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A THESIS  
ON  
THE "ARMENIAN NEEDLEWORK INDUSTRY"  
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# ARMENIAN NEEDLEWORK INDUSTRY

## CHAPTER I

### I N T R O D U C T O R Y

The love for ornament is very old in human beings specially in the feminine sex where it may be said to be almost a native tendency. And while we may ignore the primitive or semi civilized state of some tribes that are surviving in certain parts of the world today, we find that they still show this remarkable tendency by decorating their naked bodies in innumerable ways, such as: tattooing, wearing gorgeous plumes and coloured beads, shells, corals, ivory .... no doubt always trying to look fair and attractive.

History teaches that a similar stage of human progress has probably continued for many dark centuries in the past, until the evolution of the so-called hunting stage when people began to use furs and skins which formed their clothing and sometimes the cover of their huts or wigwams. In later stages they left this crude apparel too and adopted woollen and cotton clothing, thus leaving their old decorations and guise — but not their inclination for decorative art! For now they wanted to appear in diversified dresses, both in form and colour. Probably they did so because they took pleasure in rivalling their neighbours by displaying their skill and originality in the art. In some

parts of the world, specially in mountainous countries, diversity in clothing was a direct result of geographic isolation. Whatever might have been the cause for such variation in social life is of little consequence here; the point, however, is that in all cases each group developed its own taste and skill along the art.

And this was not all. In the course of years they began to adorn their clothing with all sorts of embellishments, such as: gold, silver, pearls and precious stones. They also wore embroidered dresses wrought by the special skill and imagination of the feminine sex. Thus, as men of various nations began to progress in their trade so also the needlewomen began to perfect with admirable ingenuity the art of needlework in its many forms and branches.

Before proceeding further, I believe it would be both interesting and suggestive to present a general picture of needlework as a whole, because then we shall be in a better position to approach the Armenian Needlework in particular.

#### A. NATURE AND SCOPE OF NEEDLEWORK

Needlework includes a wide range of embroidery work in its multiform stitches and variety of pattern as well as laces made by needle. The term embroidery is often

vaguely used in speaking of all kinds of ornamental or decorative needlework, even some with which the needle has nothing to do. To embroider is to work on something, and we usually understand by embroidery needlework in thread, or it may be in wool, silk, cotton, or gold, upon an already woven material.

B. RELATION OF ART TO EMBROIDERY AND THE CRAFT  
OF THE NEEDLE

In discussing the relationship of Art to Embroidery and Craft of Needle, Walter Crane <sup>\*</sup> said:-

"In that remarkable revival of the arts and handicrafts of designs, which has, curiously enough, characterised the close of a century of extraordinary mechanical invention and commercial development, that most domestic, delicate and charming of them all, perhaps, the craft of the needle, holds a very distinct position."

"In its various application needlework covers an extensive field, and presents abundant scope both for design and craftsmanship, from the highly imaginative kind -- represented by such designs as those of Burne-Jones -- to the simplest and most reserved ornamental hem on a child's

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<sup>\*</sup> Foster, L. G., The New Needlecraft (P.S. King and Son, Ltd., Orchard House, Westminster, London) 1919, p.11.

frock."

Speaking about embroidery as an art, Mrs. B. Townend<sup>x</sup> said:-

"Painting is the art of colour; sculpture the art of form; but embroidery the art of clothing forms.... Embroidery is now of what is called 'decorative art', intended to appeal to the sense of beauty, and not so much to imagination. Embroidery is from its nature, specially a women's work, though men have been known even in our day, to some very beautiful pieces of art needlework. But it requires a more sedentary life than men generally lead, and patience. It is essentially a personal art and is adaptable not only to daily domestic use of decoration, but also to ordinary conditions, and does not require a room specially to itself, for it can be worked in the ordinary sitting room, drawing-room, kitchen, and even in the railway-carriage or boat when travelling...."

Evidently a great deal of patience, care and skill is necessary for art needlework as in the other arts. A piece of this kind of needlework, when finished, should look full of life and beauty, just as good painting or sculpture does; it should give pleasure and satisfaction when looked at.

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<sup>x</sup>Townend, B., Talks on Art Needlework (London Collins. Clear. Type. Press) Chap. I.

It is difficult to see why needlework should always be placed after such works as painting, drawing, sculpture, etc., for as we saw, there is every bit as much art in needlework as in any one of the others, requiring as much personality, care and patience. I have also noticed that many books have been written on the other arts, but what are generally called secondary arts have been more or less overlooked. This is specially true of embroidery in the Near East; yet the fact remains that needlework was no new thing even in the days of Moses\* .

There is no reason for over-emphasising one art among others. All the arts have their own laws and secrets, all resulting in beauty of execution with their special technic and thus need special skill, dexterity and knack in their workmanship. Another point of similarity is that they all have the same effect or end, viz.: to cultivate in man the feeling of beauty in objects and that which is high and noble in him.

### C. HISTORIC EVIDENCES

The fact that needlework has taken precedence of painting or sculpture as a method of producing pictures has been repeatedly emphasised by many writers on the subject.

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\*See pp. 6 - 7 for other evidences.



According to one author<sup>xx</sup>, the earliest pictures representing the human figure, birds, animals, flowers, symbols, emblems of every description, were by the needle depicted on canvas. In time the brush and pigments replaced the needle and tinted threads in the making of tapestry—preserved to our own day, and now to be seen in museums and public galleries depicting historical events of past centuries, were the work of the needle.

And from the remote times when our nude ancestors stitched the skins of animals into garments and tents, up all through history, culminating in the Middle Ages — when the art is said to have attained its climax — what a field of human thought and events it has recorded !

The same author describes very clearly the popularity of needlework in the past as follows:-

"Tinted threads of every shade, in wool, flax, silk, threads of pure silver and gold, beads, pearls and every kind of precious stones, have been employed by the needle for the adornment of Church and State, Camp and Court. And neither brush nor the finest porcelain has produced more care and wondrous works of art than those wrought by the needle.

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<sup>xx</sup>Foster, L. G. The New Needlecraft (P.S.King and Son, Ltd., Orchard House, Westminster, London) 1919, p.11.

"In ancient Greece and Rome, the belief was that the goddess of Wisdom would bear no rival in this, her favourite pursuit."

"In Homer and other early authors constant reference is made to the wondrous art works of gold and embroidered garments ...."

"The Egyptians are said to have understood how to produce threads of solid gold in such fineness that it would be used by the smallest needle in exquisite embroidery and tracery. And we are told of the robes of State depicted on Egyptian tombs fashioned of looped net-work and darned in patterns of gold, silver, and diverse colours."

"Alexander the Great and Augustus Caesar are said to have esteemed the needle...."

"And in the Old Testament<sup>x</sup> times we find mention again

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<sup>x</sup>In the thirty fifth chapter of Exodus we have an account of the free gifts that were brought for the building and furnishing of the tabernacle which God commanded Moses to build:-

"And they came, every one whose heart stirred him up, and every one whom his spirit made willing, and they brought the Lord's offering to the work of the tabernacle of the congregation, and for all his service, and for the holy garments. And they came both men and women, as many as were willing hearted, and brought bracelets, and earrings, and tablets, all jewels of gold; and every man that offered, offered an offering of gold unto the Lord....And all the women

( Continued next  
page.)

of the exquisite work of the Jewish people in this craft."

"From the various ancient nations, needlework found a home among the convents and monasteries of the so-called dark ages. There it was preserved along with the other fine arts of learning. Not the nuns only, but also the monks worked at this handicraft; and ladies and noblemen of the highest degree designed, wove, and embroidered. And so the marvellous craft of the needle, which was formerly engaged in adorning pagan temples and barbarian thrones was now applied to the shrine of Christianity in decorating the churches and courts of Christian lands.

Thus needlework has played its own important part in the history of the art progress of the world. From the first attempt of our ancestors to make coarse stitches, all through ages the art developed until it rose to its highest glory during the Middle Ages, only to be superseded by the works of the Iron Man of the twentieth century, which, although cannot produce pieces of real art, seems quite powerful in displacing them.

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that were wise hearted did spin with their hands, and brought that which they had spun, both of blue, and of purple, and of scarlet, and of fine linen. And all the women whose heart stirred up in wisdom spun goats' hair.

## CHAPTER II

# HISTORICAL SURVEY OF THE ANCIENT ARMENIAN NEEDLEWORK

### A. THE ANCIENT ART

Now we come to consider in particular, the ancient art of the Armenian Needlework — the art of a nation which bears on her shoulders a history of over 4000 years. During this long period Armenia has passed through several phases of economic prosperity and political leadership in the course of which the art of the needlework has undoubtedly had a prominent part in the social life of the people. According to ancient Armenian historians, the Armenian kings, for example, used to live in the most luxurious palaces together with the members of the court who would appear in their most exquisite rainments, while the queens used to dress in richly embroidered clothing covered up with gold garnitures and pearls.

In the meantime we read that the country, due to its singular geographic location, has been a field of recurrent invasion, and an object of greed to the neighbouring states. The last six centuries of the Armenian history is a case in point. With the expansion of the Turkish sway over north-western Armenia, the various arts and trades suffered heavy

losses, due mainly to the fact that the new invaders could not appreciate the costly products of the people they had come to rule. But in spite of such difficulties, the nation has successfully maintained her ideals and social traditions which have kept alive the love for needlework in the hearts of her people.

It may be questioned here as to how long this art has existed in Armenia. Unfortunately we do not have definite information regarding its origin, but judging from the references given by the early Armenian writers, there is no doubt that the art has been cultivated for many centuries there, and has passed on from person to person, and from generation to generation in much the same way as any other inherited custom.

In her brief description of the nature and antiquity of the Armenian Needlework, Miss K. Bredemus<sup>x</sup> says:-

"Originality is a distinctive feature of the fancy work in this part of the world. It is often difficult to find two pieces exactly alike. The workers are always inventing new patterns. The cost of time is never considered, as days and weeks and sometimes months are spent on one piece of work. When questioned as to where they learnt this work the answer is usually the same: 'We learnt it from our mothers,

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<sup>x</sup>Miss Katherine Bredemus, Armenian Embroidery, The Friend of Armenia (Organ of the Society of the Friends of Armenia) New Series, No.81, Second Quarter, 1921, p.11-12

they learnt it from theirs, and nobody knows who taught the first woman.' There is no question but that from time immemorial this art has been cultivated in this part of the world."

With the introduction of Christianity into Armenia, the art of needlework gained a new impetus, as we shall see below. If we trace back the Armenian history to the first century A.D., we find that the people had in many sections of the country adopted the new faith in secret. Three centuries later, Christianity was finally proclaimed as the official religion of the state through the pioneering of Saint Gregory the Illuminator (founder of the Armenian National Church) and King Tiridat (Dertad) who was a pagan ruler but converted by the former about A.D. 301. And when the towns and villages witnessed the destruction of the pagan temples followed by the construction of wonderful churches and cathedrals, the whole nation unanimously embraced Christianity and began to bring her free gifts to these holy places.

Here mention should be made of the earnest embroiderers who, inspired this time by the new religion undertook the most delicate and costly needlework with utmost patience and perseverance, thus trying to see the churches and shrines embellished with the product of their zeal and faith.

Some of these marvellous needlework gifts consisted of

the following embroidered pieces:-

1. Chalice covers,
2. Handkerchiefs for the priest to hold the cross and  
gospel with,
3. Alter-cloths, alterpieces,
4. Curtains,
5. Vestments worn by priests or bishops while celebrating mass — chasubles, garments, albs, copes, etc.
6. Dalmatics worn by deacons,
7. Special clothes worn in church by bridegroom and  
godfather during the marriage ceremony,
8. Embroidered linen to wrap the child with, when  
carried for baptism,
9. Embroidered handkerchiefs to hold the Bible with,  
when read by the deacon.

Most of the above mentioned works were made on fine silk-stuffs and cotton in coloured threads (also in gold and silver threads) and as a rule, each gift bore on a corner the name of the embroiderer, the date, the locality, and the church to which it had been offered.

All the above mentioned gifts could be seen in churches and convents in Armenia up till 1914, some of pieces dated as far back as the fifth century A.D. Unfortunately, however, they are lost today as a result of the Turkish and

Kurdish despoliations in the World War.

At present it is possible to find only a few masterpieces of the ancient art in the museums of convents at Etchmiadzin (Armenia) and Jerusalem, in Saint Jacob's Convent; also in some of the Armenian churches at Constantinople.

#### B. SYMBOLS AND THEIR INTERPRETATION

Before taking up the social significance of the Armenian Needlework, it is appropriate at this point to consider in brief some of the typical symbolic designs and colours used in Armenian Embroidery many of which are of historic interest to the lovers of Needlecraft.

Now some of us may wonder sometimes at the different objects we see embroidered particularly in ancient ecclesiastical embroidery and the work on flags, banners, vestments, etc. We all admire the talent and patience of those ancient workers who have so nicely embroidered pictures and long stories ...! showing heroic deeds of others. Many of the oldest patterns did more than merely cover the surface of the material as we might think nowadays; they gave expression to a noble idea; they called up something moral or spiritual — they were symbols in other words.

Most of the early art expressed religious thought by



symbolic figures. It is therefore well to know what they mean in connection with needlework. The Egyptians, for example, when wishing to express water in their work, used the "zigzag". The lotus plant, so often found in their tombs meant new birth, resurrection. The palm was always much venerated; it was often called "the tree of life." Then there is a globe with wings to be seen in some of the work of the Egyptians; the globe symbolised the sun, and the wings the overshadowing of Providence<sup>X</sup>.

### 1. Symbols of Pagan Origin

Of various symbols often used in Old Armenian Embroidery, special reference should perhaps be made of the following motives all of which date back to the pagan period of Armenian history<sup>XX</sup>:-

The Sun: From very ancient times the sun was worshipped as the supreme God in Armenia and in the neighbouring lands as well. The pagan Armenians used it as a sacred sign on their banners, royal crowns, fortresses and shields. The coins issued by Dicran the Great (93 - 39 B.C.) bear his head with an octagonal sun placed in the best part of his crown, between two Parthian eagles he had appropriated by conquest; the beaks of the birds are turned toward the sun

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<sup>X</sup>Townend, B., Talks on Art Needlework (London Collins. Clear.Type.Press) Chap. III, pp.59 - 61.

<sup>XX</sup>Theotig's Almanac, Vol.XV, 1923, pp.184 - 187.

to suggest the sublimity of the latter.

Thus the sun is supposed to have been the chief national emblem of pagan Armenia. Even after the introduction of Christianity into the country, the people could not forsake it entirely and so used to carve it at the foot of their tombstones and church columns<sup>x</sup>.

The Dragon: It is supposed that the dragon as symbol has made its way into Armenia and the Near East from India, where it was very commonly used in ancient times. The dragon of the Oorardoos (one of the earliest races that inhabited Armenia) had seven heads with mouths wide open, representing seven strong provinces.

The Dove: The dove was used after the death of Alexander the Great during the Armenian satrapal government; it was the ensign of the Assyrians and was probably introduced by them into the land of Ararat. According to an ancient author, the dove was used as a Christian emblem on the Mamigonian flag.

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<sup>x</sup>In one of the Medieval Armenian prayers, the "Aravod Looyso" (the "Morning Light") by Nerses the Graceful, the first stanza runs as follows:

Morning light,  
Righteous sun,  
Shine your rays in me.

This metaphoric expression of God in terms of an old symbol (the sun) is decidedly a pagan remnant in a Christian prayer. But here again we see very clearly the symbolic value of the sun among the early Christian Armenians.

The dove when surrounded by the nimbus is the symbol of the Holy Ghost; when used alone it stands for meekness and purity, but when with an olive branch in its beak it symbolises peace.

The Eagle: The eagle was the chief emblem of the Ardashes Kingdom, as it is also seen on the coins of Dicran the Great.

## 2. Symbols of Christian Origin

With the spread of Christianity in Armenia, the following symbols came to be used in the art of the needle:-

The Cross: Since the conversion of the Armenian people the cross has been the most sacred sign of the new faith as it is the acknowledged symbol of Christianity all over the world. It was for the first time designed on the staff and crown of King Dertad and thenceforth was used on flags, vestments of priests and other religious leaders, in churches and on sepulchral monuments.

The Armenian cross has a distinctive form, the horizontal arms being shorter than the verticals, with a ratio of  $2\frac{1}{2} : 3\frac{1}{2}$ , and broadening out as they end.

Mount Ararat: Mount Ararat with its snow-clad summit is the most venerable landmark of the Armenian people. It

has played a very prominent part in Armenian Architecture, creating a peculiar style in the art. The cupolas of Armenian churches are erected in its shape; also the hood and mitre of the priests are copies of its coniform impression.

The Lamb: The lamb, another noted Christian sign, is often accompanied by a flag; it is a symbolical representation of our Saviour under the form of a lamb and holding with its right foot a small white flag, charged with a red cross.

The Lion: The lion stands for the name of Levon I, king of Armeno-Cilicia. It was depicted on the coat of arms of the Roopinian Kingdom and applied on its coins and seals.

The Vine: The vine appears very often as a Christian symbol and is often used on altar cloths and Eucharistic Vestments.

The Wheat: The wheat is another symbol of Christ, who said: "I am the bread of Life;" it is used in the same manner as the vine.

The Anchor: The anchor is a symbol of hope, firmness, and patience.

The Heart: The heart with a flame at the top, is the symbol of Charity.

There is no doubt of the fact that the early Christian artists used colours symbolically and applied them accordingly in their work. The colours that have been most commonly used by the Armenians in this respect are: Blue, Yellow, Red, White, and Green.

Blue: Blue, being one of the predominant colours in nature has been a favourite colour of the early Armenians. The deep blue tinge of the sky and lakes of the country has undoubtedly fascinated their eyes; in fact, blue was one of the most sacred colours in those days and the people used to paint their clay idols with indigo blue.

Blue is also emblematic of heaven. It signifies piety, sincerity and contemplation of the Divine.

Yellow: Dark yellow was the official colour of Armenian royal families; it was the private colour of princes who used to dress up in it.

Red: Bright red is another favourite colour, very often used for vestments, hangings, etc. On the feasts of martyrs, it typifies the blood which was shed for Christ.

White: White has been mentioned time and again in Armenian history as being the colour of the national flag. It is the emblem of purity, innocence, joy, life and light.

Green: Green, being the ordinary colour of nature,

signifies bountifulness, mirth, youth and prosperity.

All the above mentioned colours are very commonly used in Armenian Embroidery. The combination of these colours (especially when they are bright) may not appeal to Western imagination, but it must not be overlooked that in the East, with its glowing atmosphere over-circled by a vivid blue sky, and its crimson sunsets, they seem quite natural and appropriate.

### C. SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ART

The social importance of the art of needlework among the Armenians becomes clear when we consider the part it has taken in moulding the common life of the people by keeping alive the self-consciousness of the nation as a whole.

Indeed needlework has always been an important item in their family life. For example, according to an old custom, every housewife or young lady had to embroider all the linen of the members of her family. Of numerous pattern-designs thus embroidered, mention should be made of the models that were so nicely depicted on men's caps and edges of their breeches; also on women's veils, head-dresses, table covers, napkins, d'oyleys, handkerchiefs, bath-towels, etc. A good many of these works were sold by Armenians in

America (some twenty five years ago) where they had a great demand at that time.

Such has been the situation of the native needlework in the past until about the middle of the nineteenth century. But when machine-made stuffs and lacework began to find a market in the towns, they were much appreciated by the people and so were gradually used by women in place of the old traditional home made fabrics and needlework. The result is quite evident; as time went on, the native needlework was less and less demanded by the public and eventually there were no sufficient experts to perpetuate the work of their predecessors.

Fortunately, however, the situation was quite different in the country districts. Here, the peasant class still continued its own spinning and weaving thus producing its own course material on which women would embroider in various colours and threads. This can be explained by the fact that there were no good roads for communication and transportation purposes and also by the conservatism on the part of the village people who would not give up so easily the old traditions and customs of their forefathers. Thus, when a young peasant girl was to be married, she had to bring to her husband, besides her dowry, all the necessary embroidered linen as a gift to her new kindred. Accordingly, she was

obliged to prepare these works as nicely as she could, from the time of her betrothal up to the marriage day and so the bride's taste and capacity would be rated, in part, according to her skill shown in her needlework. After the marriage ceremony at the church the relatives and invited friends of the couple would start back for the home of the bridegroom's father, the bride covered from head to foot in her pink embroidered veil while riding upon a fine horse, musicians playing, and choir boys singing. On the following morning, the bride's mother would send her chest (the bride's) whereupon the mother-in-law would open it and exhibit the contents piece by piece to the guests. Meanwhile, a group of young girls in the wedding party would come forward to dance their traditional dances in a circle, accompanied by music played by a special band. Indeed it was interesting to behold these players as they danced in groups, each in her gay costume richly embroidered in silk and gold threads.

Here it should be mentioned by way of explanation that each Armenian town had its own needlework more or less different from other towns, in the matter of patterns, stitches and other details. Also each important center had specialized along a certain line of needlework. For instance, in Moosh and the surrounding villages, the Armenian women used to embroider very nicely on white coives and flat caps prevailing



there from ancient times; and so instead of wearing the Turkish fez, the Armenians of Moush would these caps which would easily distinguish them from the Non-Christian population.

Before ending this discussion, it should be understood that about a century ago, there were no special schools for young girls, and for this reason, although the Armenian girls had no opportunity to get a fair education in general, yet they would, under the guidance of their mother, learn how to cut out dresses as well as sewing, washing, ironing, etc. As to learning needlework, all those parents who could afford to teach it to their daughter, would send her to an expert needlewoman in the quarter. There she would help her mistress gratis, and at the same time learn embroidery so that in one or two years she would be quite trained in it.

It was only after the Armenian National Constitution had been ratified by the Sultan in 1860, that national schools were opened in Turkish Armenia, where young girls could get their long-expected education and also practical instruction in native and foreign needlework.

## CHAPTER III

### MODERN DEVELOPMENT

#### AND

### COMMERCIALIZATION OF THE ART

In the preceding chapter we have reviewed the Ancient Armenian Needlework as an art; we discussed its subject matter, the various symbols and emblematic designs, colours, and finally tried to point out its social significance among the early Armenian people, whose modern descendants are by all means enjoying the manifold privileges and benefits that are incident to the same art in its industrialized aspect.

We shall now turn our attention to the evolution and progress of the art and bring to light the forces that caused women to begin to make needlework for the market, be it foreign or local. We shall consider also the different kinds of stitches and designs, the source of models and patterns and finally the situation of the Armenian Needlework Industry since the close of the World War.

#### A. HOW WOMEN BEGAN TO MAKE NEEDLEWORK FOR THE MARKET

In the past, up to about 1895, there was hardly any attempt or need on the part of the Armenian women to make needle-

work for the market. In fact, there were no markets for such products, for needlework was more of an art in those days, and from the earliest times was looked upon as a very great accomplishment for all women in all ranks of society. Furthermore, as we have seen in the previous chapter<sup>x</sup>, the Armenian woman was expected to make all the pretty and decorative works for her own home. For these reasons, she nearly always invented and designed her own patterns, which will account for our finding such a diversity and originality in the Ancient Armenian embroideries that have come down to us.

With the break of the Armenian Massacres of 1895, the economic and social status of the Armenians residing in Central Turkey was radically changed. It is wholly unnecessary for our purposes to go into the description of the human and material losses entailed by this terrible catastrophe. Suffice it to say that, as a result of the uncertain and unsettled conditions then prevailing, many of the women who lost their husband in the massacre thought of making needlework in small quantities and then try to sell them abroad through relatives or acquaintances. The experiment turned out a success and in a short time not only widows but young orphans also began to embroider and thus earn a hand-to-mouth living for a good many years. It was

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<sup>x</sup>See Chap. II, pp. 20 - 21.

just at this period that a number of benevolent societies from Europe and America began to extend their help in the relief of distress among the Armenians and other sufferers in the Near East. For instance, one of the objects<sup>x</sup> for which the "Friends of Armenia" (a British relief society founded 1897) were founded was "to enable the widows to maintain themselves by developing native rug and embroidery work and selling the products."

Another reason why women began to make needlework for the market was the fact that several missionaries, among whom Mrs. Shepard of Aintab and Miss Shatig of Oorfa stand as the most prominent workers in the field, thought of helping the poor members of the community by giving them native embroidery work and then sending the products abroad for sale. The proceeds would then be reinvested in this industrial and philanthropic enterprise.

A third factor which encouraged women to prepare large quantities of embroidery work for sale was the rise of a group of local Armenian merchants who made their business to buy these works and export them to foreign dealers both in Europe and America. Almost all of these merchants used to work for their own account and the number of those who were engaged in the business as commissioners was insignificant. Of course, as the trade developed other

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<sup>x</sup>The Friend of Armenia (organ of the Society of the Friends of Armenia) New Series, No.92, Third Quarter, 1924, p.1.

private members went into this promising business to say nothing of numerous small dealers who would usually operate as middlemen between the large producers and the public at large.

Thus all the above factors worked hand in hand in transforming the old needlework art to a commercial basis and at the same time creating a source of aid to those who were employed in the production of a commodity which needs the utmost patience, care and personal skill, not to mention the time and human energy spent on it.

#### B. KINDS OF WORK

In examining the various types of Armenian stitches, we may group them for our purpose in all manner of ways, according to their effect, use, and so on. The natural way of grouping them is according to their structure, taking no particular notice as to where they come from, though at the same time it certainly makes the work far more complete and interesting to know its history. Incidentally, however, this natural classification corresponds very closely to the one given below, viz.: according to the place they come from, so that the whole subject falls in to the following leading groups:-

- First: Aintab Work,
- Second: Marash Work,
- Third: Oorfa Work,
- Fourth: Miscellaneous Works, such as:
  - Besni Work, Sivas Work, etc.

1. Aintab Work

a. Historical: The growth and progress of this work is so closely connected with the life of a noble friend and teacher that it is appropriate at this point to give a brief historical account of her efforts in connection with the development of the so-called Aintab lace and drawn work.

This earnest worker was Mrs. Shepard, wife of the much beloved and honoured American physician, Dr. Shepard of Aintab. During their thirty-three years of service in Turkey, they made many warm friends wherever they went. Now Mrs. Shepard, like her husband, was keenly interested in the life of the Armenians in every detail. As a result of her intimate friendship with these people, she was greatly interested in their needlework which they worked on white native material. After a careful examination of the various embroidered pieces, she at length came to the conclusion that these exquisite works could certainly be refined and thus turned

into a profitable occupation, if worked in white and thinner thread on materials of a much finer texture, as linen, silk, etc., in the preparation of embroidered handkerchiefs, table covers, table centers, d'oyleys, hand bags and the like. These goods could then be sent abroad for sale as novelties, the proceeds of which would go to the maintainance of poor families.

Accordingly she discussed the matter with two friends, the Mankanian sisters, and after explaining her intention, she gave them the necessary materials with specifications for the trail. To her surprise, the result was far more encouraging than she had ever imagined, whereupon she sent a few samples of the work to her sister in the United States, asking if she could help her by selling similar products, to which the latter replied <sup>that</sup> she had greatly appreciated the work and promised to cooperate in this noble act.

As soon as this news reached Mrs. Shepard, she at once set at work with the following program:-

- (1) To employ for three days in the week only those poor widows who are in real need.
- (2) To supply the workers with the necessary tools and material except the various kinds of threads which they were supposed to buy from her office.

- (3) To pay the worker in proportion to the time and labour spent on each piece.
- (4) To intrust the management to Misses Makanian who would give their criticism as regards the work and check on each piece before delivering it to the office.
- (5) As to herself, she would keep the records of goods sold, of receipts and disbursements, and prepare shipping invoices going with each consignment.

Inasmuch as the orders were sent from the Mrs. Shepard's office which was situated in the hospital of Aintab, this work came to be referred to by the workers as "Hospital Work."

It is interesting to note that in a few years time, the industry of Aintab Needlework had so rapidly progressed and the products so highly developed and diversified the workers (about 200 in number) could hardly keep abreast with the orders for the most part of the year. Furthermore, whereas at first, the exported goods were exempt from custom duties, two years later the United States government began to levy an advalorem duty of 60 - 70% on all needlework products.

Thus for about ten years, Mrs. Shepard devoted herself to this industry (in Aintab) which was taken up in 1893 by



Dr. Caroline Hamilton,<sup>x</sup> who continued the work of her predecessor as well as other missionary works.

About the same time, namely from 1895 - 1914, a group of Armenians in Aintab became interested in the Needlework Industry and soon began to engage similar poor women and girls in the production of Aintab Work. It will be well, therefore, to say a few words about these merchants before proceeding further.

The following list of first class needlework merchants with the corresponding number of workers of each, can give an idea of the scope of their business:-

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Name of Merchants	Approximate Number of Workers
H. Barsoumian . . . . .	1000
G. Karamanian . . . . .	600
S. Krajian . . . . .	400
H. Kharajian . . . . .	200
G. Bezjian . . . . .	150
H. Shnorhokian . . . . .	50

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<sup>x</sup>Riggs, A. S. Shepard of Aintab (Interchurch Press, New York) 1920, p. 71.

On the average, we may say that the value of the needlework products exported each week to America and elsewhere amounted to about 2000 £T. After deducting the custom duties, transportation charges, and other minor expenses there remained an income of over 100 000 £T., a year,  $\frac{2}{5}$  of which sum would go to the cost of the material, thread, etc.; another  $\frac{2}{5}$  would be paid as wages to more than 3000 workers (both in Aintab and the surrounding villages); the remaining part, namely  $\frac{1}{5}$ , would represent a net income which was quite a high return on their investment, especially when we consider the low cost of living that prevailed in Turkey in those days.

As to the workers, it is interesting to note that they could earn around 3£T. a month, which means an income of 10 gold piasters, a day. And in fact, the wages on the whole, would vary from a minimum of 2 gold piasters to a maximum of 15 gold piasters, depending upon the skill and efficiency of the worker. Thus, in the district of Aintab all those women or girls who had taken to needlework in ever-increasing numbers, soon became self-supporting and could in many cases save a good part of their income.

b. Kinds of Aintab Work:

(1) "Aintab Needle Lace", as the name indicates, was first made in Aintab. It is the oldest form of decoration used originally on "mabroum" (a kind of native cotton cloth) sheets. There is an old saying that lace

making makes one blind. This comes from an old tale about a girl, who while making lace work thought of taking as her pattern the fat around the intestines of an animal, but the work was so fine that she became blind.

In general, the designs used in this lace work are geometrical.

(2) "Aintab Drawn Work", is the next oldest Armenian work from Aintab region. This embroidery consists in drawing a certain number of threads of the material to be used as a background and then filling the meshes in fine silk or cotton thread. The resulting network is thus suitable to almost any design.

Among the various designs most commonly used in this work, the following deserve special mention:-

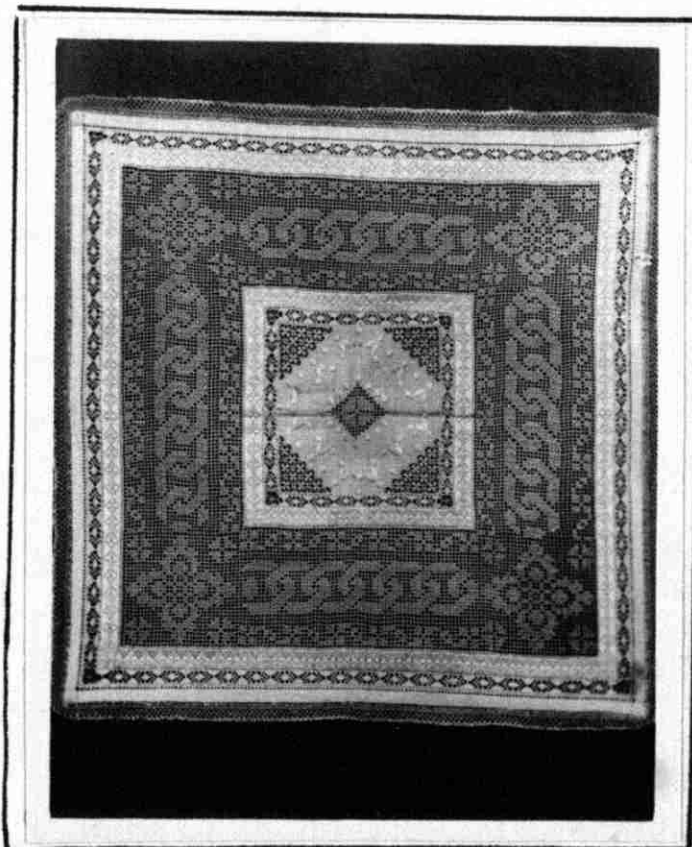
(a) "Lentil Design", is the oldest design with many variations. The story runs that a shepherd girl while taking care of her flocks, one day plaited some wheat together in an idle mood. She liked the result so much that she decided to put it on her dress. Then she thought some holes would improve it, and she made these with a thorn, like an eyelet, filling them with a kind of cross

stitch which gave the openings the shape of a lentil. Thus it is believed that this simple work was the origin of the so-called "lentil design."

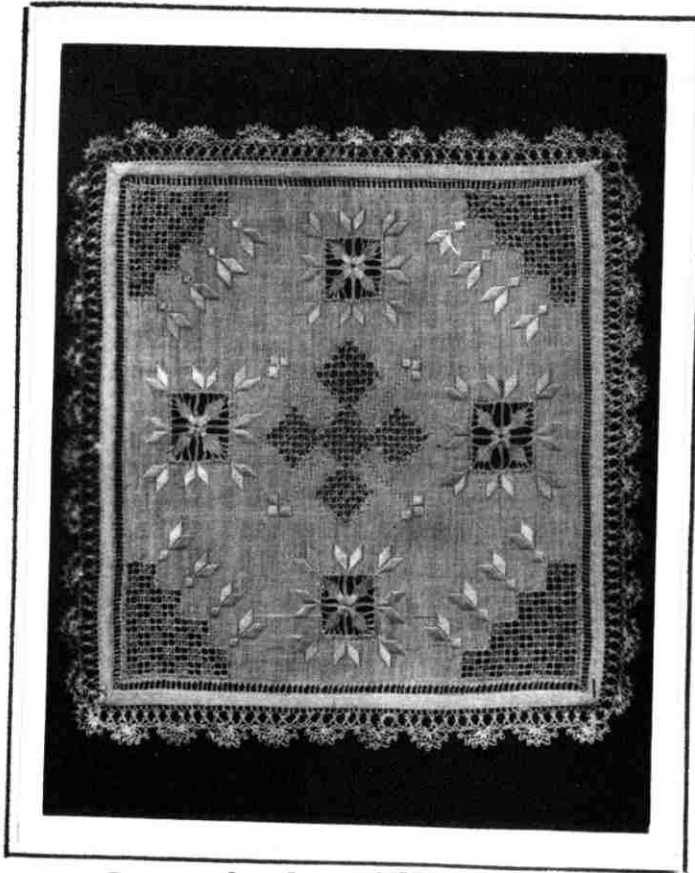
- (b) "Jemelian Design", is another variation of the above design; it was first made by a woman named Jemelian (some forty years ago). She is still alive in Beirut.
- (c) "Wheel Design" or "Anna Design", is another beautiful design in the shape of a wheel; it was made by a girl named Anna.
- (d) "Filet Design", is probably taken from lace work. The difference between the ordinary Filet Work and this one is that whereas the former is worked on a net made by a special needle, the latter is worked on a net-like background formed by drawing a certain number of threads along the length and breadth of the material.



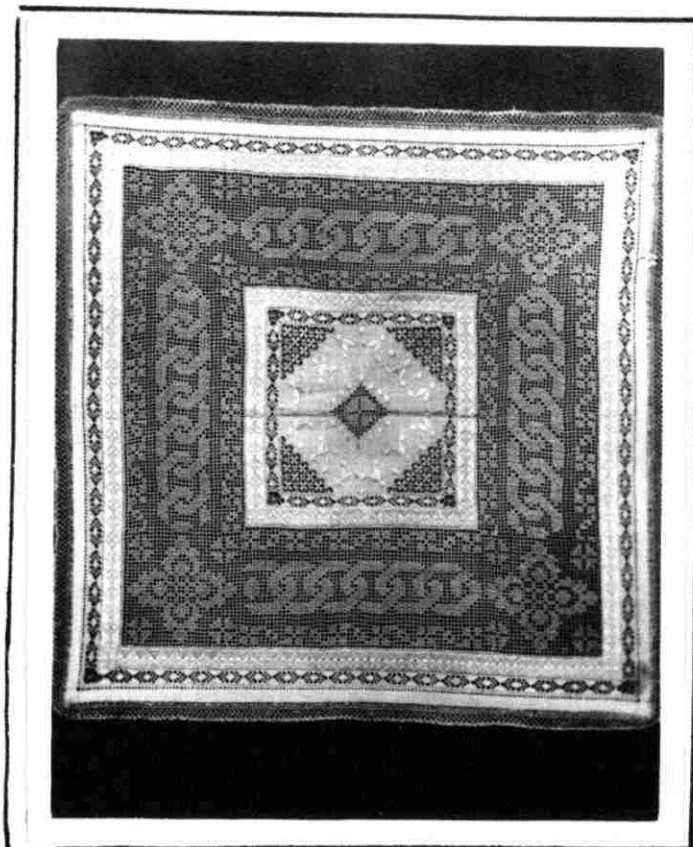
Lace-edged Table Centre  
Aintab Work



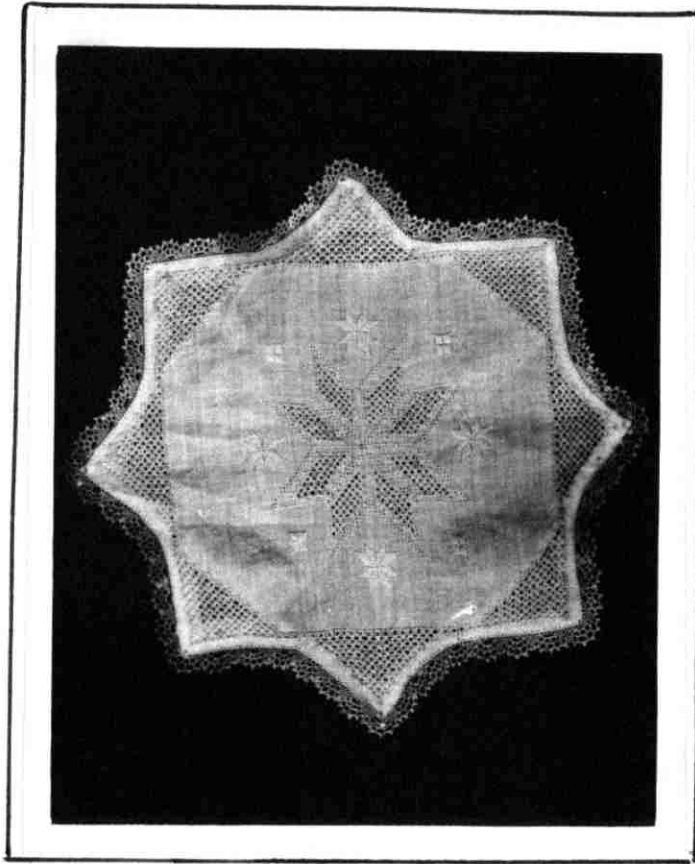
Lace-edged Cushion Cover  
Aintab Work



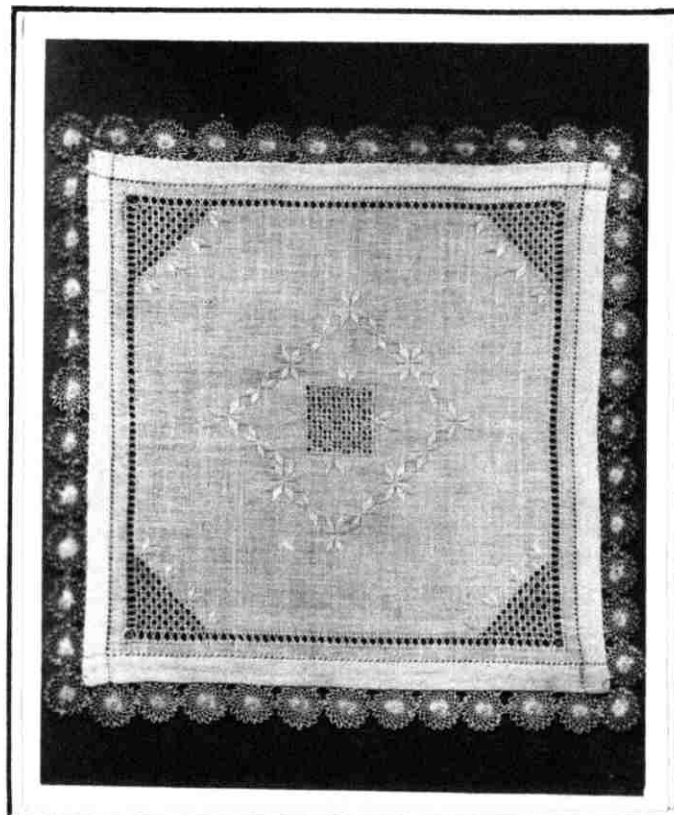
Lace-edged Table Centre  
Aintab Work



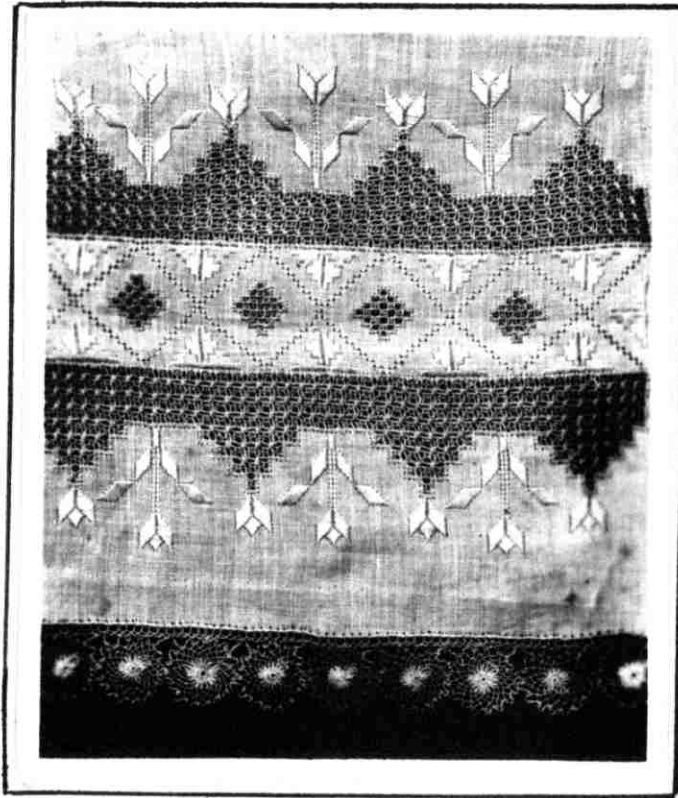
Lace-edged Cushion Cover  
Aintab Work



Lace-edged d'Oyley  
Aintab Work



Lace-edged Table Centre  
Aintab Work



Scarf Border  
Aintab Work



Lace-edged Linen and Silk  
Handkerchiefs  
Aintab Work



## 2. Marash Work

a. Historical: The commercialization of this kind of needlework and its spread in other towns of Cilicia began after the Armenian Massacres of 1895. As has been mentioned in a previous page<sup>x</sup>, "The Friends of Armenia" was one of the foreign philanthropic institutions which were founded at that time to spread information among the people and to maintain Armenian children whose fathers or relatives had been slain in the massacres.

With the above objects in mind, the organizers of this society decided then to open four orphanages in Marash named respectively: Ebenezer, Beulah, Peniel and Elem Houses. The first of these houses contained also an industrial section where a group of young orphans prepared in <sup>large</sup> quantities the local Armenian needlework, known as Marash Work, as well as many other kinds of embroidery work. Every step in the transformation of the raw material was done by hand. Thus, in order to prepare the material for their needlework, they would first spin the cotton, then weave it on a small hand loom into a material resembling linen, called, "bez", and finally they would dye it in bright red, dark blue and dark green which were the favourite colours of the time. Vegetable dyes were largely used in dyeing this material which did not fade in

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<sup>x</sup>See pp. 24 - 25

spite of the scorching rays of the Oriental sun. In this connection it is interesting to note the following list of colours and to know how they are produced:-

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Colours	Sources
Red: - - - - -	Berries and roots, e.g.: The madder whose roots affords a dark red colour.
Blue:- - - - -	Plants and flowers, e.g.: The indigo plant.
Green: - - - - -	Leaves of walnut tree and seeds of a small shrub called, "gekhre."
Black: - - - - -	Mineral mud.
Yellow:- - - - -	Straw and onion leaves.
Reddish Brown:	Leaves of "henna" plant.

The hand woven "bez" makes an excellent background for Marash Work and is exceptionally good for nearly every kind of embroidery. It is much used for cushions, bed spreads, table covers, hand bags and many hangings of different kinds.

The average yearly income of this industrial work would amount to about 1000 £T., one fourth of which (the net income) would be appropriated to the maintenance of more than 250 orphans in the four houses.

b. Kinds of Marash Work:

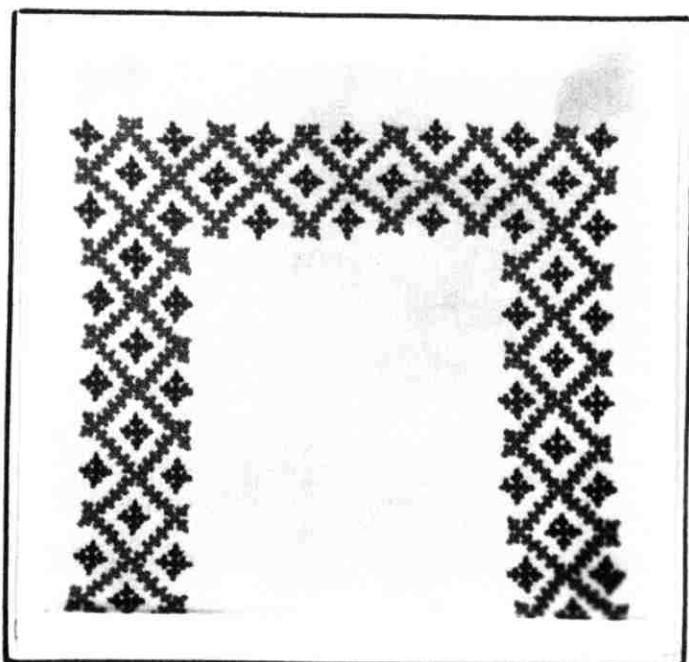
(1) "Marash Work" proper, is the name given to an old Armenian embroidery from Marash. This work is of rather a bold type and has the appearance of braiding; when worked in a combination of colours it looks like a piece of lace work sewed on the material. It is a kind of a weaving stitch and the same design (usually geometrical) must be sewed over four times before it is completed. The first time it is simply outlined and the other times a filling in stitch is used, the material thus remaining intact for the most part of the work.

(2) "Satin Work", although quite a different work from the preceding one, is nevertheless often called "Marash Work". The fact however remains that this old-fashioned embroidery was usually made by old women in Marash on the hand woven "bez". Many garments, bed-spreads, quilts, pillow covers and also towels of all sizes were elaborately embroidered with this work and according to an old custom some of these pieces were handed down from generation to generation as heirlooms.

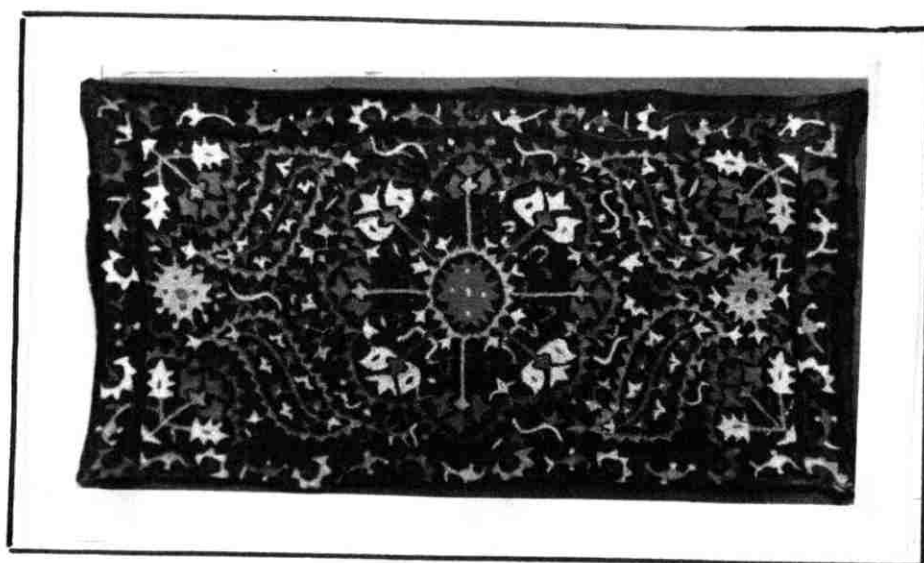
The designs are usually taken from birds, animals, plants, leaves and flowers.

3. Urfa Work

a. Historical: The development and refinement of this old Armenian stitch was due to the ceaseless efforts on



Night-gown Case  
Marash Work



Chairback, Native Material  
Worked in Coloured Threads (Silk)  
Made in Marash - "Satin  
Work"

the part of the well-known and much-beloved American friend, Miss Corina Shattuck who devoted her life for eighteen years in active work among the Armenians in Urfa and the surrounding villages. Miss Shattuck having witnessed the massacres of 1895 and the resulting poverty and distress among the people, decided to open an embroidery work-shop in the same city where at one time over 2000 widows and girls were engaged in making all sorts of needlework products (chiefly Urfa Work) which were sold through "The Friends of Armenia" in Ireland, United States, Switzerland and Turkey.

Unfortunately however, this progressive enterprise came to an end in the World War while most of the workers were helplessly caught in the great wave of the Armenian Deportation; even the secretary, Mr. Knajian, a faithful cooperator with Miss Shattuck was cruelly murdered in the unfortold calamity of 1915.

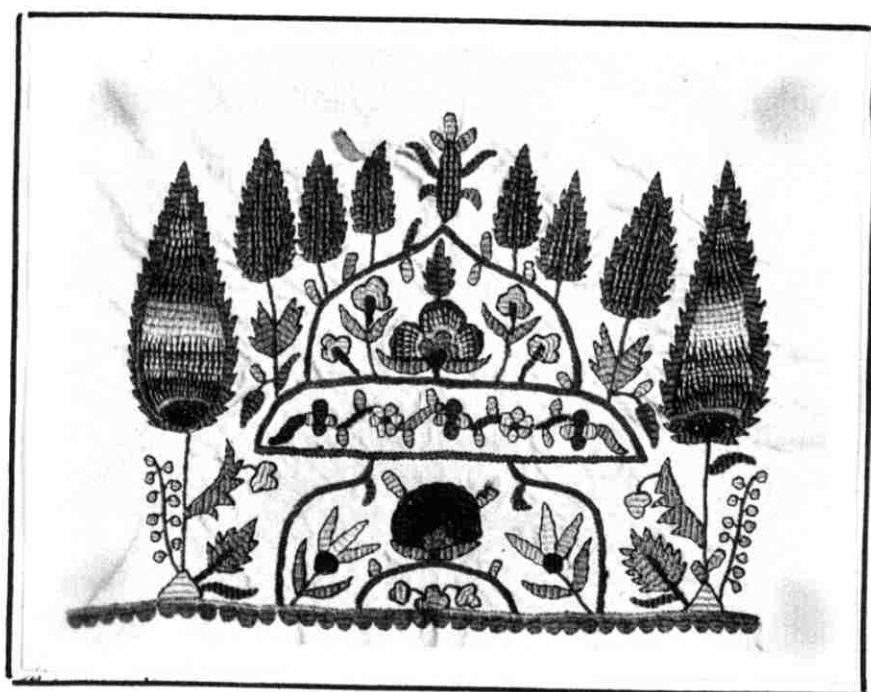
b. Old Armenian or Urfa Work; This is one of the prettiest and finest Armenian embroideries and forms the third important group in our classification of Armenian stitches.

The following are some of the striking features of this work:-

In the first place, the designs are usually taken from nature - birds, animals, trees, etc. forming the usual sources. Secondly, the front and the back of the work are almost alike, as in the case of Aintab Work. The embroidery itself consists



Dress Motive  
Urfa Work



Dress Motive  
Urfa Work

of tiny stitches worked close together in parallel lines, usually in coloured silk, although silver and gold threads are sometimes used in which case a coarse material is preferable. Linen, satin, sil damask, all make an excellent background for this work. In each case the material is sewed in a frame and the workers sit on the floor to do the embroidery. In this respect it is similar to the handling of Aintab Work.

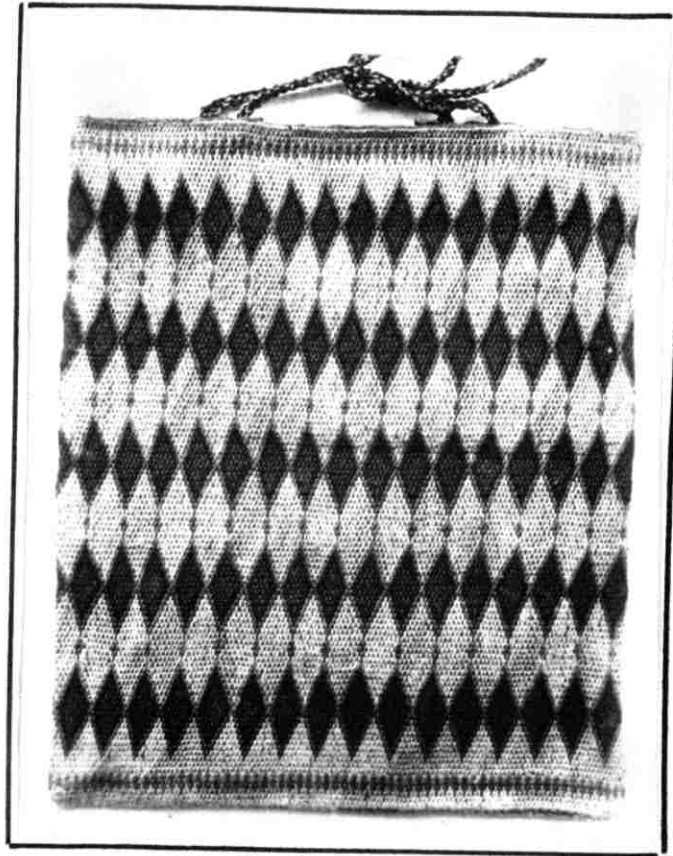
Finally, the question of colour is one of the most important points in this work. To procure a successful result, a few subdued colours must be used and these must be well-balanced in order to produce the desired effect.

#### 4. Miscellaneous Works

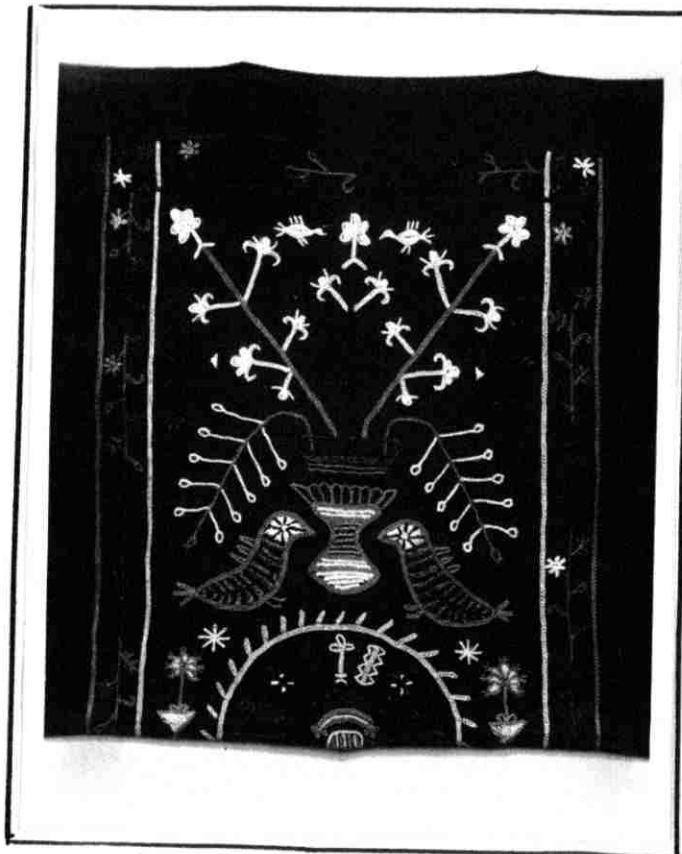
Under this heading we may group such works as: Besni, Isteefa, Sivas, works which are worked in stitches quite different from any of the ones mentioned above. In comparison with the marketability of the works, they have rather a restricted demand although much is being done in the way of improving the designs in order to keep up with the current demands of the ever changing styles and fashions.<sup>X</sup>

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<sup>X</sup> See p. for further discussion on this point.



Hand Bag  
Isteefa Work



Chairback, Old Design  
Besni Work



## CHAPTER IV

# THE SITUATION OF THE NEEDLEWORK INDUSTRY SINCE 1918

After this general survey of the Armenian Needlework Industry from 1895 - 1914, it may well to give in closing a brief account of the situation of the industry in general, since 1918, because then we shall be in a better position to judge its immediate importance and to some extent to estimate its future possibilities of remaining a constant source of income to the members of the community engaged therein.

The revival of the Armenian Needlework Industry after the War is worth studying. As soon as the armistice was proclaimed, groups of Armenian women and children who had survived their ill-fated relatives, began to emigrate from the Syrian Desert (were they had been deported during the War) and settle gradually, first around Aleppo and later along the coast of Lebanon. At that time the American Near East Relief, one of the best organized philanthropic institutions of the world, took up relief work among these settlers whose riches had been utterly despoiled by the enemy and who thus needed immediate help. Accordingly the organization established about

twenty separate orphanages in the country where thousands of young boys and girls were clothed, fed, and taught their own language also some elementary English and French.

In 1922, this same institution opened an embroidery work-shop for the orphans, but it was closed in 1925. In 1923 a similar work was undertaken in Beirut, in a building known as, "St. James Industrial Centre". This too was closed but reopened in 1925 with great success, under the directorship of Miss Kerr and later Miss D. Francis. The idea was to transform the orphanage into a kind of an industrial department where the orphans would be trained in all kinds of Armenian Needlework. It is now four years that this Industrial Centre its needlework production with a labour force of about 500 workers, both orphan girls and widows being fully employed. The wages vary from 42 - 50 syrian piasters a day.

These workers have four expert Armenian needlewomen who teach them and check their products, while the superintendency is entrusted to Mrs. Mary, also an expert in Armenian Needlework.

The average yearly sales of the needlework products amount to about \$ 18 000; these are exported mainly to the following countries:-

United States, England, Australia, Switzerland, Palestine

Palestine and Armenia.

The vitality of the industry industry is best proved by the surprising demand on the part of the customers for new patterns and new combination of designs, stitches, etc. so that constant changes are being made to suit the changing styles and fashions. If we were to analyse the causes for such changes, we would find that several things may be responsible for the phenomenon<sup>x</sup>. Very often it is caused by war, or some revolution or it may be that having reached a certain height and been the "fashion" for a time, there must be a change to break the monotony thus created. It begins to deteriorate and then after it has lost the public's approval, it is put away on one side to have its place taken by a newer style. It has been rightly said that one cannot force fashion but may be able to direct it. And there is no doubt that this principle is being observed to a large extent by the experts in the Industrial Centre just described. By trying to bring the best designs to the front, by constantly looking for better combination of colours, this organization has come to be the leading needlework centre throughout Syria.

All these evidences thus come to show how the success and development of this promising industry is the result of the

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<sup>x</sup> See Townend, B., Talks on Art Needlework (London Collins. Clear.Type.Press) Chap. I

combined efforts and the perseverance of all the elements interested therein: above all the organizers themselves, then the expert advisors and last but not least the clever workers.

It must be added here that another branch of the same work has been opened by the "Near East Relief" in Aleppo where about 150 girls are employed in similar needleworks.

Another important needle work-shop in Beirut is that of the Kelegian - Sisvan Orphanages, opened some eight years ago by the General Armenian Benevolence Union. Here also are sorts of embroideries are made by more than 100 orphans girls. Besides this occupation they are taught sewing and cutting out dresses. Part of their remuneration is kept in the treasury of the union, and when one of the number leaves the orphanage she is paid 20 £T. together with a sewing machine as a present.

Some years ago, a third needlework industrial centre was founded by the Capucin Order under the management of Père Remy. Here the workers were mostly Armenians but there were a few native workers as well. In return for their work they would receive some flour at the end of the week.

It must not be supposed, however, that the above mentioned institutions have been the only undertakers of the Armenian Needlework Industry in Syria. If we go back to some

thirty years ago, we find that there have been also private individuals who have promulgated the industry chiefly in Aleppo and Beirut. The first woman dealer in needlework products in Beirut, for instance, was Mrs. Rachel Yeghyayan who used to order her goods from Aintab and then after selling part of them in the city she would send the remaining part to the United States. The second woman was Mrs. Eva Najarian, originally from Diarbekir, who, for more than twenty years devoted herself to needlework which she loved so much. Besides selling various Armenian lace-work and embroideries from Aintab, Marash, Urfa and Constantinople, she would work a good many of her goods herself and would constantly try to improve the work, in the way of creating new designs, new combination of stitches, etc.

Among the larger dealers that have settled more or less recently in Syria, we may mention the following private houses:-

In Aleppo:- S. Krajian

H. Kharajian

G. Bezjian

Y. Parsekhian

A. Shirajian

In Beirut:- G. H. Bezjian and Co.

"Maison Blanche"

It is hoped that the foregoing short account of the Armenian Needlework Industry will render a fair idea, how varied and worthy of encouragement this industry is, especially <sup>when</sup> we realize the great possibilities of its further improvement and standardization . And it is all the more encouraging to note that, in spite of all the unfavourable circumstances that have once in a while overshadowed its history, it has always had its supporters whose praiseworthy efforts have constantly helped to raise its standard and who are still wishing to see it grow and flourish!

Bedros H. Najarian

College IV, A. U. B.

1928-29

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