

WHITHER LACE?

by Dr Aurelia Loveman

Lace — do we refer to a trimming for clothes, currently so universally admired that it is found on sleeves, dress hems, panties, petticoats, even jeans? Or do we refer to pure technique, “beauty bare,” the dernier cri of contemporary stitchery as embodied in some sparse and stark arrangement of two-to-the-inch buttonhole stitches, made of wire and laundry-line, connecting three splinters of driftwood to a plastic hose coupling? Do we refer to a half-inch-wide arrangement of holes and threads, cranked out by the millions of yards, wrapped on cards and sold in dime stores? Or do we refer to something vaguely remember as filmy, rare and expensive, its likeness painted with inconceivable care and grace by the Flemish masters?

I am concerned here with issues of function and design, as these fundamentals of art in general reveal themselves in particular in lace. Lace has had a strange and wonderful history. It was once a store of value. People could invest in lace, augment their capital by holding it, smuggle it in inventive and dangerous ways, buy the love of seductive ladies and rich old rakes with it (especially, during one period in the 17th century, if it was colored green), establish their social status by it, go broke hankering after it... While lace has survived to the present, you could probably do none of these things with it now, not even go broke over it. And yet lace somehow maintains its fascination, even debased as it usually is in whatever form we can buy it today. Lately lace has shown abundant signs that it is forcing its way back into our current awareness. Museums are mounting lace exhibitions; lacemaking guilds are mushrooming all over the country; the use of *detached buttonhole stitch* carries a bit of cachet with it, used in a piece of embroidery; fashion has gone mad with it — a sure sign of true love. In short, lace in the late 20th century has re-emerged triumphantly.

Real lace is made with a bobbin or needle. Every other technique is only straining after the real thing, with apologies to knitters, crocheters, tatters, and knot-tyers. The lace that reaches the heart and once ravaged the pocketbook is made in only those two ways. Real lace has other properties: notably, it is fine, it is intricate, and compels astonishment. It defies time limits, and will not be made to go quickly. Like the ideal woman, it looks fragile and is really very strong.

What can the emerging textile artist of the late 20th century do with these wonderful, if stubborn, properties? Looking about, we note that a fair number of highly skilled lacemakers have turned antiquarian. Using bobbins, we make “Beds,” “Bucks,” “Brussels,” “Tonder,” “Honiton”. If we use the needle, we make “Punto in Aria” or “Reticella”. These are all highly individualized developments of simple basic

techniques that arose in isolated geographic areas and flourished so long as there was money to be earned by making them. It was a crude lace indeed that could be made in under two hours per square inch.

We have, of necessity, different concepts of time now, and few of us could spend a year or two making a flounce for the hem of a dress without questioning the sense of the enterprise. The stylized flowers, the cherubs, the neoclassical urns, wreaths and columns no longer have a contemporary relevance, and will not go anywhere as themes for the late 20th century artist. With their gossamer-fine threads (no longer available anywhere), their precious lyrico-historical references (no longer intelligible to most of us), their tyrannical demands on time and eyesight (no longer economically viable for even the most leisured of us), these laces stand at the end of an illustrious road. We must use the old techniques in ways of our own, that have credibility to the contemporary mind and heart, and yet that preserve the essential technical limits and liberties that inspire the artist within any discipline.

Lace must be considered by the parameters of scale, color, materials and authenticity. *Scale*: Is a work still experienced as a piece of lace if each stitch is an inch high and an inch wide (Fig. 1) and the finished work is twenty feet in all directions (perhaps an outside mural laid against a concrete wall, and done in shining steel wire)?

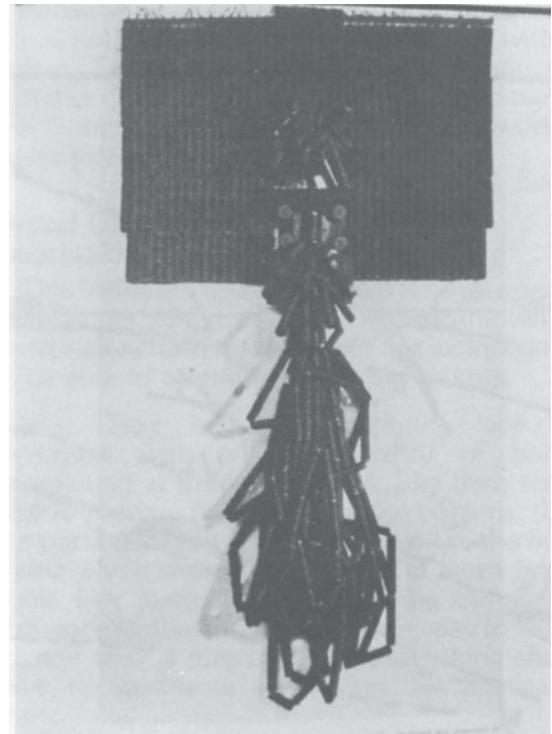


Fig 1. “Induction Field” by Inge Vahle, 1971, a lace work done in sisal.

Color: True lace is white, ecru or black. Is it still lace if it is blue, turquoise, olive and mauve, shimmering, shading and fading back and forth into each other? **Materials:** Lace was and still is made of fine linen thread, cotton, and fine silk. But today's creative stitchers work the detached buttonhole (occasionally in a wider repertoire of stitches than the everpresent single Brussels) in raffia, rope, shoelaces and braid. Can we still experience this product as lace? Or has it broken unstated limits and lost the essence of lace – the character of exquisiteness and intricacy, which is the *sine qua non* of this technique? **Authenticity:** Is there any value to retaining the rules of construction? Is there some defeat if a design bears an explicit reference to reality?

This issue of authenticity is really of a different dimension than the other three. It necessarily involves ideas of design and goes to the heart of the troublesome matter of art in our craft. We of the 20th century are a moralistic lot, so plagued about the sins of imitation and fidelity to reality that we are driven to the point of thinking, often, that if an embroidered daisy is recognizably a daisy, it simply is not art. It may not be, but not because we can recognize it as a flower. A design method, considerably in vogue in recent decades, employs a worm's-eye view of a tiny fraction of an ordinary object in an effort to reach the artistic experience. For instance, a viewfinder roaming the surface of a slice of bread to reveal the peaks and valleys of the baked dough unquestionably offers us a different experience of the bread than what we had before. But is it the unrecognizability of the bread that is of value to the artist? Or is it not rather concern with shadings and tactile qualities, and with the techniques of rendering these through visual experience so that the breadness of the bread becomes altogether irrelevant? Or see, as in the beautiful design, PLANT FORMS (Fig. 2), the simultaneous congeniality and irrelevance of the 'floral forms' to anything realistically floral.

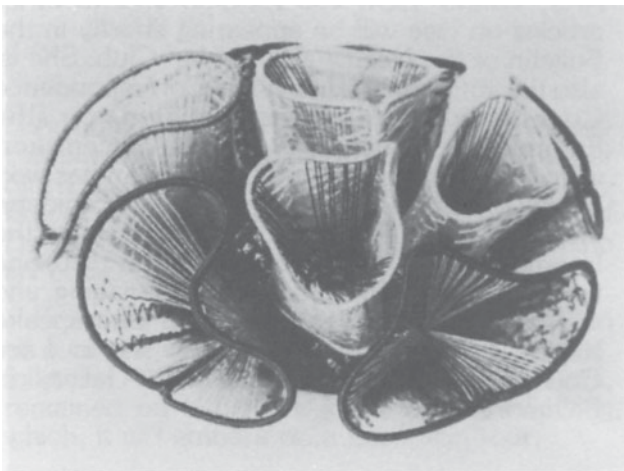


Fig. 2. "Plant Form," by Eileen Phipps.

Minuteness, fidelity to reality, extreme accuracy can be highly potent, as witness the breathtaking renderings of laces and velvets and the fur of little dogs and the ringlets of women's hair by some wonderful old painters. But they can be highly irrelevant too. The sole issue is the essence, the emotional impact of a work. And with that issue, the wire mural, the blue-and-mauve creation, the recognizable daisy, the baked bubbles of leavened dough all come to the bar of artist heaven with equal tickets of admission. **Art:** the experience of credible emotional impact. Do they give us that?

Impact. The very word implies the experience of being struck. The work of art strikes the heart, and we know we have been pierced. But banging away upon our sensibilities is not necessarily art – astonishment, revulsion, disbelief will all do that. Yet hideousness need not discredit the artistic experience. Goya has a terrible, solitary dog, baying at the moon in a night laid waste, that is guaranteed to be the stuff of nightmares; but art it is. The word "impact" connotes suddenness, yet the experience of art need not be sudden. There is room for the miniature, the gentle, the pastel – prime provinces for the lacemaker. A case in point, taken from the literary field, is Jane Austen's work, which steals so quietly into the heart that one hardly knows anything has happened, yet it remains there as a standard, an anchor, a comfort and a dream for the rest of the reader's life. So too a piece of lace. Magnificence of technique, which the lacemaker must have or the sense of lace is lost, brilliance of design and composition need not enter the spirit with a clang; they can penetrate imperceptibly.

Whither lace? Elena Holeczyova, a contemporary Czech lacemaker, has a frieze of ballerinas winding their way across a lace wallhanging in a frozen orgy of mysterious celebration. The mastery of lace technique leaves one open-mouthed in amazement and envy. Having seen that piece of lace, one is never the same again. The threads are available to us all, the scale is manageable, the claims of time it might take to make would not be crushing. It might or might not find an utilitarian fate, though hung on the wall of your living-room, it would light up your life forever. In 1960, at a time when his own craft had arrived at a crossroads much like that of lace at present, Peter Collingwood, the celebrated rug weaver, wrote: "...start with what the technique gives willingly and from those elements construct your design...the design must so incorporate the technique's peculiarities that the one could not be imagined to exist without the other."

A very simple illustration of this principle is to be seen in Fig 3 & 4, where a rather static design for fish is enabled to suggest tail movement and bubbles in the water, by the imaginative use of the ending passive threads which in standard lacemaking would normally be neatly tied and cut off.

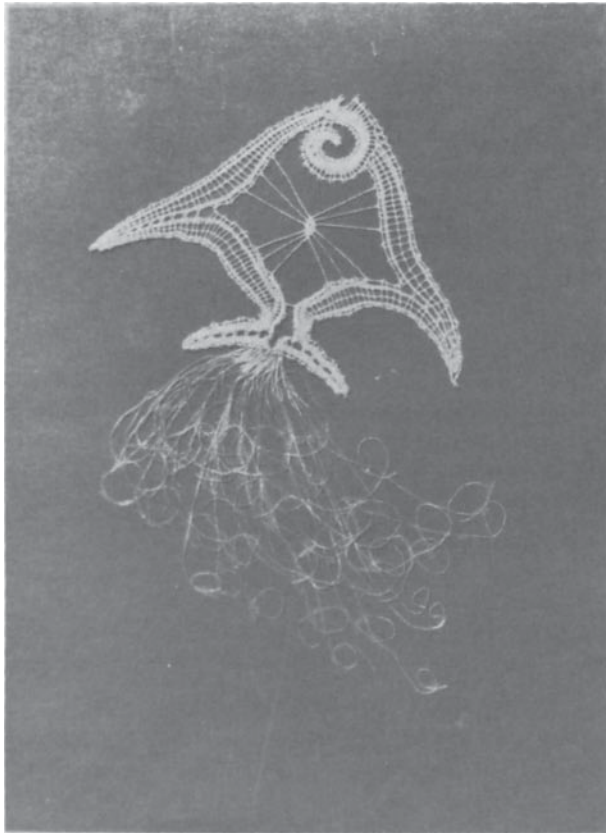


Fig 3



Fig 4

As artist-craftsmen, we are children of our time. What have we to offer? Dazzling technical virtuosity, unthought-of new materials, a fascination with the impersonal and abstract (our reward for the pains of living in the Age of Alienation). Alas, not for us the sunny vistas of Holeczyova's agrarian paradises. But we have immense vistas of interplanetary awareness. We can open up our imitative academic constraints, as valuable as they were for our training, and see what space will do for us. Let us see what gleaming wire and glass threads can be made to do in the hands of the accomplished lacemaker — with the proviso that the lacemaker be indeed a virtuoso of lace techniques, in whose hands 18th-century intricacies sort themselves with facility, but who has available to the imagination panoramas that were unthinkable in the 18th century.

“What will the technique give?” — our key question. The lacemaker must have left the journeyman years behind, and be master of the intricacies devised by centuries of earlier lacemakers. He must take up technique where his predecessors left off, and illumine them by the light of his own creativity of design. Brilliant, imaginative, beautiful, contemporary design is what will carry forward the arsenal of lace techniques now quietly lying in wait.

Biographical Note

Dr. Loveman has written and lectured on lacemaking and lace-related subjects. Her article, “Whither Lace?” appeared in *Needle Arts*, Summer 1983, vol. XIV No. 3, and was reprinted in the *Bulletin of the International Old Lacers*, Sept-Oct 1984, vol. 5 No. 1. Another article, “A Picture Story for Adults,” appeared in *Needle Arts*, Winter 1984, vol. XV No. 1. Two other articles on lace will be appearing shortly in the *Bulletin of the Needle and Bobbin Club*. She is also the author of the Individual Correspondence Course in Needle Lace offered by the Embroiderers Guild of America. A lacemaker, weaver and embroiderer, Dr. Loveman has won many prizes for her lace and embroidery, including first prize in bobbin lace at the International Old Lacers convention in 1980. She teaches both bobbin and needle lacemaking, and is immediate past president of the Chesapeake Region Lace Guild. At present she is Lace Consultant for the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore.