

Centre for Restoration and Conservation, Astra Museum, Sibiu

12 September



Painted chest, Astra Museum

The Astra Museum of the 'Traditional Folk Civilisation' consists of more than 400 buildings and 23,000 artefacts set in the Dumbrava Sibiului nature reserve. We were able to spend a full day there, which was just as well as this is the largest

open-air ethnographic museum in Europe. The first part of our visit was to the recently completed (2011) centre for the conservation and restoration of 'movable cultural heritage.' This ultra-modern facility has been provided through a project funded by grants from Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, providing much needed storage and conservation facilities. Central to this project has been the restoration of 45 painted wooden chests from the museum's collection. They form a comprehensive exhibition, which the group was able to examine and discuss at length. The chests, dating mainly from the late 19th and early 20th century, were representative of the painted furniture produced throughout Transylvania. Each example had been painstakingly restored using materials and techniques compatible with the original materials. Saxon craftsmen who were organised into guilds usually produced the painted furniture. The chests were handmade, using softwood, either to order or for sale at the local markets. The painted decoration disguised the poor quality of the timber, with embellishments and motifs particular to individual workshops; some examples were apparently influenced by baroque silks.

Polly collecting lunch money at Astra Museum



Later we visited the new furniture conservation workshops, laboratories and stores, all generously equipped, where we were kindly allowed to explore at will - something long banned from most British museums. Our thanks to Mihaela Timpea, Claudia Potcovel and Marius Iuga.

The open-air part of the museum is set in 98 hectares of open mixed woodland (lots of hornbeam) set around two artificial lakes. This is part of Astra, the Romanian cultural association, which opened its first museum in 1905 as a 'shelter for keeping the past' - one of the better museum definitions. This site opened in 1967 and sees itself as a living museum, with workshops, folk festivals and craftsmen's fairs running throughout the year. Alas, unlike some of the early open-air museums, there are no genuine peasants living in the farmsteads - only poultry - but services are held in the wooden churches. The wooden buildings range from whole fenced farmyards, to windmills, to mysterious dark painted churches protected only by wooden locks. They are arranged by type and include fulling mills and cider presses, and there is a potters' village. We were able to enter some houses and see painted furniture, pottery and piles of embroidered textiles. Many thanks to Adrian Scheianu, the curator, for leading our visit.

Mike Copperwheat and Susan Bourne

The living room of a house, Astra Museum



The same room showing the beds and textiles

