

Memory, Identity and Material Culture: an exploration of perspectives on the past through a museum collection of Romanian Artifacts

The project offers a rare and exciting opportunity to work with an existing Museum collection in London, and to trace images and objects from this collection across space and time to their places of origin in eastern Europe, thus developing new curating practices and methodological approaches to the study of memory and life stories through objects, in the context of both UK and Romanian museology and anthropology. This is particularly groundbreaking research as, during and since the socialist period, eastern European craft objects have often been presented, interpreted and framed in the Museum within the contexts of either function or folklore. The project proposes to support two separate but complementary PhD projects, both of which will take as their starting point a particular aspect of the Horniman Museum's unique and extraordinary collection of Romanian crafts, artefacts and photographs which was presented to the Museum in the 1950s and which includes unusually rich data concerning the specific provenance and in many cases the individual identity of craft producers and their villages.

Student A will work with photographic and other representations of the collection. Tracing details of place of origin, family, and artist, s/he will take representations of people and artefacts back to the source communities to show them to the artists (if still living) and their descendants, and to elicit stories, contexts, and memories of past processes of craft production, the uses of crafts in daily life, and the transmission of skills from generation to generation, within families or neighbourhoods, along gender and generation lines. This project will also develop, through ethnographic methods of participant observation, photography and interviews, a bank of new data interrogating the social lives of objects, how their production and use has changed over time and particularly throughout the turbulent and often traumatic years of early socialism in Romania (Stalinism, the time of the collection's migration to the Horniman), the Ceausescu period, and the most recent postsocialist changes. It examines the transmission of skills in terms of knowledge and practice, patterns of continuity, rupture, revival and reinvention. It is anticipated that the value and aesthetic judgements surrounding 'folk' production will have changed significantly at different points of this time trajectory, and that the student will be able to provide a unique insight into the ways in which repeated socio economic and political disrupture influences the production of objects, their social lives and aesthetic perceptions of them.

Student B will focus on the history and provenance of the collection itself, and will work both in the Horniman and, more extensively, in national and regional archives in Romania, in order to trace the history of the collection, the events that led to its purchase and export, and the journey that the objects made between their place of production and their final destination in the Horniman collection. Student B will also interview artists and their descendents in the Rumanian countryside, but the main thrust of this project will be the social history of a collection, and the human histories and everyday lives which it provided its context. The student will also be involved in curating an exhibition of Rumanian artefacts, informed by the theoretical and ethnographic insights generated through the research.

A primary question underpinning both of the doctoral projects concerns the relation between objects which become frozen in time, (classified and catalogued within a museum), and their counterparts some of which continue to be made and used in the source regions, others of which fall from use or are reintroduced as folk art or tourist commodities etc. The role of objects as retainers and triggers of memory and the use of visual methods of research and techniques of display are also central to both projects.