

Wood - An Inestimable Valuable Good in the Traditional Romanian Household

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Objects made of wood form one of the most important chapters of the heritage of civilization, culture, and traditional popular art of woodcraft among the Romanian people, encompassing creations that continue to develop this millennia-old legacy. Popular art in wood is, undoubtedly, an organic art. It is deeply connected to work and life in which various objects seamlessly blend utility with beauty in the most natural way possible, fully addressing this dual necessity. Wood art is not just a craft of shapes and motifs; it reveals, in specific stylistic structures, a genuine thought and conception of the world and life.

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Objects made of wood form one of the most important chapters of the heritage of civilization, culture, and traditional popular art among the Romanian people. Undoubtedly, among all genres of popular art, that of woodwork is not only the most widespread but also the one in which the Romanian peasant's capacity for beauty is most fully realized, synthesizing a millennia-long life experience that has been continuously maintained in the Carpathian-Danubian-Pontic region. The civilization and art of woodcraft among the Romanians encompasses creations that continue to develop this millennia-old legacy, which is acknowledged by the most esteemed foreign specialists as occupying a leading position in European popular art. This is true for the entire space in which the Romanian people were born and reside, raw materials being transformed into works of civilization and culture. Popular art in wood is, undoubtedly, an organic art deeply connected to work and life in general. It is an art in which various objects seamlessly blend utility with beauty in the most natural way possible, fully addressing this dual necessity. Wood art is not just a craft of shapes and motifs; it reveals, in specific stylistic structures, a genuine thought and conception of the world and life.

The coniferous and deciduous forests that cover the mountains and hills have provided wood that has been used in the construction of peasant homes, as well as in the making of tools, objects, and household utensils. The experience in wood craftsmanship has taught artisans the appropriate use of each type of wood. Thus, fir and oak (hardwoods) have been used for the construction of farmer houses (Fig. 1a) or animal shelters (“grajd”) (Fig. 1b), while ash wood (elastic and hardwood) was utilized for doors (Fig. 1c), window frames (Fig. 1d), wardrobes (Fig. 1e), sideboards (Fig. 1f), beds (Fig. 1g), benches (Fig. 1h), chairs (Fig. 1i), stools (Fig. 1j), dowry chests (Fig. 1k), wall hangers (Figure 1m), cradles for children (Fig. 1n), *etc.* Containers of various sizes and shapes, needed for the

storage, transport, and preservation of wine, such as vats (“ciubere”) (Fig. 1o) and barrels (“butoaie”) (Fig. 1p) were also carved from ash wood. The different pieces of furniture exhibit a variety of shapes and decorative elements, along with specific functionality and innovative construction methods. They play a significant role in peasant interiors, adding a sense of liveliness and joy. Designed by village craftsmen, these furnishings are meant to be durable, harmonious, and appealing.



Fig. 1. Some examples of wood craftsmanship in the household

Beech, maple, and linden (softwoods) have been used for various household utensils, such as cutlery with its spoons (Fig. 2a), forks (Fig. 2b), regular plates for eating (Fig. 2c) or artisanal plates to hang on the wall (Fig. 2d), “covata” (Fig. 2e), a recipient where the dough is kneaded or “fund” (Fig. 2f), a wooden plate on which polenta, used as a substitute for bread, is overturned. The designs of the household tools mentioned above demonstrate a remarkable ability to combine functionality and aesthetic appeal.



Fig. 2. Some examples of wood household utensils and dishes

The craft of weaving with willow is one of the oldest in the world, and there are traces of its practice in the Romanian space dating back to the Neolithic period. Weaving techniques are evident in the case of twigs basket (Fig. 3a), termed “coșarcă” as well as in the twigs’ fences (Fig. 3b) or twigs-based construction used to store corn cobs (Fig. 3c),

known as “pățul”. Not all the fences were twigs-based built, many of them were built from simple rows of wooden slats (Fig. 3d).



Fig. 3. Some examples of wood application in weaving techniques

Once represented in all the villages, wheel-making is currently in decline, overwhelmed by the means of motor transport. Thus, wheels existed in old land vehicles with four wood wheels, which were animal-drawn (“care”) (Fig. 4a) or in water mills (Fig. 4b) which use water power to turn wheels, which ensures the grinding of grains (wheat and corn), resulting in flour, which was the basis of the diet in peasant households.



Fig. 4. Some examples of wood in wheel-making

The tradition of working with wood has been passed down from generation to generation. With its help, wells (Fig. 5a) were created, essential for human existence on this earth, as well as bridges (Fig. 5b) and footbridges (Fig. 5c) to cross streams, which are so prevalent in Romanian villages. In the art of woodworking, the Romanian peasant showcases skill, craftsmanship, and artistic sensibility, to the point that some specialists speak of the “Romanian art of wood.” Thus, the gates (Fig. 5d) of houses feature ornaments with motives prominently in relief, crosses with special symbolism, yet perfectly framed within the style of traditional architecture, adhering to the decorative rules of symmetry, repetition, alternation, and rhythm.



Fig. 5. Some examples of wood in wells, bridges, footbridges, and gates

The cultivation of the grape vine and its manufacture precedes, according to the testimonies of time, even the cultivation of wheat. The Geto-Dacians, the ancient inhabitants, valued wine in a special way, and the vine was one of the most important sources of their wealth. They used to drink the wine poured into ox horns, jugs, or even skulls. The press for the production of wine (“teasc”) (Fig. 6a) is a wood-based mechanical tool with the help of which the grapes are squeezed to obtain the natural juice, called “must”, which through fermentation produces the wine. In local cuisine, edible oil is one of the most used ingredients, representing the basis of many dishes and cooking techniques. The tool for producing edible oil called “oleinita” (Fig. 6b) is also made of wood. The device contains a pulley and a press, with the help of which it was possible to press sunflower seeds, the most used raw material for this household utensil. One of the most interesting wood household tools in Romania is “vâltoarea” (Fig. 6c), a simple mechanism installed on the course of a fast mountain stream, used for washing clothes and fabrics. It utilizes the natural speed of the water, captured upstream and directed through a wooden trough to a basin also made of wood. In mountain villages, such archaic “washing machines” are still preserved and even used. From ecological point of view, “vâltoarea” is a solution to protect the environment, the washing being done without soap or detergent.



Fig. 6. Some examples of wood in household tools

Usually, these examples of wood craft pieces from traditional art are very well preserved through the years by careful attention of the people who made them. Many wood objects cross historical times and are exposed even in open-air spaces as museum artefacts. Many of them are also still functional, a fact that is simply amazing. Natural-based products such as vegetable seed oils and waxes are common and at hand for ease of application in order to protect wood household objects against action exerted by the inherent exposure to environmental conditions. Such substances may form an effectively protective layer on the wood surfaces, which grant them an improved water resistance and better dimensional stability. A noteworthy positive impact on the wood surfaces when applying waxes is represented by forming an efficiently protective layer known as “*patina*” through applying by repeated depositions which prolongedly interact with UV radiation and other weathering conditions. Time and again, wood is behaving as a versatile material with remarkable durability through centuries.

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Figures come from the personal archives of the authors and were taken from water mills, Rudăria, Caraş Severin County (private property) (Fig. 4b), “vâltoarea”, Moisei, Maramureş County (private property) (Fig. 6c), and from the ethnographic museum in Romania and the largest open-air museum in Europe, named “Astra”, Sibiu, Sibiu County.