

# ICWA LETTERS

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ROMANIA

*Cristina Merrill is a John O. Crane Memorial Fellow of the Institute studying post-Ceausescu and post-communist Romania.*

## Ioan Maric's Serenity Oasis

By Cristina Merrill

NOVEMBER 13, 2005

BUCHAREST, Romania – Romanians like to escape to the countryside whenever urban grit gets them down. Even while clutching the latest cell phone models, they speak fondly of idyllic lands beyond the big cities. Many dream of owning a small cottage in the country or at least spending weekends in the midst of relatives who live off the land. Bucharest dwellers especially are happy to be cosmopolitan during the working year. But once holidays roll around, they suddenly discover their peasant roots and head out to breathe fresh air, wake to the sound of the cuckoo and indulge in homemade wine, bread and terroir sausages.

It wasn't so long ago that most people in Romania lived outside cities. At the turn of the 20th century, about 80 percent of the population was rural. Thanks to the rapid industrialization enforced by late dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and his Communist predecessors (and the migration to bigger cities and better salaries that continued after 1989, when state factories in rural areas were shut down), the number is now half of that, and Bucharest alone holds about a tenth of the country's inhabitants. But the spiritual gravity center has remained in the countryside, serving to soothe the soul and ground the identity during uncertain times such as the transition away from Communism.

Children are still raised on popular folk tales, while adults often dig into a rich baggage of folk wisdoms, proverbs and not a small dose of superstition, to explain just about everything in their lives. Tradition still runs deep in the countryside — and it is here where Romanians like to go to regain their pride and their sense of community. They say that the farther one goes away from Bucharest, the kinder the people, and the more helpful to one another. And no, the burgeoning cemented suburbs taking shape on Bucharest's outskirts are not yet the answer to the quest for tranquility — which is familiar to urbanites all over the world.

I too have come to yearn to get out of Bucharest whenever the city world is too much with me. Had I not traveled throughout this country, I probably would have thought that child beggars, elder homeless people, potholes, sour faces and overly excited street dogs are also pervasive outside the capital city. I pity the foreigner for whom Bucharest is the only exposure to Romania. Graffiti scribblings I once saw in Barcelona said it best: "Spain is not Barcelona, and Barcelona is not Spain." It is the same with Bucharest, a city on the edge of raw nerves. I speak, of course, as one who tries to live among, if not always like, ordinary Romanians. Many expats and rich Romanians prefer the luxury of gated communities, and the new suburbs — for them, the joys and the sorrows are not as extreme as for the average Romanian I have in mind when writing this.

I was already planning my escape when recently, in the course of 24 hours, I got pushed out of the way and in front of oncoming traffic by a stressed and hurried older man who must have been in his 80s. I had just spent half my day waiting in line to pay various utility bills (in Romania checks do not exist), only to have my payment for electricity refused on grounds that I am not a resident of

the country. Later that night I took down food for an older homeless woman who had found refuge from the brutal cold in my building — only to be told by a neighbor that the woman, who apparently had come around before, deserved her fate because she had “recklessly” sold her apartment.

### **In search of naïveté out of Bucharest**

It was high time to get out of Bucharest, and fast, before losing my mind. This being November, close to Thanksgiving and the Christmas holidays, I decided to put aside my worries about Romania’s problems, and focus on the positive. I have recently riled some dark spirits by tackling Communist history, as well as the explosive issue of how best to handle Romania’s orphans and adoptions — so before taking a bite out of the secret police in the near future, and risking perdition as a result, I thought it would be nice to be remembered for at least one cheerful article about Romania.

The object of my diversion became Ioan Maric (pronounced Yee-oan Mahreek), a well-known painter of naïve art whom I first met a year ago when he came to Bucharest from the Moldavian town of Bacau, five hours north by train, to exhibit at a Christmas gifts fair. I instantly fell for the bright colors, asymmetrical figures, supernatural animals in all shapes and shades, and the funny yet moralistic stories from the countryside he tells in each one of his paintings. I saw Marc Chagall in him (and I am not alone in this), but more important I recognized a world I once knew as a child growing up here — and thought forgotten.

Tickets booked, I took my seat in the packed berth, and as the train pulled out of the station I witnessed more city madness, hopefully my last for a few days. A veritable Balkan bazaar on wheels: child beggars singing holiday carols and peddlers selling everything from refreshments to magazines (I have been warned against buying publications on the train, for many of them can be years out of date). A man was walking from one end to the other of the train, asking for donations to help a sick child with special needs — offering, in return, a certificate, valid proof, no doubt, for having donated. My five fellow travelers, all from



*Ioan Maric, a well-known naïve painter, exhibiting his work at a Christmas fair.*

places far out of Bucharest and going back home, soon made friends, shared food and personal experiences. They talked without pretense, and openly.

One woman confessed her recent troubles. An arsonist burned her house down, then her husband died because she cursed him for poisoning a neighborhood dog. The house trouble began, she said, after a local shop in her village got pilfered, and her son discovered some of the stolen goods underneath the bed of an acquaintance. He turned the neighbor in, and the day after the alleged thief came out of jail, their house burned down. But the arsonist died as well. She went to a witch and put the hex on him. “Six weeks later he hung himself,” she said. “I feel responsible.”

Whether it’s white or black magic, superstition is ingrained in the traditional life of the countryside as much as religion (which Communism was never able to stamp out) or the law of the land or that of nature. Over centuries, people there have developed a strong sense of right and wrong and a certain code of behavior, which they passed down through generations. Man is supposed to work hard, find a proper partner with whom to build a solid life, and act dignified throughout any of the obstacles and joys that life, nature, and God throw his way.

Romanian peasant life is still going strong in many, more remote, parts of the country but in others it is fast disappearing, as young people are moving to cities and abroad in search of jobs. This is why I think the role of Ioan Maric, the painter, is so important in recording a traditional way of being, and of genuinely enjoying life, that will likely disappear by the end of the century. “Welcome to my oasis of peace,” the sixty-year-old said as I entered his home. “You have stepped into the island of the naïves.” He and his wife Niculina have lived for thirty years in a Communist-era apartment near the center of Bacau — not as I had pictured them, on an idyllic farm full of crazy animals and infused with smells from the savory food cooking in the hearth. But in that he is also representative of the changes Communism brought to the countryside, when under the guise of progress it forced many to leave the land for the factory. A critic once described Mr. Maric, in the best sense of the word, as an uprooted peasant who never adapted to city life — a term that could be used to describe tens of thousands like him.

### **The village as a place of the past and childhood memories**

But you won’t catch the Marics criticizing the previous era. “They say [Communism] was bad, but they gave you housing, schooling and work,” he said. He recalled the times when police officers randomly searched people on the street, during the day, and if they found that someone was unemployed they forced him to find work. “Before, they took you off the street and gave you

work. Now they fire you and throw you out on the street.” The period of transition following the fall of the regime in 1989 has been tough financially on the couple. Together they earn about \$240 a month in pension, which barely covers living and travel expenses, especially when they want to travel the country to exhibit and hopefully sell his paintings. A trip to Bucharest, for example, costs about three quarters of their combined pension. And fairs aren’t always profitable. Romanians, as Mr. Maric said, cannot afford to buy art. Prices for them, which start at \$10 for small 10 x 10-inch paintings and rarely top \$100, are usually lower than what he would normally like to charge (\$120 minimum). He has great success with customers from abroad, who usually pay more.

“If it hadn’t been for his painting, we would have had to do something anyway to survive,” said Mrs. Maric. For the better part of the 35 years that they have been together, she has been his most trusted adviser, critic and helper. “The chief,” as he proudly calls her (they met when he worked on the tractor and she was his boss), orders frames for the paintings, keeps in touch with customers, and promotes his work. And like him, she is humble and not afraid to work. “It’s better than sitting around at our age. You know what they say, ‘work brings nobility to man.’ Even if I had the money to buy anything I wanted, it wouldn’t be right. Money worries are also part of what life is supposed to be.”

Common values and mutual respect, based on work, has kept them together. When I admired their spick-and-span two-room apartment, he laughed and said it was the natural order of things. In a marriage, both people are housekeepers: the woman takes care of the inside of



*Mrs. Maric, whom the painter calls “the chief,” said that “money worries are also part of what life is supposed to be.*

the house (meaning cooking and cleaning) while the man’s domain is the upkeep of the outside (painting, construction). I wish Bucharest residents could follow their example and that of people in Bacau and once in a while apply a coat of paint to their grim apartment buildings. I’m not one for living in a Soviet-style apartment building (or “bloc,” the Romanian word for “building”), but if I had to live in one, I’d choose Mr. Maric’s.

Guarding the entrance to his building, where locks are not needed, are three tall fir trees that Mr. Maric helped plant when he moved in 30 years ago. He was inspired by a popular folk song about three fir trees in the resort town of Sinaia. As I climbed the stairs to the last floor, I





(left) Ioan Maric was inspired by a country song to plant three fir trees outside his apartment building." (right) Mr. Maric recalls his beloved native village by looking through the Communist-era apartments built in the last 30 years.

smelled freshly painted walls and admired the hand-carved wooden doors of each apartment. Obviously the men of the place had kept up their obligations, while their wives probably took care of their bellies. Inside his apartment, the television set was turned to Ethno, a round-the-clock country-music channel that for the longest time I took for kitsch but which, after spending time with the Marics, I can appreciate.

We later stood on the covered balcony that serves as his studio, overlooking rows of same-looking buildings. He talked about how years ago, before they were built, he could see the hills of his native village and even the factory where he once worked, and the flowers or the snows each season brought. He smiled, looking through the cement dwellings ahead of us, and I understood how the soul sometimes lives in a different physical space than the body. I recalled my own awakening years ago, after watching Krzysztof Kieslowski's masterpiece, *The Decalogue*. Despite its setting in a similarly cold, Polish Communist ghetto, the movie inspired tenderness and spirituality, a certain purity that no political regime or sudden fortune can take away from people. I also understood that physically uprooting, as Mr. Maric did when he left his village, is not the same as leaving a beloved place for good. It is love for the hometown that gives someone the strength to stay far away. Chagall did the same with his child home of Vitebsk, to which he returned time and again.

**"I return, in my imaginary world, to my village"**

"I live with my heart in the countryside," Mr. Maric said. "I paint the place of my childhood, whose memories I stored inside my soul for inspiration. Many people come back to their birthplace, the same way I return, in my imaginary world, to my village." His merry paintings, each one a story, are multiple variations on simple

themes of country life, and especially the events that link the three "joys" of life, as he calls them, birth, marriage and death. In them, strong, domineering wives set their drink-loving men straight, to a cheering crowd of hens, chicks, and faithful dogs. The priest, the doctor (who acts as the vet) and a suite of both wild and domesticated animals also take center stage. Besides cows named after the day of the week they were born (as in "Mondyana," etc), bears and wolves often play leading roles as musicians and carolers in his holiday-themed art. In the traditional way of life, animals, like people, ought to be useful. "In the country we have a special relationship with animals," he said. "Animals give us milk, skin, meat, feathers for blankets, not to mention company."

Many of Mr. Maric's paintings are visual, sometimes literal, translations of folk wisdoms. He is in almost all of them, either as one of the human characters or as the animal chorus, to provide the moralistic narrative. He illustrates accurately, for example, expressions such as "to cut leaves for dogs," which means that someone is lazy or spends the day doing nothing; similarly, to "pull the cat's tail" denotes idleness and poverty. Another aphorism that he has portrayed is that a person is popular as long as they give to others, but the minute the person stops being generous they become an object of gossip. Mr. Maric said that the same idle talk applies to the poor farm cow; she is loved as long as she keeps on giving milk but when that dries up, she gets grief. The expression for this kind of tough treatment is, in plain words, "getting one's behind bitten." He has illustrated just that.

I especially like a large painting the Marics have at home (the painter's wife is urging him to keep some of the work as dowry for children). In it, a local mountain, called the Chicken Mountain, dominates the village landscape. Village people, in all their comical and grotesque shapes, lie at the bottom. Close to the top is a dowry cart

carrying gold and other riches. Even higher up is a painter with his easel, the artist himself. The moral? "One ought to work hard to get to the top," he said. "I have worked very hard and still need to keep on doing this, or else I'll grow [vanity] horns."

Mr. Maric grew up just outside Bacau, a bustling city that serves as the economic capital of Romanian Moldavia, which in turn is a stepsister of the Republic of Moldova and the area immediately to the East that is known as the "independent" Transnistria. The Dniester River separates the two. Before WWII, when Russia took over, as war spoils, the Republic of Moldova, a region rich in Turkish and Slavic heritage, for a Balkan minute this area belonged to Romania. Mr. Maric has been named an honorary citizen of the commune he hails from, Margineni. As the older brother, he was put to work from an early age. He had his own scythe at seven and fondly remembers taking the cows out to pasture and watching them run like children when bitten by insects.

He read a lot of fairy tales while herding cows. One of his favorite authors is Ion Creanga, one of the most popular children story writers here, who is also Moldavian, from nearby Humuleati, in Târgu-Neama. Romanian critics say Mr. Maric is the Creanga of the visual arts. Creanga, who wrote in the 19th century and whose country-inspired work was also moralistic, is most famous for his autobiographical "Childhood Remembrances." (Unlike Proust, he never forgot his madeleines.) Written in a language rich in country idioms, the book describes the hero's hilarious adventures growing up in the village: killing bees at school with a liturgy book, stealing cherries from an aunt's tree, falling in love with the priest's daughter, or running away from chores at

home in order to bathe in the nearby river. Many of the escapades, narrated in a vivid language made highly visual by the use of metaphors, are punctuated by the inclusion of a saying, a proverb or a moral lesson (such as "Don't sit idly, for your luck will sit idly too," or "God doesn't come to the aid of those given to stealing.").

Mr. Maric seems cut straight out of that orderly country life of teachings, simple pleasures and predestined existence. He remembers going to village fairs with his father, by wagon, and taking in the scenery while waiting for dad to come back from his pub crawl. "I used to watch people's faces, their joy or anger, and their emotions took on the most amazing shapes. I got lost once and had to come back by foot 15 kilometers, and when I came back dad gave me a beating, accusing me of having sunbathed that whole time." Even today he enjoys going to fairs or local produce markets to eavesdrop on back-fence talk. But many of the old habits are disappearing. Take weddings, for instance. The food, cooked in clay pots for the occasion, seemingly tasted better. According to him, dowry negotiations involving mostly farm animals, were more interesting (now talk is about money). And, of course, a stained white bed sheet proving the end of the bride's virginity made or broke a marriage and a family's honor.

He said that he is making the most of a talent he received from above: "Every man is born with a gift which needs cultivating." His desire to paint was not a common one in the family. Worried that there was something wrong with his fidgeting, Mr. Maric's mother first took him to the doctor, then to the priest, who told her that there is something worthy growing inside the child, a gift from God. "I thank the Lord for the gift He gave me to make me a painter," he said.



*Mr. Maric's paintings are visual, sometimes literal translations, of folk wisdoms.*

Like many self-taught naïve painters, he created his own color and measurement rules. His dyes are rich and bright, the figures often asymmetrical and comically grotesque, the white and black brushstrokes are thick and confident. As an artist and an admirer of the painter said, Mr. Maric's art glows in the dark and his figurines move around like mercury. For a long time he used cheap wagon paint (meant for wood, not canvas) – he grew up helping his grandfather, who was an ironmaker, paint wagon wheels and baskets. He was discovered by a teacher late in his twenties, after serving the required time in the army and working on a tractor — this,

his least favorite period, he was happy to rid of. “Adieu, you tractor, to you I will never return,” he recites in the verse he has been saying for more than 30 years. In 1967, when he was 25, he began working at a factory for woodwork in Bacau (*Combinatul de Prelucrare a Lemnului*, or CPL). This was the height of the Communist industrial élan, and everyone had to be productive. He retired from CPL in 1999 as foreman, finishing a worker’s career he is proud of. “Work was work and painting was painting,” Mr. Maric said dryly, implying that he worked hard at both but that they didn’t mix.

### **Celebrated during and after Communism**

He enrolled at about the same time at the local arts school, which he attended for six years, three in painting and three in graphic design. He was discovered by a leading painter and teacher, Ilie Boca, who encouraged Mr. Maric to devote himself to art. It so happened that more Romanian artists began experimenting with naïve art in the late 1960s, a period that marks the beginning of the naïve current here. Mr. Boca encouraged Mr. Maric to go away to the art camps that were allowed to flourish under Communism. Ironically, party officials were not opposed to “taking people out of production” for weeks at a time and allowing them to create art. But then arts, like sports, were often forced in the workplace in order to help create the New Man. One of the festivals heavily promoted across the nation during the last regime was

the patriotic “*Cântarea României*,” or “Singing of Romania.” At this time, party executives were tasked with putting forth the most promising artists — the more patriotic, the better. Mr. Maric said that for him this festival was a “good thing, it was a way to promote art. Many say it was not good but during [this festival] many painters, singers, painters and poets were launched that way.” Luckily, he did not have to change his art to placate Communists. Naïves were appreciated for promoting Romanian traditional values. He bemoans the lack of similar interest in promoting art nowadays. He estimated that only about five artists specializing in naïve art are left from the 30 or more who were known some 35 years ago.

But life was not necessarily a party for an artist living during Communism. He recalled being away at an art camp in the countryside. The air was fresh, the food delicious, the landscape good enough to paint. But he and his bohemian artist colleagues made the mistake of bathing in the nude in the nearby fresh spring water (“It was so cold it burned.”). The local party chief, who had no taste for the bohemian life, got wind of it through informers and set a pack of secret police forces on them. Accused of being “louts,” most of the bathers were fired from their respective jobs (apparently they had not been excused from production). Mr. Maric somehow escaped the purge, but his wife still got a visit from inquisitors. She told them that her husband had been at the camp on his own time, since



*A small country inn near Bacau, Sura cu Dor could make a perfect setting for one of Ioan Maric's paintings*

he was on vacation. The camp was soon abolished.

Mr. Maric is one of the lucky artists to have survived, and even be celebrated during, the last regime. And he has adapted well in the time since. In all he has had over 60 personal exhibits and won various honors here and abroad. A significant prize he won in 1999 praises him “for the remarkable manner of reflecting through naïve art the Romanian peasant’s spirituality.” That spirituality, so unique to the soul of the country, luckily survived despite more than four decades of political madness that ended in 1989. Visiting Bacau I experienced its full and untainted richness. Thanks to a friend’s recommendation, I was fortunate to stay at *Sura cu Dor* (pronounced Shura Koo Dore and meaning, roughly, The Longing Hearth), a bed and breakfast that transported me back to a time that thrived before Communists and will hopefully blossom despite the prevailing political wind. The owners, a painter friend of Mr. Maric’s and his fiancée, built a cave-like log cabin from scratch eight years ago, to fit their four kids from previous marriages. In time, the children grew and left home and the place became a small four-room country inn in the middle of a fruit orchard, with a big heart. It’s built on different levels, with pokey stairs leading into all sorts of Middle-Earth-like secret places.

The kitchen is all the way down in the dungeons, next to the preserves storage room. It’s worth crawling all the way down to the bathroom via the spiraling stairs,

once overcoming vertigo, to view the psychedelic art created by the resident owner-painter, also known as Frantz. He and his hostess and fiancée Cristina, a thirty-something beauty who strangely makes me think of Frida Kahlo as a green-eyed blonde, live upstairs. Animal skins, furs, stuffed birds, dried flowers and rag witches dress up the inn’s two living rooms as well as the guest suites. The oak tables and chairs, solid and yet crooked enough to fit Snow White and her seven dwarfs, were also hand-sculpted by Frantz. The time I was there, a white pet rabbit munched away undisturbed at the onion and garlic braids hanging down from the bar. Old Romanian chansons lingered past the last drops of boiled wine, amid smoldering flames dancing away in fireplaces in each room.

The hostess invited the Marics and me for dinner. Frantz was working late nights painting saints at a nearby church (and for a demanding priest, by all accounts). Out came the pickled apples and grapes, stuffed cabbage cooked, like in old times, in clay pots and paired with sweet golden polenta. There is always a first time for stag pastrami and flame-broiled organic pork fillets, served with peppery hot plum brandy, and mine was, unforgettably, at Sura — a place fit for one of Mr. Maric’s paintings. The artist made little conversation but his eyes danced wildly to the décor. Transposed into his imaginary world, he was dreaming up a new series of village-inspired works. □



*The Marics with Sura’s hostess Cristina*

# Current Fellows and their Activities

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

### **Richard D. Connerney** (January 2005 - 2007) • **INDIA**

A lecturer in Philosophy, Asian Religions and Logic at Rutgers University, Rick Connerney is spending two years as a Phillips Talbot Fellow studying and writing about the intertwining of religion, culture and politics in India, once described by former U.S. Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith as "a functioning anarchy." Rick has a B.A. and an M.A. in religion from Wheaton College and the University of Hawaii, respectively.

### **Kay Dilday** (October 2005-2007) • **FRANCE/MOROCCO**

An editor for the *New York Times* Op-Ed page for the past five years, Kay holds an M.A. in Comparative International Politics and Theory from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Tufts University, and has done graduate work at the *Universiteit van Amsterdam* in the Netherlands and the *Cours de Civilisation de la Sorbonne*. She has traveled in and written from Haiti and began her journalistic life as city-council reporter for *Somerville This Week*, in Somerville, MA.

### **Cristina Merrill** (June 2004-2006) • **ROMANIA**

Born in Bucharest, Cristina moved from Romania to the United States with her mother and father when she was 14. Learning English (but retaining her Romanian), she majored in American History at Harvard College and there became captain of the women's tennis team. She received a Master's degree in Journalism from New York University in 1994, worked for several U.S. publications from *Adweek* to the *New York Times*, and is spending two years in Romania watching it emerge from the darkness of the Ceauscescu regime into the presumed light of membership in the European Union and NATO.

### **Nicholas Schmidle** (October 2005-2007) • **IRAN**

A journalist and researcher for the Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life, Nick is finishing a Master's program in Comparative and Regional Studies (Middle East/Central Asia) at American University in Washington DC. He is studying intensive Persian — as is his fiancée, Rikki Bohan — in anticipation of his departure for Iran after his marriage in autumn 2005.

### **Andrew J. Tabler** (February 2005 - 2007) • **SYRIA/LEBANON**

Andrew has lived, studied and worked in the Middle East since a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Fellowship enabled him to begin Arabic-language studies and work toward a Master's degree at the American University in Cairo in 1994. Following the Master's, he held editorships with the *Middle East Times* and *Cairo Times* before moving to Turkey, Lebanon and Syria and working as a Senior Editor with the Oxford Business Group and a correspondent for the *Economist* Intelligence Unit. His two-year ICWA fellowship bases him in Beirut and Damascus, where he will report on Lebanese affairs and Syrian reform.

### **Jill Winder** (July 2004 - 2006) • **GERMANY**

With a B.A. in politics from Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA and a Master's degree in Art Curating from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, Jill is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at Germany through the work, ideas and viewpoints of its contemporary artists. Before six months of intensive study of the German language in Berlin, she was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow looking at post-communist art practice and the cultural politics of transition in the former Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine).

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