Antique Laces of American Collectors

A Book by Miss Frances Morris, the President of the Needle and Bobbin Club, and Miss Marian Hague, Vice-President

A scholarly interest in the beauties of lace is recent in the art study of our country. The gracious ladies of formal elegance who were our forebears in Colonial and early Victorian times knew laces, for they wore them daily, and it was part of every lady's education to know Honiton from duchesse and needle-point from bobbin lace.

It is probable that their interest rested there, on the laces which circled their soft necks and white arms, nor looked to the history thereof— which was a pity.

The proof that things are different now, that although we wear less rare lace we study more its history, is the publication of so important a folio volume as that of Miss Frances Morris and Miss Marian Hague.

Here the story of lace is vitally told, from the threads of which were drawn out to make a thin foundation on which to work ingeniously and beautiful stitches.

Reticella, this early style was called, the name looking for its origin to the Italian reticello, a net, for it was veritably a net, with the

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After stitch was built up with the lace-worker's needle until was composed the entrancing lace known as "stitches in the air"—punti in aria.

Miss Morris tells also of the Venetian point among the Italian laces, and of Burano, that lace of long ago, the making of which would have become a lost art—so one is told in Venice—save for the discovery at Chioggia a few years ago of a very old woman who in her childhood had been taught the fairy-like and complicated stitch. Queen Margherita, who fostered the lace industry, had the old stitch taught to new workers and now the work goes happily on, for millionaires, at Burano.

Side by side with the history of needle-point and reticella goes that of bobbin lace—perhaps it is the oldest type, as the fingers were used as anchors for the thread far back in the Middle Ages, when they called it passement. And those who like the origin of words smile when told that bobbin laces are called merletti dei piombi because the bobbins were made of lead (piombo).

Miss Morris has had wondrous opportunities for collecting illustrations for her splendid volume, as she is curator of textiles in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and is also the president of a choice group of art lovers who call themselves the Needle and Bobbin Club, while Miss Hague is vice-president. The members already number two hundred and fifty enthusiasts who find in lace a beautiful exponent of the history of art and of mankind. The exhibition of their laces which was held last summer at the Metropolitan Museum created enormous interest, as well it might, for it comprised pieces of the greatest variety and beauty and historic value.

Mrs. J. Pierpoint Morgan, Jr., exhibited among other varieties a flounce of Brussels lace made about 1750 which had as pattern a design by the great painter David, most exquisitely reproduced in needle-point with connecting tissue of the filmy net, for which this lace is celebrated.

Appearing in the same exhibition and also illustrated in the lace book in detail was a benediction veil lent by Mrs. George J. Whelan. The design, in North Italian guipure of the late Seventeenth Century, follows evidently the painting of the Holy Family of Rubens to which it may be compared with interest. Among other members of the Needle and Bobbin Club who exhibited rare treasures were Mrs. Harris Fahnstock, Mrs. Joseph Pulitzer, Mrs. Robert W. De Forest, Mrs. Geo. T. Bliss, Mrs. Herbert L. Satterlee, Mrs. McDougall Hawkes, Mrs. Frederick B. Pratt, Mrs. Gino Speranza, Richard C. Greenleaf.

The literature of lace begins with some choice and naive pattern books by an Italian lady whose name is Isabella Catanea Parasole, but which name suffered in euphony when changed into the Spanish form by her Lyustingian husband—Isabetta. Miss Morris treats of the lady most humanly in her book, and vivifies the work of four hundred years ago. The quaint volume of Signora Parasole is a conscientious affair of simple design, reproductions of it available in art libraries. As a proof of the author's keen interest in life, Mrs. Morris has unearthed the fact that the pattern maker was also an expert worker in the gardens of Prince Cesi, and draws for us a picture of the lady amid the beauties of an Italian garden of the Renaissance full of sunshine and flowers, of singing birds and of cypress towers. And the flowers of the garden are woven into the patterns of lace by the far distant lady who found in nature her inspiration for art, as all must whose works endure.

It is interesting to know that this lace book is having a success in England as well as here, for it means that America and her scholars are looked upon abroad as a source of information.

Laces of Italy, those which originated there, all retain the strength that characterized the earliest examples. From reticella and cut work, through punto in aria to the superb gros point de Venise, the idea runs to accomplish an effect of richness. It remained for France and Belgium to compose with a different feeling, with extreme delicacy as the aim. This brought about the exquisite filmy compositions of the Eighteenth Century, wherein a delicate bobbin net supplied the background. On this net were thrown designs of lightest fancy, without the necessity of having the design form the fabric. Thus liberated from technical troubles, the worker's fancy created those filmy beauties of the Eighteenth Century which are classed as point d'Argentin, Brussels, point d'Angleterre. Even artists of no that time of brilliance in design set their facile pencils to making patterns, so highly was the art of lace-making esteemed. And the ambition of the patient worker was inspired even to the point of copying in thread certain great works of art. To the court painter David is accredited the design of a Brussels lace flounce owned by Mrs. J. Pierpoint Morgan, Jr., the floral detail around the classic figures being from the brain of Pillement.

The plates which illustrate this brief review are from the book, where they are given in nearly life size and are reproduced with a clarity that makes every stitch discernible. The book is published for the Needle and Bobbin Club by William Helburn, Inc.