

Traditional handcraft among Szeklers in Transylvania





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The catalogue was made as a product thesis at the General Anthropology Master's program of Aarhus University.

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Dear Visitor,



With this catalogue, I invite you to gain an insight into the material culture of people known as Szeklers. The objects shown are from a Hungarian speaking region of Romania. Szeklers live in the east of Transylvania, and consider themselves descendants of Hungarian border guards. As people with a military background, they value independence and perseverance. The specific area where I conducted fieldwork and collected the material is a county named after a mountain range in the Carpathians, called Hargita. These mountains are an important part of local imagination, and determine the character of local resources. Wood, as one of

the most important of resources, has an important part in the handcraft of these people as well.

Szeklerland, a naturally isolated area, did not have much opportunity for development during its history. Innovations of modernity arrived late, so the region preserved some of its earlier characteristics. Among these, I find traditional handcraft worth presenting, because it shows in an expressive way how local people feel and think.

I am a local in this region, I was born and I grew up here. Learning different handcrafts as a child was not unusual to me, and having had the experience was important when I decided to learn more about the topic. But my role was different in collecting the material shown in this catalogue. I made an



attempt to see things from the viewpoint of an outsider, questioning what is otherwise usual, and I also intend to show these to someone who is not familiar with the region.

The shown material was collected during a four-month fieldwork period in 2018 and complemented in 2019, when I visited my home country several times. During this fieldwork, I also made a collection of 25 handcrafted objects which are part of the Ethnographic Collections of Moesgaard Museum. The objects of the collection are shown here together with other things I photographed or that the craftsmen showed me. On the following pages, I also present my own impressions and thoughts from when meeting the local craftsmen. Besides this, I offer an insight into how the craftsmen think about their work. I should also mention that the material collected is neither an exhaustive, nor a representative demonstration of every local handcraft. The work of other craftsmen who are left out here or some different crafts could be just as valuable as the material shown.

The topics of the catalogue are selected to show some specific aspects of the traditional local handcraft. Some parts present the work of one artist because it illustrates certain characteristics in a very expressive way. But I also put together photos, descriptions, and quotations from different craftsmen when they explain different sides of the same story.

The aim of this catalogue is to present the objects in the way that locals see them. As such I do not emphasize a few objects, but I would like to exhibit the richness presented by the items. I would also like to show the diversity of the objects, and the different understandings connected to the same objects, motifs, techniques, etc., just like the diversity of the interpretations of "tradition".

In presenting this work, tradition is not the only important issue in my opinion. I found innovation interesting too, looking at the way it becomes accepted among the traditional solutions. In my work I show how traditional forms are used today, and what kind of innovations and improvisations allow people to continue working on something that is important for them.

The value of old things



Photo: Etelka Páll

A local woman who is working with different textiles has an old fulling mill which she had refurbished a few times recently with her earnings from weaving. Only a few watermills are still working in the area as milling was restricted during the Communist era. There is not as much demand either for fulling mills as there was before. This one is used by craftsmen from the area who use it to clean wool, and carpets are also cleaned in the fuller.

"We did not fix it up to mill, we only did it to prevent it going to ruin, to preserve the tradition. That is why we did it. And if only somebody would take it over..."

Klára started weaving recently. When I asked her about it, the first thing she mentioned was her joy to be working with something connected to her roots. Her grandmother also used to weave to meet the needs of the village.



The photo of her grandmother is on the wall in the room where the loom is. Klára is also using some of the family's old tools. She showed me a weaving tool with an old sign. She told me that this sign can be found on other tools as well which belong to the family.



"I respect tradition very much when I think of the fact that people must have worked a lot with anything they created that was handmade. Because starting from the thread and the material all the way to when it became a pair of trousers or anything, it was all made by hand. It was such immense, time-consuming work, and it required such knowledge that if we were to just throw these away now, then we become worthless, our lives would be empty. I secretly do or would expect it from everyone to treat these [felt works she created] responsibly. If I give it to someone I expect them not to throw it away after a couple of months because they have become bored. I ask everyone, if they become bored of or it becomes damaged or anything, bring it back to me, I will even pay back the price if it was bought for money, but do not throw it away, because this takes a lot of work." Kinga Gáll



When Rózsika néni got married, every girl used to prepare her own dowry handcrafting different objects for household use. Rózsika néni's house is still fully decorated with her crafted objects. She also saved some parts of her dowry that she is still using today. The cloths on the photo are made of her old textiles as she would like to make use of these.

"The man had to have a house. Well, they had houses, even if there were only two rooms, it was still a house. I also moved into a little two-room house [after marriage], and then we built another into the back, but I had to have my dowry. It had to include six big pillows, I brought two woollen bed sheets, a mattress, two straw palliasses because I brought a bed. And my dowry was a modest one because we had a large family, and we could not afford as much as wealthy farmers could. And I also brought four to eight pillowcases, [...] four small pillows, eighteen towels, including kitchen cloths."



Recreating old things

"Usually the old woodcarvers' works show through, and it's almost like a tradition. Not oral tradition, but [the young wood carver] sees a motif, and then he tries to imitate it and improve upon it. There is something like this."

Csaba Török

Created by István Gábor Nagy, photo provided by the artist



The photos illustrate Sarmatian weapons and jewellery.

„Because they [archeologists] have a concept but that doesn't work usually in blacksmithing . [They don't know] until they didn't try what is possible to make as a blacksmith. Because in the beginning, they said it should be another solution. So they should try the other solution.” István Gábor Nagy

Gábor works as a blacksmith, and he is also interested in history. He cooperates with archaeologists and museums, creating reproductions of the finds.

He forged older and newer weapons, according to archaeologist finds. Some of these are used for battle demonstrations by groups practicing traditional martial arts.



Created by István Gábor Nagy,
photo provided by the artist



Created by Rézrontó,
photo provided by the artist

"This is a find, so the original one was found in a grave from the era of the Hungarian conquest, and it was created based on that. I try to reproduce it as well as possible, if not even better technically, because there are some mistakes. [...] I aim to create a more proper arc, where it does not have a flatness as you see it is a bit refracted here. And I try to avoid these things. [...] So I try to pay attention to these things when crafting, and it is a good feeling if I can craft something even better than the master."

Béla Tölgyesi (Rézrontó)



Created by Árpád Páll

Árpád makes ceramic tiles to decorate stoves and different parts of the house, such as the bathroom and kitchen. He works based on patterns from old tiles found in museums and different publications. The tiles he makes are smaller than the original ones because the use of ceramic tiles is different today than it was a few hundred years ago when they only used three tiles to decorate stoves.

"When I made my first tiles, I designed them myself. Meanwhile I was studying naive art, and naive sculpture, and I had masters. Then I realized that there are so many tile forms that died out, that it would be more valuable to bring old forms back rather than designing new ones. So this is how I stayed with traditional tile motifs." Árpád Páll

"For example, these peasant shirts are completely made up of rectangles. There is not even an inch of waste, because in the old days they had to weave the



Created by Erzsébet Bíró,
photo provided by the artist

material for this, and it was a lot of work, and very valuable. So it was designed with right angles since they did not have tailoring skills. Look at this, the front, the back, the sleeve as well. [...] For example, this is the female shirt of the folk costume from Zetelaka. This is also all rectangles. The crinkles and expansions were made by [a specific embroidery technique called] darázsolás. So it was stitched beautifully like this, and this allowed a space for the breasts, it created the bust, but it was a decoration as well. [...] This method was developed over centuries. But they did not waste anything, and it could



Created by Erzsébet Bíró,
photo provided by the artist

still be beautiful because it was embroidered by darázsolás. So I say, if we go back to old things, we can never go wrong." Erzsébet Bíró

Klára weaves textiles for traditional costumes and she likes to design her works with mindfulness of how these fabrics were created in the past. Even though she enjoys creating unique pieces, her favourite works are created when somebody brings an old cloth and asks her to weave the same motif.

"These clothes were expressive. But the world is different now. Everything was written on the clothes, how wealthy the person was, which village they were from, everything. And now we are trying to revive these things with very little information." Klára Barabás

The picture shows Szekler carpets created through cooperation by a few women. The motifs are identical with ones found on old carpets from the area. Most of the patterns have names, but sometimes more than one name can be used for the same motif. These new carpets are made using the same traditional materials and techniques, on a standing loom. The colours might be different, but they try to follow the original shades.



Created by Etelka Páll (dyeing) and Erzsébet Balázs (weaving)

This motif was reproduced after a carpet found in a local village church. The motif was named 'Saint John' after the church, even though there is no direct connection between the saint and the pattern. I could not find materials about the original carpet, but I found out that this motif was rediscovered between the two world wars in the area where I was doing my fieldwork. A local official's wife was interested in Szekler carpets in the interwar period, and she taught local women and gave them the patterns to follow to make carpets. Some of these women's children might have learnt weaving from their mothers. The woman who taught me weaving learnt the profession this way. She was not allowed to sit next to the loom as a child - the carpets were considered too valuable for children to play with, but she learnt anyway.



Created by Etelka Páll (dyeing) and Erzsébet Balázs (weaving)
Photo: Ethnographic Collections, Moesgaard Museum

I also found out about the original use of these kinds of carpets before they were rediscovered. Szekler carpets were made for the household, but not for everyday use, rather as decoration and a symbol of wealth. These carpets were only woven if the textiles for the everyday needs of the household were already complete and there was still time and materials to create something. As valuable items, the carpets were used to cover the bed or the table, but were not put on the floor as they are today.

Objects with meanings



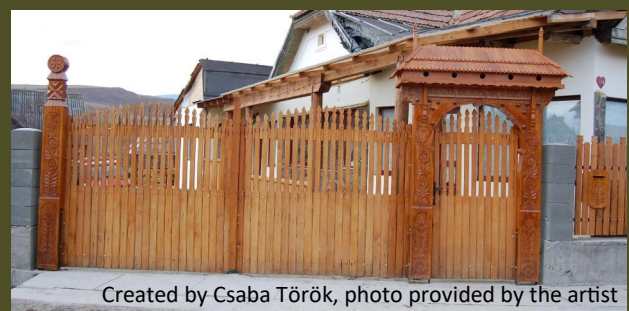
Szekler gates are entrances carved according to certain designs mostly decorated with floral and geometric elements. They are made of a small gate and a swing gate according to the needs of old households, so that a hay wagon could fit under the roof. The Szekler gate represented the entrance to the "life" of the farmer.

Locals have maintained the tradition of Szekler gates in Máréfalva that is shown in the photo, and as a result the village became known for its gates. Old and new carvings can both be found here, some gates are painted, others are plain. Szekler gates are also built in other locations, they became popular in Hungary as well. Originally, gates used to have local characteristics in different areas.

"For example, the gate from Csík has the form of a horseshoe. I am talking about the double gate. You can draw circle into the swing gate, and the same with the top of the single. That is also how we make the gates, we draw a circle into the top, and we shape them that way." Zoltán Szabó

People use traditional elements today to carve other entrances than Szekler gates. The photo shows a gate decorated as a Szekler gate, but it is shorter than the traditional ones.

There is also a new practice to set large Szekler gates on the borders of villages or towns. These can be 7 metres tall, while an average gate is about 4-5 metres. Not everyone appreciates the beauty of these large gates, as their proportions do not match that of original gates.



Created by Csaba Török, photo provided by the artist

Zoli bácsi carves washing paddles called *sulyok* in different forms according to the shape of older objects. He prefers to design the motifs himself using different traditional elements. The craftsman created the form of some of the paddles based on the work of his grandfather who was also a woodcarver.

The *sulyok* is a tool that was used for cleaning textiles in old households. Besides this, it also has a symbolic meaning, as a present.



Created by Zoltán Szabó

"The sulyok was after all an expression of love at that time. A young man would visit a woman, and sometimes three or four men could be courting a woman at a time. If the woman accepted a sulyok from one of them, this meant that they were attracted to each other." Zoltán Szabó



Created by Varga mézes,
photo provided by the artist

Men also used to give gingerbread hearts as an expression of love to women when they came back from the market. In its traditional form, a gingerbread heart is red with colourful motifs, with a mirror in the middle.

Kontyos chairs were made by woodcarvers and traditional furniture painters. These objects were meant to indicate the atmosphere of the household where they were placed. If the birds were looking at each other, it meant there was peace, or if they were back to back, that indicated conflict between the spouses. This way visitors would know right away if it was a good place to stay or not.



Created by Zoltán Szabó



Created by Zoltán Szabó, photo provided by the artist

"I use the Szekler runic script because it belongs to us, it is an ancient script. Well yes, I usually write this on each one because they are shepherd's staffs: "May the Lord give us rich pastures and fresh springs." [...] I carved at least one hundred of them until now, and no two were the same. And also the shepherd's carved motifs. [...] I use at least about 25-30 motifs." Zoltán Szabó



Created by Zoltán Szabó, photo provided by the artist

These carved wooden columns are called *kopjafa*. The *kopjafa* is used instead of a gravestone or to mark memorial sites. Many of these columns are marking a well-known memorial site close to the locality of this craftsman. Yet this wood-carver would never call most of the carved objects at this place a *kopjafa*, as these are not created in the traditional way. A true *kopjafa* should symbolize a person, with different parts representing the legs, body, neck and head with only a few decorating elements.



Created by the Páll family

The *bokály* is a jug with a specific shape. It is known as a festive drinking vessel, and today it is mostly used as a decoration. Its form reminds the viewer of a shapely woman, the upper part is her head and the handle is the long braided hair. It is mostly decorated with floral motifs, birds and deer.

In the past, the dowry chest was a typical piece of decorated furniture, where the motifs symbolised the life of the owner. Sometimes, as the final stage of its lifespan, the chest could even become the owner's coffin. Today certain pieces of home decoration are painted in this way.

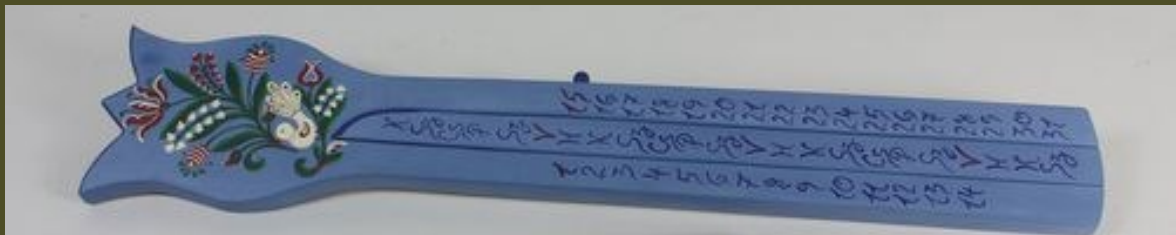


The Home Blessing is a typical text displayed on handcrafted objects.

The text in English:
Home Blessing
Where there is faith,
there is love.
Where there is love,
there is peace.
Where there is peace,
there is God.
Where there is God;
there is no need.



Objects created by Gyöngyi Bíró. Photos: Ethnographic Collections, Moesgaard Museum



The perpetual calendar should be set on the first day of every month in order to show the date and the days of the week together. On this calendar, the days of the week are shown by the first letter of their Hungarian name: H stands for *Hétfő* and it means Monday, followed by the other days in order.

Iconic representations on the objects



Created by Irma Faluvégi
Photo: Ethnographic Collections, Moesgaard Museum

"I was sitting there [next to the products], and about six to eight youngsters passed by, boys and girls holding each other two by two, they were younger than twenty. As they passed by in front of me, a boy in the second row said: Hey, stop! They all stopped suddenly. Look, how the Szeklers have surrendered!" Irma Faluvégi

Irma néni started weaving as an occupation after she became unemployed. She received the motif of the carpet with folk dancers at the beginning of her weaving career. At that time, about 20 years ago, she was working for a local folk gift shop. Since then she has continued weaving this type of carpet with small changes. As her favourite, habitual product, it has stories connected to it. The weaving woman created the motif with musicians herself, based on the other carpet with folk dancers. The other one with the label "Csíksomlyó" shows an iconic local church which is a well-known place of pilgrimage for Hungarians.



Created by Irma Faluvégi

She created this latter pattern using a drawing of the church from a book cover.



Created by Irma Faluvégi

Created by Juliánna Péter. Photos: Ethnographic Collections, Moesgaard Museum



Just like the traditional clothes of the dancers shown on the carpet, the bracelet is made of red and black stripes. These colours are representative for the Szeklers, red and black is shown on many different traditional products.



Created by Erzsébet Kustán,
photo provided by the artist

This wall decoration represents the form of a Szekler gate. It is easy to recognize, even if the technique of makramé does not allow the same shapes and decorations as those available to a woodcarver. A craftsman working with makramé is restricted by the technique, as every thread must have its place in the motif.

Gingerbread houses are known by everyone from tales and from markets. This house is even more unique, as it is made in the shape of a traditional peasant house. The porch is an important characteristic of the local traditional architecture, it is even part of the name of the house. This gingerbread house was made for a new couple for their wedding.



Created by Réka Farkas,
photo provided by the artist

"They wanted a house with a porch because they have this type of house. They did not request it to be exactly the same as their house, so not necessarily the door after two windows followed by another window, but simply a house with a porch where they could collect the money [offered by guests]." Réka Farkas

Myths and tales

The Miraculous Hind is one of the central creatures of Hungarian mythology. The legend says that two brothers followed the Miraculous Hind and found a place where they established their new home.

Created by Domokos Páll. Photo: Ethnographic Collections, Moesgaard Museum



The dawn is cool; a light wind blows;
the broad horizon brims with blue;
the hind across the river goes
and bravely leaps before their view.

On flies the bird, the song flies now
of Enéh's sons' fair fellowship:
the lark's aloft from bough to bough,
the song is passed from lip to lip.

(János Arany :The legend of the "Miraculous hind", translated by Watson Kirkconnell, Anton N. Nyerges and Adam Makkai)



Created by Árpád Páll



Created by Gizella Fehér

The princess who must be saved from the dragon is a well-known character from folk tales. She is depicted on this plate. Figures of the prince, the young shepherd, the smallest son or the poor man can be seen here as well. One of them must save the princess, and in return the king will offer him his daughter's hand in marriage and half of his kingdom.



Created by Domokos Páll

Motifs and creativity

These felted slippers show the artist's favourite motif. It symbolises the sexual act of the male genitalia penetrating the female. Tünde started using this and other traditional motifs without knowing their meaning. She later found out their significance when somebody explained it to her. Despite knowing the meaning of the decoration, she did not change the way that she is using it.



Created by Tünde Szász,
photo provided by the artist



Created by Kinga Gáll,
photo provided by the artist

Kinga does not feel comfortable using traditional motifs, as there is a complex system of meanings behind them. She does not feel familiar enough with the connotations to use the motifs. Kinga would rather use her fantasy to decorate felted shoes.

Traditional motifs are created according to certain rules and every element has its own meaning. The creativity of the artist is only one element of the creation which is complemented by the knowledge behind the motifs described mostly by ethnographers.

The tree as a symbol of life is a frequently crafted motif. Mostly, it is represented in an abstract way, where it would not be clear that a tree is depicted to someone with no ethnographic knowledge.



Created by Erzsébet Kustán, photo provided by the artist

These makramé trees are exceptions, but they are not known as traditional forms.



Created by Árpád Páll

The tree of life is often depicted as a composition of different plants connected to each other. The ceramic tile on the left is interpreted by the artist to represent a family, the connection of the man and the woman. On the right, the seven tulips in the wood represent the seven chieftains of the Hungarian conquest which are carved in the form of a tree of life. There are four different kinds of tulips on this carving.



Created by Zoltán Szabó
Photo: Ethnographic Collections, Moesgaard Museum



Created by Gyöngyi Bíró, photo provided by the artist

"This motif [the round flower] has a role of protection. If you look at, it is like an eye, it has eyelashes as well. [...] The berries actually... well, the berries represent children, youth, and so each type of tulip has its own message. This one already gave birth to her child, so it flew out [in the middle of the motif]. She is a maid, we can say that [smaller ones on the edges]. The carnation is a male motif, it signifies the man. The birds signify love, the lily of the valley signifies purity."

Gyöngyi Bíró

"Somebody asked for a sabretache where they wanted to represent that this person is a very-very good... how should I say this, that he can be a good partner. But not necessarily a good partner to his wife, but in every kind of situation, that he is not necessarily self-sacrificing, but helpful and giving. Then one day somebody mentioned that this is called arkadash in Turkish, and in Hungarian, this would be like having each other's back. [...] Actually this concept can be seen on a Scythian gold coin, where it is depicted as two figures standing back to back and shooting arrows. This means that they are defending each other's backs. [...] So this is what was required to be shown on the sabretache, but with Hungarian motifs if possible. So I set out and made it, I believe the draft is still here somewhere. The customer liked it, so I crafted it." Béla Tölgyesi (Rézrontó)



Created by Rézrontó



Created by Réka Farkas, photo provided by the artist

Different crafts adapt motifs from other crafts. Motifs from embroidery often appear on different crafts, but there is also pattern of wood carving adapted as an egg decoration. The craftsmen follow some general rules in creating these objects which are known across professions.

[How does the tulip bend?]

"Always upright. Never down, never. You know where it bends down? On the gate of the cemetery, on the Szekler gate. [...] Because if the tulip bends down, it dies. Otherwise, it is alive, flowering upright to the sky. [...] And the tendrils, the connections to the roots should be present everywhere, they should be together."



Created by Zsuzsa Puskás, photo provided by the artist



Created by Gizella Fehér
Photo: Ethnographic Collections,
Moesgaard Museum

Decorated eggs are used in a Hungarian Easter tradition where boys sprinkle girls with water or with perfume. In return, the girls give them painted eggs. Traditionally every year before Easter women paint eggs, usually simple ones, only sometimes decorated as seen on the photos. Gizi néni usually decorates eggs according to motifs found in different publications. The old egg decorations tend to be more sketchy than her works, but it is important to her to paint eggs with the traditional designs. The motif of this goose egg (on the left) was adopted from a decorated egg found in the local museum (on the right), and it originated from a nearby village.



"When there are 2500 egg motifs, then why should we design another one ourselves?" Gizella Fehér

Éva likes to use traditional motifs in a creative way. Her decorated eggs are inspired by traditional motifs, but she prefers to decorate the eggs more densely than other artists. As shown on the second photo, she divides the eggs into more symmetric sections than usual and decorates all these sections.



Created by Gizella Fehér



Created by Éva Salamon, photo provided by the artist

The pattern of this carpet is called peach stone because of its similarities with the seed of the fruit. This pattern was originally used on local kitchen cloths and towels made of cotton, flax or hemp. The artist adapted the pattern to create woollen carpets.

Created by Etelka Páll (dyeing) and Erzsébet Balázs (weaving)
Photo: Ethnographic Collections, Moesgaard Museum



Gyöngyi paints furniture using traditional motifs. Even if she knows the significance of each element, she does not always use the motifs according to their meanings. Since people can no longer read these compositions today, the meaning becomes less important.

"When I took my exam, I was asked where the motif [on the furniture] was from. I said right away that it was from Somlyó [the village she lived in], and then I could see that they were researching who had been a furniture painter in Somlyó at such and such time. I said that I would become one of them... in many years." Gyöngyi Bíró

Objects created by Gyöngyi Bíró, photos provided by the artist





Created by Irma Faluvégi

Her teachers advised the weaving woman to only weave the traditional motifs of the region. This means that she does not weave the patterns from carpets other than the ones known as Szekler. In the case of the region's own motifs, copying is not forbidden. *"It is folk art because we are copying each other."* Still, the other side of the work is creativity, as a single pattern gives the possibility of boundless combinations.

"But if you imagine that it can be extended, diminished, you can weave for a while, and then you can go back. Many variations. If you learn to weave then you can control the patterns." Irma Faluvégi



Created by Irma Faluvégi

I found it a contrast between the freedom of using and combining certain patterns that are considered part of our culture, and the restrictions related to the other ones coming from other countries or regions. This weaving woman had certain photos of carpets from different places. She liked them, but she never created something similar. Other than working with Szekler motifs, she uses her imagination to create different carpets with her own figurative and abstract designs.

Unlike wood carvings, painted furniture, or many other crafts, gingerbreads are decorated without following strict rules when creating the motif. Today, the variety of gingerbread shapes is vast, and also hearts are decorated with different traditional or other motifs. The freedom of creation might be due to the short lifespan of the products: it is not likely that many are saved for decades or centuries, or recreated as old, valuable objects.

Created by Zsuzsa Puskás



Different shades of tradition



In the region where Gyöngyi lives, blue is considered the traditional colour for furniture. The dark blue is a reminder of a local, historical event when many people were killed. Gyöngyi's preferred colours for decoration are red, white and green, which bear a national connotation as the colours of the Hungarian flag.

Natural colours are also valuable, as traditional ones. It is known that in chronological order, these shades appeared before the artificial colours were available. People find these pleasant to the eye, and respect them as old colours. Naturally dyed wool carpets are coloured with different plants, giving mostly the shades of brown, green and yellow. These are the



traditional colours of the pottery glaze as well, generated by minerals. The natural blue colour of the glaze is connected to Germans who settled in Transylvania, because the raw material needed for its production cannot be found locally. Textiles can also be dyed to have a blue colour, but the indigo had to be brought from abroad. Dying with indigo is not as widespread as the blue colour of the pottery glaze.

Materials



Straw had a meaningful influence in the history of people of Kőrispatak, a small, isolated village in the region. As an area with relatively cold weather, 200 years ago they could only grow Einkorn wheat, a species that produces little crop. But the locals discovered that the straw of this type of wheat is good for crafting, so they started to make straw hats, and sold them at different markets in the country, and even abroad. As crafting straw hats became their profession, they continued to grow Einkorn wheat for the straw rather than for the seeds.

As fewer people work in agriculture today, straw hats have become less popular. The straw is still used by the locals to create different household objects and decorations, such as napkin holders or Christmas tree ornaments.



Created by Juliánna Bálint
Photo: Ethnographic Collections, Moesgaard Museum

Corn husk is used similarly to straw. Traditionally, doormats and other objects with flat surfaces are made by different woven techniques, but some people found other possibilities too.

"In fall, when we collected the corn, I put the beautiful colourful leaves in my apron. My mother-in-law told me those are not good, nothing can be done with those. She was only thinking about weaving, and if you include colourful leaves in that they stick out and ruin it. But I made flowers out of them, and I made different edges so that it became colourful. And slowly it became accepted that I collect the colourful leaves as well." Juliánna Bálint



Created by Juliánna Bálint,
photo provided by the artist

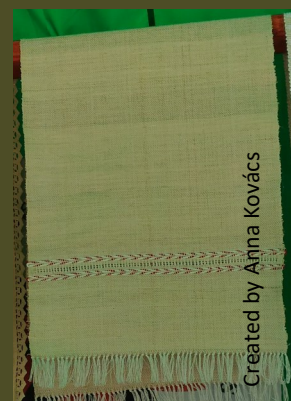
It is common among the craftsmen to create toys made of wool, but they refer to the old times when this was not possible. Wool was considered a valuable material, not something to give to a child. These days, wool is given away even for free. Felt balls made out of wool by or for the children are associated with cow hair balls created in the past.



"You see, here most people are surprised about this, or you see them throw wool away. You have to ask them to save the wool from being wasted. [...] It is such a useful material, and people treat it so ungratefully. [...] During the winter we have terrible storms here, and you can only go outside with a felted hat." Marcsi Hompoth

Textiles made of flax or hemp are different from cotton ones. Because the thread is made with a manual technique, the textiles are not smooth. Hemp makes a rough material which has been used for towels as well.

"This [thread] is home-made, it is not sold anywhere, neither flax nor hemp. You can only ask around at craft fairs, someone might come to tell you that they also have some of this or... This is the only way, by asking around. This is how I got hemp as well. They no longer produce it anywhere now. At least I have not heard about it. [...] Some are good. They have a different thickness, some are thinner, others are thicker. You have to work with what you can find." Anna Kovács



Old and new techniques

"I do not polish it nicely to make it perfectly glossy, but the mark of the hammer is there. So this is proof that it is primarily hand-made. I cannot hit two marks the same." István Gábor Nagy



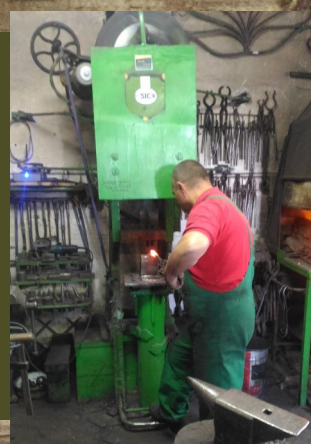
Created by István Gábor Nagy, photo provided by the artist

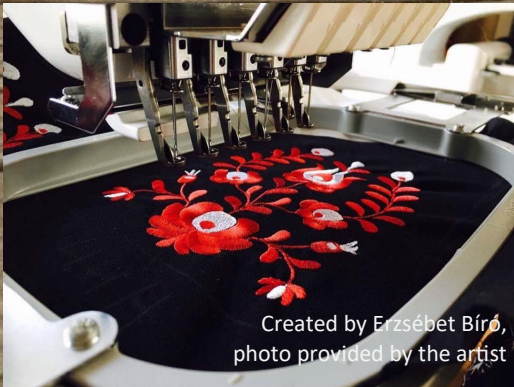


Gábor prefers to use old blacksmith techniques, going a bit backwards in time, as he explains. One of the reasons for using old techniques is the quality of the results. An appreciated old technique is the assemblage of the pieces with wrought iron nails, as welding irons together would not keep them together for so long.

"If welding is needed, we weld, we do not keeping exclude anything because primarily we need to make a living. And we use the opportunities offered by technology if possible, why would we not? Well, three hundred years ago, people would have been very happy to have electricity." István Gábor Nagy

Besides the traditional techniques, the blacksmith uses an electric hammering machine. He built the device himself by recycling different parts of other machines. The advantage of the hammering machine is that it speeds up the process.





Created by Erzsébet Bíró,
photo provided by the artist

The computerized embroidery machine is the most developed technology that I have experienced among craftsmen. For a while, I considered it an exception, since I met many artists who are interested to work with old techniques, going against technological innovation. Later, I found that it just goes one step further than many other machines in use.

The techniques of making straw hats changed when new technology became available. The sewing was done by hand in the beginning, until the hat sewing machine was invented. The available hat shapes depended on the pressing forms the craftsman could buy. But the straw was always woven by hand, and this allowed some people to demonstrate their skills.



I met two gingerbread makers who work in different ways. Zsuzsa has a little firm with a few employees where everybody has their own task in the process of making the gingerbread from making the dough to the decoration. They have different pieces of professional equipment and also a traditional oven to bake the cookies. Unlike her, Réka is working in her own kitchen with the usual tools of a contemporary household and also using pieces of equipment made by her friends and family members. She is using a common electric oven. I wonder if the resulting taste will be different?

Created by Éva Salamon



Decorated eggs are made with a traditional technique using wax, and the motifs are drawn with a tool called *kesice*. Where the egg is covered with wax, the paint cannot dye it, and so the original colour of the egg or the previous layer of paint remains untouched. The wax is removed after the process.



Created by Gizella Fehér,
Photo: Ethnographic Collections,
Moesgaard Museum



Gizi néni learnt the technique of decorating eggs as a young girl, in her family. She likes to use the old type of *kesice* (the one on the bottom) drawing thicker lines, as it is traditional. These tools are home made. Others prefer to draw thinner lines or to use different tools (such as the upper one on the photo).



Corn husk objects are woven on wooden forms which give the shape of the boxes or other objects. Every shape and size is made on another form. The objects are created by weaving or crochet techniques. While weaving on the form, the corn husk is spun into a thread. To make the work well-formed, the corn husk string should have the same thickness during the entire work irrespective of the roughness of the leaves. With practice, a craftsman's fingers develop the sense to feel the right thickness.

The kiln of the Páll family



"You are literally walking around the cauldron, and watching the fire, following your experience. And then you need to know where you need to add one piece of wood or two. [...] You need to have a sense for it, you need to know the colour of 1000 degrees, what is the colour of 950 degrees. You should know when to pull the coal. That is a very skilled thing to know."
Domokos Páll

While potters mainly use electric kilns today, black ceramics cannot be burnt in these. The colour of black objects is created by the smoke of the fire in a closed kiln. The old type of kilns can rarely be found today. With this technique, the colour of the pottery is not always black, but grey areas appear where another object was close to the burning one. Is this an imperfection or a method of creating unique objects? When the burning is complete, the polishing is done with the help of a piece of wood or rock.

Created by Jenő Vízi
Photo: Ethnographic Collections
Moesgaard Museum



Felting is considered one of the oldest techniques of creation. In spite of this, memories or descriptions of old felting cannot be found in this area. The technique of wet felting was (re)introduced by ethnographers according to oriental models. Lately craftsmen use not only wet felting with water and soap, but also needle felting. With the help of a felting needle, the craftsmen are able to create more punctual motifs which would be hard to do with traditional techniques.



Created by Tünde Szász, photo provided by the artist.

Characters

"I find it very difficult to form female faces. [...] The first pieces were very very... rough, as though I had carved them in wood, they were not even formed like these [new ones]. I had a transition in this, but I would not necessarily decide to shape something like a princess. I am going to maintain my own style in this, so even though a female person is formed in clay, it does not necessarily have to be so soft. I am sure that there is something about the clay as well, that it needs to have a certain weight to it." Hajnal Vitos



Created by Hajnal Vitos, photo provided by the artist



"Sometimes I would like to create a fairy, and an elf is born from my hands. And I see that I rather belong to the ground, rather than floating. So I am more like an elf than a fairy. My hands cannot create a genuine fairy, but I no longer even try it anymore. I will know when I am ready." Marcsi Hompoth

The old man and woman are part of both the real and the imaginary world. This old woman is connected to the figure of the witch from folk tales, and she is respected for her knowledge. But her character was based on the artist's grandmother. This old man is similar to the folk tale's Forest Elf, but he is also an old man the craftsman used to know.

Objects created by Marcsi Hompoth. Photos: Ethnographic Collections, Moesgaard Museum

This old woman is collecting plants into her bag. It was created for Etelka, an artist who also works with these plants. Now, the doll sits on Etelka's couch, as a fellow Kitchen Witch, dyeing the materials with the plants, using her large pots, and generating sour odours.



Created by Marcsi Hompoth
Photo: Zsófia Bartha

The power of a woman

The feltwork on the right is inspired by the folktale of the Wolf Woman who had the courage to ask for the fire from the witch. It represents the repressed part of women, the wild one, who does not preen herself to her surroundings. But through this female power women can connect to the ground, to something bigger than themselves.

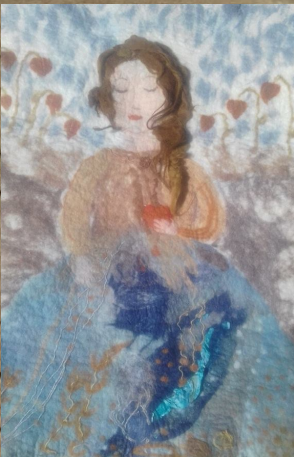
"I like these things which can touch me completely, I am completely immersed in it, and I do not feel anything false in it, and I allow it to take form through my hands."

Marcsi Hompoth

Felt gives more possibilities to the artist than painting, as it is not restricted to a surface. With this material the craftsman is free to form the different parts of the object, for example, the eyes of the woman can be closed or opened. She is also using other materials together with wool. Another aspect of felting is the physical work which the process of creation requires. She made this work using great efforts just like the inner power of the Wolf Woman.



Objects created by Marcsi Hompoth, photos provided by the artist



At the beginning of summer, when I first met Marcsi, a felting woman, she told me the story of the Wolf Woman. She explained that this feltwork was created at the end of the previous summer, and it is still the one which is close to her and guides her. She will create something important again at the end of the summer, when she will be ready, like the fruits of nature.

At the end of September, she showed her new work to me and to another artist. "This is Marcsi, she made herself out of felt!"- said the other woman. We did not have time to talk about this work. I am still curious.

The astuteness of a Szekler man

Below you can see some puzzles. If these are in the right hands, the tricks can be figured out.

"This [the propeller on the end of the stick] always turns in the direction of the way I am holding it. Usually, I lean in one direction with all the weight of my body, and then it turns. If I lean into the other direction, then it turns in the other direction. [...] You should try, the batteries are full, I changed them in the morning." Csaba Török



In fact, the "propeller" on the edge of the handle can turn around if the other wood moves on the carved part of the handle, and a finger is put on the handle. Depending on which side of the movement the finger is placed, the "propeller" moves to the right or to the left direction.

Objects created by Csaba Török. Photos: Ethnographic Collections, Moesgaard Museum



With this toy, the task is to catch the rubber band inside the hole with the slit on the edge of the stick. If the task is resolved, a little sound will be heard. The puzzle seems difficult to solve because the stick does not have enough space to catch the band, it only moves in and out in the hole.

"Does it not work? For me neither. [...] It does not even reach [the rubber band]. This [the handle of the stick] has to be pinched. Pinch it, and let it go between your fingers [to make the sound]. This is the trick. [...] It should be done in a way as to show that you are struggling with it, so that nobody notices how easy it is. It is a good deflection to pretend that I am using a rubber band." Csaba Török

Szeklers are characterized by their astuteness. Jokes and tricks are usual between friends, and everyone already knows some of them. Still, these two toys were new for me, and I could not figure it out how to deal with them. After struggling for about 15 minutes, the craftsman showed me the tricks. Of course, I practiced after that, so I can now easily trick others too. The toys became the most interesting part of my visit, even though making them does not require a lot of skills in wood carving, and they are made from the workshop's waste.

The woodcarver also told me some interesting stories about his professional life. Sometimes his style of narration is even more fascinating than the stories themselves.

"I had to steal the tricks of the trade [from an old wood carver] because whenever someone arrived, he would put the chisel down, he could not work. If you stayed there all day, he would sit all day and talk. He would talk about everything but not work at all. He could not work in the presence of someone. He was happy to show his products but the old man had terrible stage fright..." Csaba Török

"Sometimes [a customer] will bring the style of different regions [to put together], they like it that way. Okay, you say it is foolish, but they ask, will you make it or not? If not, they will go somewhere else. Now, I am willing to carve anything but I do not write my name on it, to show I made it. You can even do foolish things... for money." Csaba Török

"It was a decaying wood, it was cramped, curved, and they brought it to me to carve a walking stick out of that. I carved it, and when I carved it saw the one who ordered. He said "Well, I lost the bet". Because they bet on a crate of champagne, that I cannot make it. He said no, and he brought it to me. When it was ready, he paid the champagne. My only regret is that they were kids from Pest [Budapest, the capital of Hungary], and I did not get champagne." Csaba Török



Created by Csaba Török

Influences and cooperation

Ethnographic descriptions about traditional crafts of the area organize their findings according to localities where objects with certain characteristics can be found. I did not think that so many differences exist today until a gingerbread maker described me the preferences in different towns. She often participates on craft fairs in different parts of the country and even abroad, and always pays attention to the local tastes. The expectations of the customers are influencing the work of the craftsmen, dictating directions and giving new ideas.

"We should grow continuously, we cannot stay at the traditional gingerbreads, because unfortunately, there is not much demand for it anymore. I would like to make a heart shape with a mirror or knight, but the reality is that the demand for a little car is greater. We should adapt to the new trends, but there is also a limit. I know for sure, I will never make Minion, simply because it does not fit my gingerbreads."

Zsuzsanna Varga (Varga mézes)



Created by Varga mézes,
photo provided by the artist



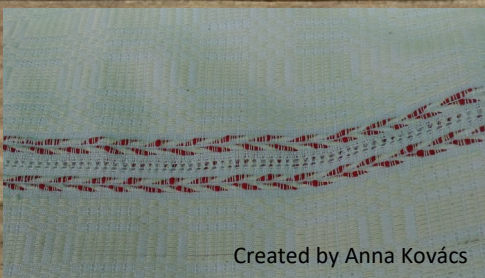
Created by Etelka Páll (dyeing)
and Erzsébet Balázs (weaving)

For Etelka not just natural colouring was important, but also to use dyeing plants exclusively from her surroundings. Recently, a customer ordered carpets in shades of red and blue which she could not produce from local plants. Finally, she ordered (natural) madder and indigo from abroad to fulfil the client's expectations. Changing her attitude to use exotic plants was not easy, and it did not happen from one day to another. Now, she is experimenting with these colours.

"[...] I am only showing the photos, but it is not made public. Well, the winter is gone, and I've got used to being more colourful. [...] [At first] I was crying at the pot, my tears were falling in, I was not doing what I like."

Etelka Páll

"Well, this is tradition, not like it is at school but one woman teaches another; it works like this. If someone is asking me for some advice, I am happy to give it, if I am asking, they tell me. This is reciprocal, based on conversations, based on discussions." Anna Kovács



Created by Anna Kovács

Anna néni learnt a new technique to decorate woven textiles on an exchange program with an institution from Hungary. During her stay she taught several local patterns, and in return, she learnt how to make this type of decoration. The new decorations also make her products distinguishable from other local textiles.



In the family working with corn husk, everybody is making the type of objects he/she can do the best. The oldest member of the family, the mother, is mostly making boxes. Her son is making lamp frames and other iron objects to be covered by corn husk. His wife found out that she can create different figures, which was not a tradition in the family. But in general, every member of the family is able to do every kind of work.

Objects created by Mária Bálint
Photos: Ethnographic Collections, Moesgaard Museum



"This just comes, it is inside of us. If one begins, this comes out from within. Everybody who grew up in the countryside, and comes from a family like this, has it, and the woodcarver has it too. He has seen how it is happening... the way his grandfather did it, the way he drew it and carved it, and it comes out of the child. This is stealing, when you steal the profession; you steal it while working next to your grandfather. You remember after thirty years how he did it."

The old and the new generation

Pottery is the traditional profession of the Páll family since the 1700s. Their aim is to create traditional pottery, and to reproduce old vessels. In their shop, different *bokály*-s placed in chronological order, show the pottery tradition.



Created by Árpád Páll

Of the younger generation, three of the brothers are working with ceramics, and all three have different professions. One of the sons is currently helping with traditional pottery in the family workshop. Another one is applying his experience with clay to create ceramic tiles. His daughter is learning to paint the motifs as well. A third brother studied art at the university, and he is creating different ceramics using his own style, inspired by traditional motifs and folk tales.



"I do not completely break away from traditions, because I find them important. I am rather inspired by them, and I rework them a little bit. [...] I simplify things when they should be simplified, or I rework it completely when it is too simple. [...] In Hungarian architecture, Eclecticism is my favourite style. They bring together different eras, and the result is a cool new style." Domokos Páll

Objects created by Domokos Páll, photos provided by the artist



Vitos Ceramics makes pots by clay which has a natural reddish colour. It is not painted nor glazed, but the pots have a simple design.



Created by Vitos Ceramics, photo provided by the artist

Today, most of the processes in the workshop are mechanized. Still, every Roman Clay Baker (bowls in the photo) has a unique fit with its lid. This happens because the bowl and the lid are stuck together by hand before burning, so they fully match. If the lid breaks during the process, it cannot be replaced, as another lid would not fit.

In the Vitos Ceramics manufactory, the daughter of the founder, Hajnal, guided me who is working there as well. She told me the history of the manufactory, which started before she was born. She remembers that already in her childhood it was clear for her that she will work in the business of her family, "on the dream of her father".



Hajnal is also creating her own works. She is combining different materials on different parts of her figures, like clay, wood, felt or textiles. She decorated her earlier pieces (like the one on the left) using a diversity of colours, motifs, and fabrics, also representing characters of folk tales. The one on the photo is the Queen of the Fire. Lately, her style became more simplified. Now, clay plays a more important role in her works than before. In this sense, her later works are even closer to the ceramics of her family. On the right, a newer piece is shown which represents femininity.



Objects created by Hajnal Vitos, photos provided by the artist

People who should be visited

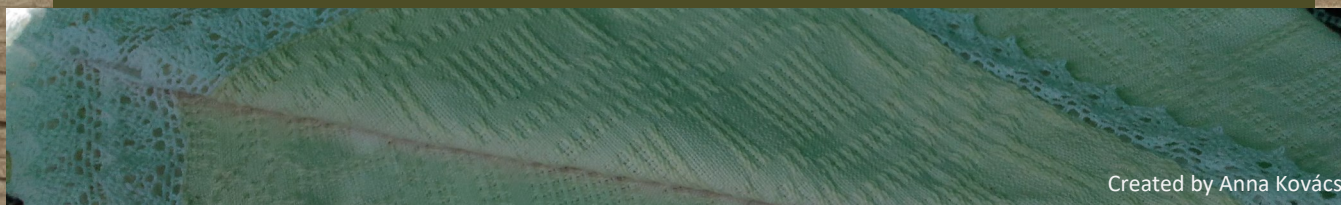
When I was asking about people who are working with some kind of traditional crafts, I was advised to necessarily visit some old women who have been working with textiles for many decades. When more locals recommended the same person, I knew I should consider them as important people in the craft communities.



Created by Anna Kovács

Anna néni is a well-known person among the local craftsmen. She learnt the basics of weaving in her childhood from her mother. During her life, she developed her skills and learnt new techniques besides having another profession as well. Even now, being over 80 years old, she is an active member of the regional craft communities.

Anna néni is making cloths using primarily traditional tools, techniques, motifs and materials. Some of the patterns she is creating are called wreath (*koszorú*), cat trace (*macskanyom*) and pine branch (*fenyőág*). These patterns got their names showing connection with the naming objects and are well-known among the weaving women.



Created by Anna Kovács

"When I was a girl, about ten-fourteen years old, girls were going to dance in these type of skirts. The material was a bit thinner, it was embroidered, and a dress was made that even on the short sleeves had two-three roses. So, I remembered this, and that is why I made this."



The skirt on the photo is not part of the traditional folk costumes. The creator was weaving textiles for folk costumes as well, which are mostly used by folk dance groups. In this case, she did not create motifs herself, but she was working according to the schemes of a local ethnographer.

"My mother was such a woman, besides being sick, she taught everything to us. [...] It was not a problem if you just knitted this size [showing little] [...] but that had to be precise, not like slapdash, and it is done."

"For me, it does not matter how much time it takes, and I am not nervous if I am not progressing fast. I am satisfied with the little if I can make it good, without mistakes."

This woman is talking about the way she has learnt, and she is still doing the patient work of handcraft. She was working for her own household, then she was also weaving dowries for money for other girls in the village. Weaving became paid work for her. Later, she started hosting and teaching tourists who came from Western European countries. She is proud that she has always had work and now, she is acknowledged by educated people, even if she has only finished three grades at the school.

Created by Rozália Goga

(Dis)continuities



Created by Jenő Vízi

The ceramic cooperative was established during the Communist era (1947-1989), but ceramics played an important role in the village even earlier. Because generally, locals consider the establishments of the Communism destructive for the local tradition, I was surprised to learn how crucial this cooperative was in the work of certain craftsmen. The potter I met learned his profession in the local ceramic cooperative and started to work individually later. He has learnt the different flower motifs there, and he is still using these as the only professional potter in the village.

The photo on the left shows some of his current works.

He did not have other potters in his family or among his ancestors to teach him, and other old, noted potters were not willing to share the secrets of the profession with him. So, his knowledge comes mainly from the cooperative and from his own experiments.

The photo on the right shows a unique vase created by his ex-coworker in the potter cooperative. This was meant to be a love confession for a girl, showing the heroism of the creator.

"They [the villagers] did not talk much about [the work in the cooperative], because they did not want to be members. They had their own workshops at home, it was how it was, some had their own kilns, some did not, they went to neighbours, relatives. And now, this was a fixed job [the work in cooperative], here one had to go every day, and there one had to do well. The farming had to end, they could keep one cow at most, and that was it. But then they realized that if the husband and the wife both were able to work, they went to work hand-in-hand, arm-in-arm with each other, they left home 10 minutes before, and when the 8 hours were over, they could do whatever they want, they were free. But the beginning was difficult." Jenő Vízi



Etelka is dyeing the wool (or other natural materials) with plants before or after it is spun into yarn. The craftsman's work starts with collecting the plants. Walnut leaves, walnut shells, birchbark, nettles, tetterwort, marigold flowers, onion skins, and other plants are used for dyeing which give different shades depending on the season when she collects them. The dyeing liquid that is made by the plants, colours the wool. The weaving women use the colourful threads for weaving carpets and other household textiles.



Created by Etelka Páll. Photo: Zsófia Bartha



Created by Etelka Páll. Photo: Lajos Csendes

This craftsman learnt the technique of natural dyeing from books and old descriptions. She also maintained a good relationship with museums. Before she started to work, people did not know, and did not practice natural dyeing in the area where she lives, so she did not have people to learn from. Some women weave Szekler carpets using a different yarn that had more vivid colours. The value of her work is that she succeeded to renew a technique which was almost lost before she got interested in it.

The term Etelka is using to name the carpets made by her yarn is festékes, which could be translated as something connected to dye. I haven't heard this name from other woman working with woven textiles, they rather call their work rakottas referring to the woven technique. But I found even more differences. I learned the professional expressions of woven techniques from Etelka. It happened that I went to another weaving woman, and when talking to her, I realized, that we do not understand each other's expressions about the technical details. This other artist learned to weave from her mother, using the local expressions which I did not know.

Trends in tradition

Craftsmen weave a thicker material for the *rokolya* (skirt) and often the vest and the apron of the local folk dresses. This can be done by hand even today. These parts of the costumes are different depending on the locality and have their own messages. In one area of Szeklerland, people mostly use folk dresses with red and black stripes until lately. After the work of ethnographers and craftswomen, the folk costumes made today are rather trying to follow the colours of older dresses found in the area. These are more colourful with blue, brown, green, purple stripes besides red and black. Now, red-black bands are considered less valuable, because the two-coloured *rokolya* is simplified for industrial production.



"I never accept to make red-black stripes. That can be bought for a quarter price. The one which is woven by machine. One should not invest so much money if she can buy the one woven by a machine. Then it is useless to pay eight hundred lei-s if she can buy it for two hundred. That also can be found if one is looking for it. But if it's already woven by hand then should be personalized, it should be herself, should be chosen by the one it is made for." Klára Barabás



For Klára it is important to weave a piece connected to the person she is working for. She claims that everyone who listens to her soul will choose the colours that will fit her best. The other important feature to consider is the locality where the customer is from or where her roots are connected. As every village had its own characteristic costumes, she would like to have her works related to these styles.

Tradition in trends

Erzsó is not creating folk costumes, but she is using folkloric elements to design clothes. She created her own brand. Some of her products reflect more the style of different folk costumes, others, only borrow elements of older clothes. The process of production is also different from handcraft, machines are also used to imitate, for example, hand embroidery. These clothes are meant to express the identity of the people who are wearing them.

"It depends on the placement of motifs and laces [if it is traditional or not]. [...] But cutting is essential on some level as well. The old style should be followed to some extent in cutting as well in order to be traditional. If it is only modern cutting with traditional motif... We do that as well." Erzsébet Bíró

Knowing that every element of the old clothes was created with a purpose, requires responsibility from the sewing woman. During workshops, she also learnt about the motifs of different regions.



In the picture, a coat is shown with a motif from the region of the creator. Here the cutting is modern, and the motif is the traditional element.

The style she follows became more popular in the last years. She is also pushed to create new collections because the designs can easily be stolen by other craftsmen, as it happens usually with popular brands. Even if she is not happy when others copy her creations, she enjoys the best designing something new.

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The photo on page 9 is from the book *Magyarország története. Őstörténet és honfoglalás* written by István Fodor (2009), published by Kossuth Kiadó. I did not succeed to reach the author, and get permission from him.

The names of the craftsmen and artists are used or left out with their consent. The choice, whether objects and interviews should be anonymous or not, was made by the informants themselves. The name of the artist is not mentioned in the case of a few older objects when their author is unknown.





