GREEK ISLAND EMBROIDERIES

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In the last quarter of the nineteenth century large numbers of brightly colored and skillfully worked embroideries in silk on linen or cotton began to come into the bazaars of Athens, Cairo, and Stambul. The merchants called them Rhodian, Yanina, or Cretan according to the coarseness or the delicacy of their stitchery, and under these names began selling them to amateurs and European dealers, mostly from England. It was not long before these fragments—for the pieces on sale were almost all fragments cut or torn from larger pieces—were recognized as the remnants of an astonishing peasant art which had flourished in the islands of the Aegean and the Ionian Seas. There were obviously many more than three types. Some showed a Turkish influence derived from the pottery, tiles, and textiles of Asia Minor, others an Italian influence in the use of grotesques and scrolls, but they all had in common a simplicity and directness of design, a high decorative quality, and a similarity of conception. A keen sense of design has been native to the islands since remote antiquity, witness the wonderful geometrical pottery of Cyprus and Rhodes and the drawing of the flowers on Minoan vases.

Not until the early 1900’s, however, was any serious study of the embroideries and their history undertaken. It was at this time that Wace and Dawkins, then at the British School at Athens, became interested in them and found the means of visiting many of the islands to collect examples, to find, if possible, what designs were peculiar to which islands, and to study the manners and customs which gave rise to such a richness of production.

Unfortunately it was already too late for complete success. The needlework was no longer done, and even the memory of it was being forgotten. On Karpathos Dawkins found only a few tiny villages at the north end, far away from the port, where the women still wore the traditional dresses. Contact with the growing industrialism of the West, which followed the coming of independence in Greece, and all its varied cheap manufactures had killed the local crafts. The younger men had begun to seek work on the mainland and even in Egypt and Turkey, returning home only for the winter and remaining only until after the ploughing, leaving the cultivating of the crops and the harvesting to the women, the children, and the aged. And some, caught by the more exciting life in the cities, had taken their families away, abandoning their houses to ruin and their lands to weeds. The islands under Turkish dominion were,
Detail of a bedspread from Skyros in the north Aegean. Double darning stitch in blue, red, yellow, and green silk. XVIII century

Piece of a linen skirt border from Crete, dated 1697. Ladder stitch, featherstitch, and satin stitch in yellow, tan, red, dark and light blue, and green silk

Fragment of a linen curtain from Naxos in the Cyclades. Darning stitch in red silk. XVIII century. OPPOSITE PAGE: Detail of a linen bedspread, perhaps from the Ionian Islands. Surface darning stitch in green, blue, cream, and white silk. XVIII century
until the nineteenth century, out of the main current of trade and had to be self-supporting and independent of commerce. That they could be is surprising to anyone who has seen them; for as one sails by they appear to rise in gray or tawny barrenness in steep, romantic, treeless cliffs and mountains, with only tiny harbors fringed by small white villages. A few houses high up nestle against the slopes of sharp peaks or cling to the edges of the cliffs, but inland on the larger islands are valleys of great beauty with olives, oaks, and pines clothing the hillsides and oleanthers, mulberries, and plane trees edging the streams that rush down from the heights. In these valleys the islanders grew their own cotton and flax, cultivated or gathered all the plants from which they made their dyes (except indigo, which they imported). They bred their own silkworms, tended their flocks, and spun the thread and wove the cloth for all their household purposes. Indeed they produced so much silk that it was an important export. All this is now at an end. The people lead dull, unenterprising existences as shepherds or fishermen and depend for all the comforts of life on imports.

Wace and Dawkins, because of their late arrival, found it impossible to assign styles to most of the single islands of the archipelagos. They were, however, able to better the old classifications of the dealers, which grouped together all pieces ornamented with highly conventionalized or geometrical patterns in cross-stitch, dominantly red, as Rhodian; those with fantastic birds, flowers, and human figures worked in delicate colors in darning and satin stitches, as Yanina; and those with designs based on scrolls and pots of carnations rather coarsely worked in red, blue, or polychrome, chiefly in a featherstitch, as Cretan. Wace and Dawkins classified the embroideries into six fairly well-defined groups—those of Epirus and the Ionian Islands, of Crete, of the Cyclades, of Skyros and the other north Aegean Islands, and of the Dodecanese—which they discovered corresponded roughly to the diffusion of the Greek dialects spoken by the people. There were some overlappings. The patterns and stitchery of Paros, one of the Cyclades, had to be classed with those of the northern islands. This is not surprising since its people alone of this group speak the northern dialect. People from the north must have found the island uninhabited and colonized it.

We do not know when the first embroideries were made. Those we now have seem mostly to be from the eighteenth or early nineteenth century and a few from the seventeenth. Only Cretan examples seem ever to be dated, and of those the earliest is in our Museum and bears the date 1697. There is another here made in 1746, and there are three in London dated in the eighteenth century. All these sumptuously achieved works must be the fruit of a long tradition of needlework.

Doubtless each one of the larger islands had at one time its own patterns and color schemes, which persisted in their main characteristics throughout the centuries, modified from time to time by neighboring island or mainland influences. We know from the account of Belon that embroidered bed tents in use in Rhodes in the sixteenth century had patterns quite different from those used in Cyprus and Chios. The Dodecanese Islands have influenced each other and the eastern Cyclades but have remained remarkably consistent in their various styles. This interchange between the islands also helped to spread foreign influences.

The various foreign influences are easily accounted for. The Ionian Islands belonged in the twelfth century to the Norman kings of Sicily and then in turn to the Byzantine Empire and the Bulgarian tyrant of Epirus, and finally to the Venetians, under whose rule they remained until the end of the eighteenth century. The Cyclades were long dominated by the Italian duchy of Naxos, founded in that island by Marino Sanudo in 1207. Crete was sold to the Venetians in 1204 and was governed by them until 1699, when the Turks captured it. Rhodes had already been taken from the Knights of Saint John in 1523, and by the mid-seventeenth century the Turks were in control everywhere in the Greek world except in the Ionian Islands. Nevertheless it is the work assigned to these Ionian Islands,
LEFT: A simple bed platform in a house in Rhodes. RIGHT: A bed platform in a house in Menetaes on Karpathos

An alcove with a bed tent in a house in Lindo, Rhodes
have completed as part of her dowry two sets of bed valances, bed curtains or a bed tent, a number of pillow cases and towels, and an embroidered costume for herself, and her worth was measured by the splendor and number of her embroidered pieces. To increase the number the right of inheritance on some of the islands decreed that the mother must give to her eldest daughter her own dowry. The mothers were left impoverished and the younger daughters had to make shift for themselves. The bed furnishings were used on the nuptial bed, and the costume was worn for the wedding and thereafter on feast days and other gala occasions.

The embroideries used on the bed conformed strictly to the style necessitated by the type of bed customary on the island on which the young woman lived. There were several different arrangements. The houses usually consisted of but one long, narrow room. One end of the room contained the hearth and served as the kitchen, the middle was the living room and contained chairs and chests for the household belongings and the other end was the bed chamber. Half the bedroom end was often taken up by a built-in storage cupboard, which made the other half into an alcove. In this alcove there was sometimes a wooden platform, a yard or so high, on which the valance was spread with the embroidered border left hanging down over the edge. The mattress and bedding were arranged on this, then covered neatly by the bedspread. Many pillows in their embroidered cases were piled up alongside to be used as needed, and curtains, also carefully embroidered, were hung from a wooden frame near the top of the alcove, closing the bed from view when they were drawn. A towel or two also hung from the curtain rod.

In simpler houses the bed platform became merely a wide shelf or bunk, leaving space underneath for a chest. On some of the islands, however, the bed platform extended the whole width of the room, often with a carved railing, and was mounted by several steps. The bed itself was placed against an end wall crosswise of the platform. This was the arrangement in

An XVIII century dress of heavy linen worked in blue, red, and yellow silk. From Crete

along with that from the north Aegean, that seems to have taken most in color and design from the Turks. The remarkable thing is that, with all this outside influence, the islands should have been able to produce anything original, let alone an almost completely individual art.

All these embroideries, which have come into the market for the most part in meaningless fragments, it must be remembered were made by peasants for their own use as they needed them. They were purely utilitarian—pillow cases, valances, and bed curtains; some were towels and many were parts of the women's costumes. As soon as a girl was able to hold a needle she was taught the stitches of her island and put to copying the work of her mother and grandmother. By the time she was old enough to be married she was expected to
the finer houses on Rhodes, and here, instead of a simple curtain along the front of the bed, a bell-shaped tent was hung from the ceiling and pulled out at the bottom to envelop the whole bed. These tents consisted of panels of cloth fixed at the top to a circular piece of board which was hung from the ceiling. There were about twenty gores of material, but only those visible from the rest of the bed platform were embroidered. The poorer bed tents were entered through an opening left between two of the strips, but the better ones had an opening down the middle of the central panel with an elaborate design in the form of a pointed door embroidered around it. On Skyros the houses were built high enough so that the bedroom took the form of a railed-in balcony across the upper part of one end of the living room, reached by a flight of stairs. The mattresses were laid across the balcony and no valance was used and no curtains. Here the only decorations were the spread, often a marvel of workmanship, and the pillows.

Almost all the surviving embroideries which do not belong to the bed furnishings belong to parts of the costumes of the women. Except in Crete these dresses were of a definitely Near Eastern character. First there was a long, straight garment of linen with sleeves coming well down to the hands. The width, length, and fullness of the sleeves varied markedly from island to island. The decoration on this dress was confined to borders round the bottom of skirt and sleeves and round the neck and the short opening down the front which made it possible to slip the garment over the head. Sometimes, notably on the island of Astypalaea, the shoulders and the body of the sleeves themselves were elaborately worked with medallions or stripes. Over this was worn

**LEFT: A group of women in the costume of Astypalaea. RIGHT: A girl in the dress of Skyros.**
a full, gathered or pleated skirt (not so long as to hide the embroidery on the bottom of the underdress) with suspenders over the shoulders to hold it in place. White woolen stockings and soft slippers were worn on the feet, and a headdress completed the costume. This headdress might be a simple embroidered kerchief, or an arrangement of two kerchiefs, one drawn up from under the chin and the other draped over the head, or again an elaborate structure of toque or pillbox embroidered with metal thread or beads and hung with metal ornaments, over which the kerchief was draped. On cold days a short, fitted, sleeveless jacket of wool trimmed with fur or embroidered round the neck and the armholes was put on, or a three-quarter length sleeved and skirted coat edged with needlework.

In some of the Dodecanese Islands the full overskirt was replaced by a long robe open all down the front and held in place by a belt or sash. As this concealed the design round the bottom of the dress, the embroidery on it came to be restricted to a wide panel on the front extending only from the waist to the hem.

In Crete the typical overdress was quite different, possibly owing to Italian influence. It consisted of a tight-fitting, sleeveless waist with a gathered skirt made of five breadths of heavy linen or cotton cloth and fully four yards round the bottom. The skirt only was embroidered, in silk with a wide band (from six to fifteen inches) and in the characteristic Cretan design of scrolls and vases of carnations with little birds and mermaids scattered about the field. Sometimes the band was worked in simple red or blue, but often in polychrome—yellow, tan, green, pink, blue, red, and white—with a curiously opalescent effect. The garment was undoubtedly worn over a dress with full sleeves. This style goes back at least to the seventeenth century, for the band in the Museum dated 1697 is a fragment from the skirt of just such a dress.

The pictures of the embroideries given here will suggest the extraordinary competence these simple island women achieved in needlework and the beauty and variety of the designs they created and so happily suited to their purposes. But the beauty of their dyes, the sheen of their silks, and the absolute rightness of their use of color are no less remarkable and cannot even be suggested here. To enjoy these subtleties the embroideries themselves must be seen.

*An exhibition of Greek Island embroideries, presented in co-operation with the Greek War Relief Association, is now being held in Gallery D 8.*

*The illustrations on page 257 have been reproduced from articles by Wace and Dawkins in the Burlington Magazine (Dec., 1914) and the Annual of the British School at Athens (vol. ix) and from La città sacra by Montesanto; that on page 258 is from A Book of Embroidery (special number of The Studio, 1921); and those on page 259 from L’Isola dei gigli by Montesanto and Laikë Tecknë Skyros by Hagimihali.*