Traditional textile art between sustainability and economic growth
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Abstract. Craftsmanship is a form of production, a form of social organization and also a material basis for symbolism. The main quality of textile handicraft goods is sustainability. The so-called products of „total beauty” are the source of many of the environmental problems we are facing. Sustainable products, like traditional textiles created using traditional techniques and dyed with natural dyes, have no major impact. If it does not affect the quality of the product, cultural goods retail contributes to the overall growth of economy. The loss of our last craftsmen, the migration of new generations to urban areas, the production of industrial competitive goods and the general ignorance of immaterial culture are some of the problems that the traditional textile art is facing. Craftsmen communities need resources, quality raw materials and markets for their products. Tourism development is a key factor in handicraft development but is often conditioned by critical facts. Traditional textiles are in need of a visual identity supported via profile web sites and travel agencies. Supporting craftsmen is another important issue. Workshop centers, summer schools, free training and access to markets and shops are some of the current ideas for sustainable and smart growth.

Keywords: tradition, handicraft, textiles, sustainability, education, cultural heritage, growth.

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1. Introduction. Art or craft?

   Traditional crafts are labeled as: “folk art”, “indigenous art”, “naïve art”. These labels often answer traveler’s quest for “the other” and has sizeable impact on those who produce object of cultural value. The term handicraft is ambiguous. We do not really understand if we’re talking about an authentic work of art or a suggestive work in a preindustrial society context. Art perception is changing very rapidly. Craft is still art when it no longer represents the philosophy of a group but rather that of an individual.

   During the process of creation authenticity, originality and know-how are key factors. Some art demonstrates no or little skills at using materials, but expresses something really profound. Equally, some that we define as craft expresses nothing in particular, but demonstrates great skill. However, some great art demonstrates both; great skills at using the materials chosen, and expressing something profound. An attempt to define something or someone as art(ist) or craft(maker) is thus meaningless. Besides the commercial value these products have also a symbolic meaning, often more important than the utility or educational purpose. Handicrafts are the mark of a community, individual works of art reflecting a group. Cultural products are derived from distinctive characteristics of social groups: material, intellectual, spiritual and emotional characteristics. These elements of artistic heritage developed by individuals reflect the cultural artistic expression of the community, either in a verbal or a material form.

   Often traditional arts or handicrafts do not get the rightful attention. In a world of real time information the media does not cover subjects that escape time. Crafts become the mission of “slow media”, of programs that address a small group of people.
Handicraft is more than the marketing of cultural goods. It is a social structure, a means of production, an artifact, a representative object for a social group and material framework for symbolism.

The majority of exporters and producers concentrate their energy on mechanized methods that ensure a fast and cheap production. Craftsmen feel that their art is not appreciated anymore and few young craftsmen accept the challenge of perpetuating tradition.

The stasis of traditional design in motifs that have changed very little over time does not encourage young craftsmen, who feel limited in established patterns. That is why the solution might come from the close co-op between designers and craftsmen.

2. Traditional textile art production. Socio-economic challenges

Adaptation, change and innovation are as old as humanity and they will continue their path as part of creativity. Many traditions, not only textile traditions are surely to be lost if we do not coin long term solutions, solutions that could help weavers earn a fair income, quality-cultural value considered.
Handicraft production and rescuing traditions are often related to a low standard of living, poor education and the lack of economic opportunities. We have to ask ourselves if rescuing and conserving tradition imply that life should remain static, keeping unaltered tradition meanwhile everything is changing.
Handicrafts are integrated in a production circuit, consumption generating extensions further than the local environment. We do not understand the implications and alterations that cultural good suffer by being integrated in an economic context.

The most important quality of traditional textile goods is sustainability. The products of “total beauty” are the source of many environmental issues. Pollution, deforestation, extinction of species and global warming are side effects of mass goods production. Many of the beautiful products we see today have a darker side, less pleasant. Sustainable products, amongst which we find traditional textiles made using traditional technologies and dyed with plant dyes do not have a major impact on environment, are consistent with the environment throughout their life span.

Sustainable products are made from organic, recyclable or compostable materials, they are safe and non-toxic. The production processes needed use renewable energy and the final product fulfils its function efficiently and has a fair social impact. Regardless of the importance of eco-friendly and sustainable products we have to focus also on the economic impact for rural communities.

Income building for small communities sustains and develops economy at a higher level. If it does not affect the quality of the products, cultural goods commerce contributes to the overall standard of life for certain areas. Benefits like food providing and health care are extremely important for families and underprivileged groups.

Studies concerning traditional crafts follow two tendencies:
- denounce the oversimplified decorative elements, the loss of symbolic value or even functional value turning the artifact into tourist goods;
- see in the process of commercializing craft goods only the economic aspects, the response of a group to a necessity induced from outside.

From these two points of view tourism is perceived as a degenerative agent of craftsmanship and, by extension, of the cultural area and group that created it.

Authorities’ interest gravitates around the contribution that handicrafts might bring to the national economy. Craft practicing limits migration from rural areas to peripheral urban areas. Authorities in South-American countries have embraced a new solution: involving NGOs.

Traditional textiles commerce is not lacking difficulties. As was the case with the ECO trend, selling traditional textiles outside touristic areas follow fashion trends or as De Vidas called it: the snob folk trend [1].

The status of traditional products is a paradox: the moment craft develops and increases to promote a community we face a small-scale industrialization and a decrease or even loss of cultural value. This is the case of
A weaver community in Peru, Ayacucho weavers that have established pattern catalogues and color schemes for each western country’s profile. A number of NGOs, institutions and even governments in Andine countries gather to revitalize traditional textiles.

The loss of our last craftsmen, the migration of new generation to urban areas, the production of competitive mass-goods and the ignorance of material and immaterial culture are some of the problems with which traditional textile art is confronted. If a cultural manifestation is still alive it is due to its constant reinvention and its understanding of the new economic, social and political challenges. There are a number of ethnic groups that continue to weave for both personal and commercial reasons. In many of these communities other economic opportunities do not exist and they are weaving to sell to local and national markets.

In many other communities there is a limited number of weavers that supply local needs. As modernization and globalization has its effect on younger people in these ethnic groups they no longer wear the traditional costume but may still weave as a way to make money. However in general they do not follow the weaving traditions. The revival of "textile traditions" is a new idea and its results are often limited and temporary. There are many well meaning people that work very hard preserving and rescuing traditional crafts all over the world. There is an army of anthropologists and others that are attempting to document and rescue traditions some musical, some textiles and other social and communal in nature. All of these efforts are valuable in terms of creating a record of what was. As the demographic of the specific population changes the probability of revival diminishes.

The basis for much of these visual traditions is the agriculture cycle and as agriculture become a smaller and smaller part of the indigenous communities focus, the meaning behind the customs fades. Word of its meaning is passed down but it begins to lose its depth and character. While there is great interest in using crafts as a way of promoting economic growth the need is so great in the villages and the market so small that the majority of the craftsmen are trapped in a cycle of poor payment.

3. Romanian context. Challenges and approaches for economic growth

When we talk about Romanian traditional textiles we refer to the genesis cultural space, the village. To understand the actual problems we have to analyze the socio-economic challenges with which the village was confronted in the past 20 years and to analyze the repercussions they had over peasant’s worldview. The utilitarian dimension of craft has overwhelmed the esthetic dimension or the latter one has been hidden in formulas like „this is the habit“. The cultural aspect of traditional arts is a reality difficult to coin but strongly connected with the context from which it emerged. Not stating the esthetic dimension turn tradition very vulnerable when faced with modernity. First we experienced changes in customs and language. Afterwards, architectural styles started to change. In the end, technical and esthetical changes were noticed.

Mechanized agriculture, urbanization, mass-culture emergence via mass-media has announced „the end of peasantry“ [2]. The phenomenon cannot be overlooked. Fighting modernity is utopian and even detrimental. Only in having an extended knowledge of traditional rural environment we can revive those cultural aspects that are part of our national identity.

Ignoring traditional art signals the fall of Romanian cultural background. Self-sufficiency has turned rural environment opaque to the challenges of modernity and when faced with them tradition broke rather brutal under the pressure. Rituals and cultural displays were forever changed.

Space of equilibrium, order and empathy the Romanian village turned into a place of poverty and perpetuation of „old” and „archaic” values. Faced with poverty, ignored by authorities, deprived of means of self-development, used as stake in political games and uprooted from traditional culture Romanian peasant has seen in craft a way of escaping poverty and hasn’t cared about keeping unaltered traditional characteristics. Traditional culture has become a refuge and a treatment against the assault of modernity.
A number of problems with which Romanian villages are confronted have turned revitalizing traditions into the last concern of authorities and peasants as well: pollution, health issues, an aging population, illiteracy, loosing abilities, vice and doubting morals and the loss of confidence imply a weak response to new socio-economic context. In need of assistance the rural population deals with problems either through migration or using as last resort ancient technologies.

“Transition maize” [3] has kept and plunged the rural population into a subsistence economy, has deprived it from reliable infrastructure and quality services (education, health, transportation). Opening markets for massive imports has put down and proved to peasants the futility of their work. From a social point of view we are faced with wasting human abilities.

“The reform peasant has been forced to rediscover plough pulled by donkeys” [4]. In the volume „Peasants and the new Europe” the authors talk about the growing poverty in which rural population is living, to the extent of comparing the situation to that of some African countries. Talking about the rural population the authors comment: „it lacks initiative, crumbles in subcultures, lacks true spirituality, practices alcoholism and delinquency” [5]. Reaching out to peasant would mean engaging them in associative structure that could enable them to access European funds.

The Romanian political class fails to understand the world stage and context and isn’t able to deal with urgent matters of society. We live the drama of not being willing to synchronize with western structures, the drama of losing ancient values and falling in a social and cultural maze. The investments in development projects are insignificant. Governments have been supported and have received funds from European Union and World Bank to develop agriculture production, to apply reform both in agriculture and industry, to train unemployed people. But, often all these programs ended up in corruption scandals.

We are still witnessing a „bad development”, a label used for inefficient fund use in third world countries. Stressing issues shouldn’t wait for solutions only from outside communities but also from within. Revitalizing traditional culture background is a starting point.

Culture is a sum of characteristics and values that have been perpetuated over time, special features of a group, valuable works of the past, traditions and symbols reunited in the form of immaterial heritage. Growing awareness over these features defines our identity. Nowadays village population is divided between those that regret the alteration of traditional culture and those that refer to past only partly. The way in which we can rescue traditional culture is by discouraging non-value, kitsch and promoting Romanian products.

Giovani Sartori emphasizes on the fact that post-modern society is emptying value of its value [6]. Cultural identity, ethnic identity and individuality are contested as anti-progress factors. The twilight of post-modern view is foreshadowed by creating a society in which tradition and modernity can coexist and inspire each other.

This past decade Romania witnessed timid attempts to revitalize traditional background and especially handicrafts. These attempts converged into workshops, fairs, profile sites, programs, European funded projects, research papers that draw attention on the peril of losing our cultural heritage.

Fairs and events fostered the entry on the traditional art market but the income for craftsmen was relatively low in comparison with the effort and energy involved. Consequently many young craftsmen gave up their work and the next generation is encouraged to seek other field of activity. Programs can fail relatively fast because of the lack of infrastructure, transportation, associative businesses and bureaucracy. Many NGOs specialized in creating educational programs (design, management, marketing) are not adjusting them for certain levels of literacy and the population that benefits from these programs cannot use the knowledge for a long term.

Durable handicraft development calls for several approaches:

- Handicraft communities need resources and quality raw materials;
- Access to markets;
- Without infrastructure to link important centers there can be no real tourism. Tourism development interacts with the growth of handicraft sector
- Romanian traditional textiles need a visual identity displayed in portals and touristic offers;
- Craftsmen have to be encouraged in their efforts by organizing centers in which could function Workshops, museums, summer schools, training classes and shops;
- Branding cultural products can increase our country’s presence in worldwide context.

4. Paths and ideas for sustainable development

International organizations discover opportunities in implementing cultural projects in Romania. Prince Charities Foundation has framed Transylvania Authentica project in co-op with Foundation for Co-op (Fundatia pentru Parteneriat). The project seeks to ensure the revival of traditional agriculture, cookery, tourism, authentic products and services by building strong links between small producers and regional craftsmen. Caring for the natural and cultural heritage, helping small businesses develop and educate consumers are only few of the objectives [7].

Amongst foreign financed initiatives we find Ruralis project (Local Action Group for Durable Development in Bistrita- Sieu- Somes Region) in co-op with Arttex Traditional that aims to rebuild or consolidate craftsmen workshops, especially traditional textiles workshops [8].

In Braila, another project financed by Phare aims to revitalize traditional textiles production: “A new opportunity- Reorient subsistence agriculture labor force”. Handicrafts Foundation Bucharest and Light Foundation helped unemployed men and women specialize in weaving. They also learned accounting and computer skills [9].

“For several years, during fieldwork through the country I noticed that women still weave and on a large scale. During winter they put up their loom, after St. John, and by the end of march they put it back in the attic and got back to land working. Fabrics and girdles are still being woven and I found cabinets filled with bedspreads that have been woven by grandmas for their daughters and daughter-in-law but hadn’t been used because they weren’t fashionable”[10]. The story was told by Maria Puscaciu, manager of County Center Braila for Promoting and Conservation of Traditional Culture.

The target groups were unemployed men and women, ages between eighteen and thirty. They were supported in opening small scale craft businesses.

Constant efforts to promote traditional textiles are made by cultural institutions such as: National Peasant Museum Bucharest, Village Museum Bucharest, Astra Sibiu Museum and other museums and cultural centers all over the country. Interactive platforms virtual tours, support material help increase awareness on traditional textiles.

Creativity Workshop is a project developed by National Peasant Museum Bucharest since 2001. Irina Nicolau came up with the idea and helped organize workshops that would offer an alternative and completion to school education for children. They gained knowledge about the village, peasants and customs. They also experienced different technologies and used their creativity in making objects.

The workshops are divided into three sections:
- ethnology-stories-drawing;
- stitching-weaving;
- clay moulding.

In time new activities have been added: photography classes, doll theatre workshops, sound and craft workshop, loom weaving and papier-mache workshops. Children works of art and craft are published periodically [11].

Art universities are also actively involved in revitalizing traditional textiles. The program Native Art Traditional Ludoteca was developed by Timisoara Orthodox Parish, Timisoara West Fabric and Antimus Foundation in co-op with West University, Textile Art- Textile Design Department. The program focused on bringing into light skills that
were not visible for every child in current educational context. Thirty children from the parish experienced weaving technologies in West University’s studios. The project attempted to conserve and pass on aesthetical traditional values, to encourage creativity, intuition, develop interest in art and tradition, in practical abilities and to disseminate knowledge regarding traditional culture [12].

Other projects are centered on the close co-op between travel agencies, guesthouses and craftsmen. The project Traditional Art in Bucovina- developing vector in contemporary tourism implemented by Cultural Center Bucovina, financed by AFCN (National Cultural Fund Administration) encourages traditional crafts by bringing authentic artifacts closer to tourists, together with artists CV and workshop presentation, in a different context [13].

Sustaining interaction between craftsmen and tour-operators helped support identifying and promoting common interests. This interaction develops ethno-cultural knowledge for guesthouses employees and help increase interest in traditional art. Craftsmen are encouraged to use new technologies in marketing strategies.

5. Pleading for tradition revival

We live in a dynamic socio-economic environment in which technology has created a gap between man and artifact. New technologies have drawn him away from the creative act.

Post-modernity is witnessing an important change. Technology determines our needs. We are adjusting ourselves to the world of artifacts.

All the shortcomings of technologies are direct repercussions of their use following only economic, social and political reasons, overlooking the link between human and environment. Traditional solutions give us patterns of sustainability. Ancient technologies are the perfect example for the way in which innovations bind themselves on tradition in their quest to become tradition. Our duty is to sustain and keep alive the core of technological tradition, as part of world’s heritage.

The unsought sustainable character and the high degree of adaptation to the needs of society from the very beginning until today have turned the specific fiber art technologies solutions into research material.

Today's textile industry is the result of a pressure. Innovations have been required by demographic growth, economic and technological reality. Chemical dye industry has replaced plant dyeing processes and has taken away the authenticity of textile tradition. Computer powered looms are the optimal solution nowadays but they have destroyed the link between human and product, between human and nature and more than that have deprived man of the gesture that reiterates tradition, identity.

Our attempt should be directed towards integrating technological innovation in traditional culture and converting it into an economic growth factor.

Craftsmen reinvent tradition knowing that we cannot live in a world in which value is non-value, in which any human activity has an impact on environment and seek to revitalize green technologies, solutions that have been tested for ages, ritual gestures that strengthen the link human-environment-artifact. The current cultural context, despite of continuous efforts made by some organizations, is sending ancient technologies to museums where they wait to be forgotten. The artists and craftsmen are the only ones that can perpetuate technological traditions in artistic statements and works ensuring its title as world heritage.
6. References


