21 June 2024)
- Ichim, D. and Ichim, F. (2005). *Wooden Churches from Historic Moldova*, Diagonal Publishing, Bacău, Romania.
- Peasant Art Craft (2024). “Wood artisan Bolek Maierik wood carving figures and pierced relief sculptures,” (<https://peasantartcraft.com/traditional-crafts/wood-carving-artisan/>), Accessed 21 June 2024.
- Pricop, M. C. (2004). *The Roadside Shrine – Mystical Symbol of the Beauty of Faith Reality*, Bachelor's thesis, Bucharest, Romania.