OLD EGYPTIAN LACE

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It is with wonder and awe that we, men and women of the modern
times, look upon the weavings and laces, made by men and women,
hundreds, nay, thousands of years ago. We look upon these fabrics
with the greatest interest, for though our machines have attained a
degree of perfection we little dreamed of years ago, we are not able
to do what the ancients have done. It is not only that we do not exactly
know yet how they worked, but what they have made too is so far
above our own artistic ability, that we feel as little children staring at
what “those who know” have wrought. It is not that the way the
ancients worked was so very complicated; as a matter of fact their
means were very simple, very much more so than ours are, but they
lived under very different conditions. They could give all their time to
their work, for time was not worth then what it is worth now, and they
were able to bestow all their energy and attention upon it. Besides, they
had only simple tools and their artistic ambition, perhaps religious am-
bition, being highly cultivated, they took infinite pains to excel in work-
manship.

When we look at the Peruvian Textiles, we marvel how any people
could work in such a way, with so much forethought as to the technical
part and such a delicacy of execution. It is only the utmost love that
can enable any one to execute such perfect workmanship. It is well for
us all, working so many centuries after these people have lived, and with
so many more technical facilities, to study these old fabrics. They may
enrich our own work in a sublime way.

But it is not only that the woven objects and laces are admired for
their execution, coloring and conception, but the scientific world too has
turned its attention to the handicrafts, realizing how great a help the
knowledge of these would be in understanding the habits and customs of
mankind.

Several museums in America and Europe carefully exhibit many pieces
of textile fabric found in the graves of Egypt and Peru. Among those
from Egypt are many pieces executed in a kind of open work, a kind of
lace. The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Natural History
Museum in New York, have lovely caps in this technique. It is about
this kind of lace—which I have studied for many years—that I want to
tell a few things. At first sight one would think that these caps were
made in the bobbin lace technique, but on a closer inspection one instantly
notices the error. One sees that these caps are not made in any of the
techniques we know. They are not sewn with a thousand patient little
stitches, sewed together to a fine solid cord and laid out in different pat-
terns with open work in between. Not made on the cushion, like our
bobbin laces, where the fine threads are rapidly thrown in all directions
by nimble fingers, a simple wonder to those who know the art of lace-
making.

When many of the objects from the graves of Egypt were brought to
Vienna by Mr. Graf, in the middle of the last century, a lady teacher at
the “Fachschule für Kunstickerei,” Mrs. Louise Schinnerer, had the
opportunity to study these most closely. However, she could not find a
way to copy them in any of the techniques used to-day. Nevertheless
she did not lose courage, considering that perhaps among the peasant
population of her own country some reminiscence of the work unknown
to her hitherto might still exist. She began her inspection and really
found a kind of workmanship among the Ruthenians in Galicia that
enabled her to copy the laces of Egypt. It was indeed no lace making,
but a kind of netting work. The Ruthenian peasant women netted their
lace caps and the insertions for their towels and bed linen in a simple way,
and the men wore long scarves made in the same manner. The women
use a standing frame, whereupon are stretched two strings, one at the
top and one at the bottom, the space between the two strings indicating
the measure of the object to be made. Then the thread, which is wound
on a ball, is fastened to the bottom string on the left and passed over the
top string, again down to the bottom string, and so on, like a skein, till
the number of threads required is reached.

By this time there have been formed two fields of threads, one front
field and one back field, as one easily understands, keeping in mind that
the threads are passed round the two strings like a skein. One begins
working in the right upper corner, taking two of the back threads be-
tween right forefinger and thumb and pulling the threads to the front.
The crossing of the front and back threads may be seen in Figure
I. Now the first front thread is slipped to the back field. The next
back thread (now one thread) is taken up in the same way and the next
front one slipped, and so on till all the back threads are lying on the
right hand of the worker. A wooden sword is then placed between the two fields of threads and moved toward the top string, where it beats up all the crossed threads. Then the sword beats up the crossed threads at the bottom string. [Figure II.] This method of crossing the back and front threads is continued; it is, in fact, the principle on which all variations are based. One sees directly that two halves are formed, whereas the hand only works once. The worker takes advantage of this result to make two objects at the same time or two halves of one object.

This pure stitch of simple crossing is so beautiful in its flexibility
and gloss that it is worth while to employ it for many articles of modern use. As the reader will have noticed, this netting is worked in rows from right to left. This regular turning of the yarn in the same direction gives a lustre and at the same time a simplicity one seeks in vain in any other lace. The light falls on every thread in the same way, whereas in bobbin laces it falls now on a thread turned to the left, now on one turned to the right. If I were to name an example I should call before your mind the Maltese laces and the Spanish ones, especially those of white silk. These laces show none of the distinction one looks for in an object of art. Now one of the characteristics of distinction is serene repose—and this is exactly what the art of Egyptian lace making shows to perfection. These considerations may perhaps explain the fact that the most beautiful bobbin laces are executed in extra fine yarn, so that the restlessness of the light is reduced to a minimum. The reader will immediately understand what I mean when he looks at both fabrics through a magnifying glass, so that the difference between the two techniques becomes clearly visible.

After the Egyptian laces had once drawn the attention, it was proved not only that the Ruthenians have been practising this technique till today, but also that in some other parts of Europe too, e. g. in Sweden and in Norway, people are still using it for the very same purposes. In Norway this technique is called “Sprang.” Maybe it would be found in more parts of Europe if researches were made.

In the textile collection of the Austrian Museum are three women’s caps, left by a lady of Liebenbürigen, in the seventeenth century, which have been made of silk and gold threads by means of the same technique. The fact that these costly materials were used proves that the technique was not only practised by a peasant population, but that it was fully appreciated by the higher classes. But it is not only in Austria that specimens of this technique were found. In Spain and in Holland we find silk sashes of superb quality, some measuring about four yards. They were worn by the state foresters and the cornets of the guilds. Our museums in Amsterdam, Haarlem, Rotterdam and the still existing guilds in many cities in Holland possess such sashes, dating from the period between 1700 and 1840 or thereabout. In many an old family these sashes, sometimes decorated with all kinds of devices and characters, are taken out when asked for. I possess a baby’s frock of fine linen yarn, netted in a lovely pattern, dating from the time of the Em-
pire, and two purses in colored silk worked in vertical stripes. These objects have certainly not been made in a factory, as is perhaps the case with the sashes in Holland, but are doubtless lady's work. All this proves that this technique had not merely been lingering on all through the middle ages and up to the middle of the 19th century, but was still flourishing.

Mrs. Schinnerer, who, by her indefatigable researches, has given us back one of the most interesting techniques, in her Antike Handarbeiten, speaks of the Spanish Faja, a sash in red silk which the Spanish general, even when he is in civil dress, has to wear under his coat. This sash, which is several yards long, is worked in one piece and does not show the two halves running in opposite directions, which are essential characteristics of the Egyptian and Ruthenian netting. The way to manufacture this kind of scarf is, as I have been fortunate enough to discover, making two scarves at a time by stretching the skein of threads over more than one frame. Thus one can attain a considerable length, which offers great advantages when the technique is used for modern articles.

It proved easy to introduce differently colored stripes into the netting, but these stripes, except in a few cases, were all running in a vertical direction.

A few years ago Prof. Six, of Amsterdam, showed me an earthenware dish of Italian origin, dating from 300 B.C., which is decorated with a painting of a woman's head, wearing a cap of curious construction. Prof. Six thought this cap might be a copy of netting work, and though I agreed with him there, for many things pointed in that direction, e.g., the loosely twisted upper part, the essential character of this technique, whose netting showed in this cap several small sections—my greatest objection was, that I had not succeeded in producing patterns running in a horizontal direction. Prof. Six gave me a photograph of the dish and I set to work to solve the problem, feeling sure that it could be solved. But how? The only way was to reflect on it, to consider thoroughly all the possibilities, and so I did, until, one day, I suddenly saw how it was to be done. But there is a great difference between knowing how a thing should be done and doing it well. Many attempts have been made before the cap on the dish could be accurately copied.

I was very grateful to have had an opportunity to study this new side of the netting technique, for now I could make not only the horizontal line, but I was able to combine the horizontal with the vertical
line; in one word, I had gained the utmost freedom of design. I have been enjoying the beauty of this work for many years, impressed ever and again by its mysterious loveliness, and realizing with unceasing interest the unexpected prospects which it has opened.

It is a great joy to have discovered this art that has lent such added interest to my life, and if the result of my efforts should be of any service in awakening the interest of others, I shall feel amply rewarded.

EGYPTIAN LACE CAP AND BAG

EXECUTED BY MME. VAN REESEMA