

A Rationale For The Design of Contemporary Lace

by Aurelia Loveman



"Espalier" by Aurelia Loveman.

The following is a condensed version of a lecture given by the writer to the North Downs Lacemakers of Surrey, England in July, 1985.

Let me begin by delivering my thesis in a nutshell: to be considered mainstream contemporary art, lace doesn't have to be big or overwhelming—in fact, it shouldn't be. It can be small, delicate, intricate and exquisite, and still be right in there as contemporary art.

The artistic impulse that wants to use lace techniques as its medium of expression must come to terms with fundamental human sensory equipment, namely, the visual and the tactile-kinesthetic senses. For purposes of analytic discussion, it is convenient to divide it into the tactile (experienced through skin and fingertips) and the kinesthetic (experienced within the muscles).

Lacemaking shares an interest in the visual and tactile-kinesthetic senses with painting and drawing, photography, sculpture, all the textile arts, and others, where in all of them, these responses are called forth in varying intensities. It is obvious that painting will make a far stronger appeal to the visual and kinesthetic than to the tactile, even where the painter is a virtuoso at brushwork. It is also obvious that compared with sculpture, painting makes its major appeal to the visual. Even where the painter's line is exceptionally bold, it is still not usually a real rival with sculpture for the kinesthetic response. Who has looked at Michelangelo's David without a sudden awareness, even if only subliminal, of sinews, arm-flexing, a stretched and extended neck, a knee thrust forward? But if painting must yield kinesthetic pre-eminence to sculpture, there is no denying the primacy of its visual appeal. Painting appeals to the eye, par excellence; it leaves the muscles and the fingertips far behind—though admittedly at varying distances behind, depending on the individual painting:

compare the kinesthetic arousal value of Leonardo, or the tactile appeal of Raphael, Rubens or Renoir with such dominantly visual painters as Monet, Rousseau, Utrillo, and Paul Klee. Yet all of the painters mentioned appeal overwhelmingly to the visual sense, first and last.

Agreed. But what has all of this to do with us as makers of contemporary lace? And what is there about a particular design subject—a flower, a fish, a geometric abstract—that makes us want to explicate it in lace, rather than through, for instance, photography, watercolors, or even quilting? What impact can lace make more intensely than the others?

To look for an answer in our sensory approach: if painting is pre-eminently visual and if sculpture is pre-eminently kinesthetic, what about lace? I will argue that lace has a primarily tactile appeal, even though it is, of course, strongly a visual art too, and on occasion a kinesthetic one, most notably exemplified in a series of stunning friezes by Elena Holeczyova, the great Czech lacemaker. To appreciate the tactile element of lace, one has only to compare the experience of it held in the hands and examined, with the experience of it as it lies in a locked glass case, or thrown clear and magnified on a photographic screen.

In fact, whether we actually do touch it or not, lace appeals to the fingertips as well as to the eyes. And therein lies the answer to why we should do a fish or a flower in lace rather than in paint. If we can offer a fresh light on a familiar object; if we have something lacy to say; if the flower is more salient for appearing to us via the lace medium than via any other, then we have fulfilled the first requirement of art; namely that by means of art, some hitherto hidden aspect may be revealed.

To offer an outstanding example: I think there is no question that Holeczyova's wonderful "Chanson de la Terre"*—those ecstatic, exalted, hypnotized ballerinas walking on flowers

and singing hosannas—would be immeasurably poorer as a mere painting. One can hardly bear the thought. How thin and remote it would be. No, it can only be lace—lace, with its innumerable variations of texture, its smooth and rough and fine and coarse and silky and ropy and homespun and delicate, its elegance, its clouds and shrouds of transparency, its flashes of picots. That is what lace gives, experienced actually or incipiently, in the hand as well as in the eye.

But this tactile immediacy has consequences. The eyes are the receptors for distance; but the sense of touch is not. Touch is a near receptor. You cannot touch anything that is ten feet away.

This has consequences for the scale of lace. Just as you cannot touch anything that is far away, so you cannot see anything that is really big if you are standing up close to it. If you look at a painting in a museum, you back away and back away until you have achieved the right focal distance. But if you back away from a piece of lace, you immediately lose the tactile element. It follows, therefore, that you must not be forced to back off very far.

That is why the teaching advice that one quite often hears—“think big”—is so inappropriate when applied to lace design. In “thinking big” about lace, one loses that which is uniquely appealing in lace—its tactile appeal. If you have to stand back in order to see a thing, you can’t embrace it with your hands, not even potentially.

Of course, tactile arousal can be incipient, even latent, as well as actual, and still enrich experience. Indeed, this is the function of imagination. But for the tactile sense to be aroused, the stimulus object must be close, not distant. If it is distant, all the nuances and richness of texture will be lost. But if it is close, it cannot be big, or the visual understanding is disrupted.

So I hold to produce that which is quintessentially lace, the creative lacemaker must work fairly small. And if you accept that, it then follows that contemporary lace, fully as much as old lace, must be intricate. What is intricate? Richness, diversity, lavishness of texture. Texture is what lace can deliver better than any other medium. If the lacemaker who is designing to a uniquely contemporary vision, hopes to grasp us and light up our imagination just as any artist must do, she must do it through textural means.

A word about color in lace. Color, so psychologists tell us, speaks to the emotions. It does not necessarily follow, however, that if white is good, red is better; or that if you want to arouse a powerful reaction to your work, color is the trick with which to do it. Obviously, many a lace design depends for its beauty and its best effect quite often on line, for instance, or on the harmonious composition of the motifs, or the graceful rhythms of its various textures—all of which might very easily be rendered unbalanced or ineffective by an unnecessary introduction of color.

In the past, for reasons of history (its derivation from whitework) and custom, lace was overwhelmingly desired as white. The Victorians had a mild fling with black, and the Edwardians with tea-color; but the salable, dependable

article was white. Now, however, that the economics of industrialization have made it permanently impossible for us to devote, for example, ten months of six fifteen-hour working days a week to produce a set of ruffles, when we can buy a mass-produced substitute by the yard (admittedly infinitely less beautiful, and still rather expensive), the contemporary artist working in lace has no constraints against the use of color. Consider the dimension of iridescence in color, so especially well adapted to needle lace. It is an immensely complex subject; but for the textile artist fascinated by the the green glisten of a beetle shell, or the infinite blues in a bird’s plumage, or the sudden shimmer now seen and now gone of a butterfly’s wing, it may be enough to know that something of the same shimmer can be produced by the skillful juxtaposition of threads which are almost, but not quite, the same color. Weavers have known for a long time that if you will mix up yarns of the same color but from different dye-lots, your weaving will have a certain liveliness, even movement, because of it. The lacemaker bent on the pursuit of iridescence can easily take this a few steps further, for the technique lends itself admirably to the blending of closely related colors of thread.

In the needle lace fan, “Espalier” (see photograph), meant to evoke something of a sense of nighttime mystery, the sudden glowing flowers in the midst of darkness are illumined by their colors. Observe how a single color, rose, takes on subtleties of light and dark, dull and brilliant, by varying not the color but the kinds of threads used to bring these qualities out. A rosy silk, a rosy metallic and a cotton all bring their different meanings to the color.

I would like to note in conclusion that beautiful contemporary lace shares certain fundamental features with traditional laces. All depend for their effect on minute intricacies of technique. They all offer great subtlety of texture. They all exploit, to a noteworthy degree, the fundamental rules of the medium in which they are worked. This is, in fact, what conveys the sense of lace. It is merely the idiom that varies from old to new—for as in any art, the idiom is ephemeral. The sense of lace, whether old or new, lies in its peculiar texture—not its color, not its design—but its texture, delicate, intricate, and seductive to the touch.

*Michalides, P. *Dentelles de Notre Temps*. Dessain et Tolra, Paris, 1978.

Dr. Loveman has written and lectured on lacemaking and lace-related subjects. Her article, “Whither Lace?” appeared in Needle Arts, Summer 1983, and was reprinted in the Bulletin of the International Old Lacers, Sept.-Oct. 1984. Other articles on lace will be appearing in the Bulletin of the Needle and Bobbin Club and Lace, the publication of the British Lace Guild. She is also the author of the Individual Correspondence Course in Needle Lace offered by EGA. 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. At present she is Lace Consultant for the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore.

The International Old Lacers, Inc. is the national organization for lacemakers, with chapters and groups in every area of the country. Activities include the annual convention (5 days of workshops), a lending-library of books on lace available to members, and the Journal of the IOLI, a magazine for the lace lover, issued 6 times a year. Dues of \$8 a year go to: IOLI, Box 11959, Jacksonville, FL 32239-1959