

# Emil Sigerus Ethnographic Museum of Saxon Folk Art, Sibiu

13 September

In his introductory talk Valeriu Olaru, Museum Director (Adrian Scheianu translating) explained that the 'Emil Sigerus' had been founded in 1997 as part of a museum complex, first opened in 1953, covering all aspects of ethnographic culture. The aim is to show and explain the traditional way of life in Saxon Transylvania which had developed over a period of eight centuries and is now history since almost the entire Saxon population had emigrated to Germany in the 1980s and '90s following reunification.

Artistic influences, from gothic through to baroque, had come mainly from western Europe, with eastern influences also discernible in, for example, some of the metal furniture fittings we saw. Painted furniture was prevalent. Most of the painting would have been done locally though a few specialists had been brought in from Germany for some of the later, finer, pieces and for more important church interiors.

Valeriu talked us through the evolution of woodworking techniques, from relatively crude beginnings using only riven timber, to later more sophisticated carpentry and joinery. His frequent use of the word translated as 'cooper' puzzled us and led to a lively discussion of comparative terminology used in England. 'Cooper' appeared to apply only to riven construction (as in barrel making); carpenters used saws to cut and make more sophisticated jointed furniture and structures. They would also have done the painting. There was no equivalent of our cabinet maker, perhaps because furniture was painted rather than veneered. A system of craft guilds had developed in the 15th century and continued in Sibiu into the 19th century.

The museum's impressive furniture store is housed in attics, already bursting at the seams. Racks were filled with every kind of wooden artefact, from simple distaffs to painted chests and larger pieces. There were also substantial collections of ceramics, woven materials, needlework and costumes, all professionally stacked in state-of-the-art racking and shelves, indexed and recorded on DVD. Our thanks are also due to Camelia Stefan, curator of textiles. With the present store already pushing up against the attic roof a storage problem is looming.

From here we were guided through the first of three temporary exhibitions, *Baroque in the Saxon Villages*. The new baroque style took off in Transylvania from the 18th century following the province's incorporation in the Hapsburg empire. First appearing in Catholic churches in the towns, in the form of decorative altarpieces, embellished pulpits and such like, the Lutheran majority had also responded to these new influences, enlivening their plain altars with decorative borders and new

paintings. Not having the wealth to hire foreigners, the painters were mostly local craftsmen. New decorative woodwork appeared: pilasters, carved angels and acanthus leaves, for example; and organs were being built and installed within new decorative casings.

The novel interest in this exhibition, with which Simona had been closely involved, was in the concept of a rustic baroque, the outcome of recent research in villages. Photographs illustrated such features in both secular and church architecture. Ornamental plaques with a date and the owner's name, and other purely decorative motifs, were applied over doorways (as we noted later in Viscri); added pilasters generally enlivened buildings, albeit in a restrained way. Decorative features within the home were exemplified by a fine architecturally-shaped painted bed-head, together with embroidered costumes and admonitory texts in German such as 'A happy heart in a happy home makes the happiness of life'!

An innate Germanic sense of good order and social discipline had originally brought the Saxons to prominence in Transylvania, and this is what the second exhibition, entitled *Saxon Order* was about. Photographs which appeared at first glance to be of sculpture, on a closer look became clearly defined images of rows and groups of village houses, seen from the air to be forming well structured patterns. Photographs and pictures, complemented by exhibits of costumes and ornamental wear, showed how clothing for particular ceremonial occasions reflected family structures and hierarchical order when worn at celebratory events such as weddings and funerals and, indeed, all formal events. Moral texts such as 'Work is the citizen's crown' were again in evidence.

*Transylvanian Tiles* came as an unexpected delight at the end of a long morning. With harsh winters the fireplace was always at the very centre of domestic life and it was natural that attention should be paid to appearance as well as efficiency. By the late middle ages the use of applied ceramic tiles to decorate surfaces was spreading into Europe from Islamic countries to the east and in the early 15th century tiles were being made in Saxon Transylvania for stove construction. Selected examples from the museum's impressive permanent collection were on display, from earliest unglazed cylinders which acted as flues, to flat patterned plates pressed from carved wooden moulds, later ones painted and glazed. Examples of complete stoves included a striking late one of 1891, covered with bold dark blue mainly floral patterns, contrasting with the plain green overall glaze of one from the early 18th century. I left feeling that I could look now look forward to spending a warm and visually satisfying winter of content in the comfort of Transylvanian rural domesticity.

Giles Hopkinson