

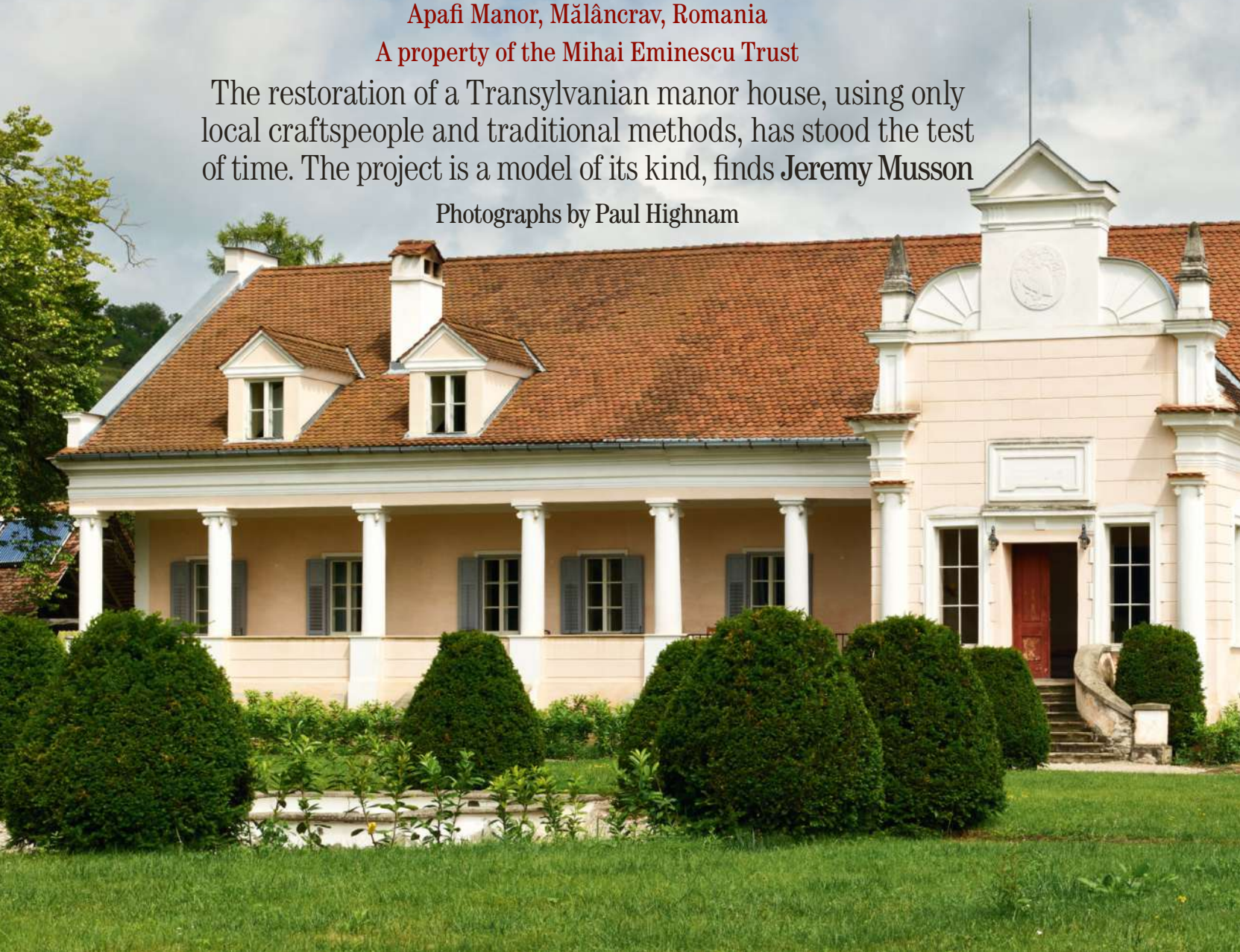
A triumph of local talent

Apafi Manor, Mălâncrav, Romania

A property of the Mihai Eminescu Trust

The restoration of a Transylvanian manor house, using only local craftspeople and traditional methods, has stood the test of time. The project is a model of its kind, finds **Jeremy Musson**

Photographs by Paul Highnam



THERE is special spirit in the story of the Transylvanian manor house of Mălâncrav—Malmkrog in German; Almakerék in Hungarian—rescued, in the early 2000s, by conservation charity Mihai Eminescu Trust (MET), formerly patronised by The King when Prince of Wales. Damaged and abandoned for decades, the story of its four-year renaissance deserves wider recognition. One of the most important restoration projects for the MET and its then president, author and artist Jessica Douglas-Home, this exemplary work was recognised in 2006 with a Europa Nostra Award. Significantly, the restoration was achieved entirely by local craftsmen using traditional materials and methods.

The project was led and managed by conservation architect Jan Hülsemann, as well as author and conservationist William Blacker, who was at the time MET's director.

Set in a deep green valley, Apafi Manor, with its long, tall, single-storey range set over a basement, is named after the princely family that built it. An open balcony or loggia runs along the south front and is punctuated by a porch-like entrance (**Fig 1**). Although initially appearing early 19th century in date, it has the familiar form of regional manor houses of the late 17th and early 18th century. As explored in a 2022 study of Transylvanian manor houses by Bogdan Sorinca, these evolved under the influence of Vienna and the Habsburg monarchy.

The manor, however, also has a much deeper history stretching back into the Middle Ages. During its restoration, a fuller idea of the original building complex emerged and excavations revealed evidence of long-lost outbuildings, including a stable block, a tower and a set of large entrance gate piers. These 'magnified farmstead' arrangements were typical of medieval manor-house complexes. As inherited by cousins of the Apafis, the Bethlens, this eventually developed into a house 'elegantly painted' with frescos of Old Testament scenes. The basement incorporates what may be the remains of a 17th-century doorcase.

By the 1830s, the manor was the property of a Count Haller, who is credited with



Fig 1: The loggia and porch impose order on the asymmetric garden frontage of Apafi Manor, named for the princely family who built it. Much of the building to the left of the porch has been reconstructed. The parish-church tower is visible to the right

rebuilding it in the form we see now. Damaged in a local rising in 1848, it was still in a poor state in the 1860s when British traveller Charles Boner, family tutor to Karl, Prince of Thurn and Taxis, and author of *Transylvania, its Products and its People* (1865), described seeing its 'gutted remains'. Restored on a reduced scale, the house was acquired in about 1920 by the Lutheran Church. Seized by the communists in 1949, it became a village hall, with a concrete kitchen on the already reduced east side and a stage in the former parlour. Poorly maintained, it fell into disrepair and was abandoned.

In 2000, it was acquired by the MET, with the approval of village elders, on condition it was restored. Ms Douglas-Home and the MET board of trustees received support from Jeremy Amos of the Horizon Foundation and invited specialists from the UK to contribute their knowledge to the project, including Colin Richards, joint founder of the Institute of Historic Building Conservation, the interior designer David Mlinaric and the garden designer Catherine FitzGerald. Mr Hülsemann led the project with Mr Blacker.

Mr Hülsemann trained at the Academy of Arts in Hamburg, Germany, and has

a special interest in traditional carpentry techniques. He spent some years working in Zanzibar and is widely recognised for his sympathetic restorations in the region's Transylvanian Saxon villages, with their networks of interlocking houses, barns and enclosed yards. His book *Das Sächsische Bauernhaus in Siebenbürgen (The Saxon Farmhouse in Transylvania: A guideline for the rehabilitation of old houses)* includes many MET projects in the Saxon villages in Transylvania.

Thus, today, Apafi Manor's condition is a testimony to local building traditions and the survival of ancient skills in the village →



Fig 2 above: There are fine views over the garden and wider landscape from the loggia. Fig 3 below: A piano in one of the library bays. The loggia and garden are beyond



Fig 4: An antique bench in the kitchen is painted in bright colours. A repeated pattern has been rolled onto the walls

and surrounding area. Brightly limewashed, with formal gardens surrounded by woods and pastures, it stands close to the fortified parish church (*Fig 7*), which is protected by a wall and a watchtower. Lutheran since the Reformation, the church retains a parish priest—due to Mălâncrav having the largest Saxon population of any village in Transylvania, after the mass migrations of the 1990s. The church's interior retains large areas of rare 14th-century wall paintings. The main altarpiece in the chancel (*Fig 8*) includes donor portraits, plus the arms of Michael and Clara Apafi, and it was the presence of such Hungarian landowners (who remained Catholic after the Reformation), that helped ensure the paintings' survival.

The church's close association with the Apafis adds significance to their former manor house and its restoration. Few funds were available for the restoration of Apafi Manor, however, and early proposals from large construction firms were happily set aside after Mr Hülsemann's simple, sage advice: 'Use what talent you can find in the village; use all the latent skills in all the surrounding villages.' This 'Whole Village' dictum is a well-established principle in the rescue and revival of historic buildings, emphasising the value of using local craftspeople and builders, providing and sustaining the training for the necessary skills. The Packard Foundation was already supporting the MET's work and generously funded the Apafi Manor project as a special demonstration of the Whole Village concept.

Apafi Manor's stonework, bricks, clay roof tiles, floor tiles, internal carpentry and



Fig 5: The library has been divided into bays by new bookshelves. Note the stencilled ceiling rose and the tile parquet floor

wrought-iron metalwork were all hand crafted by a local workforce using materials to hand. The first phase was managed by Fritz Klutsch from a neighbouring village of Nou Săsesc (Neudorf in German) and the final phase by Ernst Linzing, a builder based in the village. More than 50 people were involved in the different aspects of the job, with the building team entirely drawn from the village.

The missing part of the western end of the range was entirely rebuilt. There is an uneven spacing of columns and window openings, but the whole, nonetheless, has a feeling of rustic symmetry. The old main entrance to the south was reopened and the northern staircase reconstructed. The formal garden layout is centred on a restoration of the lost central fountain, the foundations for which

were found during excavations and informed by local memories of the pre-war house.

Father and son stonemasons Bartalis Bela and Bartalis Attila from Târgu Secuiesc restored the coping of the southern porch and remade the stone steps of the external staircase to the north. Gheorghe Căpățână with his son Ovidiu, who run a small carpentry workshop in Gura Râului, near Sibiu, renewed all the windows, doors and shutters, including the French windows to the loggia. The model for the detailing of the inward-opening casements, behind outward-opening shutters, was taken from the nearby parish priest's house. They also made the wooden staircase and new furniture.

Blacksmith Gabor Matei from Viscri made the wrought-iron balustrade for the north

staircase and Ioan Jinariu, a metalworker based in Sibiu, created the traditional door hinges used throughout. White ceramic tiles decorated with the Apafi family crest for the traditional tall stoves were handmade by artisans at Teracota Mediaș, a firm operating since 1906 from nearby Mediaș, in Sibiu County. All these elements were carefully designed and detailed to a scale of 1:1 by Mr Hülsemann, who states: 'The small management team of William Blacker, Ben Mehedin and Fritz Klutsch, should be especially recognised for their tireless work to find local skilled craftsmen and supervision of the daily works. They also organised the training sessions with experts such as Henry Rumbold for stonework and myself for traditional carpentry. They worked long days →



Fig 6: The reconditioned stove from Făgăraș with its jugendstil sunflower. The other stoves are newly made

and poured passion and dedication into the project, which, in my opinion, has become part of the spirit of the house, adding something to its original historic interest.’

The decision was taken to remove unsightly modern additions and to re-create the original structure as much as possible, using traditional techniques. With the full extent of the colonnaded loggia reinstated, the western end—as ‘a new build’—had to be constructed with greater thermal efficiency. This new part of the house contains bedroom suites and bathrooms and is served by a handsome new timber staircase in spruce, with oak handrails and steps. The columns

of the external loggia were—as before—built with shaped bricks and mortar, then rendered (**Fig 2**). All the external joinery was painted in linseed-oil based paint.

Internal timber windows and door frames were made to a carefully considered traditional pattern, the windows in spruce and the parlour and library doors in walnut. Old casement locks were painstakingly refurbished locally and given new keys and locking bolts. The ceilings were plastered onto reed mats and the internal floor tiles, based on surviving originals, were laid in a herringbone pattern. New stoves were created for most rooms, although a stove from a house in Făgăraș was acquired, reconditioned and restored for the main parlour (**Fig 6**).

The simple interiors were painted in muted pastel colours selected under the advice of Mr Mlinaric, based partly on evidence from the house, also drawing on examples from country houses of the Hungarian nobility, including the home of Count Teleki—between Târgu Mureș (Neumarkt in German) and Reghin (Sächsisch Regen in German)—and the Bethlen family’s Castle Criș. Stencilled friezes and ceiling rosettes were based on evidence found during works.

‘Use what talent you can find in the village; use all the latent skills in all the surrounding villages’

The central room is now furnished as a common parlour—for both gathering and eating meals—and the easternmost room is a drawing room-cum-library characteristic of such houses (**Fig 5**), modelled on a 17th-century example in Count Teleki’s country home. Its bookcases and cupboards were specially designed and made up locally in spruce. The furniture includes many regional antiques (**Fig 4**), some being gifts from benefactor Ilinca Bossy, who also gave many of the books in the library (**Fig 3**). New beds were made following traditional patterns and the curtains were woven in the village.

The work was begun in 2003 and was completed by 2007, since when the house has been available for letting. It has hosted significant cultural events, including seminars, conferences and concerts. Comfortable, peaceful and well serviced, the house is available for rent for families or groups, which raises funds for MET and helps contribute to its upkeep. The current MET president is Caroline Fernolend, a Saxon



Fig 7 above: The church is encircled by a wall. Fig 8 facing page: The chancel interior, with its winged medieval altarpiece and late-14th-century wall paintings

conservationist and campaigner based in Viscri (*COUNTRY LIFE*, May 28, 2025) where her family has been living for centuries. She continues to champion the Whole Village concept and the restoration of Apafi Manor is one of more than 1,300 projects the charity has undertaken in 45 villages.

The house today has the strong atmosphere of simple, elegant country-gentry hospitality, of the type Boner described in the 1860s: ‘There was no embarrassment, though a perfect stranger has dropped among them... The house was neat in the interior, simple in its arrangements but orderly and clean. A flight of steps ran up to the house, along the front of which was a veranda supported by columns. You entered the dining room directly from here... we sat down to a good dinner, a large and cheerful party, and the delicious wine warmed my very heart.’

Patrick Leigh Fermor evoked this same culture in his memoirs of travelling in Romania during the 1930s, published in *Between the Woods and the Water*. He recorded a little-changed network of gentry life, which was savagely dispersed by war and communist ideology—especially the home of a former cavalry officer, ‘a mixture of manor house, monastery and farmstead... Indoors, shaded paraffin lamps shed their lustre on the fine portrait of an ambassadorial ancestor... I knew that István and his family meant it when they said I should stay all summer.’  www.experiencetransylvania.ro/guesthouse/malancrav-apafi-manor
Acknowledgements: Angelika Beer, Caroline Fernolend, Nicolae Ratiu



... sind, die reines Herzen ... werden Gott f...
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Der Herr ist mein Hirte
mir wird nichts mangeln.