

“Objects, memory and cultural identity in (re)construction”

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From Crafts to Arts : folk traditions and national modernity

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Abstract

The creation of the European modern nations, which started in the 19th century, is not only linked to political changes but also to major cultural changes. Modern nation have been conceived as sovereign political communities that embodies specific cultural communities. The current European national cultures act as strong identity referential, uniting the members of the national community beyond their economic and social differences. These national cultures have been built since the 19th century by intellectuals, artists, writers and largely circulated among the people by associations, teachers, cultural entrepreneurs (media, press, theater etc.).

In the process, the popular culture was strongly valued. Popular culture was supposed to have preserved, through traditions, the original values and culture of the nation's ancestors. It was thus presented as precious resource for the construction of modern national culture. Besides, because the peasantry has an intense and daily relationship with the soil, the rural popular culture tended to symbolize the relation between the nation and its territory.

Since the beginning of the 19th century, operations of gathering and collection of popular culture were associated with the political and cultural construction of the modern nations. They first focused on oral literature, then on objects (costumes, furniture, household objects) that were displayed in the first ethnographic museums, all patriotically oriented, which opened from the 1870s on. Interest for traditional architecture and work operations led to the creation of 'open air museums' on the model of the Skansen Museum in Stockholm.

Actually, it is through the International Exhibitions that the principles of the ethnographic exhibition and of the 'ethnographic villages' were elaborated and presented to the public. It shows the strong link between industrial modernization and the search for traditional culture and values. In the second half of the 19th century, intense debates were carried about how to correct the negative effects (economic, social, cultural) of industrialization through the use of craft production. The 1900 Universal Exhibition in France witnessed indeed the consecration of the 'Art National', a economic and cultural movement largely inspired by the ideas of the British 'Arts and Crafts' movement.

The paper will present through this example the place and roles given in Europe to traditional culture in the national culture of the industrial age: an identity referential, a commercial activity for urban consumption, tourism, and exportation, a repository of aesthetic models, and as source of moral value.