

THE TERCENTENARY OF COLBERT
THE GREAT PATRON OF THE FRENCH LACE AND
TEXTILE INDUSTRIES—1619-1919

BY GERTRUDE WHITING

JEAN BAPTISTE COLBERT, son of a Rheims woolen merchant of Scotch descent, was born in Paris, August 29, 1619. After an apprenticeship with his father, young Colbert went to Paris, became secretary to Le Tellier, then at the head of the War Office, and through his influence was made a counsellor of the king and introduced to Mazarin in 1648.

As Richelieu left his friend, Mazarin, to succeed him, so Mazarin, in turn, in 1661, left this counsellor and provincial governor to take his place. But despite his ability, Colbert was not to possess the unquestioned power of his predecessor. When the Cardinal died, the Secretary of State asked Louis XIV, then twenty-three years old, "To whom, Sire, shall we now apply for instructions?" "To me," replied the King. It was indeed an astonishing novelty for a sovereign to take the actual business management of affairs into his own hands, but the will of the young Louis was a strong element and he pursued his new policy in respect to the colonies as well as in France, diligently laboring daily, from early morning through the space of a good working day, at his self-appointed task, saying, "To rule by work is the true secret of power." In 1665 Louis appointed Colbert Comptroller General of Finances to succeed the polished, pleasant Nicholas Fouquet, who was prosecuted by his successor and locked up in prison, where he died.

The new Comptroller reorganized the Treasury, changed confusion, reckless waste and dishonesty into order, economy, honesty. The Crown had been receiving only 30,000,000 francs out of a revenue of 80,000,000. Colbert put an end to this graft, introducing the annual budget system, showing a Sovereign for the first time in French history how his royal account stood. In six years receipts had risen to 63,000,000 and expenses dropped to 32,500,000. In twenty years the revenue rose to 116,000,000 francs! Colbert, moreover, instead of raising the taxes, was able to administer them without favoritism and partisanship, equal-

izing and reducing them to an extent never before attempted. He abolished many superfluous offices and the farming of finances. Consequently government credit rapidly increased and the state was able to borrow at reasonable rates.

Colbert soon had control not only of the finances but also of public works, agriculture, commerce, the royal household and the navy. And as if he had not enough else to do, he constructed the great Languedoc Canal, connecting the two seas by uniting the Atlantic via Bordeaux, along the Garonne to Toulouse, with the Mediterranean at Cette, and created the first royal navy worthy of the name in 1669. France had only a few old hulks, but in three years Colbert had provided her with a fleet of 60 ships and 40 frigates. Bounties were given for ships built in France. He constructed a vast system of roads, bridges, docks and other public works; instituted a pretty high tariff (his creed held "the wealth of one country to mean the poverty of her neighbor"), encouraged agriculture, introducing superior breeds of cattle and better methods. He also encouraged trade with the French colonies, granting special privileges to Levantine dealers in imitation of the East India Company scheme, but owing to his protective tariff this plan failed. But he was a business man. Amid the prevailing aristocratic, feudal theories of the day, his idea of turning France into a commercial state, paying its own way and not existing merely for the king and military glory, took courage.

Moreover, he turned his attention to revising the Civil Code, formerly a conflicting tangle of statutes, reducing them to six systematized codes, repealing some of the cruellest criminal laws. It was during this administration that the merchant, Legendre, replying to Colbert, used for the first time in history the politico-industrial term, "Laissez-faire."

Dunkirk and Marseilles were made free ports.

But Colbert, sometimes styled "The North," had a too cold, hard, unremitting passion for detail; lacking warm, sympathetic comprehension of the people and trust in them. As the Cambridge Modern History says: "It was not in Colbert's nature to trust for the development of industrial France to the effect of competition and the free impulses of the people. He could not believe that a thing was done unless he did it himself or through his agents. He was alarmed and irritated to find that, in certain markets, the products of the French factories were not welcomed and were regarded as deficient in quality compared with those

of the rivals of France. To alter this condition of things the manufacturers must be schooled by the state.

"The industries of France were nearly all in the hands of trade guilds, and it was through these that Colbert brought the influence of the state to bear on the manufacturers. Edicts and regulations followed one another by the score; methods of manufacture, with details as to the size, color and quality of manufactured articles, were laid down. The tone adopted was that of a schoolmaster who alternates punishment with moral platitudes. Then inspectors were sent around the country to enforce these regulations.

"The customs and traditions of France and the love of ease natural to all men resisted Colbert at every turn. His instructions show his growing anger with the "fainéantise" of the people. He closed the public houses during working hours. He uses irony and threats, and often confesses that his efforts are in vain. But much was done. Industrial France was slowly coming into being. Patient energy and a continuance of peace would have done much."

Colbert was indeed the founder of a new epoch in France, promoting both the beautiful and the useful, encouraging academies of inscriptions, sciences and arts as well as providing money—sometimes against his better reason, for he had a vast grasp of policies—for Louis' ruinous wars. The great Minister opened the Mazarin Library to the public, founded the Academy of Inscriptions in 1663, the Academy of Sciences in 1666, of Medals, of Music, or Architecture and other institutions, established schools of painting, sculpture, music and architecture both in the Capital and in the Provinces. He obtained honors and pensions from the King for the most distinguished men of science and letters abroad as well as at home. "Although the King is not your Sovereign," wrote Colbert to Vossius—a learned Protestant divine of Holland—"he chooses to be your benefactor."

When Colbert established the Royal Manufactories his hope was that they might come to excel along whatever lines French art was weakest. He paid great heed to the fashioning of mirrors, porcelains, furniture, tapestry and lace. Why should thousands or hundreds of thousands of francs go out of the country every year to purchase these beautiful articles from other nations? So their making was investigated, foreign workmen were induced to visit or settle in France, and the very finest artists—Charles Lebrun, Charmeton, Le Pautre, Bérain, Bailly, the

Artists of the Louvre—were engaged to make designs. These designs were passed upon before they were executed and the finished work was also submitted to compulsory royal inspection, all inferior pieces being thrown aside, debarred from sale, so that only the best could be had in French markets. He wished to capitalize French taste and skill. France to this day sells millions of dollars worth to the world each year, not merely of one but of all sorts of works of art. Artistic instinct and spirit have been fostered there for centuries—thus fulfilling Colbert's wish that "Fashion should be to France what the mines of Peru were to Spain."

Among other things, Louis' great assistant found that the nobles poured much gold into Venetian coffers in return for handsome rabats, et cetera. So he wrote to Monsignore de Bonzy, Ambassador to the Venetian Republic, arranging all the details of a new French enterprise. Not only Venetian lace-makers were brought to France, but also 200 Flemish workers. Later the Ambassador received a letter stating, "I can now say that collars worked in relief are produced in this realm, which are as beautiful as those of Venice." It had been found that a few centres of lace-making already existed in France—though poor ones. But Alençon and Argentan soon became the principal centres, especially as it was not far from here that those who were already somewhat familiar with lace-making were to be found, the Family Barbot, including Mme. de la Perrière and Mme. Fenouillet of Alençon, being skilled workers. These centres, I believe, are still in existence. Other lace factories were established at Quesnoy, Arras, Rheims, Sedan, L'Onray, Lignerès-la-Doucelle, Château-Thierry, Loudun, Aurillac, Château de Madrid, et cetera. This last furnished the royal household itself. A central depot, under Pluymers, Talon and Talon, was established, with ten years' exclusive privileges, at the Hôtel Beaufort in Paris. At first the Italian work was copied exactly, which has been a source of confusion to those trying to classify lace of that period. The designs often show the flowers of Venice with the sun, symbolizing Le Roi Soleil and the rich foliage typical of the velvets used in his time. War trophies, fanciful architectural canopies and little figures of princes and saints also abound in these wonderful needle laces. The artistic composition and light formal lines of these productions are incomparably superior in freedom and invention to the ever-repeated scrolls of Italy! Madame Gilbert, the manager, was highly paid and had, it is

said, about 1,600 girls working under her. By royal decree, the lace was named Point de France. The Royal Monoply of this industry lasted from 1665-1675. Falling collars were introduced the better to show the handsome designs of the period. In spite of Colbert's insistence upon fine design and workmanship, Fate ironically gave his name to a tawdry square net lace used for domestic purposes.

While Colbert was thus engaged, Louvois, Minister of War, was improving the French army, giving each corps a distinctive uniform and replacing the clumsy pike by the formidable bayonet. But Louvois undermined the Minister of the Navy's standing with the King, who but ill appreciated his "man of marble," and also willingly listened to Madame de Maintenon, who found Colbert far too tolerant. For not the least of his merits was his lenient attitude towards the Huguenots, whom Louis finally drove out of France by the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, thus scattering his workmen, sending them, with all their skill, into foreign lands. When Louis XV later asked Frederick the Great what favor he could do him, the latter replied, "Grant a second Revocation of the Edict of Nantes." Colbert tried to restrain Louis XIV's wasteful architectural fancies at Versailles and his reckless wars, but the King's extravagances finally forced Colbert to such limits of taxation that he became hated by the people, and at his death, September 6, 1683, the populace of Paris would have torn him to pieces had the soldiers not protected him, and burned him—bitterly disappointed, mighty builder of France—under the cover of night! Louis had been heartless. "Had I served God as I have this man," cried the dying Minister, "I should have been saved ten times over; now I don't know what is to become of me."

Among his posthumous papers were found: "Particularités secrètes de la vie du Roy," which has repeatedly been published; and "Mémoires sur les affaires de France," 1663.

He had large estates, and some of his offices were inherited by his sons, one of whom became Minister of Marine, one Superintendent of Buildings, one Archbishop of Rouen.