

Lace for Your Shoes: The Impractical Vanity

Pat Earnshaw

During the peak period of the fashion of lace, from the late sixteenth to the early eighteenth century, it was the very impracticality of lace which made it a discriminating accessory par excellence. The extraordinarily stiff ruffs, the towering heights of the *fontanges*, the airily trailing lappets, the heavy flounces, the cascading rivulets of deep sleeve ruffles (*engageantes*), were quite simply announcements to the whole world that one had no need to perform a single practical activity for oneself. The ultimate, however, was the incongruity of lace on shoes, if we bear in mind the close proximity of feet to the muddy earth or cobbles of the streets, so frequently a repository for sewage and other unsavoury rubbish.

This fashion began with circular rosettes, fastened to a strap over the instep, and not infrequently spreading to twice the width of the shoes themselves. What the rosettes indicated was that the wearer had no need even to walk: he had a horse, a carriage, or some other conveyance in which servants could carry him. Even indoors, however, shoe roses must have been impractical, converting a casual stroll into an awkward strut with the legs straddled so that ankles and silk stockings alike were safe from the slash of their sharp edges (Figure 1).

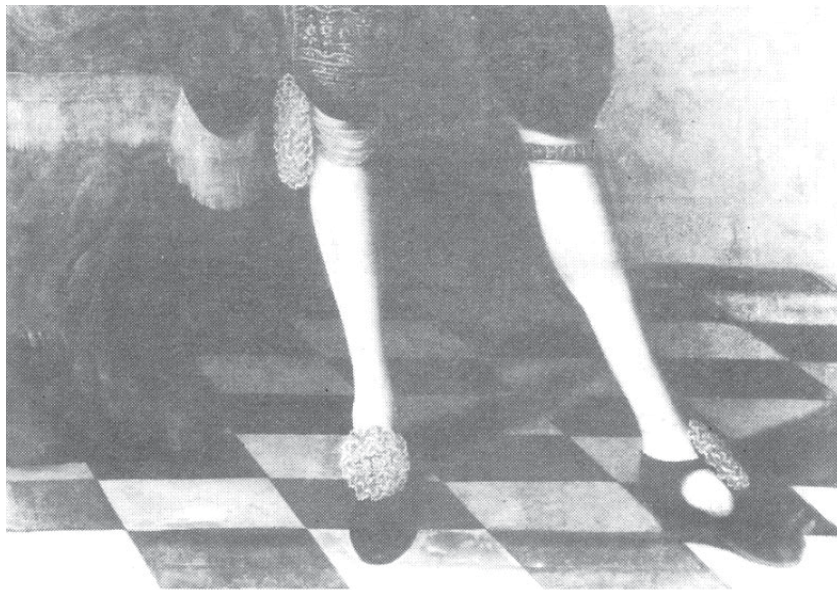


Figure 1. Shoe roses, and a garter rosette, worn by James Hay, first Earl of Carlisle, 1628. Portrait by George Geldorp. (Courtesy Christie's).

The cost of such roses was inordinately expensive since precious metal thread of gold or silver was commonly used, twisted into decorative scale-like loops called purling, or at times into something sufficiently elaborate to resemble punto in aria. As for their being scuffed by others, the whole dress assemblage of men and women – the protuberant ruffs, the stiffly padded and jewel-encrusted doublets and trunk hose, the farthingales – staked out a protective perimeter beyond which others would not dare to venture.

Matching roses might appear on the garters, but the two areas of foot and knee remained separated by the length of the shin. However, in the first quarter of the seventeenth century, boots of soft Spanish leather were replacing shoes, and lace for the feet was now impossible. It retreated to the knees, a little further removed from the soil, but it retained its connection with footwear by means of the *canion* (Fr. *canon*). This was a close tube of linen cloth depending from the lower end of the breeches, ducking down into the boot top and rising out again to form a neatly turned over border (Figure 2).

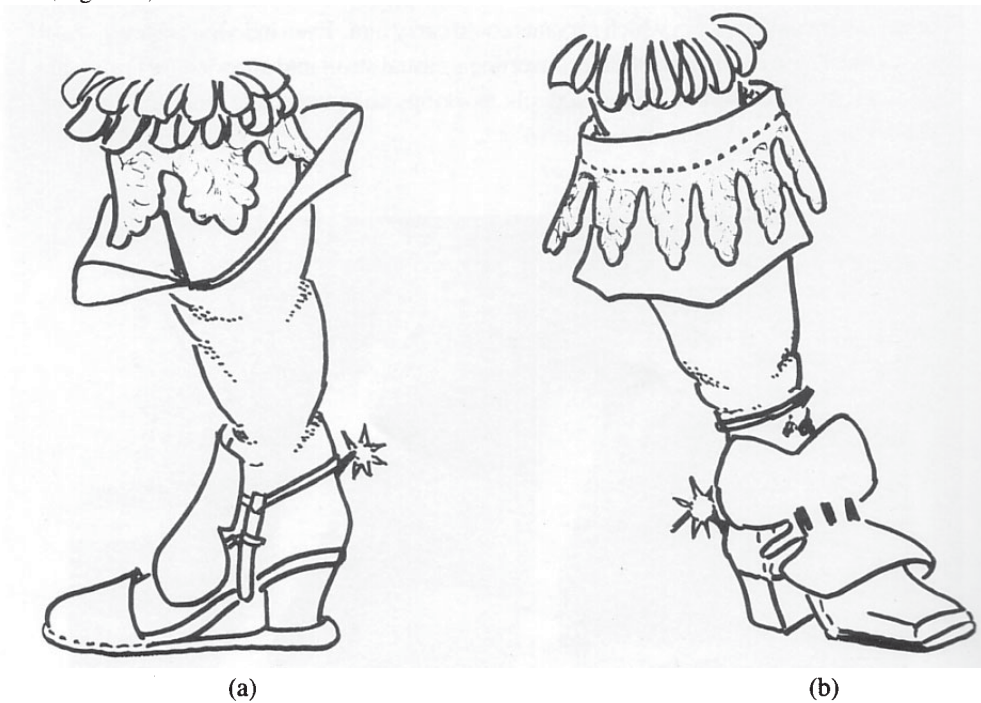


Figure 2. Canions of Flemish bobbin lace turned down (a) over the boot hose inside the boot. (b) over the top of the boot itself. The sole in (a) is protected by a golosh with a toe cap to prevent the boot sinking into the mud. (Based on engravings by Bosse, 1630's-1640's).

The tasteful restraint of the single band of lace which edged it, made of good linen (not precious metal) thread, was soon superseded by a greater exuberance. The tops of the boots spread more and more widely until they resembled buckets. The simple turned-down edging of lace multiplied into layer upon layer, each pleated closely upon itself until it filled the entire gap between boot and calf with a white foam (Figure 3).

The elegant Marquis de Cinq-Mars, who rose by devious means to be Master of the Horse to Louis XIII, outraged his master by his extravagance. "He has some 300₁ pairs of boots in his wardrobe," complained the king, nearing the end of his patience. According to Palliser,² just such a number of lacy boot hose appeared in the inventory of the Marquis' estate in 1642 when, at the age of only 22, he was executed for treason.



Figure 3. Canions, French fashion, mid-seventeenth century. The spurs are intended to indicate that the wearer is not horseless, but chooses to walk. (From Dayot, *Louis XIV*, 1909).

By the 1660's the knee-footwear combination was again severed. Below the knees a frill of lace swooped down the lower leg halfway to the ankle. Fashionable boots reverted to fashionable shoes, and shoe laces became cords or shoe-strings, not a fabric with holes like a true lace, but a solidly woven tape or braid. A painting by Laumosnier of the marriage of Louis XIV to the Infanta Maria Theresa, daughter of Philip IV of Spain, in 1660, shows Louis and his courtiers with the high fastening of their shoes caught together by bows from which the strings extend far outwards on either side, like the wings of a dragonfly (Figure 4). It seems likely that strands of precious metal were incorporated to keep them extended, and one might imagine that, as with the earlier shoe roses, some care was needed in putting one foot before the other if damaging collisions were to be avoided. They "wear a farm in shoe-strings edged with gold/And spangled garters worth a copyhold," grieved the seventeenth-century poet John Taylor. The implication is either that the shoe-strings (how many pairs?) had cost as much as an entire farm, or that courtiers had been forced to mortgage their lands in order to appear satisfactorily dressed before their king. As for Louis XIV himself, he was quite prepared to bankrupt bankers,³ or anyone else from whom money could be extracted. On his death in 1715, France's national debt stood at millions of pounds.

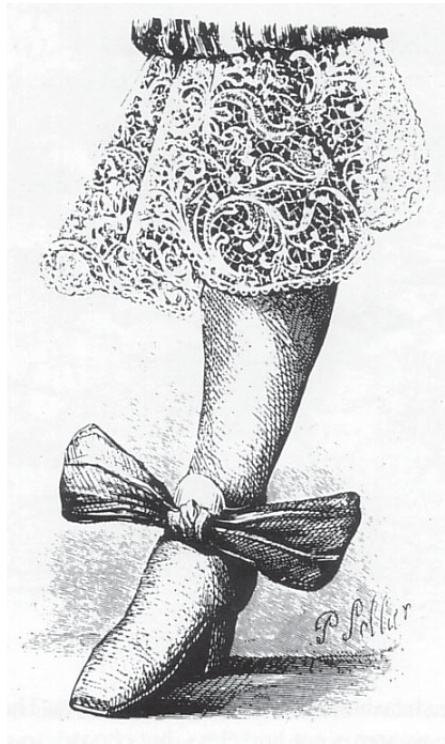


Figure 4. The lace frills are still called *canons* in French fashion. (From Mrs. Bury Palliser, *History of Lace*, 1910 ed., after the painting of Louis XIV by Laumosnier, though the engraving has been reversed).

By that time, lace-decorated shoes were already out of fashion, and never again did they appear as a status symbol of the “idle rich.” For men, lace of any kind rapidly vanished as the decades of the eighteenth century rolled by, until finally the advent of trousers made lace trimmings of the lower limbs unthinkable.

It is all the more interesting then to find, some 200 years later, a lace or “fancy” being manufactured specifically for shoes. Figure 5 shows the registration of this fabric, which appears in the archives of G.W. Price Ltd., donated to the Trent Polytechnic Library in Nottingham. The situation was now very different. The aim was not extravagance, but economy. The market was not the upper minority, but the lower majority. Women were aimed at, not men. The two widely-spaced fashions for lace on shoes had perhaps one thing in common—a wish to impress by a form of deceit.

“Number of registration 786061. This is to certify that the Design . . . has been registered in class 12 on the 2nd day of May, 1933 in respect of the application of such design to a sheet of textile materials for use *as a substitute for fancy leather.*”

Another registration of the same year bears the superscription: “*Patt. No. 241. Shoe Fabric, or for Hand Bags. This fabric was made by sticking the Lace on to the specially made Canvas Backing. Then the Dark parts of the pattern were put on with a spray gun. Afterwards this sample had a thin coating of cellulose sprayed on it.*” Its aim, in short, was to suggest not lace, but snakeskin.

In the 1930’s, such an invention had an air of desperation about it. The machine lace industry had fallen on hard times. The depression of the late twenties, following on the massive loss of skilled manpower, and of a whole apprentice generation during the first world war, was a disaster of the first order. The surviving male population sought less exacting work, while the restlessness of the decade made a five- to seven-year training in the industry too slow to be palatable. At the same time, increase in wages, in the cost of production, raw materials and general overhead made it more and more difficult for lace manufacturers to surmount the initial deadweight of expenditure in creating the design, punching the Jacquard cards, and hand-threading the machines. It was however still relatively inexpensive for the Leavers machine to make fancy nets, at which they had excelled in the early years of the twentieth century, with their *violettes* and motoring veils for tying down the flower-encrusted edifices of hats, and for protecting the complexion from dust and dirt. The application of a net of irregularly sized scale-like meshes to the shoe was, from the point of view of appearance, completely successful, and the saving in money for the customer extremely satisfactory. How well they could stand up to wear is another matter. Applied to practical usage, with the wearer caught in a shower, accidentally stepping in a puddle, slipping in unavoidable mud, wouldn’t canvas surely become sodden and out of shape, the counterfeiting net unstuck?

In spite of the spraying with cellulose, lace on shoes remained an impractical vanity, its only aim to establish the importance of the wearer: in the 1930's by making her seem rich enough to wear snakeskin when she was not; in the earlier glorious centuries by creating an impression not only of apartness but of a quasi-divine origin which made it unnecessary for the wearers to keep their feet firmly on the ground.

Notes

1. *Vie de Fabert* quoted by Philippe Erlanger, in *Richelieu and the Affair of Cinq-Mars*, London, 1971, p. 137.
2. Mrs. Bury Palliser, *History of Lace*, 1910 ed., p. 145.
3. Lucy Norton, *Saint-Simon at Versailles*, London, 1980, pp. 122-3.

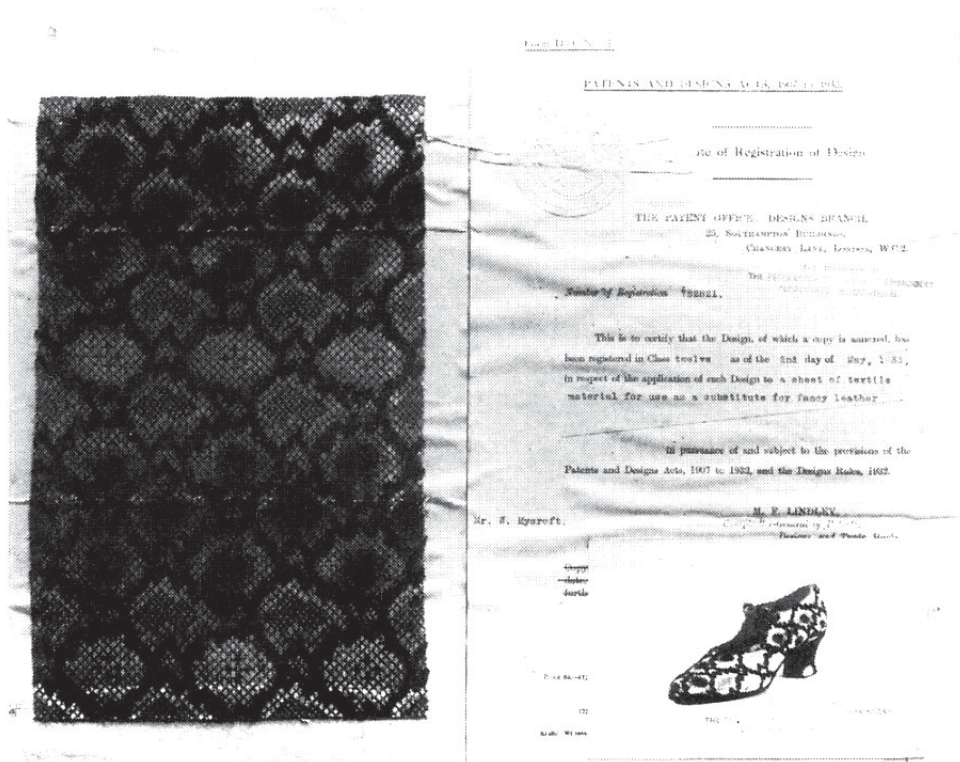


Figure 5a. The imitation snakeskin made of net applied to canvas, and its intended use for a shoe.

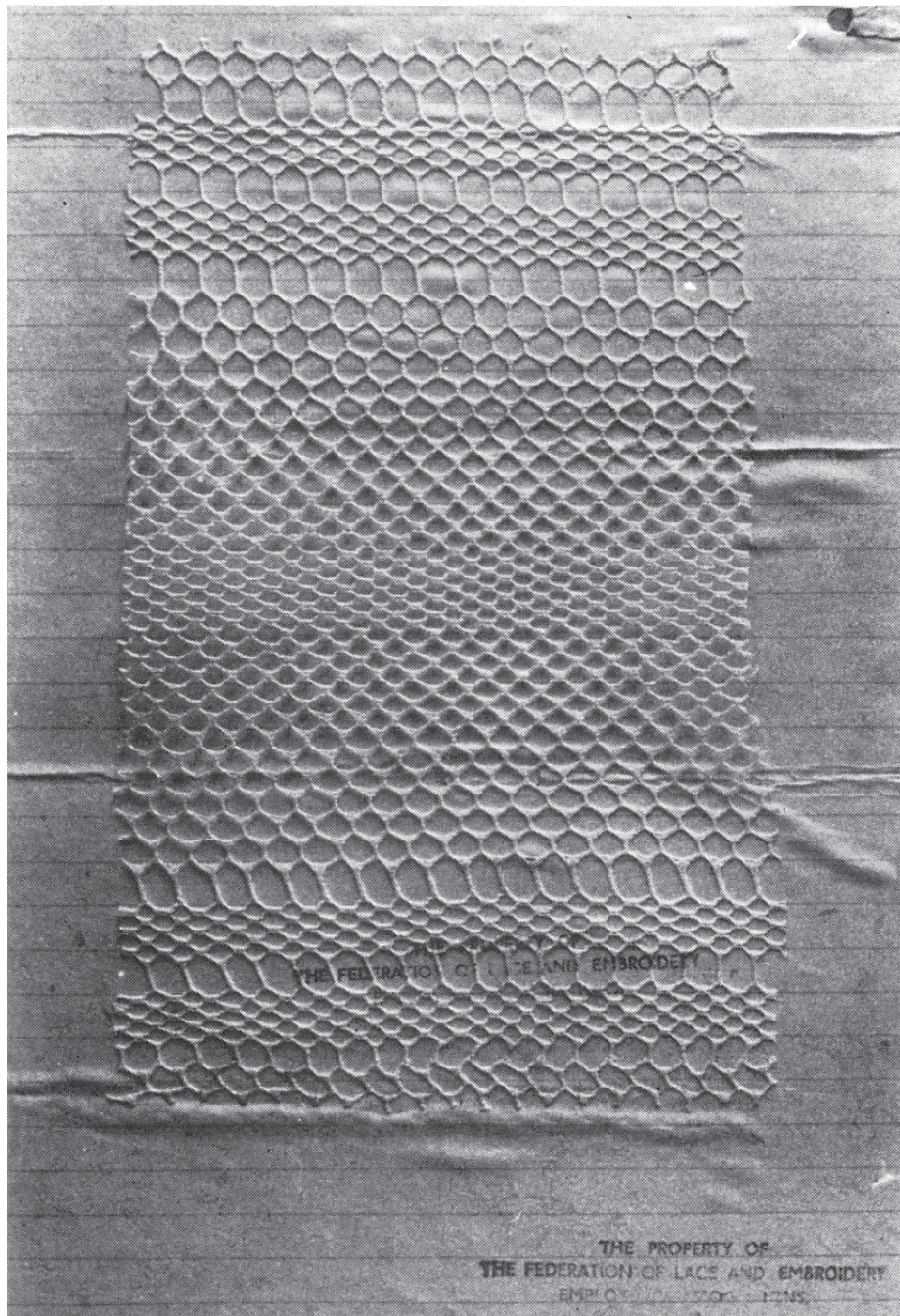


Figure 5b. The net in isolation showing the carefully varied sizes of the hexagonal meshes.

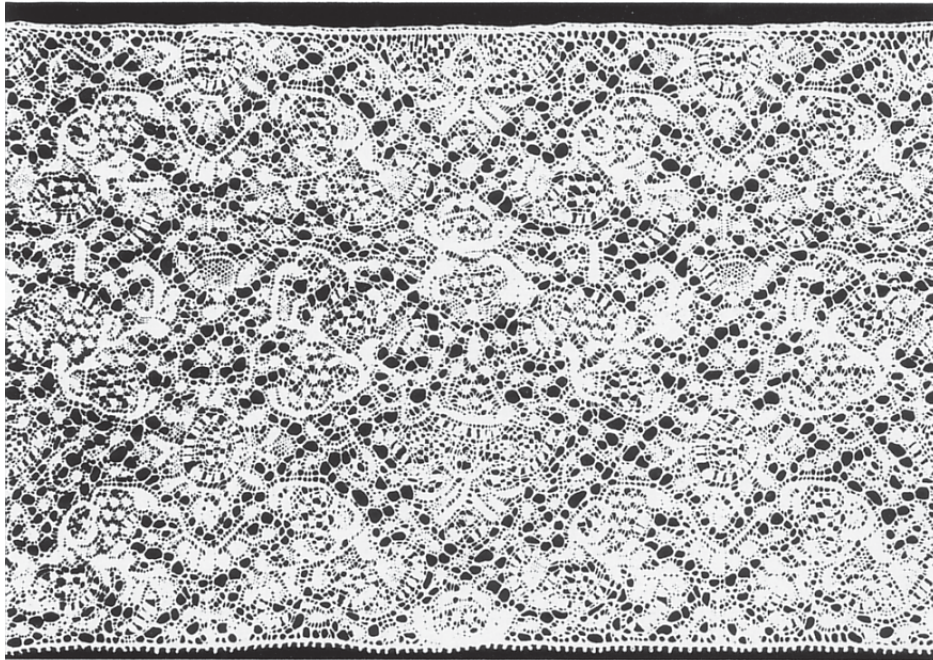


Figure 1: Binche, 1680, 4" wide

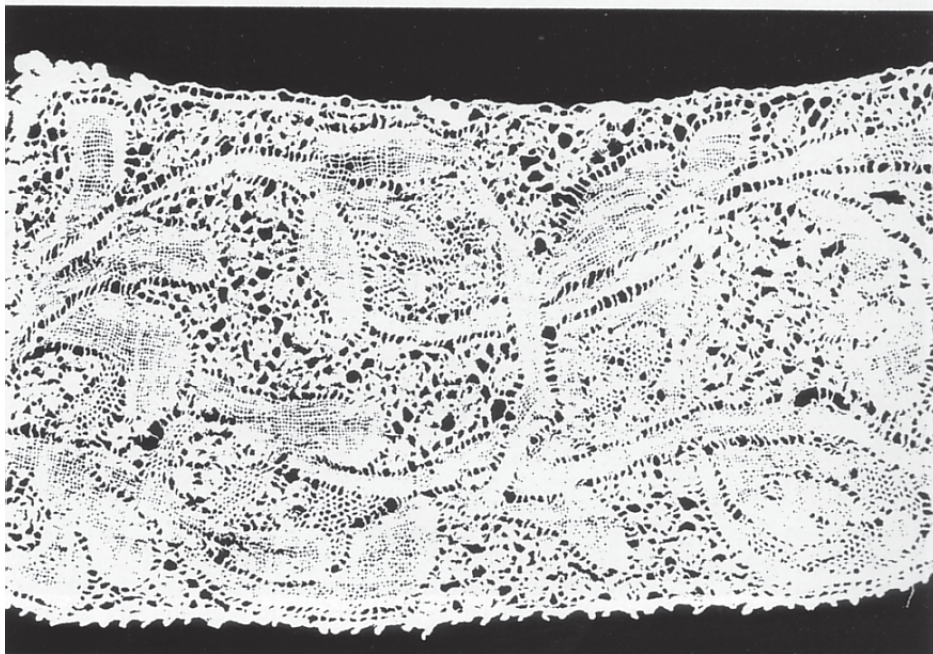


Figure 3: Binche, 1690, 1½" across