Greek Embroideries: The early collectors and their ongoing legacy

Cheryl Simpson

The early collectors of Greek embroidery left a substantial legacy of unique textile work for the benefit of all. Today, we can still see examples of these rare embroideries in major museums such as the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. This paper explores the influence of political debate about the nature of being Greek on the collecting practice of British archaeologists. It shows that due to views prevailing at the time, there are significant omissions in major collections.

The British Archaeologists

The earliest collectors of Greek embroideries were in the main British diplomats and archaeologists working in Greece and Turkey from the late nineteenth century onwards. As Johnstone observes:

In the past English philhellenes, perhaps because they came from a country with its own traditions of fine needlework, discovered these embroideries with delight, and about the turn of the last century some notable collections were made by British connoisseurs. (Johnstone, 1961:2)

They were firstly interested in the origin of the embroideries and sought to identify the different patterns and stitches used primarily in the Greek islands and Epirus, part of the Greek mainland.

A second reason for the interest in collecting Greek embroideries is that towards the end of the nineteenth century there was general concern expressed by the Arts and Crafts movements over the industrialisation of textiles previously made by hand and the creative loss that went with this new mechanisation. The collecting of handmade embroidered textiles from countries outside Britain, became very popular during this time in an effort to insure that they were kept as examples of a dying art (Schoeser, 2012:11). Among the earliest collectors was a Thomas Sandwith, the British Consul in Chania, Crete, between 1870 and 1875. Taylor tells us of the generosity of the man...
and his support of the local Greek community and how this in fact came to make him a collector by default.

[...] he had given financial help both from his private and government funds to members of the local Greek community who had suffered during the troubles that endlessly beset them in their conflict with the Turkish occupiers, and was repaid by them with gifts of embroidery and lace. (Taylor, 1998:175)

Sandwith donated his collection to what was later to become the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

His collection was varied (Taylor, 1998:175) but not of the same diversity as the archaeologists whose aim was to collect as many examples of island embroideries as possible for study. These early Archaeologists worked for the Hellenic Society or the British School at Athens.

There were also other early collectors, but the main focus of this paper is on the British School at Athens, which opened in 1886. Two members of that school are of particular interest, because they were active collectors and their early study on Greek island embroidery, along with their considerable collections, remains influential today. These are: Richard Dawkins, Director of the School from 1906–1914, followed by A. J. B. Wace, director from 1914–1923. Both Dawkins and Wace were classical scholars and conducted archaeological digs over a number of years. The annual reports for the British School of Athens indicate the breadth of archaeological research undertaken by both men.¹ It is also clear from these reports that their interest in embroidered textiles and folk dress paralleled their interest in archaeological finds. Dawkins, when reporting on his study of dialects at Karpathos, added as an aside that this was “where also the ancient dress of Elymbos is preserved” (1904:102). In his 1905 report from a visit to Skyros, to record the events of Carnival, he commented:

Carnival is thus a good opportunity to see the fine silk embroidered skirts, sleeves and kerchiefs of the women's full dress. The finest of these are old, though embroidery in silk is still practiced. (Dawkins, 1905:72)

The amount of travel to the islands and other parts of Greece for their archaeological work, provided much opportunity for Wace and Dawkins to be in “the right place at the right time” to obtain many of the embroideries for their collection. Their research skills and knowledge of the ancient world would have also been of considerable help in developing their textile knowledge. Wace arrived in Greece in 1902 and from the very beginning of his archaeological work it seems he was also collecting Greek embroideries. As early as 1906, he organised an exhibition of Modern Greek embroideries at the Fitzwilliam museum in Cambridge. The exhibition consisted of pieces nearly all collected by both Dawkins and Wace. The catalogue produced for the exhibition had some discussion of the works which included, according to Taylor

presented “the first analysis of techniques, dyes and patterns used, and refers to a joint study of these embroideries that he had made with Louisa Pesel and John. L. Myers” (Taylor, 1998:178).

Wace continued to develop his knowledge of Greek embroidery with the approach he had adopted in 1906. His commentary in the Catalogue of Old Embroideries of the Greek Islands and Turkey, included not only a detailed description of the embroideries themselves and their patterns, but analysis of the materials used, an attempt at dating the embroidery and commentary on the natural dyes used from locally grown plant material (Wace, 1914).

His collaboration with Louisa Pesel further enhanced his knowledge of identifying embroidery stitches, used predominantly in different parts of the Greek islands. Pesel, an embroidery designer and collector of textiles, was also the Director of the Royal Hellenic School of Needlework at Athens for a period of time, which further equipped her with both the knowledge and skills of Greek embroidery techniques (Parry, 1988:141). Like Wace and Dawkins, she was also connected with the British School at Athens and her own substantial collection of Greek embroideries can be seen today at the University of Leeds International Textile archives.²

Her articles in the Burlington Magazine, during 1906 and 1907, were written about the embroideries of Crete, Ioannina (the capital of the Epirus region on mainland Greece) and the Aegean islands. It is clear that Pesel (along with Wace and Dawkins), also sought to connect the designs of the embroideries with the Greek past. Her research paper on Crete claimed an ongoing link between the designs used in a number of embroidered textiles she investigated. In each of the embroideries, regardless of the date of the work, she noted there was always a repeat of some of the same motifs. From this analysis, Pesel made the following claim:

This proves that although they may have been worked over a period of some 200 to 300 years, tradition in design and colour, as well as in stitch, had a firm hold on the people, and whilst a worker might vary her hand work according to her personal taste, she was not willing, or, more likely, was not able, to break away entirely from the accepted models. The influences which are to be found in the designs of the Cretan embroideries are three, i.e. Byzantine, oriental and Italian. Only a virile race could have absorbed such different elements and yet have given forth work so constant in style. (Pesel, 1906:155)

Pesel provides quite a detailed analysis of the typical motifs which appear in Cretan embroidery such as the double-headed eagle, the flower pot and pairs of birds or animals flanked either side of a middle motif. In attempting to trace the origins of these designs she refers to ceramics, carpets, tiles and architecture to connect the motifs with their outside influence. Her paper on the embroideries of the Aegean also adopted a thorough approach to design, and stitches used as well as an analysis of

² Pesel was an associate at the British School at Athens. For a full description see the Oxford Dictionary of Biography, Oxford University Press, 2004.
difference and similarity of motifs throughout the islands. Her technical knowledge was sound as was her attention to detail regarding the type of fabric used and the colour of the dye. Both of these helped to establish the likely origin of the embroidery work. For example she noted that:

It is a recognized fact that the linen from each island or locality varies in width, quality and texture; it is useful therefore to note these points carefully, as the character of the fabric often helps to determine the provenance of any given sample. (Pesel, 1907:235)

Likewise with the embroidery colours used on different islands, Pesel suggested that full consideration be given to the likelihood of local plant material determining the colours used for embroidery. If a bright red dye could be produced in abundance from a particular plant on a particular island, then that is the most likely source of the colour used. She also continued to draw on the influence in design of past rulers. She commented that some embroidery found on the Cyclades: “so closely resembles the Sicilian work as often to be mistaken for it” (Pesel, 1907:235).

Her technical knowledge would have been very helpful for Wace and Dawkins learning about the structure and technique of the embroidery stitches, although she did make a rather strange qualification to her research on the Aegean when she made the following claim:

The study of the embroideries of the Aegean must necessarily for the present be subject to a certain amount of conjecture; that it is worth serious attention is, however, evident to all those who consider it, from the fact that it is one of the few crafts which has occupied the leisure of the islanders during the last 200 to 300 years. There is no good pottery, carving or metal work to be examined and during this period little beyond the embroidery remains to show the continuance of style and tradition, and it therefore forms one of the few links connecting mediaeval with modern work. (Pesel, 1907:239)

Pesel’s comments are puzzling, if for no other reason than the durability of the mentioned crafts goods would have to be far greater than the general fragility of embroidered textiles, which have a tendency to rot and mildew without adequate protection. She had not had the archaeological training of Wace or Dawkins and that may account, in part, for her statement or it may be that she simply thought there were no suitable examples of surface design and motif on the craft objects she looked at, which might have furthered her research on Greek embroidery.

In her writing Pesel also demonstrated pre-conceived racial stereo-typing as to traits of particular Greek island groups. She claimed of the Cretans that the strong Italian influence in their embroidered work should be no surprise because “the ideas of the Italians would naturally appeal to the Cretans, a quick and vigorous people, more than those of an oriental and more placid race” (Pesel, 1906:155). These favourable comments about the Cretans are in direct contrast with her comments about those living in Cyprus, who were also subjected to the same influence as the Cretans. In this instance she commented:
Cyprus, coming under equally opposing forces, produced only insignificant work lacking unity and without any of the strength to be found of that done in Crete. (Pesel, 1906:155)

Pesel seems to presenting views here of the stereotypical orientalist of her time. She clearly sees the Cretans as being Greek in both habit and nationality and the Cypriots as far more oriental. On this basis she appears to be quite dismissive of the embroidery work produced on Cyprus. Yet it is of interest to note that today it is the Lefkara work of Cyprus which has world heritage protection as an outstanding example of Greek Cypriot handwork that has been continuously produced for hundreds of years. This white work, as it is commonly called, still provides a cottage industry in the region of Lefkara and the original work is highly sought after by tourists.  

Pesel’s views (as with Wace) would no doubt have influenced her decision as to what embroideries she would select for her own collection. The different knowledge base of Pesel and Wace led to an exchange of information on various occasions regarding the identification of Greek embroideries (French, 2009:82–83).

By the early to mid-1900s, Wace and Dawkins were getting a well-deserved reputation for the research they had been undertaking in situ on the Greek islands. With both Wace, and Pesel also writing articles for the Burlington Magazine during the same period, it is reasonable to assume that the magazine would then (as today) have had a wide readership of people interested in the arts. Further interest in Greek embroideries would have no doubt been fostered through these publications.

Wace and Dawkins were also involved in exhibiting their collections when the opportunity arose, such as the Burlington Fine Arts Club exhibition in 1914 titled Old Embroideries of the Greek Islands and Turkey. Taylor points out:

This was the first time domestic peasant embroidery was to be shown to be worthy of collecting, alongside Ivories, Italian Majolica and English earthenware, for all of which earlier exhibitions had been held by the Burlington. (Taylor, 1993:178)

Wace continued to gain recognition for his textile research and during the years 1924–1934 was appointed as Keeper of Textiles at the V&A Museum in London. He was by then viewed as a well-established authority on Greek textiles. By 1935 Wace was professor of Classical Archaeology at Cambridge. During this time he wrote the catalogue for Mediterranean and Near Eastern Embroideries from the collection of Mrs F. H. Cook. The book today remains a standard work on the subject and is a valuable reference for collectors and researchers alike.

Although the sizable collections of Greek embroideries, held in museums in the United Kingdom, are largely due to these early collectors, there are of course other collections of Greek embroideries in many other countries as noted by Taylor:

There are a number of small holdings in museums all over the world demonstrating the interest that these embroideries have aroused and how they are now treated as art objects, far removed from their insular peasant beginnings. (Taylor, 1988:186)

---

3 See for example the UNESCO World Heritage Listing.
Taylor’s comments do raise consideration of how important it was to have these early collectors purchasing domestic embroideries and dress which were being discarded at the time. The perception of embroideries as “art objects” takes them into another realm of interest, far removed from that of something utilitarian which also served to decorate the home.

Wace and Dawkins, however, did preserve an excellent variety of Greek embroideries, which were donated to museums and are still enjoyed today by the general public and researchers alike. The embroidered textile as art object is of course not the way that Wace, Dawkins or the other early archeological collectors viewed the Greek embroideries they collected. This is evident by the articles produced by Wace for the *Burlington Magazine* on the research conducted by both Dawkins and himself. Wace always acknowledged that his research was undertaken with Dawkins, but Wace was the primary author of the published articles. He also made clear in the articles he wrote for the *Burlington Magazine* and the commentary in exhibition catalogues, that he was of the belief that he was “saving” these embroideries before they were either left to rot or be cut up and reused for other purposes, other than their original use.

When Wace and Dawkins first started collecting Greek embroideries, they found it difficult to obtain accurate information on pattern and design. The dealers were interested in a quick sale rather than accurate identification of the origin of the embroideries. As a result, they were usually said to have come from Rhodes or Ioannina, possibly because the style of embroideries from these two places were quite distinctive and very different from each other (Hauser, 1943).

Wace and Dawkins were less than satisfied with this general information and so set out to research and collect their own samples. To that end the two spent many months in the Aegean obtaining Greek embroideries (Hauser, 1943). Their documentation of island embroidery was thorough and also included notes on the architecture and interior design of the homes. They noted the furniture (or the lack of it) and the placement of textiles within the home. Their research in the islands led to a collection between them of over 1200 items of Greek embroidered textiles (French, 2009:77).

**Why the Focus of the Greek Islands for Embroidered Textiles?**

Wace had documented why his main focus for collecting Greek embroideries was on those from the islands. His comments are insightful for what they reveal about his views on what it was to be Greek. He commented that:

> The Peloponnese and the mainland of Greece have never been productive of embroideries and have been overrun by invaders so often that they are Greek by culture and language rather than by race. (Wace, 1914:49)

---

4 For details of these articles see Greek Embroideries 1 and 11, Burlington Magazine, Bibliography.
He further differentiated the areas of Argolis, Attica and Southern Boeotia because “they are almost entirely Albanian and their embroideries therefore not typically Greek” (Wace, 1914:49).

By contrast with Wace, Angeliki Hatzimichali (1895–1965) the renowned Greek folklorist presents another view. In the first volume of *The Greek Folk Costume*, she commented:

> It has been ascertained that in all the villages where these Albanian settled, whether in Attica, Boeotia, Euboea, the Peloponnese, or Salamis in particular, they fully accepted, assimilated and safeguarded the customs, mores, traditions and crafts of Greece, including the costumes. (Hatzimichali, 1977:22)

There is agreement between the two eminent researchers at one level in that there was indeed a large Albanian settlement, but they differed in interpretation as to what this meant for the researching and recording of embroidery and what one interpreted as “being Greek”. Wace excluded the islands of Euboea, Salamis, Aegina, Andros, Porus, Hydra and Spetsai from his collecting, but described the remainder of the islands “as insular” and “essentially and naturally Greek” (Wace, 1914:49).

This was not such an outrageous view at the time of Wace’s writing. The concern as to who were “the real Greeks” was a very topical matter especially from 1830 with the formation of modern Greece. As an outsider and philhellene, it is highly probable that Wace was influenced by (but not necessarily fully accepting of) the theory of Fallmerayer (1790–1861). According to Herzfeld, Fallmerayer argued “that the Classical Greeks” heritage could not possibly have survived successive Slav and Albanian invasions during the Byzantine era; as a result, he maintained, the present population of the country must be of entirely non-Greek “racial” origin (Herzfeld, 1982:77). Fallmerayer seems to have collapsed race and heritage. Wace appears to be following him to some degree. By contrast when Hatzimichali was writing there had been a move away from this concept.

Once Wace established the parameters for his collecting of Greek embroideries, others followed on accepting his definition. For example, Pauline Johnstone wrote in her introduction to her book, *Greek Island Embroidery* (1961), in justifying why she has chosen the Islands to study rather than the mainland:

> Mainland Greece has been so frequently overrun by invasions from the north that its embroidery should be studied in conjunction with that of the rest of the Balkans, whereas the island embroideries form a distinct group in their own right. There, are however, certain islands near the Greek coast, such as Euboea, Andros, Salamis, Aegina, Hydra and Spetsai, which, for racial and historical reasons too complicated for discussion here, may be classed with the mainland from the point of view of embroidery. (Johnstone, 1961:4)

These comments echo those of Wace from many years earlier. And again, by way of example in the 1993 publication of *5,000 Years of Textiles*, Harris comments:
GREEK EMBROIDERIES: THE EARLY COLLECTORS AND THEIR ONGOING LEGACY

During the long period of Ottoman rule the mainland and some of the islands of Greece were partly repopulated by Slavs and Albanians from the north as part of a political reorganization of the country. (Harris, 1993:242)

Although Harris does not explicitly discuss the impact of this political upheaval on Greek embroidery, she still acknowledges the ethnic differences that existed and that parts of the mainland do have a commonality with the rest of the Balkans. She does, however, point out that there is a difference between the mainland and the islands; in that on the mainland embroidery was typically ornamentation for dress, whereas in the islands it was for both dress and the home (Harris, 1993:243).

Underlying the process of defining the parameters of his collection, it can be argued that Wace was seeking to define and preserve what he determined was part of Greek cultural heritage. The early establishment of the boundaries of his collection clearly influenced museum collections for many years to come. Wace and Dawkins also collected Greek embroideries from what they considered to be the peak period of these unique textiles. Most of the collection was from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and already becoming rarer to obtain during their time in Greece. In determining what pieces to collect, both were very aware of the influence of former ruling powers of the Turks in the East and the Italians in the West. These influences could be observed in the designs of embroideries and style of stitching employed in various parts of Greece. For example, Crete has a strong Venetian influence, while Epirus has a strong Ottoman influence. Noting these influences helped in the determination of the dates of the embroideries collected.

Wace had a sense of urgency to collect as many varieties of embroidery designs for as he commented:

Modern life and European imports have expelled local arts, national dresses and to a large extent old customs and modes of speech. We have attempted to preserve what is still recoverable before the handiwork is scattered and the few old women who still know how their great grandmothers used the embroideries have disappeared with the skill and traditions of their art. Much is already irretrievably lost. This is plain from the contrast between the little that can be learnt about the islands first submitted to modern influences and the fuller information still obtainable in islands till recently under Turkish rule. (Wace, 1914:49)

One of those modern influences was of course the domestic sewing machine which was being advertised in Greece in the late nineteenth century and was in use in the countryside by the early twentieth century (Yiakoumaki-Moraiti, 1999:481). The impact of the sewing machine on the traditional handmade garment, brought with it significant change that was difficult to gauge in terms of its long lasting impact. Wace also voiced concern over the increasing difficulty of being able to carefully record regional differences of the embroideries, due to the greater communication between the islands. What were been lost, according to Wace, were the local differences of embroidery, which had for such a long time differed significantly from one region to the next (Wace, 1914:50).
On the face of it this remains a puzzling proposition because we know he was certainly aware that the islands had long been exposed to trade and pirates. However, both Dawkins and Wace observed that local dialects and embroideries fell into the same divisions. They commented: "Both are like domestic architecture, genuine products of local and native genius profoundly influenced by the environment in which the people lived. And the limits of one are naturally and necessarily those of the other" (Wace, 1914:50).

Maybe Wace was referring to the greater movement and interaction between the islands with the development of technology making communication far more accessible and therefore breaking down the insularity of the past. However, by using this idea of linking local dialects with the embroidery of the area, Wace developed a classification of identification for the textile works of the various islands, where he and Dawkins were gathering embroideries.

After the ground work had been laid by Wace through his publications and work at the V&A, others followed on in a similar pattern of collecting and recording.
Wace was writing his preface to the commentary for the Cook catalogue, he also acknowledged the help of colleagues in both European and American museums but noted that he had not had the opportunity to study the embroidery collection at the recently established Benaki Museum in Athens in 1930 (Preface, Cook catalogue, 1935).

These comments by Wace are insightful in that they indicate that a number of museums by this time already held established collections of Greek embroideries and textiles. So, along with the philhellenes, other collectors and researchers were also aware of the potential loss of this aspect of Greek cultural heritage.

Johnstone (1919–2007), like Wace, also worked at the V&A in the textile area during the 1970s and 80s. Her research is highly regarded and her early books on Greek embroideries remain a valuable resource for researchers and embroiderers alike. They are commonly found in many libraries of institutions such as the Embroiderer’s Guild.5 Like Wace and Dawkins she spent time in Greece (living in Athens for some time) and became quite familiar with the embroidery from different regions. She also traveled extensively in Eastern Europe and Turkey with her diplomat husband, Ken Johnstone, thus providing her firsthand experience with a broad range of textiles, their significance and utilitarian use. Her travels also provided the opportunity to make comparisons with Turkish embroidered work, some of which has a close resemblance to some Greek embroidery (Brown, 2007:21–22).

Johnstone appeared to differ with Wace in regard to the embroidery designs reflecting their local environment. She suggested the naming of the embroidery designs related far more to passing on the patterns as part of the traditional practice of the women, thus continuing the heritage of the design. She says:

In direct contrast to England, where the embroideress’s great pleasure, at any rate before the bought pattern became universal, was to copy the flowers and birds and insects found in her own garden, the Greek woman never appears to have turned to her surroundings for inspiration. She copied patterns used by her mother and grandmother, these in turn were already taken from earlier embroidery, textile or pottery design. It is true that in many villages the patterns were given homely names (eg. the walnut, the hen, etc.) but this appears to be because a certain pattern already known to them reminded women of these things: the pattern itself was not originally a representation of the thing it was named after. (Johnstone, 1961:11)

There were of course Greek collectors within Greece such as Angeliki Hatzimichali, mentioned earlier, and others who were very concerned to keep folk crafts alive on the basis of tradition and Greek heritage, but it was those outsiders, such as the philhellenes, who held a strong interest in Greek heritage who stimulated the early collecting of Greek embroideries.

5 Johnstone’s books for example are to be found in the libraries of the Embroidery Guilds in Australia and the UK.
Conclusion

The early embroidery collections of Wace and Dawkins form the basis of significant collections of museums, such as the Victoria and Albert Museum. Whilst it is important to acknowledge the immense value of the work undertaken by these early British collectors, it is equally important to note the defining boundary of their collecting in their determination of what was perceived as Greek textiles which were a part of Greek heritage and what was “other”.

The collecting of Greek textiles cannot be removed from the broader political picture of the time. During the late nineteenth early twentieth century, Greece was still very much in the process of nation building (Clogg, 2013). Debates over what it was to be Greek were ongoing at the time. A folklorist such as Angeliki Hatzimichali was deeply concerned about preserving folk art, as she believed it was an essential element of Greek heritage that was about to disappear. Wace and Dawkins also felt the urge to collect Greek embroidery as part of a dying tradition. The difference in what was perceived to be Greek folk work by foreigners and Greeks, was largely based on ideological and philosophical grounds. The construction of Greek heritage, as represented through museum embroidery collections today, can provide us with an opportunity to reflect on what the early British collectors saw as Greek heritage.
GREEK EMBROIDERIES: THE EARLY COLLECTORS AND THEIR ONGOING LEGACY

Bibliography

Brown, 2007

Dawkins, 1905

Clogg, 2013

French, 2009

Harris, 1993
J. Harris, 5000 Years of Textiles. London: British Museum Press.

Hatzimichali, 1977

Hauser, 1943

Herzfeld, 1982
M. Herzfeld, Ours Once More: Folklore, Ideology, and the Making of Modern Greece. Austin, USA.

Johnstone, 1961
P. Johnstone, Greek Island Embroidery. London: Alec Tiranti Ltd.

Parry, 1988
L. Parry, Textiles of the Arts and Crafts Movement. London: Thames and Hudson.

Pesel, 1906

Pesel, 1907

Pesel, 1907

Schoeser, 2012
M. Schoeser, Textiles. New York: Thames and Hudson.

Taylor, 1988

Wace, 1914
Wace, 1935

Wace & Dawkins, 1914

Wace & Dawkins, 1914

Yiakoumaki-Moraiti, 1999

University of Leeds, Louisa Pesel Greek Embroidery Collection
http://ulita.leeds.ac.uk/wiki/mediawiki-1.10.1/index.php/Louisa_Pesel_Collection