

Of Glass Fishes and Crystal Chandeliers: The (Important) Role of Material Culture within Changing Times

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Abstract:

In *Domesticity on Display: Romanian Middle-class Material Culture from Late Socialism to Today*, Maria Cristache analyzes the production of decorative objects as well as their use in the domestic sphere in the time period between socialism and postsocialism in Romania. Her analysis of the role of material culture within such an eventful historical period acknowledges the centrality of objects in social relations and the potential of gifts to provide their givers and receivers with means of identification.

Von Glasfischen und Kristalleuchtern: Die (wichtige) Rolle von materieller Kultur in Zeiten des Wandels

German Abstract:

In *Domesticity on Display: Romanian Middle-class Material Culture from Late Socialism to Today* analysiert Maria Cristache die Produktion von dekorativen Objekten sowie deren häuslichen Verwendung in der Zeit zwischen Sozialismus und Postsozialismus in Rumänien. Mit ihrer Analyse der Rolle von materieller Kultur in einer solchen ereignisreichen Zeit macht sie deutlich, wie wichtig Objekte in sozialen Beziehungen sind und dass Geschenke bedeutsame Mittel der Identifikation sowohl für die Schenkenden als auch für die Beschenkten darstellen.

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There is no doubt that people like buying, possessing, and collecting material objects. We buy things not only out of necessity, but also because we hope that they might contribute to our well-being and happiness. At times, we even regard things as an expression of ourselves or our beliefs: They are supposed to ‘materialize’ some aspect of our personality and, on a larger scale, to function as a representation of a social and historical phenomenon (like in the case of this study). Every single object can be bestowed with an implicit value and deeper significance thereby functioning as the symbolic representation of something or someone. Thus, material culture is an important part of our social reality because it gives a better understanding of the relationships between people and their things as well as a better understanding of people and the society they live in.

Maria Christache’s study is clearly situated within material culture and consumption studies. Through an anthropological and sociological lens with a focus on the domestic sphere, she traces the connections between people and their material environment in postsocialist Romania. More specifically, she centers her research on the time period between the beginning of Ceausescu’s leadership in 1965 and the present. Her focus on the domestic sphere provides interesting insights into larger and more complicated topics, such as long-term societal change, gender roles, and the relationship between people and the state (cf. p. 6). In doing so, she skillfully analyzes important transformations of the above-mentioned time period through the mirror of daily experiences and, in particular, through material practices of middle-class Romanians. The aim of the research is to contribute to the consolidation of postsocialist studies by focusing on the intersection between materiality, value, and temporality in Romania (cf. p. 7). Furthermore, her goal is also to capture the dynamic processes and social practices found

around these objects (cf. p. 8), to analyze how socialism and the post-1989 changes have been experienced by local actors (cf. p. 9), and especially to point out the potential role of objects in evoking a system of social support and in strengthening and deepening social relations through the practices of gift exchange and barter.

Born and raised in Romania, Christache uses her insider position to collect a variety of perspectives from the people she interviewed, who, as she points out, welcomed her into their homes not only as a researcher but also as a guest. As a way of approaching the material practices of middle-class Romanians, she examines the implicit/hidden and more explicit meaning of decorative objects she was shown by her interview partners — images of photographs of these objects taken by the author are printed throughout the book. With her study, she insightfully explores and analyzes what I would like to define as the ‘powerful nature’ of objects: their potential to act as junctures between different social actors and events in a time full of transformations.

From the first page onwards, the reader is carefully and skillfully guided into the topic of the book so that even without any prior knowledge it is easy to follow her argument. In the first chapters, Christache provides the historical and social context of socialist and postsocialist Romania, which makes it possible for the reader to understand how and in which circumstances material practices of the time evolved and changed. She also provides information on her research methodology and on her theoretical framework. She then focuses on the exploration of postsocialist transformations, analyzing the intersections between temporality and materiality in the domestic sphere, with a focus on people’s interactions with specific objects in their homes and on the social meaning of these objects in this period. The following chapters are based on the analysis of three case studies of crystal and porcelain decorative objects for which she draws on the interviews she conducted as source material. The objects she analyzes are glass ornaments in the form of a fish, porcelain statuettes, and luxurious crystal chandeliers which were typically produced in Romania during late socialism and after 1989. Due to her choice of interviewing people of two different generations — who had either lived during socialism or were born during socialism and then grew up in postsocialist times — Christache is able to trace important transformations that occurred in Romanian society during those turbulent years. Among these are the change of the nature and significance of leisure time and gender roles – more specifically, the role of women and men in the domestic sphere which

points at the relation between women and consumption in the context of industrialization. It was particularly interesting to me to learn about the intricate relationship of gender and consumption in the domestic space in Romania. Christache explains that during socialism women were seen as caretakers and ‘guardians’ of domestic material objects which, after the collapse of the socialist regime, they then rejected as they regarded them as a representation of this dreadful social system.

Furthermore, the case study of the glass fish is worth mentioning in more detail as it concisely illustrates the strategies people used to make sense of their material surroundings in a changing society. The fish, made out of multi-colored glass, was a common decorative object in the homes of middle-class Romanians. It was considered a symbol of modest homes because of its low price and, more importantly, because it represented the so-called “secondary economy” (cf. p. 56). As Christache learned in the interviews, the fish was made by glassblowers outside their regular working hours, often at night or during breaks, and then circulated on the informal market as gifts in exchange for favors or as a way of thanking someone for a favor received (cf. p. 57). While before 1989, the glass fish was one of the most renowned products of glassblowers (cf. p. 62) — at least in the eyes of common people — after 1989 it fell out of favor and was rejected since it was associated with the socialist past and with ‘alternative’ social practices (cf. p. 62). With this case study, the author clearly shows how the devaluation of an object can reflect changes in people’s social and/or economic status (cf. p. 76). Such behaviors and beliefs were also confirmed by the younger generation who rejected these statuettes and preferred to get rid of them or to hide them because they considered them as a clear socialism-associated practice which had lost its value. Christache’s analysis of the collected opinions and comments on the glass fish and the other statuettes nicely illustrates that the changed attitude towards these specific objects can be regarded as a form of resistance to the socialist past. Thus, the example of the glass fish, but also the other case studies, help to understand the social stratification in socialist Romania and how different groups were defining others and themselves according to consumption practices (cf. p. 63).

To conclude, with this study Maria Cristache successfully explains and sheds light on the peculiar means of material culture such as important changes and transformations that occurred in Romanian society during a complex historical period. With an elegant writing style

and clear logic of argumentation, Christache provides valuable insights into complicated matters.