

**RURAL HERITAGE AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY:
BUILDING THE SUSTAINABILITY OF RURAL COMMUNITIES**

THE SCENARIO OF THE EXHIBITION

This exhibition aims to reveal and illustrate the symbolisms that have been preserved in the conscience of rural communities, thus remaining alive as a foundation of their collective identity. Celebrations, weddings, rituals and customs provide a forum for community gatherings and for revival and preservation of long-held traditions reinforcing the community spirit. Symbolic events may have lost their potency in present societies; however their significance remains high, because customary and traditional acts incorporate a nostalgic dimension, relating the past to the present, keeping the collective memory alive and demonstrating, in a unique way, the difference between everyday life and celebrations, the latter having a primary function as sources of joy and cultural expression, usually through dancing, singing and sharing food and drink. The exhibition attempts to interpret the role of such events in the process of social and cultural evolution, to show how social capital is being built and enhanced.

The exhibition is structured along four “thematic units” that reflect manifestations of symbolic acts in the ethnography and current practices of three countries: Greece, Poland and Bulgaria. These units refer to a) apotropaic and protective acts, b) symbolisms of fertility, c) ecstatic rituals and d) rites of passage.

Apotropaic and protective acts

This unit includes apotropaic and protective rituals and objects related to the 12-day feast of Christmas and to the carnival. Christmas brings with it a rich range of customs expressed by the preparation of special breads and the performance of rituals related to divine adoration and the warding off of evil spirits. The meaning of these customs and rituals is relayed through a diversity of exhibits: animal-head or demonic masks, bells, swords and shepherd's sticks, as well as musical instruments forming parts of masquerades, are worn by children or adults to drive away the evil spirits and the forces of winter and darkness; caroling bells, houses, boats, holy crèches, Christmas decorations and *porte-bonneur* form part of rituals related to the religious character of Christmas; specially decorated breads and wafers depict the hope for affluence and abundance of food throughout the year. Films from various regions of Greece, Poland and Bulgaria can be selected by the visitor to view, placing the exhibits in the context of the actual happenings.

Symbolisms of fertility

The fertility of the earth is symbolized by the rituals of Easter and by harvesting celebrations that conclude cultivation cycles. Easter is for Christians the most sacred event of the year, symbolizing also the regeneration of the earth and its preparation for bearing fruits. The dividing line between religious and fertility rituals is very fine: Palm crosses, Lazarines, Easter eggs, epitaphios, specially decorated breads are presented, complemented by audio-visual material depicting parades and ceremonies that transcend faith to symbolize health, fortune and a good harvest. Harvesting celebrations in fields are illustrated by photos and film; and exhibits are presented of symbolic objects such as bowls with grains and fruit, ear corns and special bread.

Ecstatic rituals

Anastenaria or *nestinar dance* is a representative example of ecstatic rituals practiced in the Balkans, allegedly of pagan origin. With roots in ancient times, these rituals have kept alive the memory and bonds of communities which many generations ago arrived from the Black Sea to Thrace. Barefoot villagers walk over hot coals on St Constantine and Helen's day, performing an ecstatic dance influenced by the sound of a specific tune. Exhibits include dressed ikons, as the central item of the ritual, musical instruments (lyra and drum), sacred

kerchiefs (*amanetia*). A film and slide show with an imposing sound track takes the visitor through the ritual, from the preparation of the firewalkers at home to their departure and return for a celebration dinner. Although turned into a tourist attraction in recent years, the ecstatic abilities of firewalkers that are inherited or attained after a lengthy preparation and meditation, remain solid parts of a rural tradition that has managed to stay alive.

Rites of passage

Rituals celebrating the passage of nature from one season to another and the passage from adolescence to married life and maturity in the lifecycle of humans, have always had a special significance, imbued with symbolic acts and objects. The summer solstice days are celebrated by fires and divinations, coinciding with St. John the Baptist's day. Fire symbolizes purification, but also protection against misfortune, bad luck and illness. Jumping over fires is illustrated by an allegoric installation. Floating candles on water inside flower wreaths are exhibited and illustrated in photographs, to convey the message of the triumph of light over the darkness. Divinations accompany the solstice celebrations: love fortune-telling, interpretation of dreams and clairvoyance, all connected to future love and marriage are symbolized by such exhibits as water urns, keys, dancing and music films and photographs. The wedding celebrations have their own symbolic objects and parades: a rich bridal dress with decorated head cover and jewelry, wedding flags, dowry chests and special foods, including decorated breads, cakes and pomegranates, are presented around a dancing circle of life-size photographs and a celebration table with a panorama of foods and various utensils, cutting across all units, to depict the celebration of utmost joy and hope represented by a wedding.

The thematic organization of the exhibition, based on its narrative character, allows the visitor to comprehend the symbolic meanings that build the collective identity of communities through the selective presentation of objects, images and sounds. Modern works of art complete the structure of the thematic units, illustrating the modern artists' interpretation of the symbolic acts and customs exhibited.