

National Inventory of Active Intangible Cultural Heritage Elements

– extract –

I. Domains:

- social practices, rituals, and festive events
- traditional craftsmanship

II. Name of the intangible cultural heritage element:

The standard term: *The custom of wax-inscribed Easter eggs in Romania*

Local/ regional names: Across different Romanian regions, these eggs are called “scribbled”, “flowered”, “dotted”, “written”, “painted”, “labored”, etc.

Geographical location of the element: Argeş, Bacău (Dărmăneşti, Ghimeş-Făget, Palanca), Bihor, Botoşani (Doina, Rogojeşti), Braşov, Buzău (Vintilă Vodă), Dâmboviţa, Iaşi (Scânteia), Maramureş (Ţara Lăpuşului: Cupşeni, Costeni, Rogoz, Groşii Țibleşului; Ţara Maramureşului: Ieud), Mureş, Olt (Oboga), Prahova (Salcia), Satu Mare (Ţara Oaşului), Suceava (Dornelor area – Ciocăneşti; Câmpulung Moldovenesc area – Vatra Moldoviţei, Moldoviţa; Paltinu area, that connects with the areas of Rădăuţi, Brodina, Gura Humorului, Marginea, Ulma, Vicov), Vrancea (Jitia, Reghiu, Soveja, Vintileasca).

According to the *Romanian Ethnographic Atlas* (vol. 5), the practice of making red or painted eggs was in the past active in all ethnographic areas of the country (See the map “Easter, I. Gifts and alms”, p. 245).



Siret – Suceava (©AFMB)



Brodina – Suceava (©AFMB)

Short description:

From a historical viewpoint, the simple one color dyeing of eggs was documented before the later complex decoration using various colors and symbols. Within the Romanian-speaking area, the most used colors were: red (of various shades, from lighter to darker ones), yellow, green, brown, black, blue, purple, etc. Traditionally, natural dyes were obtained from flowers, leaves, fruit, and tree parts. These botanical dyestuffs were specially prepared by boiling, blending, and combined according to traditional techniques and recipes.

While the simplest inscribed eggs have white ornaments on a red background, people enhanced their beauty and meaning with more and more complex ornaments inspired from nature and their traditional occupations, but also from ornaments specific to other folk-art objects (carpets, ceramics, hand carved household objects). Romanians also decorate Easter eggs with beads, with sgraffito, and with flowers and leaves applied directly to the shell.



**Wax-inscribing craftswoman from Valea Sării,
Nereju – Vrancea, 1975**



**Wax-inscribed eggs by Nicoleta – Tănase (Vintileasca
Vrancea)**

(©Vrancea Cultural Center)

(©The Folklore Archive of Moldavia and Bucovina)

While appreciating the importance of this heritage for the Romanian people, the renown Romanian ethnologist Petru Caraman emphasized that: “The Easter eggs are the expression of a ritual magical-religious motivation, as well as of a great artistic one; some of them are proof of an exceptional esthetic technique, a proof of refinement and detailed work, comparable with the one that creates the complicated and detailed arabesques on various household objects of the Middle Eastern people. From a decorative

point of view though, the art of the Romanian Easter eggs is of domestic origin, because it reflects the local flora and fauna, as well as the rural agricultural tools and techniques. It is noticeable that such great decorative achievements, of a pictorial kind show a great harmony of colors that is specific to the Romanian art of this kind” (Petru Caraman, 1997, p. 381).



Wax-inscribed eggs by Costinel Beșteanu, Oboga – Olt (Photo: dr. Corina Mihăescu)

The technique of wax-painting involves sequential dyeing starting with the lightest and progress to the darkest colours, while inscribing the ornaments with fluid beeswax to protect the waxed parts from the next colour bath. To remove the colours and prepare the egg for the next colour bath, acidic substances were used, and at the end, the wax was wiped down by exposing the egg to medium heat. The traditional instrument for applying the wax is a sort of quill pen made from wood to which was attached an adapted metallic funnel through which the fluid wax was dripped; the high skill demanded to draw the specific ornaments transforms the practitioner into an expert calligrapher. In some villages in the county of Vrancea, craftspeople make wax-inscribed eggs called “chiclazuite”, in which the ornaments are made with colored wax and are not washed off after the inscribing, to produce relief decoration.

The ornaments. The most common and oldest ornaments inscribed on the eggshell by Romanians are **astral ornaments** (*star, sun, diamond, rays*), **vegetal ornaments**, inspired from the local flora (*tree of life, wheat stem, oak leaf, grapevine leaf, Easter flower, stalk, etc.*), **animal ornaments**, connected with the specific Romanian fauna (*bird, cockscomb, serpent, fish, snail, horse, deer, rabbit's ears, etc.*), **human ornaments** (*fingers, hand, palm, eye, palm*), Christian ornaments (*cross, church, etc.*). There are also **magical symbols** expressing the desired abundance and protection (*dots, labyrinths, etc.*).

Traditionally, inscribed eggs were gifted during the Easter celebrations to family members and friends in accordance with to the message expressed by the ornaments; for example, the eggs ornamented with agricultural tools (*plow, rake, etc.*) were gifted to peasants, the shepherds received the egg with symbols derived from their occupation (*shepherd's crook, ram horns*), and the youngest member of the family received an egg with a *spiral* motif indicating the wish for a long and healthy life.

Using the small canvas of the eggshell, Romanians created a complex cultural code to express the joy of the Resurrection and the hope for a good destiny. Today, the techniques and the ornamental system of the Romanian Easter eggs are a living heritage being strongly practiced and transmitted in certain regions of the country, with local communities that are specialized in this craft and identify with it. This intangible cultural heritage element is also widely cherished and promoted across the country. Besides being an artistic object kept behind the ethnographic museum glass case, and displayed in Romanian homes as a decoration, the inscribed Easter egg is also a Romanian ritual food traditionally consumed at Easter as part of ceremonies and religious observances symbolizing the communion with the resurrected nature, the Christian faith, and that encourages social bonding during the holidays.



Floarea Țăpor and granddaughter from Jitia – Vrancea (©Vrancea Cultural Center)

The symbols “inscribed” on the eggs recall some of the ornaments embroidered on hand-made house textiles or traditional clothing, or the ones embellishing woodcrafted objects or ceramic objects. At Oboga – Olt, a famous locality for traditional pottery, the craft of wax-inscribing eggs was also well developed. As dr. Corina Mihaescu noticed, the greatest potters are also the very skilled craftspeople of wax-inscribing eggs: “The distinctive colours of the Oboga wax-inscribed eggs are: the combination of black, red, orange/yellow, the use of botanical dyes (from alder tree bark for black, apple peel for yellow, petals of poppy flowers for red, and the specific symbols, that are common to both ceramics and decorated eggs, i.e. the rooster, the peacock, the vulture, the frog, the fish, the tree of life, the precious stone, the hedge maple leaf, the acorn, the iron of the plow, the star with eight corners, the lost path” – they are all present on the so-called “Easter eggs of Oboga” (Mihăescu 2022, p. 18).

Age category of performers: 7-90 years old

Gender: the majority are women, but also some men

Socio-professional categories: peasants, craftspeople, teachers, other professional categories
Ethnicity: Romanian, Hutzul, Ukrainian, Hungarian



Oțeleni – Iași (AFMB)

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Current status of the element (viability, dangers): The element is quite viable due to the fact craftspeople are able to sell them as aesthetic objects, moreover during the Easter season. As happens to other elements of intangible cultural heritage, the practice is decreasing within the family environment, because of the demographic factors (internal and external migration, ageing of rural areas, etc.). In many localities, during the Lent time, there are organized many educational and cultural activities of wax-inscribing, which are revitalization practices based on both direct knowledge and information derived from books showcasing the various symbols. Nevertheless, the changes and challenges that the element suffers within the traditional practice done in the family or the community, the element is still viable in some localities and preserves its old features. An intermediary phase between loss and preservation of the practice by most of the community is the situation where only a few women in the village craft the eggs before Easter and they give them at demand to their neighbors. In this case, the inscribed eggs are ritually consumed during Easter holidays. One of the significant changes of the practice is the rare use of natural dyes. As dr. Corina Mihaescu noticed: “the people who dye the eggs using natural dyes are using mostly plants (alder tree, plum tree, walnut tree, birch tree, lovage leaves, etc.), and as substances that help the colours stay on the shell, they use copper sulphate, sea salt, vitriolum martis, etc. Today, most often there are used chemical colours” (Corina Mihăescu, 2022, p. 20).



Botoșani (©AFMB)

Expected safeguard/ protection measures:

At the local level, in the localities where the element is active and relevant for the local cultural identity, constant inventorying activities will be organized, especially to identify old ornaments that are known by the older local craftspeople. The local and regional cultural institutions will continue to document the local features of the element with the help of communities, such as the specific techniques, colors and local symbols. Within school workshops and other non-formal education activities, the local tradition of wax-inscribed eggs will be rediscovered and disseminated.



Anastasia Flocea and her granddaughter from Frasin – Suceava (©Sergiu Ciubotariu, 2019)

In order to safeguard the element, the National Institute of Heritage, with the support of local cultural institutions based in areas where the practice is active, will create a special database with the names and contact details of the craftspeople who are actively involved in wax-inscribing Easter eggs. A similar platform, documenting craftspeople of all crafts was already created: <https://www.hartamestesugarilor.ro>. Traditional fairs and festivals dedicated to the element will continue to promote it. The national and regional cultural institutions will design promotion campaigns to make the craftspeople more visible, and especially those who received the “Human Living Treasure” title.

Data collecting, the community involvement and consent:

The participants at the interactive workshops “UNESCommunity”, organized in 2022 by the Romanian Academy – Iasi Branch, in partnership with the Ethnographic Museum of Moldavia and the County Cultural Office in Iasi inventoried the local craftspeople and the local active techniques representative for this element. Various county cultural offices and county centers for the preservation and promotion of traditional culture, as well as regional and national ethnographic museums (such as The Ethnographic Museum of Transylvania, The ASTRA National Museum in Sibiu, etc.) and many NGOs representing associations of craftspeople organize every year exhibitions and workshops to increase the visibility of the element among the general public and to demonstrate its heritage value. Many schools collaborate with local craftspeople in order to create events dedicated to explaining and showing the practice. Art schools have integrated into their curriculum classes about the element that are taught by craftspeople.



Educational workshop of egg-inscribing taught by Ana-Maria Zăbavă from Scânteia – Iași, 2022 (©County Cultural Centre for the Preservation and Promotion of Traditional Culture, Iasi)

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