

RESEARCH IN PRACTICE



“Guilt” (Antonia Clenciu, 2022)

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TRADITION, ALLEGORY & DEATH

I considered a lot of things before deciding on the words for this essay. I wanted to capture the core of what my practice is all about while also attempting to showcase all of the elements and references that go to the creation of my work.

This type of essay, in my opinion, offers a wonderful proposal for thinking through your practice and processes, and I find it quite useful to halt and organize my thoughts.

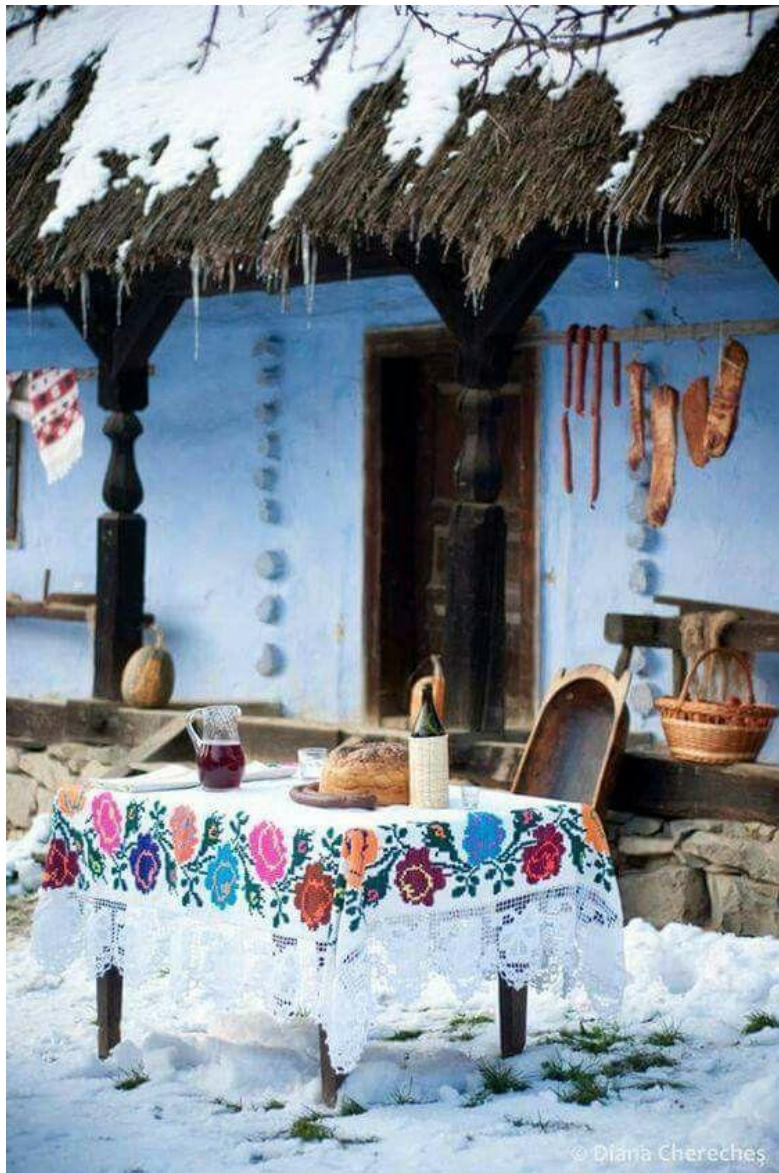


Figure 1. Romanian traditional welcoming meal



Figure 2. Crosses at the *Wood Church*, Maramures-Romania



Figure 3. Wood crafted gate, Romania



Figure 4. The Merry Cemetery, Maramures, Romania

TRADITION

Tradition is a sense of belonging; for me, it is something I was born into and reared with, in a culture soaked in dateless rituals, feasts, myths, and legends; it runs through my veins and is a fundamental part of my identity.

Romania, the country where I was born, is an archaic world, with roots that lie in the folkloric mentality. Romanian culture is heavily influenced by the unique relationship between folklore and learnt customs that have been passed down through the generations.

This country's rural nature resulted in a flourishing and creative traditional culture. Folk creations and traditional celebrations are still alive and well kept in the community, with many of them still being celebrated today, in most rural regions of the country .



Figure 5. Romani witches

Figure 6. Romanian witches performing a ritual





Figure 7. Ritual at a lake in Romania

My practice is based on these kind of traditions, which have been ingrained in my memory since I was a child. The methods and practices surrounding funeral rituals and witches, especially, were the most complex and striking for me, whether because of their taboo element or because I was too young to comprehend such a heavy issue at the time. My inspiration comes from a variety of sources, including my local customs and tales, as well as a group of artists who are important to the superstitious and mystic aspects of my work.

Francisco Goya's paintings, particularly his late paintings from the late 1700s and early 1800s, where the Spanish painter interpreted the witch trope for himself, are one of my greatest sources of inspiration. He created canvases depicting the witches' sabbath and covens, as well as several demon and devil emblems and images. He regularly utilised violent motifs to protest societal ills; his witch canvases may have been digs at superstition and paranoia as the Spanish Inquisition raged until 1834. Goya's late-1700s painting, *"The Witches' Sabbath"* (1797-98), unexpectedly reminds me of the Three Witches, also known as the Weird Sisters or Wayward Sisters, characters in William Shakespeare's play, *"Macbeth"* (1606), thanks to the clear lyrical aspect of the painted scene .

Shakespeare's witches are prophets who foretell Macbeth's ascension to kingship early in the play. The play's ominous tone is set by their uncanny appearance and supernatural activities.



Figure 8. Francisco Goya - *"The Witches' Sabbath"* (1797-98)



Figure 9. Francisco Goya - *"The Two Monks"* (1823)



Figure 10. Francisco Goya - *"The Bewitched Man"* (1798)

Andrea Zanatelli is another artist who sweeps me into this mystic universe that I have created in my mind, similar to Goya. The Italian artist is fascinated by Arts and Crafts and the Pre-Raphaelites movement, and influenced by names like Dante Rossetti and William Morris.



Figure 11. Andrea Zanatelli - "The Sick Rose" (2021)

Zanatelli plays around with ancient fabrics, antique jewellery, miniatures, and English poetry, being obsessed with romantic imagery, allegorical illustrations and of course poems and mottos. His work carries me to another world, directing my gaze across the works in the hopes of deciphering all of the symbols' meanings.

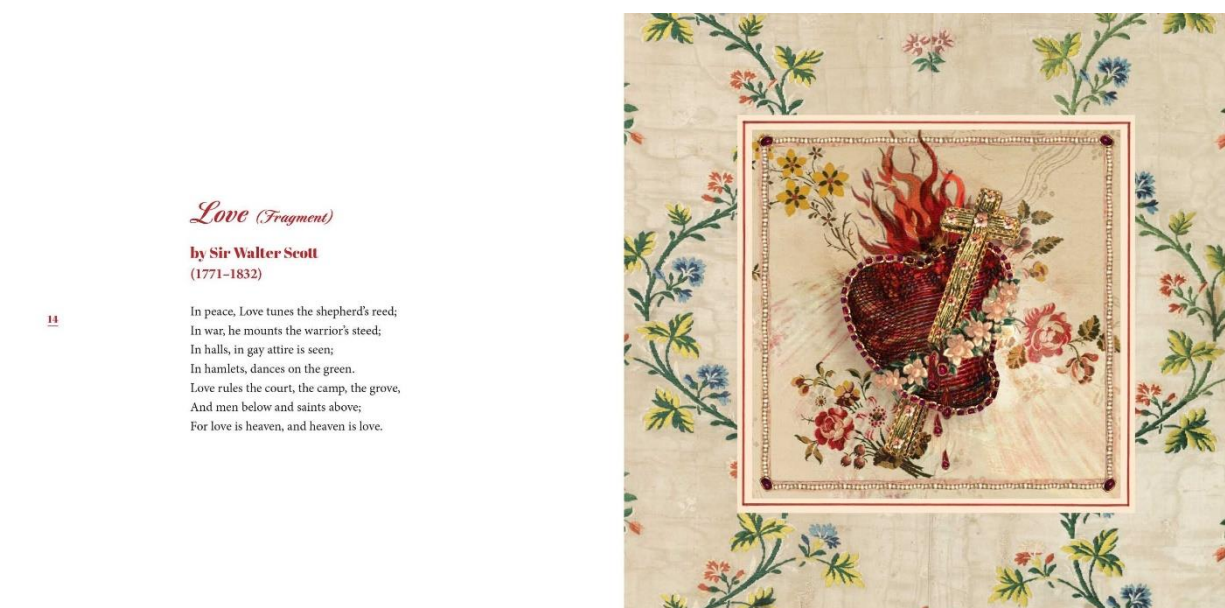


Figure 12. Andrea Zanatelli - "Love" (2021)

Frederick Sandys, a member of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, is an essential source of inspiration for Andrea Zanatelli as well as me. Even though I've seen it many times, there's one painting that never ceases to astonish me. In 1868, the British painter completed an oil painting titled "*Medea*" (1868).

Sandys modelled "*Medea*" (1868) on Keomi Gray, a Romani woman he met in Norwich, England, and had brought back to London to model for many of his works. The painting depicts an enchantress performing an incantation, with light bouncing off her robe from her chafing-dish, her pale face and ashy lips giving an intriguing expression, nasty toads and bizarre roots, images of strange gods, and quaint shells filled with wicked concoctions. It's a remarkably strong piece, with so many hidden meanings revealed by the rich symbolism.

These artists have attempted to create a window into these intimate cultures. However, the discussion still raises the question "did these artists really succeed to fully represent the essence of these unique customs?" and "is this just some cryptical imagery or are these symbols being disclosed to explain a mysterious world?"

Figure 13. Frederick Sandys –
"*Medea*" (1868)



ALLEGORY

People and animals have had close interactions since the dawn of civilization. Evidence of potential human-animal ties can be found in a variety of places throughout history, including literature, cave paintings, art, and archaeological sites. They played an important role in my country's traditions, as they have in many other cultures, with animals serving as emblems or as a reminder of our ancestors' lives. Animals, we believe, serve as a bridge between realms, guiding, warning, and assisting us in a variety of ways throughout our lives. All sorts of creatures appear frequently in my art, and I frequently incorporate them as symbols or allegorical masks. This reminds me of my local ceremonies and festivals, in which we worship animals in the belief that they can bring us luck and prosperity in various ways. The purpose of many of these ancient dances and feasts, which take place around Christmas and just before New Year's, is to ward off all negative energies and evil spirits.

Starting with the bear, which was a sacred animal in ancient Romania, it is thought that the tradition of dancing bears originated many centuries ago in Rome, where these groups would visit villages with real bears on leashes to dance, with the same intent of chasing away foul entities, just before the beginning of the next year.

Figure 14. Group of traditional Bear Dancers



Figure 15. The Bear Dance in Romania



Figure 16. Preparations for the
Bear Dance, Romania



Figure 17. Girl in bear costume



Figure 18. Boy captured by NAT GEO WILD, in bear costumes, Romania

Around the same time as the bears dance, a young man covered with a goat mask and wearing a sheep skin on his back performed "The Goat" dance. The "goat" and its companions walk from house to house, dancing for the owners, as it is said that the "goat" can foretell the weather for the following year. This practise was considered to be a pagan dance, but it has since evolved into a fertility ritual.



Cerbul din Corlata, Romania

Figure 19. "The Goat", traditional costume



Figure 20. "The Goat" dance



Figure 21. Groups of traditional dancers

Animals have been used by many artists in their work, either to play with social classes, human morals, or because the link between humans and animals is stronger than we imagine. However, some artists prefer to utilise animals instead of humans because they believe some scenes are too disturbing to be depicted on humans.

Paula Rego is a visual artist from Portugal who is best known for her paintings and prints based on storybooks. Rego's work evolved as she progressed as an artist, moving from abstract to representational. In her paintings, she replaces human figures with animals and creatures as an allegory that allows her to "mock" and show her "loathing" in a "nasty" way that would not be as possible on people. "It is easier if you make them into animals because you can do things to animals that you would not do to people because it is too shocking." (Rego, 2011)

I've looked at a lot of Paula Rego's work, with a particular interest in her drawings of animals or animals mixed in with humans. Rego's work has an oddly old-fashioned aesthetic, is dreamy, and has fairy-tale motifs. Alice in Wonderland comes to mind, with illustrations that transport you to locations where you can dance with mice and converse with enormous pigs in suits!

Rego portrayed the crouched, howling, biting "*Dog Woman*" (1994) and the half-nude kicked out of bed on all fours in "*Bad Dog*" (1994) using her lookalike model Lila Nunes. The dog paintings reflect the beginning of Rego as we know today, with almost a naturalism attained by greater volume and shadow, blended with fairy-tale elements and intense narration.

Figure 22. Paula Rego
- "*Bad Dog*" (1994)





Figure 23. Paula Rego - *"Dog Woman"* (1994)

Many cultures use allegory, and many artists have experimented with it, giving it many backgrounds and interpretations. Frida Kahlo, for example, used her treasured animals to portray physical and psychological wounds.



Figure 24. Frida Kahlo - *"Self Portrait with Monkeys"* (1943)

"Self Portrait with Monkeys" (1943) had Frida working with the common theme of her work, tropic plants. She posed in an academic setting. After the artist began to teach at the School of Painting and Sculpting in Mexico City, not long passed and her health deteriorated, and she was forced to hold classes in her own home. The class got eventually reduced to only four devoted students. They were known as the "Los Fridos" which means "Loyal to Frida Kahlo". Frida painted

herself surrounded by four monkeys, which may be interpreted as her four devoted students. This brings me back to an interview with Paula Rego, where she said:

I did that story but then, of course, the people, the monkey and the bear and the dog with one ear became people I knew, you know, that always happens. All these animals become people I know and the thing becomes rather personal really. So I was able to... because if you make them into animals you can do anything, can't you?

(Rego, 2017)

"Is this reoccurring phenomenon of transforming animals into something common, dear, or someone we know, a shared emotion?" I wonder as a result of this conversation. and "are animals more connected with us than we realise?". It's bizarre that we can see aspects of someone in an animal, but I believe that's what makes allegory such a strong and fascinating concept.

DEATH

Death, more than any other experience, evokes conflicting emotions and thoughts. Body and soul, graves and the afterlife, mortality and immortality, loss, and creation, it's only normal for them to disagree and refuse to be dragged into any simple, harmonious picture. In this naturally illogical sphere, where body and soul lead separate but linked lives and deaths, life and death are the most obvious unity, an untortured instinct as well as an old poetic and religious tradition: irreconcilable principals insistently held together like twins in a nurse's arms.

(Vermeule, p. 19, 1981)

This third word, with which I'd want to end the discussion, is a vital part of my painted universe. Because I am bound to my culture, it is pointless to deny my spiritual tendencies, which I also reflect in my works. I believe that death is more than a final step, and that life serves as a womb, keeping us warm and fed until we are reborn.

My compositions are based on funeral ceremonies and their associated superstitions and customs. As a result, the theme I chose is one that beautifully combines "tradition" and "allegory", all three words represent the heart of my practice.

The dance of "the masked" people was a significant event in my childhood that continues to influence my work now. Around the New Year, it is celebrated to assist the community in entering the new year with wealth and good fortune. In some Romanian regions, these masked groups are also present at funeral rites, acting as guards for the soul of the bereaved, departed person, thought to keep off evil spirits from stealing the soul and even death itself from trying to take other people into the afterlife.

A group of men are dressed in sheep skins on their backs, hideous masks, and large bells for this feast. Making a noisy and frightening scene in the hopes of scaring away the bad entities from the village. They will circle the house of the passed away person, dance around the fire, and make loud noises until dawn, when the soul of the person who died will be reborn in the form of a bird, according to tradition. It's fascinating, that sometimes, at these event we can hear a distinct bird singing while the sun slowly makes its light visible on the horizon.



Figure 25. The ritual of *"The masked"*, Romania

The most important aspect of these costumes are the masks. They are hand crafted in the traditional way, often with large genuine horns attached to make them look as menacing as possible, and they represent real or imaginary animals.



Figure 26. Traditional costume
Masked



Figure 27.
"The masked"



Figure 28. Traditional masks shop, Romania



Figure 29. Crafted traditional mask

One of the most pervasive subjects in art history is death. While many works of art depict afterlives in heaven or hell, death is most frequently invoked as a sombre reminder of numbered days and a potent motivator to live life to the fullest while you still have the chance. Death rites exist in every culture, and they are shown in art as icons and colours.

Once we accept the passage from one state to another as an inevitably and healthy process of change, however, it allows us to evolve and to move forward with the realisation that death in all its varied forms is an essential part of life - that for anything to be born and to live, something must usually die (or undergo a process of sacrifice) in order to sustain it.

(Endymion, 2021)

Austrian painter, Marianne Stokes, drew on mediaeval and Renaissance predecessors when she depicted a young girl confronting the embodiment of death in her painting "*Death and the Maiden*" (1855-1927). Death is played by a "genderless angel", according to Stokes. The angel's light and outstretched hand, as well as its wing that enfolds the child and the freshly fallen petals that litter the bedroom floor, lend this portrayal of a girl's imminent death its heart-breaking, quiet dread.



Figure 30. Marianne Stokes - "*Death and the Maiden*" (1908)

This image leads us to a musical exploration of the theme and Franz Schubert's song "*Der Tod und das Mädchen*" (Death and the Maiden) from 1817. The lines are taken from a poem written by Matthias Claudius (1740-1815). Following a dark and typically Schubert-esque piano opening, the work is given to the listener in two different parts, the first of which is a frenzied appeal from the girl that she should be saved, that she is far too young and charming to die. The second part draws the listener into the tranquil, consoling words of Death itself, reminding the girl that he is not wild or fierce, and that she should surrender and slumber softly in its embrace.

As I previously stated, I feel that death is a powerful event for many individuals and cultures, and that it represents a significant transition. Many artists have attempted to depict it in many ways, either to create the image of "death" itself or to convey situations such as funerals, bereavement, or the strong emotions experienced by those left grieving for the lost one. Everything in the hopes of finding something on the other side and finding our place in the world. Many philosophers, such as Plato and Epictetus, have debated the subject of life after death, but even after growing up in a culture with well-preserved and still-practiced customs, as well as many other occurrences I experienced throughout my journey as an artist and as a simple human, I still wonder "why are we conserving so many death rituals?", "where did these practises and thoughts come from?" "What is it truly after death?"

"As an artist, I have the right to extract the emotional value from everything, to let it act on me and then to represent it." (Käthe Kollwitz, 1920)

This subject leads me to a question that I'd like to explore further in my essay next year, and that is whether "the culture you were raised in and the customs might influence your identity?" and "How?". In the next topic, I'd want to concentrate on questions such as "What is the importance of culture and tradition in art?" and "Does tradition represent not only the artist's subject but also their style, and how inspiration grows around this universe?"

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