

# **A Seventeenth-Century Cretan Dress in a Twenty-First-Century Athenian Museum From the Display Case to the Theatrical Performance**

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## **Abstract:**

The paper presents a dress from the island of Crete from the Benaki Museum collection, dating back to the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century and the different stories this dress could narrate.

The first one related to the dress pattern and the style of its embroideries is the story of the Venetian occupation of the island of Crete and its impact on the local sartorial system.

The second one refers to the common project of the Benaki Museum and the National Theatre of Greece entitled "From the Silence of the Display Case to Living Theatrical Voices": One exhibit from each museum collection provides the spark for a theatrical performance. In this context the Cretan dress gives the opportunity to the National Theatre's actors to bring to life Erofilo, the female character of the popular tragedy by Georgios Chortatsis (c. 1545 - c. 1610).

## **Contents:**

The Seventeenth-Century Cretan Dress of the Benaki Museum / Venetian Occupation / Sixteenth-Century Italian Lace and its Impact on Cretan Embroidery / Seventeenth-Century Crete's Sartorial System / The Benaki Museum and National Theatre's Joint Project / Erofilo / Conclusion / Acknowledgements / References

## **The Seventeenth-Century Cretan Dress of the Benaki Museum**



Fig. 1:  
Dress, linen & cotton, with silk embroidery. Crete, 17th-18th c. Benaki Museum (inv. no EE872), gift of George II.

The first exhibit that a visitor to the Benaki Museum sees on a tour of the Neo-Hellenic Culture Collection is one of the most significant objects in its costume collection: a Cretan dress from the late seventeenth or the first half of the century (fig. 1) What perhaps makes this dress particularly important is its rareness, since no more than ten complete dresses of this type are preserved in museum collections around the world. The knowledge we have about dresses of this type and specifically about the embroidery that adorned their hems, is supplemented by a significant number of embroidered borders or fragments of borders from dresses that had outworn their use. The upper, unembroidered parts of these dresses had apparently been reused by their owners, who had, however, kept the embroidered lower sections as precious heirlooms which now survive in museum collections.

There is no space here for a detailed description of the dress. We will only say that it is made of a white linen-cotton cloth in a tabby weave with a hem richly embroidered in silk thread in a horizontal band 45cm high, with two elaborate compositions that are repeated throughout: one with a flowering vase as the central subject and another with a fork-tailed mermaid (fig. 2).



Fig. 2:  
Detail of the EE872 dress border.

The few Cretan dresses and the considerably greater number of embroidered hemlines that can be found in museum collections are dated with certainty between the late seventeenth and mid-eighteenth century. The certainty of the dating is due to the existence of five dresses or sections of dresses that have the year that they were made embroidered on them. The oldest is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and bears the embroidered date of 1697 (MET Collection, Accession No 26.34.6) and the most recent one is in the Victoria & Albert Museum and bears the date 1762 (V & A Collection, Museum No 2051-1876). From the dates alone we can see that this is a tradition with a long duration, while we can also assume that the other samples that do not have their date of making embroidered on them may extend this fashion to earlier in the seventeenth or later in the eighteenth century.

The date of the older dress, 1697, reminds us of the historical conditions that explain the morphological elements of the dress and reinforce the interpretation that most scholars have given in terms of the above characteristics, which we will develop later on. And this leads us to the first story that this Cretan dress has to tell, the history that shaped these characteristics.

### **Venetian Occupation**

The date of the dress is only thirty years after the end of Venetian rule in Crete, a period of occupation that lasted more than four centuries and left a strong impression on all aspects of the island's cultural identity. This period began in 1211, a few years after the Fall of Constantinople to the Franks, after the Fourth Crusade. The first two centuries were marked by the re-

peated efforts of the Cretan people to overthrow the feudal regime that the Venetian colonists attempted to establish. These attempts, however, did not come to fruition, with the result that Venetian domination became established on the island. Over time and due to the pressure exerted by ever-increasing Turkish power in the Mediterranean, Venetian policy in Crete changed in the sixteenth century, abolishing the old feudal system and treating Crete as part of the Venetian state (Maltezou 1988, 142-3). The results of this new policy were both economic and social and above all cultural, but were limited to Crete's urban centres and large ports, and especially to Candia, today's Heraklion. These ports were also important stops on Venice's trade routes to the East. A Veneto-Cretan aristocratic class was created there, as well as a bourgeois class that adopted the way of life of the Venetian metropolis. The last two centuries of the Venetian occupation, the sixteenth and the seventeenth, were characterized by intense economic and cultural development, and the Cretan elite's access to Italian culture, to the extent that this period is known as the Cretan Renaissance (Maltezou 1988, 107-61).

Details about the standard of living of this new Cretan class are available to us through notarial documents of the time – wills and dowry agreements – that record the imported luxury goods to which the bourgeoisie and the aristocrats of the Cretan cities had access (Mertzios 1961-62, 228-308). Out of these, we will focus on references to imported fabrics such as satin, velvet or damask, or even entire garments (Macha 2009, 254; Maltezou 1986, 139-47). Samples of these fabrics have not survived in museum or private collections. However, a rare embroidery with a dense, repetitive pattern of motifs throughout the fabric, which is preserved in the Benaki Museum (Delivorrias and Georgoula 2005, 166), seems an attempt to copy some precious silk cloth, whose production would not have been possible in Crete (fig 3)



Fig. 3:  
Bedspread, silk embroidery on linen & cotton. Crete, late 17th-early 18th c.  
Benaki Museum (inv. no 32646), gift of Christopher Tower.

## Sixteenth-Century Italian Lace and its Impact on Cretan Embroidery

Passing now from the written evidence to objects, namely the embroideries and embroidered hems of the seventeenth-century Cretan dresses which we are looking at here, we must note the following. The fact that the dress is not sewn from a valuable imported fabric but from a white linen-cotton cloth in a tabby weave, as well as the date it was made, make it clear, we believe, that it is not the dress of a Cretan noblewoman or bourgeois lady from the heyday of Venetian rule, i.e. the sixteenth century, but a woven embroidered dress from a rural area in the late seventeenth or the eighteenth century. However, in spite of all this, in these dresses we will see a remarkable similarity between their embroidery motifs and the motifs of another Venetian luxury good of the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries: needle lace.

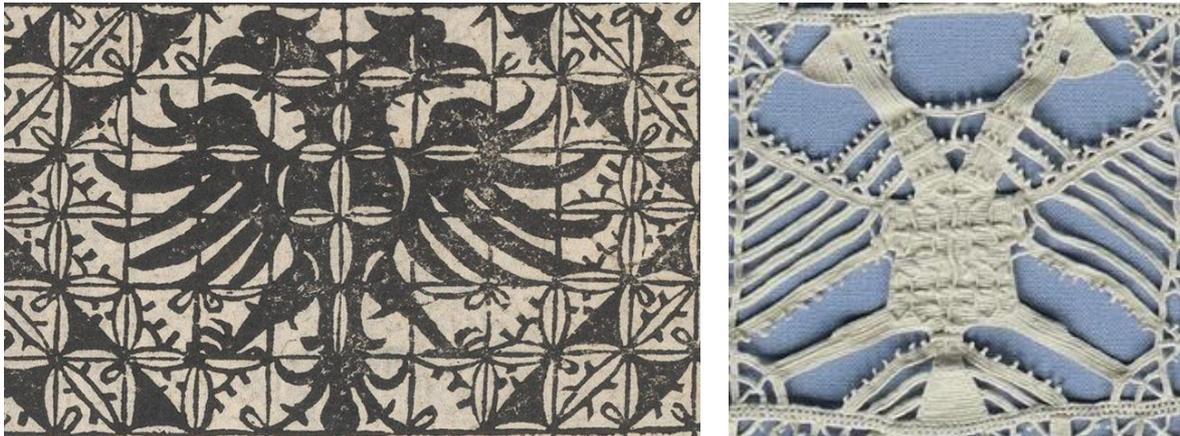


Fig. 4:  
Wood cut design for lace (detail), Metropolitan Museum of Art (acc. no 21.15.1bis[38]) (Pagano 1554, 19 [verso])  
(a). Embroidered lace, Reticella, Venice, late 16th c. (detail). Benaki Museum (inv. no EE3027) (b).

As central subjects in the densely embroidered hems of the Cretan dresses, we can easily recognise flowering vases, which are stylistically similar to corresponding compositions that were very common in the Renaissance repertoire of Italian lace in the sixteenth century, as we mainly find in pattern books for lace and embroidery (for examples see Johnstone 1961, pl. 78 and compare with Abegg 1978, 67, figs. 91, 92, 94). What is interesting, however, is the dissemination of certain specific subjects, which also correspond to Italian lace through which, apparently, they spread to Cretan embroidery: the double-headed eagle (fig. 2, 4) and the mermaid or siren with a forked tail (fig. 2, 5). We will focus more on this last subject, which was transferred from medieval manuscripts illustrated with animals and monsters to pattern books for embroidery and lace printed in Venice in the sixteenth century.



Fig. 5:  
Wood cut design for lace (detail), Metropolitan Museum of Art (acc. no 29.5.91bis[27]) (Pagano 1556, 14 [recto])  
(a). Embroidered lace, reticella, Venice, late 16th c. (detail). Benaki Museum (inv. no EE3027) (b).



Fig. 6:  
Dress borders, silk embroidery on cotton & linen (details). Crete, late 17th-early 18th c. Benaki Museum (inv. nos EE3389 [a] & 26111-gift of Maria Matzouni [b]).

This subject seems to have particularly impressed the embroiderers of Crete, since we find it in many variations. The figure usually wears a crown (fig. 2, 6b, 7) and is sometimes assimilated into the surrounding foliage (fig. 6, Zora 1960, 348-9), while, according to some scholars (Wace 1935, 33), she is very often transformed into the figure of a woman, dressed in a simple peasant costume, the only vestige of her previous existence being the gesture of her outspread, raised hands, which no longer hold the edges of a double tail, but two blooming branches (fig. 7).



Fig. 7:  
Dress borders, silk embroidery on cotton & linen (details). Crete, late 17th-early 18th c. Benaki Museum (inv. no 26110-gift of Maria Matzouni [a] & EE1564 [b]).

### Seventeenth-Century Crete's Sartorial System

However, apart from the loans from Italian lace that we find in Cretan embroidery designs, even the shape of the dress reminds us in a strange way of the Renaissance heritage. We say in a strange way, not, of course, because the Italian Renaissance was unknown in seventeenth-century Crete. However, the abundant pleats that start at chest height, as we can see in both the few surviving samples and as depicted in Pitton de Tournefort's engraving of 1718 (fig. 8), allude to the early Italian Renaissance of the fifteenth century, i.e. at least two or even three centuries before the prevalence of this costume tradition in the Cretan countryside. Unfortunately, information is either scarce or poses new questions. The traveller Pitton de Tournefort, in the text accompanying the engraving, describes this pleated dress as an "upper coat

of reddish cloth, full of pleats, hung on the shoulders by a couple of thread-laces” (Johnstone 1972, 29), a description that might fit the drawing but not so much our dress, unless we assume, like Pauline Johnstone, that the embroidered dresses that are preserved in museum collections are bridal or festive variations of the monochrome reddish dress described by Tournefort (Johnstone 1972, 29).



Fig. 8: Pitton de Tournefort, *Women of Candia*, engraving, 1718. Benaki Museum (inv. no 40776).



Fig. 9: Early 20<sup>th</sup>-c. postcard representing an old woman with the Kritsa costume, including a *kouda* skirt gathered up (a). Female costume, with a *sartz* skirt gathered up in the back. Anogheia, Central Crete, late 19th c. (b) Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation.

In the attempt to reconstitute the lost ensemble, of which the pleated dress of the seventeenth to eighteenth century is a part, some theories have already been proposed. It is worth looking at Evagelia Fragaki’s theory which has also been reformulated by Nantia Macha. The two scholars take as a starting point the “karpeta”, a dress or skirt worn in the Cretan countryside

in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, probably pleated, made of red felt or even of a more precious fabric, which would be probably gathered up in various occasions (Fragaki 1960, 48-9, Macha 2009, 257). The use of this garment, quite close to the reddish dress described one century later by Tournefort, as noted by Macha, is confirmed by the existence, in more recent years, of various types of red skirt (fig. 9), which the two scholars consider to be its survival.



Fig. 10:  
Illustration of the 1710 *Erotokritos* manuscript, representing Aretoussa, the main female character, with her outer dress gathered up. British Library, Harley MS 5644.

They note that these skirts were gathered up in a variety of ways, leaving the inner garments visible. They also note that this is a habit that may have been inherited from Venetian rule, as the name of the skirt from Kritsa in Eastern Crete may testify: “kouda” from the Italian *coda*, which in terms of clothing may refer to a train (Fragaki 1960, 50-1, Macha 2009, 257). To support this argument, Fragaki refers to the illustration of the *Erotokritos* manuscript of 1710 (a poetry work of the Cretan Renaissance by Vintzentzos Kornaros) and the costumes of the women dressed in Venetian fashion shown in it (fig. 10), where she sees this gathering up of the outer dress (Fragaki 1960, 49-50). On the basis of this evidence, the two scholars conclude that the white cotton dress with the embroidered hem looks like a kind of intermediate dress, worn beneath the outer, multi-pleated red dress, which is gathered up to reveal the embroidery of the inner, or rather intermediate, embroidered white dress.

If this theory is true, it probably explains the preservation of a design dating back to the Italian fifteenth century in the Cretan countryside of the seventeenth or eighteenth century, as part of an ensemble that is, in essence, a transition to later costume ensembles. It is worth noting, however, that this Cretan dress is certainly evidence of the Venetian influence on the island’s rural costume tradition, although it also shows the slow pace at which this influence was assimilated. In this case the Cretan countryside seems to be unaware of the sixteenth-century Italian fashion adopted by the bourgeois and aristocratic class of the cities, as shown by depictions of icon donors in that period (Konstantios 2004, 169), maintaining, as we have seen, earlier forms. While it may not have had access to precious imported fabrics and lace, however, it had access to their designs, which it used as a source of inspiration.

### **The Benaki Museum and National Theatre’s Joint Project**

Using this link to the Venetian heritage of Crete as a starting point, the Benaki Museum’s Cretan dress was invited, last winter, to tell another story: the tragic story of Erofilii, the heroine of the Cretan Renaissance tragedy of the same name, which was performed by the National

Theatre of Greece at the Benaki Museum as part of their joint project entitled “From the Silence of the Display Case to Living Theatrical Voices”.

This project, initiated in November 2016 by Irene Papageorgiou, curator of the Prehistoric, Ancient Greek and Roman Art collection, aimed to give, through theatrical performance, another dimension to the presentation of the Museum’s works. Theatrical performances have taken place in museum galleries in the past. What is perhaps novel in this case, is that theatre was called upon to serve the presentation of the museum object, to extend by other means the curator’s narrative, and to illuminate aspects of the object that are not readily perceived by the visitor.

In this collaboration, a director from the National Theatre, Stratis Panourios, worked closely with the curators of the four main collections of the Benaki Museum: the archaeological, Byzantine, modern Greek culture, and historic heirlooms collections, while two more collections followed in fall 2017: the Islamic art collection and the Nikos Hadjikyriakos-Ghika Gallery. Essential to this event was the joint selection of texts and works that could work in complementary ways: the aim was for the text to complement and interpret the work in some way and for the work to link to the theatrical play and to introduce the public to it. The result of this collaboration was four performances, one for each collection, associated with an object or a set of objects from each collection. Each performance was presented in the collection’s gallery, where the objects exhibited in it functioned in part as a natural stage set, contributing to the special atmosphere of the performance. Prior to each performance, the curator of the collection made a brief presentation of the selected work, linking it to the performance that would follow.

## **Erofilii**

The seventeenth-century Cretan dress was linked to the late sixteenth-century tragedy *Erofilii*, by Georgios Chortatsis. The Cretan theatre of the time, born of a particularly developed society, also carries traces of the Cretan elite’s contact with Italian culture. The Cretan bourgeoisie of the period studied at the Italian universities of Bologna, Ferrara and Padua, while the works of Cretan literature were printed in the Greek printing houses of Venice. *Erofilii*, a tragedy in five acts, with choral parts and intermezzi, was written with *Orbecche*, a tragedy by the Italian Giambattista Giraldi, as a model, as mentioned by St. Alexiou in the introduction of the original text (Chortatsis 1988, 27-39). Many elements in Chortatsis’s tragedy recall the Renaissance theatre and reveal their knowledge of it, a knowledge which was surely transmitted through the contact between Crete and Venice.

Although Italian culture may have influenced Cretan tragedy and traditional Cretan dress in different ways, it nonetheless formed the common ground on which the presentation of the dress and the performance was constructed. The performance was based on an abridged version of the original and was entitled “Erofilii’s Needlework”. It was accompanied by original music composed and played on stage on the viola da gamba by Alexis Kotsopoulos. As there was no budget for costume design and production, the costume designer Maira Vazeou selected costumes from the wardrobe of the National Theatre, according to the rationale she explains here: “My approach to the piece was to initially study the space where the play was about to be performed. The audience was placed at the centre of one of the Neo-Hellenic culture galleries. On one side, dummies with lavish costumes of the era were exhibited in the glass cabinet. We decided to dimly light them throughout the whole show creating an audience from the past. The main acting area had a colourful background of an eighteenth-century heavily embroidered bed curtain (fig. 11). Therefore I thought to keep all the costume in a pale cream pallet in order for the audience to be able to focus on them and allow the surrounding to jump out and give the essence of the era.



Fig. 11:  
Andromachi Davlou and Amalia Tsekoura in the roles of Erofilis and Death. "Erofilis's Needlework", National Theatre of Greece at the Benaki Museum, February 2017. Photo Andreas Schinias © Benaki Museum.

The primitive coexistence and antagonism of Love and Death is the principal subject in the play. There are three characters and each one of them has his servant. Through textures and shapes I portrayed the emotional world of each one of them, their status, their vulnerability and strength. For the character of Death, who referred to his omnipotence and vanity of glory and material goods, I gave an androgynous look, being the only dark figure in the space".

As Maira Vazeou mentions, the gallery's own objects served as the scenery, while three ladders from the Museum's storerooms were put into service, initially to increase visibility, but also to perform various functions, as in the case of the tall ladder that represented, among other things, the throne of the king, father of Erofilis. At one point, outside its showcase, and set upon a chest close to where the action was unfolding, the mannequin wearing the Cretan dress seemed to be silently participating in the story, like a mute person observing the events (fig. 12). Towards the end of the tragedy, when the king is seeking his dead daughter, Erofilis, the actor, entering the stage area, addressed the mannequin in the Cretan dress. The dress had taken the place of the dead heroine; it had been identified with his dead daughter and had recounted her story.



Fig. 12:  
Andromachi Davlou and Stratis Panourios in the roles of Death and the King. "Erofilis's Needlework", National Theatre of Greece at the Benaki Museum, February 2017. Photo Xenia Politou © Benaki Museum.

## Conclusion

The great success of this project gave the Cretan dress from the seventeenth century the opportunity to narrate the story of Erofilii. Through that story it was also able to narrate its own history, the history of the Cretan Renaissance and Venetian rule, and above all, the Italian influences that shaped it; to narrate all these stories, both major and minor, that do not fit within an artefact's caption or a wall text and which seek a way to reach their natural recipient: the visitor.

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