



## Drawn Thread Work and Lacis

By M. Jourdain

LACIS took its origin in the cognate drawn-thread work known in Egypt in the earliest times, examples of which are to be seen in the mummy cloths in the Egyptian room of the British Museum. The withdrawal of threads from linen is the simplest form of ornamentation of linen; the material in old Italian drawn work is usually loosely woven. Certain threads were drawn out from the ground and others left, upon and between which needlework was made. The withdrawal of threads regulated the pattern to be produced; a curved scroll or a circle had to be approximately rendered in small squares. The background of such work appeared to consist of a net of square meshes, somewhat clumsy and thick in appearance.

*Lacis* is darned work upon a network of meshes, very similar in appearance, known as *réseau*, *rézel*, *rézeuil*, which we learn from Matthias Mignerak (1605) was made by beginning a single stitch and increasing, or netting, a stitch on each side until the required size was obtained, then the square was finished by reducing a stitch upon each side until it was reduced to one.

*Lacis*, though generally a term applied to the *réseau* when embroidered, was also occasionally used for the *réseau* itself. Such is its use in the "Bèle Prérie contenant divers caractères, et différentes sortes de lettres alphabetiques . . . pour appliquer sur le réseuil ou lassis" (Paris, 1601), and in the lines of Skelton quoted on next page. Mary, Queen of Scots, referred to her lacis-work as "*ouures masches*" (Fr., *mailles*; Ital., *maglia*\*). Cotgrave† gives, among other meanings

\* "*Maglia* is properly the holes in any net. Also a shirt or jacket of mail."—Florio, *A Worlde of Wordes*.

† *Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues*, Randle Cotgrave, 1611.

of *maille*, "a mash of a net, the square hole that is between thread and thread."

This *rézeuil* was generally of linen thread, sometimes of silk or gold. Lacis were sometimes made in a long border or panel, at other times in small squares, which, joined together and combined with *point coupé*, were much used for bed hangings. The pattern of lacis was varied, and an effect of openwork gained by varying the closeness of the darning, or by raised embroidery upon the darning, and prominent parts were sometimes thrown into relief by a thicker outlining thread—the forerunner of the *cordonné*. The darning is sometimes quite even in workmanship, at other times it is of different degrees of strength; lighter for certain portions of the surface, and heavier for others, thus producing a shaded effect. Relief is very seldom obtained; but in a fine piece with a vine pattern in the Victoria and Albert Museum, the grapes are raised into a considerable degree of convexity by tightly sewing round each portion of the canvas ground, which had been previously darned so as to represent a grape.

The earliest known pattern book containing designs for lacis, was published in 1527 at Cologne, by P. Quentell. The patterns consist of mediæval and arabesque borders, alphabets, etc., some on white, others on black, ground; some with counted stitches. Quentell, however, refers to a previous edition, hence M. Seguin obviously puts the date of its invention too late when he gives 1520 as the approximate limit of its earliest use. Knotted net (probably ornamented) was very much used in church work for lectern and frontal veils, and pyx cloths and "corporals," as early as the fourteenth century, and Rock in his *Textile Fabrics* quotes from Dugdale's *St. Paul's*: "St. Paul's, London, had a cushion covered with knotted thread—*Pulvinar copertum de albo filo nodato*." Network, *filatorium*, was probably another name

## The Connoisseur

for this darned net; in the Exeter Inventory we read that its Cathedral possessed, A.D., 1327, three pieces of it for use at the altar, and one for throwing over the desk: *tria filatoria linea, unde unum pro desco*.

The earliest mention of lacis, by name, is to be found in the lines of the "laureate" Skelton (1460-1529), which also contain the earliest literary reference to samplers.

"When that the tapettes and  
carpettes were layd  
Whereon theis ladys softly  
myght rest,  
The sampler to sew on, the  
lacis to embroid."

Another argument against dating lacis only from the first quarter of the sixteenth century is the exceedingly archaic character of the design of some specimens, and the work must have been widely known before it created the demand for a pattern book. The patterns for lacis which form the greater part of the designs of the early Italian and German pattern books until Vinciolo could be also used for embroidery in short and cross stitches—largely used for trimmings to collars, cuffs, table-cloths, and napkins, and frequently combined with lacis to decorate altar cloths. The earliest designs are conventional diapers. Subject designs and religious emblems, however, were soon introduced, and Vavassore gives patterns of a large flower-pot, mermaid, Paschal lamb, and a double plate representing Orpheus playing to the beasts. The most influential designer, both for lacis and cutwork, was Vinciolo, the first edition of whose work was published in 1587. The second half of this edition contains

designs representing "The Seven Planets—Sol, Luna, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn. Four in squares of various designs, two of Amorini shooting stags and birds; Neptune and the winds, an arabesque with impresa of a column with circle

and double triangle; five borders and squares, and two 'bordures à carreaux,' diamond-shaped meshes. The interest of Vinciolo's work is that specimens of lacis are extant which reproduce his designs. In the Victoria and Albert Museum there is a specimen of lacis (Nos. 109-84) representing designs similar to those of Vinciolo. This bed-cover (sixteenth century) is composed of a series of squares, lacis, darned with representations of the months of the year, male and female heads, figures and groups. There is also a piece in the Musée de Cluny very much in Vinciolo's style.

In the second part of the edition of 1588, in his *Advertisement au Lecteur*, Vinciolo says that having promised, since the first impression of his book, to give a "nouvelle bande d'ouvrages," and not to disappoint certain ladies who have complained that he has not made "du reseau assez beau à leur fantaisie," he wished for the third time to place before their eyes many new and different patterns of "reseau de point conté que j'ay cousus et attachez à la fin de mes premières figures." After the thirty plates already published, follow the twenty additional of "reseau de point conté," consisting of the Lion, Pelican, Unicorn, Stag, Peacock,\* Griffon, and the Four Seasons.

\* The peacock, or two peacocks, affronted, drinking from a fountain, frequently appears in early Italian lacis.



OBLONG PIECE OF LACIS PATTERNS OF BIRDS AND BEASTS AMONG TREES; A REPRESENTATION OF THE CREATION ITALIAN, SIXTEENTH CENTURY 20 IN. X 8 IN. VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM

## Drawn Thread Work and Lacis

“Déesse des fleurs, representant le Printemps.” Lacis was frequently combined with point coupé or reticella in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the combination was known as *punto reale a reticella*. Elisabetta Catenea Parasole (1616) gives designs for this type of work, which made use of small squares, lacis, and was used for bed-furniture.

In comparing characteristic specimens of German and Italian lacis, and German and Italian pattern-books, we see that in the German designs eagles, and heraldic emblems, oak leaves, acorns, thistles, and hunting scenes of a North European character, are often met with; in the Italian lacis the foliage is more conventional in character. Some squares of lacis in the Kunstgewerbe Museum at Leipzig show coats of arms darned in a variety of stitches, with a raised *cordonné* forming the outline. Some of the designs in this Museum are conventional, in others an attempt at naturalistic effects appears. Pieces of German make are frequently of a loosely-made net, and of coarse linen thread. Germany, however, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was renowned for its lacis and embroidery with thread on net, of which there are several good examples in the Victoria and Albert Museum. But it is exceedingly difficult to assign a specimen of lacis to any definite country, there is but little refinement in the manner of working, and little differentiation in design. The finer qualities were, no doubt, made in Italy. A very coarse type was made in Spain; of interest from their bold and naïf designs. “Mallas” (the French *mailles*), as they were called, were made in

Spain in the seventeenth century, and are supposed to be older than the “desillados” or drawn-work, which was also largely used for bed furniture. Much lacis was produced in France under Catherine de Médicis, the patroness of Vinciolo, and the popularity of the work is proved by the number of editions of Vinciolo’s work printed in Paris from 1587 to 1623, and by the fact that his designs were copied.\* There are some good specimens in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs of lengths of insertions made of darned or run net. A linen cap ornamented with lacis and very fine white embroidery, in which appear eagles, is now in the Musée de Cluny, and is said to have belonged to Charles V. It was sold in 1836, from the treasure of the prince bishops of Bâle, where it had been preserved.

Italian lacis shows richer and more conventional designs than those of any other country. An angular scroll with a conventional vine-leaf is frequently met with, and curious Renaissance fantasies, tritons, terminal figures, or figures with foliated extremities, such as are met with in the decoration of the period, are combined with effective scroll designs. In Southern Italy and Sicily the influence of Oriental taste was of necessity more direct than in the north; and in a curious piece in the possession of Mr. Arthur Blackborne, a negro is represented shooting at a peacock. In other South

Italian and Sicilian lacis small skirted figures, holding up their hand (like the Boxers of Samplers), and other traditional *motifs*, are represented.



PART OF A BAND OF LACIS OF SQUARED  
DESIGNS ITALIAN, LATE SIXTEENTH CENTURY  
20 IN. × 7½ IN.  
VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM

\* The title of Jean de Glen’s pattern-book, published at Liège in 1597, is borrowed from Vinciolo, and the plates are mostly drawn from his.