

ITALIAN BOBBIN LACE, SIXTEENTH CENTURY

“LE POMPE”

A STUDY OF THE TECHNIQUE OF SIXTEENTH CENTURY  
BOBBIN LACES

BY MME. L. PAULIS \*

THESE notes on the technique of the laces in the designs in “Le Pompe” (“The Poms”), the earliest known pattern book for bobbin laces, will be of interest to students of the historical development of the craft as well as to those who make lace.

The first edition of this book was published in Venice in 1557. Froschower’s book of patterns for bobbin lace was published in Zurich in 1560,† repeating many of the patterns which had appeared in “Le Pompe” and saying that Venetian merchants had been bringing such laces to Switzerland since 1535.

The old pattern books and even the reprints of them are so rare that our readers will be glad to see these selections from one of the most important.

The designs in this volume may be divided into two groups of entirely different character. Those of the first group show the geometrical combinations of plaited lace, composed simply of braided lines which in-

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†ED. NOTE—Several authorities place Froschower earlier, cf. Dreger, Palliser, Strange, etc.

terlace to form the design, (Fig. 1, page 3, of "Le Pompe,") or again in others, the braidings, which in the execution of the pattern would translate a *line* of the drawing, expand in many instances into surfaces composed of "cloth stitch," or the more open stitch known as "wire ground," while other designs are composed entirely of the "wire ground," *passée tordue* (Fig. 2).

The execution of these designs is generally simple and easy. Nevertheless some of the combinations of plaitings or braidings, and some of the multiple crossings require ingenuity and a perfect knowledge of the resources of the craft.

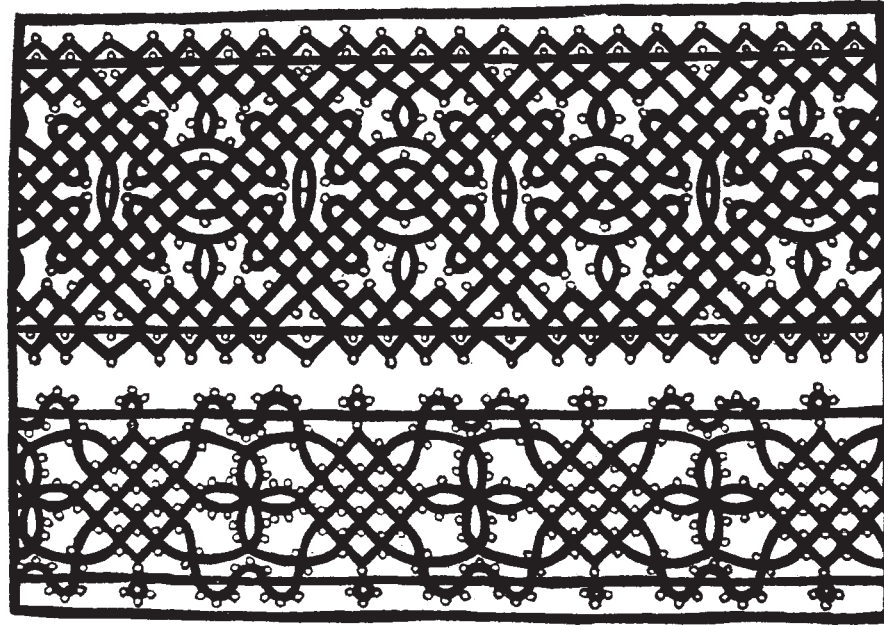
For example to execute the motif of the squares of model a, Fig. 1, one must place the plaited lines as shown in the sketch a, of Fig. 4. The three crossings of the center of the figure, executed successively, are all held by the same pin, placed when the first crossing is made and taken out and replaced twice more in the same hole, in such a way as to support the two additional crossings.

A similar case presents itself in model b, of Figs. 3 and 4. The execution of the motifs separating the squares should be done as in diagram b' Fig. 4. The successive crossings are so many in the center of the figure that one cannot expect a very satisfactory effect in the finished work.

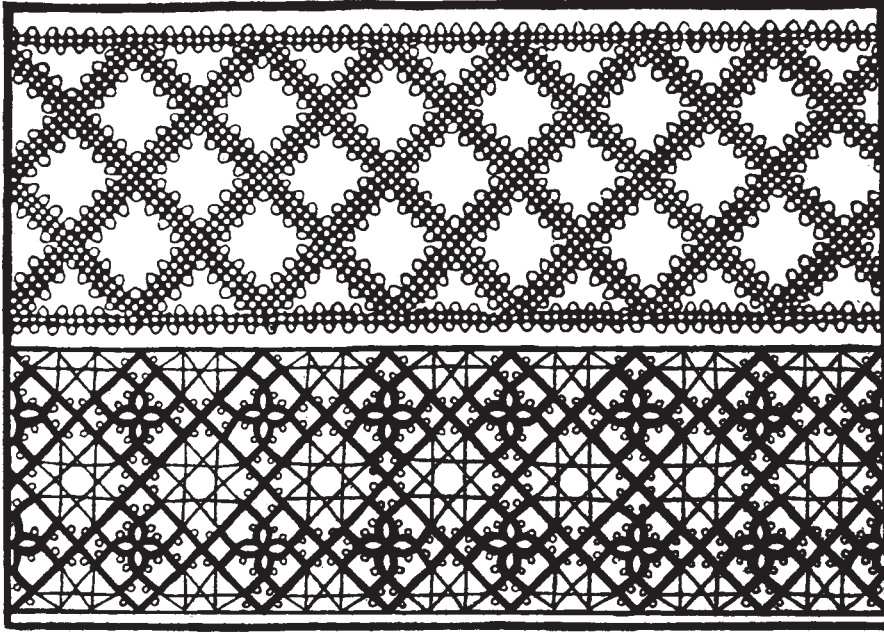
The third model (a, Fig. 5) also requires ingenuity (cf. diagram c, Fig. 4). The most simple manner of carrying out the crossings of the plaits at the spot where the two loops meet is indicated in sketch c' of the same Fig. 4.

Similar difficulties will be found in other models, where certain details which in the pricking seem at first sight very logical, present some difficulties in execution. For instance the loops which fill the center of the square motifs of the model b, in Fig. 1, and all the loops as well as the star-shaped motif of the model a, Fig. 2. If one keeps to the technique of plaited lace as seems the logical way, each of the curves forming the loops (those marked with an X) should be formed, not by a braid of four threads as in most of these laces, but by two tie-bars of two threads each, crossing each other (diagram d Fig. 4). The two strands of the "brides" or tie bars lying close together (not separated as in diagram d'), give the same effect as a braided bar. (See a, Fig. 6, showing the execution).

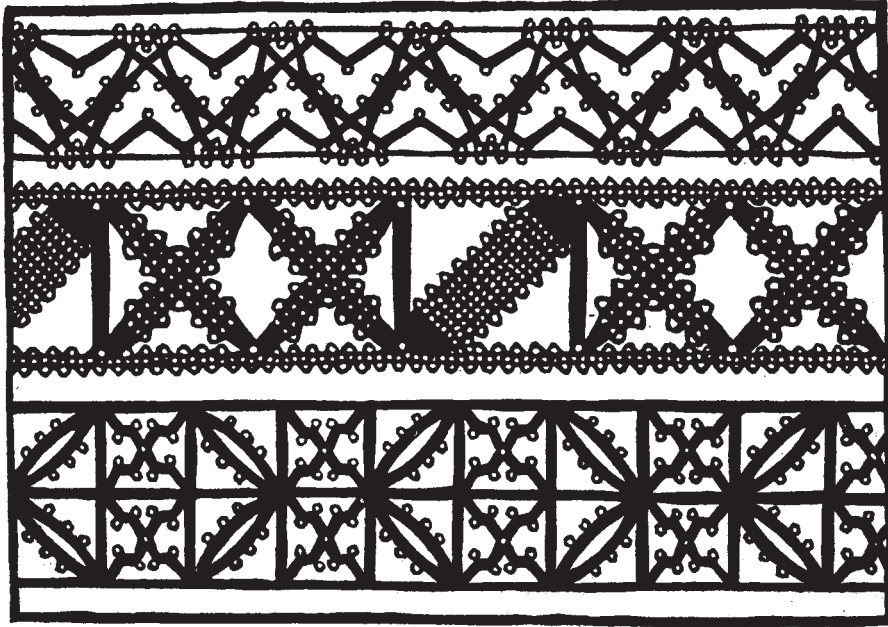
As for the star-shaped motif, it can only be executed according to the



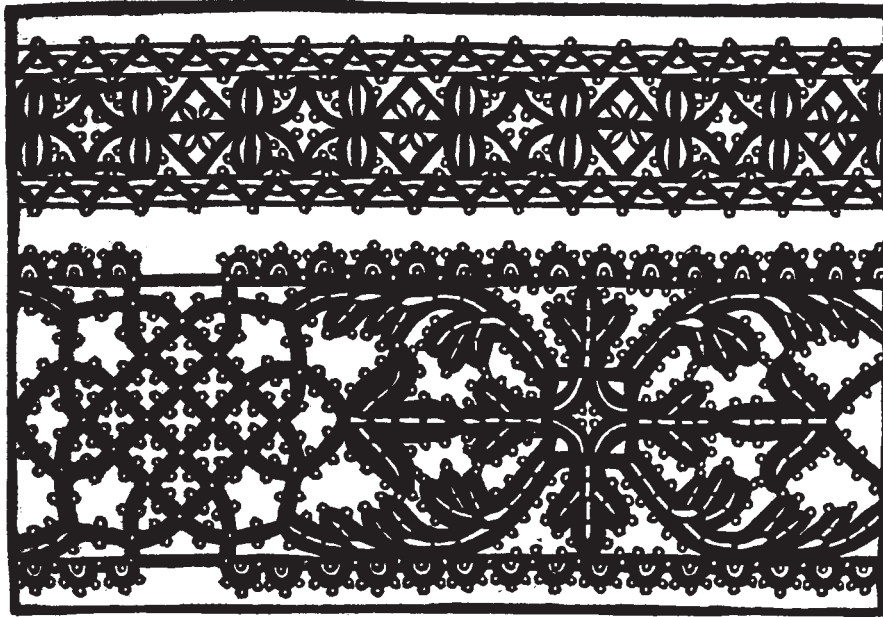
a b  
FIGURE 1. PAGE 3 OF "LE POMPE"



a b  
FIGURE 2. PAGE 28 OF "LE POMPE"  
FOR EXECUTION OF THE STAR-SHAPED MOTIF IN MODEL 3, SEE  
DIAGRAM e FIGURE 4 AND b ON FIGURE 6



a b c  
 FIGURE 5. PAGE 21 OF "LE POMPE"



a b  
 FIGURE 3. PAGE 11 OF "LE POMPE"  
 FOR EXECUTION, OF MODEL D, SEE B, FIG. 14

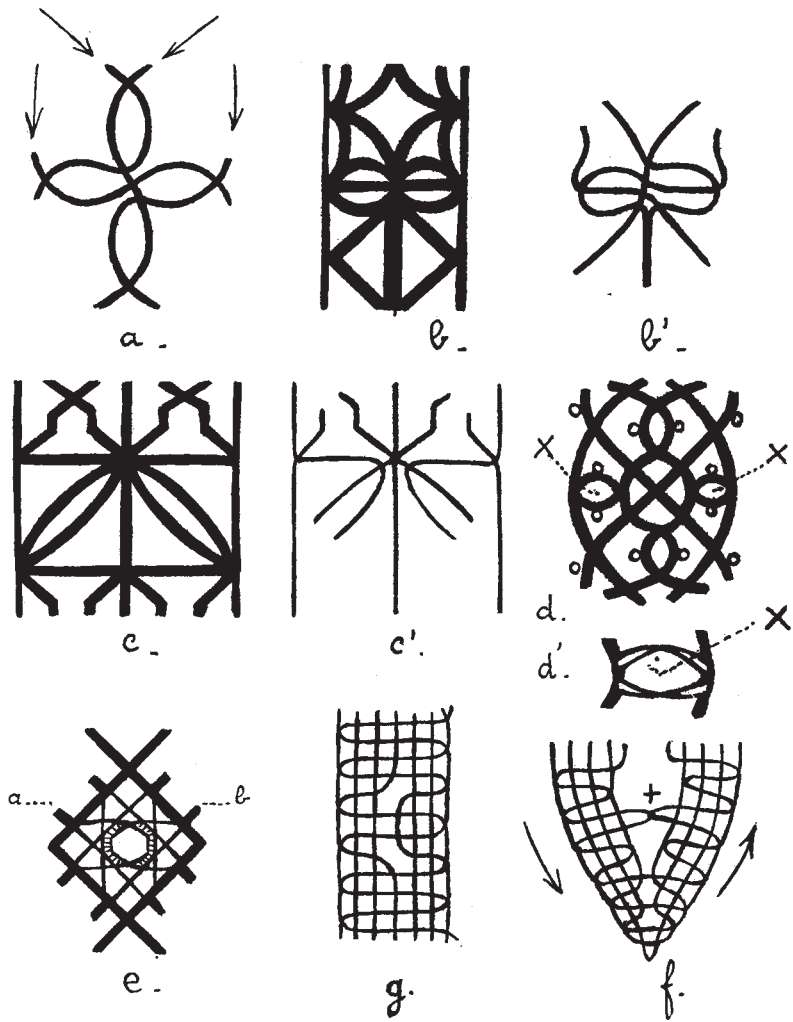


FIGURE 4. EXPLANATORY DIAGRAMS

In sketch *f*, the arrows mark the direction of the work. When half the point is made, the position of the lace pillow must be changed in order that the work may be continued in the direction of the right hand arrow. The + indicates an "accrochage." Each line in *g* and *f* in reality would be composed of two threads, "*les voyageurs*."

diagram e, Fig. 4. The braid a, coming from the left crosses the braid b, coming from the right. Each of these braids continues after the crossing, to follow the line of the octagon forming the center of the star. (Cf. model b, Fig. 6, showing the execution.) Thus the thickness of the contour lines of this octagon is greater than that of the lines of the rest of the star, which the printed pattern does not indicate.

It is possible that this omission may be an error of the engraver, as it would not be probable that the author of such well-composed designs would be guilty of such negligence. The engraver who probably did not know the technique of lace, might easily have made such a mistake.

These slight defects may be found in various parts of the book, for instance on page 3 (Fig. 1, model a), where the marking of picots at the angles of the squares is incorrect.

Besides this, in a certain number of models the thickness of the line in the drawing does not correspond to practical execution. All the models of the first group have a solid and heavy air, like *passementerie*. The workmanship had to be extremely firm and close because often the angles, loops or curves are not supported by any cross bars, and the accumulation of crossings in one place which is so often found in these patterns is intolerable unless the work is very firm.

The title of the book, claiming to present patterns *per poter far Cordelle, ouero Bindelle, d'oro, di Seta, di Filo, ouero di altra cosa*, is moreover the confirmation of this fact, that the designs were for *passementerie* as well as for lace.

What is the exact meaning of *Cordelle* and *Bindelle*? The author of the preface of the reprint made in Vienna in 1879 translates them by the French words "*cordelette, cordelière et bandelette*," which do not seem quite exact.

But whatever the material for which these designs were made, whether linen thread, or what we now call "cordonnet" (fine cord), gold thread, silk or hemp, the processes of the work are incontestably the braiding and weaving processes of plaited bobbin lace.

Certain models made up of interlacing lines of equal thickness, make one think of *soutache* work, but in other analogous designs, the spreading of the lines into flat surfaces proves that the patterns were meant to be executed by the braiding of bobbins.

So if there is uncertainty as to the purpose of these designs, if it is

possible to call them *passementerie*, it is equally correct to call them *laces* in the accepted use of the word.

The same uncertainty results from the study of the patterns of the second group. One might consider them as being of quite a different type and not permitting any sort of comparison with the preceding ones from the technical point of view as well as from their appearance, if certain designs did not act as intermediaries between the two groups.

A number of the designs, in fact, present a combination of geometrical

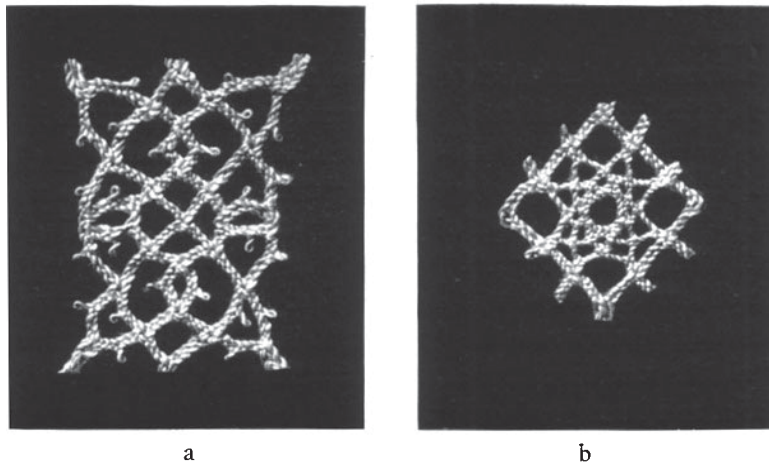


FIGURE 6  
SHOWING THE EXECUTION OF d, FIGURE 4 AND e, FIGURE 4

lines, and of loops and curves more or less freely disposed. Such as, for example, the model shown in Fig. 7, and others in which the geometrical element only occupies a secondary place, but which has, nevertheless, the technical character of the first group. It is, then, a question of the same sort of work. The element of *plaiting*, however, gives way almost entirely to the element *weaving* or *cloth stitch*.

If the execution of the models of geometrical type demands ingenuity in the study of the working out of the plaited strands, that of the models of the second group demands an extreme technical cleverness.

The designs show curving inflections, often very delicate in drawing; spreading forms, sharp points, a compact or elegant line sometimes even slightly baroque, but requiring skilful technique in its execution. This

technique may be compared in certain ways to that of typical Bruges laces of the present day. The worker's cushion would have to be turned as in making Bruges lace, to permit the worker to follow the curves of the lace in working always from the top downward. A crochet hook would have to be used to connect the part of the work in process to the parts already finished by the process known as *accrochage*, the English phrase being *taking a sewing*. (Diagram f, Fig. 4).

The points, or parts of the design which diminish in width and then swell once more to their original dimensions, could only be obtained, as in Bruges lace, by the taking out of threads, laid aside for a while and then added again.

The numerous holes which ornament and lighten most of the solid surfaces of the lace could only be the result of the manœuvre known as *change of weavers*, which consists in abandoning the two *weaver* bobbins at a designated place, replacing them by two of the *passives* or hanging bobbins, which causes a sort of defect in the texture, making a little opening. (Diagram g, Fig. 4).

These different operations, the taking out and adding of threads and the *change of weavers* and the hookings, *accrochages*, permit the execution of all the models, although the difficulties are plentiful. (Cf. Fig. 8, model a, and its execution Fig. 8A).

In a certain number of designs the thickness of the lines does not correspond with reality. The working of these models therefore could not be exact except by the process of cutting threads or of adding them again according to need. It seems that these differences might again be errors of the engravers, because the author of the designs seems always to have taken pains to make the forms pass from one end of the composition to the other, without interruption, in a manner that ought to have rendered this technical process unnecessary. But one must not take that entirely for granted. The idea of adding threads or of cutting them must have been a logical consequence of the diversity of the forms in the models of "Le Pompe." The worker must have been tempted in certain cases, in order to carry the model out faithfully, to cut some encumbering threads or to add some, which is an easy thing to do and passes unperceived.

In one of the most complicated designs on page 22, (Fig. 9, model a) a little fantastic "personage" which forms the central motif, confirms this



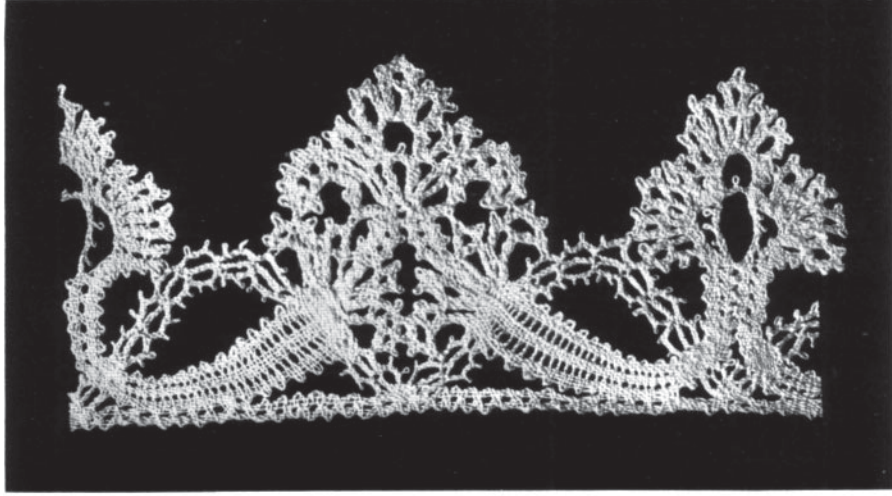
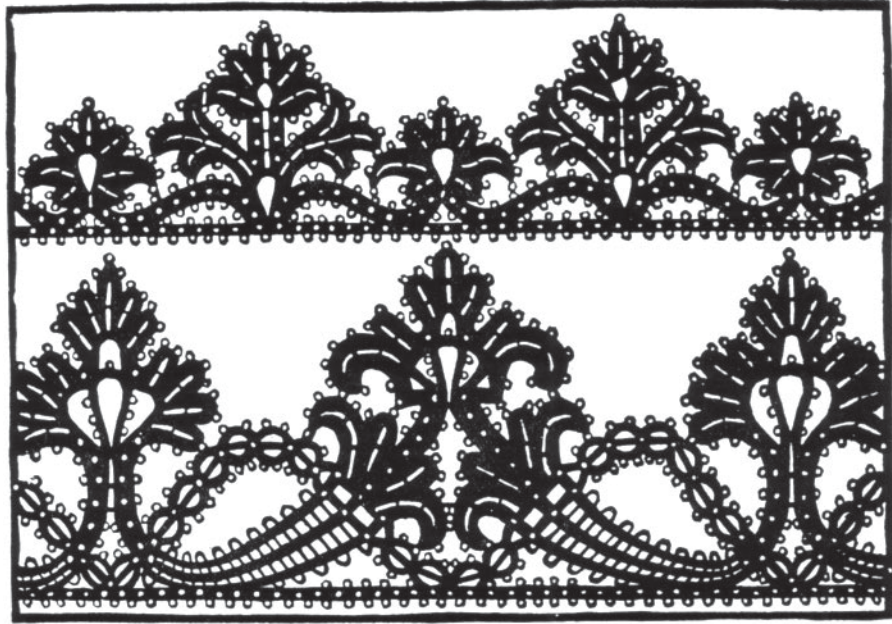


FIGURE 8 A  
SHOWING THE EXECUTION OF MODEL a ON PAGE 26  
OF "LE POMPE"



<sup>D</sup>  
FIGURE 8. PAGE 26 OF "LE POMPE"

supposition. It proves also that technical difficulties did not discourage either the designer or the worker, and in consequence one must admit that at the time when these designs were published, the craft was already highly developed and consequently ancient.

The somewhat heavy and compact aspect of these models is that of passementerie, but here as in the designs of the first group one is obliged to admit the close relationship between the two crafts of passementerie and lace, because of specimens that have come down to us presenting exactly analogous decorative character and which are incontestably laces. Executed in a comparatively fine linen thread, they are more delicate, more light and open than the patterns of the book, but otherwise the same.

The most remarkable of these examples is the splendid cover in the Victoria and Albert Museum supposed to have been made for Philip IV of Spain. The insertion which surrounds it is conceived entirely in the spirit of the models of "Le Pompe" and the technique is identical, although some parts are executed by the process of non-continuous threads. This cover is illustrated by Ricci, "Italian Bobbin Lace," Figs. 37 and 38; also by Mrs. Palliser, Plate XXXVI to face p. 110; and in "Old Lace," by M. Jourdain, plate XV to face p. 19.

Of a similar workmanship, although lighter, as is characteristic of Flemish work and of a comparable decorative style, are the ornamental panels uniting the groups of figures in the cover of Albert and Isabella, belonging to the Museums of the Cinquantenaire at Brussels. After the study of these models of "Le Pompe" one is led to conclude that the transition between lace and passementerie was imperceptible and that the laces which come under the category of guipures, that is, laces without *réseau*, were simply passementerie made of finer linen thread, white, rather than of silk or gold. They only differed in the matter of material until the time when the world realized that it might ask of lace a different effect, that of lightness and delicacy, which gave the fabric its particular characteristic.

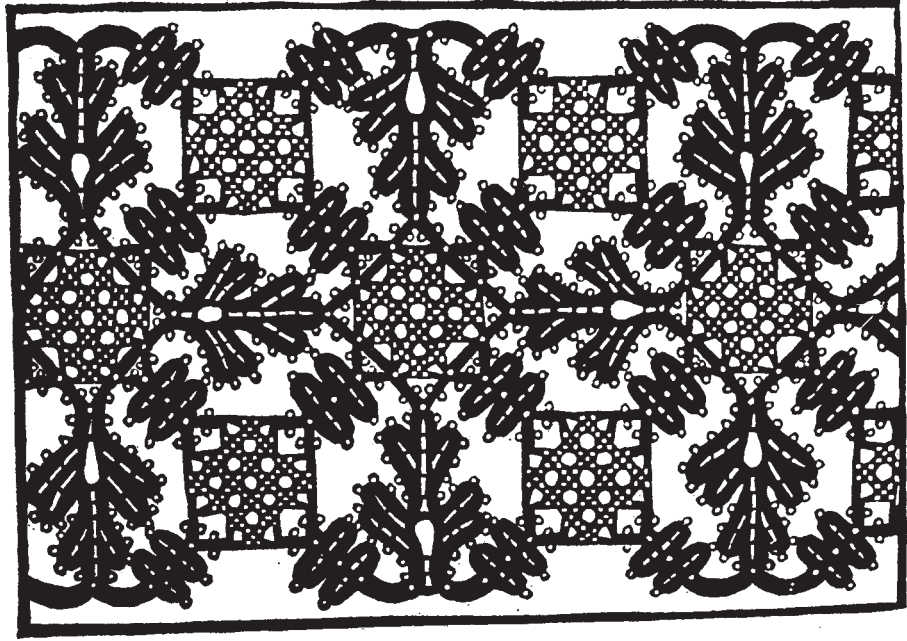


FIGURE 7. PAGE 2 OF "LE POMPE"



a  
b  
FIGURE 9. PAGE 22 OF "LE POMPE"