

# Snowflakes in July

*Aurelia Loveman, MD*

Oddly, unexpectedly, both of these words - snowflakes, July - are surfacing now on account of a dear friend and teacher, Vera Cockuyt. I have been cogitating one of Vera's teaching patterns ever since I saw it in a previous issue of the CRLG Newsletter. I have to admit to being obsessed with the subject of the lace snowflake. Traces of that obsession were noticeable to my fellow lacers at a tour of the Baltimore Museum of Art, where, after looking at gorgeous pieces of old Binche and Valenciennes laces, the talk turned to snowflakes. They too began to show signs of the same infatuation.

Another aspect of the gathering snowstorm gets us into July. In July, Vera herself came to teach us a workshop featuring this beautiful and intriguing feature of the old Flemish laces. And since there are lots and lots of different snowflakes, we can look forward happily to July 2002, 2003, 2004...Did I say obsession?

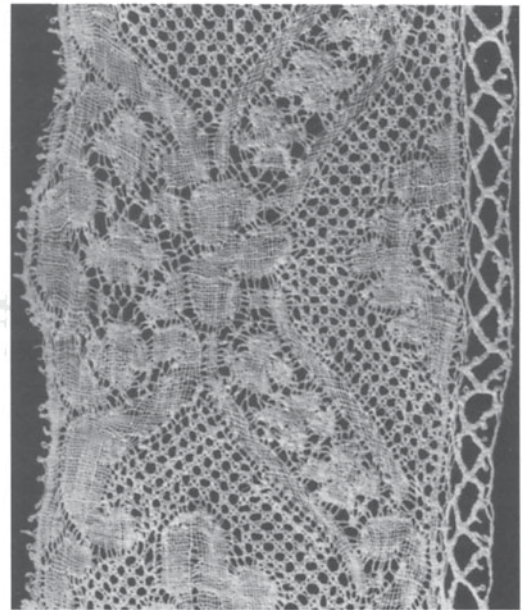
Lace snowflakes...there are lots of different ones, varying from each other only slightly, all of them coming under the general name of *fond de neige*. And I found out, to my astonishment, about fifteen years ago, how similar to each other they can look, and how utterly different they can actually be. I was studying a piece of antique Valenciennes in the collection of the Walters Art Museum here in Baltimore. Blown away by the beauty of the whole piece, and mesmerized though I was by the snowflake ground, I was finally about to put it away again, when my eye was caught by a different snowflake. What was it? I got out the microscope, and Cook



*Flounce, Valenciennes (detail)*



*Ruffle, Valenciennes (detail), France, very early 18th century, linen.*



*Flounce, Flanders (detail), Belgium, late 17th century, linen.*

& Stott (Book of Bobbin Lace Stitches). A snowflake in a box (C&S "Toile Star in Diamond Frame")? No. A snowflake-with-a-halo (C&S "Toile Star 6")? No, again. What could it be? I went on a snowflake hunt, and a year later, waving a victory flag, I had the answer: my snowflake had a halo and a box! Thrilled out of my mind, and floating away with lacemaker's excitement, I diagrammed it, gave it a lofty name, l'Etoile en Carré Double, and survived long enough to see it published by the Needle and Bobbin Club.

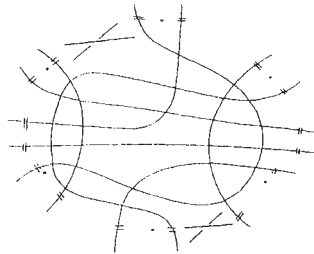
A word about the Needle and Bobbin Club, a distinguished society, now defunct. It was founded in 1916 and flourished for the next half century and more, though there was always a touch of Edith Wharton's vanished high-society about it. It was made up of a mix of well-to-do ladies, professional designers, and textile enthusiasts, united in all their variety by their genuine love of textiles and lace (hence, "needle and bobbin"). It was not a blind love by any means. They were highly discriminating in their tastes, and had rather a studious, even a scholarly approach to lace. Their lodestar was the Textile Study Room at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, a magical place where a vast collection of marvelous laces lay, and no doubt still does lie in hundreds and hundreds of shallow, glass-topped cabinet drawers.

For many years, from 1916 until 1989, this remarkable group of lace-lovers published an annual volume, the Bulletin of the Needle and Bobbin Club, devoted to technical studies of textiles and lace; and this is where my Valenciennes snowflake finally landed (un-melted, in spite of all the heat of discover and the excitement of publication around it), in Vol. 68, 1985, pp. 3-10.

Well, July came and went, and the workshop by Vera Cockuyt was a remarkable success. It has been a decade-long mystery for me, how there can be so many varieties of snowflakes. Well, a mystery no longer! Vera held forth for two days, with word and with diagram, on the basic, universal snow ground structure.

The big discovery was that underlying all the different exemplars of *fond de neige*,

there is to be found a firm hexagonal grid to which they are all tethered. And we learned what astonishing results were to be had from the seemingly simple device of dropping the weaver pair. Binche, Valenciennes - watch out!



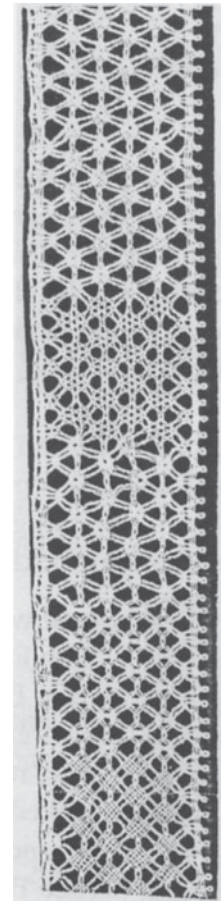
*Dropping the weaver pair.*

There is a wonderful page (p.535) in a wonderful book, *Trois Siècles de Dentelles*, by M. Risselin-Steenebruggen, that illustrates via a piece of modern Binche (1913) the culmination of three centuries of thought, inspiration and enormous talent. This amazing book takes the snowbound lacemaker on the whole journey, from the initial 17th Century glimmer of what *fond de neige* could ultimately be like (p. 368), through an "apparition" of Binche fifty years later (p. 451), up to the real thing, the real, gorgeous, glorious thing. The lacemaker who gets lost in this incredible book is going to stop for a moment on page 452 to shout "We got there!" before turning the page and going on to the completely realized ideal on p. 535.

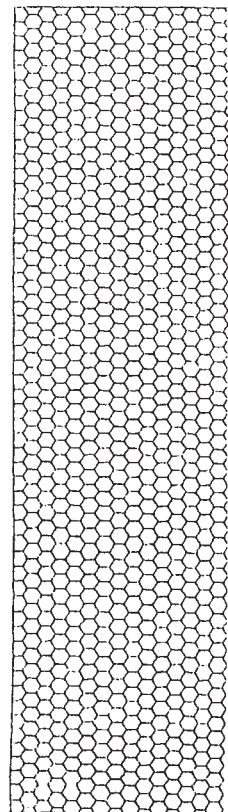
Do I sound as if I might burst into song any minute now? I think we all felt a bit that way after Vera's thrilling July workshop in the snow.

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This article was a combination of two articles published this year in *The Newsletter of the C.R.L.G.* by Aurelia Loveman. The photos are of laces in the collection of Walters Art Gallery and are reproduced with permission.



*Variations on the snowflake ground. Courtesy of Vera Cockuyt.*



*The Famous Hexagonal Grid. Grid courtesy of Jonathan Levi, M.D.*