



The National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History

Preserving the traditions. Presenting history through ethnography in connection with nature.

Anna was a young woman filled with excitement and anticipation. She had just received important news that she was eager to share with her beloved. News that led her on a journey of discovery about the rich cultural heritage of Moldovan traditional fine crafts and priceless artifacts.

Anna's thoughts swirled as she gazed at the intricate clay figurine displayed in the National History Museum of Moldova that she visited previously. This small artifact had suddenly awoken something deep within her, something that transcended her own being. She felt as though she was being pulled back in time, to a place where her ancestors had lived, breathed and nurtured their traditions. The women who had lived before her had kept their heritage alive, now they stood behind her, and she felt a sense of duty and honor to continue their legacy.

The thought of losing precious elements of the past made her heart ache. The stories, beliefs and customs were the foundation of her people, and they were in danger of being forgotten. She felt an overwhelming urge to protect them, to keep them safe from the eroding effects of time. Her heart was not enough, it was too small a space to contain all of her nation's traditions. Her thoughts landed at the National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History, an astonishing building, the perfect chest to keep the wealth of her people's traditions.

At the enterency Anna found a booklet where it was written a short information about the history of the place.

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”This is a museum that dates back to 1889 when it was established as the Zemstvo Museum of Bessarabia, the first public museum in the Prut-Dniester region.

In 1902, the museum participated in the First Exhibition of Domestic Industry from the Russian Empire and the First International Exhibition of Historic and Modern Costumes in Saint Petersburg, which led to the creation of a department dedicated to traditional regional crafts.

The museum's growing popularity and recognition resulted in the construction of a new building, designed in pseudo-Mauritanian style by architect Vladimir Tsyganko, in 1903-1905.”

While reading this, she understood why she was attracted to enter here - it was actually due to the unusual style of the building that does not resemble other buildings in the city or even in the country. It was actually the reason why the architect chooses this style - to grab the attention of people passing by and *invite them in the past so that they could understand the present and choose the direction for the future.*



Anna’s journey through centuries was accompanied by more than 150 thousand objects from different fields that the museum has in its collections.

The museum proved to be a real treasure of cultural heritage that offers a comprehensive view of the complex relationship between humanity and the natural environment through its permanent exhibition, "Nature. Humans. Culture". This exhibition showcases the intricate details of Moldovan folk art and tradition.

The “Big House” room

Anna was immersing in time till she arrived at something that she seemed to be known for her eyes and her feelings. It was the “**Big House**” section that grabbed her attention, where some of the finest traditional fabrics, carpets, costumes, and dowries are on display. These masterpieces reflect the rich spiritual heritage of her ancestors and embody their cultural identity. The “Big House”

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it's actually a room where the most valuable things were kept and the place where special events for a family were held.

Anna started to analyze various folk costumes from different ethnographic regions of Moldova, which were accompanied by a beautiful painting "Joc" representing a traditional holiday in the village that was on the background wall.



While admiring the folk costumes, she observed as well that all the women costumes have the head covered. She was wondering why? At that question was a simple answer that was offered to her by the museum curator: *“head coverings have not only a decorative role, for women, but are also a way to mark their marital status. In the past, only unmarried girls could have their heads uncovered. Wives used several types of coverings - head kerchief, head scarf, kerchief, scarf, shawl, etc. It was considered a big shame if a married woman uncovered her hair in public.”*



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Images: „Peasant from Muscel” by Nicolae Grigorescu;
„The girl at the window” by Valentina Rusu-Ciobanu.

Changing the status from a girl to a married woman

The moment of changing the status from a girl to a married woman was represented nearby with a significant scene “The Wedding”. That section depicts the custom of removing the dowry from the bride’s house, is staged in a scenic Codri landscape and presents the diversity of folk customs. The peasant architecture elements in wood and stone displayed in this section illustrate the influence of nature on Moldovan culture and demonstrate man’s ability to seamlessly integrate into the natural environment.



Anna's mind wanders back to the days of her great-grandmother, where the traditions and customs were quite different from what she knows now. She imagines herself surrounded by the elderly women who have a love for weaving, braiding, and other crafts.

Anna was thinking about the life she could have lived if she was born in that period of time. She can see herself as a young girl of 10 - 12 years old, living in a close-knit community of women who share the same interests and passion for traditional crafts. She can feel the warmth of the women's love and support as they work together, passing on the knowledge and techniques from one generation to the next.


“Just like the young girls of that time, she would start working towards her marriage settlement, preparing her own dowry.

She embarks on a journey of sewing, embroidering, and weaving everything necessary to "dress up" a house - tablecloths , carpets,

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pillowcases, towels. As she works, she feels a sense of pride and responsibility towards her future family. The bigger her dowry, the more diligent and competent she seemed to be.”

Don't forget about the “mother-in-law's shirt” - her grandmother's voice rang in her mind.

	<p><i>Back in time, but not so long ago there was a tradition according to which the bride, together with her bridesmaids were sewing the mother-in-law's shirt, uncut at the neck, so that she would have a small mouth and not scold her daughter-in-law.</i></p>
<p>Picture from the story “Mother-in-law with three daughters-in-law” by Ion Creangă</p>	

Preserving tradition

Preserving tradition is not just about showcasing it in a museum, it's about igniting the flames of culture in the hearts of every individual, keeping it alive and warm like the comforting fire in every home and soul.

Anna probably won't sew the mother-in-law shirt, but looking at the representation of the bride's costume she thought that when the time comes she will wear a traditional costume for her wedding. She was thinking about it as a valuable piece of art that inspired known names during the time.

”Ia”, a Historical Timeline through Art

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"Ia" the folk shirt has its roots dipped in ancient folk tales. It's a cultural will left by the first inhabitants of this land that goes far back to the Cucuteni culture (5500 BC - 2750 BC). Symbols of Cucuteni culture are recognized in the pattern hand-sewn in the blouse until today. As well, the geometric designs on pottery items from Bronze Culture - are met and can be admired today on an "ia " blouse.

Art is a first-hand source of historical events as well as the life of everyday people. For example, some of the basic designs appear on the bas-relief figures enacting Trajan's victory in the Dacian Wars on Trajan's Column in Rome: collarless blouses with gathered necklines and wrap-around skirts worn by the women, and long, belted shirts worn by the men.

She should keep that in mind, if she will have the chance to visit Rome in the future. Anna was thinking how past history is intertwined with the present, and how even being outside of your country you still can find traces of your past.

But the story of the blouse didn't remain printed only on Trajan's column. The attire is depicted by the Vienna Illuminated Chronicle, a 14th-century medieval illustrated chronicle from the Kingdom of Hungary, a source for the cultural history of the Late Middle Ages.

Paul Poiret, pre-WW1 Parisian fashion designer, apparently was dazzled by Queen Marie's Romanian folk attire and promoted it in its designs. In the first half of the 20th century Henry Matisse painted "La Blouse Roumaine" (The Romanian Blouse).

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From Queen Mary of Romania, painter Henri Matisse to Yves Saint-Laurent, the traditional Romanian blouse has become a symbol of universal femininity. After being an exclusive piece of clothing, part of the traditional costume for many decades, the Romanian blouse has crossed the borders to become an international fashion trend.



The painting of Henry Matisse & the Queen Mary

The way the Blouse “ia” is made

The blouse is cut as a cross, its symbols are meant to generate positive energy and redirect it for the benefit of the one who wears it. Thus, the embroidery on the chest and sleeves is meant to channel the positive energy downwards through the body, for strength and protection. And the cloth on which these symbols dance is sacred, as it was born through spinning and weaving, an activity over which songs, heartfelt words, and prayers would have been whispered.

Sewn on fabrics such as cotton, flax, hemp or silk, the blouse has motifs dedicated to the important events that mark a human life: weddings, baptisms, religious holidays, and even the sequence of a marital status (married women wear modest colors and patterns, while the youngest members wear bright, colorful shirts.).

With needle and thread, the story of one’s destiny is written on cloth: love, fertility, faith, luck, hope.

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