

MEDITERRANEAN FOLK EMBROIDERY: A COLORFUL HISTORY

With its vibrant colors and bold designs, Mediterranean folk embroidery is both charming and compelling. Traditionally worked on hand-loomed cotton or linen in both “free hand” designs and “cross-stitch” designs, these embroideries feature a wide variety of symbols and figures, from serrated leaves to stylized peacocks to intricate meander patterns and geometric borders. The historic color palette of golds, soft olives, rich blues, garnet reds, and bright corals originates in the late Roman and early Byzantine period in which deep reds and burgundies were the most valued colors in society and the use of multiple colors in a textile was a sign of skill and quality.

Some scholars even contend that the embroidery designs utilized in these wonderful textiles were a “poor man’s” method of copying the sumptuous, amazingly intricate silks produced in the imperial silk weaving workshops of the Byzantine Empire, an industry that spanned almost 1000 years and had its origins in the gold embroidery workshops of ancient Rome. This illustrious “golden age” of silk weaving and embroidery came to an end with the fall of Constantinople in 1453, which resulted in a far-flung dispersion of highly skilled textile artisans throughout the Mediterranean world. It is thought that many of them ended up in the courts and noble houses of Europe, keeping their skill and these amazing designs alive for centuries more. Indeed, the echoes of Roman and Byzantine embroidery designs can be seen in the folk embroidery traditions of countries like Serbia, Roumania, Russia, Greece, Italy, Spain, France, Germany, and even as far north as Scandinavia.

Upon viewing these graceful and complex designs, it’s not hard to see why they became beloved folk embroidery traditions in many countries. Textile artisans through the centuries have prized them for their intricacy, their compelling repetition of simple geometric motifs, and the sheer joy of working these wonderful designs.

For the past two decades, Krista West has worked as an ecclesiastical tailor in the Greek Orthodox tradition which found her visiting Greece regularly for research and supplies. An avid embroiderer herself, each of these visits found her rummaging around old handwork shops and asking elderly women about their techniques and

materials (one of the first Greek words she learned was “ken-thee-ma”—embroidery). In the beginning, she was often met with surprise—Greek grandmothers didn’t think anyone was still interested in these “old” designs—but upon her repeated requests, she slowly built up a network of shops and friends who helped her and shared patterns and embroideries from their “prika” or bridal chest, a lovely tradition in which a woman’s female relatives make beautiful embroideries that are given to her on her wedding day.

One of Krista’s favorite trips to Greece was when she was going from shop to shop in an effort to locate editions of vintage Greek embroidery patterns that had been published in the 1950s and 1960s. After visiting numerous shops and coming up empty, she walked into a thread shop in Thessaloniki and inquired yet again: the owner took one look at her tattered old sample pattern and said, “Those?! You want those? We’ve got a whole box in the basement—you can have it.” The box contained over 40 vintage patterns, each pattern featuring 5-10 traditional designs, and this treasure trove of old designs became the perfect raw material Krista needed to begin working her own folk embroideries.

As friends and clients began to see her finished embroideries and remark on their uniqueness, Krista realized there was still an interest in this craft and so she started Avlea Mediterranean Folk Embroidery to sell both ready-made textiles as well as embroidery kits, patterns, and supplies. Her current patterns and kits are worked on counted-thread fabric, either the traditional groundcloth she imports from Greece or Legacy’s 15-count linen and they feature a traditional color palette of soft golds, olive greens, leaf greens, peacock blues, soft blues, coral reds, rust reds, garnet reds, and black. Some patterns feature the use of outlining to create intricacy and contrast.

Even after many centuries, these traditional designs still look fresh and charming and bring a wonderful historic element to the modern home. Avlea kits and patterns are available in small, easy-to-work BitKits and BitBags as well as Standard Kits and Patterns for the more ambitious needleworker. Just like folk embroideries of the past, many of which are still in museums today, these embroideries will be sure to become treasured heirlooms for generations to come.

