“Oh, My Thoughts, My Thoughts...”:
Olena Pchilka’s and Lesia Ukrainka’s
Contributions to Epigraphic Embroidery

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“Oh, My Thoughts, My Thoughts...”: Olena Pchilka’s and Lesia Ukrainka’s Contributions to Epigraphic Embroidery

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Abstract
The article focuses on the role of Olena Pchilka and Lesia Ukrainka in epigraphic embroidery development. Undoubtedly, Olena Pchilka was an ardent proponent of folk art purity. Following from this, there is a tendency to think that she was against all novelty in Ukrainian embroidery. Many researchers and antiquity enthusiasts refer to her authority when arguing against inscriptions on textile as a phenomenon resulting largely from printed cross-stitch on paper. However, not all embroidered verbal texts have been of print origin. Most of them were folkloric (or folklorized) texts. What is more, Olena Pchilka to some extent provided her own comment on epigraphic embroidery in approving Lesia Ukrainka’s rushnyk (embroidered runner) containing the inscription “Oh, my thoughts, my thoughts, woe is with you! Love one another, brethren, love Ukraine” (devoted to Taras Shevchenko). In modern embroidery, embroideresses reproduce the citation with new connotations of these words, thereby continuing the


2 Epigraphic embroidery is embroidery with inscriptions. The practice of embroidering verbal texts was widespread in Slavic culture from the late 19th until the first half of the 20th centuries. In most cases, this involved folkloric texts (lines from folk songs and proverbs) embroidered on Ukrainian rushnyky. A rushnyk (ritual towel) is a piece of cloth that is highly important in Ukrainian ceremonies and rituals. Folkloric texts (folklore) are used here in a broad sense – that is, all texts popular in folk culture. They include folklorized texts, that is, authored texts that over time have come to the people in many variations. Details about the phenomenon of epigraphic embroidery (or embroidered verbal texts) may be found in the monograph: Tetiana Volkovicher, Verbalni teksty u narodni vyshyvtsi kintsia XIX – pershoi polovyny XX st.: heneza, semantyka, prahmatyka [Verbal Texts on Folk Embroideries (End of the 19th – First Half of the 20th Centuries): Genesis, Semantics, Pragmatics] (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 2019).


4 Cross-stitch papers are typographic samples (printed on squared paper) for counted-thread embroidery.
epigraphic embroidery tradition. The author illustrates the folklorization of oft-cited lines from Taras Shevchenko’s poetry with examples of epigraphic embroidery from her own Interactive Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery).

Key Words: Olena Pchilka, “Ukrainian Folk Ornament,” Lesia Ukrainka, rushnyk, epigraphic embroidery, inscriptions, cross-stitch papers.

Introduction

At the turn of the 19th century, radically new forms began to appear in Ukrainian folk embroidery.5 This was connected with the rapid development of printing houses that began producing cross-stitch papers. Their circulation was so extensive, that the residents of almost all Ukrainian regions had access to them.

Many girls and women quickly mastered embroidery modeled on printed schemes. The printed production was for all tastes,6 as represented were ancient geometric ornaments as well as absolute novelties for Ukrainian folk embroidery, such as naturalistic images of people or verbal texts.

It is noteworthy in this regard that it was the content of the pictures and inscriptions proposed by the publishers that was not strange for people,7 as some presented scenes of everyday life and others originated from folklore (or folklorized) texts, mainly songs and proverbs. The absolute novelty was in their form: the images and inscriptions were to be embroidered.

The article will emphasize the existence of verbal texts on textile. Today we have a special term to denote it – epigraphic embroidery. There is no longer doubt that the tradition of making inscriptions on textile caught on in Ukrainian culture.8 Nevertheless, many researchers and authorities in the matter continue to argue for folk art purity.9 They speak out against embroidery that has been made by means of printed cross-stitch paper. In this respect, a generally negative attitude has taken shape, when it comes to verbal texts on textile.

6 Kostiantyn Dalmatov, Tretii albom russkikh, malorossiiskikh i yuzhnoslavianskikh uzorov dlia vyshivaniia [The Third Album of Russian, Little Russian and South Slavic Patterns for Embroidery] (Sankt-Peterburg, 1883); Ye. Dolivo, Sbornik Yuzhno-Russkikh Uzorov [Collection of South Russian Patterns] (Kyiv: Izdanie T. A. Gubanova, 1898); M. Karagodina, Uzory dlia vyshivaniyia M. Karagogidinoi [Patterns for Embroidery by M. Karagodina] (Odesa: V. Til & Co Litography, 1897).
7 Volkovicher, Verbalni teksty u narodnii vyshyvtsi, 55.
8 Volkovicher, Verbalni teksty u narodnii vyshyvtsi.
At the same time, I must note that far from all embroidered inscriptions were made according to printed schemes. It is truer to say that published cross-stitch papers gave impetus to epigraphic embroidery development, as they contained not only ready inscriptions, but also an alphabet – schemes of separate letters, with the aid of which embroideresses could compile any phrases.

Despite this, many antiquity enthusiasts still disfavour epigraphic embroidery. They often refer to the authority of a well-known campaigner for folk art purity, Olena Pchilka, who was alleged to have had the same view. As proof of this, her statement “There is a great need for such purely folk, Ukrainian samples, as similarly to folk poetry, embroideries may deteriorate, get worse,” is actively cited in numerous works.

The question arose, however, of folk art purity meaning no innovation at all. Linked to this is a second and more concrete matter: drawing upon Olena Pchilka’s thought, would it be justifiable to advocate against epigraphic embroidery as a phenomenon resulting largely from cross-stitch paper?

Olena Pchilka as a Researcher of Embroidery and Campaigner for Folk Art Purity

Olena Pchilka, an outstanding writer, translator, public figure, and the mother of Lesia Ukrainka, was recognized in her lifetime, inter alia, as a researcher of Ukrainian folk...
embroidery. The following excerpt from Ivan Franko’s letter to her provides clearest evidence of this:

I also would like you to write an article about Ukrainian folk embroideries and ornaments. Many compendiums that have come out in our country are modeled on your compendium and introduction to it. Some of them are teamed with articles (e.g. by Volkov). It seems to me there were also separate articles, because Ukrainian folk ornament has become very popular. As such, these achievements in the past several years should be reviewed and pieced together. And you seem like the most competent person in this regard.16

No prizes for guessing that the mentioned by Ivan Franko compendium is the well-known “Ukrainian Folk Ornament” (1876)17 that soon brought fame to Olena Pchilka as the first Ukrainian researcher of folk decorative and applied arts, in particular, embroidery.18 The main message of this work is the cultural identity of Ukraine on the example of its ornamental art.19 Such a patriotic idea could not have gone unnoticed. The book turned out to be such a big success that not only Ukrainian, but also Western European researchers praised it. As Petro Odarchenko and Valentyna Tytarenko state, some French professors even lectured on her work.20 Small wonder, then, that the compendium was reissued five times during the author’s lifetime.21

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17 Olha Kosacheva, Ukrainskii narodnyi ornament: vyshivki, tkani, pisanki [Ukrainian Folk Ornament: Embroideries, Fabrics, Easter Eggs] (Kyiv, 1876).
18 Olena Dikunova, Olena Pchilka – berehynia ukrainskoj natsii, 2; Drofan, “‘I pravdu i borotbu blahoslovyty,’” 221.
Olena Pchilka began collecting folk ornaments in Zviahel (Novohrad-Volynskyi) immediately upon marriage (1868) and moving there, although she was interested in folk decorative and applied arts before these important events in her life. According to Olena Pchilka, she was inspired by her brother, Mykhailo Drahomanov. The fact that Volyn embroidered patterns differed from her home Poltava ones encouraged the young researcher to intensively collect samples in order to have the opportunity of comparing them. The collected material showed Olena Pchilka that Ukrainian ornament had its own originality.

The last (during the author’s lifetime) fifth edition of Olena Pchilka’s *Ukrainian Patterns* was published in 1927 – in the period of the New Economic Policy (1921–1928). After that a long time-out in balanced Ukrainian folk art research transpired.

In her works, Olena Pchilka relied on materials collected by herself: “Probably, it may seem strange or false to someone... But I will just answer that my conclusion is based on facts that I have collected.” And it is so. Nothing is more convincing than personally obtained extensive material.

However, materials collected more than a century later demonstrate concrete changes in Ukrainian folk embroidery. This allows me to make inferences, some of which run contrary to previously noted ones. For instance, Olena Pchilka argued that...
naturalistic images of people, animals, or buildings were not typical for Ukrainian folk embroidery, as it "demands a relatively more complex technique, failing which they would be ugly." Actually, the statement was fair for the times described. Today we have a rather different picture of Ukrainian folk embroidery, and can state that it also contains naturalistic images. This is absolutely normal. Traditions always develop according to new contexts.

Above all, as we will later confirm, Olena Pchilka ultimately recognized some novelties in folk art, even at that time. This will be seen on the example of Lesia Ukrainka’s work.

As evidenced by memoirs of the Drahomanov-Kosach family, Olena Pchilka’s work meant the world to her children. They called her compendium “mother’s patterns.” One of Olena Pchilka’s daughters, Olha, would later write:

Those mother’s patterns had a strong parenting influence on Lesia and Misha: since the beginning of their conscious lives, the children watched their mother working on patterns, seriously and purposefully, – collecting them, drawing them, writing something about them, consulting with her “learned” uncle on this question, finally – and this is key – publishing them. And this work is not about some sort of “handicraft for ladies,” but towards a “Ukrainian Folk Patterns” compendium from their beloved Zviahel region. This work of mother in tandem with Chubynskyi’s ‘Works’ have taught the children from an early age to respect the work connected with Ukrainian ethnography.

Olha stated that she deliberately mentions the publication of “mother’s patterns” in Lesia Ukrainka’s “Chronology” in 1876 as an event in her life.

Lesia Ukrainka as an Embroidereress and Heir of Olena Pchilka

Olena Pchilka’s work led to Lesia Ukrainka’s passion for folk ornaments. When the girl was six, she learned to sew and embroider. It was not a curiosity for that era, as it

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29 Kosacheva, Ukrainskii narodnyi ornament.
32 Kosach-Kryvyniuk, Lesia Ukrainka, 43.
33 Kosach-Kryvyniuk, Lesia Ukrainka, 43.
34 Iryna Lukashyk, “Rechi pobutu ta etnohrafii yak skladova chastyna literaturnoi ta memorialniyi ekspozyt si museiu Lesi Ukrainky v s. Kolodiazhne [Household and Ethnographic Items as a Component of the Literary and Memorial Exposition at the
was a typical pastime for young girls. Notably, Lesia Ukrainka treated this activity not as a routine, but as a harmony of mind. Later, in her letters to her mother, Lesia Ukrainka asked her to send some patterns for embroidering, and in her letters to her sister Olha, Lesia Ukrainka wrote that she “often was in such a state that she could only embroider and do nothing else,” advising her sister to embroider too, as the activity could do no harm.

When Lesia was eight, she embroidered a shirt for her father. This fact is mentioned in works about Lesia Ukrainka as evidence of her skills in embroidering from an early age. Although, it was another embroidery by Lesia Ukrainka that gained more fame. This was a rushnyk dedicated to honoring Taras Shevchenko.

There are several interesting moments connected with this embroidery. Firstly, the runner was embroidered not only by Lesia Ukrainka, but along with her friend, Marharyta Komarova. It is accepted that the runner was commissioned. The Odesa Hromada commissioned Lesia Ukrainka and Marharyta Komarova to make a rushnyk for a Taras Shevchenko portrait (by Ilya Repin), as tradition demanded. Thus, the collaborative preparation of such a sacred article as a rushnyk may be examined in the context of the friendship between the Drahomanov-Kosach and Komarov families.

There is an extant photo of Lesia Ukrainka, Mykhailo Kosach and Marharyta Komarova with this rushnyk. This is how Tetiana Ananchenko annotated the photo:

She is often visited by Marharyta Komarova. The girls always find fascinating topics to talk about. At that time, they took a picture together to remember the moment – Lesia, Mykhailo, and Marharyta Komarova. This is the famous photograph wherein the girls sit by a tree, dressed in Ukrainian style:


wearing tiaras, corsets, and *vyshyvanky* (embroidered shirts), with beads around their necks. There is an embroidered *rushnyk* on their knees (later, they would present this runner in Kaniv, at the Kobzar’s gravesite, it would later be stored in the Taras Shevchenko memorial museum).\(^{39}\)

There are different legends about this very visit to Taras Shevchenko’s grave with the gift. According to the first version, the *rushnyk* was taken to Kaniv region only by Marharyta in 1889. Two years later, Lesia Ukrainka and her mother saw the embroidered runner there, in a place of honor.\(^{40}\) Lesia Ukrainka’s sister Olha also wrote about this in her “Memoirs and Notes of the Year 1889”:

Marharyta Komarova, while visiting someone in Kaniv region that summer, took the *rushnyk* that they had embroidered together with Lesia to the house at Shevchenko’s gravesite. When we (mother, Lesia, and I) were at Shevchenko’s grave in the summer of 1891, we saw the *rushnyk* hanging in a place of honor in the house.\(^{41}\)

Another legend states that this very *rushnyk* was presented at Shevchenko’s gravesite by Lesia Ukrainka herself. In June 1891, Lesia Ukrainka, her sister Olha, and their mother, while travelling to Yevpatoria for medical treatment, stayed in Kaniv in order to leave the embroidered towel there.\(^{42}\) As Liudmyla Ohnieva states, there are memoirs about that visit by Ivan Yadlovskyi, legendary watchman and keeper of Taras Shevchenko’s gravesite:

I didn’t know that such a thin, small, and weak woman was the prominent writer Lesia Ukrainka. She brought the embroidered *rushnyk* by herself. There were some people with her. One man wanted to put the runner over the portrait of Shevchenko, but she said that she wished to hang it personally: “Myself, myself…”\(^{43}\)

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\(^{43}\) Ohnieva, “Ikony ‘Sviatoho Tarasii.’”
Ultimately, there is also a version that Lesia Ukrainka embroidered more than one rushnyk devoted to the Kobzar:

In June 1891, Olena Pchilka accompanied Lesia to Yevpatoria from Kolodiazhne for medical treatment... Lesia personally put the rushnyk embroidered by herself over the portrait of her spiritual father in Tarasova Svitlytsia. They also saw the runner embroidered in 1889 by Lesia Ukrainka and Marharyta Komarova. It is certain that Olena Pchilka consulted them in choosing the patterns...44

Unfortunately, detailed information is known about only one of Lesia’s rushnyky.

A third factor, which is of most interest to us, is the content of the rushnyk.45 Besides geometrical ornament, it contains an inscription. On one edge of the towel it reads “Oh, my thoughts, my thoughts, woe is with you!” (“Dumy moi, dumy moi, lykho meni z vamy!”), and on the other, “Love one other, my brethren, love Ukraine” (“Liubitesia, braty moi, Ukrainu liubit”).

Today, verbal texts on rushnyky have become all-too-familiar. But at the end of the 19th century this tradition was still nascent. Many researchers demonstrated their total rejection of such “modernizing.”46 However, the practice of embroidering inscriptions on textile has deep roots in Ukraine.47

With regard to the embroidered text on Lesia’s rushnyk, it consists of two parts. The first originates from Shevchenko’s poem “Dumy moi, dumy moi” (1840; Oh, My Thoughts, My Thoughts), while the second has as its prototext Shevchenko’s poem “Zghadaite, bratiia moia” (Remember, My Brothers) from the cycle “V kaz emati” (1847; In the Casemate).48

Both verbal parts of Lesia’s rushnyk have subsequently become formulas for epigraphic embroidery. This means that variants of these texts were widely embroidered by other women.49

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47 Volkovicher, Verbalni teksty u narodnii vyshyvtsi.
48 Shevchenko, Kobzar.
As concerns the first part, the Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery)\(^{50}\) contains a photo of a *rushnyk* with the reduced variant of this verbal text. The inscription is repeated twice from both sides: “Dumy moi lykho meni z vamy!” (Oh, My Thoughts, Woe is with You!).

With regard to the second part of Lesia’s *rushnyk*, four other embroideries in the Interactive Online Index of Folklore Formulas (Epigraphic Embroidery) are to be found. All the samples have amplified variants of this formula: “Love one other, my brethren, love Ukraine, and pray to God for our unfortunate country” (Liubitesia, braty moi, Ukrainu liubite i za nei beztalannu Hospoda molite).

Three of these *rushnyky* also have combinations with other verbal formulas. The full version of the first reads “Ukraine will rise up! The light of truth will shine, and slave children will pray in freedom / Oh, my God, save Ukraine! / Love one other, my brethren, love Ukraine, and pray to God for our unfortunate country” (Vstane Ukraina, svit pravdy zasvityt i pomoliatsia na voli nevolnychi dity / Bozhe, Vkrainu spasy! / Liubitesia, braty moi, Ukrainu liubite i za nei beztalannu Hospoda molite). The second version reads “Love one other, my brethren, love Ukraine, and pray to God for our unfortunate country / Oh, Ukraine, you are our mother...” (Liubitesia, braty moi, Ukrainu liubite i za nei beztalannu Hospoda molite / Ukraino, ty nasha nenko...). And the third reads “This is the well where the dove basked, this is the girl that I loved / Love one other, my brethren, love Ukraine, and pray to God for our unfortunate country” (Os taia kyrnychynka, v nii holub kupavsia, os taia divchynonka, shcho ya v nii kokhavsia / Liubitesia, braty moi Ukrainu liubite, i za nei beztalannu Hospoda molite). The last version contains only one formula “Love each other, my brethren, love Ukraine, and pray to God for Our unfortunate country” (Liubitesia, braty moi, Ukrainu liubite i za nei beztalannu Hospoda molite).

The examples above confirm that the verbal formulas on Lesia’s *rushnyk* “Oh, my thoughts, my thoughts, woe is with you!” and “Love one other, my brethren, love Ukraine” become part of epigraphic embroidery. They are represented in different – reduced or amplified – variations and combined in various manner, which proves their folklorization.\(^{51}\)

I do not have in mind that it was Lesia’s *rushnyk* that marked the beginning of these embroidered formulas, but I claim that Lesia’s *rushnyk* became part of epigraphic embroidery in its nascent stage.

\(^{50}\) Brovarets, *Interaktyvnyi elektronnyi pokazhchyk folklornykh formul*.

\(^{51}\) “Dumy moi”, “Liubitesia, braty moi.”
Olena Pchilka and Lesia Ukrainka in Modern Ukrainian Epigraphic Embroidery (End of the 20th – Early 21st Centuries)

We can be certain that Lesia’s rushnyk laid the foundation for a wide range of Ukrainian epigraphic embroideries from the end of the 20th to the early 21st centuries. This resulted in numerous copies of her work made by modern embroideresses. Some of them are mentioned by scholars in their academic papers and public lectures.

For example, Svitlana Bryzhytska, commenting on modern rushnyky in the Shevchenko National Reserve in Kaniv, mentions a copy made by indigenous embroideress Halyna Bondarenko (1989), modeled on Lesia’s rushnyk (1889) – apparently, on the 100th anniversary of the commemoration of Lesia’s embroidery. The author of these lines has recently lectured on interpretations of Lesia’s rushnyk by modern embroideresses.

Liudmyla Ohnieva has reproduced cross-stitch paper modeled on Lesia’s rushnyk and published it in her eponymous book Lesyn rushnyk (Lesia’s Rushnyk), so that it be available to a broader spectrum of embroideresses, thereby increasing the number of would-be copies. However, as the author states, the existence of cross-stitch paper does not suffice for the reconstruction of the famed embroidery: “One should also have an understanding of what Lesia and Marharyta wanted to say to Taras Shevchenko, as a rushnyk is a letter.”

It could be added to this that there is one more natural occurrence in the development of folklore. Besides changing the forms of tradition (e.g. folk embroidery from the end of the 19th century can be supplemented by inscriptions, as contrasted to folk embroidery of the 18th century), there may also occur a rethinking of existing texts. Today, different reinterpretations or further connotations of this embroidered inscription are not excluded.

For instance, in a modern context the image of Lesia’s epigraphic rushnyk is also used as a symbol of Ukrainian unity. In particular, another embroideress, Larysa Azymova, has made a copy of it in Sloviansk (Donetsk region) while under occupation, showing that Donbas is a part of Ukraine. The rushnyk was represented at the exhibition “The Rushnyk’s Path of Donbas” (2016): “In a place of honor is a runner with the ubiquitous Shevchenko lines ‘Oh, thoughts, my thoughts…’ This is a copy of the rushnyk

made by Lesia Ukrainka as a gift to the prominent poet.”56 In this instance we see connotations regarding the recent events in Eastern Ukraine.

Another example is an attempt to make a precise copy of an artefact. Zhytomyr embroideress Tamila Yaremenko reproduced the runner 120 years after Lesia Ukrainka’s prototype. The artisan did her best to come as close as possible to the original, applying a method of historical reconstruction: “I made accurate measurements, took approximately five hundred photos, and restored the geometry of the pattern.”57

 Needless to say, there are also plenty of epigraphic embroideries in honor of Olena Pchilka and Lesia Ukrainka themselves. The rushnyk below, devoted to Olena Pchilka, is embroidered with: “God forbid, one live to a time to lose faith” (Ne dai, Hospod, dozhyt do toho chasu, shchob viru shchyru zahubyty); the runner with an image of Lesia Ukrainka reads: “Oh, Ukraine, our unfortunate mother, my first string will be for you” (Do tebe, Ukraino, nasha bezdolnaia maty, struna moia persha ozvetsia).58 These are lines from Olena Pchilka’s and Lesia Ukrainka’s poems, and represent the poetesses’ continuing indirect input into epigraphic embroidery development.


**Conclusion**

On the one hand, we know that Olena Pchilka was a noted campaigner for folk art purity. She steadfastly reaffirmed this position in her introductions to her writings

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devoted to Ukrainian ornament. On the other hand, she approved of Lesia Ukrainka’s embroidery containing verbal text on it, despite the fact that in those times inscriptions on textile did not yet belong to the sphere of native tradition.

Superficially, there appears to be a disconnect here. One might surmise that this discrepancy represented different periods of Olena Pchilka’s life, or indicated an exception made for Taras Shevchenko’s words, or perhaps there is something wrong with one of the statements. But there is a simple explanation for the conundrum. The point is that the term “folk art purity” is not to be taken literally. This expression does not equal total rejection of everything new, at least in Olena Pchilka’s understanding. Presumably, folk art purity implies not only the preservation of established elements, but also the development of new forms, including verbal texts on textile, as in this case.

Therefore, notwithstanding the held view that Lesia Ukrainka’s mother was against all sorts of novelties in Ukrainian embroidery tradition, she, on the contrary, contributed to them. With the aid of her daughter Lesia Ukrainka, Olena Pchilka, to a certain extent, provided input for epigraphic embroidery. Lesia Ukrainka’s rushnyk marked the beginning of new embroideries symbolizing the unity of Ukraine. What is important is that this tradition is ongoing, gaining new connotations in response to modern contexts.

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