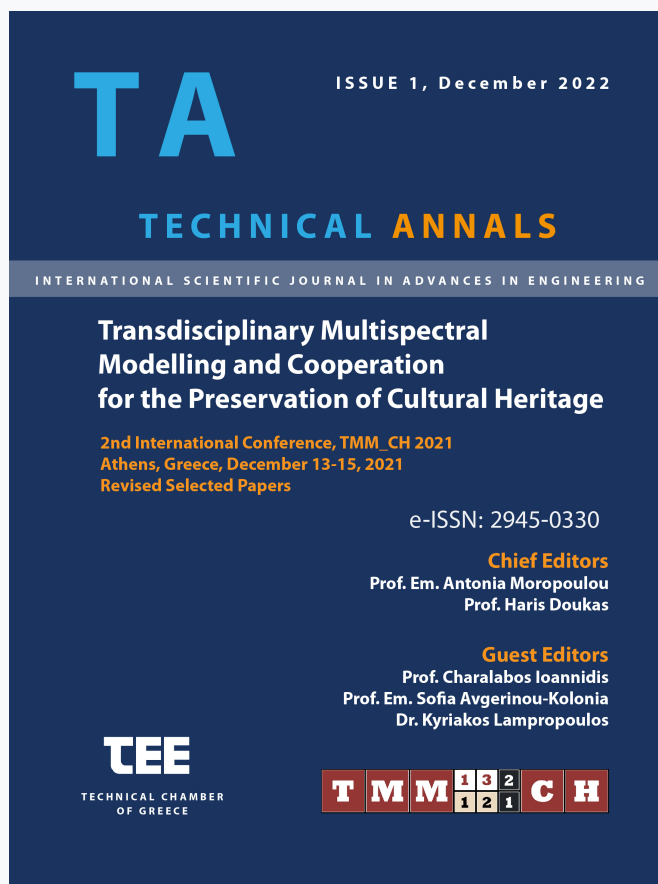


## Technical Annals

Vol 1, No 1 (2022)

Technical Annals



### Old fabrics

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doi: [10.12681/ta.32103](https://doi.org/10.12681/ta.32103)

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### To cite this article:

Tzortzaki, D. (2022). Old fabrics : π.ε.ρ.ι.τ.ο\_ο.ι.κ.ε.ι.ο. *Technical Annals*, 1(1), 205–212. <https://doi.org/10.12681/ta.32103>

## Old Fabrics

### πε.ρι.το\_οικείο

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**Abstract.** The proposed project positions itself within the field of museum, material culture and heritage studies but at the same time it shifts the attention to the history of fashion and fashion industry while drawing on local community and work force. The interdisciplinary nature of the idea links together the debate on sustainability and reuse of heritage with the social history of fabrics, retail shops and cloth makers and opens up possibilities for more transparency in the process of cloth making and the management of raw materials.

First, I look at the discourse of sustainability and link it with heritage and the fashion industry. Then, I turn to the particular and examine a) the repurposing of the Etmektzoglou silk deadstock produced at the Etmektzoglou silk mill in Volos during the 20<sup>th</sup> century b) the research idea revolving around the art of sewing and the reuse of fabrics and clothes from homes in urban Athens, during 1920-1980.

**Keywords:** Sustainability, Heritage, Fashion industry, Reuse, deadstock, Intimacy

## Introduction

Childhood lens on: women of the family sewing. A seamstress is walking among tons of colourful textile pieces covering the floor. Mirrors reflecting their everchanging silhouettes. Fashion magazines laid on table tops, cut outs and a sewing moulage doll of dark green cardboard with all sorts of measurements to fit different body sizes. An android of the most promising quality. Adulthood lens on: visits to the attic at the change of the season.

A metal ladder clumsily set. Quick, there is an event to attend in a couple of days. Change, cut, destroy. Blissful creativity (*two photos*).

*Περίττο* in Greek means of no need, useless, a waste, while *οικείο* means intimate.

The whole phrase woven together translates however, into something else: ‘about the intimate’ / ‘peri to oikeio’.

Old fabrics are intimate traces. Pieces of clothes, whole garments, zippers, bindings for hemming clothes, buttons, handmade belts, all sorts of left overs. Spanning most likely a couple of generations, maybe more, old fabrics are populating our storage spaces lingering on because of our reluctance to draw the line and turn them into memorabilia or clear-cut waste. The project *Old fabrics. πε.ρι.το\_οι.κει.ο* is about the process of ‘de- souveniing’ the traces, of indulging in intimacy that has to do with one’s own life filtered by use value.

We would like to reinstate use value, then, as we find it deeply meaningful. Use value possesses a kind of hands-on meaningfulness that stops the mind from getting astray. Its aesthetic, which has lately become number one trendsetter in fashion and design and has been labelled sustainable, circular, has been accompanied by “re” before verbs such as make, fashion, do, mold and so on, has a cathartic impact on consumerist souls. It is a collective guilt extinguisher and as such, it dominates the official discourse of goods production, be it clothing, furniture and homeware in general, packaging and the like. While this assumption might be epistemologically valid and financially prosperous no doubt, it makes claim – to our deep surprise and intellectual embarrassment – to an ontology of the self, a core of our existence that draws upon cell memory: hands that weave, that sew, that dye, that cut and paste pieces together, that embroider. Reassigning intimacy to the waste appeals to our very need to keep going, and if the planet escapes its fate, so can humans carry the hope. Remembrance and action remove the romantic element of the souvenir and turn traces into actual companions, testimonies of the continuity of life narratives, however ruptured, flimsy and remote those narratives (and clothes for that matter) might appear to be.

The project is a two-faceted endeavor: there is a research part and a business idea. In this paper, I will just draft the main points of the brand-new research project that draws upon the idea of intimacy to map out incidents of fashion and cloth making from the 1920s to the 1980s. The business element is expected to support research by proposing a renewed attention to our drawers and stuffed old suitcases and engaging us into creative synergies with the owners.

## **The socio-academic context: sustainability and reuse**

We often buy or even make clothes ourselves but ignore the provenance of the materials and the agents that make the process of clothing possible. Whereas the attempt to fill out gaps in origin and production seems like the new utopia from a global point of view, tracing production more locally maps out and visualizes real people, real shops and activities, styles and trends contained in everyday routines.

This is of course a catch for trendsetters. Recently, we witness a new everyday language filtering and communicating processes happening at higher levels of society, be they national and supranational executive bodies and / or the corporative world. Sustainability, as the idea of caring for the needs of the present without putting the next

generations at risk<sup>55</sup>, has gathered moral concerns around buzz words such as ethical consumerism, socially responsible decisions and investments, second life of things, slow fashion and so on. From EU programmes to businesses to activism to the market, there is a frenzy revolving around the reduction of carbon footprint. Main constitutive element of this general concern is the care for humanity's future and the therapeutic revelation that less is more<sup>56</sup>. Informed choice smoothes and justifies the anxiety of overspending while the markets prosper. As Basil Bernstein notes in his seminal book *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity* therapeutic identity relies on "sense-making resources"<sup>57</sup>, ways through which individuals construct personalized narratives to achieve the so-called personal growth. The turn to the self from the perspective of personal growth and the emphasis on emancipation and freedom of choice becomes entangled with market-oriented identity, a condition detected even before 2000 and commented by philosophers and heritage analysts. Hilde Hein, in her book *The Museum in Transition. A philosophical Perspective* talked about the advancement of "experience economy"<sup>58</sup> and its direct connection with the therapeutic identity and the intimate self in museums and the heritage industry. What we now witness is the end result of several decades of preparation for more diversity and acceptance, less rich-kitsch shows and more ethical reflexes. Still, the emphasis on the experiential is what informs the current discourse on sustainability.

Since we agree that ideas do not come from nowhere but are iterated by specific subject positions invested with power (nations, international institutions, professionals and think tanks, big businesses etc.), governments and supranational bodies set the pace. Sustainable development and heritage preservation are top on the list of UNESCO's strategic horizon. We read:

*Based on a strong appeal from national and local stakeholders, the 2030 Agenda adopted by the UN General Assembly integrates, for the first time, the role of culture, through cultural heritage and creativity, as an enabler of sustainable development across the Sustainable Development Goals. World Heritage may provide a platform to develop and test new approaches that demonstrate the relevance of heritage for sustainable development*<sup>59</sup>.

When it comes to fashion industry, the corporate "profits, planet, people"<sup>60</sup> discourse is defracted down the line of ideas to social agents such as bloggers, small businesses, bigger fashion manufacturers, shoppers, activists. This frame of mind reshapes the premises upon which the heritage industry operates and sets new rules and regulations, new exigencies and expectations as far as preservation and sustainability guidelines are concerned. During 2020 and 2021, just as I was processing the concept of the project, *Vogue Greece* hosted numerous articles exploring the new grounds. International brands such as Marrashki Life, Albus Lumen, Mimi Prober, Another Heritage, Guiliva Heritage and other, couple high-end aesthetics with historical refer-

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/s/sustainability.asp>, last accessed 10.7.2021

<sup>56</sup> Tahtara 2020, 24.

<sup>57</sup> Bernstein 2000, 73.

<sup>58</sup> Hein 2000, 198

<sup>59</sup> <https://whc.unesco.org/en/sustainabledevelopment/>, last accessed 8.7.2021

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/s/sustainability.asp>, last accessed 8.7.2021

ences. In February 2020 the journal featured a contribution by Elina Dimitriadi titled “Ithiki Epilogi” [Ethical Choice] which introduced the socially sensitive brand *Collina Strada* to Greek audiences. The founder, Hillary Taymour, staged a wedding show in a New York park by having people of various genders, styles and body sizes walking hand in hand in an attempt to promote her motto: “sustainability is a journey”<sup>61</sup>. The company targets “climate awareness, social awareness, change and self-expression” and sells at a three-digit price climbing towards the fourth digit a piece<sup>62</sup>. Taymour supports new ecological materials such as vegan skin, saves on water during production process and advertises fair salaries. More than a year later, an article on vintage revival, again in *Vogue Greece* rebrushes the concept of vintage: the collaboration between Alexander McQueen and the platform Brand Approved confirms the eagerness of the markets to appropriate global directives and profit: the House of McQueen buys used garments back from its clients and restyles them in order to sell them through the digital platform Brand Approved. Vintage is „in“ again and another digital platform, Farfetch, has recently added two new categories: Pre-owned garments for purchase and Second Life for those who sell<sup>63</sup>. At the same time, Greek brands like Zeus and Dione, Kepler, Ioanna Kourbela, Salty Bag, 3Quarters, Urban Owl, the activists Fridays for Future among others embrace both the sustainable approach, i.e. less is more and the heritage approach (traditional techniques, fabrics, motifs, cuts) and give Greek fashion and design an imaginative and up to date twist<sup>64</sup>.

At the level of the academia, MoMA offered an online seminar on sustainability in fashion in December 2020 while the British Council in Athens continues its four-year programme under the general title *Circular Cultures* focusing on the role of design for a sustainable future. This year’s edition, 2021, was dedicated to circular design and materials from the perspective of material wisdom and material waste and hosted an international conference and workshops (March 29-30)<sup>65</sup>. The contributors emphasized the need to move from the concept and practice of recycling to that of remaking, redoing, upcycling and paid special tribute to new garments tailored out of old military uniforms (RÆBURN) and innovative digital models for pattern cutting with zerowaste<sup>66</sup>.

Within the framework of the above, Old Fabrics bridges theory with practice in order to shed light on small-scale, home-contained fashion heritage in Greece by personalising the focus on local and synergetic forms of remaking.

Let me then turn to the specifics of the idea.

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<sup>61</sup> Dimitriadi 2020. “Ithiki Epilogi”, *Vogue Greece*, February, pp. 38-39

<sup>62</sup> <https://collinastrada.com/>, last accessed 10 July 2021

<sup>63</sup> Kiss 2021. “Vintage Revival”, *Vogue Greece*, April, 71

<sup>64</sup> On the topic of recent Greek brands operating along those line, see Kiss 2020.

<sup>65</sup> <https://www.britishcouncil.gr/en/events/circular-cultures-materials>, last accessed 10 July 2021

<sup>66</sup> <https://decode.com/>, last accessed 10 July 2021

## The research idea

### *A. Repurposing the Etmektzoglou silk deadstock*

The point of departure for this project has been, as it often happens, anecdotal, not academic. A friend who has been using silk to produce dyed scarfs, introduced me to one of the offsprings of the Etmektzoglou family whose silk production in Nea Ionia, Volos, had been well acclaimed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was even documented in the publication *Ιστορικός και Βιομηχανικός Εξοπλισμός στην Ελλάδα* (Historical Industrial Equipment in Greece)<sup>67</sup>. The two brothers Etmektzoglou with an origin from Vithinia, in Asia Minor, started the business in 1924 and in the first ten years, until 1935, they have expanded the exports to 12.000 kilos of silk sent mainly to Europe (Milan, Marseilles and Lyon) with just part of it sent to Athens to be turned into fabric bolts and decorative silk ribbons. The cocoons were mostly from Thessaly, thus Volos constituted the epicentre of the activity in that part of Greece. During World War II, the factory was commandeered by the Italians, while silk was used for parachute canopies. In 1955 the historic building was damaged by an earthquake and ceased to function and later on, its equipment was dismantled and transferred to Athens and was not used ever again. Gradually and for reasons relating both to the Greek history of deindustrialisation and import activity and to the microhistory of the family itself involving death and change, the business was no longer prosperous, even in Nea Ionia Athens, where it was transferred. The building in Volos, on the other hand, owned since 1996 by Volos municipality, has acquired a new use as cultural centre and a museum for the history of silk in the area, thus preserving equipment that dates to the last phase of the whole enterprise between 1962-1991<sup>68</sup>.

The story of the factory, the building and its function, fascinated me, especially after having the chance to see samples of the silk deadstock, in at least fifty different colours, all sorts of fabrics (*photos*): crêpe satin, crêpe de Chine, mousseline, organza, soie chavagne and other. The stock also includes fabrics made according to traditional weaving techniques and ordered to the Etmektzoglou brothers by local manufacturers who had ceased to produce silk, namely the famous Soufli silk mill and other producers from the Evros region, Ioannina and the islands. Within the Etmektzoglou deadstock there are bolts of fabric with only a few meters left, which makes them quite unique as objects of human craftsmanship. The clients were many and well acclaimed: banks, couturiers, fur producers, the textile industry such as Peiraiiki Patraiki, especially in the 1980s, monasteries but most of all Olympic Airways in its heyday, manufacturing duty free items and scarfs for the crew in collaboration with top Greek designers such as Tseklenis (photo) and Tselios.

Soon the idea of turning the deadstock into something living and vivid by restoring its use value and at the same time unravelling the humble traces of its story (i.e slightly worn selv-edges showing the end of the piece of the fabric, photo) became an urge.

<sup>67</sup> Dimoglou 1998, 229-232

<sup>68</sup> <https://www.volovweb.gr/el/sights/politistiko-kentro-metaxourgeio/>, last accessed 10 July 2021

Unica fabrics are like persons, with particularities and flaws that make them stand out. I came into contact with a pattern designer, Natali Pala, a graduate from the Department of Cultural Technology and Communication, University of the Aegean and decided to work together with her to find fitting patterns for the factory story. In the meantime, silk as heritage was establishing itself as the state of the art<sup>69</sup>. Yet, the Etmektzoglou heritage constitutes an ‘extinct’ source of material culture, which we aim to reuse for new garments and at the same time solidify the idea that reusing deadstock with a name, an origin and a narrative is part of our industrial and social history by and large dimly lit.

*b. The art of sewing. Home-contained fashion heritage and its reuse*

The initial idea deepened as the continuous need for raw materials began to puzzle me vis-à-vis the future of the project, after the Etmektzoglou’s deadstock would have been depleted. Deadstock is not expandable, thus how to continue? A more „sustainable“ concept soon took shape, and seemed sustainable in every sense of the term: continuity, less is more, low-budget, existing networks, social engagement. If my personal story of attics and boxes filled with textile remnants and stories behind them is the source of my long-term enthusiasm and attraction to clothing, so are other people’s stories too.

Discussions with friends often ending with the “what I am going to do with those garments that I don’t want to get rid of” motto, led to the belief that those stories could reinstate a more complete picture of urban couture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Together with the more recent collaborator, Panagiota Korompli, a cultural officer and experienced administrator in EU programmes, we decided to set the research period between 1920s, an intense mid-war phase design-wise, and 1980s, when local tailors, dressmakers, seamstresses, textile retailers and the like began to fade from the map. Despite that reuse and refashion of older pieces had never really died completely, it had considerably withered under the pressure from the multinational chains of cheap casual clothing in the 1990s and onwards. Even though the wealth of traditional embroidery and national costume making in Greece is an uncontested fact, applied arts were not on the agenda of academic and educational institutions, therefore markets did not push for handmade products. For the most part, imports catered for the day-to-day needs of clothing supply. Greek design was definitely present with prominent brand names in haute-couture and prêt-à-porter (Tsouxlos, Eleftheriadis, Tseklenis, Parthenis, Valente to name but a few). Yet, the diffusion to larger audiences and most importantly, the mentality of preserving and remoulding was far from promising. Easy come easy go kind of mentality.

Panagiota drafted a first version of a questionnaire including the following: personal info of the owner/s, date and mode of acquisition of the particular garment, details of the garment (style, material, preferred features etc. ), info of seamstress / tailor or retail shop, ateliers, other sources of material acquisition relating to the garment, patterns preserved or periodicals containing the patterns (for instance Gineka, Burda),

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<sup>69</sup> <https://www.zeusndione.com/story>, last accessed 11.7.2021.

process of making, eventual reuse and remakes, photographs, personal stories about the garment and its use. After a recent discussion with the Director of the Ethnological Museum of Thrace, Ms. Aggeliki Giannakidou, herself a heritage „activist“ having devoted her work in sharing techniques with the local Pomak women, we realised that this whole enterprise could indeed become a more long-term project sketching the story of sewing, first in the urban areas of the Athens centre, and maybe later in other cities of Greece. Ms Giannakidou gave us invaluable information about Alexandroupoli and Thessaloniki, just to confirm the significance of the endeavour and attest to the wealth of data that could be extracted and documented after having built networks with our informers. We thank her and look forward to conducting and sharing research results with her.

Last but not least, the idea of preserving fabric and fashion heritage by reusing old stock is a process to be taken up with, for instance, Norwegian or Scandinavian academic and business actors, who have been deeply engaged in the domain of sustainability and materiality during the last decades<sup>70</sup>

## Concluding remarks

*Old Fabrics. π.ε.ρ.ι.τ.ο\_ο.ι.κ.ε.ι.ο* project attempts to particularise general discourses on heritage sustainability and reuse within localised contexts (researchers, pattern makers, seamstresses, informers) in order to delve into a topic still unexplored in Greece: deadstock fabrics and clothes along with their trajectories. Our goal is to draft the scene of cloth making and purchasing first around urban Athens, distinguish between local makers and imports during the decades 1920-1980 and consequently propose a creative exchange with the owners: they will see their stock, be it fabrics or clothes, returning to their wardrobes restyled and we will have gained insight vis-à-vis a hardly visible part of Greek contemporary history.

Grasping social history from the perspective of the less privileged applied arts in Greece, extorts the element of folklore and restores the status of production and use, as part of people's life narratives. Intimacy in this sense is not a buzz word without concrete meaning, an empty signifier having lost its ability to refer to a particular content, meaning everything and nothing, but a term pointing directly to the self and our memory traces, however fragmented, constructed and glued together these might be. While discourses produced from power positions, as discussed above, will never cease to shape individuals and the values we all like to flag, it is, I believe, challenging to detect them and attempt to work with them, from within. This diagnostic process, the what of things, is a process of real empowerment, which means finding micro-possibilities of action with healing effects. If sustainability, as any big idea, stands a chance for humans, it is in the process of desacralizing the term and appropriating it, so as to make sense of our being in the world. What is before and what comes after, in any way cultures, communities and individuals understand it, is what anchors us to life, not in the sense of *lacrimae rerum*, as Pearce names the souvenirs,

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<sup>70</sup> See for example <https://betterworldfashion.com/>, last accessed 11.7.2021

the tears of things, but as continuation<sup>71</sup>. Exactly what sustainability in the heritage debate should stand for.



Logo design: Hara Vidopoulou

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