



BELGIAN LACE-MAKER

## BELGIAN LACE-MAKERS AND THEIR ACCESSORIES.<sup>1</sup>

A thread of gossamer! A lovely line  
Set by a master in brave design;  
A hand that toiled while spun the world through space;  
Peace, patience, labor—then the Belgian lace!

Blanche Wilder Bellamy

**B**EFORE the World War when all Belgium had work, about fifty thousand women were employed in making those delicate linen flowers known as lace.

In the peaceful old cities of those days, when the weather was fine, lace-makers gathered at the doorsteps of their homes might be seen bending over their pillows rapidly manipulating their tinkling bobbins or, with quiet application, patiently working over the minute stitchery of the needle lace. These capable and thrifty mothers with their children beside them, always intent upon their work were, nevertheless, able to keep a watchful eye over their little ones and at the same time interest themselves in the life of the street and in the neighborly gossip that generally prevails when women are together. If bad weather confined them to their homes, each worker would then place herself in front of a window where a corner of the white curtain was drawn back to allow as much light as possible to enter; for in Flanders the light is often very gray.

In the evenings also these industrious women continued to ply their craft placing before their pillow a carafe full of clear water which served to concentrate the light of the lamp upon their lace. To soften the glare,

<sup>1</sup>From the French by Mme. Lucie Paulis, translated by Gertrude Whiting.



FIG. 1

BELGIAN LACE-MAKER

FROM "TOOLS AND TOYS OF STITCHERY," BY GERTRUDE WHITING.

a few drops of sulphuric acid, in which they had plunged a silver centime, was added to the water, and this produced a transparent light green fluid that prevented the light from separating into prismatic rays. (Fig. 1.)

The whole general atmosphere that surrounded the lace-maker was quaint and old-fashioned, the homely dress of homespun or cotton print, gingham apron and little shawl topped by the stiffly starched white "bonnet" with its primly tied bow beneath the chin, were all in keeping with the rather stilted attitudes and movements of the workers as they plied the simple tools, that have remained unchanged through the centuries, handed down through many generations of lace-makers; for the methods and tools to-day are the same as those recorded in works of the old masters with whom the gentle lace-maker seems to have been a favorite subject. Take for instance the "Lace Maker" by Vermeer of Delft, a work of the seventeenth century, which shows a girl holding two bobbins in the uplifted left hand as she prepares to place a pin in the pattern in exactly the same way that our actual lace-makers do to-day. The cushion, absolutely identical with ours, is held by a support that differs from those of our lace-makers only by its elegance.

For our humble women have no luxurious work accessories. Their pillow or square of poplar wood is stuffed with sawdust and covered with blue cloth. The support upon which the pillow rests is a sort of well worn desk of beechwood, mounted upon a kind of crotched cog rail in such a way that the worker can regulate the desk according to the height of her chair. The desk is supported by a platform upon which the worker places her feet to steady the support and also to raise the knees, upon which rests the forward edge of the square pillow. (Figs. 2 and 2A.)

The bobbins are generally of very simply turned beechwood. Three types of them exist from which there is seldom any variation. They are sometimes made of box or of rosewood; but besides their greater cost these woods have the defect of being hard and they therefore require more care in the turning. Charming specimens of these bobbins are sometimes available, but they are not currently employed and may be properly classed as curios. (Fig. 3.)

To supply the bobbins with thread, the lace-maker employs an ordinary *dévidoir* or reel, and a *bobinoir* or winder. This winder reminds one of an old spinning wheel. It is made like a wheel turned by a hand crank,

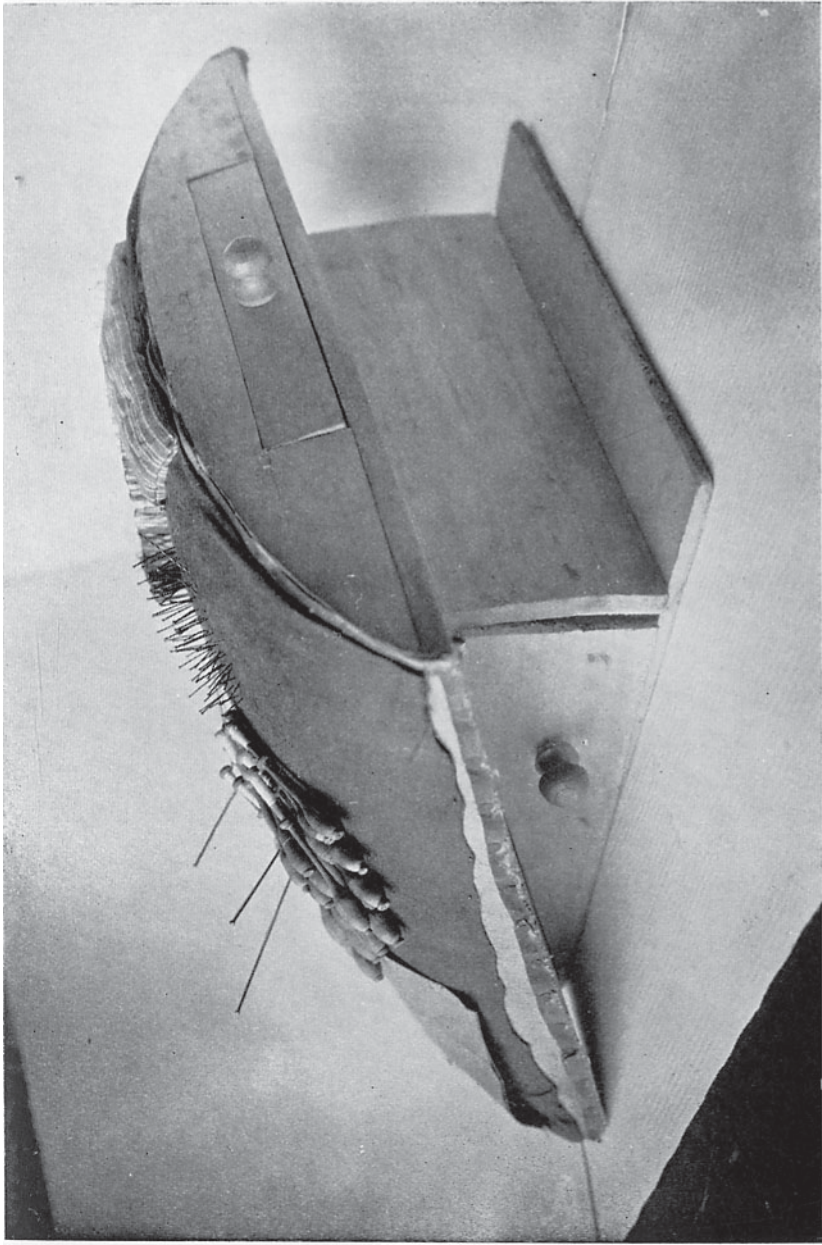


FIG. 2  
SQUARE, STATIONARY PILLOW. REAR VIEW WITH DRAWERS CLOSED. COURTESY OF B. ALTMAN AND CO.

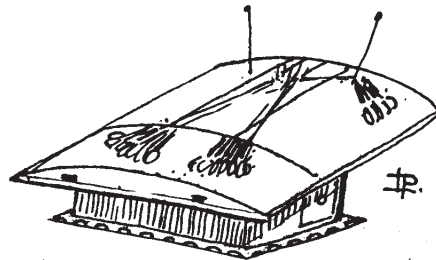
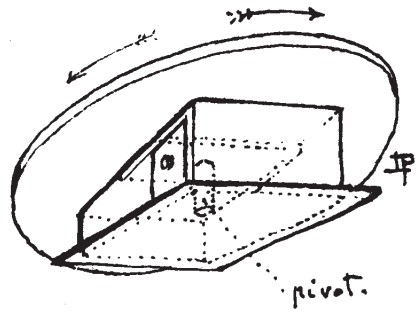
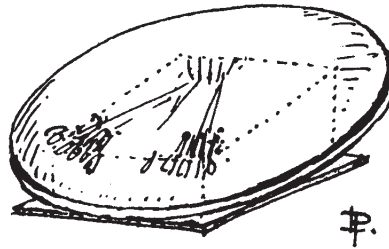


FIG. 2A

SQUARE, STATIONARY PILLOW



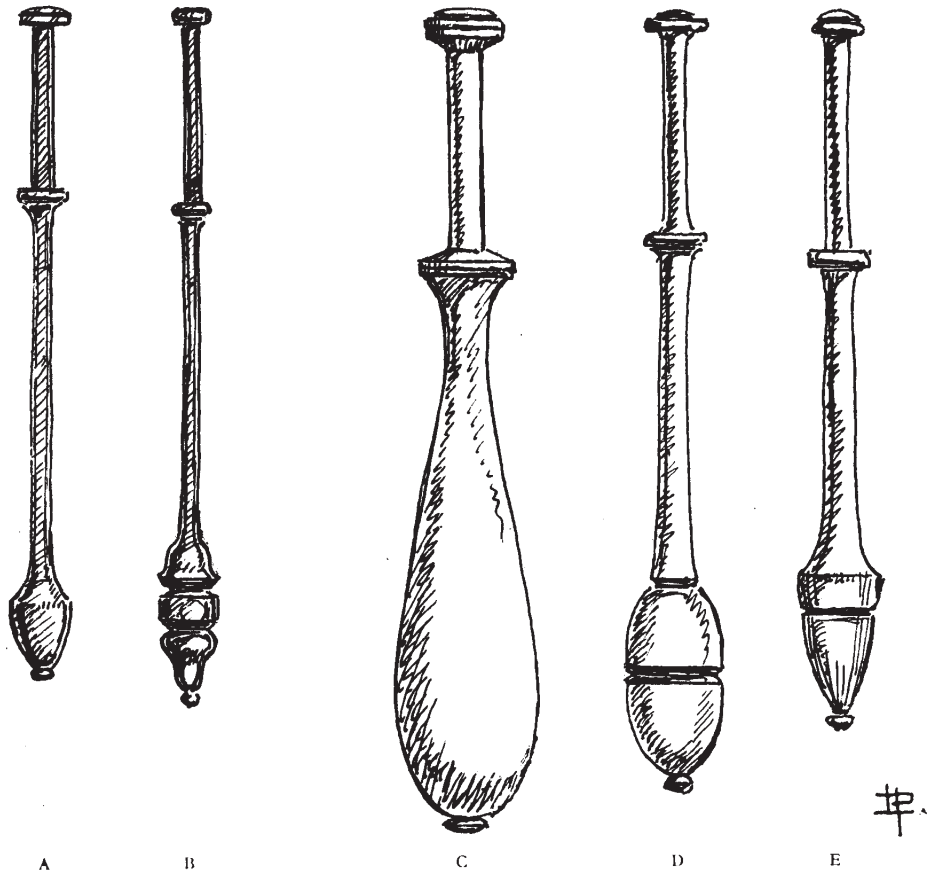
B



C

FIGS. 2A, B., C.

REVOLVING CIRCULAR PILLOW. B SEEN FROM BELOW. C. SEEN FROM ABOVE



A

B

C

D

E

FIG. 3

BELGIAN BOBBINS

A, B. ROSEWOOD

C, D, E. BEECHWOOD

of which the movement is transmitted to a sort of vise or clamp that holds the bobbin. The thread placed on the reel is tied to the spindle of the bobbin. The worker guides it with the left hand while with the right hand she turns the crank. Sometimes the apparatus for winding is altogether primitive. The bobbin is held in two notches cut in the parallel borders of a little wooden box without cover. The wheel is replaced by a simple metal ring, that the lace-maker attaches to her belt or apron, making the bobbin turn by rapidly pulling a stretched cord, which by successive motions always in the same direction, serves as a continuous, endless strap, passing from the ring to the bobbin.

The pillow, the support, the bobbins, the reel, the winder, a cushion and some tin pins, constitute all the accessories of a lace-maker. A very simple outfit, non-cumbersome, inexpensive. Thus, after the World War, throughout the devastated area where the horrors of war had ruined all kinds of industries, it was the lace-maker who was the most easily able to maintain a livelihood. When she could not do otherwise, she left her beloved village, moved a little farther on, and tried to take up her life of minute but tranquil labor, until the shells again obliged her to leave. Thus she moved back step by step before the terror of the invading forces without abandoning her most peaceful of employments. Those lace-makers who, happily, were able to remain in their homes, were not idle either. Thanks to kindly, overseeing help, which all Belgian hearts will remember, thanks particularly to America, towards whom we have contracted a debt of gratitude which we can never repay, these women were able to continue their fairy craft, though they were very humble, very poor little fairies, engaged in a task so minute and so slow that it requires the agility and the flexibility of the fingers of a child.

Thus it is that the apprenticeship of the lace-maker begins in early childhood. At fourteen years of age it is too late, she is "too old." She should begin about the sixth year in order to acquire sufficient dexterity; and every day after classes, little girls are engaged for several hours with their pillows. They are first taught to make very narrow lace, then more and more complicated models. But they do not change them until a certain number of meters have been made; until, if I may say so, they have exercised speed for a certain number of months. It is very evident that



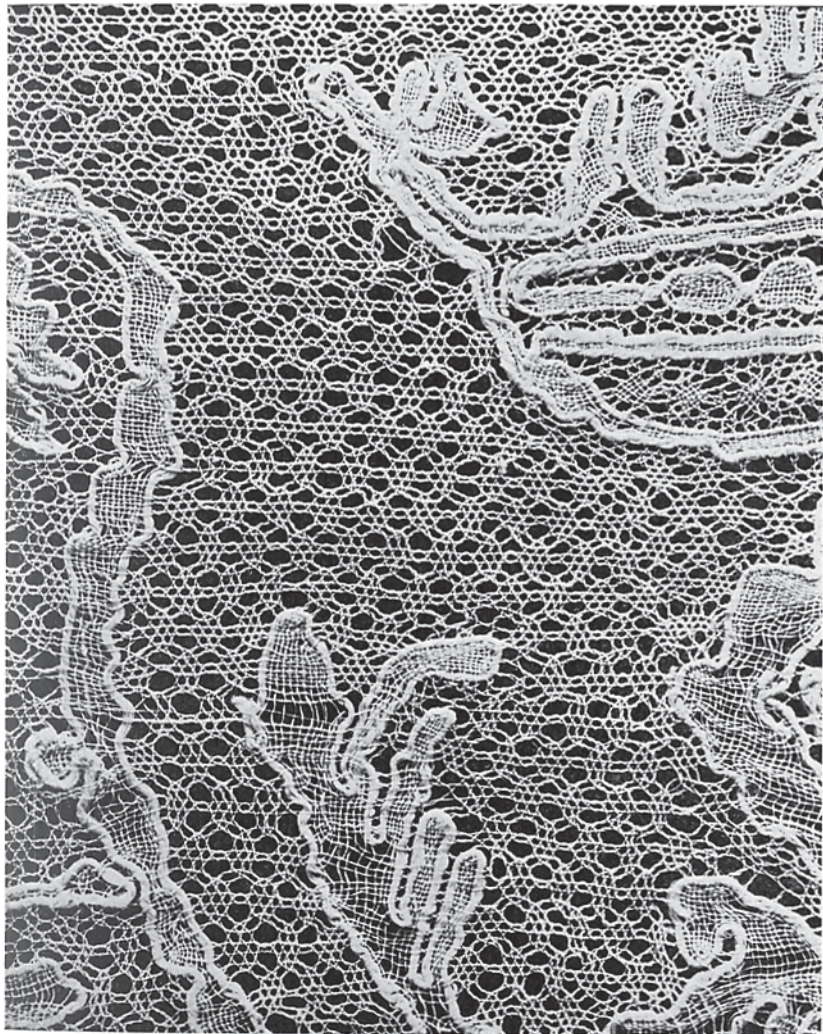
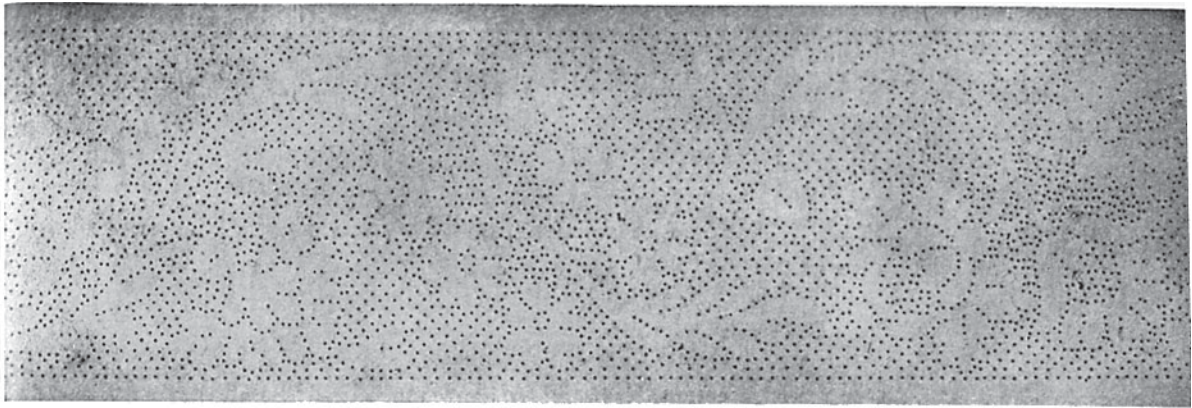
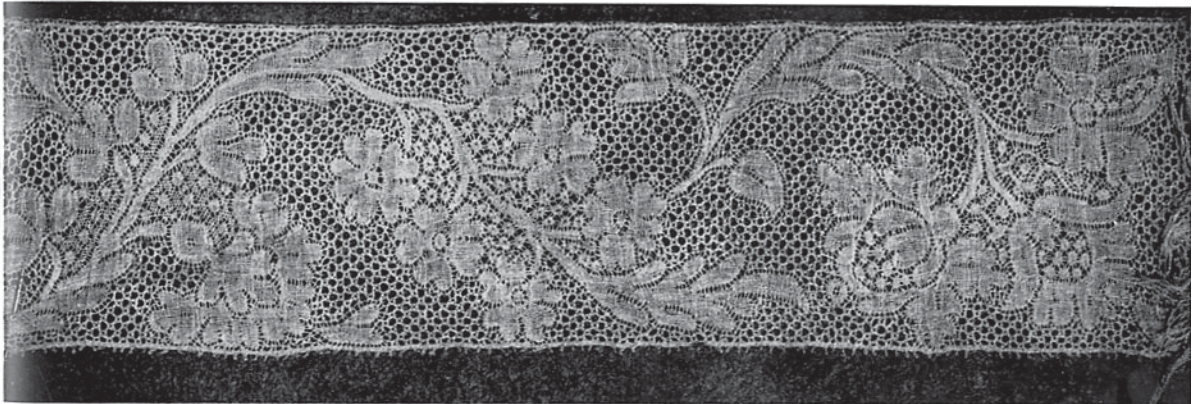


FIG. 4

*Fond armure*, ONE OF THE LESS-KNOWN BELGIAN LACE GROUND MESHES (ENLARGED DETAIL). FROM THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART.



A



B

FIG. 5

- A. WHITE PAPER PRICKING, WITH DATE INDICATING THAT THE LACE HEREWITH WAS BEGUN IN 1775 AND FINISHED IN 1782
- B. BINCHE LACE WITH *cinq trous* GROUND, PRESUMABLY EXECUTED UPON A STRONG PARCHMENT, OF WHICH THE ABOVE PRICKING IS A MODEL THAT MIGHT BE USED IN PRODUCING A NEW PRICKING. NEARLY ACTUAL SIZE.

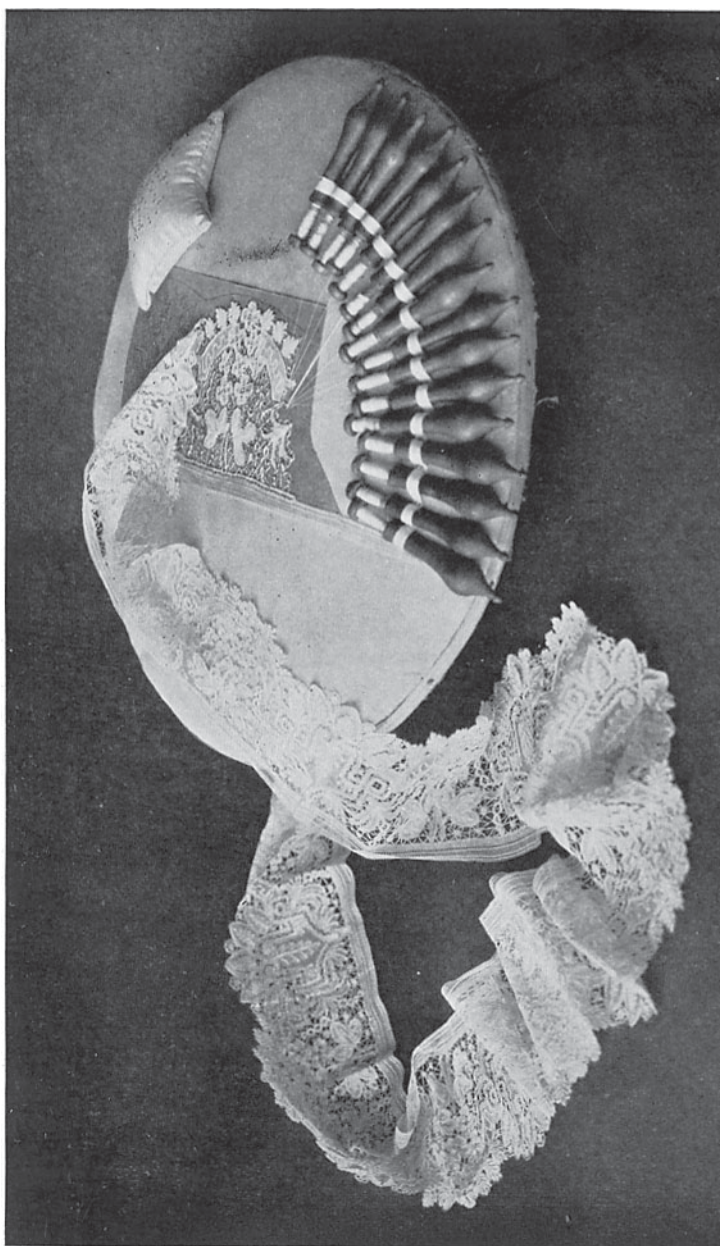


FIG. 6

CIRCULAR, REVOLVING PILLOW, DRESSED WITH BOBBINS, PATTERNS, ETC., READY FOR WORKING.  
COURTESY OF B. ALTMAN & CO. FROM THE "TOOLS AND TOYS OF STITCHERY"  
BY GERTRUDE WHITING.

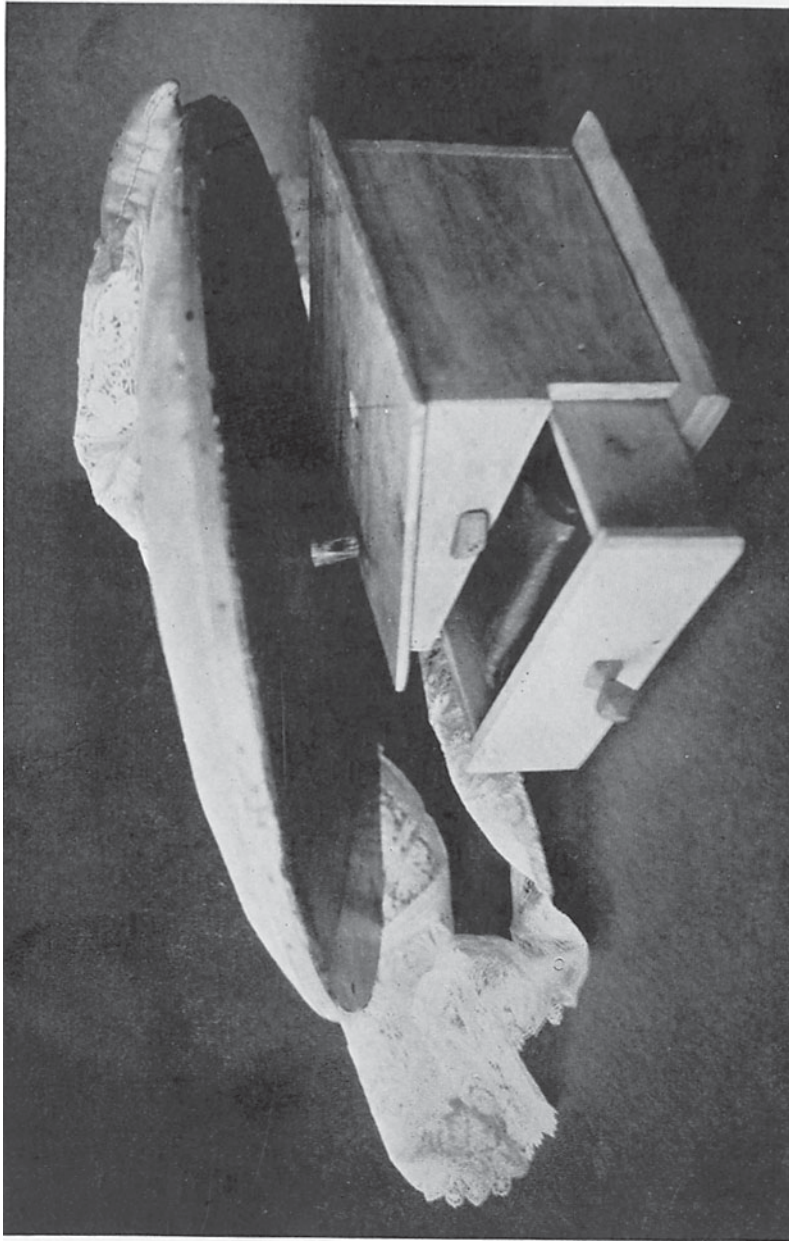


FIG. 6A.  
CIRCULAR REVOLVING PILLOW FOR MAKING DUCHESSE LACE, REAR VIEW, WITH DRAWER OPEN.

they cannot work very fast until they know their pattern by heart, which is not so difficult, the work of a lace-maker being very mechanical. Nothing is left to her initiative: the stitches are always executed in the same manner, and the patterns or "prickings" which bear the design of the lace, give at the same time the precise directions necessary to its execution.

In all laces with net backgrounds—those of Malines, (Fig. 4.) Valenciennes, Antwerp, Grammont and Lille and in the guipures, the holes destined to receive the pins are pricked in advance and therefore the worker does not have to feel her way as she goes. When the threads are twisted, tressed or woven, according to the desired effect, the lace-maker keeps them from ravelling by placing a pin in the prepared hole. She weaves, braids or twists the threads again, always by the same established motions, and again places pins, all of which requires only relative attention after she once knows her model well. (Fig. 5.)

The intelligent part of the work rests with the designer, inventor of models; with the pricker, who determines beforehand the places of the pins; and with the sampler, who translates the design into a model thread specimen; that is, an actual piece of lace.

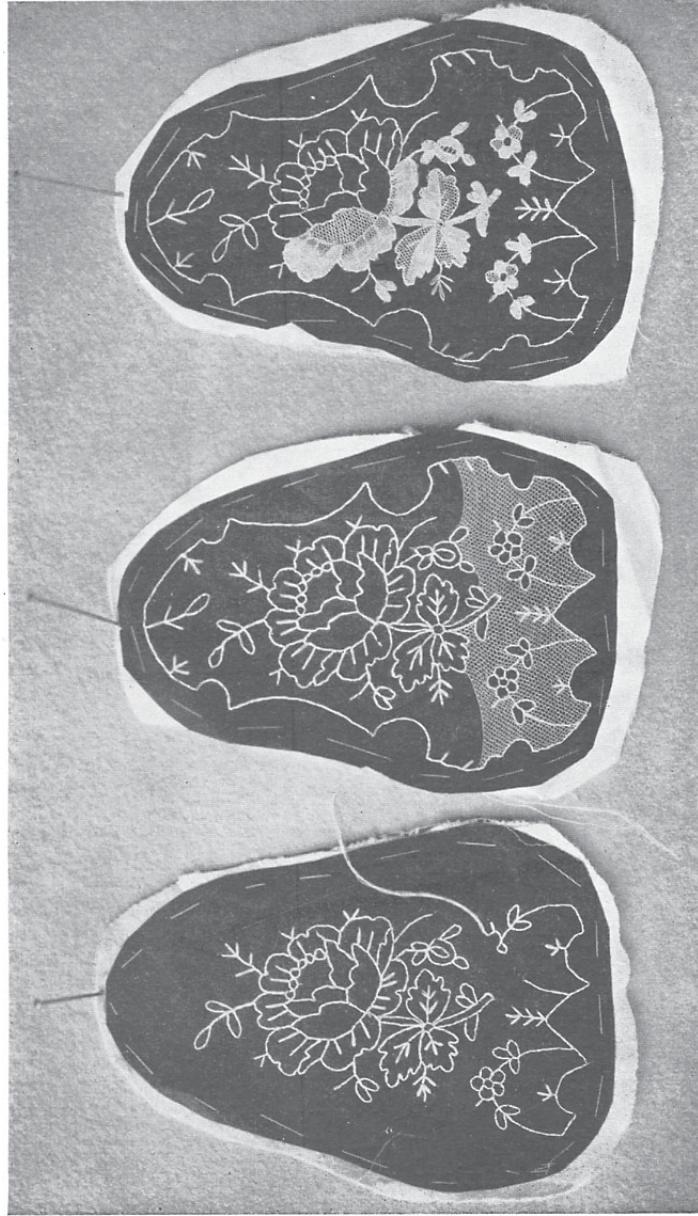
Duchesse Lace, Rosaline, the work of Bruges, and the flowers destined to be applied on tulle, which one might call by the general term *dentelles à fils coupés*—free-hand laces—those with detached independent motifs, of which the technique is entirely different from the Malines, Valenciennes, etc., just described, are executed upon a round, movable pillow. This is composed of two parts: a lower stationary section, similar to the corresponding part of an immovable pillow; and an upper part, forming a sort of slightly domed disc, of variable size (fifty to seventy centimeters in diameter), below which is fixed a central pivot held in a hole drilled for it in the lower part of the pillow. According to the exigencies of the work, the lace-maker twirls the convex disc forming the cushion, properly speaking, so that the bobbins at the ends of the warp threads of this particular form of weaving, known as lace, always hang vertically. (Fig. 6.)

The patterns for laces of detached separate motifs do not give indications for pin placing. They are simple designs traced on dark blue paper. The worker fastens the pattern to the centre of her pillow; then she covers

the whole with a piece of coarse blue cloth, pierced in the middle by a circular hole three centimeters wide, which thus exposes only the bit of work in course of execution. The lace-maker then moves this cover as the work progresses. The function of this cloth is to protect the lace from possible soil, and at the same time to prevent the threads from catching upon the heads of the pins already planted in the pillow. All this being ready and placed within reach of the hand, and the *guipoir*—that indispensable little hook by the aid of which the pieces or parts of the lace are fastened one to the other—and a little cushion well supplied with short pins made of tin, the lace-maker can begin her work. This particular worker has not, like her colleague of the mesh laces, often great quantities of bobbins to manipulate; but as a rule, only fourteen to sixteen. She herself decides where to use pins. When she is conscientious, she places them very near together, and her weaving is both close and regular. But when she is over-anxious to see her work progress, or desirous of earning a little more, or perhaps too poorly paid, she scrimps on the number of times the weft thread passes from side to side and also saves pins; her weaving thus becomes thin and slazy, the details of the pattern distorted and the original line of the pattern lost; as a result the finished lace lacks consistency, color and character.

The astute merchant, in order to sell this mediocre product, does not fail to point out to his well-meaning customer the admirable lightness of such work. He asks a high price for it, establishing a supposed value, in the face of which the patron no longer hesitates. In reality, a lace to be beautiful should be of fine, regular workmanship, the quality depending upon the gossamer-like delicacy of the thread employed and by nothing else; and it is important that patrons of the industry should appreciate the fact that only by demanding high quality of work, can the lace-makers be encouraged and inspired to excel in their art.

Belgium's lace-makers have always been numbered among her great craftsmen. Our museums are full of marvelous specimens that are a tribute to the knowledge and professional skill of our women, a monument to their untiring patience and conscientious labor. In some of the museum's masterpieces the thread is of such inconceivable fineness as to be worth more than thread of gold; thread such as tradition avers was spun



A B C  
FIG. 7  
NEEDLEPOINT MEDALLIONS IN BRUSSELS *point de gaze*. A. COUCHING THREAD. B. NET GROUND: GAUZE, *gaze*.  
C. SOLID PART OR *toilé*

in damp, dark cellars, to preserve its tenuity, thread so fine that if it had been allowed to dry it would have become brittle and snapped. Our lace-makers no longer have at their disposal thread of this exquisite quality which, alas, in many instances has been replaced by cotton which lacks the lustre of linen.

But our women of to-day know how to work just as well, their patience is just as great as of old, and their souls do not seem to have changed any more than their tools. For more than three hundred years the skilled hands of the Belgian women trained in the traditions of their forbears, have attained a perfection of technique in an art excelled by no other country, for it is they who have brought the art of bobbin lace-making to its highest point; it is from Belgium that the lace industry has spread to other countries—excepting Italy the mother and the originator of the craft, and it is the Flemish workers who have always excelled, above others, in the exquisite delicacy of their perfected technique.

LUCIE PAULIS

