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The Louisa Pesel Collection at The University of Leeds
International Textile Archive

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The University of Leeds International Textile Archive (ULITA) was formally opened in 2004. It evolved from collections donated to the School of Design (formally the School of Textile Industries) at the University of Leeds over the previous 130 years.

One of the most important constituent collections of the archive is the Louisa Pesel embroidery bequest. Pesel (1870-1947) was an accomplished practitioner and scholar of ethnographical embroideries. After her death in 1947 Pesel bequeathed her collection of embroidery and manuscripts, some unpublished, to the University of Leeds. Although her collection of Mediterranean embroideries has been studied and exhibited, much of her own work which chronicles her dynamic and innovative approach to design has remained in storage until recently. This paper documents this exciting un-seen collection and places it in the historical context of the early twentieth century.

Pesel trained in design under L.F. Day one of the key members of the Arts and Craft movement. Following Day's recommendation she was appointed as a designer at the Royal Hellenic School of Needlework in Athens she eventually became the Directress. During this time Pesel started her extensive collection of Mediterranean embroideries which she used to study and classify stitch formation.

Pesel not only collected examples of international embroidery, she had a desire to establish a new British tradition of embroidery. She felt strongly that national design characteristics were produced by people

living and working in similar circumstances and to add to the English characteristic, one should study English embroidery. On her return to England she was appointed as an Extra Inspector of Art Needlework and became the first president of the Embroiderers' Guild in 1920.

Throughout her life Pesel experimented with design and materials documenting her research in both her writing and embroidered samples. She evolved a teaching style in which she encouraged the development of design and embroidery techniques through practice and shared experience, always demanding the highest quality of work from her students.

Social responsibility was evident throughout her life. During the First World War she formed the handicraft section of the Khaki Club in her home town of Bradford, West Yorkshire, working with shell-shocked servicemen. After moving to Twyford, Hampshire she formed Yew Tree Industries to give employment to local women. With Sybil Blunt she designed and produced a collection of ecclesiastical embroideries for Winchester Cathedral.

Louisa Pesel was one of the most important embroiderers of the early twentieth century and her work provides a link between historical design and the modern embroidery movement.