

TRADITIONAL CRAFTS: CHAIRS AND BENCHES IN RURAL HOMESTEADS OF BESSARABIA (LATE 19TH CENTURY - MID-20TH CENTURY)

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ABSTRACT: IN THIS ARTICLE, WE EXPLORE TRADITIONAL CRAFTS IN BESSARABIA, WITH A FOCUS ON RURAL FURNITURE, PARTICULARLY CHAIRS AND BENCHES, FROM THE LATE 19TH CENTURY TO THE MID-20TH CENTURY. THESE PIECES OF FURNITURE EXHIBIT REMARKABLE DIVERSITY IN FORM, FUNCTION, AND PRODUCTION TECHNIQUES, SHEDDING LIGHT ON THE TRADITIONS OF RURAL CRAFTSMANSHIP AND THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE REGION.

OUR INVESTIGATIONS INVOLVED FIELD RESEARCH IN ALL REGIONS OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA, RESULTING IN THE ANALYSIS OF OVER 230 CHAIRS AND BENCHES. WE FOUND THAT IN ADDITION TO SMALL LOW CHAIRS, PRIMARILY CRAFTED BY LOCAL HOUSEHOLDERS AND PREVALENT IN ALL REGIONS, THERE WERE ALSO TALL CHAIRS WITH BACKS. THE LATTER WERE EITHER PRODUCED BY LOCAL CARPENTERS OR ACQUIRED FROM DISTANT VILLAGES, TOWNS, AND FOREIGN SOURCES.

THROUGH THIS ANALYSIS, WE AIM TO HIGHLIGHT THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN TRADITIONAL CRAFTS AND THE CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF RURAL HOMESTEADS IN BESSARABIA. FURNITURE REPRESENTS NOT ONLY FUNCTIONAL ASPECTS BUT ALSO EXPRESSIONS OF CULTURAL AND SOCIAL IDENTITY, RECORDING INFLUENCES AND CHANGES OVER THE CENTURIES.

KEY WORDS: TRADITIONAL CRAFTS, RURAL FURNITURE, CHAIRS, BENCHES, BESSARABIA, 19TH-20TH CENTURY.

Introduction

In this article, we aim to explore traditional crafts related to the making of chairs and benches in the rural households of Bessarabia, focusing on the period from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century. This investigation builds upon previous research in the field, with a special emphasis on the work of R. Capesius² titled "Mobilierul țărănesc" (*Romanian Peasant Furniture*), which has served as a source of inspiration and knowledge for our endeavor. Additionally, we have examined the contributions of other authors such as B. Ștefănescu³, V. Tătulea⁴, Gh. and R. Țăranu⁵, N. Dunăre⁶, who have provided significant insights into the historical, functional, and artistic evolution of rural furniture in the Romanian context.

In the Republic of Moldova, specialists like Z.V. Moiseenco⁷, M. V. Marunevici⁸, M. Ciocanu⁹, and others have also addressed the subject of these traditional crafts and rural

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² Roswith Capesius, *Romanian Peasant Furniture*. Ed. Dacia, Cluj, 1974, p. 28.

³ B. Ștefănescu, *Peasant Furniture from Crișana*. Ed. Biblioteca revistei Familia, Oradea, 1997, pp. 16-18.

⁴ Tătulea, V. *Peasant Furniture from Oltenia*. Ed. Sport-Turism, Bucharest, 1989.

⁵ Gh. Țăranu, R. Țăranu, *Furniture Styles and Decoration Techniques*. Ed. Didactică și Pedagogică, Bucharest, 1991.

⁶ N. Dunăre, N. *Comparative Traditional Ornamentation*. Ed. Meridiane, Bucharest, 1979.

⁷ Z. Moiseenco, *Architecture of Rural Houses in Moldavia*. Ed. Cartea Moldovenească, Chișinău, 1973, p. 10.

⁸ M.V. Marunevici, *Settlements, Dwellings, and Estates of the Gagauz People in Southern Bessarabia in the 19th - Early 20th Century*. Ed. Știința. Chișinău: ШТИНЦА, 1980, p. 99-100.

⁹ M. Ciocanu, *Traditional Furniture from the National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History in Chișinău in the Context of Home Interiors in Bessarabia*. In the Yearbook of the Ethnographic Museum of

furniture in numerous articles and research works. Thus, in this article, we will synthesize and interpret these sources of information to provide a comprehensive perspective on traditional crafts related to chairs and benches in the Republic of Moldova.

Furthermore, we will highlight the significance of field research in the identification and classification of traditional furniture, aiming to pinpoint the artistic characteristics of these pieces of furniture. We will explore the techniques of crafting and ornamentation of these pieces, emphasizing their distinctive technical and artistic aspects.

Evolution and Use of Chair and Bench Crafts

Analyzing furniture from various historical periods can provide insights into the living environments of different cultures and social classes. By closely examining such furniture, we can learn about the technologies, materials, and diverse forms used during different time periods, as well as the attention to decoration during specific eras. A narrow segment, such as the diversity of chairs found in rural households from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century, particularly in the present-day Republic of Moldova, can offer us a classification of this type of furniture. It can also demonstrate the functional and artistic concerns of those who crafted it and those who used it in their daily lives.

In the Republic of Moldova, the craftsmanship of producing chairs and benches has a rich history spanning several centuries. These crafts have been passed down from generation to generation, preserving their authenticity and cultural value. Traditional chairs and benches were primarily made from local materials, with a focus on wood. Wood was carefully selected based on its strength and appearance. Commonly used wood species included oak, beech, and walnut.

Craftsmen during this period employed traditional techniques to shape and provide functionality to these pieces of furniture. The manufacturing process involved:

- Cutting and processing wood using traditional tools such as saws and chisels.
- Creating the basic structure of chairs and benches, often through sturdy joinery methods like dovetail joints.
- Carving ornamental details to add aesthetic value to the pieces.

These traditional techniques gave rise to durable and functional pieces of furniture with a distinctive aesthetic specific to the region.

Chairs and benches played an essential role in rural households. These pieces of furniture had several important uses. They were used as household furniture in rural homes, serving as resting places for family members, especially around the dining table. Chairs with backrests and backless benches were preferred according to needs and preferences, used in everyday activities. These pieces of furniture played a significant role during holidays and social events. They were often gathered around the table to accommodate guests. Chairs and benches were beautifully decorated to reflect the significance of the event.

Classification of Chairs and Benches: Form, Function, and Production Techniques

Chairs have existed in peasant households since ancient times, alongside fixed platforms specially built for resting (benches and beds). Their differentiation, both in terms of dimensions and component elements, results in this large category of furniture comprising two types, namely:

1. *Chair without a backrest (with three or four legs).*

2. *Chair with a backrest.*

This classification of chairs finds correspondences in European and even universal furniture, but what sets them apart is the specific proportioning and, most importantly, the decoration of the component elements¹⁰.

The simplest joining techniques were used in the making of chairs. In all cases, supporting a sitting platform was solved through archaic methods, using dowels and pins; only in much later examples were glue or iron nails applied.

Both the joining system and the unity of the design concept, resulting from the oblique placement of the legs, place these types of chairs in the broad category of furniture crafted by village artisans. Craftsmen made chairs for both household needs and for sale in other villages¹¹.

1. ***Chairs without backrests***, with three or four legs (fig. no. 1 a-e) Small in size and therefore easily transportable, low chairs with three or four legs were used both indoors and for various tasks outside the house. They served as seats for various household chores, such as weaving, winding threads, carding wool, threshing grain from cobs, weaving with plant fibers, milking cows, and more¹². That's why some chairs have a hole or a specific shape in the seat, for example, to hold a fork or a spindle.

The joining system for these chairs is simple: in a square, rectangular, round, or even hemispherical piece of wood, three or four holes are made, into which sharp conical pegs are fixed at the top. The pegs pass through the entire thickness of the platform and are fixed at the top with wooden pins. The length of the legs varies between 20-40 cm. The number of legs depends on the shape of the board; in most cases, four legs are used for square, rectangular, or trapezoidal boards, while three legs are used for round or semi-round platforms. Another joining system is the swallowtail, which replaces the three or four legs with two platforms ending in a swallowtail system that are joined together by a crossbar located under the seat panel. Some craftsmen shape these platforms according to their artistic taste, leaving 4 support points at the bottom.



a	b	c	d	e
Location: Trușeni commune, Chișinău municipality Owner: Nina Laur Photo by Elena Madan (2007)	Museum of History and Ethnography, Criuleni city Photo by Elena Madan (2009)	Village Țipova, Rezina District Owner: Strugulea Mihail Cozma Photo by Elena Madan (2007)	Museum of History and Ethnography, Bălți City Photo by Elena Madan (2009)	National Gagauz History and Ethnography Museum "D. Cara- Ciobanu" Beșalma Village, Comrat Photo by Elena Madan (2009)

Fig. 1. Chair without a backrest, with three or four legs

¹⁰ Roswith Capesius., *Op. cit.*, p. 45

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 46

¹² M. Ciocanu, *Traditional Furniture from the National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History in Chișinău in the Context of Home Interiors in Bessarabia*. In the Yearbook of the Ethnographic Museum of Moldova, Iași 2011, pp. 233-264, Available online: <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=668417> (accessed on July 20, 2019).

The beauty of these pieces lies in their simple form and the way wood is processed, which varies from simple shaping with an adze to very careful adjustment. Due to the use of hardwood, typically, they develop a specific hue over time. A chair that features elements of incised decoration, depicting a sun rosette and several circular elements placed on the seat of the chair, was discovered during field research in the Trușeni commune. Its owner is Laur

Nina (fig no. 1 a).

For example, a backless stool with three trapezoidal legs, found in the village of Țîpova in the Rezina district, is used by its owner, who is a craftsman, for the convenience of sitting during the processing of hides and the installation of a special device on the edge of the stool.



A distinctive group is made up of small round stools. These are made from roots or tree trunks, sometimes using boards to create an upward-facing hemisphere with the segmented part on top. However, the upper part is lightly hollowed out, which adds extra comfort to these stools. The legs are mounted in solid wood, sometimes without piercing through its entire thickness, and they are secured with a few small wooden pegs, without the need for additional procedures.

For example, in the village of Trușeni, in Chișinău municipality, a backless three-legged stool was documented. It was round with a hollowed surface. According to the owners, in this hollow space of the stool, they would place the cauldron for the convenience of stirring the cornmeal porridge in it (fig. no. 2).

1) *The chair with a backrest*

The chair with a backrest in Bessarabia is characterized by its distinct shape and the materials used in its construction. The chair with a backrest consists of a square, rectangular, or trapezoidal platform, often with a more prominent central part and a narrower base towards the backrest, supported by four fixed legs. The height of the backrest can vary, designed to provide support and comfort to the user. The chair can be made from various types of wood, such as beech, pear, cherry, or oak. These types of wood are chosen for their strength and durability.

Although there are no preserved examples with particularly elaborate backrests in the territory of the Republic of Moldova, such as those with anthropomorphic figures found in Romania, the chairs from Bessarabia have a simplistic yet harmonious aesthetic. The dowels used to ensure the stability of the chair are arranged symmetrically or emphasize the central part of the backrest. Additionally, chairs can be upholstered with fabric or leather, especially in the central area of the seat or backrest. Some chairs may have decorative elements, such as round or domed-headed pegs that provide additional decoration, placed around the seat and backrest. Some chairs, especially those from Ceadâr-Lunga, may feature abstract floral paintings. Additionally, there are chairs with specific floral elements typical of the early 20th century, and some with scrollwork in the shape of a small crown with petals or a heart. Some specimens have turned legs and the edges of the backrest (fig. no. 3 a-g).

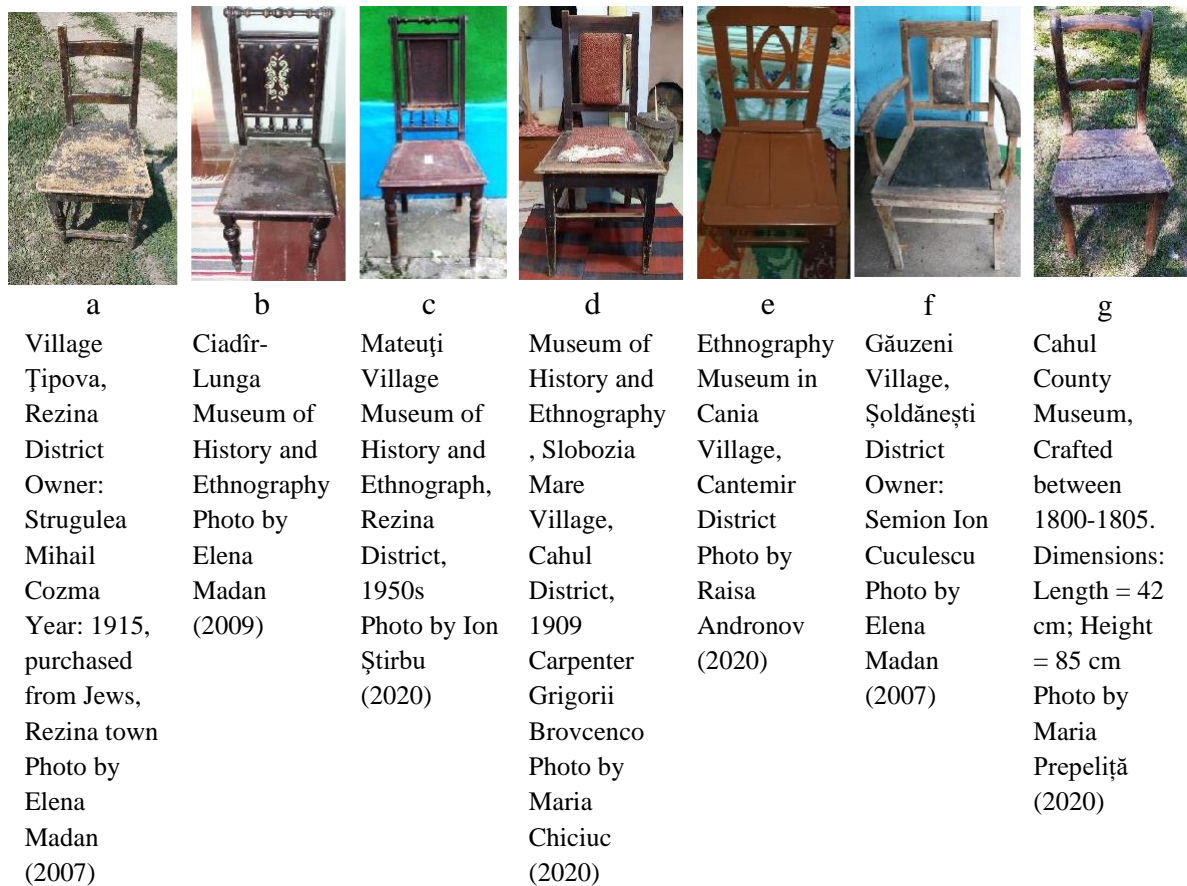


Fig. 3. Chair with a Backrest

In Moldova, we observe the emergence of a type of chair whose origin can be traced, on the one hand, to the ingenuity of the craftsman and, on the other hand, to the influence of urban styles. The practice of bending a thin twig or branch by holding it above the fire or through slow drying is not unknown in folk art, so its use in rural furniture can easily be explained.¹³ Chairs or armchairs (known as "jilțuri") made from woven wicker are also crafted, and their origin is certainly influenced by the woven furniture pieces from the end of the previous century that appeared in the salons of wealthy homes. The weaving is done from twisted reeds, with various patterns resembling straw or papyrus weavings. Additionally, chairs with one or two twigs as backrests have their counterparts in Viennese urban furniture from the "Jugendstil" era at the beginning of the 20th century.

Furthermore, the influence of curved and woven furniture, such as that produced by the Austrian company Thonet, is notable. Viennese furniture had a significant impact on the furniture production in Bessarabia during the period of 1900-1940. This style of furniture was imported by luxury furniture firms from Vienna and Budapest and became popular throughout Europe. Viennese furniture is characterized by influences from the Baroque, Rococo, and Empire styles. This style was popularized by famous craftsmen such as Michael Thonet, who invented the technique of bentwood, enabling mass production of Viennese furniture, especially chairs. A comprehensive account of Viennese furniture can be found in the book "The Thonet Principle: Bentwood and Tubular Steel Furniture," which explores the

¹³ Roswith Capesius., Op. cit p. 51

history and design of bentwood furniture from the 19th century, with a particular focus on the Austrian company Thonet and their technological innovations that allowed for mass production of bentwood furniture¹⁴.

These pieces of furniture were highly regarded for their quality and unique aesthetic appeal. Taking the structure of Thonet chairs as an example, they typically consist of the following elements: the back frame and rear legs, the inner area of the backrest, the front legs, the connecting ring, and the seat structure. The style of these chairs is noted for its lightweight and elegant structure. The back frame and rear legs are typically crafted from a single steam-bent beechwood profile, which takes on an organic shape. This element is bent in a delicate curve that is narrower in the seat area and can be seen from the front or the side. The chair features a ring-shaped structure covered with rattan or wood. Some models include a second ring lower down, which is connected to the four legs. However, the main distinguishing feature among the models is the design of the backrest area. This is achieved using one or two bent beechwood profiles in oval or "S" shapes. These profiles are connected to the back frame and rear legs, the backrest, and the seat, as well as to each other. Thonet chairs are functional and do not feature decorative elements; the focus is on the structure itself¹⁵.

A very relevant example of his vision for furniture design is represented by chair number 14, manufactured in 1858, consisting of six structural elements, not including the connecting elements (see figure no. 4). Because it was simple, lightweight, and could be stored in flat or cubic packaging for individual or collective transport, chair number 14 became one of the most popular chairs worldwide and is still in production today¹⁶



Fig. 4. Thonet Chair No. 14¹⁷ As a result of extensive research throughout the territory of the Republic of Moldova, numerous pieces of Viennese furniture have been discovered in the homes of locals, especially in local museums. In addition, several firms that produced Viennese furniture have been identified, such as Thonet Mundus Vorlova, FISCHER, VIENNA PANCOTA, "Заведение гнутой мебель С. Б. СТЫРТ, ст. Рудня, м. Пулинъ, Жит. Уезда, Волын. губ.", MUNBUS. In some cases, the furniture pieces did not have the company indicated, suggesting

¹⁴G. Bott, *Thonet Principle: Furniture from Bentwood and Steel Tubes*. Nuremberg, 1991. Available online: <https://tehne.com/library/princip-toneta-mebel-iz-gnutoy-drevesiny-i-stalnyh-trubok-nyurnberg-1991> (accessed on February 9, 2023).

¹⁵Mario Barros, *A Design System for the Mass Customization of Thonet Chairs*. In Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on Sustainable Intelligent Manufacturing, July 2011, pp. 184. Available online: https://www.academia.edu/2292666/A_design_system_for_the_mass_customization_of_Thonet_chairs (accessed on February 9, 2023).

¹⁶*Ibidem*, p 184.

¹⁷

that they were produced by local workshops. Concrete examples of these furniture pieces will be presented in fig. no. 5 a-e.



Fig. 5. Viennese Chairs from the Territory of the Republic of Moldova

Thus, the peasant chair with a backrest in Bessarabia began to combine local traditional elements, such as reed weaving, with specific elements of the Viennese style, such as curved shapes and decorative details. This influence led to the creation of unique chairs that blend the elegance and refinement of the Viennese style with the authenticity and rusticity of traditional Bessarabian furniture (fig. no. 5f).

If the construction principle is uniform for both low and high chairs, the overall appearance differs in terms of proportions. Thus, their decoration fits into the artistic conception of the builders. In addition to the silhouette cutouts, an important role is played by the shapes made in the middle of the backrest. While in some cases, these cutouts are clearly functional, facilitating lifting and transport, in others, their role is primarily decorative.

Banks (long chairs), with or without backrests, were characteristic of Moldova. Initially, in Moldovan homes, benches that surrounded the room on three sides, which gradually narrowed, were replaced by banks.¹⁸ These banks were known by various names, such as "laiță," "long chairs" (widely used), "scăunoaie" (less commonly used), and in the northern region, they were called "oslon." If we compare the dimensions of the benches intended for sleeping (~ Dimensions: length L=260-300 cm, width w=55-90 cm, height h=50-60 cm) with those of the banks (~ Dimensions: length L=80-200 cm, width w=30-40 cm, height h=30-40 cm), we can observe a reduction in all three dimensions for the banks.

¹⁸ Roswith Capesius., Op. cit p. 31.

Banks were used more often outside the homes and were brought indoors when needed, especially during celebrations held in the "Casa Mare" (Great House). Some smaller benches were placed in the pantry to serve as supports for buckets and other objects. The construction of the bench was simple, similar to small chairs. It was made from a carved board with an adze, on which four legs or pegs inclined towards the middle of the bench were mounted and fixed with wooden pins (fig. no. 6a). Some benches had legs in the shape of swallowtails, reinforced with a few corner pieces inside or two crossbars, one on each side of the bench, connecting the legs to the seat (fig. no. 6b).



a

Bench (regional long chair) with four legs. Museum of History and Ethnography, Negureni Village, Telenești District. Dimensions: Length = 80 cm; Height = 37 cm. Photo by Tatiana Zaporozjan (2020).



b

Bench (regional long chair) with swallowtail legs, fixed on the sides with crossbars, Trușeni Village, Chișinău Municipality. Owner: Ana Popa. Photo by Elena Madan (2007).

Fig. 6. Bench (regional long chair)

The bench with a backrest is another piece derived from the bench. The method of execution and decoration varies from the simplest ones, similar to the backless benches, where four legs, with a length of 30-60 cm, support a long board of approximately 200 cm and a width of about 40 cm. The tops of the legs pass through the floor and are fixed at the top with wooden pins. The backrest consists of a single, thinner, and narrower board, fixed to the bench at a distance of about 20-30 cm, with the help of two small brackets. Many of the benches we have identified have legs carved on all four sides and are reinforced by a frame to which the seat is attached. The rear legs are longer and have an upward angle from the middle, which is necessary to fix one or two boards that serve as back support.



a

Bench with profiled brackets. History and Ethnography Museum, Petrunea village, Glodeni district. Photo by Elena Madan (2008).



b

Bench with fretwork and cut-out decoration. Owned by Viorica Dabija, Trușeni commune, Chișinău municipality. Photo by Elena Madan (2007).



c

Bench with decorative lattice. Museum of History, Ethnography, and Art, Cimișlia. Photo by Angela Matei (2020).

Fig. 7. Bench with backrest.

Another construction method of benches involves brackets that end in swallowtail shapes. In longer benches, there are usually three such brackets, with one placed in the middle serving as a central support point. These brackets are reinforced with several corner pieces inside or two bars, one on each side of the bench, connecting the legs to the seat (see figure no. 7a). The side brackets are profiled and elevated, functioning as support for the backrest. The connection between the components is made using a technique called "pen" and "groove." Often, decorative molded slats are fixed between the bench and the top board of the backrest, serving as decorative elements with small and varied profiles (see figure no. 7c). The backrest boards, as well as the narrow board that is sometimes applied to the front of the bench, are fretted (see figure no. 7b). The fretwork decoration, as mentioned by Roswith Capesius, consists of a rhythm of semicircles, Vs, or square teeth, practiced in one or more of the horizontal lines of the bench¹⁹.

Traditional furniture in Bessarabia represents a valuable part of the cultural and historical heritage of this region. Chairs and benches, in all their forms, reflect not only the functional needs of communities but also artistic and technical influences from different periods. From the simple functionality of backless chairs to the refinement of the Viennese style in chairs with backrests, Bessarabian furniture reveals the creativity and skills of local craftsmen.

Using traditional production techniques and local materials, Bessarabian furniture has become an expression of cultural identity and aesthetic tastes within the community. It not only satisfied everyday needs but also added a touch of beauty and personality to traditional homes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article explores the traditional craftsmanship related to the production of chairs and benches in rural households in Bessarabia during the period from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century. The furniture pieces created during this time reflect remarkable diversity in terms of shapes, functions, and production techniques, highlighting the traditions of rural craftsmanship and the cultural heritage of the region.

These investigations included extensive field research in all regions of the Republic of Moldova, and the results have shown that traditional chairs and benches were largely made from local materials, especially wood, such as oak, beech, and walnut. Craftsmen from this period used traditional techniques, such as cutting and processing wood with traditional tools, robust joinery, and the carving of ornamental details.

Chairs from Bessarabia, in all their variations, from those without a backrest to those with elaborate backrests, offer insights into the evolution of aesthetic tastes and the skills of local craftsmen. From the simple construction of basic chairs to the refinement of the Viennese style in chairs with backrests, Bessarabian furniture showcases the adaptability of the community to the changes in the surrounding world.

¹⁹ Roswith Capesius., Op. cit p. 41

Likewise, benches, known by various names and with different construction styles, represented a significant part of traditional furniture in Bessarabia. These pieces of furniture were often used outdoors and reflect the evolution of the housing needs of communities, from "lavițe" to smaller and more functional benches.

Remarkably, traditional furniture in Bessarabia managed to combine artistic and technical influences from different periods with traditional production techniques and local materials. Thus, this furniture not only satisfied daily needs but also added a touch of beauty and cultural identity to traditional homes in the region.

In conclusion, traditional furniture, especially chairs and benches, represents not only functional aspects but also expressions of cultural and social identity in Bessarabia, recording significant influences and changes throughout the centuries. Today, the study and preservation of this traditional furniture play an important role in preserving and promoting the history and culture of the Republic of Moldova. This article contributes to understanding the value and significance of these traditional crafts in the history and culture of the Republic of Moldova.

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