

Embroideries from the Burton Y. Berry Collection

Author(s): Margaret Gentles

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*Detail of seventeenth century bedspread from the Ionian Islands. Wide border design of a wedding group embroidered in colored silk threads on linen*

## EMBROIDERIES FROM THE BURTON Y. BERRY COLLECTION

There is a reviving interest today in the old and fascinating art of needlework. In the past decade embroidery exhibitions have increased in number and several popular new books on how to embroider have been published. The large crowds attracted by Queen Mary's carpet, in this country as well as in London, are clear indication that a new enthusiasm for this gentle art has been aroused. Nevertheless the trend is now away from traditional subjects to a realism and originality of design. Embroiderers, therefore, will be keenly interested in the magnificent Turkish and Greek Island embroidery collection of Burton Y. Berry now in the process of presentation to the Art Institute. This collection was assembled by Mr. Berry during the many years he was engaged in diplomatic service in Turkey and Greece. The embroideries are rich in color with an inventiveness of design appealing to all lovers of fine needlework. A small exhibition of the group already presented by Mr. Berry is now installed in Gallery 5B near the entrance to the museum.

Turkish and Greek Island embroideries can be divided roughly into two groups: those made for the decoration of homes and, in Turkey, for palaces and religious edifices, and those made to be worn or used by individuals. The first group includes wall hangings, bedspreads, curtains, sheets, prayer rugs, carpets, covers for pillows, divans and sundry other household furnishings. The embroideries in the second group are for personal use such as dresses, sashes, kerchiefs, squares and towels for everyday use as well as for ceremonies. Turkish towels can be used for many purposes such as table napkins, as ceremonial towels for distinguished guests to wipe their hands on after eating, as handkerchiefs to be tucked into a girdle, as wrappers for precious objects or as head coverings. The ceremonial use of an embroidered towel is a Turkish heritage from Byzantine times when on festival days the Emperor threw from his Imperial box in the Hippodrome the towel or napkin, as it was sometimes called, onto the course as a sign for the races to start. Towels played an

important part in the lives of Turkish women. The bride was given one on her wedding night to preserve as proof of the consummation of the marriage. They were also used at births, circumcisions and marriages. The Sultan at the palace often gave one as a sign of favor. It is on these towels that some of the most beautiful needlework of the Near East has been lavished.

Throughout the Greek Islands and Turkey embroidery usually was worked with silk thread and, with the exception of some of the later Turkish towels, on hand-loomed linen. In the eighteenth century there appeared another cloth woven with very fine cotton thread that gave the appearance of gauze and upon this toweling was embroidered some of the most elaborate work of the period, enriched with gold thread. A certain amount of work was done on linen mixed with silk, particularly on the sides or at the ends of the towel, and sometimes a pattern was worked into the body

of the plain material. More ornate weaves appeared in the nineteenth century and the simple linen or cotton toweling generally disappeared. It was during this time that the well known Turkish bath toweling of looped woven cotton material became popular.

Formerly in the Greek Islands young girls were taught by their mothers as soon as they were able to hold a needle to embroider bed linen and frocks for their dowry. In one group of the islands this would mean two types of dress, one to be used as the bridal dress and afterwards as the Sunday best, all others for everyday wear. They would also have to embroider a curtain for the bed, a pair of valances and at least two pillow cases. As they copied their mothers' work, the tradition was carried on with little change in style. Each group of islands has distinctive patterns and types of embroidery and it is only when intermarriage occurs between different groups that one finds an intermingling of local designs.

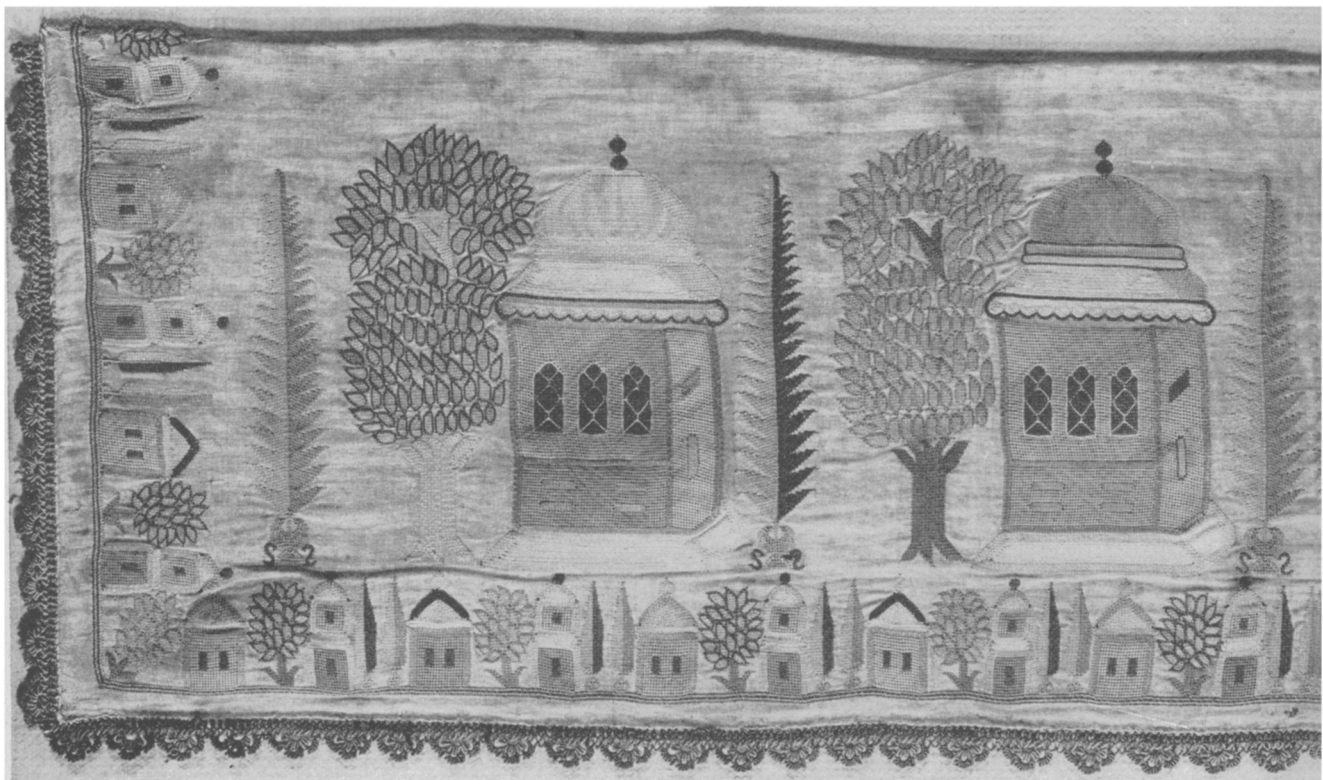
*Detail of seventeenth century panel from a bed curtain embroidered in stylized patterns of animals, birds and leaf forms in darning, satin and cross stitch. This piece is typical of the work from Patmos in the Dodecanese Islands*



Since many countries are famous for beautiful needlework one should not be surprised to learn that certain stitches are common to several countries in certain periods, as are the designs and color schemes employed. That the same stitch appears in widely separated countries might be explained by the gifts of returning travelers. More often the similarity of stitches was due to a definite effect being

needed and the stitch was created rather than copied from an imported piece. Strictly speaking there is not a great number of different stitches, but rather an infinite number of variations in the exact method of working the fundamental ones. In the East, where pure, brilliant colors are popular, a smaller number of stitches is required for the general effect than in other countries where a greater variety

*Detail of towel end. Embroidered design of kiosk and trees in colored silk threads on cotton*



*Detail of sixteenth century Turkish silk and gold brocade panel. Bold patterns such as this had a tremendous influence on embroidery designs for hangings and bed covers*



of stitching is combined with little or rather subdued coloring. More or less similar stitches appear on both the Turkish and Greek Island embroideries and the same stitches recur again and again. Those used most effectively are the darning, double darning, double running, chain, pulled, herringbone, tent, stem and the satin stitch known in Turkey as the embroiderer's stitch.

Due to the Moslem interdiction against the reproduction of human figures and animal life, the designs appearing on Turkish embroideries are usually based on floral patterns although one also sees garden scenes, architectural motifs, Arabic inscriptions, daggers and ewers. On the other hand, the Greek Island designs portray figures, animals, birds, flowers, ewers and geometrical patterns based on leaf and star motifs.

The Berry Collection of Greek Island and Turkish embroideries is one of the great collections in the world. Characteristic examples have been assembled from Yannina, the Dodecanese, the Cyclades and the Ionian Islands. The Turkish wall hangings of the seventeenth century, made in imitation of the earlier woven silks and velvets, are a superb group, enough in themselves to make this collection justly famous. The larger portion of the Turkish collection is composed of a very fine group of towels ranging from the typically bold, simple embroidered patterns of the seventeenth century through the elegant perfection of the eighteenth and to the ornate designs of the nineteenth century.

*Detail of Turkish seventeenth century wall hanging. The hanging is embroidered on linen in a variety of softly colored silk threads in imitation of the rich patterns of a woven silk or velvet*



MARGARET GENTLES