

COULD-BE MUSEUMS AND WHAT COULD BE

Reflections on Alternative Museum Practices

Cheryl Klimaszewski, PhD, MS-LIS



Fig. 1. An example of the museum way of seeing on display at the Museum of Ethnography and Folk Art, Bistrița-Năsăud Museum Complex, Bistrița, Romania. This kind of display is typical in institutional ethnographic museums throughout Romania.

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Cheryl Klimaszewski, PhD, MS-LIS,
is an independent researcher and data
consultant based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
handlaughing@gmail.com

“Did that say museum?”

It happened enough that I began to seek them out. Driving through the Romanian countryside, I would spy a hand-painted “*Muzeu*” sign tacked up along the roadside. Distinct from the brown-and-white metal tourist signs that identify official museum sites, the rustic versions appeared unexpectedly. These bespoke markers signaled museums created by individuals or families on their own private properties. They were invitations to stop in and encounter eclectic displays – whether formally collected, salvaged from the trash, rescued from abandoned properties, or donated by community members – arranged in older, traditional homes.

This type of self-made, self-designated museum is not new, nor is the phenomenon unique to Romania. A search of websites like Roadside America or Atlas Obscura can uncover numerous examples of such ad hoc museums. Discussions of these alternative institutional forms have been emerging in the academic literature, as well.¹ Yet cultural anthropologist Vintilă Mihăilescu has pointed out how such museums “are not legitimated as ‘real’ museums because they do not play according to the institutional rules of the game: they are just ‘could-be’ museums.”² But my impression of and research into these spaces suggests that the makers of these could-be museums were never that interested in following institutional

rules in the first place. Instead, they borrow the museum concept as the accepted cultural form for showing and sharing their passion for old, obsolete, curious objects.

Could-be museums are remarkable because their approaches to navigation and display contrast with the proverbial museum “way of seeing” that has become synonymous with the museum as an observational and experiential space.³ This way of seeing often employs modes of display that separate objects from their original contexts and situate them within a carefully curated and supposedly neutral space (fig. 1). This article presents my personal reflections on some of the unconventional approaches to navigation, arrangement, and display I encountered during visits to six Romanian could-be museums: Casa-Muzeu Galoșpetreu; Colecția Etnografică Felicia și Dionizie Olenici in Horodnic de Jos; Colecția Etnografică George Nechiti in Feldru; Muzeul de Artă Populară Ligia Alexandra Bodea in Iaz; Muzeul Pastoral in Jina; and Punctul Muzeal Victor Tatău in Sasca Montană. By embracing their subjective position in relation to objects, history, and location, could-be museums open up alternative avenues of exploration that impact visitors differently.⁴ In conclusion, I suggest potential ways that institutional museums might learn from could-be museums as they reconsider their own relationships to their visitors, collections, and geographies.

NAVIGATING THE MUSEUM: ALTERNATIVE METHODS FOR ENGAGEMENT

Reading and looking are integral to the museum experience. Institutional museums rely on labels that are standard in format and aimed at supplying largely the same factual information to all visitors. Text panels are well-researched and vetted by a team of museum experts. Additional signage throughout the museum reminds visitors of appropriate behavior: walk this way; stay behind certain lines; don't touch. In could-be museums, these conventions are replaced by different sensory engagements and enhanced by the embodied expertise of museum makers.

The contrast between listening to, engaging with, and being absorbed by a personal story versus looking while skimming label text was profound.

Listening Instead of Reading

Could-be museums rarely rely on labels or written explanations. Instead, makers provide verbal narratives as they personally guide visitors through their museums. I found that the emphasis on listening instead of reading changed the pace of my visits. My role shifted from visitor (one who has come to see the museum) to guest (one who waits to be shown at the pleasure of the maker) in a way that signaled a different kind of museum experience from the outset.

Museum creators conveyed their expertise, ranging from lived to self-taught to scholarly, in ways that immersed me in the materiality of the object arrangements that grounded each museum's story.

These stories revolved around how things were made, how they were used, how life events were celebrated, and in the details of village life on a domestic scale. The different qualities of existence *pe vremuri* (meaning, more literally, "past times" – though my translator preferred "back in the day") were vividly contrasted (positively and negatively) with contemporary life. While the narratives were not impromptu, they also did not feel scripted; I could interrupt with questions because the informal setting opened the door to conversation. This created a closeness between me and each museum maker that underscored the feeling of distance I have come to associate with institutional museum visits. The contrast between listening to, engaging with, and being absorbed by a personal story versus looking while skimming label text was profound. Something similar happened in my interactions with objects.

Permission to Touch

Not touching objects is often the first rule one learns upon visiting a museum. But at could-be museums, I was free to touch anything I wished. In fact, I was often invited to do so. At the museum in Jina, for instance, the maker insisted, "This is a blanket. You should touch it. It's wool. Come here, follow the ritual of touching" (fig. 2). Exchanges like this one around the "ritual of touching" a scratchy wool blanket created closeness between guests, museum maker, and objects, adding literal and figurative texture to understandings of the past.



Fig. 2.

The “ritual of touching” a wool blanket at the Muzeul Pastoral in Jina.

As a trained professional, I also found it the most difficult rule to break. But, as I became comfortable handling things, feeling their weight, I could better imagine what it took to make or to use a textile or a tool because I got to know it beyond its appearance. Navigating the materiality of history and heritage through touch made objects more real, in part because I was more engaged and present. Tactile interactions interwoven with the makers’ personal narratives further fostered an intimate and comfortable museum experience. While I treated the objects with care, they were not so precious that I had to keep my distance. Through touch, things in the home were connected through their materials, details, and decorations beyond verbal explanations. The past became palpable.

As with listening, handling objects – the simple act of removing and replacing them within the display – also enhanced the sense of closeness brought on by the maker’s personal narrative and guidance. Through acts like lifting one textile to reveal others stored underneath or reenacting how to use a kitchen tool, I entered into the museum’s process, becoming part of the display.

Differences of Opinion

The tone of institutional museum exhibitions tends toward neutral, objective, and balanced – or at least what passes as these things – conveyed through a disembodied curatorial voice. While listening to the personal narratives that guided me through could-be museums, I noticed the makers adjusting their commentary as they responded to my admiration or curiosity for certain objects or displays. Entering the museum in Galoșpetreu, for example, I was

immediately drawn to a set of embroidered textiles hanging on the wall (fig. 3). The maker explained: “That’s handmade...from when girls weren’t scrolling through their phones, they were actually doing things.” The embroideries became evidence of the kinds of activities valued by this maker and revealed a tension around traditional notions of gendered work. His comment exposed a personal measure of significance at work – about both the social and material values that guided his collecting – that transcends accepted notions of connoisseurship. As a guest, I also had to tamp down my irritation at the sexism implicit in this comment. Yet the material presence of these embroideries made it difficult to argue against the idea that the hand-making of objects was a better use of time than the endless scroll of today’s technologies. This interaction reveals

could-be museums as spaces where one may encounter personal perspectives on the past and what each maker values that differ from one’s own values. As a guest, I learned to respond appropriately, sometimes politely pushing back, other times just listening, trying to understand the maker’s point of view.

These examples foreground some ways existing exhibit and display conventions insert a feeling of distance between visitors and the museum. At could-be museums, listening instead of reading, physically interacting with objects, and encountering personal opinions about the past removed this distance, changing the pace, texture, and impact of my experiences. Moving through the space of a home created a rapport between me and the makers, even if it sometimes



Fig. 3. In the display at Casa-Muzeu Galoșpetreu (left), I was drawn to these handmade embroideries (right) that became evidence, as the museum maker said, of time spent “doing things” besides “scrolling through phones.”



Fig. 4. The main display of traditional clothing and textiles at Colecția Etnografică Felicia și Dionizie Olenici in Horodnic de Jos, part exhibition space, part open storage.

Novel or unexpected encounters at institutional museums that productively bend the rules could foster more intimate and personally meaningful experiences.

revealed uncomfortable subjectivities. Such contrary modes of museum navigation can cultivate different museum rituals that, in turn, leave visitors with unexpected impressions. Novel or unexpected encounters at institutional museums that productively bend the rules could foster more intimate and personally meaningful experiences. It is also worth noting that could-be museums provide these different sensory experiences in distinctly analog ways, revealing that large budgets and flashy technologies are not the only ways to engage visitors in new and meaningful ways.

ARRANGEMENT AND DISPLAY: EXCITING THE EYE

Institutional museum exhibitions provide a well-designed, cohesive encounter of carefully curated objects, selected because they are in some way the best means of representing the thesis of the exhibition or collection at hand. But, in contrast to the stereotypical vitrined isolation of objects, could-be museums regularly embrace an

aesthetics of multiples, repetition, and excess. The presence of too many objects within a space generates sensory excitement by presenting more things than a viewer can take in. The effect is heightened because this overabundance is set within a home, a space that is by nature deeply contextual. Although the original function of a room may provide some sense of order, in the museum at Horodnic de Jos, for example, the bulk of the collection was contained in one large room – a former barn (fig. 4). The effect was somewhere between an organized display and open storage. At other times, groupings of like items such as irons or local ceramics created visual typologies within a particular space, anchoring the displays. Looking together through these visual lists created shared moments in which I and other guests (usually my translator) and the maker each pointed to the things we liked the most. The activity of comparing and sharing aesthetic preferences provided a way of seeing through one another's eyes, which in turn heightened my awareness of my own way of seeing.



Fig. 5. Historical examples of clothing irons anchor a more random display of tchotchkes and “kitsch” at the Colecția Etnografică George Nechiti in Feldru.

The presence of too many objects also tempered notions of significance and connoisseurship inherent in institutional museum collecting. Objects were included because they were found and deemed worthy of saving by the maker for any number of reasons. Often makers were just saving objects they found interesting from being thrown away. Several makers noted that they included items that might be kitsch and/or made from synthetic materials because they were created by local people (fig. 5). The result was an environment in which curatorial responsibility was subtly shifted; I could make my own decisions about what was most beautiful, interesting, or engaging based on my own criteria. I actively engaged in the process of comparing and contrasting as a reaction to the initial feeling of surfeit spurred by having so many objects in each space. These examples demonstrate visual excess as a mode of engagement for visitors.

CONNECTIONS TO PLACE: ENGAGING THE LOCAL-SPECIFIC

Object displays in institutional museums are guided by protection and preservation guidelines related to accepted professional standards and accreditation. Could-be museum makers often arrange displays as people might in their own homes. One maker described her process of arrangement as “respect(ing) the local-specific.” Yet displays also have to be adapted because could-be museums contain more objects than one would find within an actual home. Even when the impetus for creating a museum was the commemoration of a loved one, I found that this did not translate to an authentic preservation of the space as it was, such as in the museum at Iaz (fig. 6). Flipping through a family photo album was an activity integral to this museum’s experience. The maker pointed out one photograph of the house as

it was during the original inhabitant's (the maker's grandmother's) lifetime. The maker encouraged us to compare the image to how the house looked today, moving us through time. The current display on the porch emphasized the sheer quantity of beautiful and interesting items from the past no longer being used. In the moment, it spurred a discussion on sustainability in what has become a throwaway society. Although (or, perhaps, because) they were not all collector quality, objects could still demonstrate other ways of knowing about life in *this* home, in *this* village, saved by *this* maker. Preserving and sharing these items, mostly hand-made and likely otherwise destined for the trash heap, restored their value. For me, the crowded display drove home the need for this different kind of museum because it made me reconsider how I relate to objects in my own life: Where do I not see value in the everyday objects that surround me? How might I live differently if I thought about my surroundings with a kind of museum reverence?

Could-be museums are also reciprocally activated in and by their local landscapes. Their existence provides a reason to stop within a particular locality. They also extend

local ways of knowing because of how museum narratives involve their natural surroundings. This was most dramatically illustrated at the museum in Jina (fig. 7, p. 76). After touring this museum's interior spaces – a multi-room house and two barn-like spaces – we continued through the garden and yard to the edge of the property. The view of the hills and valleys provided additional context about this village as a place, the highest in this region known for its production of sheep's milk cheese. The things I had learned inside the museum connected with the wider landscape, bringing everything together as a holistic knowledge experience. My visit became about being in this museum, in and of Jina, versus simply knowing about the village as an abstraction.

TEXTURES OF KNOWLEDGE: MAKING IMAGINED WORLDS NAVIGABLE

My memories of could-be museums are generally more vivid and lively than those of my institutional museum visits because of this impression of *being there*. The images of could-be museums featured here are those that encapsulate this feeling: the moments where my knowing about traditional Romanian village life became entwined with each maker's spoken narrative and the material



Fig. 6. At Muzeul de Artă Populară Ligia Alexandra Bodea in Iaz, a photograph reveals the appearance of the front porch of the main exhibition house in its original inhabitant's time (left), compared to its appearance when I visited in 2018 (right).

Fig. 7. Following the museum maker (left) at the Muzeul Pastoral in Jina to the rear of the property to admire the view from this highest village (right).



When is it time to rethink some of our longest-standing professional practices?

environments they created. These nontraditional exhibition spaces are exemplary of scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's idea of the museum as a kind of utopian imagining that "reflects on what is, by projecting what could be, either in the spirit of critique or in the hope of a transformative program."⁵ In the presence of so many salvaged objects, I could imagine who and how I could be differently, beyond the complications of contemporary life and consumer culture. My proximity to the quantity and variety of old and hand-made objects provided the texture that made these imagined, alternative worlds palpable and navigable. As a guest in each museum, I "reflect[ed] on what is" by comparing and contrasting my own experiences of time and place, refracted through rich and full visual taxonomies of objects. I learned by looking at the things that stood out to me. The past manifested through object displays characterized by excess that encouraged me to learn to find similarities and differences by engaging all of my senses. Could-be

museums blurred distinctions between conventional museum practices, flattening curatorial voice/exhibitionary practices and exhibition/storage spaces. Makers improvised with exhibition conventions, creating their museums with what they had on hand. Each museum fit within the abilities of the maker, rather than requiring the maker to conform with acceptable ideas about what or how their museum *should* be.

If exhibitions are an interplay between information and objects, could-be museums also demonstrate some ways to engage different aesthetic registers to foster alternative impressions of what institutional museums could be. It is easy to dismiss could-be museum approaches as impractical for "real" museums because professional standards and practices dictate a particular level of care. But thinking through these modes of display that convey knowledge through repetition, excess, and locality and without an abundance of written text begs the question: *When is it time to rethink some of our longest-standing professional practices?* Could-be museums expose some of the limits of institutional interpretative techniques. Voiced by their makers and through objects, these innovative museum spaces spark powerful questions around some of our most deeply held institutional practices:



- What personal stories are included in museum spaces – and how and by whom are they being told?
- What would it look like if we welcomed visitors as guests?
- What happens when guests are allowed to assert their own ways of knowing?
- How can we challenge the legacy of the museum way of seeing?
- How might museum impressions be enhanced through better linkages between a museum’s interior exhibits and its exterior locality?

In could-be museums, the museum concept appropriated for personal ends reveals new possibilities for museum practice that might expand visitor impressions about what institutional museums could be. As subjective worlds made navigable, could-be museums expose some limits of many long-standing practices in the field. The need for increasing awareness of these limitations and expanding our understanding of alternative approaches is particularly relevant in light of new goals around audience engagement that can be inspired by the most unlikely spaces. ■

1 See, for example, Fiona Candlin, *Micromuseology: An Analysis of Small Independent Museums* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); Mariona Moncunill-Piñas, “The Practice of Everyday Museum Making: Naturalization and Empowerment in the Amateur Consumption of Museographic Language” (first published online, September 6, 2017), *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 3 (June 2020): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549417722113>; and Maja Mikula, “Vernacular Museum: Communal Bonding and Ritual Memory Transfer among Displaced Communities,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 21, no. 8 (September 2015): 757–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2015.1020961>.

2 Vintilă Mihăilescu, “Local Museums? Village Collections in Recent Romania,” *Martor* 14 (2009): 11, <https://martor.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/mihaiulescu-site1.pdf>. Mihăilescu was Director of the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant when that museum spearheaded a series of workshops for a subset of museum makers in the hopes of increasing the visibility of these emergent institutions. The program ran from 2008 to 2013 and the association that grew out of this program (RECOMESPAR) became inactive not long after.

3 Svetlana Alpers, “The Museum as a Way of Seeing,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, DC, and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 25–32.

4 Discussions of subjectivity and museums are increasingly relevant to the field, most recently in response to issues around decolonization. In addition to a conference entitled “The Subjective Museum” hosted by The Historical Museum Frankfurt in 2017, the work of Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, Susan Pearce, and Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine’s influential and previously cited volume *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* all discuss subjectivity in museums in various ways.

5 Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “The Museum – A Refuge for Utopian Thought,” in *Die Unruhe der Kultur: Potentiale des Utopischen*, ed. Jörn Rüsen, Michael Fehr, and Annelie Ramsbrock (Weilerswist, Germany: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2004), 4, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242493603_The_Museum_-_A_Refuge_for_Utopian_Thought.