

Needleplay: History of lace reflects itself

By ERICA WILSON

Beautiful, mysterious lace. Probably all of us have a cherished piece of it tucked away somewhere. A small scrap of an ancestor's christening robe; a filmy swatch you picked up at a thrift shop; your own wedding veil.

The history of lace is rather like lace itself — intricate, romantic and rather elusive. Fragments of lace-like materials have been found in Egyptian tombs, and historians tend to agree that early lace grew out of embroidery (although lace is not embroidery, for it has no background material).

From the early 15th century, lace found its way to almost everyone and everything in the aristocracy. Caps, collars and cleavages were adorned with the magnificent handiwork, as were luxurious parlors, sitting rooms and ecclesiastical coverings in churches and monasteries. It even became a common sight for lace to peek from steel armor.

Such high sums were paid for certain laces that many European governments put prohibitive restrictions on their import and use. Noblemen were known to sell acres of land to be able to afford

the expensive luxury. A French courtier of 1630 boasted that he wore "32 acres of the best vineyard" around his neck.

In Italy, young people were not allowed to wear lace until their 21st birthdays. And in some countries smuggling went on, with the use of dogs, to carry the coveted cloth across the borders.

In Holland, a coarse, flaxen fabric was produced that was so famous in 16th-century Europe that all white linen was known as "Holland cloth." Threads drawn out of this linen lent a look of laciness to open work, and in Italy, it was eventually discovered that these drawn-thread stitches could be worked without any background at all.

Thus, this Venetian "punto in aria" stitch (literally "a stitch in the air") led to one of the great discoveries in needlework: Needle-made lace.

The "real lace" (made on a pillow with bobbins) may have derived its origins from macrame — those twisted, knotted threads that were first created by sailors for their sails on long voyages.

The stitch I've shown

here is "Point de Paris," or pin stitch, and it's a lovely way to add real lace as an edging around a fabric.

You could also make an entire pillow with scraps of wedding veil, etc., stitching the pieces onto the background with the pin stitch. (Wait until you see how delicate this looks set into a sheer background, such as lace.)

The effect is a series of open work holes, made by pulling the fabric tightly together with fine thread (one strand of six-stranded embroidery floss will do nicely). These holes then become dominant, and the connecting stitches are almost invisible.

And because each stitch is taken twice, it's very strong and can be done on either open work

linen or any fine material such as lawn, muslin, organdy or silk. (But it's best to practice first in bold scale on the open-weave linen or similar fabric.)

The 17th-century divine, Thomas Fuller, grumbled that lace was frivolous, that it was "nothing save a little thread"; but once you

pull a lovely piece from that dark old attic or drawer and attach it to something, I'm sure you'll be the first to disagree.

4. Now repeat steps 1, 2 & 3, wrapping each stitch tightly to form large holes.

5. Shows finished effect.

