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ENGAGE THE PAST TO ADVANCE THE FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

Navigating through very uncertain times, tradition and belonging become the new paths to take. Designers are slowing down the making process in order to produce fewer and better pieces that are intended to be loved and treasured for generations. This research analyzes the role of local craft as a tool to highlight the importance and value found in the skill, craft and story of the product and it becomes a source for its artists and creatives to interpret it through different techniques and mediums to contribute to its continued preservation and perpetuation through generations. In Transylvania, Romania, crafts such as embroidery, beading, lace making, wool processing, wood carving and much more continue to be part of the region's heritage. In order to sustain this practice not only in the region, but worldwide, both as the basis for the local economy and people's heritage, it is necessary to seek alternatives to engage older craftsmen while attracting younger generations. There must be a continuum of practice to transfer knowledge and know-how. This paper is based on a recently completed case study entitled ""Quiet Luxury"", conducted in 2020. Showing a durable, sustainable and carefully crafted approach, has become, more than ever, the norm in the creative industry and beyond. This journey of connecting to our ancestors and rediscovering their crafts is imperative in order to acknowledge, understand and pass on to future generations; it is a constant work in progress.

Keywords: sustainability, heritage, craftsmanship, ancestral techniques

INTRODUCTION

Maramureș, Transylvania is an idyllic place where - amongst an extremely rich landscape, with stunning sights and rich natural resources - rural areas are home to talented craftsmen that have kept traditions alive throughout generations. The region stands as a testament to traditional, simple ways of living, with pride and moral values that many of us can now only read about or hear from our elders. A visit to the villages from the area enables an observer to see these traditions practiced until today. Unlike "invented" traditions, ancestral practices and customs in the region rise naturally from the bucolic way of life that still in part carries on. It is true that with passing years and new industrial developments, keeping ancestral practices alive has proven to be increasingly challenging. Nevertheless, one can still encounter practices like wool processing and spinning, weaving, felting, spinning, knitting, crochet practice, embroidery, pottery, wood carving and many others, entirely practiced in the craftsman's household (whether inside the home, courtyard, or purpose built workshops). Each of the resulting handmade items has a particular energy that cannot be identically reproduced; it is the energy associated with the unschooled rhythm, with nature; nothing is imposed but left to self-expression.

"Romanians from Maramureș have held onto an unadulterated life of a remote past, their villages have an archaic atmosphere of fullness and Romanian virtue. In this isolated corner of the country we find life and shapes that belong to olden days.

Locals preserve millennia of civilization through practices, traditional clothing, habits and most of all in their consciousness”, says Ernest Bernea in the book “Maramureşul”³⁰.

Choosing to start my paper with an ode to this „isolated corner” filled with vast material and spiritual abundance should come as no surprise due mostly, to my complicity with these values. Born and raised in this region, I became aware of the local heritage at an early age and decided to help preserve and promote this unique traditional culture to the world.

Ancestral customs and practices that have been familiar to the local community since early ages, we lived with them, we deepened and assimilated throughout our personal and professional development and so they naturally manifested a substantial contribution to shape personalities.

A core idea of my professional practice is that traditional arts and crafts represent our most valuable and authentic characteristics. Carefully following throughout my own professional path the idea that traditional arts and crafts represent our most valuable and most authentic belonging, immersing in the cultural richness of Maramureş and Transylvania as a whole, came naturally.

The ethnographic study of my childhood surroundings became the starting point of my creative path and it took a permanent leading role when I understood that only through exploring this unique heritage would I be able to pursue making of designs/objects that would acclaim the national identity and consequently, my deepest values. Once this connection was established, it continued growing organically, only to uncover a desire to deepen the hidden mysteries of this space, as well as sketching a personal identity throughout the process. I firmly believe one’s distinctiveness is rarely disconnected (on different levels) from the heritage and

ancestral values. The Romanian sculptor Constantin Brâncuşi once said that borrowed clothes have a different smell and they never accurately match your own body, or being. Learning this came as the most valuable confirmation that my artistic pursuit is on the right path.

As Ernest Bernea says in the book “Spaţiu, timp şi cauzalitate”³¹, “amongst the 3 time phases, the past has priority, because on its own it’s very objective. The present is the moment, it’s the immediate one lived, and the future is something probable, something that can only be imagined.” My intention is therefore to reimagine the future and illustrate it, having as a solid foundation the past, the one perceived as consistent and concrete, as an existence on its own. The past, if left to be forgotten, cannot resonate or affect the present; it can no longer be imagined or represented. Instead it should fuel the present and open the future. In traditional belief systems,”the past is the absolute owner of time.”³¹

It becomes very clear that heritage is the past, as time confirms, and on this note I quote the poet and essayist Nichita Stănescu, who says: “I am not interested in either one, the new or the old, but in the immemorial. For only the heritage/folklore keeps talking about the old days.”¹⁰

“Traditional costume, as well as other phenomena and processes of material and spiritual culture, shows itself through the perfect structural unity based on continuity and the creative development of its valuable traditions.”⁸ “The unity of the aesthetic concept doesn’t include the inexhaustible decorative variety of the traditional Romanian costume, expressed through the richness of shapes, ornaments and the incomparable dance of coloristic compositions”⁸, and before such a vast heritage, it is impossible not to be touched. We find ourselves in the position of discovering this value and showing it to the world, but not recreating it, as it is

already offered to us in its best shape and form. Merging the functional with the creative, the production of one artistic and functional piece is the result of a long tradition, passed on from generation to generation, an example of the morphological unity of this precious cultural element.

As H.H. Stahl also asserts in his paper, "Studii de folclor și literatură"²⁰ (Studies of Folklore and Literature), following an analysis and uptake of the past, we are heading towards the present and we are trying to shape the future. I have built my entire creative journey in this direction. I have kept engraved in my memory the conviction that an educated artist should find a style, a direction, permanently relying on ancestral crafts, an embodiment of the representative element of traditional art.

"A craftsman in general - and the Maramureș one in particular - does not copy. In most obvious cases one must search for the transposition and recreation action that was ever present in art objects we have been studying. This is different from what is generally understood by originality and it is difficult to name it.

Finding and studying this concept up-close however means understanding objects, artworks and revelling in their charm."³⁴

I went a step further and chose to use these as source of inspiration in my artistic quest in recent years.

The aim of this research is to highlight the interconnectivity between craftsman, craft, and environment towards a sustainable presence and operation. Cultural heritage, including cultural heritage sites, as well as folklore and traditional practices and techniques represent an important part of the whole, each piece completing the other.

In order to stay relevant to the contemporary world and newer generations, these heritage elements should adapt, or be adapted into new projects that are presented to the world. Local crafts and communities have to be integrated within contemporary creations, as well as discussed and presented to the world. This will not only provide awareness, but also exposure, attracting more lucrative opportunities and sustained development.

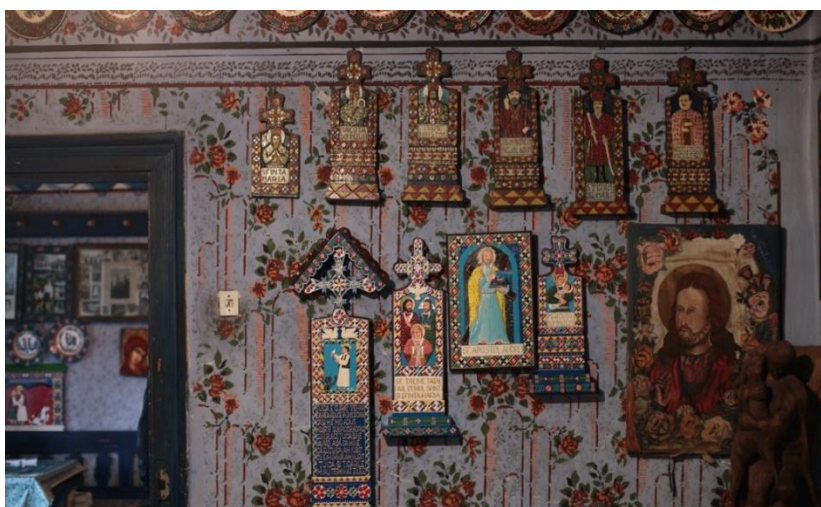


Fig.1 Interior from Săpânța, Maramureș

Photo: Adi Bulboacă

METHODOLOGY

This research takes a qualitative approach to investigate non-numeric data concerning ontological points of cultural heritage and craft in Maramureş, Romania. It investigates the role of crafts as sustainable engines for local communities, and suggests measures to be considered in their preservation for future generations.

This research aims to present the reality of the place through verified hypotheses, organized in two parts: a research of the historical material presented as a documentation, and a case study that takes the shape of a textile installation, involving local practices and communities from Maramureş, Romania.

The former, a case study on local crafts, was done by working online with local craftsmen, considering the project was developed at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The outcome of the documentation was integrated into contemporary designs and applications. The final results were then presented in the form of a textile installation, including local crafts and practices. Combining both the theoretical argument and a creative, practical solution was considered as the best way to achieve the desired outcome.

CRAFTS IN MARAMUREŞ

“A handcrafted object evokes the aura of human tradition, the sweat and skill of its individual maker, since craftsmanship avoids the repetitive precision of a stamping machine – uniqueness and originality.”³⁹ (Waterbury 1989:245)

If “modernity is about progress and I s soulless, Maramureş on the contrary has kept its magic and its soul, and managed to remain a unique position in Europe. This idea that Maramureş is a magical place is quite a common way of expression in the formal representation of Maramureş. The people of Maramureş are said to have

‘magical power’ (Medieval Tours, 2009), the villages have a ‘special charm and magic’ (Metaneira, 2007a) and ‘life in Maramureş is like a mystery’ (MCC, n.d.(e)). And all these descriptions, feelings and emotions, charms and senses - they all add up to the formal representation of Maramureş. A Land of Old, a living museum, a rural area devoid of modernity, ‘that is at once within reach yet simultaneously beyond the grasp of the whimsical traveller’ (MCC, n.d.(e))¹³.

Appreciating with age, imperishable, an accumulation of stylistic richness lasting a near eternity, imposing itself as an important entity, the Romanian folk costume represents the interface of the traditional Romanian people with the rest of the world, therefore could not have been left out of the picture, as it is the one element where all the textile related crafts meet in order to show their magic to the world. Its specific unity proves the wish and pride of those who adopt it to belong to a community. The wish to be more beautiful together, to contribute to its making and preservation in time and space, because its reach has no boundaries.

The folk costume represents an important part of the Romanian cultural heritage, „a live document of the past, that over centuries has transmitted to multiple generations the message of an authentic artistic creation, with a specific own content, with a powerful hallmark of originality, manifested in shape, decoration and chromatics. The raw material, tailoring, decoration, the morphological constituent, all are parties of an organic ensemble connected through a wide historical period, measurable in hundreds of years, or in certain aspects millennia. These overlap and interact within a unitary style, giving to the Romanian folk costume the structure of a fact of life and art.”⁸

This unit can be found in the general morphology of the costume, in chromatics, raw material, disposition of

ornaments, elements under the umbrella of originality, because the popular artist permanently creates, he never copies.

The construction of the Romanian folk costume starts from several rules, namely the simplicity of tailoring, of used materials, of the strategic placement of decorating art. Let's not forget that,

initially, its function was only practical, the purpose being to protect the body against weather and to serve to the ordinary; only afterwards it attained an important artistic side, a result of long research, of its ephemerality. In time it morphed into intricate objects of artistic craftsmanship.



Fig. 2 – 3 Details of the Traditional Folk costume Photos: Adi Bulboacă



Fig. 4 Craftsmen from Maramureș Photo Adi Bulboacă



Fig. 5 Craftsmen from Maramureș Photo Adi Bulboacă



Fig. 6 Craftsmen from Maramureș Photo Adi Bulboacă

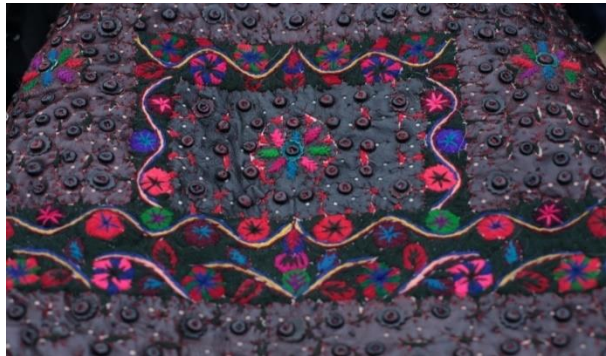


Fig. 7 Craftsmen from Maramureș Photo Adi Bulboacă



Fig. 8 Pottery craftsmen from Baia Sprie, Maramureș Photo Daniel Leș



Fig. 9 Photo Adi Bulboacă Fig.10 Photo Daniel Leș



Fig. 11 Craftsmen from Maramureș Photo Adi Bulboacă

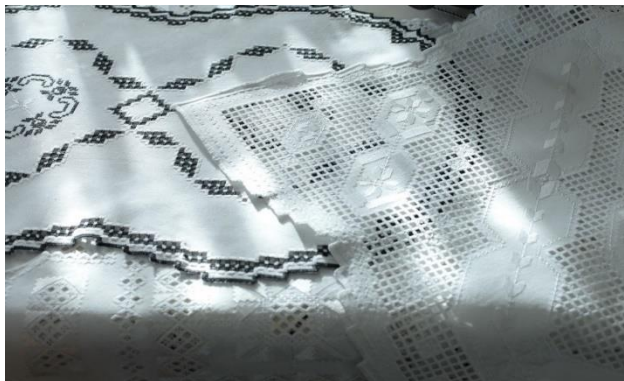


Fig. 12 Craftsmen from Maramureș Photo Adi Bulboacă

This says a lot about „the relationship between the people and their costumes. Romanians are conscious about the beauty and value of their costume, through which they see the legacy of their bright tradition. Hence, they wear it with an unequalled spiritual pride and visible body delight. The Romanian folk costume is the external, plastic and eloquent sign of the consciousness, the same on the entire Romanian territory, somehow overlapping and identifying itself with the language of the Romanian people. This seems to be the deep, private signification of the

fundamental unity of the Romanian folk costume.”³⁵

Therefore, it is not surprising to find out that great painters, designers and carvers like Henri Matisse, Gheorghe Asachi, Theodor Aman, Theodor Pallady, Ion Grigorescu or Nicolae Grigorescu dedicated entire works to the Romanian folk costume and going towards contemporaneity, this served as a source of inspiration for important fashion designers at an international level, e.g. Yves Saint Laurent or Tom Ford.



Fig.13 Ion Grigorescu – "Vadul Izei",1981 Fig.14 Theodor Pallady - "The peasant"

“The structure of the Romanian costume in the Maramureş region preserves lots of archaic elements, among which the “gubă”(made of tufted white, grey or black wool, an integral piece of winter costume due to the long cold winters in these areas) and the woolen” zadii” (striped aprons made of a single width of woven wool).

In the beginning, women wore the Romanian blouse gathered at the neck. Of late, it has been replaced by the blouse with a neckline, cut of two wide pieces of white, homespun fabric, one of them sewn up front and the other at the back. The slightly pleated sleeve is tied straight to the shoulder and ends with a wide, lace flounce.

Ornaments are displayed on the following areas: the shoulders, embroidered with “trăsură”, sewn with “grații” or “ciur” and the head opening, decorated with “copciuțe” and “cârlig”. Over the blouse, they put on catrințele “zadiile” woven of wool on the loom: there are two “zadii”: one worn up front wrapped up over the back one. The

“catrințe” are decorated with stripes displayed horizontally or crosswise, whose colors are special: red alternated with black or orange with black. Every “catrință” has cords “frânghii” around the waist with which it is tied.

Around the neck women wear “zgardă” consisting of coral necklaces.

Girls braid their hair into “pleteri” by the temples and into pigtailed hanging down the neck. On holidays they put flower coronets on their head. Wives braid their hair into pigtailed tied on the top “stebel” and cover their head with a homespun kerchief “pânzătură” or with a floral cashmere kerchief bought in town. They put on wool knit socks and then “opinci”(traditional leather footwear).



Fig. 15. Traditional women’s costume from Săpânța Photo: Sorin Brotnei

Men wear a poncho-type shirt, which can be very short, waist length or longer, with “chept”. Both types have the same ornamental patterns as the female blouses.

In winter, men put on “cioareci” of felt “panura”, and in summer, cotton underpants, “gaci” with baggy legs, made of two-three wide pieces of fabric, shorter and with fringes, “roituri” on the hem. They are griddled with a broad leather belt to protect their backbone when doing hard work. The leather belt is decorated with polychrome sheepskin embroidery.

Men cover their head with a fur cap “cujma rotate”, a thick felt hat with big brims or a straw cloche often trimmed with beads. In winter, both women and men wear a white or grey woolen fleecy called “gubă” and fur vests called “pieptare”, buttoned up front, covered with brightly colored sheepskin embroidery.

They protect their legs with woolen socks over which they put on “opinci”, and in winter black leather high boots.”²⁹



Fig. 16 - 17 From Bănățeanu, Tancred, Traditional costume from Maramureș. Ethnical areas Oaş, Maramureș, Lăpuș



Fig. 18 - 19 From Bănățeanu, Tancred, Traditional costume from Maramureș. Ethnical areas Oaş, Maramureș, Lăpuș



Fig. 20 – 21 From Bănăţeanu, Tancred, Traditional costume from Maramureş

ENGAGEMENT/ PROJECT MOTIVATION

Working with craftsman from Maramureş, Transylvania, has been the motivation behind my work for over a decade. Therefore, I started this journey a long time ago: a journey of authenticity where we can connect to our ancestors and rediscover their crafts, through contemporary design.

Born and raised in this region, I became familiar with the local crafts at an early age and turning into a main interest during my latest studies. I have been trying to make a contribution towards preserving and conveying to the world ever since, the unicity traditional culture has to offer.

Maramureş is divided in four ethnographic areas, the Historic Maramureş, Țara Lăpuşului, Țara Chioarului and Țara Codrului, each one having different characteristics of its traditional costumes, nevertheless, mostly keeping the same practices and fabrics. The differences are noticeable in the patterns, colours, items layout and so on.

Traditional costumes reflect codes, shapes and meanings that are common to a whole social group, expressing the communitarian function of traditional art (see Bănăţeanu 1985: 133–135)³. Consequently, each community has its own particularities when discussing fabrics attributes (materiality, patterns, symbols, design), which are different from community to community, even if regional

common features can be found, says Ana Iuga in her paper, “Contemporary Traditional Clothing in Maramureş”⁵.

As such, clothes help people differentiate from each other within different communities and people took an extreme pride over this.

QUIET LUXURY – A CASE STUDY

As mentioned earlier, crafts are a gift from ancestral times, therefore their practice in continuum is not only a way to give back to the community and people at large, but also a way to protect the surroundings, the environment, which is of main importance, as we have been reminded in the recent years.

One way to grace nature and crafts, is by reducing harmful consumption, respecting and preserving it in all forms given to us.



Fig. 22 Natural structures in Maramureş, Romania Photo: Cliţan Andra Camelia

The name of my project is “Quiet luxury” (part of the “International Connections” Annual Faculty Show College of Fine Arts and Design, University of Sharjah – displayed at Maraya Art Center, Sharjah, UAE), a discussion on new approaches to artistic practices within the circumstances of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which forever changed our familiar, what we perceived as “normal”.

Already in times of globalization, we are more strained to look for inspiration inwards, locally, to the practices we call familiar. Not only does that give us a remembrance of our upbringing, or brings back forgotten memories, but also helps us preserve ancestral techniques, giving us self-expression in the world.

I have therefore chosen to implement within my project a number of techniques commonly used in Maramureş, the place I call home. I selected crafts like knitting, crochet, pottery, felting, dyeing, bead embroidery, to re-create natural damages sometimes encountered by our used items and objects, and explore them in new ways, to create a new outcome.

Navigating through very uncertain times, having purpose, as well as showing a durable, sustainable and carefully crafted approach, has become more than ever the norm in the creative industry and beyond. I was therefore strongly driven into creating a capsule collection with a design base of hand-knitted, hand-woven, hand-built objects, grounded in ancestral crafts, that celebrates the unique irregularity of natural materials and shapes.

Tradition and belonging to a community become the new path to take. Designers are slowing down the making process in order to produce fewer and better pieces that are intended to be loved and treasured for generations. Embracing the imperfect aesthetics of wear and aging, these carefully crafted products welcome mending and repair, darning and patching, a faded luxury direction, where value is

found in the skill, craft and story of the product rather than branding or material cost and popularity.

The result is a capsule collection presented as an installation, a survival collection that shows different solutions to recreating, renewing or giving new life to old, stained or broken items, with touches of luxury elements, such as beads or silk refined crochet lace. Not everything broken has to be disposed of, on the contrary a healthy sustainable approach would claim quite the opposite. Each item was handmade personally in collaboration with local craftsman and artists during the lockdown and immediately after.

The collection is comprised of textiles as well as pottery, hand made by Daniel Leş, a well-known craftsman from Maramureş. Regarding textiles, local craftswoman Monica Varga has contributed to knitting the wool jumper on display, Dana Dobrai added crochet finishes to the wool felted waistcoat and jewelry artist Ioana Matei contributed to the crochet lace collar.

The oversized quilted jacket was made from silk scraps, overlapped using different types of thread embroidery, as well as beading techniques. It is the idea of recreating a toned luxury item from leftovers available in our surroundings.

The hand knitted jumper, made from cotton and wool yarn, has been purposely stained in order to further challenge new artistic practices, in order to shed more light on the idea of rebirth. Felting and beading are the techniques chosen to offer surface structures, as well as a touch of elegance and brightness that we are looking to bring in our lives.

Stitching hand-crafted ceramic objects was chosen to show the practice of repurpose. Repurposing broken ceramic using cross stitching technique and wool yarn traditional in Maramureş, has offered not only an unbroken, but mostly an artistic alternative ready to be embraced.

Braiding raw wool has been a practice I have challenged in the last few years, as the size, properties, color or surface of this unique material has never ceased to amaze, to stand a solid ground for artistic practices, as well as practicalities. Once again, it offers infinite solutions for those who have the will to discover its magic.



Fig. 23 – 24 Photos: Clițan Andra Camelia



Fig. 25 – 26 Photos: Clițan Andra Camelia



Fig. 27 – 28 Photos: Clițan Andra Camelia



Fig. 29 - 30 Photos: Clițan Andra Camelia



Fig. 31 - 32 Photos: Clițan Andra Camelia

SUSTAINING LOCAL CRAFTS IN MARAMUREȘ

Preserving ancestral crafts is not only the fundament of a nation but the starting point for contemporary design. One's creative path cannot stand for authenticity and longevity forgetting their culture's origin.

Craftsmanship plays a significant role in Romania, particularly in Transylvania, but crafts are an integral part of a wider context; they are part of a whole, a system, inside which each element is interconnected, and one could not survive and strive without the other, or at least not in harmony.

The world order is uniquely perceived in a Transylvanian village through abundant and practiced cultural heritage. The local crafts are at the forefront and form the basis of limited edition designs rendered through modern techniques and sustainable fabrics.

Handcrafts, perceived as a work profile, are rooted in the rural, ancestral times, rising as a testament of authenticity throughout the years. Historically, crafts were associated with a bucolic way of living and a rural habitat.

Consequently, craftsmanship takes place in a suitable habitat, following a natural rhythm of nature and community, part of a traditional maker's lifestyle, one cannot create without the foundation and support of the environment. One such creator cannot subsist outside the personal habitat, part of a wider circle. And although this was a fact until recently and still is in most parts of the region, these practices are being explored by displaced people like myself all over the world in our strive to evoke the homeland and a sense of belonging or to recreate our familiar habitat.

“Maramureș is described as ‘the land of rural simplicity’ (Metaneira, 2007a), which managed to preserve its ancient traditions and customs. Since immemorial

times earth, water and fire have come alive in the hands of the craftsmen from Maramureș.”³⁹ Beside the other well developed crafts of the region like spinning, weaving, embroidery, knitting, crochet and others, clay has given birth to unique articles that stand as true examples of craftsmanship.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of the “Quiet Luxury” project is to continue to preserve local crafts through the production of diverse, current art, and cultural projects, as well as documenting and implementing the results within relevant and meaningful contemporary practices. To encourage authentic craftsmanship and practices by immersing in it, to make it viable with the contemporary approaches, the following recommendations are inferred:

- The continuous adoption of authentic and traditional crafts as a means for modern inspiration, while sustaining local economies.
- Incorporating ancestral crafts into contemporary designs to ensure continuity of local aesthetics.
- Support local craftsmen for art and cultural projects, in order to keep alive local heritage and promote them to the world.
- Discuss similar case studies within international frameworks to exchange know-how and best practices.
- Bring traditional crafts back into education so students can learn ancestral skills.
- Encourage young people to search for their identity through exploring their heritage, using fashion to do so.

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