



The interior with its painted barrel vault looking towards the iconostasis, which screens the altar from the nave. The new timbers inlaid during the restoration work are clearly identifiable

## Wooden walls restored

The painted church of the Annunciation and the Archangel Michael, Urși, Vâlcea County, Romania, has been the object of an heroic 10-year restoration programme, as John Goodall discovers

Photographs by Paul Highnam

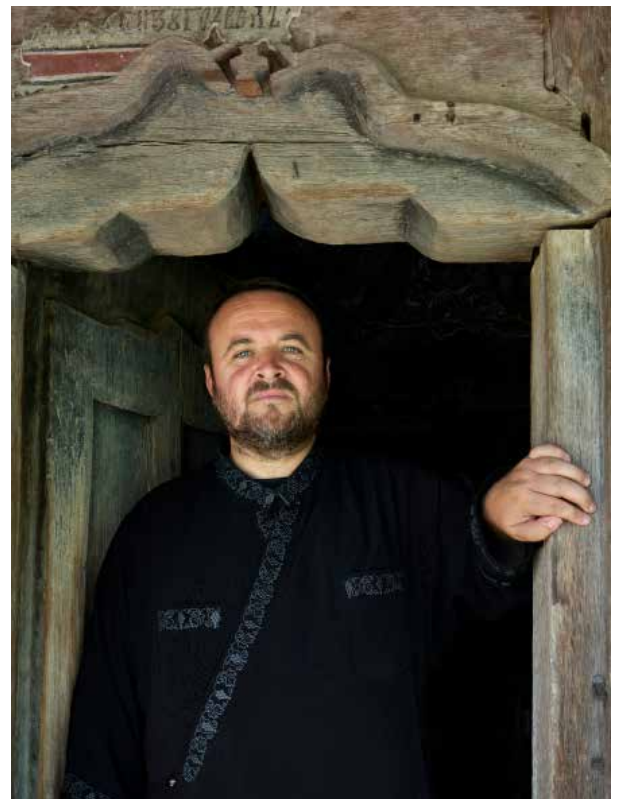
**T**HE church at Urși was built between 1757 and 1784 by Ion Danciu and Constantin the priest, damaged by fire in 1838 and repainted in 1843. Three people are known to have created the paintings, Gheorghe, Nicolae and Ioan. With the construction of a new brick church in the village in 1913, the old one became a cemetery chapel and it ceased to be repaired after 1943. A period of decline followed, which culminated on June 12, 2010, with the collapse of the timber vault over the altar. The whole structure had to be protected from the weather before repairs could begin. These were planned by architects Ștefan Bâlici and Virgil Apostol on a voluntary basis and the paintings were consolidated by the National University of Fine Arts



A south-west view of the Wooden Church of Urși across the graveyard. Its walls are made of squared logs and are decorated externally with figurative roundels and floral patterns. The roof is shingled and to the left is the outer porch or exo narthex, which leads into a narthex or internal porch



The fashionable whiskers sported by the patron of the church on the west wall of the narthex are an unexpected contrast to the timeless Byzantine character of the other wall paintings. He holds a bunch of flowers in his hand and a hat in the crook of his arm



The parish priest Father Șerban Constantin Valeriu in the doorway of the church. He has played an important supportive role in the restoration project

in Bucharest. With the help of the local community, volunteers, institutional partners and funding bodies, including the Prince of Wales Foundation, work was undertaken each summer. In 2021, the project won both the Grand Prix and Public Choice Award at the European Heritage Awards/Europa Nostra Awards.

The work is part of the '60 Wooden Churches' initiative conceived by the architect Șerban Sturdza that has been supported by the Order of Architects in Romania and the Pro Patrimonio Foundation. This seeks to undertake emergency repairs to wooden churches in the counties of Sibiu, Hunedoara, Gorj and Vâlcea. Most are abandoned cemetery chapels, as in this case, but all are classified as historical monuments. Visit <https://www.propatrimonio.org>





*Above:* The south wall of the narthex features full-length figures of saints. The abstract pattern in the lower register of the wall is intended to suggest marble. The names of the painters of the mural scheme appear above the oblation table, or proscomidie, that stands to the left of the altar. Gheorghie is specifically identified as 'painter from Urși'. The inscription includes the date May 27, 1843.

*Right:* The wooden west door has an ornamental head. It is covered by a porch supported on carved posts to create an exo narthex



*Facing page:* A view into the nave from the narthex. The iconostasis is visible in the distance. Note the smoke stains of tapers to either side of the door 🐉

