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# **Ethnographic Objects on the Cold War Front: The Tangled History of a London's Museum Collection**

## **Abstract:**

This article addresses the historical context of a museum collection of Romanian artifacts in the light of the British-Romanian diplomacy. The museum's holdings are unpacked through a study of the events that led to their acquisition, in the context of the cultural exchanges of the 1950s. It is argued that the ethnographic investigation of the historical and political landscape in which the collection emerged reveals the importance of its performance on the Cold War cultural stage, where acts of exhibiting museum artifacts across the Iron Curtain served to create certain representations of the modern state. Particular attention is paid to the often-overlooked European folk art collections residing in ethnographic museums. The example of the history of the Horniman Museum Romanian collection demonstrates that an anthropological critique of these holdings can serve as a way to explore the complex histories and the political relations that underpinned the movement and display of folk artifacts across the Iron Curtain.

[Key words: Cold War, museum ethnography, state, Romania, Britain]

## Introduction

Assembled in the 1950s, the Horniman Museum's collection of Romanian artifacts consists of over three hundred unique objects of folk art. The collection includes pieces from across Romania, such as textiles, ceramics, woodwork, religious images, and household objects, and is considered extraordinary in terms of size, content, and value (Rodriguez 2001; Teague 2004). The museum material includes everyday objects, from household textiles, examples of dress, ceramics, furniture, kitchen utensils to craft tools and fragment of objects in the making. Some artifacts such as carved wooden chests, are highly decorated, while others such as knives, pottery, and weaving tools appear more mundane. Every artefact has been very well documented by the Romanian collectors and is accompanied by an individual record file with rich information about the function of the object, the material and technique used to make it and the name of the producer. The objects have a diverse provenance, encompassing many provinces of Romania, from southern Oltenian carpets to Transylvanian pottery. Although the documentation provides a detailed description of individual artifacts, the information given is lacking in terms of providing insight into the history of the collection. It is unclear how such an aggregation of objects from a former Eastern Bloc country became part of the Horniman Museum in the 1950s.

This article addresses the question of the story of the collection through the historical context in which the set has been acquired and sent to London. It traces the events that activated the collection acquisition through the memories of the last surviving collector and the archival traces of the collection based in London and Romania.<sup>1</sup> In order to understand the diplomatic significance of the collection, the first part of the paper discusses the entanglement of folk art with the national and international representations of the state. The second part focuses on the history of the collection within a sequence of its precursors,

the 1952 and 1954 exhibitions of Romanian folk art in post-war London. Using the memories of the 1950s curator, the third part discusses the ways in which the artifacts were collected and given away by the the Museum of Folk art in Romania. Finally, the analysis draws attention to the significance of politics of museum representations of folk art in the context of the international circulation of politicized objects.

### **Folk Art, Modernity and the Cold War Material Culture**

Studies concerning the material culture of the Cold War period describe it as a struggle of representations, a negotiation and accommodation between competing images of modernity and good life (Crowley and Pavitt 2008; Fehérváry 2009; Verdery 1996). As modernity is visibility (Rowlands 2011), this warfare of representations was often presented through images, objects and displays, including exhibitions staged on the other side of the Iron Curtain (Buck-Morss 2000; Romijn, et al. 2012; Reid 2008; 2010). In this context, exhibitions often provide the link between the past, the accelerating present and a projected triumphal future. For example, Ssorin-Chaikov (2006) demonstrated, that the exhibition of gifts to Stalin displayed a specific mode of temporality, the “teleology of socialism”, approaching the present from the perspective of a more modern future.

Although modernity imagines itself in a temporal contradiction with heritage, it is ruled by historicism through numerous cultural practices and material expressions (Huysen 2003; Rowlands 1995). Much heritage literature has uncovered the relations between the constructions of modern states and the legitimising models of national patrimony and body of folklore (Basu 2013; Boswell and Evans 1999; Bozdoğan and Kasaba 1997; Davison 2008; Díaz-Andreu and Champion 1996; Hertzog 2010; Herzfeld 1982; Meskell 2002). In Romania too, material culture classified as a national folk art served as a means of

showcasing the modernity of the state. Popescu (2010) highlighted that the Romanian drive to become modern was embedded in a longer trope rooted in the nineteenth and twentieth century cultural policy and state-building practices. In this period, Romanian modernity was a ‘polymorphous concept’ (Popescu 2010, 12), combining drives toward westernization with a strong idea of a national tradition and *the Romanian soul*. Overlapping ideas of national identity, rural material culture and modern living were disseminated through exhibitions and museum-making practices in the country and abroad through World’s Fair pavilions (Demetrescu 2010), an opportunity to showcase “progress, which they promoted by means of the most advanced experiments and tradition, often in pastiche form, reduced to décor capable of throwing into sharper relief the discourse of modernity” (Popescu 2011, 160).

Scholars of the twentieth century history of the Romanian folklore highlighted its persistent entanglement with politics. After the Second World War, following the policies of Sovietisation of scholarship, the sociology departments in Romania were closed down and many scholars were “forced” to seek employment in departments of ethnography, art history or folk art (Ionescu-Gura 2005; Rostas 2000). Throughout the 1950s, folklore and ethnography followed the Soviet blueprint, framed by Marxist interpretations and didacticism (Bubociu 1966). As ethnography and social research were restricted, many scholars became New Folklore specialists, some creating ‘new’ folk poetry and songs “to acknowledge the popularity, among the masses, of the political actions taken by the authorities” (Eretescu 2008, 47). Studies of the institutionalization of folk art production also uncovered the pivotal role of the state in the reification of cultural practices and the transformation of folk art for political means (Kligman 1988; Mihăilescu 2008). Insightful as they are with regard to debates on the use of heritage and folk art in state representations, however, the above literature do not provide accounts about the ways in which collections

and exhibitions participated in state practices and emerged as agents of political work abroad. This article brings some of these practices to light and by using the context of the Horniman Museum collection acquisition to reveal how the set served both as an instrument of state representation and a site of encounter with the Cold War other.

## **Museum Encounters and Peaceful Coexistence**

A photograph taken during the opening of the Horniman Museum *Folk Art in Rumania* exhibition shows three men sitting on a bench; Otto Samson, the Horniman Museum curator, in the company of the representatives of the London City Council (LCC) and the Romanian diplomatic mission. They are shown in a peaceful, semi-relaxed conversation, sat in an exhibition display of a rural interior. This photograph materialises the complex network facilitating the donation of the museum collection – the Romanian and British state authorities and the expert, the museum curator. It is a visual document of one of the unique encounters between the competing social worlds, separated by the Iron Curtain (Buck-Morss 2000; Romijn et al. 2012).

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the Iron Curtain, as Winston Churchill announced, descended across the continent. In 1947, the newly established Romanian People's Republic became a Soviet satellite. In 1948, Romania adopted a new Soviet-inspired constitution and judicial system as well as planned economy. Under the new government, Romania turned eastwards culturally and politically, engaging in cultural Cold War with the West (Deletant 2000; Ionescu-Gura 2005; Tismaneanu 2003; Vasile 2011). Within the Stalinization policy, the state engaged in delegating 'anti-Soviet propaganda', withdrawing Western publications from circulation, organizing purges of pro-Western

intellectuals, reforming the higher education system in the spirit of Marxist-Leninist doctrine and introducing Russian as a compulsory language in secondary schools.

The political storm also significantly affected diplomatic relations. In 1950, the Western cultural institutes, accused of being information offices and sites of propaganda were closed down, followed by arrests of their attendants (Deletant 2000). As Sitariu (2014) demonstrated, throughout the 1950s British Romanian relations were conducted in the atmosphere of mutual suspicion and affected by numerous accusations of espionage. In 1953, for example, the Commercial Attache at the British legation was declared part of the “spies and traitors in the service of British intelligence” (Sitariu 2014, 102). In 1954, the Romanian government staged a large group trial of Romanian conspirators allegedly working for Anglo-American Intelligence with an aim to overthrow the Romanian People’s Republic. This sense of distrust continued throughout the decade. It is this context of separation and suspicion that formed the background of the acquisition of the Romanian collection for the Horniman Museum. The story of the Horniman Museum collection is situated in the pre-Thaw landscape of cultural activities .<sup>2</sup>

The Stalinisation of foreign affairs in the 1950s significantly affected the international cultural arena. From 1951, international cultural diplomacy was run centrally by the Institute for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (hereafter, ‘the Institute’) under the control of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It closely followed the Soviet blueprint, sharply dividing its activities into units targeting socialist and capitalist states (Vasile 2009).<sup>3</sup> In the West, the Institute organized its programme through a vast network of satellite associations, Romanian friendship associations, disseminating the Institute’s agenda in the absence of official diplomatic structures. This strategy was part of broader activities of promoting “intense cultural contacts with Western “progressive”, communist-oriented

intellectuals” (Vasile 2009, 138). In Britain, with frozen diplomatic relationships, the Institute coordinated its programming through the British Rumanian Friendship Association (BRFA). In 1950, the secretary of BRFA visited Romania for the first time. He soon wrote to the Institute:

I echo your remarks regarding closer cooperation and we can only pledge ourselves to do our utmost to cement that friendship between our two peoples and strengthen our fight to maintain peace in the world confident in the fact that the leadership in the struggle for peace is in the hands of the Soviet Union. <sup>4</sup>

According to the annual report of the BRFA, in 1954 the organization admitted over six hundred members, mostly trade unionists or members and affiliates of the British Communist Party. The association aimed to popularize the achievements of the Romanian state, foster peaceful cooperation between nations and fight the hostility towards the People’s Republic through activism and the recruitment of new members.<sup>5</sup> It had its own publication, the BRFA bulletin, focusing on the social revolution in Romania, development of the country’s Five-Year Plan, *Stakhanovism* among Romanian workers and reports on members’ visits to Romania.<sup>6</sup> It also co-organised the exhibitions that were part of the Institute’s official policy of ‘visual propaganda’ actions (*propaganda vizuala*).

In the following section, I am tracing the history of a sequence of two exhibitions organized by the Institute and BRFA in Britain. These shows were direct precursors of the Horniman Museum collection. In particular, it was the visit to the 1954 exhibition that triggered the London curator to enquire about presenting the Romanian material to the Horniman Museum. As he noted afterwards:



A colorful exhibition of Rumanian Folk Art was held in London in 1954.<sup>7</sup> At the time there was no possibility of obtaining any specimens there displayed for the Museum, as this was a travelling exhibition. However, the request for specimens was not forgotten, and in 1955 an invitation came from the Romanian Institute for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries for me to visit their country to see the museums there and to see the folk-art in its own setting. In the Museum of Folk Art in Bucharest an interesting collection of material had already been assembled for presentation to the Horniman Museum (Samson 1957, 2).

The section below presents the ways these two exhibitions used ideas of tradition and modernity in the representations of the state.

### **Romanian Folk Artifacts in an Accelerated World**

Since the establishment of the BRFA, heritage and folk artifacts were used to seal relationships and showcase the modernity of the Romanian People's Republic. Initially, the Institute was sending small gifts for its members. The inventories of these cargos consisted of an idiosyncratic combination of folk art and trinkets, from traditional carpets and basketry to national flags, political posters with socialist iconography, lighters, and souvenirs with images of Romanian politicians. The objects were often arranged into displays in meeting halls and households of organization members across Britain. Through sending artifacts, the Institute frequently celebrated the rituals of the newly constructed state. For example, the new annual rituals of the Liberation Day (23 August) and the Proclamation of the Republic (30 December), were celebrated through these small exhibitions. Building an activist community in Britain by celebrating Soviet commemorations and international visits were important emphases of the Institute's propaganda (Radulescu 2012). Material culture

displayed during the BRFA events was a symbolic device showcasing the Romanian People's Republic.

Over time, the Institute decided to extend its outreach ambitions in the West and started developing public exhibition programmes. In 1952, the Institute adopted a new dissemination strategy through the creation of “vitrines of photomontage with folk art objects” combining art with documentary material.<sup>8</sup> At the end of the year, an opportunity arose to showcase this exhibition style in the Britain, in Leeds and the R.W.S. Galleries in London. State modernization became the main theme of the show, entitled *The Rumanian Exhibition. Achievements of the Rumanian People's Republic*.<sup>9</sup> Setting the scene was a large scale photograph of the prime minister followed by a panel on *The Past Full of Misery*, demonstrating the dreadful conditions of life under the bourgeois regime. Presenting the Romanian People's Republic, the exhibition was abundant in visualizations of development, displaying graphics, statistics, architectural sketches, construction plans, predictions of Five Year Plan outcomes and photographs of the Romanian people working and building socialism. The Stalinist modern future was represented by a series of prognoses on the realization of the plan, such as this fragment: “The plan for the electrification and the utilization of the water resources will lead to the great prosperity of the Romanian People's Republic.”

The economic Five-Year Plan was a race against time in order to catch up and overtake the West (Buck-Morss 2000). Throughout the exhibition, this accelerated world of peasant-workers charging ahead through a rationalised landscapes of the collective farms and factories was presented in stark contrast to their stagnant feudal past. Within this staged Stalinist teleology of the future (Ssorin-Chaikov 2006), the second part of the exhibition focused on folk art. As the BRFA reviewer stated:

The rest of the exhibition, which consists of examples of peasant folk art, attractively shown in glass-covered cases, is the most colorful section of the whole show. Here we can see the wonderful national costumes, the richly embroidered blouses and woven skirts, the decorated leather belts and sheepskin jerkins, and the colorful aprons, which are still worn today in Rumanian villages. These and the decorated pottery in traditional designs and the examples of woodcarving are examples of what is rightly claimed to be the richest folk tradition in Europe. This popular art is immensely alive and it rounds off the whole exhibition in a way which clearly shows that the Rumanian people have a tradition of culture which they have preserved through years of oppression and which now, in the new inspiring conditions of Socialism, will continue its development into the future (Carpenter 1952, 4).

In this spatial arrangement, folk art was shown in tandem with modernity. In this unitary narrative, the rural artifacts were representative of both the peasantry exploited by feudalism (old era) and the emancipated peasant-workers enjoying the new material world. The 1952 display was a showcase of the Romanian self-image, premised on the concept of socialist progress in the Stalinist spirit. The exhibition served as a form of visual propaganda of political anticipation to demonstrate the “already fulfilled” but still in progress the Five Year Plan.

### **Too Much Future!**

Although visitors to the 1952 exhibition felt that it was a “pleasure to look behind the Iron Curtain”, the display was met with mixed reactions by the British audience. Visitors’ responses were recorded in the comments’ book and included in a self-critical review by the

British Romanian Friendship Association sent to the Institute's headquarters in Bucharest.<sup>10</sup> Studying comments' books as archival records poses limitations regarding representativeness (Macdonald 2005; Reid 2000; 2008). Archival materials on public responses cannot by any means, be seen as a wholly representative reflection of viewers' opinions, neither can one assess their sincerity, examine what type of visitors wrote them or how they engaged with the artifacts on display. The evidence given by the visitors' comments tells a fragmented story of public response, including agendas, visit motivations, or the particularities of the exhibition's effect on specific categories of viewers. At the same time, this limited resource can offer insights concerning public perceptions of the opposite side of the Iron Curtain, showing the contrast between the intentions of the exhibition makers and the visitors' interpretations.

While several viewers wrote that the displays were attractive and aesthetic, there were many negative comments about the lack of information on the history of Romania prior to 1944. It was emphasized that the exhibition represented an example of "crude propaganda in faulty English" carrying "meagre" content. Visitors to the 1952 exhibitions noted that incorrectly written captions made some of the photographs and exhibits appear absurd. One example was an image with children enjoying state-sponsored summer camps described as: "children are sent to the colonies". Most criticisms, however, were related to the number of artifacts on display. One anonymous visitor stated:

"Too little of the products of Rumania shown – just a few vases, a few dresses (costumes), a little folk art. There should have been more of the lovely embroidery work, and there should have been displayed products such as the food, wine, tobacco, musical instruments – something shown about the road and rail transport. Of the actual

display there was no indication what district the vases, dresses, carpets came from and what district the costumes are worn.”

A number of visitors felt a need for more craft objects on display but also looked for more detailed information about the local specificity of the presented material. Another visitor stated: “Show us more next time” as this was “a fine exhibition but too simple, too many photos and not enough things like the beautiful carpets”. This common sentiment about the scarcity of artifacts was often related to the problem of the progressive theme framing the exhibition:

“The growth should have been shown not only by photographs but real things. Even if only a sculpture or painting by the moderns, more craft work and folk art. A few musical instruments, a model of the diesel or other engines now being made in Rumania, even if some ball bearings on a tray. These things are being produced now for the first time. This could then be stressed.”

The concern for and need for more ‘real things’ was emphasized in the BRFA report sent to Bucharest:

“The criticism made above, I agree with to a large extent, especially that there is not enough things and the contrast between the past and the present. The statistics show too much of the future. Rumania can show enough of what it has achieved in the very short period the Republic has been in being.”

These critical comments sent alongside the BRFA report carried a strong message for the exhibition’s designers in Bucharest. They demonstrated that the exhibition provoked strong reactions and constituted a site of friction. Visitors’ feedback subverted the storyline

of the exhibition, revealing how the show performed outside its intended representation of socialism.

The 1952 exhibition was an important learning curve for the Institute's visual propaganda. Firstly, the Institute realized that the use of direct propaganda narratives might trigger opposition of the authorities. For example, despite several attempts to show the exhibition in Manchester and Liverpool, the BRFA did not manage to secure space for display. Similarly, in Italy an exhibition was closed down because of its politically radical character. Secondly, the Institute learnt that the public opinion was a key site of the Cold War's cultural front and its struggle for representations (Crowley and Pavitt 2008). As these visitors' reactions were collected and reported back to Bucharest, the misreading of the exhibition became apparent to the Institute and informed the construction of the following show. The audience responses to the 1952 exhibitions revealed that the presentation of history-as-progress (Buck-Morss 2000) was an unconvincing framework for the British audience. The vanguard future, displayed in panels with numerous spelling mistakes, appeared to explicit in its propaganda functions. Instead, the British visitors wanted more folk art and material presence of contemporary Romania. A comparison of the 1952 and the 1954 exhibitions demonstrates how folk art material was reimagined in the continuing struggle of Romanian self-representations in 1950s Britain.

### **The New/Old People's Art**

As noted previously, a visit to the exhibition organized by the Institute and BRFA in the London's Royal Hotel in 1954 triggered Otto Samson's interest and consequently led to the acquisition of the Romanian folk art collection for the Horniman Museum. Otto Samson was a one of the most prolific collectors in the history of the Horniman Museum, with a

keen interest in European material culture. Under Samson's directorship between the late 1940s and 1965, the Horniman Museum established a number of new institutional networks with museums across Europe and the Eastern Bloc, resulting in many acquisitions (Shelton 2001; Swallow 1989; Teague 2004).<sup>11</sup> However, as Rodriguez (2001) suggested, the Romanian folk art collection was unique in terms of size, content and value, becoming a turning point within the context of the Horniman Museum's focus on regional specificity and celebration of the craftsmanship of a European country, generally neglected by the West. Let us follow the London's curator's footsteps in the space by revisiting the Institute's archival documentation. The opening panel presented images of rural and industrial workers and photographs of political leaders.

“In the Rumanian People's Republic the treasures of popular art are turned into account on an unprecedented scale thanks to the support granted by the State of People's Democracy. Continuing the tradition handed down from generation to generation, the popular men of art continuously enrich the artistic creation of the people.”

Throughout the exhibition, there was a strong emphasis on the presentation of socialist modernity.<sup>12</sup> New to the 1954 show, compared with 1952, was the showing of pre-socialist heritage and folk art as fully integrated into Romania's modernizing society. For example, the *Appreciation of Popular Art* section demonstrated the state's efforts in promoting conservation and developing traditional crafts by building museums, houses of culture and state cooperatives for the production of folk art. The exhibition case with traditional costumes were very detailed and classified the outfits by specific ethnographic areas (*zone etnografice*). The section displaying peasant vernacular architecture emphasized the aesthetics of the past by highlighting the mastery of traditional craftsmen. Visitors could

admire the photographs presenting their work from the intricate detail of the carved gates to the richly decorated cottage interiors. The exhibiton also displayed images of historical religious buildings, churches and monasteries, framed as architectural treasures and inspiration for new designs. The visitors were presented with the emblematic projects of the Socialist Classicist Spark House in Bucharest, the National Opera building in Bucharest or the Romanian pavilion at the Moscow Exhibition of Architecture. The new architecture, the panel explained, was inspired by the richness of traditional and national architecture, at the same time designed for the working people. In this model, the future was inspired by the past. The discourse of scientific design allowed the modern building to be linked to historical vernacular and sacral architecture.

The key difference between the 1952 and 1954 exhibitons was a shift in the relationship with the pre-socialist past. In contrast to the defined historical starting point of state's foundation that characterized the 1952 show, the Royal Hotel exhibition presented stories about the value of pre-socialist heritage as a site of inspiration for modernity. Another difference was a strong emphasis on the materiality of the show. A rich selection of folk art presented with great care about detail. Objects were arranged according to regional classification (*zone etnografice*) with displays emphasizing their unique craftsmanship and the aesthetic values of artifacts. In comparison to the 1952, although the emphasis was still placed on the modernization project, the exposition of Romanian progress was significantly reduced. Instead of anticipatory messages about the economic plan, there was a proliferation of objects. Perhaps responding to previous visitor comments, the diplays were almost cluttered.

When, in 1947, the country turned eastwards, its modern project was pushed in the socialist direction, accelerating in a futuristic Stalinist spirit. The 1954 marks a return to the



narrative of entanglements of old and new. In many ways, the 1954 exhibition was a manifestation of recycled ideas of Romanian exhibition practices and the ‘traditional-modern-national’ (Popescu 2010) tropes informing international exhibition practices since the nineteenth century.

### **Serious Attention**

Samson’s visit to the 1954 London show was not a coincidence. On 15 March 1954, the BRFA sent a letter inviting the curator to be involved in the Sponsorship Committee of scholars and public figures related to the folk art exhibition of a “serious and important compilation” shown previously in Paris, Helsinki and Vienna.<sup>13</sup> In this letter, Glyn Evans (BRFA) praised Samson’s expertise and asked for support in the organization of the exhibition. As the Horniman Museum curator’s response to the call came quite late, the BRFA proposed that instead Otto Samson could assist in the opening. Samson was also offered the possibility of a loan of material to the Horniman Museum. He was sent photographs of the forthcoming exhibition setup and was invited to examine the artifacts before their display as,

it is quite understood that no one can act in the dark in a matter of this sort ... we had no clear idea as to the scope and importance of the exhibition. Since these now appear to make it something quite special in its field, we are most anxious for it to receive serious attention.<sup>14</sup>

The London exhibition at the Royal Hotel in Woburn Place was visited by around 3,000 people in total, mostly students and academics. Just as its Soviet counterparts, the Institute acknowledged the significance of the expert viewers and the Western scholars (David-Fox 2012; Stern 2006). The prioritization of the serious audience was also

exemplified by a letter sent from the BRFA to Bucharest, regarding a review of the 1954 exhibition in the Pottery Quarterly journal. In this correspondence, the secretary of the BRFA appealed to the Institute:

We most urgently require serious factual and scholarly answers to the enclosed questionnaire on the Romanian folk ceramics ... A detailed criticism of the lack of documentary material of sufficient detail and scholarship on all sections of the Exhibition will follow in due course. Meanwhile, we hope you will learn from the enclosed questionnaire the extent of professional and specialist interest in the Exhibition, and also realize that, unless better informed by you, we are totally unable to turn this interest into good account.<sup>15</sup>

Reporting on the London exhibition, the BRFA praised its scientific, specialist character, appreciated by “competent personalities”.<sup>16</sup>

The success of the exhibition, the BRFA report to the Institute suggests, illustrated the potential of disseminating visual propaganda amongst specialist and academic circles.<sup>17</sup> Their feedback influenced modifications in the exhibitions prepared for other audiences. Following the exhibition at the Royal Hotel, the 1954 exhibition material was sent back to Bucharest for amendments before its redisplay in Denmark.<sup>18</sup> As the exhibition captivated Otto Samson, the renewed strategy of the Institute worked well. In October 1955, Samson visited Romania with a group of “men of culture and science”, suggesting a “major exhibition” of Romanian material in London.<sup>19</sup>

### **Handsome gift**

The generous gift from the IRRCS [the Romanian Institute for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries] of a collection of examples of Romanian

folk art has been received with great pleasure by the Council's Horniman Museum. The collection will form a most valuable addition to the museum's exhibits and I have been asked to convey to you the Council's warm appreciation of this handsome gift.<sup>20</sup>

The handsome gift of the Romanian collection, as the Clerk of the London City Council wrote in his letter, was much appreciated and constituted a unique addition to the museum collections of the time. The uniqueness of the 1956 collection stems from its nature as a very early act of reciprocity in the context of the frozen post-war British-Romanian relationships.

Following the story of the 1952 and 1954 exhibitions, the Horniman Museum collection was an outcome of the relationships of diplomacy and exchange created by the cultural politics of its time. The story of the 1952 and 1954 Romanian exhibitions led to the creation of the 1956 collection and all three constituted a sequence of encounters across the Iron Curtain. Folk art was a legitimate fragment of material culture to perform that function – in the past made by the laboring collective, quintessentially non-bourgeois, linked to the nationalist sensitivity and 'the Romanian soul'. As the curator mentioned, it fulfilled its purpose without being overtly propaganda-like. Showcasing Romanian folk art was a medium through which the newly established socialist state aimed to display its past and future abroad. The well developed anthropological literature on gift-giving sheds light on the complexity of the politics of the gift and its ssymetries (Bourdieu 1990; Graeber 2001; Gregory 1982; Mauss 1990; Weiner 1992). For example, Sahlins (1972) demonstrated that whereas gift-giving creates relationships of solidarity and acts as social glue, it also generates tensions and makes the social fact of sides visible. Gifts are embedded in political

processes, reflecting relationships between groups and their competitive logic (Thomas 1991; Graeber 2010).

As the historical outline of the context of this gift through early exhibitions in 1952 and 1954 showed, the Horniman Museum gift resulted from representational practices embedded in the spectacle of the Cold War. The generous act of offering was a political act of securing a representation of Romania in Britain. With difficulties to get an exhibition space throughout the 1950s and exhibiting in small galleries and hotels, the interest of a London museum curator provided an opportunity for the Institute to secure a space in the institution. As the Bucharest curator asserted, folk art was a perfect medium for representing Romania as the objects themselves were admired. The Romanian material was not deposited in the Horniman Museum store by accident. It was a product of transnational museological relationality and an intersection of the contingent relationships of the 1950s. By giving the collection away, the Institute received a guarantee of an ongoing ‘serious’ interest in Romania

### **A Feverish Collection**

“Folk art was very good for international exhibitions because there was no need for propaganda. These objects themselves, woodwork, ceramics, dress were admired; it was sufficient.”<sup>21</sup>

Following Otto Samson’s visit to Bucharest, the Institute commissioned the curatorial team of the Bucharest Museum of Folk Art to acquire a representative collection. Soon, a six-person team was sent to the countryside to purchase the artifacts. Collecting, documenting and exhibiting folk art abroad on Institute’s demand were key activities of this museum at that time. Between 1949 and 1957, the institution contributed to fifty

international exhibitions (Bănăţeanu 1957, 9). This section presents the story of collecting for the Institute told by Jadwiga, the last surviving curator of the Folk Art Museum team commissioned to acquire objects for the Horniman Museum acquisition. During a series of interviews, she remembered the complex relationships between the Romanian museum, the Institute and the central authorities.

Jadwiga saw the 1950s as a period of rushed collecting dependent on the orders of the Institute and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The curatorial diary was a product of constant demands from the government: “The ministry always needed something, for example through establishing relationships with a museum abroad that was interested in exchange. We had to respond to that invitation and these activities defined our schedule”<sup>22</sup>

Typically, she explained, collecting was organized into group field trips, with each curator working within their expertise in textiles, ceramics, and traditional architecture. In her view, these collecting activities were shopping trips on behalf of the state. The museum team embarked on several shopping trips following repetitive requests from the central authorities. Most projects were created at very short notice. Shopping and exhibiting was an appendage to the political activities abroad: “Often, prior to the Party dignitaries’ international travels, we were sent abroad with a general folk exhibition related to the venue given for use.”<sup>23</sup>

The curator had a reputation for successful installation of exhibitions with short deadline and was asked to take part in several international projects. Often our conversations turned to Jadwiga’s work abroad, revealing the mechanisms of political monitoring that accompanied exhibition-making across the Iron Curtain:

“I was told to pay close attention while being abroad. The museum securist [secret police officer] advised me: ‘If you are told to make a statement, please write it down in two or three copies, including one for me. He said that those who were very Party-oriented in the embassies could ... that it was easy to change a coma here and there [and alter the meaning of a statement]. He trusted us ... everything depended on who you dealt with.”<sup>24</sup>

Thinking about her professional practice during the 1950s, the curator recalled several challenges of working with the authorities and political pressures encountered throughout the exhibition-making process. For example, any international correspondence was seen as suspicious and needed to be closely monitored: “The securist knew that I was writing letters to Poland and Germany and the contents of what I was writing. I never included anything offensive to anybody ... but they did read everything.”<sup>25</sup>

Collecting, or shopping for artifacts, and exhibition making operated in a highly politicised climate under the conditions of the socialist culture of rush (Ssorin-Chaikov 2006). Facing external pressures, the curators engaged in feverish acquisitions for cultural exchanges. These collections were often exported to museums abroad to construct political installations or accompany diplomatic visits.

## **Conclusion**

The article aimed to shed light on the use of museum collections in the international representations of the Cold War period. Macdonald (2016: 7) recently argued that folklore museums are often overlooked in museological debates. This article aimed to address this gap by shedding light on one of the many understudied collections held in museum stores across Europe. This article, albeit exploratory in nature, has attempted to initiate a debate

on the the social history, mobility and the politics of European folk art collections in the Cold War period. The issues raised in this paper clearly have to be investigated further, yet indicate that folk art collections have been embedded in the warfare of representations. Collecting and exhibiting folk art need to be understood both within the highly politicized arena of museum practices and the negotiations and tensions generated in the process. An investigation of the multiple presences of artifacts from beyond the Iron Curtain in museums would make an illuminating comparative project that outlines both the commonalities and differences in these activities and the complex macro- and microrelationships that made up these collections.

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> The archival study in Romania focused on the archives of the Museum of Romanian Peasant and the collections of the National Archives on the Romanian Institute for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (*Institutul Român pentru Relații Culturale cu Străinătatea*, hereafter *the Institute*) and Central Committee of the Romanian Workers' Party.

<sup>2</sup> In 1956, during the the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU, Nikita Khrushchev gave a famous "Secret Speech", exposing the crimes of Stalinism and resulting in the change of relations between Moscow and its satellites, named as the "Thaw". Following the return from the Congress of the CPSU in Moscow, the Romanian Politburo decided to keep the status quo, highlighting the righteousness of the party line and strictly controlling any discussions about Khrushchev's de-Stalinization. In particular, Gheorghiu-Dej's only once publicly presented a shortened version of the Khrushchev's secret speech to the Romanian Central Committee plenum, asserting that it was irrelevant to the Romanian Party as personality cult had been removed in 1952. (Deletant 2004). As Romania refused to initiate destalinization, any revisionism or "liberal-anarchic" tendencies resulted in sanctions on the Party members (Tismăneanu 2002). As a result, there were no significant long-term changes in Romanian politics equivalent to the "Thaw" and the resulting de-Stalinisation process (Deletant 2000, 2004). In contrast to other states within the Soviet sphere of influence, Romania has initiated a very limited process of liberalization only in the wake of the 1964 "Declaration of Independence" from COMECON. (Deletant 1999). In this context, the British-Romanian relations that were strained at the end of the 1940s, were virtually inexistent until the 1960s (Sitariu 2014).

<sup>3</sup> The Institute for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (Institute) was modelled on the Soviet institution VOKS (All Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries).

<sup>4</sup> Arhivele Nationale Istorice Centrale [hereinafter ANIC], Fond IRRCS 1774, Structura 2, file no. 342/1950, doc. 310.

<sup>5</sup> ANIC, Fond IRRCS 1774, Structura 2, file no. 338/41.

<sup>6</sup> Named after the Soviet miner, Stakhanov, it was a system of industrial shock-work, over-achievement in the factory and output beyond production norms.

<sup>7</sup> In the 1950s sources „Romania” was usually spelled „Rumania”, at times appearing as “Roumania”. The author uses spelling as it appeared in the original form. It is interesting to note that spelling had a political connotation. Whereas “Romania” implied connections with Rome (and therefore, the West), “Rumania” linked the country to Byzantium (the East) (see: Wixman 1988, White 2000, 124).

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<sup>8</sup> In the Annual Plan for the Propaganda Section we read that the main aims of the department was setting up new Friendship Associations, exhibitions and intensifying the activities of the existing groups (ANIC, Fond IRRCS 1774, Structura 2, file no. 7 pp. 35). That year, there was series of ten exhibitions located in Austria, Belgium, Great Britain, France, Holland, Italy and Sweden (ANIC, Fond IRRCS 1774, Structura 2, file no. 15 pp. 365). At the same time, fifteen ‘capitalist countries’ received sets of artifacts for the bazaars of 23<sup>rd</sup> of August and 30<sup>th</sup> December.

<sup>9</sup> The exhibition took place between 29th December and 19th January 1952 in R. W. S. Galleries, 26 Conduit Street in London and then moved to Leeds. The travelling show followed directly an exhibition of folk art in Stockholm that took place in November (ANIC, Fond IRRCS 1774, Structura 1, file no. 15), exemplifying a unified ‘visual propaganda’ strategy of the Institute.

<sup>10</sup> ANIC, Fond IRRCS 1774, Structura 2, file no. 338, pp.198-202.

<sup>11</sup> In the 1950s and 1960s, he led to acquisitions of objects from Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Holland, Hungary, France, Scandinavia, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Spain and Yugoslavia (Swallow 1989).

<sup>12</sup> The 1954 Exhibition displayed the mechanisation of agriculture through emphasis on productivity in a panel entitled ‘Plenty’. The success of the socialist model was illustrated by sections on ‘Rising Living Standards’ exemplified by electrification of the countryside, rational redistribution of goods and provision of social and medical services.

<sup>13</sup> Letter from Glyn Evans to Otto Samson, Horniman Museum Archives, 15th March 1954 Arc/Hmg/Exh/1957/001.

<sup>14</sup> Letter from Glyn Evans to Otto Samson, Horniman Museum Archives, 8th April 1954 Arc/Hmg/Exh/1957/001.

<sup>15</sup> The letter was sent on the 13<sup>th</sup> May 1954. ANIC, Fond IRRCS 1774, Structura 2, file no. 351, p. 138

<sup>16</sup> ANIC, Fond IRRCS 1774, Structura 2, file no. 342, p. 203.

<sup>17</sup> ANIC, Fond IRRCS 1774, Structura 2, file no. 342, p. 216.

<sup>18</sup> ANIC, Fond IRRCS 1774, Structura 2, file no. 351, p. 56.

<sup>19</sup> ANIC, Fond IRRCS 1774, Structura 2, file no. 342, p. 117.

<sup>20</sup> Excerpt from a Letter to Prof. Michail Roşianu, (Chairman of the IRRCS) from O. Hart (Clerk of the London County Council), 26 October 1956.

<sup>21</sup> Jadwiga Formagiu (retired curator), personal communication with the autor, 2012

<sup>22</sup> Jadwiga Formagiu (retired curator), personal communication with the autor, 2012

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<sup>23</sup> Jadwiga Formagiu (retired curator), personal communication with the autor, 2012

<sup>24</sup> Jadwiga Formagiu (retired curator), personal communication with the autor, 2012

<sup>25</sup> Jadwiga Formagiu (retired curator), personal communication with the autor, 2012