

**EMBROIDERY ON GREEK WOMEN'S CHEMISES IN THE  
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART**

**By Dr. Linda Welters**

**Acknowledgements**

A special thank you goes to  
Mrs. Gunnel Teitel for the  
photographs accompanying  
this article.



## EMBROIDERY ON GREEK WOMEN'S CHEMISES IN THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

### Introduction

The Metropolitan Museum of Art has in its collections twenty-nine embroidered chemises worn by Greek women in the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries as part of traditional costumes. This group of chemises is by far the largest collection in the United States and Canada (Welters, 1981, p. 24), and appears to rival better-known British collections (Johnstone, 1972). Many of the chemises are remarkable examples of the embroidery traditions they represent, and a few of them are quite rare. Overall, the collection is geographically diverse and makes a solid foundation upon which to discuss regional variations in Greek embroidery.

It is the intent of this article to illustrate and discuss the embroidery of nineteen chemises from this collection. Information was gathered as part of the author's doctoral dissertation. The research involved close examination of 78 chemises in collections in both the U.S. and Canada. In addition, study was done in numerous museums in Greece.

The chemise is a basic garment worn by peasant women all over the Balkans for many centuries, as late as the twentieth century in some places. In Greek the word for this garment is "poukamiso" which is commonly translated as chemise, or shirt. It can best be described as an underdress as it was the first garment put on. It was always worn with other outer garments but certain parts would be visible, such as hems, sleeves and necklines. These visible parts were embellished with embroidery and sometimes finished with a needle lace edging in patterns traditional to each region. The women would generally have two types of chemises, a simple one for every day, and a more elaborate one for Sundays and festival days. Most of the chemises in the Metropolitan Museum's collection are festival chemises.

The embroidery on these chemises are particularly fine examples of folk art. In addition to embroidering clothing, Greek women worked similar motifs on certain household articles such as towels, cushion covers, bed covers and curtains. These embroideries were made as part of a woman's dowry.

In agrarian societies like pre-20th century Greece, embroidery on costumes and domestic textiles was a vehicle for a community aesthetic, just as woodcarving or metalwork was. The collective need for ornament in peasants' lives took the form of embellishment of functional everyday objects. For us, these objects of folk art are records of the political, cultural, and economic influences on the different regions of Greece.

These influences were many, making Greek embroidery a melting pot of Mediterranean heritage. Greece is located at the edge of Europe and at the threshold to the Near East. Although we do not know precisely when embroidery began, we know that Greeks embroidered in antiquity. The recent excavations at Vergina in Macedonia (350-320 B.C.) brought to light a murex-dyed textile with gold embroidery (Mitten, 1982). Certainly Greek women in the post-ancient world knew of, and perhaps had seen, the elaborate workshop woven silks from Byzantium, and later from Bursa or Venice, and tried to copy them in needle and thread. Byzantine church embroidery and Italian laces must also have been influential. Embroidery on underdresses appears to have been well-established by the 16th century according to Nicolas de Nicolay, who in 1572 illustrated and described embroidered costumes from Greece in an early travelogue (Nicolay, 1572, pp. 68-9).

Historically, Greece was part of the extensive Byzantine empire which lasted until 1453. From Byzantium the Greeks inherited the knowledge of sericulture, a love of elaborate ornamentation on simple forms in dress, and motifs such as double-headed eagles, cockerels, and mythical animals. Certain islands were under Frankish or Venetian rule from the 13th century on, thus introducing Western influence in shapes of dress and style of embroidery.

Perhaps most importantly, there was domination by the Turks from 1453 to 1821, the year of the Greek Revolution. Parts of Greece remained under Turkish rule until 1922 when the last vestiges of the Ottoman Empire collapsed. This affected Greek embroidery not only in the borrowing of motifs such as carnations and tulips, but by unintentionally encouraging the development of highly distinctive local variations of embroidery which lasted until the 19th and 20th century. This was done through the passage of sartorial laws limiting the subordinate Greeks to home-produced cloth, by restricting travel from village to village, and by suppressing independent economic development.

Regional variations on motifs inherited from Byzantium, Venetian Italy, and Turkey developed to such a degree that embroideries are easily identifiable by region, and sometimes the actual village of manufacture can be named. It is interesting to note that in some regions the women readily adapted Turkish or Italian elements into their costumes and embroideries, while in neighboring regions the dress remained more purely Byzantine.

Early collectors of textiles were attracted to Greek embroidery, especially those examples from Aegean islands and mainland Epirus. In the late 19th and 20th centuries, island embroideries were generally thought to be superior to mainland embroideries, perhaps because machine-made textiles had replaced handwoven and hand decorated cloth in the islands before the mainland. There is a substantial amount of descriptive literature on Greek island and Epirote embroidery, much of it written in the early years of the 20th century by the collectors themselves.

Mainland embroidery, with the exception of that of Epirus, has been slighted in most exhibitions and publications in favor of the older, better documented island pieces. Fortunately, the Metropolitan Museum of Art collection contains a substantial number of chemises from mainland Greece (23) compared to only six from the islands. Thus, this article will give a fresh perspective on Greek embroidery by discussing less frequently published mainland chemises.

Mention should be made of the particular collectors who donated Greek chemises to the Metropolitan Museum because their gifts are the backbone of the collection. Mrs. Van S. Merle-Smith contributed on two occasions: the first contained an outright gift of two chemises, and a loan of five; the second was a gift of five. We know that the chemises in the second donation, and possibly the first as well, were from the collection of her aunt, Miss Henrietta Brewer of Oakland, California. Miss Brewer studied archeology in Greece and Asia Minor in the early part of the century. Greek textiles from her extensive collection were exhibited at Mills College in 1943 (Mills College Art Gallery, 1943). Irene Lewisohn, after whom the Metropolitan's Costume Institute Library is named, gave six chemises.

#### **Variables**

When studying Greek embroidery, certain overall variables must be kept in mind. These variables include technical and aesthetic factors.

*Fiber content* of both ground fabric and embroidery thread is important, and should be determined by microscopic tests. Ground fabrics were commonly made of cotton, linen, or silk, or mixtures thereof, depending on local availability. Embroidery threads were most often silk, sometimes linen or cotton, and in northern Greece, wool. The appeal of gold and silver to the Greek aesthetic sense is seen in the use of metallic embroidery thread. Hammered metal strips were used as well as the more common gilt threads wrapped around silk cores.

*Yarn type* did not vary much from region to region. Embroidery threads were usually 2-ply yarns. In certain areas, like the Dodecanese Islands, the twist was looser giving a more raised effect to the finished embroidery.

*Motifs* include flowers, animals, human figures and geometric shapes. Flowers and other plant forms are most frequently seen, including tulips, carnations, flower sprays and meanders, flowers in vases, single flower heads, branches and trees. Animal motifs, such as eagles, cockerels, and peacocks, were inherited from earlier Near Eastern textiles. Human figures are rare in Greek embroidery, but appear in certain regional styles, most notably those from Epirus and the island Skyros. Geometric motifs include squares, rhomboids, meanders, and highly stylized flowers.

*Placement of embroidery* on chemises follows the Byzantine tradition of decorating the simple structural framework of the garment. Embroidery is located at

necklines, on the edges of sleeves, in stripes up the sleeves, on seamlines, and around hemlines. Some of the more visually striking chemises have two vertical bands of flowers running up the front near seamlines. Vertical bands such as these were part of clothing since antiquity, such as the clavi on Roman tunics. There is a remarkable diversity in placement of embroidery on the chemises in the Metropolitan's collection.

*Color.* Greek women showed a preference for polychrome embroidery, although in certain areas color palettes were limited to one or two colors. In the Dodecanese Islands, for example, red-green color combinations were traditional. Dyeing of embroidery threads was done with natural dyes until 1900 when German aniline dyes made their way to the Greek village (Papantoniou, 1978, p. 86).

Most of the chemises themselves were white, although not all. The Metropolitan's collection has a number of chemises from Trikeri, Thessaly, where color of the ground fabric was symbolic of a woman's situation in life.

A marked preference for the color red in some proportion is seen. In Roman times, red was the color of brides (Gouel-Badieritakis, 1980, p. 125). The association of red with brides in Greece seems likely since the first time a woman wore her elaborately embroidered chemise was for her engagement or marriage.

*Technique.* Overall, chemise embroideries can be divided into three main categories based on technique. These are (1) counted thread embroidery, (2) drawn threadwork and (3) "grafta" embroidery. In "grafta", meaning written or drawn embroidery, the designs were traced on the fabric first with ink, then embroidered. The technique used had a decided effect on the design. Whereas the counted thread embroideries are geometric and abstract in appearance, the "grafta" work is curvilinear and more representative of nature.

The types of stitches used varied regionally. Each traditional style required its own repertoire of stitches. The simple counted thread designs were often cross-stitched, whereas the complex "grafta" designs used seven or eight different kinds of stitches to complete the design. In this study, embroidery stitches were identified using Thomas' *Dictionary of Embroidery Stitches*.

Greek women often finished their garments with something known as "bibila". This was originally needlelace, worked directly on the hem, sleeve or neck edge. Sometimes applied lace edgings were substituted.

There is some indication in the literature that in certain areas women did not always embroider their chemises themselves, but instead sent them to professional embroideresses (Hatzimichali, 1977, p. 31). Research done by the author in villages of Attica in 1983 revealed that most women knew how to embroider the traditional chemises, but that some wealthier families hired professionals to do the work. These

professionals were other women in the village who took to embroidering for hire in their spare time because they enjoyed doing it, or needed the money.

*Dating.* A.J.B. Wace summed up the problem of dating Greek embroideries by saying "It is impossible to assign, with any degree of certainty, a date to any piece of Greek embroidery, unless it happens to have the date worked on it" (Burlington Fine Arts Club, 1914, p. xxiv). Only a few Cretan skirt borders are dated.

The standard method of dating is to assign a 19th-century date if no documentation is available. Partially useful data for assigning dates to the Metropolitan's collection included information given by the donor, date of accession by the museum, and similarity to costumes already documented and published. Also useful is knowledge that the wearing of certain types of costumes ceased at different areas in Greece.

### **Regional Embroidery Styles**

Regional styles of embroidery will now be discussed by illustrating and describing specific chemises in the Metropolitan's collection. A map is included with the names of places included in the text.

*Attica.* The seven chemises in the collection attributable to the region of Attica all have borders on the skirt hems of solid silk embroidery, which means they were bridal or festival dresses. Everyday chemises were embroidered in cotton. These garments were sleeveless, but were worn with sleeved vest-like bodices made out of the same coarse cotton fabric. The sleeves of the bodices were embroidered in silk and gold threads in motifs related to the hem borders.

The borders ranged from relatively narrow (Fig. 3 - 16 cm.) to wide (Fig. 2 - 45 cm.). In Attica, festival costumes were indicators of economic status. These indicators were in the width of the embroidered hem border, the elaborateness of the other costume parts, the use of gold, and the amount of jewelry worn.

No two embroideries of the nearly 100 seen by the author are exactly alike. Diversity occurs not only in size, but in color, variation of motif, and degree of abstraction. The same basic arrangement of design elements is the key to identifying them as coming from Attica.

In Fig. 1, the design is composed of six bands of varying widths. The two wide bands have repeating stylized vase shapes with flowers growing out where there should be handles. The three narrow dividing bands consist of geometric meanders. The top band is a row of blunted triangles, creating a saw-toothed edge. The lines of the motifs are outlined in red, giving this piece a clear relationship between the design and the darker colored ground.

Fig. 2 shows a stylized version of the design just discussed. The shapes of the leaves and blossoms have become more geometric, and are filling up more space. The colors are brighter and more numerous, including a rather strong magenta. The vase motif is harder to distinguish, and the relationship of the design to the ground is not so clear. The overall appearance is mosaic-like.

Fig. 3 shows a narrow border in somber colors. Although this does not resemble the other two embroideries much, the basic elements are the same. The largest band displays angular vases and the smaller ones geometric meanders. The saw-toothed edge is in simplified form.

Although all three embroideries are from Attica, and share the same general arrangement of design, why are they so different? In an attempt to find the answer to this question, the author conducted field research in the villages of Attica in the summer of 1983. The project was funded by The Center for Field Research through Earthwatch.

One explanation is that each embroidery type is from a different village, since there are more than twenty villages that had this costume. It is certain that Fig. 3 is from the village of Vilia, as it is very similar to a published piece (Hatzimichali, 1933, p. 22), and interviews in Vilia in 1983 confirmed it. Fig. 1 and 2 were of a more general type the author has identified as coming from the Messoghia villages, but they cannot be pinpointed as coming from a particular village.

It is also possible that certain designs are older than others. Such may be the case here, with the more naturalistic Fig. 1 being an earlier piece (1800-1850?) and Fig. 2 being from a later period (1850-1900?). Although the data from the 1983 research has not been fully analyzed yet, this explanation is a distinct possibility.

A third theory is that individual embroideresses exercised artistic license within the basic framework of the traditional designs. From interviews conducted in 1983 it appears that certain designs and colors were preferred for aesthetic reasons, or because the wearer wanted to be unique. Therefore it is probable that some individual choice in design was allowable.

Overall, then, it is likely that each of these explanations is somewhat true. Before any firm conclusions can be drawn, however, the data needs to be thoroughly analyzed.

*Argolis-Corinthia.* There are four chemises in the collection from the Argolis-Corinthia region on the Peloponnesian peninsula. These chemises are particularly interesting because the placement of embroidery so closely resembles the clavi bands of Byzantine costume. Within this group of four, there are subtle differences in color, motif, and fiber of the embroidery thread.



Fig. 4 illustrates a chemise from the Voha region near Corinth. It is a “kolonata” (column) chemise, meaning that it has two vertical bands reaching from the hem to the chest. This indicates that it was a wedding dress (Hatzimichali, 1977, p. 142). The same theme is repeated in fourteen smaller columns of varying heights around the hem.

From a distance the predominantly black embroidery appears dense and geometric. Looking more closely (Fig. 5), we see that the majority of motifs are actually stylized flower heads. The columns alternate with small cypress trees. The sleeves have geometric designs based on zigzags and triangles. The geometric appearance is partly due to the counted threadwork technique.

Fig. 6 illustrates the hem and sleeve detail from a chemise which has the same placement of embroidery as the one just described, but the embroidery color is predominantly red with small areas of regularly repeating blue. General confusion in the literature makes it difficult to assign a more specific provenance than Argolis-Corinthia.

This chemise is embellished with two long and nine short ornamental columns of flower heads projecting from a central axis. Alternating with the short columns are two-tiered triangular shapes. The sleeves are embellished in geometric motifs with half-flowers ornamenting the seamline. It is unique among the chemises included in this article for its all-cotton embroidery.

*Atalandi.* The collection has one chemise from the Central Greek mainland village of Atalandi (Fig. 7). Like the chemises of nearby Attica, it is made of cotton fabric and embroidered in silk. Unlike the Attica chemises, which were embroidered after being made into garments, the pattern pieces were embroidered flat and then the seams were sewn.

The motif and coloration of Atalandi chemises do not vary like the others already discussed because they were worn in a smaller geographical region than Attica or Argolis-Corinthia. The skirt hem border measures 12 cm. and is composed of diagonally placed repeating stylized floral sprays. The colors of the blossoms are alternating reds and greens. The sleeve hem is a simplified version of the same motif. This is counted thread embroidery, primarily cross stitch.

*Trikeri.* The Metropolitan’s largest number of chemises are from Trikeri ( Fig. 8-14). Because it is unusual to find so many in one collection, and because they are diverse in color, design and technique, six will be illustrated.

The chemises of Trikeri are especially interesting for a number of reasons. The first is that the design elements of the chemise are symbolic of the wearer’s station in life. Secondly, Trikeri is one of the rare villages where the chemises are not only white, but red, blue, or green. Thirdly, although Trikeri is located on the mainland,

in Thessaly, the overall characteristics are those of the islands.

The inhabitants of Trikeri moved there in 1800 from the islet of Kikynithos, now called Old Trikeri, to escape piracy (Benaki, 1948, p. 55). They continued to live the life of seafaring people. As a result, their dress resembles that worn in the nearby Sporades Islands.

These chemises can be classified from a technical point of view by fabric, color, and style of ornamentation. The fabrics used are of two types: (1) linen poplin with selvedge stripes of waste silk (Fig. 8-10), and (2) sheer gauzy silk (Fig. 11-14). The embroidery was either of the geometric counted thread type, or freely drawn curvilinear designs in silk or metal threads on silk fabrics.

The chemise illustrated in Fig. 8 is made of linen poplin. Because it is white, we know that it was worn by a young unmarried girl. Usually the linen chemises were worn for everyday, but Hatzimichali tells us that it was the richness of the design and ornamentation which determined whether the chemise was a "good" chemise or a "second" chemise (Hatzimichali, 1930, pp. 143-144).

The embroidery is of the counted thread type. Hem and sleeve are embellished with repeating oblique floral sprays, the design of which seemed to be standard for the everyday chemise. Unique to this piece are two little human figures next to the seam on the skirt (Fig. 8). Peculiar to all the chemises of Trikeri embroidered in silk is the practice of changing color when making borders or seams. One can see this in the narrow border under the floral sprays in the insertion stitched seams, and in the picot edgings (Fig. 8 and 9). Colored insertion stitches are used to join seams and to make small gores at the hem. Three types of picot edge stitch are used: petit, ring, and woven, with colors changing every two or three picot units.

The indigo-dyed dark blue chemise illustrated in Fig. 10 is the only one of its kind in an American collection. The color and fabric indicate that it was worn as an everyday chemise, most probably by a married woman. The embroidery motifs and stitches are similar to the white linen chemise just described. Note that the sleeve motif is a simplified version of the skirt-hem floral-spray motif. The sleeve and hem motifs are rarely identical in Trikeri chemises.

Fig. 11 illustrates the sleeve and hem of a young unmarried girl's "best" dress. It was worn to church on Sundays as well as to festivals. It is made of a sheer, crisp white silk and embroidered in polychrome silks.

The embroidery motif is a complex floral meander done mostly in double darning stitch. The edges are worked in picot rings, which change color every three rings. The seams joining the garment are done in various types of polychrome insertion stitches.

Embroidery on a young girl's "good" chemise could also be in metallic threads, which was considered to be more elaborate than silk embroidery (Zora, 1981, p. 9). Fig. 12 illustrates the sleeve and hem of such a chemise, with yet another variation of the floral motif. While the sleeve border shows a floral meander similar to Fig. 11, the hem motif is a vertical branch with symmetrically arranged blossoms between leaves. Trilling notes the widespread use of the branch motif by comparing it to Egyptian embroidery of the Mamluk period (Trilling, 1983, pp. 22-25).

When a girl married, she wore a red silk chemise embroidered in gold, as shown in Fig. 13. Again, the fabric is crisp, sheer silk. The embroidery motif on the hem appears to be a complex stylized version of either flowers in vase or a branch with flowers, with bird-like shapes near the top. The sleeves are similar to the floral meanders seen in Fig. 11. There are small birds between the larger motifs.

In place of the picot edging, there is applied gold lace, in the "bibila" style. The edges of the sleeve pieces are also joined to a band of gold lace, which forms a decorative band up the back of the arm when worn. The small gores at the hem of the skirt are actually strips of pre-made gold lace.

Embroidery from another red chemise, bought by Henrietta Brewer in Athens in 1925, is seen in Fig. 14. Both the motifs and the work on this piece are particularly fine. On the hem we see a stalk of blue-bell type flowers, with birds in place of leaves. There are also small birds between the larger motifs near the hem. The sleeve border displays an elaborate floral meander, more complex than that seen in Fig. 11. It should be noted that colors change more frequently on this piece; even each picot ring is more than one color.

A young bride would continue to wear this red color for the period she was considered newly married. After that passed, she would wear a burgundy, dark green, or dark blue silk chemise on festival days. Dark green signified that the woman's husband was away; since these were seafaring people, this color must have been common (Hatzimichali, 1930, p. 143).

*Skiathos, Sporades Islands.* Of the northern Aegean islands known as the Sporades, Skiathos is the closest to the mainland. It is near the coast of the Pilion peninsula, where Trikeri is located. Understandably, the chemise of Skiathos, illustrated in Fig. 15, is in some ways related to those of Trikeri. The fabric is crisp, sheer red silk, like the wedding chemises in Fig. 13 and 14. Insertion stitched seams and gilt lace joining the sleeve seams are also similarities.

The placement of embroidery is unusual in the Skiathos chemise. From the shoulder to the bottom of the neck-opening there is a narrow gilt mesh band applied over the top of the fabric, a remainder of the old Byzantine clavi. The fitted velvet jacket that was worn with this chemise was cut away in the front to reveal the decorated neck and shoulder area. The border at the neck-opening and around the sleeves

is embroidered in gilt and silver threads in a flower and leaf design. A picot-like edging was applied to both neck and sleeve edge. Around the hem there is a row of small silk eyelets in alternating colors, like a floral meander.

*Epirus.* Two chemises in the collection are attributed to Epirus, a region in the northwestern portion of mainland Greece. Epirus was under Turkish rule from the 15th century until 1912, and its capital city Ioannina was the Turkish seat of government for all northern Greece and Albania. The famous Ali Pasha arrived in 1788, establishing his opulent court there. The city quickly developed a reputation for trade and craftwork, including gold embroidery which was sold all over the Balkans.

The chemise pictured in Fig. 16 and 17 was purchased by Miss Henrietta Brewer in Athens in 1925. Because the neckline was not finished, we can assume that this garment was never worn. This is a rather unusual piece in that it has two columns of floral sprays reaching from the hem to the waist area, unlike other published Epirote chemises, which have no skirt embroidery.

This piece is a prime example of the metal thread embroidery Epirus was famous for. Both silver and gilt threads were used. The neckline (Fig. 16) is lavishly embellished with curvilinear carnations and leaves. The arrangement of the leafy branch at the bottom of the neckline is reminiscent of the Turkish rose spray found on Epirote cushion-covers. The top and bottom sleeve seams, and the front chemise seams are embroidered with flower sprays which alternate direction (Fig. 17). There are seven sprays on each sleeve, both top and bottom, and fourteen on each seam of the front panel. Small sprigs of leaves repeat around the entire hem. Back seams are joined with decorative insertion stitches resembling lace-work which are the same height as the front embroidery.

Fig. 18 illustrates an extremely fine example of metallic embroidery on the sleeves and neckline of a linen chemise, attributed by the donors to Ioannina. Museum records date it to the 18th century.

The motifs are Anatolian in nature. On either side of the neck opening, there are flower bearing branches with a crowned bird in the center (Fig. 19). Birds like this were common motifs for Turkish pottery, and before that, for decorative woven silks of the Near East. An often-seen feature of the Epirote chemise neckline is a switch from metal thread to white silk thread at the back of the neck and the bottom of the slit opening.

This chemise is also embroidered on the upper seam of the sleeve in a floral branch motif. When worn, these wide sleeves would be visible from the elbow down, as the sleeves of the coat were open to the elbow. To understand how these chemises looked when they were worn with silk coats, see the catalog accompanying the Textile Museum's exhibition of Greek island embroidery (Trilling, 1983, pp. 88-89).

Epirote women also embroidered domestic textiles. Silk embroidered cushion-

covers, bed-covers and hangings in dark tones of red, green, yellow, blue, and black must have been fairly abundant because there are many in American collections. Typical designs were Turkish brocade-like rose sprays in ogival frames. Human figures in elaborate court costumes are also found on cushion covers.

*Leukas, Ionian Islands.* The Ionian Island of Leukas is near enough to Epirus to have its chemises bear some resemblance to those just discussed. The cut and placement of the ornamentation is related to Epirote chemises, but the embroidery itself is Italian rather than Turkish in nature. Leukas was under Turkish rule during the late 15th and 16th centuries, but was returned to Venice in the 17th century.

Two of the Metropolitan's chemises are from Leukas. Both are typical of the white-on-white embroidery from this island, which on the chemises is located around the neckline and on the sleeve. When worn, they must have been similar to what 15th- and 16th-century Italian shirts were like, with their delicate edgings visible only at the neckline or from under a sleeve.

It is evident, however, that the chemise in Fig. 20 was never worn as the neckline has not been cut. Every other detail of the chemise was completed. This uncut neckline, along with the unfinished neckline of Fig. 16, leads the author to believe that chemises in some parts of Greece may have been placed in the dowry chest not quite finished, and only when needed were the necklines cut and edged. This is also true of Turkish chemises seen by the author.

The embroidery motifs at the neckline, although difficult to distinguish from a distance, consist of a narrow border of diagonal floral sprigs alternating with birds (Fig. 21), and a larger area on either side with pairs of flowers between confronted birds. Johnstone calls these motifs "Italian/Mediterranean" and cites that they constantly recur in embroideries from Epirus, the Ionian Islands, and the Cyclades Islands (Johnstone, 1972, p. 23). The sleeve embroidery consists of floral sprays. There are small repeating sprigs around the skirt hem.

The seaming of this chemise is of a type of needlework known as "dantela." "Dantela" is the Greek word for the lacework which was introduced by the Italians in the 16th century (Zora, 1981, p. 12). The front and back vertical seams are joined by elaborate insertion stitches with small lacey gores near the hem.

The other Leukas chemise shows a little variation from the one just described. The motifs used in the embroidery are similar, however the birds are not confronted in pairs and are larger than those in Fig. 20 and 21.

*Patmos, Dodecanese Islands.* Patmos is the northernmost island in the Dodecanese group. Since the 11th century it has been the site of the Monastery of St. John the Divine, which saved it from marauders in the Middle Ages. The relatively peaceful existence may be the explanation for why the Byzantine form of decoration

survived in costume. It was under Venetian control until the Turks gained power in the early 1500's.

When the chemise illustrated in Fig. 22 and 23 was accessioned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the registrar assigned only a provenance of Greece. Because it is almost identical to a published chemise from Patmos (Apostolaki, 1932, p. 52, Fig. 27), the author believes it is from Patmos. This is further reinforced by its similarity in technique and placement of motif to a chemise in the Textile Museum attributed to the nearby island of Kalymnos.

The most unusual feature of this chemise is the placement of the exquisite embroidery, which consists of repeating single floral sprays. The motif is repeated thirteen times in columns next to the seams of the central panel in both the front and the back (Fig. 22). No other chemise had such long clavi-type bands in the back. A larger version of the same motif is repeated four times at both the top and bottom of the sleeve seam (Fig. 23).

The floral embroidery motif is worked in a loosely twisted silk yarn, similar to that of other Dodecanese embroidery. On closer inspection of the embroidery thread, we see that instead of being plied in the usual "S" direction, it is plied "Z". Anytime two single yarns are plied in the same direction in which they were originally twisted, the resultant yarn tends to untwist, giving it a loose, raised appearance. The stitch appears to be half-cross stitch in pale colors with no two flowers worked in exactly the same color combination. Silver metal thread in a double darning stitch is used to fill in certain areas.

This chemise is dated 19th century in museum records, but it may be earlier. Tarsouli illustrates a different type of costume for Patmos in her book of Dodecanese costumes (Tarsouli, 1951), which implies that this was part of an older costume. The use of pale colors, similar to 18th-century Turkish embroideries, suggests that it was made in the 1700's.

*Tilos, Dodecanese Islands.* The chemise seen in Fig. 24 and 25 was purchased by Henrietta Brewer in Athens in 1925. She was told it was from Rhodes. However, the embroidery design on the sleeves tells us it is from the island of Tilos (Johnstone, 1972, p. 44).

This chemise displays a variant of embroidery characteristic of the Dodecanese Islands. We see the traditional color palette of red and green, the heavy raised embroidery, and the stylized plant motifs. These islands were renowned for extensive use of embroidery on cushion-covers, valances, hangings, and most importantly, elaborate tents used for the nuptial bed which were hung on wooden rings suspended from the ceiling.

The sleeves of the Tilos chemise (Fig. 24) are embellished with vertical stripes of small green flowers, much like the chemise from the neighboring islands of Astypalaia and Nisyros. The distinction is that sleeves from Tilos were not as densely embroidered as the others, and the pattern seems to have been limited to green stripes. The shoulder area and the U-shaped neckline are embellished in patterns similar to the other islands just discussed.

The sleeves are linen, whereas the body of the dress is cotton. Other published Tilos chemises have this same feature (Johnstone, 1972, p. 44).

The hem (Fig. 23) of this chemise is worked in a narrow border of designs called by some authorities "vase patterns" (Benaki, 1948, p. 67), although in Dodecanese embroidery they are abstracted to the point of no longer being identifiable as such. Color alternates from red to green to taupe. Each of the four skirt seams are ornamented with a Cretan feather stitch.

Typical of the embroidery of the Dodecanese is the use of a loosely twisted silk thread in a stitch which gives a raised textural appearance to the work. There is some confusion in the literature as to what the stitch used really is. Johnstone and the Benaki Museum label it cross stitch, while embroidery expert Gostelow calls it "Astypalaia stitch" (Gostelow, 1977, p. 158), which is really a raised chevron stitch. After closely examining the embroidery, we see that Gostelow is correct. This stitch is worked in two stages: first, a foundation is laid in parallel rows of small V's which do not show in the finished embroidery; secondly, the foundation is re-embroidered in the thick silk thread which does not pass through the ground material. In a chemise from Astypalaia in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the foundation thread is cotton, and the raised thread is thick silk.

*Psara, Eastern Aegean Islands.* Psara is east of the Sporades Islands. A hem from a chemise the author attributes to Psara, because of its similarity to a chemise in the Folk Art Museum of Athens (Zora, 1981, Fig. 15), is illustrated in Fig. 26. The ground fabric of the chemise is a striped fabric called "safido". All the yarns are white, but by using silk warps in groups against other cotton warps, a shiny stripe is achieved. The wefts are silk. The sleeves are made from a different fabric, a cotton gauze.

The hem of the skirt is embroidered in repeating motifs in white silk. Each motif has three branches bearing four-petaled flowers. Below runs a floral meander border.

The "dantela" needle lace is exceptional in this piece. Skirt seams are open at the hem to allow for "aratzidela", the narrow lace work which connects two widths of cloth. The hem has a wide "bibila" edging in a floral pattern. Both sleeve and neckline also have narrow "bibila" edgings. Very little of the chemise showed in the

final costume. In a photograph of a married woman of Psara taken around the turn of the century, the delicate edgings barely show beneath the hem of an ankle-length Western styled overdress (Papantoniou, 1978, p. 33).

A head scarf with an embroidered border, and a sash for the waist were donated as part of the same costume.

### **Summary**

Through illustration and discussion of 19 of the 29 chemises in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection, the diversity of the Greek embroidery tradition has been seen. Depending on influences from earlier cultures, specifically Byzantine, Italian, and Turkish, distinctive variations in embroidery developed on the universally-worn woman's chemise. From the complex solidly embroidered hem-borders of Attica, to the metallic embroideries of Epirus, to the textural red and green embroideries of the Dodecanese Islands, we see that Greek embroidery on women's chemises gives us a unique opportunity to study regional embroidery traditions.



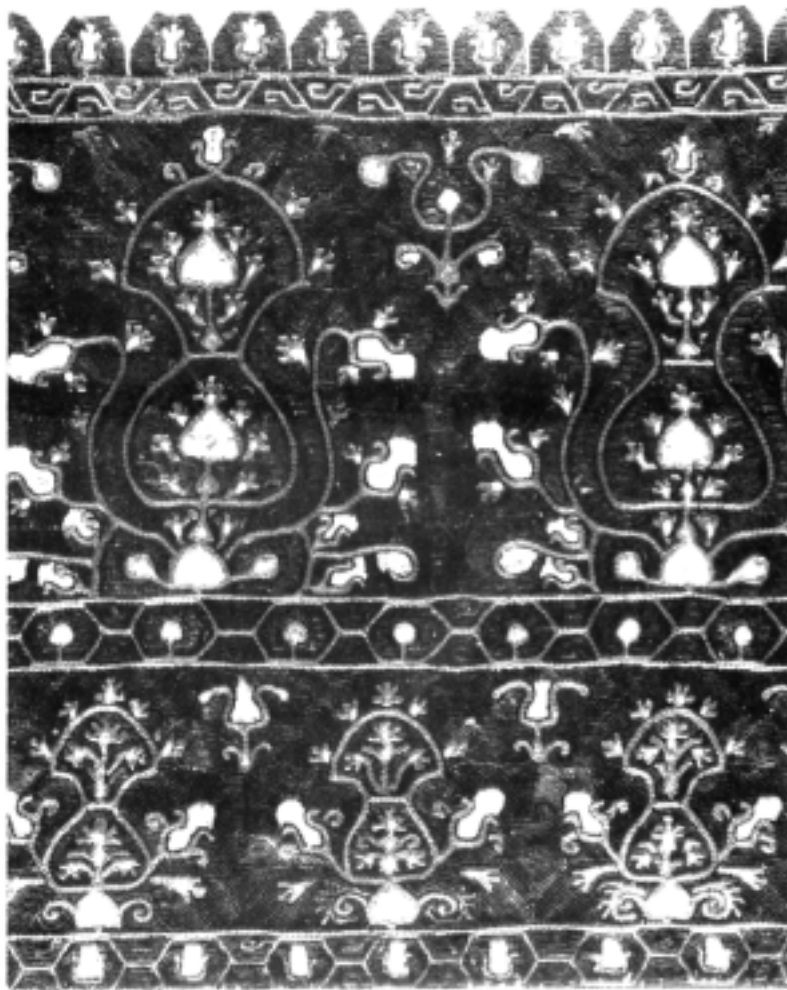


Fig. 1. Hem detail, Attica, mid-19th century, 38 cm. border (Mrs. Van S. Merle-Smith, CI L41.11.45).  
Photo: Gunnel Teitel.

Technical analysis:

warp - cotton, single, Z twist

weft - cotton, single, Z twist

embellishment threads - silk, 2 ply, S twist

stitches - gobelin, stem, and satin; hem edged with silk cord

colors - black, red, dark green, dark blue, light blue, and peach on white ground

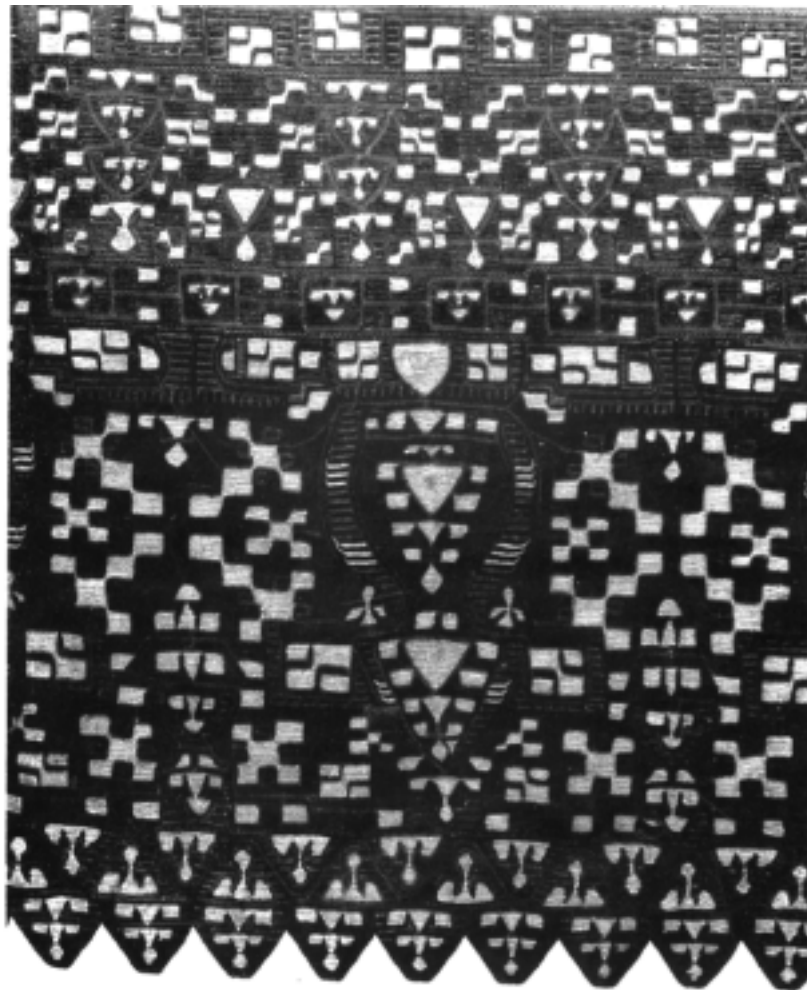


Fig. 2. Hem detail, Attica, 2nd half of 19th century, 45 cm. border (Mrs. Van S. Merle-Smith, CI 41.110.23).  
Photo: Gunnel Teitel

Technical analysis:

warp - cotton, single, Z twist

weft - cotton, single, Z twist

embellishment threads - silk, 2 ply, S twist

stitches -gobelin, stem, outline; hem edged with silk cord

colors - black, blue, green, magenta, pink, light green, and light blue on white ground



Fig. 3. Hem detail, Attica, from the village of Vilia, late 19th century, 16 cm. border (Irene Lewisohn and Mrs. Alice Lewisohn Crowley, CI 46.9.197).  
Photo: Gunnel Teitel.

Technical analysis:

warp - cotton, single, Z twist

weft - cotton, single, Z twist

embellishment threads - silk, 2 ply, S twist

stitches -gobelin and chain; hem edged in fishbone stitch

colors - black, red, dark green, and dark blue on white ground

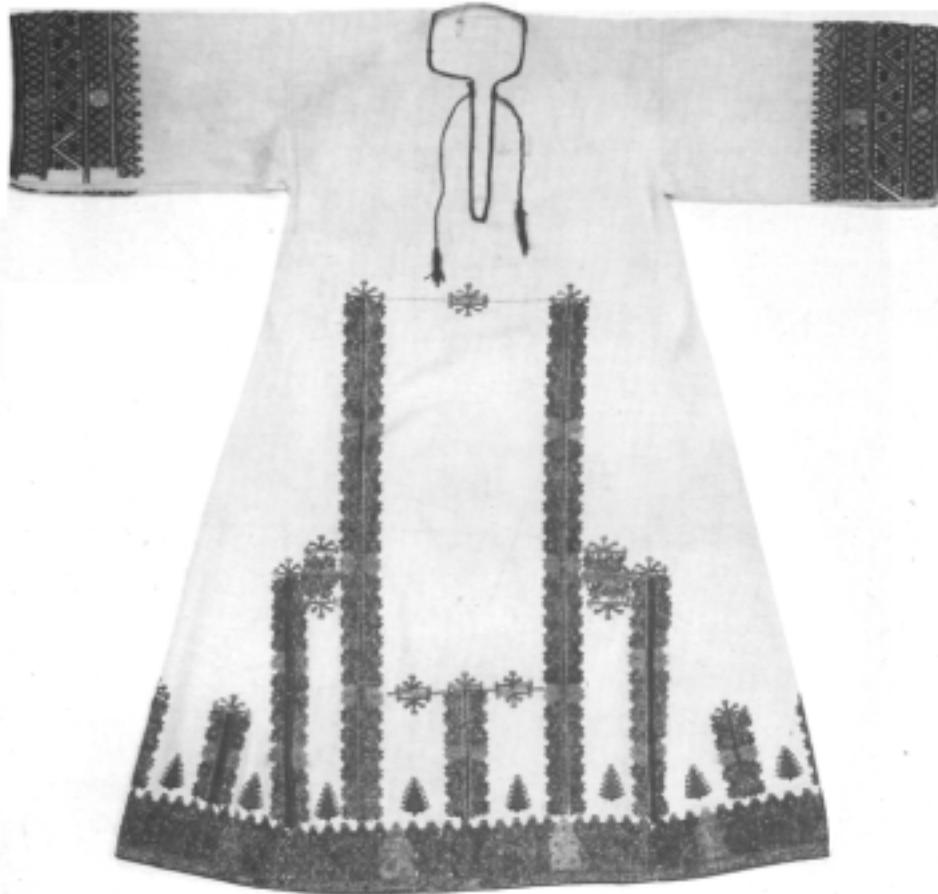


Fig. 4. Woman's chemise, Corinthia, possibly Voha, late 19th century, 122 cm. x 127 cm. (width at sleeves), (Miss Louise M. Iselin, CI 47.45.A).  
Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Technical analysis:

warp - cotton, single, Z twist

weft - cotton, single, Z twist

embellishment threads - silk, 2 ply, S twist

cotton, 2 ply, S twist

stitches - running, double running, pattern darning, backstitch, stem, and Cretan stitch over seams, hem edged in fishbone stitch

colors - predominantly black with gold, red, green, and blue on white ground

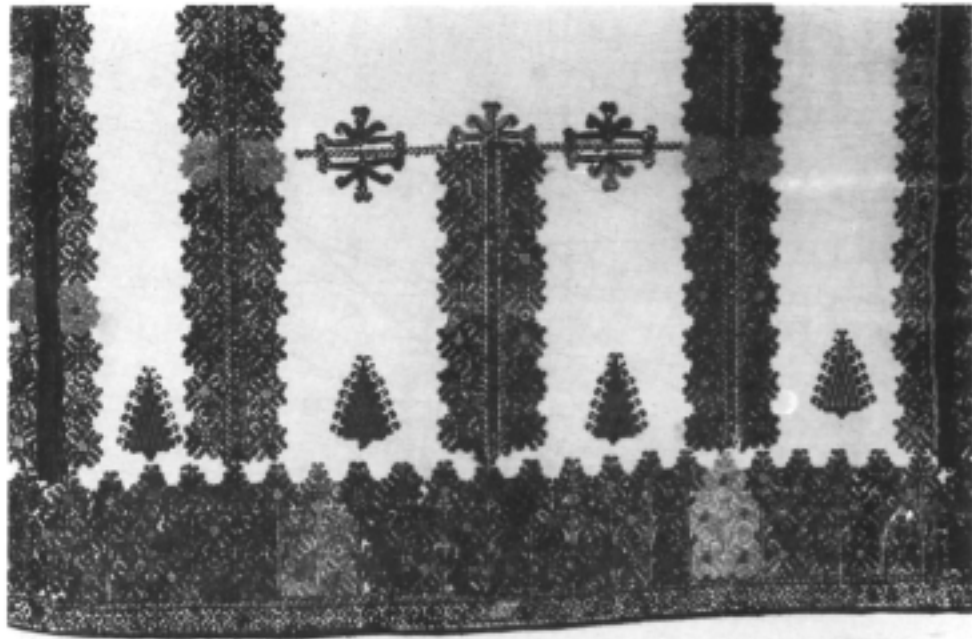


Fig. 5. Detail of Fig. 4, center front at hem.  
Photo: Gunnel Teitel.

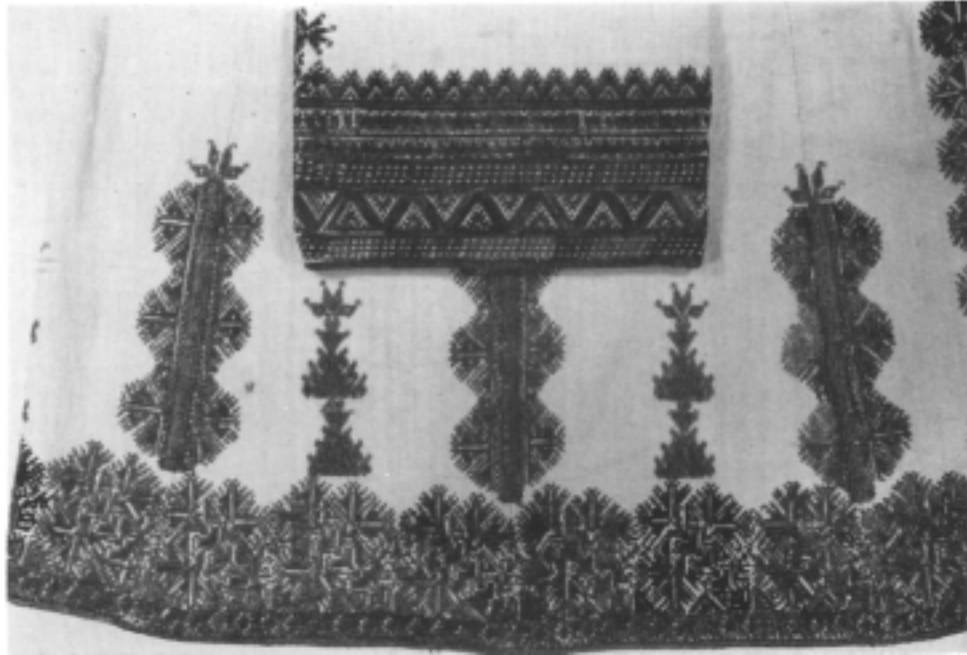


Fig. 6. Hem and sleeve detail, Argolis-Corinthia, 19th century, (Mrs. Van S. Merle-Smith, CI L41.11.44).  
Photo: Gunnel Teitel.

Technical analysis:

warp - cotton, single, Z twist

weft - cotton, single, Z twist

embellishment threads - cotton, 2 and 3 ply, S twist

stitches - pattern darning, cross, back, gobelin, and Cretan stitch on seams; hem edged in long-armed cross stitch

colors - predominantly red with small areas of blue on white ground

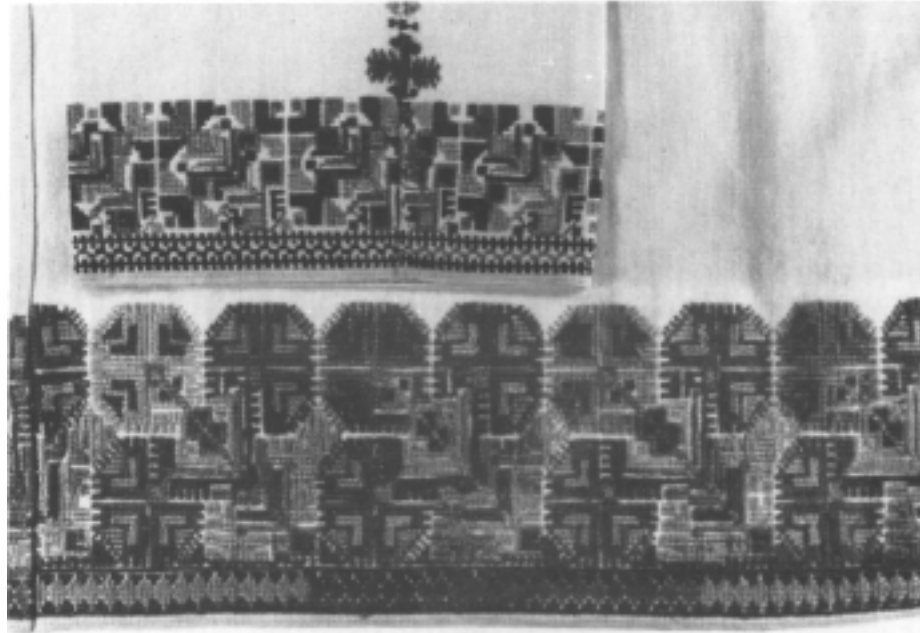


Fig. 7. Hem and sleeve detail, Central Greece, Atalandi, late 19th century, 12 cm. hem border, 6.5 cm. sleeve border (Miss Irene Lewisohn, CI 39.91.7A).  
Photo: Gunnel Teitel.

Technical analysis:

warp - cotton, single, Z twist

weft - cotton, single, Z twist

embellishment threads - silk, 2 ply, S twist

stitches - cross, outline, running, pattern darning (collar), satin and pattern darning (sleeve)

colors - red, green, gold, peach, and faded black on white ground

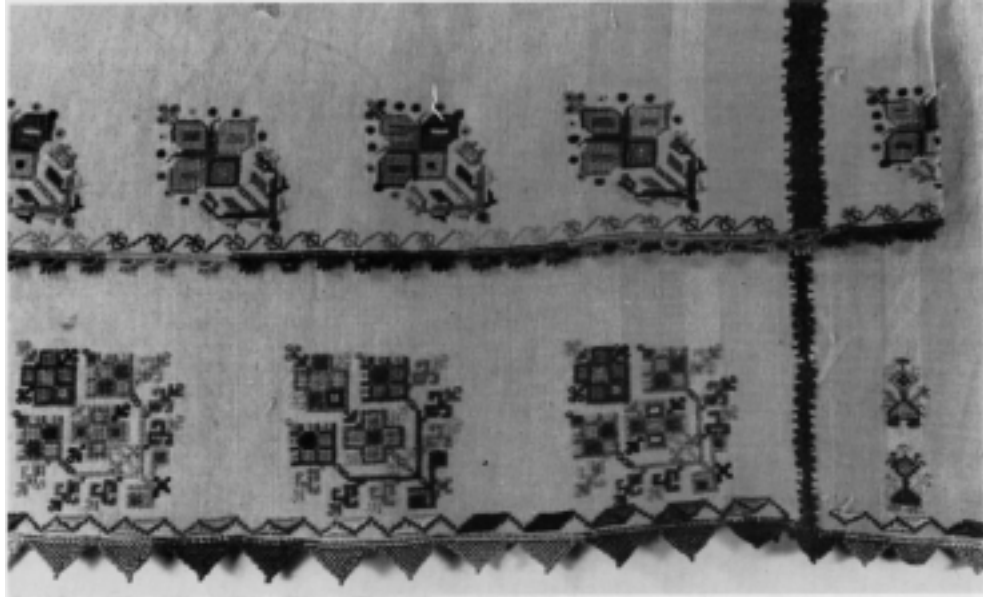


Fig. 8. Hem and sleeve detail, Thessaly, Trikeri, late 19th century, 5 cm. hem border. From the collection of Miss Henrietta F. Brewer of Oakland, California (Mrs. Van S. Merle-Smith, CI 53.21.5). Photo: Gunnel Teitel.

Technical analysis:

warp - linen, single, Z twist with silk selvedge stripes

weft - linen, single, Z twist

embellishment threads - silk, 2 ply, S twist

stitches - cross, satin, eyelet, and drawn filling; seams joined with various insertion stitches; neckline, sleeve and hem edged with various picot stitches.

colors - red, pink, blue, green, tan and black on white ground



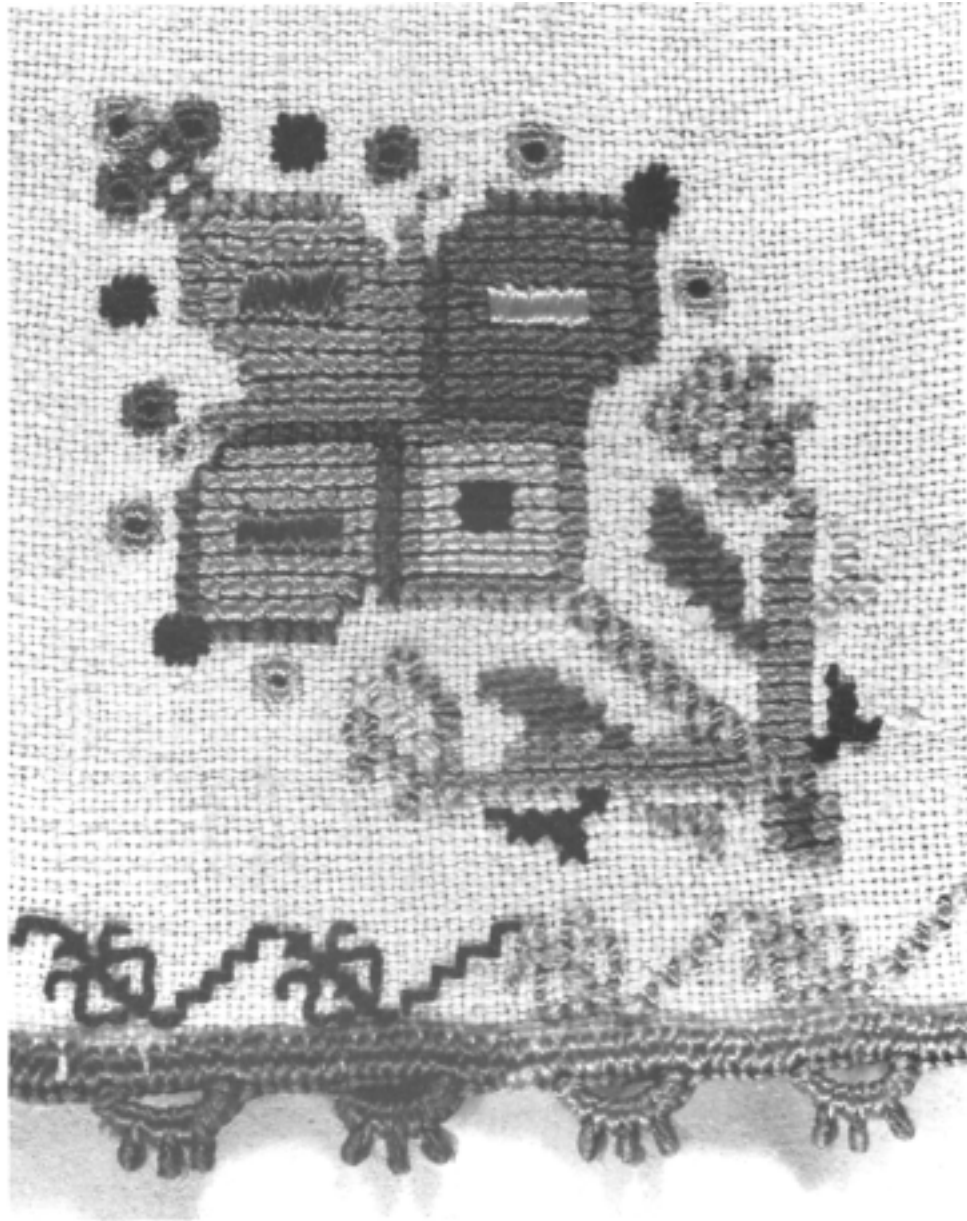


Fig. 9. Close up of Fig. 8, sleeve edge, 4 cm. border.  
Photo: Gunnel Teitel.

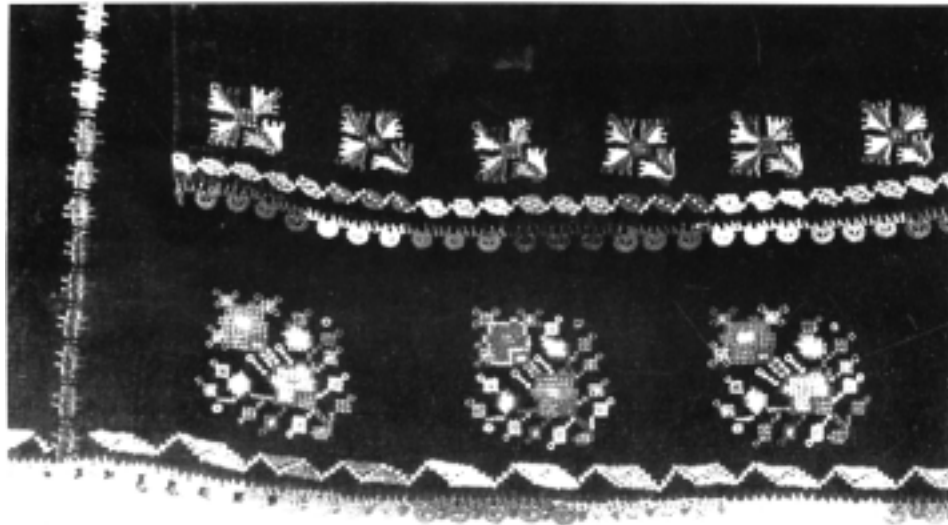


Fig. 10. Hem and sleeve detail, Thessaly, Trikeri, 19th century, 5.5 cm. hem border (Mrs. Van S. Merle-Smith, CI 41.110.118).  
Photo: Gunnel Teitel.

Technical analysis:

warp - linen, single, Z twist with silk selvedge stripes

weft - linen, single, Z twist

embellishment threads - silk, 2 ply, Z twist

stitches - cross, satin, eyelet, and back; seams joined with various insertion stitches; neckline, sleeve and hem edged in picot ring stitches

colors - red, yellow, green, blue, pink and white on dark blue ground

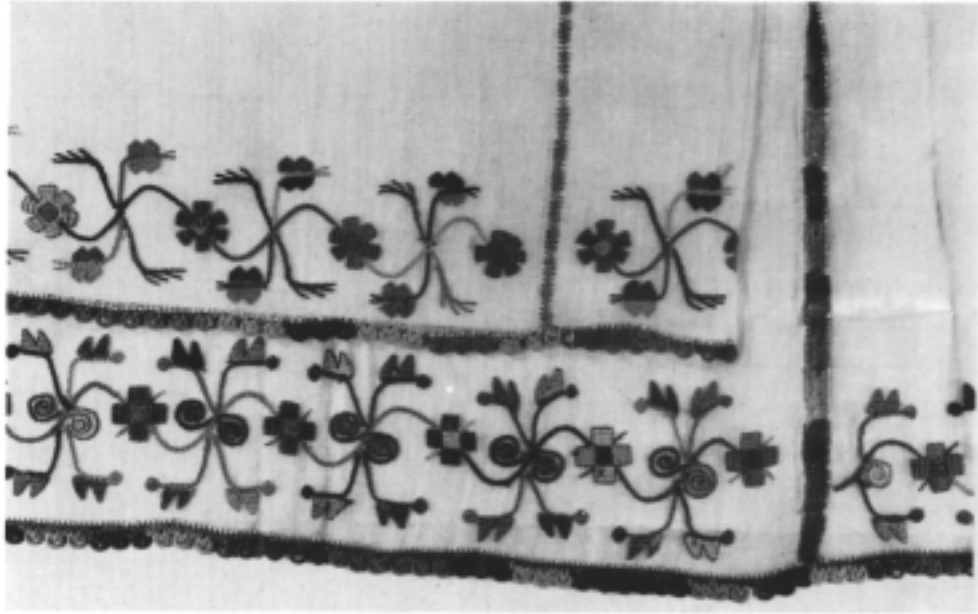


Fig. 11. Hem and sleeve detail, Thessaly, Trikeri, 2nd half of 19th century, 7 cm. hem border (Mrs. Van S. Merle-Smith, CI L41.11.40).  
Photo: Gunnel Teitel.

Technical analysis:

warp - silk, single, Z twist

weft - silk, single, Z twist

embellishment threads - silk, 2 ply, S twist

stitches - double darning; seams joined with various insertion stitches; sleeve and hem edged in picot ring stitches

colors - black, blue, yellow, 2 shades of green, and 2 shades of red on white ground

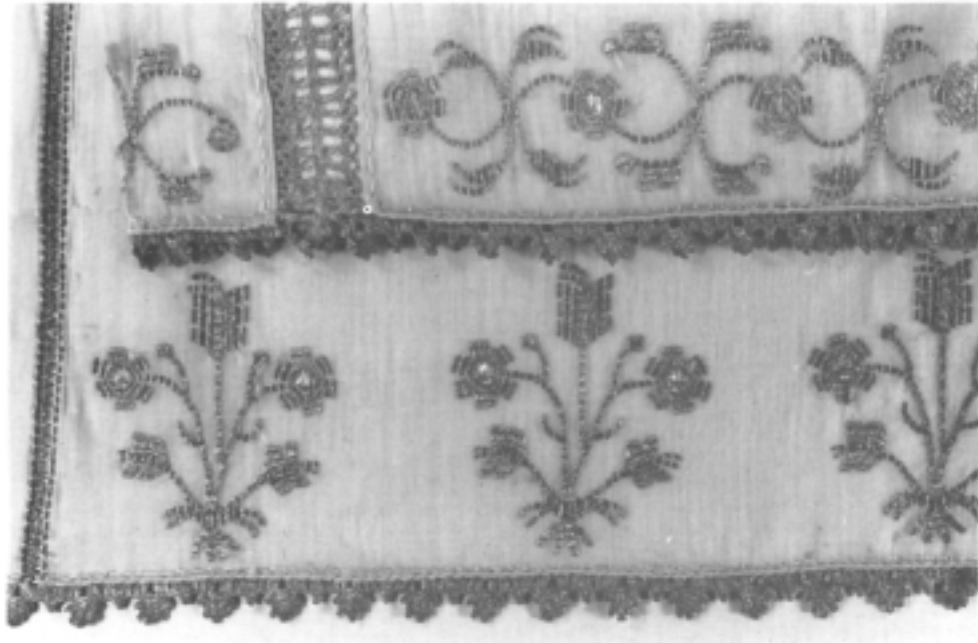


Fig. 12. Hem and sleeve detail, Thessaly, Trikeri, late 19th-early 20th century, 8 cm. hem border (Irene Lewisohn Bequest, CI 61.18.1B).  
Photo: Gunnel Teitel.

Technical analysis:

warp - silk, single, Z twist

weft - silk, single, Z twist

embellishment threads -metallic (gilt wrap, yellow silk core),  
2 ply, S twist; silk, 2 ply, S twist

stitches -double darning and satin; seams in body joined with silk insertion  
stitches; sleeve seam joined with pre-made gold lace; sleeve and hem  
edged with pre-made gold lace

colors - gold motifs, red and white seams in body on white ground

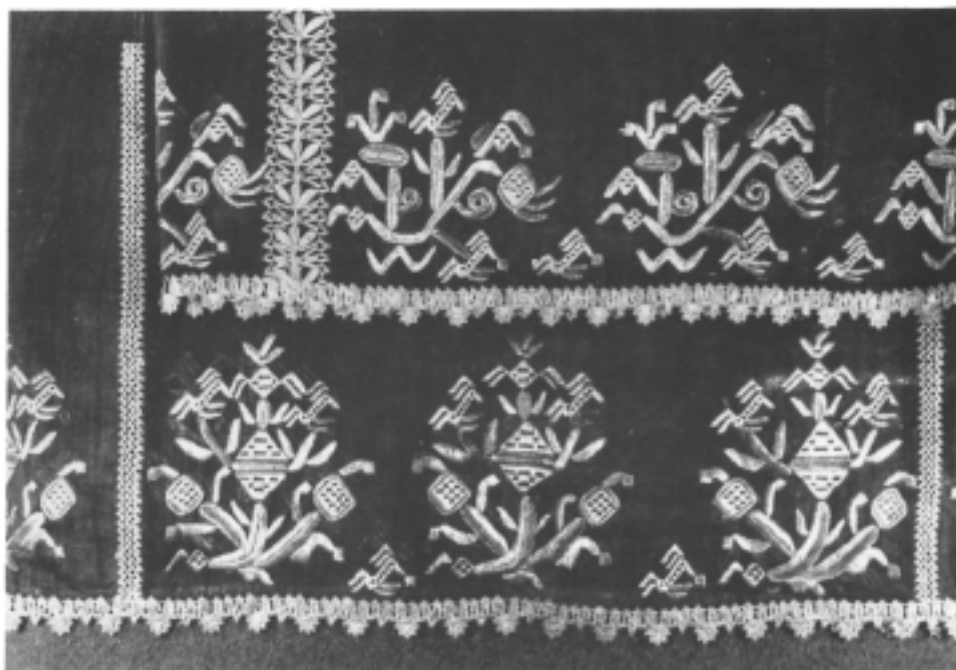


Fig. 13. Hem and sleeve detail, Thessaly, Trikeri, late 19th-early 20th century, 16 cm. hem border (Irene Lewisohn Bequest, CI 61.18.2B).  
Photo: Gunnel Teitel.

Technical analysis:

warp - silk, single, Z twist

weft - silk, single, Z twist

embellishment threads -metallic (gilt wrap, yellow silk core),  
2 ply, S twist  
silk, 2 ply, S twist

stitches -satin and fishbone; seams in body joined with insertion stitches; sleeve seam joined with pre-made gold lace; sleeve and hem edged with pre-made gold lace

colors - gold motifs; green seams in body on raspberry red ground

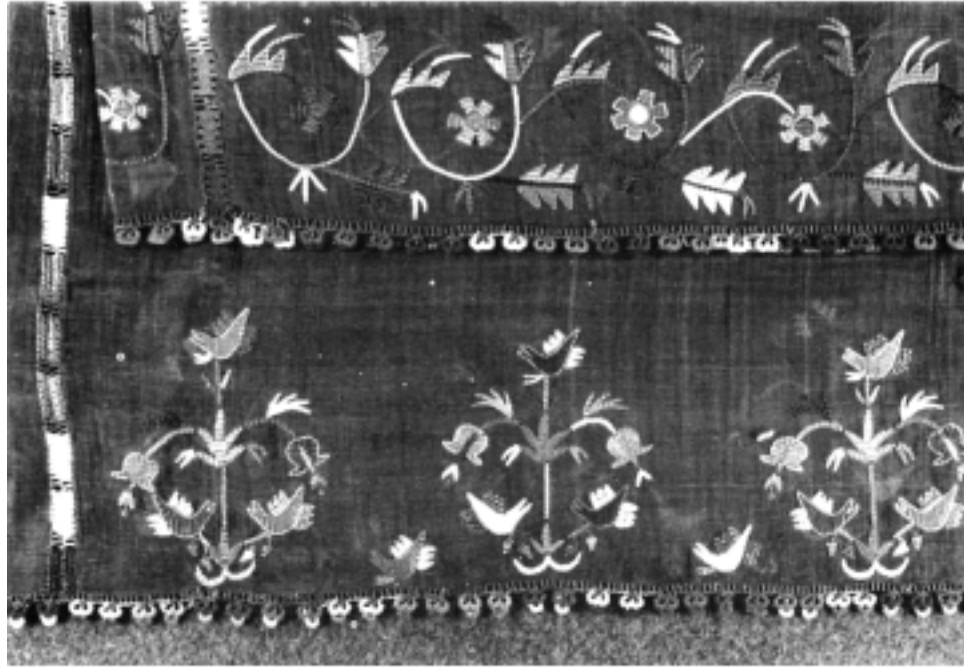


Fig. 14. Hem and sleeve detail, Thessaly, Trikeri, 19th century, 9 cm. hem border. From the collection of Miss Henrietta F. Brewer of Oakland, California (Mrs. Van S. Merle-Smith, CI 53.21.6). Photo: Gunnel Teitel.

Technical analysis:

warp - silk, single, Z twist

weft - silk, single, Z twist

embellishment threads - silk, 2 ply, S twist

stitches - double darning; seams joined with insertion stitches; neckline, sleeve, and hem edged in picot ring stitches

colors - red, pink, tan, white, gray, two shades of green, two shades of blue on red ground



Fig. 15. Woman's chemise, Sporades Islands, Skiathos, mid-19th century, 127 cm. x 159 cm. (width at sleeves) (Robert J. and Mary B. Monks, MMA 53.131.19). Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Technical analysis:

warp - silk, single, Z twist

weft - silk, single, Z twist

embellishment threads -metallic (gilt wrap, yellow silk core;  
silver wrap, white silk core),  
2 ply, S twist  
silk, 2 ply, S twist

stitches - satin, fishbone, double darning, eyelet; seams in body joined with  
insertion stitches; hem edged in picot stitch; sleeve edging, lace at  
sleeve seam, neck edging and vertical band at shoulder are pre-made  
before application

colors - gold, silver, green, dark blue, gold and white on dark red ground



Fig. 16. Neckline, Epirus, probably Ioannina, 19th century. From the collection of Miss Henrietta F. Brewer of Oakland, California (Mrs. Van S. Merle-Smith, CI 53.21. 10).

Photo: Gunnel Teitel.

Technical analysis:

warp - cotton, single, Z twist with silk selvedge stripes

weft - cotton, single, Z twist

embellishment threads -metallic (gilt wrap, silver wrap, yellow core), 2 ply, S twist  
silk, 2 ply, S twist

stitches -satin, drawn thread work; seams joined with insertion stitches

colors - gold, silver, and white on white ground



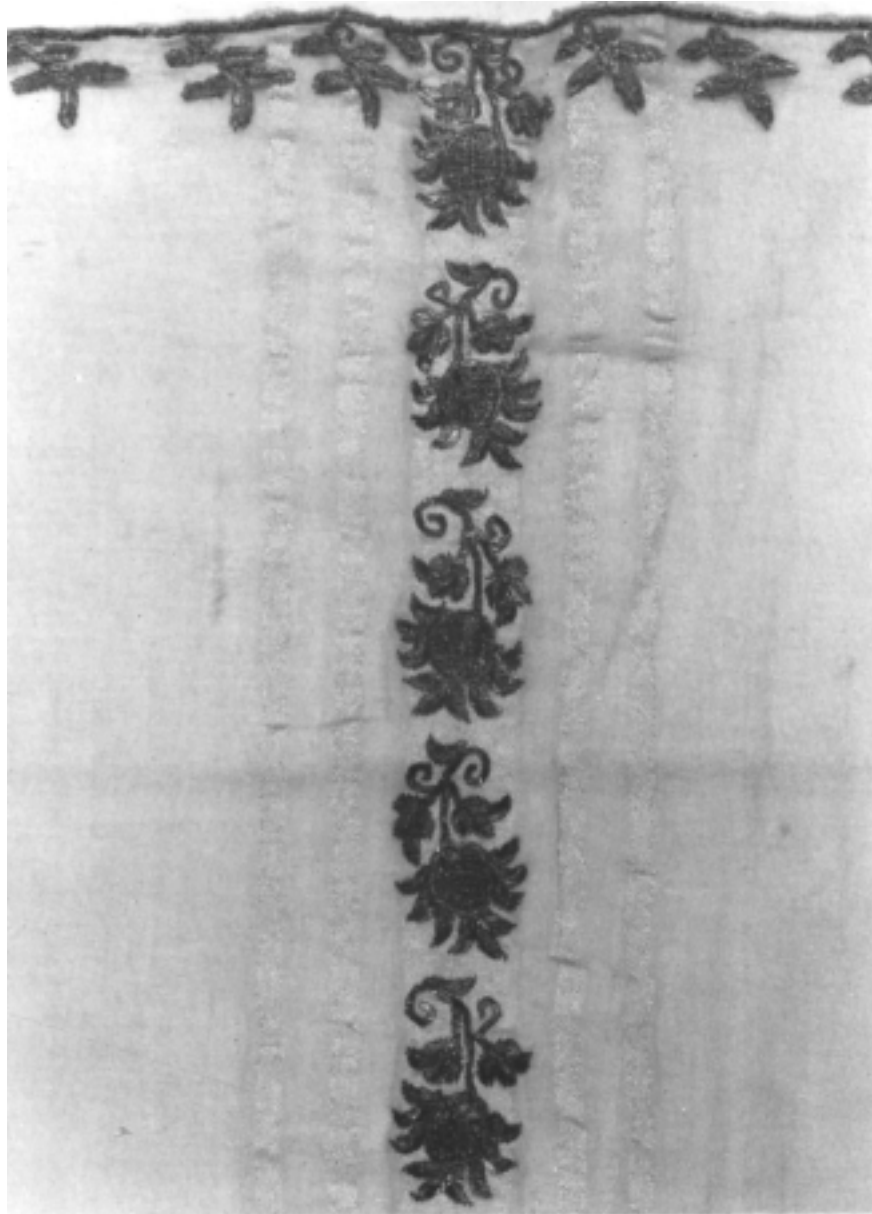


Fig. 17. Hem area of chemise illustrated in Fig. 16, 5 cm. hem border.  
Photo: Gunnel Teitel.

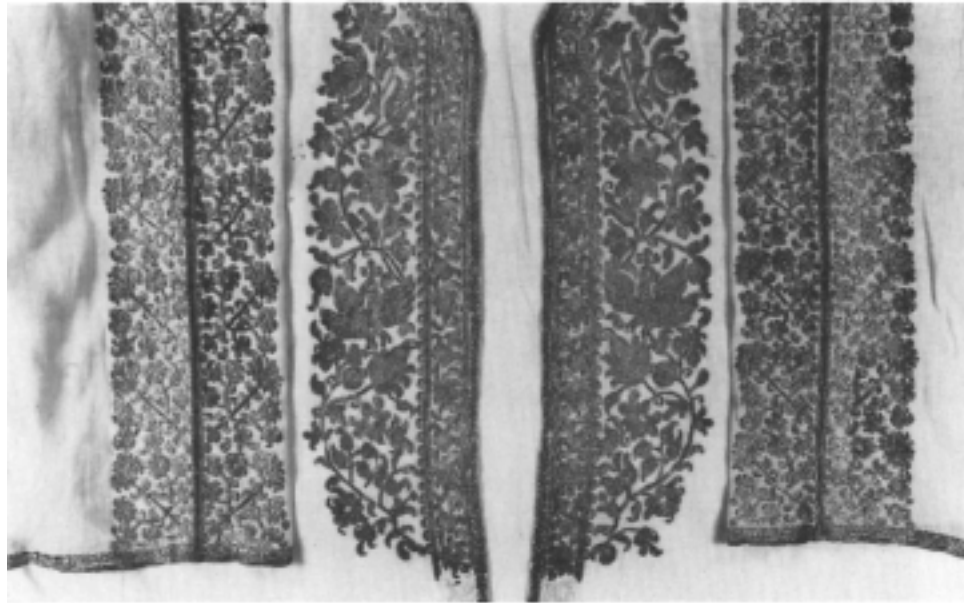


Fig. 18. Detail of neckline and sleeves, Epirus, Ioannina, 18th century (Robert J. and Mary B. Monks, 53.131.20).  
Photo: Gunnel Teitel

Technical analysis:

warp - linen, single, Z twist

weft - linen, single, Z twist

embellishment threads -metallic (gilt wrap, silver wrap, white silk core),  
2 ply, S twist  
silk, 2 ply, S twist

stitches -satin, eyelet, double darning, and overcasting; seams joined with insertion stitches

colors - gold, silver and white on white ground

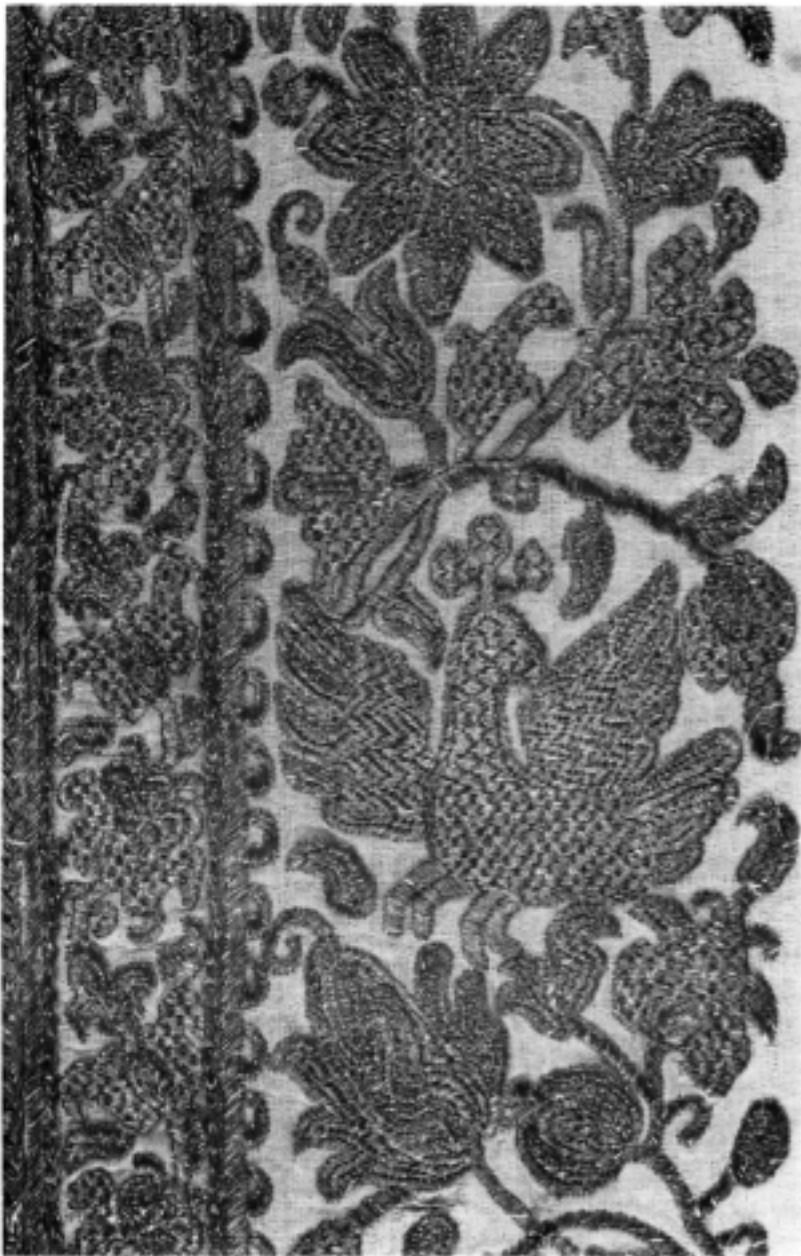


Fig. 19. Closeup of neckline illustrated in Fig. 18.  
Photo: Gunnel Teitel.



Fig. 20. Uncut neckline, Leukas, Ionian Islands, 18th-19th century. From the collection of Miss Henrietta F. Brewer of Oakland, California (Mrs. Van S. Merle-Smith, CI 53.21.19).  
Photo: Gunnel Teitel.

Technical analysis:

warp - cotton, single, Z twist

weft - cotton, single, Z twist

embellishment threads - linen, 2 ply, S twist

stitches - satin and eyelet; seams joined with various insertion stitches

colors - white on white ground

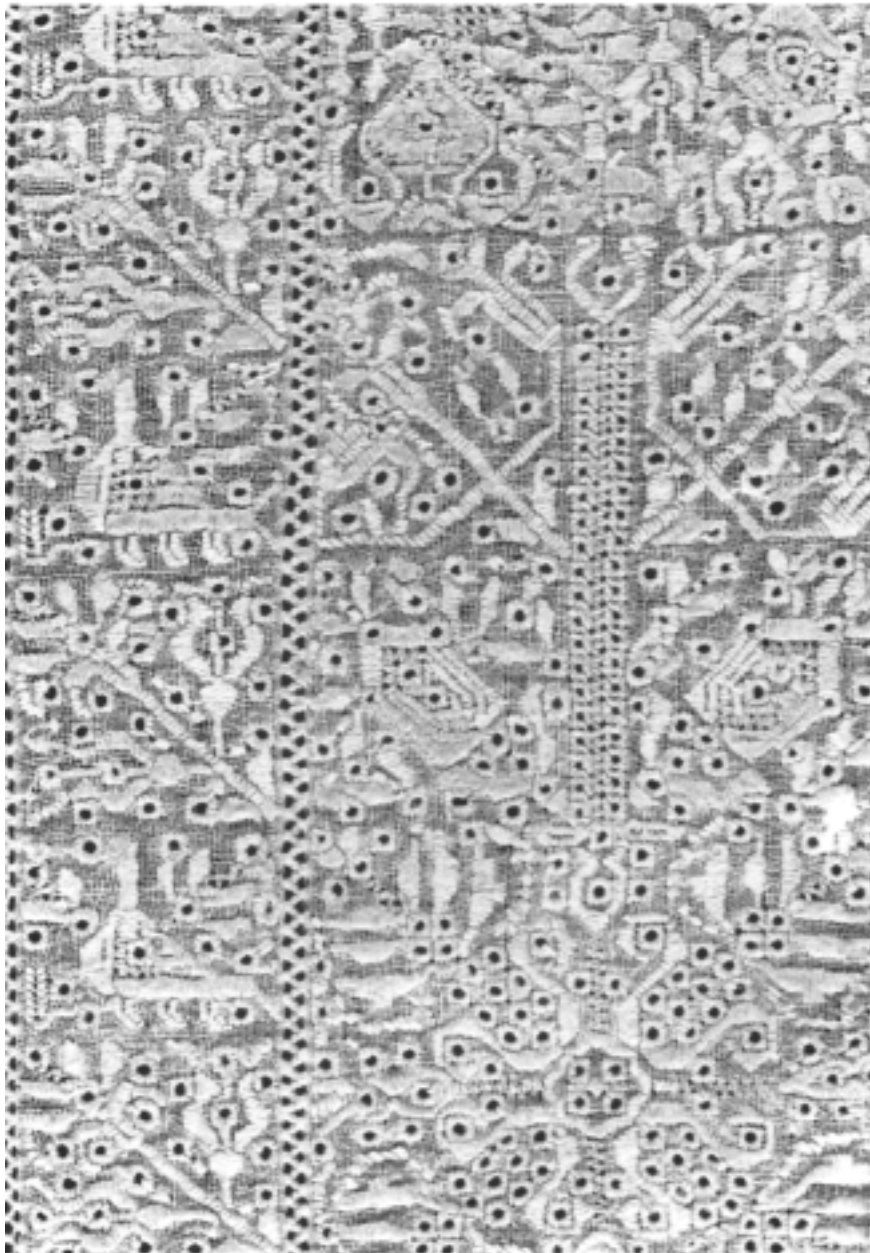


Fig. 21. Closeup of neckline illustrated in Fig. 20.  
Photo: Gunnel Teitel.

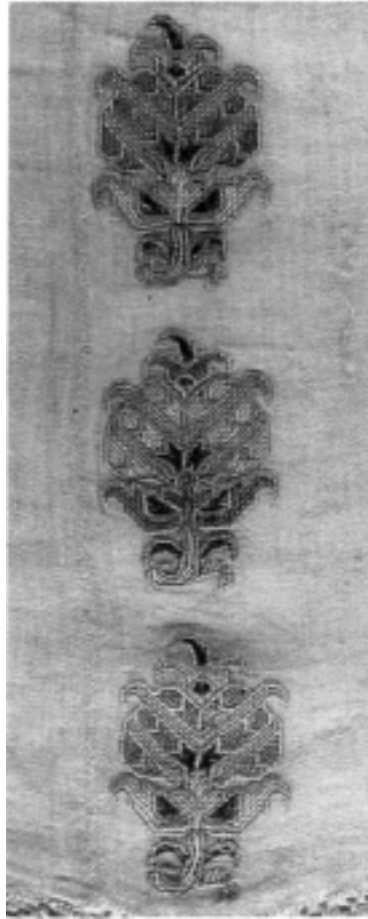


Fig. 22. Vertical band of flowers at front seam, Dodecanese Islands, Patmos, 18th century, motif height 4.75 cm. (Mr. and Mrs. Rafi Y. Mottahedeh, CI 1975. 344.10).  
Photo: Gunnel Teitel.

Technical analysis:

warp - linen, single, Z twist

weft - linen, single, Z twist

embellishment threads -metallic (silver wrap, yellow core),

2 ply, S twist

silk, 2 ply, Z twist

stitches -half cross; neckline and hem have cut work borders; sleeve seam is edge stitched

colors - pale hues of pink, blue, yellow and green; silver on white ground

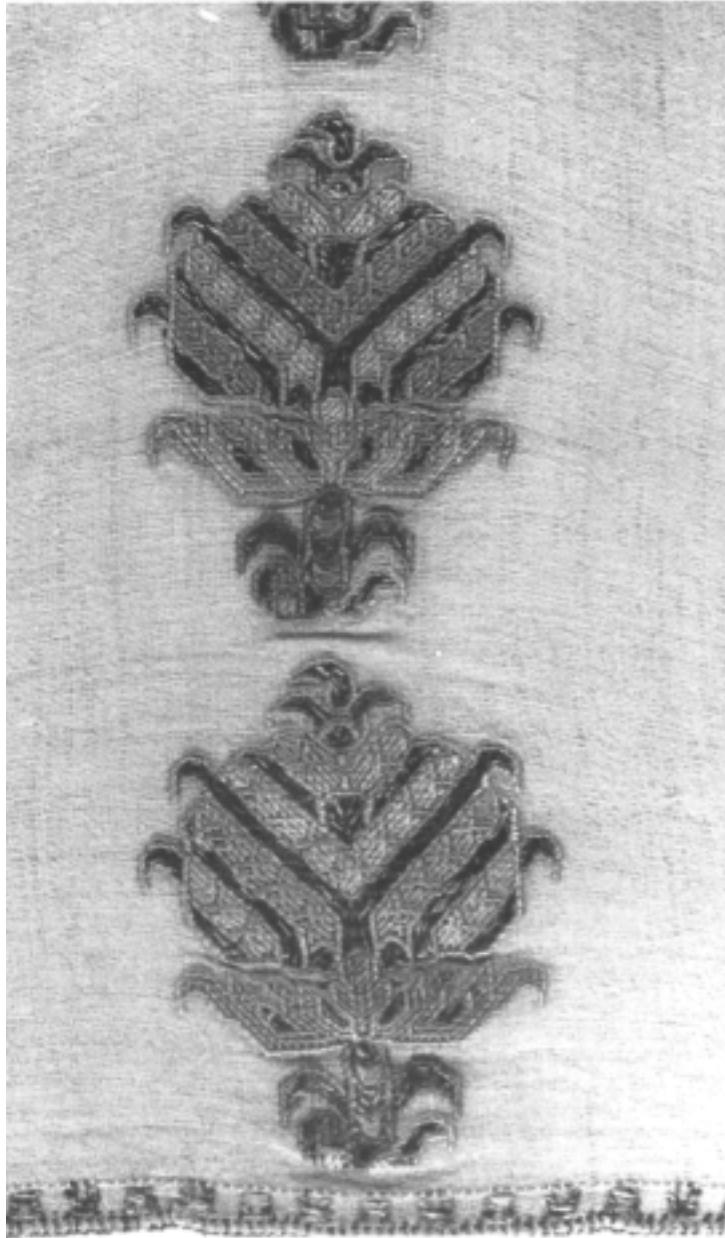


Fig. 23. Closeup of embroidery motif on sleeve of chemise front detail illustrated in Fig. 22, motif height 6.75 cm.  
Photo: Gunnel Teitel.

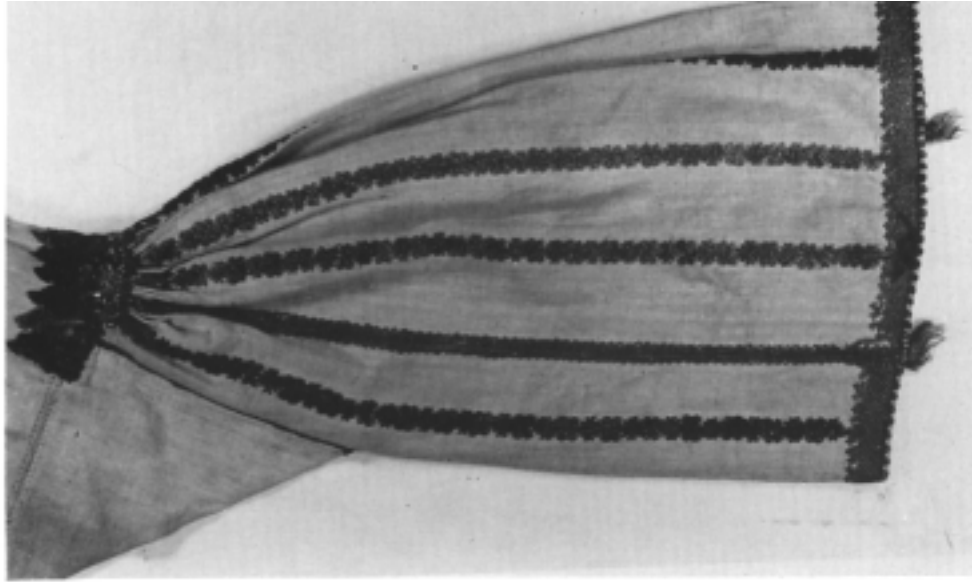


Fig. 24. Detail of sleeve, Dodecanese Islands, Tilos, 19th century, 47 cm. shoulder to sleeve edge. From the collection of Miss Henrietta F. Brewer of Oakland, California (Mrs. Van S. Merle-Smith, CI 53.21.7).  
Photo: Gunnel Teitel.

Technical analysis:

warp - linen, single, Z twist with cotton stripes

weft - linen, single, Z twist

embellishment threads - silk, 2 ply, S twist

stitches - raised chevron, running, double running, straight, long-armed cross, and Cretan stitch on seam

colors - red, gold, peach, taupe, 2 shades of green, 2 shades of blue on white ground



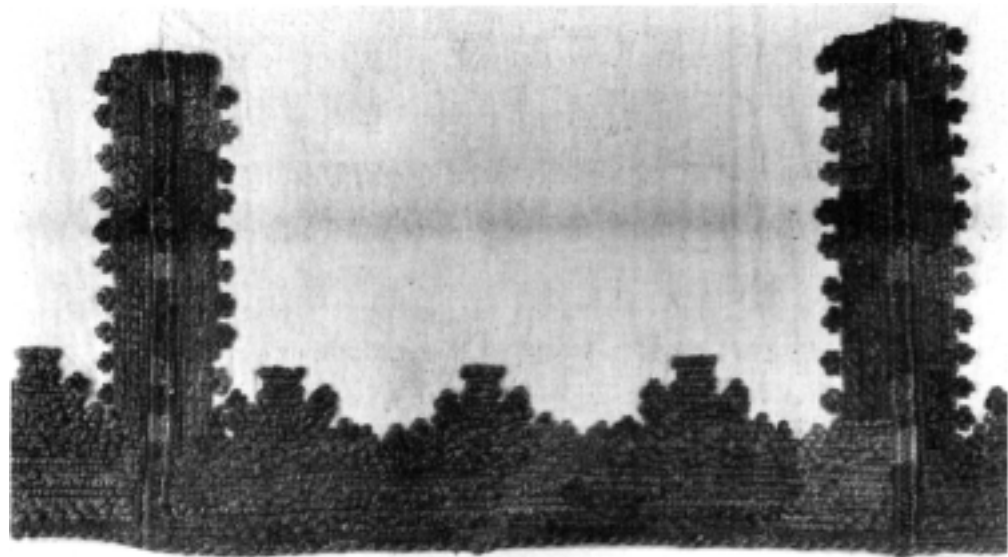


Fig. 25. Hem of chemise illustrated in Fig. 24, 7 cm. hem border.  
Photo: Gunnel Teitel.

Technical analysis:

warp - cotton, single, Z twist

weft - cotton, single, Z twist

embellishment threads - silk, 2 ply, S twist

stitches - raised chevron, running, double running, straight, long-armed cross,  
and Cretan stitch on seams

colors - red, green, gold, and faded black on white ground



Fig. 26. Hem detail, E. Aegean Islands, Psara, 19th century, 8 cm. hem border (Miss Irene Lewisohn, CI 42.93.1A).  
Photo: Gunnel Teitel.

Technical analysis:

warp - cotton, single, Z twist with wide silk selvedge stripes

weft - silk, single, Z twist

embellishment threads - silk, single, twist (?)

stitches -satin, eyelet, cross, hem, and lattice; seams joined with complex insertion stitch; hem edged with needlelace

colors - white on white ground

## Bibliography

### Books

- Apostolaki, Anna. *Ta Koptika Yfasmata Tou Enathenes Mousiou Kosmetikon Techne*. Athens: Typografion "Estia", 1932.
- Benaki, Antony E., ed. *Hellenic National Costumes*. Athens: Benaki Museum. Vol. I, 1948. Vol. II, 1954.
- Benaki Museum. *Crete-Dodecanese-Cyclades Embroideries*. Athens: Benaki Museum, 1966.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Epirus and Ionian Islands Embroideries*. Athens: Benaki Museum, 1965.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Greek Embroideries*. Athens: Benaki Museum, 1980.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Skyros Embroideries*. Athens: Benaki Museum, 1965.
- Burlington Fine Arts Club, *Catalogue of A Collection of Old Embroideries of the Greek Islands and Turkey*. London: 1914.
- Gostelow, Mary. *The Complete International Book of Embroidery*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977.
- Gouel-Badieritakis, Jean. *To Gynekio Paradosiako Poukamiso Tis Epirotikis Elladas*. ("The Traditional Woman's Chemises of Mainland Greece.") Athens: 1980.
- Hatzimichali, Angeliki. *Art Populaire Grec*. Athens: Pysos, SA, 1931.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Epirotike Laike Techne*. En Ioanninois: 1930.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Greek Folk Costume*. Vol. I. Edited by Tatiana Ioannou-Yiannara and Angelos Delivorrias. Athens: Benaki Museum and Melissa Publishing House, 1977.
- Johnstone, Pauline. *A Guide to Greek Island Embroidery*. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1972.
- McMillan, Susan B. *Greek Island Embroideries*. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1973.
- Michael-Dede, Maria. *H Foresia Tis Mesogeitias*. Athens: Bogiati, 1981.
- Nicolay, Nicolas de. *Les Navigations, Peregrinations et Voyages, Faicts en la Turquie*. 1572.
- Tarsouli, Athena. *Embroideries and Costumes of the Dodecanese*. Athens: Athena Tarsouli, 1951.
- Thomas, Mary. *Dictionary of Embroidery Stitches*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1979.
- Trilling, James. *Aegean Crossroads*. Washington, D.C.: The Textile Museum, 1983.
- Wace, A.J.B. *Mediterranean and Near Eastern Embroideries from the Collection of Mrs. F.H. Cook*. London: Halton & Co., Ltd., 1935.

### Books (Continued)

Zora, Popi. *Embroideries and Jewellery of Greek National Costumes*. 2nd ed.  
Athens: Museum of Greek Folk Art, 1981.

### Articles

Borbolla, Daniel F. Rubin de la. "A Note on Popular Art and Crafts." *Culture*. Vol. II, No. 3 (1975), pp. 99-102.

"Greek Island Embroideries." *Connoisseur*. September, 1943, p. 49.

Hatzimichali, Angeliki. "Ta Vilia Tou Kithairona." *Nea Estia*, Athens, 1933, pp. 1-23.

Papantoniou Ioanna. "A First Attempt at an Introduction to Greek Traditional Costume (Women's)." *Ethnografika*. Vol. I (1978). Nafplion: Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation, pp. 4-92.

Welters, Linda. "Greek Women's Chemises." *Dress*, Vol. 8, 1982, pp. 10-21.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Greek Women's Chemises in American Collections." *Ethnografika*. Vol. 3 (1981-82). Nafplion: Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation, pp. 23-40.

### Unpublished

Mills College Art Gallery. "Greek Textiles: The Henrietta Brewer Collection of Textiles." 1943. (Mimeographed).

Mitten, David. "Classical Textiles." Lecture, American Institute of Textile Arts, Chestnut Hill, MA, November 16, 1982.

Welters, Linda. "Analysis of Greek Women's Chemises in American Collections." Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1981.

\* Illustrated

## APPENDIX

List of Greek Women's Chemises in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MMA)  
and its Costume Institute (CI): Loan objects are prefaced by L..

### Accession Number

CI	37. 31. 5	Attica
CI	37. 37. B	Peloponnese, Corinth
* CI	39. 91. 7A	Central Greece, Atalandi
CI	L41. 11. 39	Thessaly, Trikeri
* CI	L41. 11. 40	Thessaly, Trikeri
* CI	L41. 11. 44	Peloponnese, Argolis-Corinthia
* CI	L41. 11. 45	Attica
CI	L41. 11. 46	Attica
* CI	41.110. 23	Attica
* CI	41.110.118	Thessaly, Trikeri
* CI	42. 93. 1A	E. Aegean Islands, probably Psara
CI	43. 12. 73	Peloponnese, Argolis-Corinthia
CI	46. 9.196	Attica
* CI	46. 9.197	Attica, Vilia
* CI	47.45A	Peloponnese, Corinthia
CI	48. 16	Thessaly, Trikeri
* CI	53. 21. 5	Thessaly, Trikeri
* CI	53. 21. 6	Thessaly, Trikeri
* CI	53. 21. 7	Dodecanese Islands, Tilos
* CI	53. 21. 10	Epirus
* CI	53. 21. 19	Ionian Islands, Leukas
CI	53. 48. 2	Attica
	53.131. 18	Thessaly, Trikeri
*	53.131. 19	Sporades Islands, Skiathos
*	53.131. 20	Epirus, Ioannina
CI	53.131. 21	Ionian Islands, Leukas
* CI	61. 18. 1B	Thessaly, Trikeri
* CI	61. 18. 2B	Thessaly, Trikeri
* CI	1975.344. 10	Dodecanese Islands, Patmos