

Sighisoara History Museum

14 September

The History Museum is in an ideal location housed in the landmark of the town, the Clock Tower, the gateway to the walled town of Sighisoara. In Romania there is a strong tradition of painted, carved, and dated furniture in tandem with a strong cultural appreciation of these items. Most museums are the inspiration of an enthusiastic passionate collector, in this case a local physician, Josef Bacon, in 1899. Romanians have a high regard for their history, heritage, and culture so visitor numbers are large enough for entrance fees to have funded the conservation and display of the collections.

The crowning glory is the Clock Tower clock. Its automaton, seven moving figures, Roman deities, symbolise the seven days of the week. On their heads they carry symbols of medieval alchemy. Crowds gather to watch them in motion at the strike of twelve, revealing a different god or goddess every day. The current clock dates from 1677, but with adaptations: an electric-driven Swiss movement was fitted in 1906.

The displays are thematically arranged in separate rooms, the 14th century doors themselves being part of the collection. One, ornately carved and dated 1537, has its original metalwork. Furniture is very well represented throughout the museum. Of particular note are the carved wooden signs of the craftsmen's guilds. The Carpenters' sign, with an ornate well made plane and mallet, is dated 1697. The display below the sign has ancient tools including an interesting trivet. A large stone lid from a corn granary has the sign of the Shoemakers' guild carved into it. The carving shows two left feet.

Historically, families had a painted chest which was passed down through the generations. They were used for storage of precious items and might include clothing, cloth, fur and leather. The museum has a number of these chests with the best preserved being a painted 16th century example of primitive, almost abstract, images of humans and other animals which have a magical interpretation. Apart from the basic form of lions rampant I have seen nothing like this on British furniture. The metal hinges were similar to ours, but the front catch is most unusual being a long hinged metal rod with loop and hoop at each end. Another fine chest is both carved and painted, with a triple loop and hoop catch. Most of the door and furniture metalwork is of fine workmanship and very ornate. The furniture represents a number of styles and influences, with some items made up in the 18th century from earlier pieces. Gothic, renaissance, rococo and baroque are all represented here with regional variation.

The fifth floor allows viewing access to the tower clock

and its symbolic figures (with RFS members playing the dating game on the age and originality of the gods and goddesses). There is also a display of time-keeping from stone sun-dials, an 18th century sand glass in an ornate wall case with two sand glasses (for different time settings?) to a 19th century spring-driven clock by a local maker, Josef Schuller. Cuckoo clocks have invaded Transylvania and are accepted here. A partial movement of a turret clock with balance wheel escapement described as an 18th century clock jack caused some debate. The consensus emerged that it was possibly an ancient precursor of the current tower clock. Although this clock was small and on more of a domestic scale it could still ring a loud bell. It could at least be described as an intriguing object and fulfilled the purpose of a local history museum in raising questions as well as answers.

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