

Traditional Turkish Embroideries: A Case Study of Pieces Held in the Clothworkers' Collection, the University of Leeds

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An important group of Near Eastern embroideries, donated by Louisa Pesel in the 1940's to the University of Leeds is described and illustrated. A brief biography of Louisa Pesel is presented and accompanied by a description of some of the items of the collection held at Leeds. Particular attention is focused on the Turkish pieces, and a description is presented of the general characteristics of these in terms of colour, motifs, patterns, stitches and end-uses.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Clothworkers's Collection of the Department of Textile Industries at the University of Leeds houses a large collection of historic and contemporary world textiles (Hann, 1989). Among the contents of the collection are the Louisa Pesel embroideries which were donated in 1947, and consist of a total of 126 embroidered items. Also donated were a large number of notebooks, photographs, coloured plates, drawings and lantern slides. The Pesel collection of embroideries are mainly of Near Eastern and Mediterranean origin and are wide ranging in terms of stitching and individual provenance.

Following a short biography of Louisa Pesel, a brief description of the embroidered items is presented and particular attention is focused on the pieces of Turkish provenance. Through comparison with similar pieces held in other collections in Turkey, the general characteristics of the Pesel embroideries are identified in terms of motifs, patterns, colours and techniques.

2. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE COLLECTION

2.1. Louisa Frances Pesel (1870-1947)

Louisa Pesel studied drawing and design under

Lewis Foreman Day, a contemporary of William Morris in the Arts and Crafts Movement. Following Day's recommendation, she was appointed in 1903 as designer to the Royal Hellenic School of Needlework and Laces in Athens, and acted as Director until 1907.

On her return to England, she became an inspector of art and needlework under the Board of Education, and she gave lectures and talks to numerous societies and associations. In 1920 she was elected as the first president of the Embroiderers' Guild of England, and in 1938 she was appointed as "Mistress of Broderers of Winchester Cathedral". She died on April 29th 1947. During the course of her active life she published a range of articles and papers concerning both Eastern and Western Embroidery. These were listed by her sister Laura in a more recent issue of the Embroidery Journal (Pesel, 1962).

2.2. The Range of the Collection

A total of 126 embroidered items, ranging in size, stitching and provenance were bequeathed. The majority are of Turkish or Greek island origin (83 pieces in total); 14 pieces are of Western European origin; 6 pieces are of Moroccan or Algerian origin; 3 pieces are of Syrian origin; 7 are considered to be Turkestani, from regions outside modern Turkey; 7 pieces are Persian, 6 pieces are Chinese.

3. THE TURKISH EMBROIDERIES

The Turkish pieces, being the majority in the collection, mainly consist of metropolitan embroideries of the 18th and 19th centuries, from Istanbul and Bursa. They show the general characteristic features of their periods in terms of technique, motif, colour and pattern. Included among the Turkish pieces are household items such as napkins, hand towels and mirror covers as well as turban-covers and costume accessories such as sashes and waist-bands. A further identification of these pieces is made below under a description of the characteristic features of Turkish embroideries in general.

3.1. General Characteristics of Traditional Turkish Embroideries (16th-19th centuries)

3.1.1. Motifs and Patterns

A vast range of design elements were used in Turkish embroidery designs: Flowers, fruits and plants, animal figures, man-made objects, landscapes, geometrical forms, symbolic motifs and calligraphic phrases and verses. Designs showed certain similarities to decoration from other applied arts such as tilework (especially iznik) designs, pottery, bookbinding, manuscript illumination and woven fabric designs [Rogers, 1986]

The general characteristics of embroidery decoration varied according to the period of production. For example sixteenth century embroideries are characterised by stylised motifs derived from nature: Floral motifs, with curved stems and serrated leaves, such as