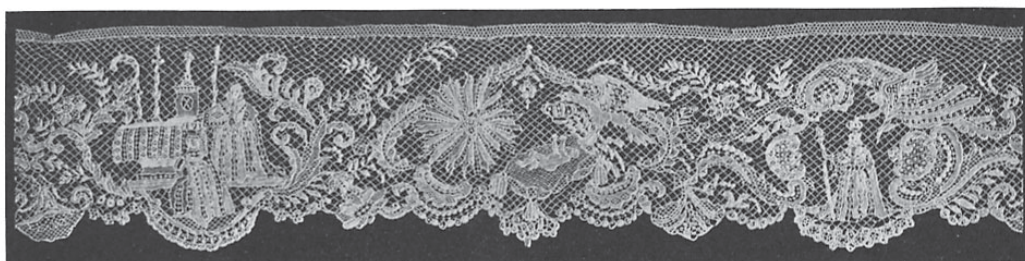


The Charm of Lace

By CLARA M. BLUM

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A Point de France baptismal veil or robe trimming

WE have remarked with keen delight, within the last few years, the growing interest in hand-made lace and, in fact, in all needlework. The American public is awakening to the beauty of this almost lost art, and the many private exhibits as well as permanent exhibitions, in our museums, are drawing interested visitors. The visitors to the museums who formerly hurriedly passed through the galleries of lace and needlework to the more popular appeal of painting and sculpture, tarry now a moment to gaze at the marvellous productions of bobbin and needle and to wonder at the deftness and skill of those who could create a filmy bit of lace, of thread so fine and design so intricate that it is hard to believe it the work of human hands. But then how much that is beautiful in the world the untrained eye passes by unnoticed, just because it has not been taught to grasp readily the beauties of art and nature, with which we are surrounded, or maybe because we are not educated up to the proper appreciation and love of the beautiful. There is no better example of this than the art of lace making—lace treasures which the fingers of the present day are too hurried to produce, but which have been handed down to us from other times, not made by the "Hand of God," but worthy to take their place alongside of many of Nature's creations in her gallery of wonders. We can see reproduced in lace the picture which Jack Frost draws on our window panes, the web that the tricky spider spins under the eaves, or the coral branches that the deep sea hides—and so we could go on indefinitely making comparisons with what Nature's pattern book has given, and human hands of other centuries have reproduced in their works of love. We would rather picture these beautiful things as works of love, amusement or recreation, than the toil of weary fingers, working

day and night to earn a mere pittance to keep body and soul alive. This may have been the sad story in many cases, but rather let us feel that many of the beautiful examples that we look at to-day have been the production of the idle hours of the ladies of the court, for history tells us that the making and possession of lace can truly be termed a passion in the 17th and 18th centuries; and it was as necessary an accomplishment of "my lady" as was her music and her painting; how many of the engravings and prints as well as paintings of these centuries show ladies of the court, with pillow and bobbins on a table beside them, or the tapestry frame standing nearby, ready to be taken up as soon as there was a leisure moment, and there were many leisure moments, for there was little to take woman from her home in those days—means of transportation were limited and the distraction of needlework can readily be appreciated. Then again we see pictured the homely interior of a peasant's hut—the flickering candle shedding its light on the form bent over the pillow and, in our imagination, we can hear the clicking bobbins humming a soft lullaby to the sleeping infant in its cradle close by—and see slowly but surely yard after yard of lace unroll itself—lace to deck the robe of some great lady, or maybe it is only a modest peasant edge destined some

or then some old men have taken up this vocation; if so, however, history has been careful to leave it unmentioned, for it is one of the few arts where woman reigns supreme, and while men adorned themselves with it, at one period, almost as much as the women, its creation was strictly feminine.

Had we but the magic power to make some of these pieces whisper to us, what pretty stories they could tell us, and if we will allow our imagination to carry us away, what romances would unfold that have been woven into the patterns guided by deft fingers. It might be either the gay courtesan playing with her bobbin as she plans intrigues and love conquests, of the serene-faced nun at her convent casement creating the priceless albs and altar cloths to adorn the church or some holy prelate, in this labor of devotion trying to drown the memories of a life, beyond these cloistered walls, whose hard path drove her to seek shelter and repose in the quiet and peace of the convent garden. But whatever the motive, or whoever the worker, every town, every hamlet, every palace had its lace workers, reeling out yard upon yard of these filmy creations that as they have come down to us to-day we can but look upon with wonder and reverence as something that has passed from our reach, schooled as we are in all the modern arts. The same pride was taken in the execution of masterpieces of this art as in the more lasting examples of the sister arts, such as painting, sculpture, tapestry weaving, furniture making or the weaving of sumptuous brocades and velvets; each had its place in these centuries so crowded with the production of the beautiful in everything to please the eye. The world was intoxicated with a craze for all that was artistic and while we only wish to talk about lace in this article, it is difficult to separate it in

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A beautiful example of the Toile d'Honneur, its design composed of square panels, two of which are shown in detail below



Detail of Toile d'Honneur, showing needle-point of double-headed eagle and crown in corner. Fleur de Lys in embroidered muslin

day to trim the trousseau of this very babe—for in those days the great thought in the mind of the parent was to see that chests were well stocked with linen and lace as the marriage portion of the daughter of the house—and where everything was hand-made the linen as well as the lace and embroidery, it was not any too soon to start when the little daughter was still in her cradle. If we can only realize how much trimming in the way of lace and edgings have been, and still are used in personal adornment and in the home, especially in the 17th and 18th centuries, where it was used so much more profusely, we can appreciate how much of this had to be made, so it is not surprising that nearly every woman was a maker of lace in all the European countries. Has it ever occurred to the reader that this is purely a feminine art, exclusively in the hands of women? We can never picture a man with bobbin and needle. It may be possible that now



A detail from the Toile d'Honneur, one of twenty-four squares from the whole shown above

our minds from all that went with it, as a fitting back-ground or accompaniment.

To specify in detail a few of the uses that lace was put to besides the regular trimming of costumes, take the beautiful renaissance "Toile d'Honneur," illustrated here, made of the finest filet and drawn and cut work, with designs most interesting and unusual in both the filet squares and embroidered linen strips, with "motifs" of the "fleur de lys" and the pomegranate, both characteristic of the period. This "Toile d'Honneur" was used in some parts of France as a marriage canopy to be held by four posts over the bride and groom while the ceremony was performed. This delightful piece is still wonderfully preserved, though its grey tan color and soft chiffony touch breathe its antiquity. Then take this bit of needle point of beautiful "Point de France," undoubtedly made to adorn some royal infant's baptismal veil or gown, with the story of the glorious life just budding, portrayed in the design which pictures the royal eagle holding the crown, suspended above the swinging babe, while the rising sun is already spreading its rays of glory and renown, and then we see the youth kneeling at the lace-trimmed altar with its crucifix and its candles, while the priest in his wonderful robes is placing the crown on the bended head and we can hear resounding through the ages "Long live the King," and then we see the crowned monarch standing erect, doubtless receiving the homage of his loyal subjects. What makes lace of this type so intensely interesting is the feeling that every piece is unique, that each piece tells a story of its own and we of the present day, so many hundreds of years afterwards, can weave our own little romance around these fragments that have come down to us; so it not only pleases the eye, but has an interest quite its own, apart from all other arts, for as we wonder at the beauty of execution, we also try to picture to ourselves who it adorned, whether some fair lady, some gay cavalier, or some mighty cardinal, or then as we said before it might have been the marriage canopy sheltering two hearts united beneath its lacey protection.

Lace since its inception has played an important part in the costumes of people and the paintings of the great masters from the early 16th century have been a chronicle of intense interest, making it possible, in their portrayal, for us to trace the various fashions and uses of the period. Thus we see in the early Italian or Flemish paintings, the narrow needle point edge of either gold or silver thread ornamenting the rich velvets so much in vogue at that time, or an altar cloth or an alb, edged with the finest Milan,

Then we came to the days of Rubens and Van Dyck when the pointed scalloped collars and cuffs of Venetian needle point adorned every portrait, attaining such fame, that the name Van Dyck points and collars still clings to that particular lace to-day. Then again the Medici collar and Elizabethan ruff with their yards and yards of fine wired lace showing us so well the fashion of two different countries during the middle and end of the 16th Century. And so, following down to the 17th and 18th Centuries, we again see the painters of the period, but how differently are the ladies portrayed with their sumptuous costumes of gorgeous brocades, heruffled with Alençon and Malino, lappets of exquisite Point d'Angleterre hanging from their lofty headdress. Then comes the fichu made popular by Marie Antoinette, until we reach the simpler costumes of the Empire, followed by a revival of the lavish use of lace about 1830 which brings us nearer to modern times. In Spain, the mantilla of blonde lace in both black and white has been a national adornment for centuries. There was every opportunity for the lace maker to find a ready market for her work, for the countless uses that lace was put to, provided a limitless field; the frilled jabots, the flounces for sleeve and breeches of the gentleman of the court; the bonnets, the mits and handkerchiefs of the ladies; the rabats and albs of the priests, the altar cloths and chalice veils for the church; the lace trimmed dressing tables, bed curtains and coverings; table covers, all consumed countless yards. Everything on every side called for lace and when we think what a perishable fabric it is and, knowing how extensively it was used, it is surprising to see how much has escaped destruction and still exists in museums and private collections. There are many fine collections all over the world and here in America where we are so much younger in the art of collecting, there are many private collections of no mean value, and a book recently published, entitled "American Collectors," by Miss Morris & Miss Hague, gives us interesting reproductions from these collections. But I have great faith in a rapid appreciation of this art and the American spirit, true to its traditions, once having its interest aroused is quick to follow and apply. It is just a matter of looking twice to see the beauty of this modest art which shines best under the closest scrutiny. It does not seek us; we must seek it and it is the second and third glance that finally brings up the interest to a deeper degree, and then lace becomes something real, something wonderful, and the desire of possession is a natural following.

