



Banded together

CRETAN LACE FROM THE SANDWICH COLLECTION

Lying between Europe, Africa and the Middle East, Crete is known as the crossroad of civilizations. It was the centre of Europe's oldest civilization, the Minoan (ca.2600-1400 BC). Lace, embroidery and weaving have been practiced on the island since antiquity. The first fine interlaced textiles were made on a wooden frame. This technique can still be seen in some areas of Cyprus, where a wooden frame known as *skala* (ladder in Greek) is used to support the warp threads during the process. Braids and ropes were also made by twisting thicker threads, such as goat hair or flax.

Thomas Sandwith is believed to have been the first collector of Cretan embroidery and lace in the West. But according to his daughter, the collection started by accident. As the British consul in Crete between 1870 and 1885, Sandwith was concerned with relieving the economic hardship caused by conflict between the Cretans and the Ottomans.

His efforts to alleviate poverty were appreciated by the Cretans and as thanks he was given examples of their most cherished possessions: embroidery and lace. He kept them for a while until at the end of the 19th century Sandwith donated the majority of his collection to the V&A. Almost 100 years later, following in her grandfather's footsteps, Priscilla Boys-Smith returned to Crete to donate the remaining artifacts to the Historical Museum of Crete at Heraklion and the Historical Archive of Crete at Chania.

Crete has had a turbulent history and known many conquerors. It formed part of the Byzantine

Empire from 330 until 1453 and from 1204 until 1669 the island was held by the Venetians. Strong links with Venice brought the cultural influences of the Renaissance. Lace was in high demand and the cities of Venice and Genoa were amongst the famous lace capitals of the west, enjoying prosperity due to the production and export of lace.

Lila De Chaves, associate of the Benaki Museum in Athens, specialist in textiles and author of 'Greek Lace in the V&A', believes that the origin of lace in Venice could be due to Greek influence. Greece has had close contact with the city since the 11th century and in 1453, after the fall of Constantinople, large numbers of Greek craftsmen, traders and men of letters sought refuge in Venice. It may be no coincidence that lace was established in Venice at the same time.

De Chaves explains that during the Venetian rule it is possible that books on lace patterns from Italy, Belgium and France were circulating in Crete introducing western influences. However, she states that in Crete the renaissance elements from the west coexisted with native aesthetics and that local cultural tradition prevailed in Greece despite occupation.

Most of the lace in the Sandwith collection is what is known as Cretan lace – thin bands of bobbin and needle lace that contrast with the swathes of delicate lace produced in Italy and France. Often the outlines of the designs were embroidered in coloured silks and the base cloth made with kopanellia (bob-

bin lace technique). The bands were used to decorate the seams and edges of both furnishings and clothing, but rarely used to cover large areas.

Motifs reflect the local aesthetics, with geometric designs borrowed from woven textiles. The double headed eagle, symbol of the Byzantine Empire, is evident in many pieces within the collection. In rare examples from the 17th century women are depicted holding hands and dancing in an open circle in traditional Greek style.

By the end of the 19th century there was organised production of lace in Greece. Women's workshops and Royal Handicraft Schools, mostly run by Catholic nuns, were formed on many of the Greek islands, including Aegina, Spetses, Ydra and Kefallonia. Between 1903 and 1908, in the Convent of John the Baptist, near Chania in Crete, the School of Domestic Science taught more than 600 girls how to make lace. Some of these girls were amongst the lacemakers to complete the bridal gown for Princess Olga in 1922 – made entirely of bobbin lace it took 6 months to complete.

Today only a few women make lace on Crete. A cluster of lace makers in the village of Gavalochori, near Chania, produce cloth that resembles Russian tape lace, it is made with pairs of bobbins on a round pillow called a *kousouni*. They weave an intricate white fabric but they seem to have forgotten the Cretan lace bands that once signalled their cultural independence. ●●● **Ismini Samanidou**

Embroidered skirt, detail. Crete, Greece, 1700s

Bibila lace

In 1845 Queen Victoria was given a delicate small purse by the Ambassador of Constantinople, a place famous for its lace purses in that time. It stayed in the royal family for over a century, was passed down to Queen Mary, wife of King George V, and in 1959 donated it to the V&A museum, where it now forms part of the Greek lace collection.

It is made from bibila lace, a form of small needle-lace floral motifs common in the Eastern Mediterranean, especially the coast of Asia Minor and Armenia, the Greek islands and highlands, and Cyprus. Bibila flourished in these areas, keeping its original and topographical character and resisting the influence of western lace making techniques. Nevertheless Bibila has crossed national boundaries. In Greek it is called *bibila*, from the Turkish *bir-biri* which means one by one, explaining the way the needle lace is made in a row of knots and loops. In Turkish the same lace is called *Oya*, from the ancient Greek word *oa* meaning fringed.

Bibila was made exclusively by women and girls would begin making decorations for their dowry fabrics taught as soon as they could hold a needle. Social



anthropologist Yannoula Kaplani explains that in some areas a woman would need to have at least 50-60 bibila decorated head scarves before she could be married, and says that the accomplished making "was a benchmark of a girl's ability and aptitude, for it won her a place in the category of 'well-endowed brides'".

The motifs and colours in bibila lace reflect a regional character. Depending on the area they would also carry hidden meanings, allowing women to communicate without using words. Pregnant women would wear a headscarf with pink flowers; while an older woman would use wildflowers like pansies which symbolised stability and dedication in a relationship. If a woman was angry she would wear a scarf with red peppers, whilst black flowers signified a grievance or in some regions hatred. Kaplani explains that 'in Constantinople and the Marmara region, a bride who had a bibila with the motif of a five leaf shrub on her kerchief was hinting that her mother in law was a scold and a gossip'. ●●● IS