



Young Brides, Old Treasures:

MACEDONIAN EMBROIDERED DRESS

Museum of International Folk Art and the Macedonian Arts Council

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I Will Pin this Kiska on My Head¹

VLADIMIR JANEVSKI

THE CREATION AND EVOLUTION OF MACEDONIAN FOLK DRESS OCCURRED over a long period of time with the earliest indications rooted in the oldest local cultures and connected to religious icons of the people.² Indications of this art form in the middle ages are found on frescoes in churches of that period, a notable example in the local church in the village of Psacha, in Eastern Macedonia, and the churches in Ohrid. In the development of Macedonian folk dress we also find Oriental influences introduced by the Ottoman Turks.³

Hand in hand with the evolution of the dress went various initiation rituals that were connected to the dress, makeup, and hair of Macedonian women. These rituals are evident even in ancient times and continued as late as the second part of the twentieth century when modern life and western styles overtook the rites that had been practiced through centuries. Among the most practiced rituals were those connected to makeup and hair. They have been documented through folk songs that celebrate the life passage of a young girl to a married woman such as this song from Dolni Polog warning the bride of changes that await her:

*Say goodbye and cry for your youth,
You will be going to a strange new house.
They will remove your sokaj,
They will unbraid your naplitsi.
You will separate from your large family
Like a sheep from his flock,
Like a wheat stalk from a field,
Like grapes from a vineyard.*

Various beliefs in connection with the hair and head played a great role among the Macedonian people. The head and hair were thought to be sacred, untouchable,⁴

¹ I would like to thank Menka Aceva Kulevska, born 1922, from the village of Skochvir, who graciously completed the braiding of the model's hair.

² V. Klichkova, *National Dresses of Macedonia*, (Skopje: Ethnographic Museum, 1963), 3.

³ G. Zdravev, *Macedonian Folk Costumes* (Skopje: Matica Makedonska, 2005), 9.

⁴ J. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (Belgrade, 1992, 1st ed. 1890), 298.

and from there great magical force was attached to them.⁵ Additionally the head and hair symbolized the strength and power of the individual.⁶ The process of distinguishing boys from girls began at the time a child started walking. In terms of the head and hair, that meant that the boys started wearing caps, while the girls started wearing their hair in braids.⁷ Cutting the first lock of hair held a special significance, and from there the mysticism associated with that lock of hair was protected forever. In early childhood the mother began to add various items, like bead decorations, coins, and other things to a child's hair or headwear as protective charms.⁸

The combing and braiding of hair in Macedonia was greatly varied and particular, evident even in ancient times. Every ethnic group had its own specific style of hair-dressing.⁹ Rituals centered on the hair and head marked changes in status for a female as well. Typically girls would go bareheaded until marriage. As young unmarried women together they started to braid each others' hair, incorporating a multitude of various adornments. As the years passed by, so the hairstyles changed, from day to day providing their own specific and individual message in the communal group. Through the style of dressing one received a message communicating the status of the individual, whether she was a maiden or already a married woman.

In the eleven villages of Skopska Crna Gora north of the capital Skopje, unlike much of the rest of Macedonia, Orthodox Christian girls of marriageable age not only braided their hair in a specific manner but typically wore a head scarf; a sign of crossing over into womanhood. Once a young woman was wed, there were additional rituals that tied the new bride to her new house as her in-laws prepared to present her to the community in her new status as a married woman. These were performed, after the couple returned from the church ceremony, on the first floor of the house where the livestock was kept in the room called *kled*. It started with a ritual called *oplitanje* when the bride bowed in front of the groom ten times. After she did this the groom handed her a water pitcher and she poured water on the hands of the godparents and the best men. Then the unbraiding of her hair began.

As her single braid was undone and rebraided as two braids, and her scarf was replaced with the two head scarves of a married woman, the older women mourned the passing of her girlhood by singing sad songs. The bride cried as the women worked and they consoled her with the song,

*Girl, oh girl,
Give yourself but don't give in.
Who is braiding your hair?*

⁵ Lj. Radenkovic, *The Symbolic World in Folk Magic of the South Slavs* (Balkanological Institute: Belgrade, Nis, 1996), 25.

⁶ J. Chevalier and A. Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols* (Zagreb, 1987, 1st ed. 1969), 293.

⁷ V. S. Radovanovic, "Folk Costumes in Mariovo," *The Newsletter of the Skopje Scientific Society*, Books XIV and XV, (1935), 98.

⁸ G. Zdravev, *Macedonian Folk Costumes, Vol. 1*, (Skopje: Matica Makedonska, 1996), 181.

⁹ R. Polenkovic-Stejic, *Combing and headscarf covering among the Vlach women in the village of Mezdri*. Tkalicicev Collection, special printing from the first volume, (Zagreb, 1955), 175.

When they finished, the bride again poured water to wash their hands and gave a gift of a towel to each woman. On the following day, the bride was taken to the village fountain, by the female members of her new family, to fetch water so she could be introduced to the community and acknowledged as a married woman.

Along with dress and hair style the face was also given much attention, in particular among Muslim women. In five villages outside of Skopje where Macedonian Muslims live, Tsvetovo, Elovo, Drzhlivo, Bela Crkva, and Dolno Kolichani, known as Skopska Torbeshia, a bride was ritually prepared to move to her husband's family home by the application of special makeup by the female members of her new family. First her face was whitened, historically with powdered limestone, *belilo*, and on her cheeks were painted circles of deep red, *tsrvilo*. Then fine metal wire or gold colored paper was pasted on her cheeks by an older woman experienced in the technique. Meanwhile, the other women sang and played a drum called *dajre*. Cries of "she is ours, she is ours, she is ours" were heard from the house of the groom.

Once she was dressed and several other rituals performed, she was taken out of her house and helped to mount a horse waiting to take her to the groom's home. When she was in the saddle she was covered with a white sheet to protect her from the evil eye. The concealing of her face, both with disguising makeup and with cloth, deflected any evil. As a newly married couple both the bride and groom were thought to be vulnerable to the ill wishes and intentions of others that could cause them harm.

A woman continued to use the makeup with which she was painted on her wedding day throughout her life. Repeated trips to a special grocery known as *bakalnitsa* were made where she would buy the makeup, as illustrated in this folk song:

*The moon lit the road from Salonika to Tetovo.
Ah, but it was not the moon, but three young brides
Three young brides headed to Tetovo
Headed straight to the Uncle Jakim's shop.
Good day, Uncle Jakim,
We're here to buy gram belilo, gram tsrvilo.
Our husbands are gone to work abroad
But they will pay you when they return.*

In another song, young men used the reference to makeup to express their love:

*Open the door, oh beautiful Lena
So I can see your pretty fair face,
So I can see your face flushed and made up,
So I can kiss your honey soft lips.
I can't come to the door my darling
My mother has fallen asleep on my dress.
So I won't be able to get up
So I can't open the door.*

Or to express trouble in the marriage:

*Beautiful Maria,
Do not put on rouge.*

*Do not powder your face.
Do not dress up.
The neighbors are laughing at me.
Whoever you look at – you wound,
And me, you set on fire with your beauty.*

Another practice involving the head and hair of young women was once found in many different communities all over the country. Skillfully twisted lengths of black, red, or white wool served the purpose of providing the appearance of long, extended hair while at the same time acting as an amuletic device that protected the individual against supernatural forces. These adornments were used to indicate the transitional state in preparation for a new status, signifying that a woman was ritually initiated and ready for marriage. They were also worn during the first year of marriage.

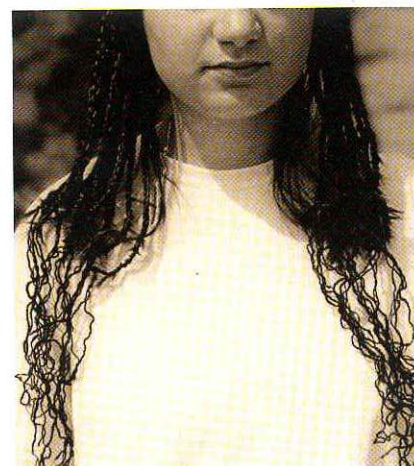
These wool extensions had various names, depending on the region or village, such as: *kotsle za devojka*, a false braid for a girl, or *golem kotsel za nevesta*, a large false braid for a bride, in Mariovo. A false braid in the Bitolsko Podmariovski region was called *prtsle* while *prtsle-tilnik* referred to a false braid worn at the nape of the neck in Prilepsko Pole; *til* means the back of the head or nape of the neck. Other names used are *prtsle* in Poreche, Debartsa, Zheleznik and Kicheviya, *piskyul*, meaning tassle, in Skopska Torbeshiya, *kotsel* in Skopska Blatiya and Kumanovsko, *naplitsi*, braids, in Dolni Polog, *pletenitsi* among the Miyaks, and *gaitan*, the word for cord or braid, in Debarski Drimkol. What follows is a specific review of the combing and braiding of the hair of *chupi*, young girls of marriageable age, in the village of Skochvir, in the Brsyak region.

The village of Skochvir lies along the southeastern portion of Bitolsko Pole and borders Mariovo, Bitolsko Pole, and the Moshtenska group of villages in Lerinsko Pole. Formerly, marriage ties were maintained with the surrounding villages of Brod, Dobroveni, Veleselo, Slivinitsa, Polog, Gnilezh, Tepavitsi, Iveni, Baldoentsi, Paralovo, Oreovo, Brnik, and Orle.

In the past this entire area was a crossroads where life was insecure, and various types of looting and plundering occurred regularly. As a result of this instability, the local population was constantly compelled to move and resettle. Over time, these difficult conditions differentiated the populations of Bitolsko Pole, people who lived on the Pelagonia Plain near the city of Bitola, from those in Mariovo, a cluster of villages high in the Nidzhe Mountains. However, the two groups retained some common characteristics that are easily seen in the material culture, and also in the spiritual and intellectual realm, such as the practice and beliefs about dressing the hair.¹⁰

In the village of Skochvir and the other mentioned villages, the first time a girl's head was covered was on her wedding day. Until the beginning of the twentieth century a married woman covered her head with an *obrus*; after that, women wrapped their heads with a white cotton scarf with embroidered decoration and a tassel, *shamiya so pashka* or *darkma so gugan*.

¹⁰ F. Trifunovski, *The Bitola-Prilep Valley, Anthropogeographical Preservation* (Belgrade, 1994), 107.



- 1)
- 2)

Most often, hair styles were created by the girls themselves, working with and helping each other. For the most festive occasions, such as large village festivals and religious holidays, the girls started braiding their hair on Thursday or Saturday, so that by the holiday, usually Sunday, their hair would look its best. First the hair was parted; a straight line taken from the nose with the forefinger that went to the back of the head, called the *tilen patets*, where later they braided the *tilnite pletenki*, braids at the nape of the neck. The hair was divided above the ears into sections called *tseluvtsi*. To begin, a lock of hair on either side of the part at the very front of the head was braided. At the top of the braid was attached the *tunturnitsa*, made of black, tightly spun wool yarn in combination with several rows of white beads. This ornament was attached to the braid at the forehead with a metal hook called *yadichka* and at the nape of the neck. The *tunturnitsa* was worn like this until the beginning of the twentieth century, after which time the girls started wearing bangs and the beaded *tunturnitsa* was attached directly to the hair, instead of attached with a hook.

The remaining portion of the hair was braided into very tiny little plaits that they gathered all around the ears. Near the ends of these braids they attached *predentse*, twisted wool cords that were usually black but sometimes dark red. (1) These small braids were then divided into three sections. The hair at the nape was made into four or five little braids on each side, which were called *tilnite pletenki*. (2) For the most festive variations young women in Skochvir braided as many as twenty five



3)

4)

5) Right page

little braids while in the neighboring region of Prilepsko Pole the girls braided a similar style using up to sixteen plaits on the sides.¹¹

After the small plaits were made they started to braid them into a larger braid. To begin this process, they would braid three plaits from the middle of the bunch and attach an ornament called *niza*, made of pink yarn decorated with a single row of beads. For the most festive occasions they also attached an *oyme*, a triangular ornament made with black and white beads.

Once the *niza* was braided into place, the rest of the braids were incorporated, in a specific order, into a larger braid that fell down the back. The braid closest to the ear was not included in this bunch but was fastened to either side of the *yalovka*, the term that designates each half of the false hair piece. (3) The woolen threads attached to the ends of the small plaits were also integrated into the larger braid. (4) These intertwined braids, together with the *yazhe*, a group of wool cords that linked the natural hair braid to the *prtsle*, were about one *peda* (ten inches) long. Then the girl started to braid the *tilnite platenki* at the nape of the neck, beginning at the first one closest to the *yazhe* to the last one in which the *yalovki* are braided. As the braiding progressed, individual strands of the yarn of the *yalovki* were added from each side, ending with a braid made entirely of wool.

The entire piece, composed of two *yalovki* when braided in this manner, was called *prtsle*. On top of the *prtsle* they would attach another jewelry piece called a *tsela*. *Tseli* were made by tailors from black, braided cord. Women added additional beads and coin decorations at home. The coins themselves were called *tseli* in the local dialect, so this entire decorated piece was named after them. The center portion of the *tsela* was tied to the *prtsle*.

A chain, hung with silver coins and hooks on each end, called *sindzhir*, was fastened on each side of the apron and draped underneath the hair piece. Finally, a bouquet of natural flowers such as daffodils, tea roses, basil, ivy, or holly was tied together with a red cord and affixed to the hair. (5) With that, a young woman showed she had attained the social status of a *chupa*, a girl ready for marriage. The bouquet, known as *kiska*, was also worn by young brides for about a year after the wedding, pinned to the *obrus*. The hair style was unbraided in about a month and a woman's best friends started the entire process again. In Macedonia it is well known that adorning oneself with flowers has, according to folk belief, an apotropaic or protective function,¹² while simultaneously symbolizing happiness, joy and health.

Up until the end of the nineteenth century, girls would wipe oil on their hair to give it a high sheen, but later they used only water, because the grease stained their outer garments. A woman braided her hair in this manner her whole life, but as she got older the decorations were left off and the number of braids reduced. This can be verified through photographs from 1913.¹³ This style of hair dressing and adornment was maintained until the 1950s.

¹¹ A. Krsteva, "Macedonian Women's Costumes-Displays of Social Relationships." *Macedonian Folklore*, xxiii/45, Skopje, (1990), 28.

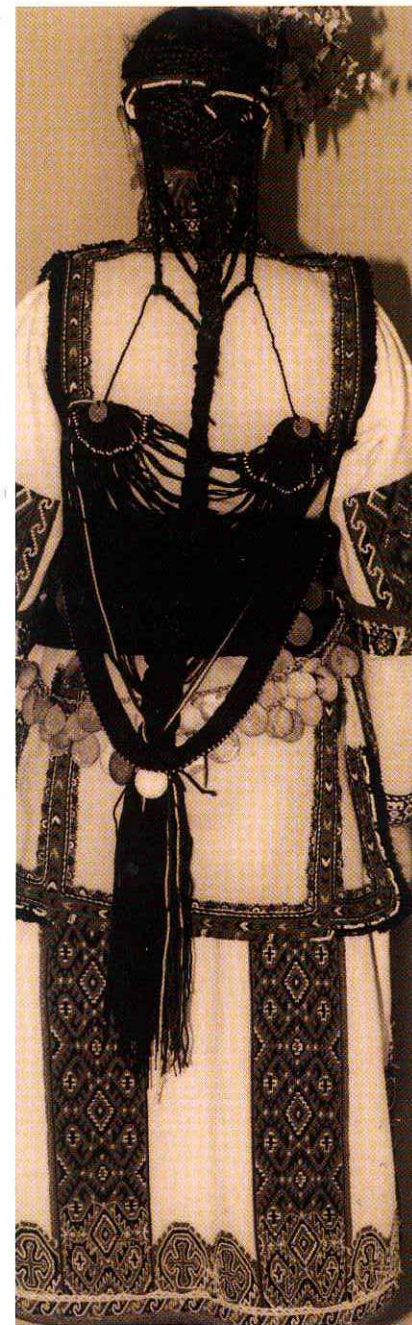
¹² Z. Nikolova, *Folk Jewelry and Adornments in Macedonia* (Skopje: The Museum of Macedonia, 1982).

¹³ *Macedonia in 1913, Autochromes from the Collection in the Museum of Albert Kahn*, (Skopje: Museum of the City of Skopje, 2001), 106-107.

Although elaborate localized hair styles were not uncommon before World War II, a slow transformation began with the action of the revolutionary committees during the period of the Ilinden Uprising in 1903. The revolutionary leadership forbade the purchase of the dyes and silver-gilt thread needed for embroidered garments, and the purchase of jewelry including the ornaments braided into the hair. They encouraged women to sell their valuables to buy weapons and to show their support for the revolutionary cause by refraining from so-called frivolous activities. According to this testimony from the village of Zhiovo, in the Mariovo area, "The Komitadje did not allow red embroidery or extensive embroidery; they did not allow *krkmi* [bangs] or *kotsle* [additions to the hair]. They would punish our fathers."¹⁴ Many women complied, as demonstrated in this folk song:

*Yana embroiders a Macedonian flag
She embroiders for three years
And there is no one to ask her
For whom does she stitch those tiny stitches?
Until her aunt finally asks
Say Yana, oh beautiful Yana,
For whom do you stitch those tiny stitches?
Ah my aunt, my dearest aunt,
I am embroidering a Macedonian flag
So I can give it to Jane Sandanski.*¹⁵

These rituals are not commonly practiced in Macedonia in the present day. There are few women left who remember how to dress the hair or apply makeup in these specific ways. Macedonia became less isolated as the twentieth century progressed and these practices, as well as the making and wearing of dress associated with the female life cycle and particular geographic and ethnic areas, gradually disappeared.



¹⁴ A.I.F, file 14 /5, Mariovo, reg. number 228.

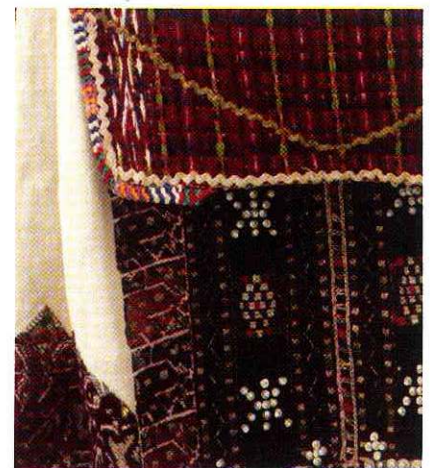
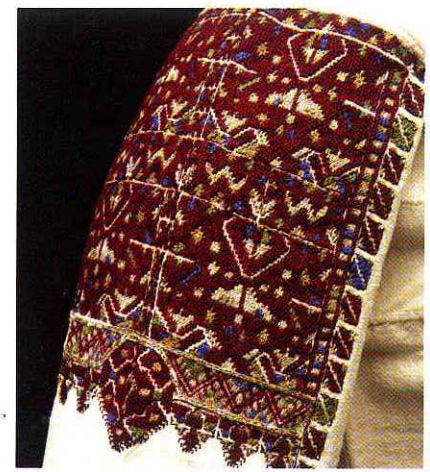
¹⁵ One of the most revered Macedonian revolutionary heroes, killed in 1915.

Young Brides, Old Treasures:

MACEDONIAN EMBROIDERED DRESS

BOBBIE SUMBERG

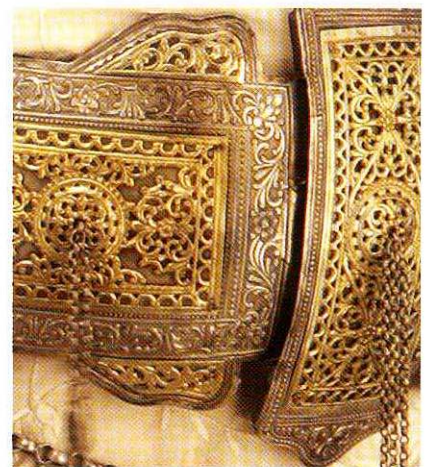
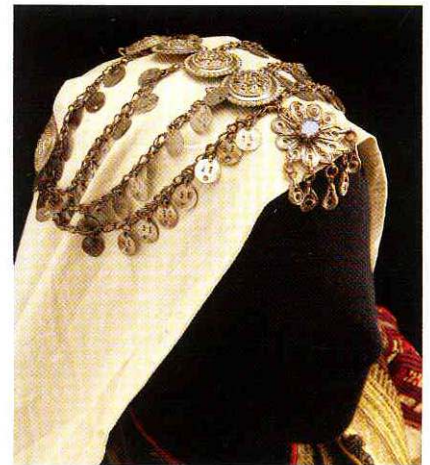
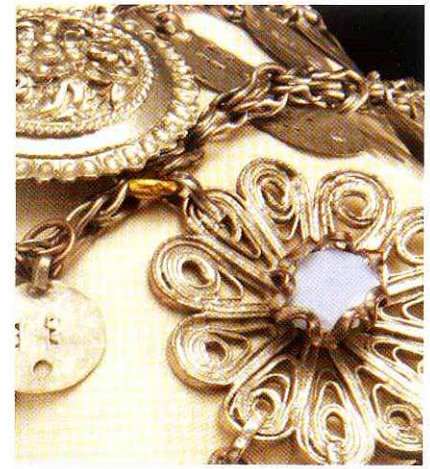
VLADIMIR JANEVSKI



YOUNG WOMAN'S FESTIVAL DRESS. Villages under Suva Gora, c.1900

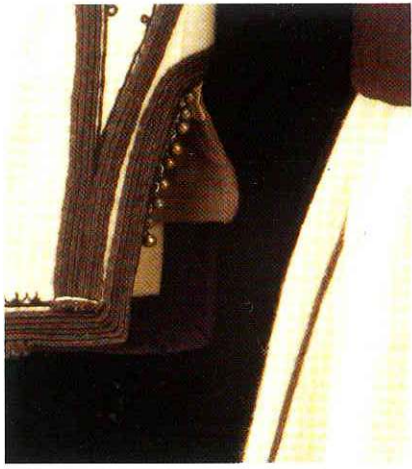
Cotton, wool, metallic thread, metal, glass beads, silk, possibly synthetic fibers. Gift of Bernard W. Ziobro, Gift of the Macedonian Arts Council, The Ronald Wixman/Stephen Glaser Collection. There are five villages at the foot of Suva Gora Mountain where women wore this style of dress. The fitted sleeves with embroidery at the shoulder of the chemise are unique in the Macedonian repertoire. A chemise from the mid-nineteenth century would have the proportions of wool and silver-gilt thread embroidery reversed. The model wears a blouse, a chemise, a sleeveless coat of striped cotton with silver-gilt decoration on the fronts, a white cotton coat, *saya rhkae*, with vestigial sleeves covered in maroon pompoms, small and large aprons tied over a wool sash, a printed scarf tucked in at the waist, and a coin necklace called *gyerdan*. On the head is worn a *glaina* or braid holder that straps under the chin, a head scarf, and a pin, *igla*. Women wore *igla* in other parts of the country as well.





NEW BRIDE'S DRESS. Miyak, Mala Reka, c.1900

Cotton, wool, silk, metal, metallic thread, rayon. The Ronald Wixman/Stephen Glaser Collection, Gift of Bernard W. Ziobro, Museum Purchase. Mala Reka, on the western border, is the original land of the Miyaks, who migrated south and east from here beginning in the eighteenth century. Depicted here is the dress of a bride on the fourth and final day of the wedding festivities, when she went to the water fountain in the center of town to ritually wash the hands of the wedding party. The *tnoka* chemise worn the day before, during the church ceremony, has a particular type of embroidery called *pisani podvevci* (page 44) not seen on this chemise. Dressing began with a long-sleeved blouse, *mintan*, then the chemise, a vest, *elek*, and finally a heavy wool coat with vestigial sleeves, *klashenik*.



YOUNG MAN'S FESTIVAL DRESS. Miyak, c. 1900

Wool, cotton, leather. The Ronald Wixman/Stephen Glaser Collection, Gift of Bernard W. Ziobro, IFAF Collection. Miyak men wore very heavy wool garments all year round when attending festivals. A male tailor, *terzia*, constructed the garments. The decorative trim is called *gaitan*. A brown cotton shirt was worn under the pleated coat, *dolama*. Wool trousers, *bechvi*, a wool belt, *poyas*, a short wool jacket, *kepe*, a hat, *keche*, and leather shoes, *opinci* complete the outfit. Men of other ethnic and religious groups in Debar, some parts of the Brsyak region, and Albania wore the same style. The *dolama* was reserved for festival days, whereas the rest of the garments could be worn every day.

PUTTEES. *nazovtzi*. Miyak, Debar District, c. 1900. A.2010.6.136V

[Left] Wool, metal, cotton, length 16 ¹/₈ in. (43cm). Gift of Bernard W. Ziobro. A man wore *nazovtzi* when he had plain trousers without the decorative braid on the sides.





HEAD CLOTH. *darpna*. Debarsko Pole, c. 1860. A.1949.1.93



EARRINGS. *ushnitsi*. Debarsko Pole, c. 1880. A.1955.1.394 SC

Metal, glass, carnelian, $8 \frac{7}{16} \times 2 \frac{3}{16}$ in. (21.5 x 5.5 cm). Gift of Florence Dibell Bartlett. A fine chain attached to each earring and worn over the head supported their weight in the ears.



WEDDING DRESS. Kicheviya, c. 1920

Cotton, wool, metal, metallic thread, silk, glass beads. The Ronald Wixman/Stephen Glaser Collection. The ensemble worn by Brsyak women in this part of the region is simpler than that worn in Bitola or Prilep; they wore far fewer garments. Lighter colors and less ornamentation overall were typical. The bride wore a more fitted chemise and two white wool sleeveless jackets. The deliberately offset stripes of the apron, the black braid belts visible underneath, and the dangling chain of coins draw the attention immediately to the reproductive area of the body.



OVERCOAT. *djube*. Gorna Prespa, c. 1900. A.2010.23.1

Wool, fur, metallic thread, silk, 41 5/16 x 13 3/4 in. (105 x 35 cm). Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William F. Hennessey.

NEW BRIDE'S DRESS. Gorna Prespa, c. 1900

[Details of Following Spread] Cotton, wool, fur, hide, metallic thread, silk, rayon, plastic buttons, glass beads and gems, metal, linen. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William F. Hennessey, The Ronald Wixman/Stephen Glaser Collection. The bride's dress from Gorna Prespa is distinguished by the long black *djube* lined with fur and decorated with *srma* embroidery. Under it the bride wore an embroidered chemise, a smocked dickey, a white wool coat with velvet sleeves, a vest with silver-gilt embroidery, a long braided belt, a red-and-black-striped wool apron, a silk brocade apron, *predsemnik*, and a large buckle. Gorna Prespa is located in the far south of Macedonia, near the borders of Greece and Albania. The ensemble shown here is very similar to what was worn in the town of Resen at the time.

