

History

The Evolution of Lace

by Aurelia Loveman

What is lace? Arriving at a definition has bedeviled a good many writers. One of them, Thomas Wright, calls lace "a filmy, web-like impossibility ... something that allures or entices, a derivation that is singularly appropriate seeing that so many persons are ensnared by its irresistible graces." Wright adds that "ladies are difficult to resist, even without lace, but with it they cannot be withstood. The only safety is in flight."

The famous Brooklyn Museum, which has a distinguished collection of textiles, defines lace succinctly as "patterned voids in space" that must be the focus and emphasis of the material in question. By this definition, lace may be macramé, tatted, knitted, crocheted, embroidered, woven, netted, or punched — just so that the prime interest remains in the pattern of the voids. However, most of those techniques are not what is meant by lace. There are only two techniques that give what has been established, sought and paid for as "real lace" — bobbin lace and needle lace (the original meaning of the word "needlepoint").

Both needle and bobbin laces have their origins in fabric, though there are profound differences in technique — needle lace being produced by a single continuous thread, like knitting or crocheting, and bobbin lace being produced by many threads worked at once, like weaving.

Real lace is a vanished art form, developing out of various early forms of needlework in the sixteenth century, and rapidly reaching a pinnacle of appreciation and refinement in the two hundred years that followed. Lace became a craze - a ruinous, expensive madness. Yet another two hundred years, filled mainly with declines and revivals (as well as losses of designs, techniques and markets), and the art form vanished. Today few people have ever seen real lace, and fewer still know what it is. The baroque and rococo laces of the late seventeenth century, in their inconceivable complexity and minuteness, could never be made again. This is not because of the disappearance of skilled lacemakers, for knowledge of the old techniques, though not commonplace, has never entirely died out. Rather, it is because neither the substance of the linen fabric nor the labor required to execute the designs is any longer available. The extraordinary gossamer of older laces de-

pends on the exceptionally long-fibered flax that was used to manufacture the thread. No such flax is now grown, and the economic substructure that could sustain it no longer exists. The finest flax thread now available is only about one-fifth as fine as the old thread, and thus incapable of delivering the filmy, weightless fabric of the past. Nor can the designs of the past, which were predicated on the availability of skilled labor, be reproduced. It would take three skilled lacemakers, working six fifteen-hour days a week, ten months to make a set of men's ruffles of the best quality - thousands of hours. It is no longer economically feasible to give that much time and effort to any sort of textile, and our modern social values would, in any case, seriously question the appropriateness of using human energy in that way. But the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did not question it at all.

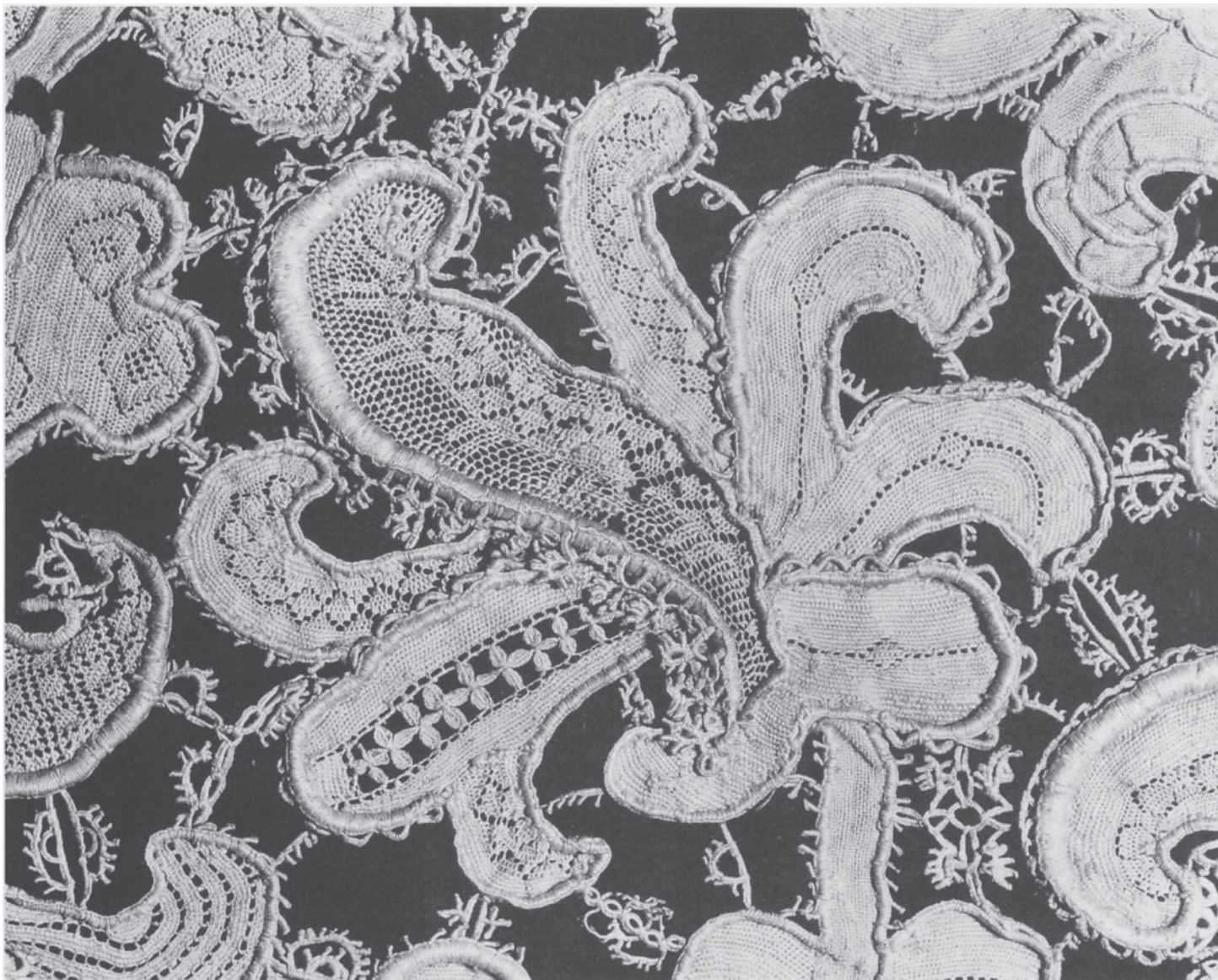
The slow, demanding, square-inch-per-hour production of handmade lace, however ingenious, exquisite, and beautiful, could not compete economically with machine-made. The great artists who in the past would have lavished their genius on designing for lace (and painting it with affection and care), simply came to ignore it. Designs became banal; intricacy, cranked



Eighteenth century Alençon of Burano. France and Venice were the lace capitals of Europe at the time. Their competition included even the kidnapping of Venetian lacemakers. It was a struggle that France eventually won. Photos and portions of article reprinted with the kind permission of Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, Maryland.



This example of Point de Gaze comes from the nineteenth century. Point de Gaze evolved from both the Venetian and French needlepoints. Using the techniques of the older laces, Point de Gaze developed distinctive designs of its own, notably overlapping rose petals and chains of buttonholed rings. The lace takes its name from the exceptionally gauzy net.



Rose Point de Venise, a seventeenth century marvel of exquisite detail, emerged with other laces out of punto in aria. Punto in aria represents the departure of lace from the vertical-horizontal grid boundaries inherent in woven fabric. Rather than pulling out virtually every thread of an evenweave cloth only to buttonhole over those few fragile threads left, lacemakers began dispensing with fabric altogether, putting down free threads to follow an inked design, and then buttonholing over them.

out mechanically, ceased to intrigue. Fine, cobwebby lace threads went out of production.

Though the machine makes a degraded product, it nevertheless makes what can be taken for lace, and it is almost all we ever see now. However, just as the ubiquitous machine knits have never quite put luxurious handknitting out of business, so real lace has never quite died out. Incredibly expensive, it is still occasionally made in small pieces for royal weddings and the like. Not surprisingly, the finest of the laces, bobbin or needle, cannot be successfully imitated by machine. The solid toile of lace, so exquisite and delicate when

done by hand, is poorly approximated in the machine-made article. The sprightly flights of fancy fillings known as jours look stiff; picots look, and are, merely tacked on.

There have been innumerable attempts to revive lacemaking. In the early twentieth century a group of Italian artists formed the Ars-Aemilia Society, which stood in relation to Venetian needle lace somewhat as William Morris did earlier to English textile design. The Ars-Aemilia Society succeeded in producing beautiful new designs, and in fact, beautiful lace, but the economics of the age were against them.

Nevertheless, there is hope. All of the

textile arts, including lace, are now experiencing an unprecedented renaissance.

Lacemaking is occasionally taught in the professional textile schools, and in Europe, especially England and Czechoslovakia, it can be taken as a subject for credit toward a degree. The work of modern lace artists points toward a bright future for lace as a vigorous art form.

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