

Corina Mihăescu

Horezu Ceramics

Craftsmanship and symbols
of a UNESCO heritage element



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Foreword

This work is a tribute paid to the UNESCO intangible cultural element of heritage ‘Craftsmanship of Horezu Ceramics’, an integral part of a publicity campaign to promote this acclaimed traditional craftwork in the universal cultural space, thus building itself into an initiative based on retrospection and introspection into Horezu history on the occasion of 12-year anniversary since its inclusion in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

The core structure of this work derives from *Ceramica de Hurez. Lutul – miracol și devenire (Hurez Ceramics. Clay – between miracle and shaping, n.tr.)*, printed in 2005 under the aegis of ‘Niște Țărani’ National Foundation for Rural Civilization, by Contrast Publishing House and under the cultural patronage of Maestro Dinu Săraru, an accomplished son of Vâlcea, who proved his full and honest dedication to the world of the ‘people of the earth’, out of whose hands the miracle of clay shaping manifests and to whom I owe my enthusiasm of a young age for the initial research, the persistence in this field and the deep affinity for this *Terra sacra* of our civilization.

I therefore felt the need to build on the recorded information, brought out and gifted to the readers of that time, written after acquiring or adapting and updating a significant part of the book above-mentioned, in order to reconfigure a relevant content, in alignment with a new temporal dimension so as to refresh the cultural memory of the ancestral Horezu community.

The content of the book was improved multiple times, renewed and updated in its themes and interpretations of the data and images collected until the end of June 2023, hence outlining the Horezu Phenomenon in modern times, while now keeping unaltered the substance of the potters’ valuable testimonies after almost two decades when many of them are working on a different wheel, in another space of their ancestors’, not accessible to us anymore. Other emotions, views, experiences of the people I have been living with have in time added up to the above so far.

My intention was to have a rigorous selection of the photos at hand, as their number has steadily increased, and each visit to Horezu gives me the urge to capture one moment or another, a new or a changed landscape, portraits of the locals and, above all, the image of the creation defining the artistic genius, embodied in the clay blessed with a miraculous life.

I have therefore considered necessary to have the images in close conformity with the texts, while converting themselves into living documents, in visual explanatory legends and witnesses of the guiding ideas they are drawing attention to. This impact of the correspondences between texts and pictures will help the reader move through this interactive experience in a creative decoding act.

The present version in English of the *Știință și simbol în Ceramica de Horezu – element de patrimoniu UNESCO (Horezu Ceramics: Craftsmanship and symbols of a UNESCO heritage element)* volume represents a necessary abbreviation of the 464-page Romanian edition, issued in December 2023.

I express my gratitude for everyone who contributed to this volume, blessed with the demiurgical gift, constant companions for many years, brightening my soul with the beauty coming out of their hands and also the ones who tirelessly assist and support me to follow my given path into the Romanian ethnological space.

We hope that *Horezu Ceramics: Craftsmanship and symbols of a UNESCO heritage element* – through its chapters opening new horizons in this field, related to ornamentation, preservation of the traditional techniques, the actuality described by a continuous monitoring required by the safeguarding coming from the international recognition, via an extended research, synchronic and diachronic, upon a craft turned a universal phenomenon – to carve itself into a real image of the ceramics in Oltenia, dominated by the active and fascinating present of the Horezu ceramics, a step up in its value and an incentive for what might be done in the future, an ample work on the Romanian ceramics.

Last, but not least, our appreciation goes to the National Institute of Heritage and the manager Oana Zaharia, which made this volume possible, an institution that wishes to be *de facto* the pivot in the safeguarding process of the national cultural heritage in all of its aspects, in a present time that still stores priceless values of the spirit in the man-creator.

Corina Mihăescu

Introduction



Horezu, county of Vâlcea, produces one of the most beautiful and refined ceramics in Romania. The traditional elements, the old shapes and the motifs preserved over the years, with the help from the knowledge and specific techniques, convert the ceramics here into objects of art and civilization.

Since December 2012, the traditional Horezu ceramics, along with the techniques associated, has been included in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Elements of Humanity.

The legend of Horezu ceramics is linked to Constantin Brâncoveanu's reign and his edifice,



The rooster – a central symbol of Horezu Ceramics.

Hurezi Monastery.



Hurezi Monastery, around which the pottery center was opened, meant to manufacture high quality products to satisfy the demands of a fastuous boyar court and also to promote the culture elements that define a medieval civilization at its peak in Wallachia.

Given the natural conditions provided by the hilly landscape and the good quality clays, pottery can be assumed to have dated earlier than the 17th century, even continuing a neolithic tradition, from prehistoric times, evolving into the Daco-Roman era and incorporating the Byzantine influences later, to reach a lavish character, with singular particularities during Brâncoveanu time, in a process of change and adjustment due to filtering and recontextualization of extralocal elements. Under the influence of other arts, the peasant potter's vision is coerced into a path of new artistic expression, thus assuming a different route from the common use pottery to the refinement of Brâncoveanu style, present in architecture, painting, sculpture, art of metals, art of embroidery and tapestry or the miniatures of the manuscripts of that era.

Despite being rich in artefacts to prove the practice of the pottery craft at a high level

of specialization during the Neolithic period (archaeological evidence from cultures of Criș, Cucuteni, Boian, Turdaș, spread out within Oltenia), the ethnolinguistic examination demonstrates the strong Roman influence similar to the other areas where the craft blossomed and perpetuated itself.

Terms that name fundamental pottery-related notions are, without any doubt, of a Latin origin, such as *oală*, *olar*, *ulcea*, *ulcior*, *lut*, *roată*, *cuptor* etc., used by both the romanized populations north and south of Danube. The toponyms tributary to these terms, present in Vâlcea and also other regions, confirm the uninterrupted activity in a certain area of the craft – Olari village (part of the city of Horezu), Poiana Olarului (in Berești, Gorj county), Olari church, Olari Street, Olari slum (Bucharest), etc.

Over centuries, these base terms were added borrowings from other languages or words with another base meaning. The instrument used to decorate in the Hurezu pottery was called *gaiță*, reminding about the quiff of the eponymous bird, *mălaia* – the cake resulted from the pressing of the linseeds – became the soil or brick structure at the kiln bottom, the onomatopoeic *gogoloț* (also

The paint dripping 'writing' technique (*jirăvit*).

