

The heritage state. From mask-maker to digital heritage curator. Representing masks on social media

El estado del patrimonio. Entre el constructor de máscaras y el conservador digital del patrimonio. Representar máscaras en las redes sociales

Adrian Stoicescu

Recibido: 25/09/2025 · Aceptado: 20/10/2025 · Publicado: 26/12/2025

Resumen

Basándonos en la investigación etnográfica clásica sobre la fabricación de máscaras y en estudios con dos artesanos marcadamente diferentes, en este artículo exploramos los roles cambiantes de los artesanos en relación a los objetos que crean. Examinamos cómo la máscara, concebida como un objeto patrimonial con capacidad de agencia, contribuye a la transformación de la identidad del artesano —lo que aquí se describe como entrar en el “estado patrimonial”—. Esta transformación se produce en el doble contexto de la producción, tanto del objeto patrimonial tangible como de su contraparte digital y reinterpretada. Al analizar la máscara como objeto material, como proceso y como catalizador del cambio identitario, el artículo también pone de relieve dos estrategias conservadoras diferentes, cada una de ellas configurada por los diferentes enfoques y perspectivas de los dos artesanos.

Abstract

Drawing on classical ethnographic research into mask-making and based on studies with two markedly different craftsmen, this paper explores the evolving roles of artisans in relation to the objects they create. It examines how the mask, viewed as an agentive heritage object, contributes to the transformation of the craftsman's identity—what is described here as entering the "heritage state." This transformation occurs within the dual context of producing both the tangible heritage object and its digital, remediated counterpart. By analyzing the mask as material object, as process, and as a catalyst for identity change, the article also highlights two distinct curatorial strategies, each shaped by the differing approaches and perspectives of the two craftsmen.

Palabras clave

artesano gestor cultural patrimonio digital identidad transformada objetos patrimoniales como agentes

Keywords

craftsman curator digital heritage heritage state heritage objects as agency

1. Introduction

The research behind this article was initially intended for a different purpose. Conducted within the framework of the project MASKS: Unveiling the Arts and Works behind the MASKS(1)

(<https://gazeta-antropologia.es/#edn1>), the original aim was to investigate the techniques—both vernacular and modern—used in mask-making by documenting the successive steps involved in transforming raw materials into finished products. Using well-established ethnographic methods such as participant observation and interviews conducted in the workshops of craftsmen, data were collected to support this objective.

However, interactions with two mask-makers—Paul Buta, who works in the village of Sivita-Tilicani in Galati County, and Serban Tertiu from the village of Chiricari-Nereju in Vrancea County—opened up a new perspective that diverged from the initial research goal. Although they craft different types of masks and have distinctly different biographies, personalities, and attitudes toward their craft, they are equally noteworthy for their contrasting approaches to using digital technology to promote their work. These differences provided valuable insight into the evolving roles involved in heritage creation.

On one hand, both artisans preserve and practice their uniquely acquired mask-making skills. On the other, they also assume the role of informal digital curators, sharing their artifacts through social media. In doing so, their creations gain meaning not only from their connection to past traditions but also from the variety of purposes that contemporary society assigns—or invents—for them.

To this end, the masks take on multiple functions. It is worth noting from the outset that, at the first level, masks epitomize the continuity of heritage and its practice, encompassing both historical connections and contemporary reshaping. As such, they generate knowledge that is subject to reinterpretation within evolving social and political contexts. At a second level, the present-day relevance of masks and mask-making contributes significantly to the status of mask-makers, both within their heritage communities and among broader audiences once their work is shared via social media.

Social media, viewed as a platform for self-promotion, enables new forms of interaction between the craftsmen and their creations. Through processes of remediation (Bolter and Grusin 2000), the artifact is increasingly framed as an aesthetic object, becoming a form of digital heritage. This transformation profoundly affects both the artifact and its creator. The agency of the artistic artifact (Gell 1998) becomes especially evident in the digital context, where the personal, subjective choices of what to share online imbue the objects with new layers of meaning in a predominantly visual medium (Gibson 1986).

In light of these considerations—concerning the agentive function of the mask, the emergence of digital heritage in connection with vernacular practices, and the added curatorial roles assumed by the mask-makers—this article examines the extent to which social media interactions shape the relationship between the creators and their objects as a reciprocal system of influences.

To trace this transformation, the article adopts a three-layered approach to cultural heritage. The first layer examines the evolving discourse on heritage, with a particular focus on digital heritage and its impact on creators. The second layer offers a descriptive account of the field research and interactions with the two mask-makers, in order to outline their relationships both with the artifacts they produce and with the researchers engaging with their work. The final layer analyzes the digital footprints of the two craftsmen on social media, exploring how untrained curatorial practices may contribute to the construction of distinct digital selves. Ultimately, this study aims to assess whether the two craftsmen achieve what might be termed a heritage state, in which the role of heritage producer becomes intertwined with that of digital heritage curator.

2. Heritage, digital remediation and curation

To assess the object-creation practices of the two craftsmen, a discussion of what heritage means in contemporary contexts is essential. Numerous studies have mapped the social, cultural, and political appropriations of heritage; however, this is not the place for a comprehensive critical review—particularly given the well-documented complexities and ideological tensions associated with the term (Klein 2006). Instead, the purpose of this section is to introduce a theoretical framework that allows for a more nuanced positioning of the masks and the mask-making process as active agents in

reshaping the roles of their creators. In its most concrete sense, heritage has the capacity to «mobilize people and resources, to reform discourses, and to transform practices» (Hafstein 2012: 502).

Recognizing that «folk culture, mass culture, and digital culture co-exist» (Jenkins and others 2015: 8), this analysis approaches heritage as a performative process—one that lends «substance and reality to social abstractions» (Hafstein 2012: 508). In this view, heritage is enacted through the integration of folk cultures into mass media, and more recently, through digital platforms that capitalize on technological connectivity. This is not merely a case of objectifying tradition by extracting it from its original cultural setting; rather, it is an intricate process of reinterpretation, through which heritage becomes self-aware, acquires new meanings, and is enacted within the routines of everyday life.

Ultimately, the practice of heritage represents an ongoing process of meaning-making. It is a performative engagement that constructs awareness of a particular past, thereby fostering a sense of belonging to a shared cultural reality—whether that reality is tangible or imagined (Andresen 1983)—and rooted in a material or symbolic space.

The process of bridging past and present—an intrinsic component of heritage—operates through a dynamic interplay of remembrance and forgetting, which renders heritage fundamentally relational (Graham 2002, Bendix 2009, Hafstein 2012). What emerges is that the recollection of the past is not merely an act of preservation, but rather a means of creating new meanings by adapting heritage to the contemporary «needs and demands of our present societies» (Graham 2002: 1004).

At the same time, this presentism fosters the creation of knowledge that must be continuously negotiated in light of current social and intellectual demands (Livingstone 1992). This negotiation reflects what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2006) describes as the «desirability of heritage»—the idea that it is contemporary cultural life that seeks connections to past cultural forms, rather than the past miraculously surviving oblivion on its own.

Technological advancement has inevitably extended into the domain of heritage. UNESCO's Charter on the Preservation of the Digital Heritage (2003) introduced the concept of «digital heritage,» emphasizing «born-digital» materials as well as digitized representations of heritage originally produced in other formats—resources that contain «unique expressions of human knowledge and creativity» (2) (<https://gazeta-antropologia.es/#edn2>).

UNESCO's framing largely emphasizes institutions such as museums, archives, local communities, and cultural centers as primary digital heritage creators (Hennessy 2012: 346), which seems to marginalize the role of individual creators. These individuals, however, play a vital role—either by producing original digital content or by digitizing and remediating existing cultural expressions. Together with their audiences, they contribute to a broad and evolving category known as public heritage. This umbrella term encompasses two groups: those who generate digital heritage through «unofficial» life stories, and those who engage with it as users (Purkis 2016). This interaction lays the foundation for the «democratization of heritage» (Samuel 2012, Gentry 2015), a process through which everyday narratives contribute to the formation of locality and shared cultural identity.

Digital remediation, as a form of digital artifact creation, is the process that weaves together the personal life histories of individuals engaged in creating digital heritage. While remediation refers to the transformation of existing media into new digital forms, it differs significantly from digitization. The latter is the straightforward conversion of analogue materials into digital formats, whereas remediation involves the refashioning of existing media to suit new platforms and purposes (Bolter and Grusin 2000: 273). Rooted in the desire to convey immediacy and a sense of reality, remediation often replaces older media in the pursuit of what Bolter and Grusin (2000: 273) describe as the “authenticity of experience”.

This conceptualization is particularly relevant in cases where craftsmen produce digital content that conveys a sense of authenticity tied to their crafts—and, by extension, to their identities. Their life

stories become embedded in the creation of digital heritage through the circulation of images and videos of their physical objects and creative processes on social media. In this context, digital remediation—whether through digitally captured or digitized photos and videos—both bridges the gap of digital distance and authenticates the cultural artifact through its integration into a personal digital narrative. As Purkis (2016: 436) succinctly puts it, “digital heritage can be about creating new historical content centred on people’s experiences”.

However, digital remediation is preceded by another key process: curation—both of the heritage maker and the heritage itself. Broadly defined, curation refers to the selection and presentation of materials for online dissemination, particularly on social media platforms. This process is shaped by the “affordances, limitations, and relationships between the various media and modes used in contemporary forms of representation and communication” (Serafini and Reid 2019: 625). In this sense, curation is not merely a technical activity but a deeply interpretive one, shaping how heritage is framed, perceived, and experienced in digital contexts.

Even in non-digital environments, subjectivity often plays a central role in curation. For example, in a museum setting, limited physical space means that only a portion of heritage objects can be displayed, necessitating curatorial decisions about what to include and what to omit. In contrast, digital museums or online platforms offer seemingly unlimited space, which could, in theory, allow for the inclusion of far more content. However, this expanded capacity does not eliminate curatorial subjectivity. On the contrary, individual heritage creators or local communities are often guided by notions of representative heritage, whereby specific cultural messages or values are attached to the selected items.

This indicates, without doubt, that digital heritage is always the product of a subjective curatorial process. The choices made—what to digitize, how to frame it, and how to present it—are shaped by personal, cultural, or community values, underscoring the interpretive nature of digital heritage creation.

When narrowing curatorial practice to folk heritage creators—those who construct visual storytelling accounts of their lives with their craftsmanship naturally embedded—the process of self-reflection becomes more pronounced. This intensification is shaped by the content formats and constraints imposed by social media platforms. Drawing partly on Goffman’s concept of the “front stage” identity, Thomas and others (2018: 57-58) argue that the individual remediation of content on social media is influenced by four key value judgments: the appropriateness of the content, its archival value, its narrative content, and, finally, the appeal and usefulness of the material in its remediated form.

Although the authors refer to general social media users, these four value judgments constitute a subjective curatorial framework that is equally applicable to a distinct subclass of users: heritage creators.

Adapted to the purpose of mapping the shift in roles from craftsman to curator, the four-pillar judgment framework translates into a process of selecting relevant elements of craftsmanship, heritage objects, and, ultimately, aspects of the craftsman’s identity to be digitally mediated. To observe this role transformation, it is essential to closely examine both the offline and online profiles of the craftsman.

However, heritage creators represent only one side of the “democratization of heritage”. For this process to occur, there must also be an audience to engage with the digital heritage. On the other side of this relational dynamic lies audience participation, which—through interaction with the life stories of heritage creators—shapes both the validation and valuation of the heritage. The audience’s engagement, relationship-building, and ongoing dialogue with digital heritage are central to its contemporary relevance and its perceived value.

Taking all of this into account, one may identify several categories: tangible and intangible heritage

creators (in the classical sense), digital heritage creators, and those who digitally remediate tangible or intangible heritage without necessarily practicing heritage as a way of life. This latter group can be understood as occupying a heritage state—a condition in which heritage creation is one facet among many in a broader set of personal or professional activities. The heritage state becomes an integral part of the individual's identity, regardless of the form heritage takes. However, for craftsmen who produce digital heritage from physical artifacts, this transformation requires further consideration and adjustment.

The heritage state is, above all, a process of selecting a present-oriented historicity—applied both to the heritage object itself and to its creation process. It is deeply rooted in locality, fostering a sense of shared history that supports imagined belonging and, in turn, strengthens community ties. Importantly, it not only contributes to the reconfiguration of the imagined community but also shapes the presentation of the self that craftsmen adopt as they engage with the heritage they produce.

Moreover, when the artifact is digitally remediated, the heritage state entails a dual curation—of both the object and the identity of its creator. This process can offer a transparent window into how the craftsman perceives and values their work. In this way, the heritage state becomes a reflective space where identity, value, and representation intersect.

To effectively document the heritage state, one must delve deeper into the methods by which craftsmen produce their artifacts and, subsequently, transform them into digital heritage.

3. The craftsmen and their crafts

The rationale behind selecting these two mask-makers lies in the diversity – and at times, the stark contrast – of their characteristics: the types of masks they create, the techniques they employ, their personalities, and their engagement with the heritage they produce. These differences provide a richer understanding of their transition toward the curatorial roles they now assume on social media. Their contrasting approaches are directly reflected in the roles they embody during the process of creation.

The first role is that of the vernacular craftsman, represented by Serban Tertiu, who employs orally transmitted techniques and locally sourced materials. The second is that of a skilled artisan, embodied by Paul Buta, who acquired his knowledge through crowdsourcing and adaptation. His work reflects an intricate process of heritagisation, wherein a personal brand is constructed in connection with the masks he creates.

Viewed more broadly, the distinction between the two craftsmen can also be understood through the wider categories into which their artifacts may be placed – namely, the contemporary continuation of vernacular heritage, on one hand, and creative products that imitate or resemble such heritage, on the other. Despite this distinction, the contemporary reception of both types of objects tends to blur the boundaries between them, integrating them into a shared cognitive process of artifact appropriation (Boyer 1992).

Whether sustained by a vivid memory of past identities or resulting from a process of heritagisation that transforms a newly created object into something resembling traditional representation, the mask – along with its associated materials, methods of manufacture, and modes of display – acquires new meanings. These meanings support the perception of the mask as a culturally iterative product. As such, audiences interpret it as familiar and, through that familiarity, accept it as part of contemporary heritage.



Photo 1: Serban Tertiu holding the finished mask. Taken by Sonia Prodan.



Photo 2: Paul Buta holding the finished mask. Taken by Sonia Prodan.

The first creator, Serban Tertiu, is a traditional craftsman who aligns closely with the textbook definition of an intangible heritage bearer. He has been officially recognized with the title of Human Living Treasure by the Romanian Ministry of Culture. Residing in a remote village in the Eastern Carpathian Mountains, Tertiu inherited the craft of mask-making from his father, who served as the ritual mask-maker of their community. The transmission of knowledge occurred through direct observation and hands-on apprenticeship.

This method of learning not only ensured the preservation of traditional techniques, tools, and materials but also maintained continuity in the types of masks Tertiu produces. He restricts his practice to a single mask type historically associated with the Chiparus(3)

(<https://gazeta-antropologia.es/#edn3>) ritual, which he crafts in two distinct forms. While both versions reflect the same cultural reality, they differ in the material used for the structural frame: one is carved from wood, the other constructed from leather.

The choice of material is not influenced by contemporary cultural valuation but rather by the traditional function of the masks. Once converted into aesthetic objects, the primary difference becomes functional: the leather mask continues to be worn by members of a local folk group that bears the name of the ancient ritual, while the wooden-framed version has retained only its decorative role and is no longer used in performance contexts.

Despite this divergence in function, both masks are aesthetic objects. In the case of the leather mask, it occasionally takes on an additional role as an identity-building object, reinforcing connections to community and tradition.



Photo 3: Serban Tertiu's father, Pavel, with a version of the Chiparus mask he made.

Taken by Sonia Prodan.



Photo 4: Serban Tertiu in his workshop. Taken by Gabriel Tamas.

In terms of craftsmanship, and primarily due to the different materials used for the mask frames, the craftsman employs tools and techniques inherited from his father throughout almost all stages of the production process. For the wooden mask, two of the tools he uses are the very ones once handled by his father: a semi-circular knife (*cutitoaie*) used to shape the curvature of the wooden plank, and a manual drilling device composed of a wooden spindle with an iron tip, rotated with the help of a thick thread.

In contrast, the production of the leather mask involves a different set of techniques that do not rely on specialized or inherited tools. The process requires only a pair of scissors, a shaving knife, and a common sewing needle. As such, any discussion of the tools from the perspective of heritage transmission becomes less relevant in the case of the leather mask.

The conversations around techniques, tools, and materials not only revealed the depth of vernacular knowledge enabling the craftsman to create these objects, but also offered insight into his personality. During the recording of his work, the craftsman preferred to demonstrate his technique rather than narrate each step verbally. An introvert by nature, he provided spontaneous commentary only when he felt the technique alone might not be sufficiently self-explanatory, occasionally offering brief explanations for specific operations. He refrained from engaging in broader conversation—whether directly related to the craft or in the form of contextual storytelling. Additional information regarding both the production techniques and the historical or contemporary uses of the masks was provided only in response to direct questions posed by the research team.

Equally relevant to understanding the relationship between the craftsman and his heritage production are the general setting of the interview and his attire throughout the research period. Serban Tertiu has a separate room outside his house that serves as a workshop, where all tools and materials are stored. This space is designated exclusively for the production of masks, rather than for displaying

them after completion. In contrast to the other artisan discussed in this article, Tertiu wore his everyday clothes during the entire recording process, with no special preparation for the sessions. This suggests that mask-making is deeply embedded in the everyday rhythm of his life and integrated into his routine activities.

Finally, Serban Tertiu is actively engaged in transmitting the craft of mask-making. He does so both formally and informally—he is employed by the Vrancea County Cultural Centre to teach traditional craft classes and occasionally hosts workshops at his home for groups interested in learning these skills.

At the other end of the spectrum, Paul Buta demonstrates a markedly different relationship to his craft. Although he also specializes in a single major category of masks—crafted through a range of techniques using various textile and vegetal materials—Buta is a self-taught mask-maker. His approach does not align with any traditional model of folkloric, in-group apprenticeship or intergenerational transmission of craft knowledge. Instead, through successive experimentation with materials and techniques, Buta has developed a distinctive style of mask-making that resembles a personal brand more than the continuation or revival of a local tradition. This characterization does not in any way diminish the creative value of his work; rather, it clarifies his position in relation to the vernacular model embodied by the previously discussed craftsman.

In terms of research setting, the documentation of Buta's mask-making process also took place at his home. However, unlike Serban Tertiu, Buta does not operate in a dedicated workshop. Instead, he uses a room that functions both as a workspace and as a small exhibition area for his masks. The house in Sivita, where this activity occurs, is also distinct from his primary residence. It is an old local home that he purchased and restored using traditional construction techniques. Upon completion, the house came to serve a dual purpose: as a personal retreat from the city, and as a space for a small ethnographic museum. This museum not only displays his masks but also showcases objects tied to traditional rural life. Additionally, the house functions as a cultural hub, where Buta organizes various educational and artistic activities related to folk traditions, with mask-making occupying a central role.



Photo 5: Paul Buta in his ah-hoc workshop. Taken by Adelina Dogaru.

Photo 6: Paul Buta's house. Taken from his personal Facebook page.

An extrovert by nature, Paul But – an actor by profession – maintained a performative, histrionic presence throughout the documentation of his mask-making process. He narrated each step of production in detail and enriched the sessions with numerous stories about his life as a folk object collector. These narratives suggest that his emotional connection to local heritage may have served as a

foundation for his engagement with mask-making. Moreover, he frequently discussed the sources of inspiration behind his creations, thereby fostering an awareness of the symbolic meanings each mask might convey.

His attire also plays a notable role in understanding his relationship with the craft. In contrast to Serban Tertiu, Buta changed into specially chosen clothing before filming began. This act can be interpreted as part of what has been termed the heritage state, in which the artisan adopts a vernacular aesthetic to align with the expectations surrounding heritage object creation.

While the direct interaction between the research team and both craftsmen provided ample insight into the technical aspects of mask-making, it offered a more limited view of the broader cultural and performative contexts in which these crafts exist. To address this gap, the study was extended to examine the content generated by both artisans on social media—a move that proved both necessary and productive in capturing the full spectrum of their heritage engagement.

4. From craftsmen to curator

Undoubtedly belonging to the empirical category of digital immigrants (Prensky 2001a, 2001b, 2009)—a classification particularly relevant in the Romanian digital context and considering their age—both Serban Tertiu and Paul Buta exhibit digital skills and behaviors shaped by this background. Despite these limitations, they capitalize on the power of what Castells (1996) termed networks of flows, leveraging digital platforms to circulate their work. Neither craftsman operates with a clearly defined target audience, nor are they part of a tightly knit digital community in which their content is regularly shared or amplified. Nevertheless, both attempt to project a subjective vision of their craft, addressing an imagined or aspirational social space (He and others 2023).



Photo 7: Tertiu's craftsman page. <https://www.facebook.com/TertiuSerban>.

Photo 8: Buta's craftsman page. <https://www.facebook.com/MascaPopulara>.



Photo 9: Tertiu's and his wife personal page. <https://www.facebook.com/lenuta.tertiu.98>.



Photo 10: Buta's personal page. <https://www.facebook.com/paul.butu.9>.

Although they differ significantly in the density and frequency of their content, both mask-makers maintain two separate Facebook pages: one personal and one professional. The existence of these dual profiles suggests an intentional separation between their private and professional identities. This distinction is reflected in how the pages are categorized—Tertiu's professional page is labeled as that of an «artist», whereas Buta's is classified under «home decor». These categorizations mirror two contrasting conceptions of the mask: in the first case, as an agent of traditional craft; in the second, as a decorative object.

Both professional pages also refer to external websites. However, at the time of the research, only one remained active: www.actorvatra.ro, the official site of the cultural association managed by Paul Buta. This website also serves as an online shop for artisanal products, with his masks representing the largest category on offer.

Their engagement with the digital ecosystem confirms that, for both craftsmen, their personal social media pages primarily function as extensions of their offline identities. This aligns with the initial expectations of the research, given their clear status as digital immigrants—a term that renders any assessment of their online presence through the lens of post-digital identity largely irrelevant. Nevertheless, these digital extensions allow the researcher to observe a distinct role that each craftsman acquires at the intersection of their craft and its digital projection—what has been previously defined as the heritage state. In this context, the heritage state operates as an intercommunicative loop between the object and its creator, with additional visibility amplified by the dynamics of the networked self (Papacharissi 2011).

As previously noted, the onsite research into mask-making practices revealed two contrasting presentations of the self in relation to the craft. Serban Tertiu produces masks in a utilitarian workshop, dressed in everyday clothing, emphasizing the integration of mask-making into the routines of daily life. In stark contrast, Paul Buta transforms the ethnographic research session into a fully theatrical performance, appearing in full folk attire and wearing traditional footwear (opinci), in what seems to be a deliberate effort to align himself with the social construct of a traditional environment (see photos 2 and 5 above).

This performative approach extends to Buta's digital presence, where the mask, the act of mask-making, and the folk costume are consistently interwoven. This reinforces the interpretation that the artifact elevates him beyond ordinary life and places him in a distinct experiential state. However, this does not suggest any form of artificiality; rather, it reflects a different, equally valid approach to heritage creation—one in which performance, identity, and tradition converge to produce meaning.

Shifting the focus from the observation of mask-making at the craftsmen's homes to the digitally mediated display of masks, we observe a notable shift in Tertiu's presentation of self. He rarely shares content in which he is dressed in folk costume, and only occasionally while engaged in the act of mask-making. The few images in which he appears in traditional attire are typically those tied to contextual performances shaped by a regime of heritagization—such as folk festivals, craft fairs, or local and national celebrations. This type of representation is predominantly found on his professional craftsman page, and when it appears on his personal page, it is usually in the form of tagged content rather than content he has created himself.

Regardless of whether the content is self-generated or co-generated, the presence – or at least the suggestion – of the mask remains consistent, either as part of a cultural performance or as an aesthetic object. However, the relative scarcity of images explicitly featuring the mask, the mask-making process, and the folk costume may point to a different kind of valorization of these elements in Tertiu's digital narrative.

One could argue that Tertiu draws a distinct boundary between the mask as a cultural artifact and the process of its creation. For him, it appears that only the finished mask belongs to the vernacular

culture in which he is embedded, while the act of making it is more closely tied to his private, everyday life. From the perspective of the folk group to which he belongs – unlike the external or outgroup understanding of heritage – cultural identity is often recognized only in its final, performative forms, as the result of visible, repeated practices. Conversely, the process of crafting tangible heritage, being largely invisible and taken for granted within the group, is excluded from active cultural recognition and thus falls outside the scope of heritage as cognitively appraised.

Building on the distinctions outlined above, the triadic identity structure – comprising the mask, the mask-making process, and the folk costume – requires a deeper examination in relation to its connection with the heritage state.

At the core of this discussion lies the finished artifact: a tangible expression of heritage that reveals divergent modes of self-presentation adopted by the two mask-makers. In this regard, the mask affords new layers of meaning and, as such, provides cues for potential courses of action (Gibson 1986). When introduced into a new context, the mask—both as a process and as a completed product, as a heritage object embedded in cultural practice (as seen in some of Tertiu's masks) and as an aesthetic object (as exemplified by Buta's work)—elicits similar forms of engagement, yet yields distinct outcomes. These outcomes reflect the different ways the mask and its maker are received and understood within the framework of the heritage state. This is especially significant given that the new affordances attributed to the mask reinforce its agency—not merely as an object that is made, but as a «modality through which something affects something else» (Gell 1998: 42).

For Tertiu, a craftsman embedded in a well-defined folk group, the mask functions primarily as a cultural binder. It reinforces group identity by triggering a cognitive recognition of the artifact as part of the group's tradition. This results in a relatively narrow expectation for the triadic identity image (mask, process, and costume), which is evident in his social media presence – largely directed at a close-knit audience from his own folk community. In this context, as with the earlier distinction between the mask as process and as heritage object, his self-presentation follows a similarly bounded framework of perceived meaning. The triadic identity image, then, becomes relevant primarily in two cases: first, within formal heritagization contexts, and second, when the craftsman addresses an unfamiliar or external audience.

By contrast, Buta does not experience such tension between cultural tradition and aesthetic expression. His work does not emerge from a specific local practice; instead, he re-signifies the mask through contemporary imagery and personal aesthetics. For Buta, both the artifact and the making process operate within the same framework of heritagization, where the triadic identity image is expected to accompany every stage—from creation to final display.

This contrast can be theoretically grounded in the notion of heritage as a selective memorial process, shaped by the meanings attached to material objects (Graham 2001). Heritage, in this view, involves a balance between what is remembered and what is forgotten. When applied to the mask, this understanding highlights the contrast between the two craftsmen. For Buta, heritage carries a more explicit historical dimension: although he is not part of a folk group tradition, he assumes the role of cultural authority by curating elements of the past. Through research and travel, he reconstructs mask-making techniques and aesthetics from diverse regional traditions. Rather than diminishing his value as a craftsman, this lack of direct lineage allows Buta—and those who engage with his work—to participate in a broader communicative practice. His creations foster exchange and meaning-making within an expanded framework of contemporary heritage.

Buta's lack of communal ties to a traditional folk group is offset by another key feature of heritage: the social value of objects, rather than their material or communal origins. He articulates this clearly in describing his work: "The secret is not just in the manufacturing of masks, but more in the understanding of what they speak about: you need to know its original meaning". While this may initially

appear contradictory – given that Buta learned his craft through a selective and individual process – he succeeds in bridging the historical roots of mask-making with contemporary usage. Though his masks serve primarily aesthetic functions, they are imbued with symbolic meaning, each one representing a recognizable stereotype that still resonates today (e.g., the Roma figure, the bitter old woman, or the Devil). Whether grotesque or humorous, Buta’s masks respond to a cultural and aesthetic demand he has helped cultivate within specific communities. In this way, through a selective historical lens and intentional meaning-making, he addresses what Graham (2001:1004) calls “the needs of our present society”.

Among these needs, one can clearly identify the triadic identity image – mask, process, and folk costume – as part of the socio-cultural reception of the artifact. This framework, however, takes a different shape in Tertiu’s case. As a member of a well-established folk group, the process of cultural remembrance is communal rather than individual. For Tertiu, the preservation of the mask as a local cultural artifact – including its incorporation into processes of patrimonialization – ensures in-group validation and the ongoing recognition of the mask as living heritage. This echoes a collective memory process, as opposed to Buta’s individualized reconstruction. As a result, the meanings assigned to Tertiu’s masks are deeply embedded in a shared cultural identity that binds the community to a specific place.

This communal connection also intersects with Tertiu’s personal biography, functioning as a form of descent-based heritage. As illustrated in photo 3, where Tertiu’s father is shown holding a mask, there is a clear visual testimony to the generational transmission of the craft. On social media, Tertiu frequently shares images of his father, both as a mask-maker and in everyday contexts. Notably, these photos show his father dressed both in traditional folk costume and in commercially manufactured clothing. This detail is significant: during the time those images were taken, such clothing marked a transitional phase in rural communities. For Tertiu, these garments represent the “forgotten” elements within the process of remembering. That is, vernacular dress – partly phased out – is now selectively forgotten, shaping how heritage is re-assessed in the present.

In contrast to Buta’s proactive meaning-making, Tertiu’s engagement with the past reveals a subjective negotiation of the present. He not only assesses the heritage value of contemporary encounters but also tailors his understanding of the past to fit current circumstances. His approach involves choosing which elements of history are appropriate for each heritage event in which his masks appear – whether as objects or as processes.

At this stage of analysis, we can suggest that the heritage state, as reflected in each craftsman’s social media presence, emerges as the culmination of an untrained yet intentional curatorial practice. These online spaces serve as informal exhibitions of identity and heritage, shaped by subjective appraisals, audience expectations, and shifting notions of cultural value.

Social media, as a form of participatory media, facilitates what Jenkins and others (2015) describe as participatory culture – a space where users not only consume but also engage with various types of content and with one another. Despite the two craftsmen each having over 1,000 followers on their official Facebook pages and more than 1,500 friends on their personal accounts, the participatory nature of these platforms remains largely underutilized. While these numbers indicate a level of affiliation, the actual circulation of content (Jenkins and others 2009) remains low.

There are at least two plausible explanations for this limited engagement. First, in a digital landscape increasingly diversified by platforms, both craftsmen remain exclusively active on Facebook. This limits their reach and restricts potential engagement, particularly among younger demographics who have largely migrated to other platforms. Second, vernacular cultures, though capable of evoking a strong sense of belonging, may still be perceived as tied to specific physical and localized contexts. Once remediated into the digital sphere, such traditions risk being perceived as static displays—akin to museum

exhibits—rather than as dynamic, lived practices. This shift from participatory practice to contemplative observation alters how users interact with the content, emphasizing passive consumption over active involvement.

Nevertheless, interaction does occur, albeit in limited forms. One such form is crowdsourced curation through mechanisms like upvoting or downvoting (Askalidis and Stoddard 2012), which reflect a community-based filtering of content. Other forms of validation—such as comments, likes, or shares—are present but modest in volume. Across the four Facebook pages curated by the two craftsmen, sharing is infrequent and comment activity remains minimal.

This suggests that the heritage state, as conceptualized earlier, must be understood in terms of how it adapts to the networks of flow in which these networked selves operate. The previously introduced concept of the triadic identity image—the composite of mask, mask-making process, and self-presentation—remains relevant in assessing the digital representation of heritage. However, the effectiveness of digital heritage creation as a component of the heritage state also depends on how it is received.

To fully evaluate the transformation from craftsman to curator and the degree of success in this curatorial process, reception analysis is essential. Yet, the current conditions limit the scientific rigor of such an analysis. While a qualitative examination of online interactions has been conducted, its validity is compromised by the nature of the commenters. Most are closely connected to the craftsmen: kin, co-workers, local cultural institution employees, or researchers in ethnology and heritage studies. Their responses tend to reflect personal relationships rather than neutral or widespread engagement with the content as digital heritage.

6. Conclusions

In contexts where creators of vernacular heritage hold occupations beyond that of full-time craftsmen, their engagement in material culture production must be understood through the lens of the heritage state. This concept refers to the identity adopted at the specific moment when individuals actively engage with the heritage they create. Whether the craft represents the continuation of a traditional practice or the revitalization of an artisanal form acquired through self-directed learning, the relationship between the craftsman and the object plays a formative role in shaping identity within the heritage context.

This identity emerges from the incorporation of the object into the craftsman's self-presentation, conceptualized here as a triadic identity image—a composite formed by the object itself, the object as process, and the public portrayal of the craftsman. Social media platforms, where content undergoes informal and untrained curation, further mediate this identity. The heritage state, therefore, is not fixed but fluctuates in relation to the visibility of the craft and the nature of the craftsman's relationship to the heritage object.

Ultimately, the object—viewed both as a process and as a finished artifact—assumes an agentive function in the construction of the craftsman's identity. It becomes an active participant in shaping how heritage is performed, perceived, and negotiated within contemporary cultural frameworks.

Notes

1. The Chiparus dance was traditionally part of ritual games performed during wakes in various regions of Romania (Ciubotaru 1999: 76-94). A 1992 recording—based on a reconstruction of the dance—is available in the archive of the National Institute of Heritage and provides visual documentation of the masks used in the performance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHdnpSyntC4>. However, with the advance of secularization, the funeral ritual has significantly changed, leading to the disappearance of the original practice. In response, the community repurposed the role of the mask from its ritual context to a ceremonial one. Today, the Chiparus dance is artistically performed at cultural festivals, preserving its symbolic presence in a reimagined, performative form.

2. Charter on the Preservation of the Digital Heritage, retrieved from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000179529>, on February 11th, 2025.

3. The research was carried out by a research team consisting of three researchers: Adelina Dogaru, Gabriel Tamas, and Adrian Stoicescu. They were joined by Sonia Prodan, an MA student in the Ethnology program at the University of Bucharest. The field visits to the craftsmen took place in mid-July 2024.

Bibliography

Anderson, Benedict

1983 *Imagined Communities. Reflection of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London and New York, Verso.

Askalidis, Giorgios (and Greg Stoddard)

2012 "A Theoretical Analysis of Crowdsourced Content Curation". The 3rd Workshop on Social Computing and User Generated Content.

Retrieved from <http://users.eecs.northwestern.edu/~gar627/crowdsource.pdf>.

Boyer, Pascal

1992 *Tradition as Truth and Communication. A cognitive Description of Traditional Discourse*. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Cambridge University Press.

Bendix, Regina

2009 "Heritage between Economy and Politics. An Assessment from the Perspective of Cultural Anthropology", in Laurajane Smith and Natsuko Akagawa (ed.), *Intangible Heritage*. London, Routledge: 253-269.

Bolter, Jay David (and Richard Grusin)

2000 *Remediation. Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press.

Castells, Manuel

1996 *The Rise of the Network Society*. Oxford, Blackwell.

Ciubotariu, Ioan H.

1999 *În marea trecere*[During the Great Passage]. Bucharest, Ed. Grai si Suflet.

Gell, Alfred

1998 *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford, Calredon Press.

Gentry, Kynan

2015 " 'The Pathos of Conservation': Raphael Samule and the politics of heritage", *Journal of Heritage Studies*, n° 21 (6): 561-576. doi: 10.1080/13527258.2014.953192 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2014.953192>).

Gibson, James J.

1986 *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. New York, London, Psychology Press, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015.

Graham, Brian

2001 "Heritage as Knowledge: Capital or Culture", *Urban Studies*, n° 39 (5-6): 1003-1017. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00420980220128426>.

Hafstein, Valdimar T.

2012 "Cultural Heritage", in Regina F. Bendix and Galit Hasan-Rokem (editors), *A Companion to Folklore*. Malden, Oxford, Willey-Blackwell: 500-519.

Hannessy, Kate

2012 "Cultural Heritage on the Web: Applied Digital Visual Anthropology and Local Cultural Property Rights Discourse", *International Journal of Cultural Property*, n° 19: 345-369. doi:10.1017/S0940739112000288.

He, Wanrong (and others)

2023 "Cura: Curation at Social Media Scale", Proceedings of ACM Human-Computer Interaction 7, CSCW2, Article 337. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3610186>.

Jenkins, Henry (and others)

2009 Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture. Media Education for the 21st Century.

Cambridge Massachusetts, London, MIT Press.

2015 Participatory Culture in a Networked Era. A Conversation on Youth, Learning, Commerce and Politics.

Cambridge, Malden, Polity Press.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara

2006 "World Heritage and Cultural Economics", in Ivan Karp, Corinne A. Kratz, Lynn Szwaja and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto (ed.), Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations. Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 161-202.

Klein, Barbro

2006 "Cultural Heritage, the Swedish Folklife Sphere, and the Others", Cultural Analysis, nº 5: 57-80.

https://www.ocf.berkeley.edu/~culturalanalysis/volume5/vol5_article3.html

Livingstone, David N.

1992 The Geographical Tradition: Episodes in the History of a Contested Enterprise. Oxford, Blackwell.

Papacharissi, Zizi

2011 "Conclusion: A Networked Self", in Zizi Papacharissi (ed.), The Networked Self. Identity Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites. New York and London, Routledge.

Prensky, Michael

2001a "Digital natives, digital immigrants", part 1, On the Horizon, nº 9 (5): 1-6.

[doi10.1108/10748120110424816](https://doi.org/10.1108/10748120110424816)

2001b "Digital natives, digital immigrants, Part II: Do they really think differently?", On the Horizon nº 9 (6): 1-9.

2009 "H. Sapiens Digital: From Digital Immigrants and Digital Natives to Digital Wisdom", Innovate: Journal of Online Education, nº 5 (3). <https://www.learntechlib.org/p/104264/?nl=1>.

Purkis, Harriet

2016 "Making digital heritage about people's life stories", International Journal of Heritage Studies, nº 23 (5): 434-444. doi: 10.1080/13527258.2016.1190392.

Rapetti, Emanuele (and Lorenzo Cantoni)

2010 " 'Digital natives' and learning with the ICTs: The 'GenY @ work' in Ticino, Switzerland", Journal of E-Learning and Knowledge Society, nº 6 (1): 39-49. doi: 10.20368/1971-8829/386

(<https://doi.org/10.20368/1971-8829/386>).

Samuel, Rapahel

2012 Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture. London, Verso.

Serafini, Frank (and Stephanie F. Reid)

2019 "Multimodal content analysis: expanding analytical approaches to content analysis", Visual Communication, nº 22 (4): 623-649. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357219864133>.

Thomas, Lisa (and others)

2018 "Exploring Digital Remediation in support of personal reflection", International Journal of Humana-computer Studies, nº 110: 53-62. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhcs.2017.10.002>.

Autores

Adrian Stoicescu

Studii culturale – Etnologie, Facultatea de Litere, Universitatea din Bucuresti.

