**Textiles: Women's ~~Work~~ Art**
**Dr. Katherine A. P. Iselin**

## Textiles: Women's ~~Work~~ Art

- How did women contribute to the visual arts in ancient Greece? Discussions on the art of ancient Greece typically focus on sculpture and vase-painting – unsurprising as these two forms of art not only most commonly survive, but sculpture and painting remain the most highly-regarded of all artistic mediums in the Western art world. As they have been for much of Western art history, these media were largely produced by men. Thus, women are frequently absent from discussions of ancient Greek art. Yet ancient Greek women *were* involved in visual art in other ways – most notably through textile arts.
- In this video, we will look at the role of women in the ancient Greek world and their contributions to Greek art
    - Unfortunately, much of the reason women's art is absent from Greek art surveys is because of modern biases against textiles as a "low" art or "craft"
    - Additionally, few examples of textiles survive from the ancient Mediterranean, making it a difficult subject to study
    - However, as you will see, women and textiles had much more of an impact on Greek art than is often acknowledged

## Textiles and myth

- The main art form Greek women produced was textiles
- Weaving was considered a hallmark of the ideal woman, so wives and daughters participated in it regularly
    - Even into Roman times, a spindle whorl could be used as a symbol of a virtuous woman
- This weaving would clothe the entire family – it was an economic endeavor (they didn't have to buy it!)
    - As the family wore the clothing, it also would have been the public display of a woman's textile work

## Athena and weaving

- In addition to its functional value, weaving also had an important presence in religion
- Athena, as the goddess of weaving, was most prominently associated with the activity
    - In Athens, the young women were appointed to spend nine months weaving a special peplos for the Athena Polias statue, which they would then present at the Panathenaea
    - This important ritual was memorialized on the Parthenon as part of the Ionic frieze on the east side

## Penelope and weaving

- Oral tradition also reminds us of the importance of weaving for women
    - In the *Odyssey*, the people of the city-state Ithaca, of which Odysseus is the king (wanax), suspect their leader might be dead as the Trojan War ended 10 years ago. Suitors are staying at his palace, vying for Penelope's hand in marriage so that they might take over Odysseus's authority. She delays this by saying she will

select a suitor when she finishes weaving her father-in-law's burial shroud. However, clever Penelope unravels it by night without raising suspicion by the suitors.
    - This subplot of the epic emphasizes the significance of weaving to a woman's identity: Penelope is the ideal woman, unwavering in her faith and love for her husband, while diligently weaving a burial cloth for her father-in-law. She is preserving her **oikos** (and thus the oikos of Odysseus) through all these actions.

**The *oikos***

- To understand women in ancient Greece, one must be familiar with the definition of an ***oikos***
- This Greek word has several meanings that work together
    - Family – not just blood relatives, but anyone adopted into the family or married into it too
    - Household or estate
        - This was all property, including enslaved people that were owned by the family
- The purpose of an oikos was to be economically self-sustaining
- There was a hierarchy, with the patriarch at the top
    - As a man's role was outside the house, he was the link that connected the oikos to the larger community, the city or polis
    - He also was the first step in recognizing babies into an oikos, acknowledging them as legitimate children
- When girls married (usually around the age of 14), they left their oikos and joined that of their husband's
    - When men married, they stayed in their oikos
- Property was transferred to sons, whereas daughters had a dowry they took with them to their new oikos
    - If there were no sons, a daughter could transfer property to someone else, even if she couldn't own it herself
        - This was done by marrying a man, having sons, then those sons would inherit the property
- While all of this seems very technical, the oikos as a concept is connected to one's legacy
    - A man would not want his oikos to die out – this would essentially be a second death for him
    - It also connects to the polis – a community of oikoi (plural of oikos) creates the polis
    - So a woman's role in maintaining the oikos – both the house and the people in it – directly impacted a man's place and legacy in the ancient Greek world
- It seemed the ideal oikos had gendered spaces
    - There was one area that would be reserved for all women of the household (mother, daughters, enslaved women)
    - It's unknown if these spaces were permanently gendered, or if they changed sometimes (such as using wall hanging to separate the women into a room if a male guest was visiting)

- In this diagram of the House of Many Colors (in the villa section of Olynthos, c. 432-348 BCE), one room contained many implements used for weaving (upper left), so that may have been a space either reserved for or used by the women of the oikos regularly
    - Notice it is furthest from the entrance

**Slide 2: Oikos on a vase**

- This pyxis shows scenes of the oikos of the king of Mycenae, Agamemnon, a familiar name from the Homeric epic the *Iliad*, with lettering identifying members of his household: Clytemnestra, Iphigeneia, Cassandra, and Danae
- We can see how the folding doors on the right separate spaces within the house

**The process of making cloth**

- It also was not just weaving – the women were responsible for the entire process
    - They would have to clean the raw wool, then spin it, then weave it into garments
- This vase depicts the process of wool preparation through weaving
    - First slide: You can see the preparations and spinning, with the drop spindle hanging
    - Second slide: On the other side of the vase, two women weave on a standing loom
        - Note the loom weights on the very bottom
    - Third slide: Finally, two women fold the newly-woven cloth
- While this vase isn't the most detailed, you can see that the Amasis Painter has taken care to include all the required tools for the weaving process, as well as decorated the women's clothing with patterns
    - Textiles are an important signifier – a finely woven garment would speak the skill of the women of the oikos
- If you're unfamiliar with the complexity of textile production, Google "spinning wool" or "spinning with a drop spindle." There are plenty of YouTube videos out there that show how these processes are done
    - Navajo weaver Clara Sherman covers the entire process, and you might be able to recognize the steps she does in comparison to those shown on this vase: https://youtu.be/D_p7OIghMVw
    - Scottish weaver Christine MacLeod goes into detail on how to spin using a drop spindle, How to Spin Yarn Using a Drop Spindle: https://youtu.be/bKAJTKvl0nE
    - It is significant that this same process was and continues to be used all over the world – it is efficient and produces quality textiles

**The process of weaving**

- Weaving is an incredibly complex process
- The photograph here shows what an "in progress" project might look like
    - It is part of the Penelope Project, a collaboration between several German organizations
    - This "in progress" loom is left in that state for museum visitors
- The pattern they are using derives from an Attic cup that depicts Penelope at her loom with her son, Telemachus

**Spindle whorls and loom weights**

- There is a significant amount of archaeological evidence for weaving, even if the textiles themselves do not survive
    - The distaff and spindle shaft were made of wood, so there are no surviving examples
    - But the spindle whorls and loom weights were made of clay, so there are many extant examples
- Spindle whorls were often beautifully decorated, which implies they were important objects to their owners
    - Many women were ultimately buried with them
- Loom weights were also significant, as girls/women took them with them when they got married
    - This is interesting, as they don't seem to have been decorated, unless they were painted

**Epinetron from Euboea**

- An epinetron is another object associated with women that survives, it was used during the preparation process
- An epinetron was worn on the thigh, and was textured to card wool
    - If you look closely at this one from Euboea, you can see incised scales on the large red surface
- Decorated versions were buried with unmarried women or could be dedications at temples

**Similarities in textile design and vase-painting**

- As we've seen in the vase paintings, the women of ancient Greece were not limited to solid colors – they frequently made intricate patterns
- Unfortunately, there are very few extant examples of textiles from the ancient Greek world
- The climate just doesn't preserve textiles, although a few small examples have been found around the Mediterranean
- You'll notice from these examples that the patterns are similar to those on vases!
- While the examples used throughout this PPT vary chronologically, one can see similarities throughout the ancient Greek period

**Other textile design**

- During the Classical period, or 5$^{th}$-4$^{th}$ centuries BCE, pottery shows that Athenian dress was plain – there were no patterns on the clothing
    - But some places preferred patterns outside of Athens (and Sparta); by no means were the ancient Greeks a homogenous group
- Prior to this, however, clothing had intricate designs
    - It is during the earlier Geometric and Archaic periods that we see evidence of beautifully complex designs, both abstract and figural
    - These vases, both from the Archaic period, show the variety of textile patterns painters incorporated into their figures

- Vase-painting also preserves representations of clothing and the patterns elite women may have woven (or oversaw the weaving of)

**Elaborate textile design**

- The Homeric epics mention complex designs at multiple points
- In the *Iliad*, Helen's weaving of a figural scene is interrupted
- This fragment shows such friezes could also be painted on
    - While difficult to see, the one at the bottom of the drawing shows a horse pulling a chariot with a figure in front of the horse
    - Note the decorative band above and below the friezes as well – again they match vase-painting!
- It is unfortunate that so few examples of textiles survive, as this was the major art form of the women's domain
    - But the evidence shows us that they were working with the same visual language as vase painters
    - In fact, **the designs used by vase-painters likely derived from textiles!**
    - The men of the pottery workshops were using the patterns designed by women
    - Geometric vases use geometric designs – all of these patterns would have first been used in weaving (hence the geometric shapes – there weren't any circles)
    - As the Homeric epics record figural scenes being woven by the women of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and the epics date to the 8$^{th}$ c. BCE, it also seems likely that the integration of figural scenes onto pottery was also derived from textile sources
- While the *actual* women's work of textiles may not survive, we can still see the influence of women artists preserved in the vase-painting!