

## LACE and DRESS A COLLECTION OF LACES as CREATIVE INSPIRATION

Meeting Eleni Kyriacou proved to be an important moment!!! Seeing her warm, clear gaze overlooking her garments, grafted with salvaged treasures crafted by women, immediately evokes a sense of esteem towards her. Her appreciation of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century historic, folk lace, once elemental to a young woman's dowry, and now "passé", triggers one to re-think our relationship with this part of our heritage, to re-assess the artistic merit and skill of its female creators and to explore the idea of their re-appropriation in a contemporary context.

These hand-crafted laces are exceptional examples of *The Decorative Arts*, which have been executed through the use of various techniques (filet, needle-point, Venise, bobbin, crochet and so on), which, regardless of the technique used (needle-point, tatting, bobbin, crochet, etc.), result in refined laces. Lacemaking, being an occupation historically held almost exclusively by women, became popular throughout the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly in Greece and Cyprus. There lacemaking reached a standard of supreme skill. Historically, in traditional, exclusive circles of society, women were taught lacemaking from an early age and it became a benchmark skill used to evaluate a young woman, assessing her virtue and profitability as a bride-to-be.

A cosmos of which women were the architects, "the realm of laces", naturally engage Eleni Kyriacou, having an architectural background herself and as a practising fashion designer she is in awe of these artistic masterpieces created by women. She appreciates the uniqueness of each piece, the diligence in the never-ending time devoted by women resulting in these masterful artworks, as though time, like the air passing through their fingertips, brought the laces into existence. The imprint of the soul - joy, sadness, hopes and dreams - that each girl patiently and lovingly embodied in every piece.... This profound appreciation and understanding, together with her love for craft is what brings Kyriacou to the fore as a collector of laces. It's her passion!!! To save these treasures, is saving history and "women's heritage". She is saddened, almost to the point of tears, by the "unfortunate" disregard of these treasures of the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of our country.

She started to collect laces as a means by which to salvage them, from the streets and bazaars of Athens. Thereby collecting and rescuing in the same way that an animal lover collects and rescues "strays", except she sees them as treasures that have gone "out of fashion", that were inherited and discarded or sold by their heirs. Her collection currently comprises of over 1,000 pieces. The collection pieces account for an endless number of hours of work, display incredible skill, artistry, and represent a discipline that one can say is largely lost today, if not entirely. The laces' rescue has become an important and personal undertaking for Kyriacou.

Eleni Kyriacou delves into the essence of things! There are times she likes to take out her stored collection of laces one by one, admiring their visual harmony and through their touch and feel, sensing they are alive with energy. She develops a spirited and meaningful "relationship" with them, a "dialogue" while simultaneously exploring new ways to re-use these pieces and expand an aesthetic, cognitive and sensory experience through their new use. She believes that this lace collection (*Old Lace, New Life*) has the potential to be a kind of template for future garments. Fashion designer Eleni Kyriacou is thereby advancing in creating new ways to elevate and appreciate the art of lace.

As sustainability, (in this case via the use of historic and traditional elements), has become more and more central to her work, Eleni Kyriacou draws our attention to "undervalued handmade laces" which she has so lovingly collected from the streets and markets of Athens, or wherever and whenever opportunity arose. Facing the restrictions of the second lockdown during the Covid 19 pandemic, where social and cultural

outings and gatherings were not possible, she found herself gravitating towards her lace collection and examining the possibility of re-appropriating these artworks into garments and thereby enabling them to cross over into her beloved field of expertise - dress. Based on her sound understanding and knowledge of art & design history and fashion, she incorporated lace into her creations, proving that a fresh, contemporary design is possible, through the use of something "traditional". She does this without ever replicating the historic element but by using the historic design to inspire the contemporary design. The historic element also becomes a connecting factor, linking us consciously and subconsciously to Greek history, via both being a material and immaterial element of cultural heritage. Also, by being placed in a contemporary context, and in a new-found dialogue of creativity amidst new materials and forms, the historic lace begins to offer possibilities for new, universal designs.

In this manner, she embarked on her collection where lace became the instrumental design element. Eleni Kyriacou's use of these historic creations offers new possibilities of understanding and re-use of these delicate female-created textiles. Thereby lace becomes a means of inspiration and artistic expression sparking a new design approach and vision for Eleni Kyriacou. By being bold and imaginative, she uses original pieces of handmade lace, which become central to her creations. On the one hand her work pays homage to the Greek textile tradition, whilst on the other it redefines the role of lace within the modern-day context of fashion and haute couture. Rather than being seen as folklore, a museum exhibit or folklore nostalgia, here, lace is seen in its original state, as part of a new design, creating a bridge and point of interaction between fashion, tradition, femininity and sustainability.

This collection, comprises of 15 looks, and has a low-key subtlety about it, characteristic of Eleni Kyriacou's design identity. Being the designer, whose established brand, was awarded an honour by the Hellenic Olympic Committee for redesigning the Olympic Lighting of the Flame Ceremony costumes, Eleni Kyriacou, needs no introduction.

These pieces are minimal and not over-designed, the lace being the principal design element. The garments epitomise a sense of comfort and simplicity. The lace placement in each garment is unexpected and novel, for example a long, crochet lace becomes an impressive, long sleeve or a round crochet ruffle becomes a draped short sleeve. In other garments the laces become back details, a collar or pockets and so on.

The collection has a colour palette that is striking, in that it is limited (white, cream, beige and dark blue of the denim) and yet makes the most of this, emitting simplicity. This design approach, one could say, recalls Oscar Wilde's notes regarding dress, who stated: 'I have mentioned... how identical the laws of architecture and of dress really are, and how much depends on line and proportion'. He then follows by arguing in favour of the simplicity of a limited colour palette.

The simplicity of the colour palette in Eleni Kyriacou's collection creates an aesthetic that gives her creations a clean, timeless and distinct character, while at the same time, maintaining an authentic air of tradition through the mere incorporation of the sole element of lace, which she seeks to integrate into contemporary dress. Eleni Kyriacou's designing, in this collection, is also characterised by minimalism, where her use of historic lace make it unnecessary to further embellish each look with accessories or jewellery!!! One can therefore conclude that this collection of garments by Eleni Kyriacou effectively brings tradition, contemporary dress, sustainable design and creativity together harmoniously, as, aspects from our past, present and future are deconstructed, urging one to innovatively redefine, the kind of relationship one should have with one's tradition and homeland!