

NOTES ON THE LACE INDUSTRY IN BELGIUM IN THE
NINETEENTH CENTURY

BY MADAME L. PAULIS

THE storm of the French Revolution made a great breach in the history of lace to which emigration, the flight of the rich classes and of the court proved a fatal blow. Did Revolutionary society, then, know no luxuries? Far from it, for sufficient proof is found in the portrait of any dandy or “merveilleuse” of the day or in the description of a fête given under the Consulate by Madame Récamier, as recorded by Mrs. Bury-Palliser, who was the first to write the history of lace and to whom the following incident was recounted by an elderly lady who in her youth had participated in this brilliant function.

“The First Consul was expected, and the élite of Paris early thronged the salons of the charming hostess, but where was Madame Récamier? ‘*Souffrante*’, the murmur ran, retained to her bed by a sudden indisposition. She would, however, receive her guests *couchée*.

“The company passed to the bedroom of the lady, which, as still the custom in France, opened from one of the principal salons. There, in a gilded bed, lay Madame Récamier, the most beautiful woman in France. The bed curtains were of the finest Brussels lace, bordered with garlands of honeysuckle and lined with satin of the palest rose. The *couvre-pied* was of the same material; from the pillow of embroidered cambric fell ‘*des flots de Valenciennes*.’ The lady herself wore a peignoir trimmed with the most exquisite English point. Never had she looked more lovely—never had she done the honors of her hôtel more gracefully.”

This luxury, however, was confined to a very small number, for lace-making had been at a standstill practically for twelve years. Napoleon endeavored to revive the industry and to this end employed the best means,—he restored lace to a place of honor in the Court, and he himself, placed important orders at Alençon, from which source may have been

derived the flounce that ornaments the skirt of Marie Louise in her portrait by Gérard.

The Empire period introduced a new note in the decorative ornament of the day, that was reflected in the fabrics of Alençon, Chantilly (whose industry migrated toward Normandy, centering in Bayeux), Malines and Brussels,—which city was at that time specializing in “application” lace on “droschel” ground,—that is, detached motives of bobbin or needlepoint applied on handmade net.

The Empire veil shown in the illustration and which was made for the Empress Marie Louise, is a charming example of the latter type of work the bobbin-made ornaments and réseau showing remarkable technique.

The Queen of Prussia at the time of her interview with Napoleon at Tilsitt, wore one of these veils falling over her shoulders. Another found in the portrait of Dominique Sophie Frédérique Catharine Dorothée, Queen of Westphalia, wife of Jérôme Bonaparte, shows a distinctly defined pattern, characteristic of the restrained and formal motives of this period, that so clearly indicates the last phase of an evolution.

From this day, in fact, dates a decline of which the end is not yet in sight. Crisis followed crisis, the most disastrous being the fashionable furore for the English machinemade imitation of the handmade net or “droschel.” Net which in 1818 brought more than a pound a square yard, experienced in the following years a decided fall in price which popularized its use, as it permitted the creation of large pieces,—robes, veils, scarfs and deep flounces. This net was embroidered and applied with bobbin and needlepoint motives, a mode that retained the favor of popular beauties until 1830 and that resulted in the complete disappearance of the handmade “droschel” as well as a decline in the laces of Malines and Binche.

After this period lace recovered a momentary prosperity. The Belgian industries revived and the historian of the Antwerp Exposition of 1885 states that “lace has once more become an indispensable ornament of ‘la toilette.’”

Toward 1820 the silk “blondes” attained a brief popularity. These laces while becoming and rich in effect, have no special interest as regards design; and the same is true of the patterns produced in the years immediately following the Empire, all of which show a marked lack of individuality. The portrait of Queen Maria Cristina shows such lace.

As for the Restoration, when fashions bore so distinctive a character,



EMPIRE VEIL

MADE FOR THE EMPRESS MARIE LOUISE
SECOND WIFE OF NAPOLEON

THE PATTERN IS OF BOBBIN LACE APPLIED ON HANDMADE "DROSCHEL"
FROM THE COLLECTION OF MRS. WILLIAM H. MOORE



MARIA CRISTINA OF BOURBON, QUEEN OF SPAIN
BY LOPEZ Y PORTAÑA
THE ORIGINAL IS IN THE PRADO, MADRID

though sometimes slightly ridiculous,—for instance the garb of the Ladies Tangry painted by David about 1830, and also that of Louise, Adélaïde d'Orleans, by Decreuse,—this period restored nothing at all from the standpoint of decorative arts.

French work, nevertheless, remained distinguished and in good taste, but with the Belgian fabric its mediocrity is reiterated by the juries of all Expositions, universal or otherwise, held during the first quarter of the century.

At the Paris Exposition of 1867, the reporter of the Belgian section confirms the prosperity of that industry:

“Twenty to twenty-two thousand workers,” he states, “are working at Ypres and its vicinity, making Valenciennes lace,—now dead in the city of its origin,—a lace that has lost much of the former beauty of its technique.” The *réseau* is more open as the result of using fewer bobbins, and in consequence the number is insufficient to make the exquisite “*toilé*” (the linen stitch used in the pattern) flowers of the beautiful old Valenciennes. The worker is therefore obliged to add threads, which are discarded when a flower is completed and then taken up again to make the next; between two successive flowers these threads are laid on the *réseau*, useless, and are then trimmed off when the lace is finished. A method that is a perversion of the ingenious technique of the continuous thread.

Continuing, the report states that Grammont makes quantities of Chantilly and silk blondes, not as skilfully, however, as her French rival who knows how to execute shaded designs with infinite delicacy. Brussels and her vicinity employing 40,000 workers in the creation of needlepoint and “application” lace upon machine made net, the total number of lace-makers in Belgium at that time being about 130,000.

And what of all of this important fabrication? Let us take up again the Belgian report of the Exposition of 1867. After having cited all of the manufacturers and the different groups that had received awards, he states: “The enumeration of awards proves conclusively that Belgium holds the palm in this eminently national industry. In order to keep it, our manufacturers should be persuaded that the judicious and intelligent choice of patterns is a condition essential to success. In this respect France here maintains her reputation for elegance, novelty, originality . . . But,” he continues farther on, “if we took away from the French display the laces made in Belgium, France would not so easily have obtained the awards ascribed to her.”

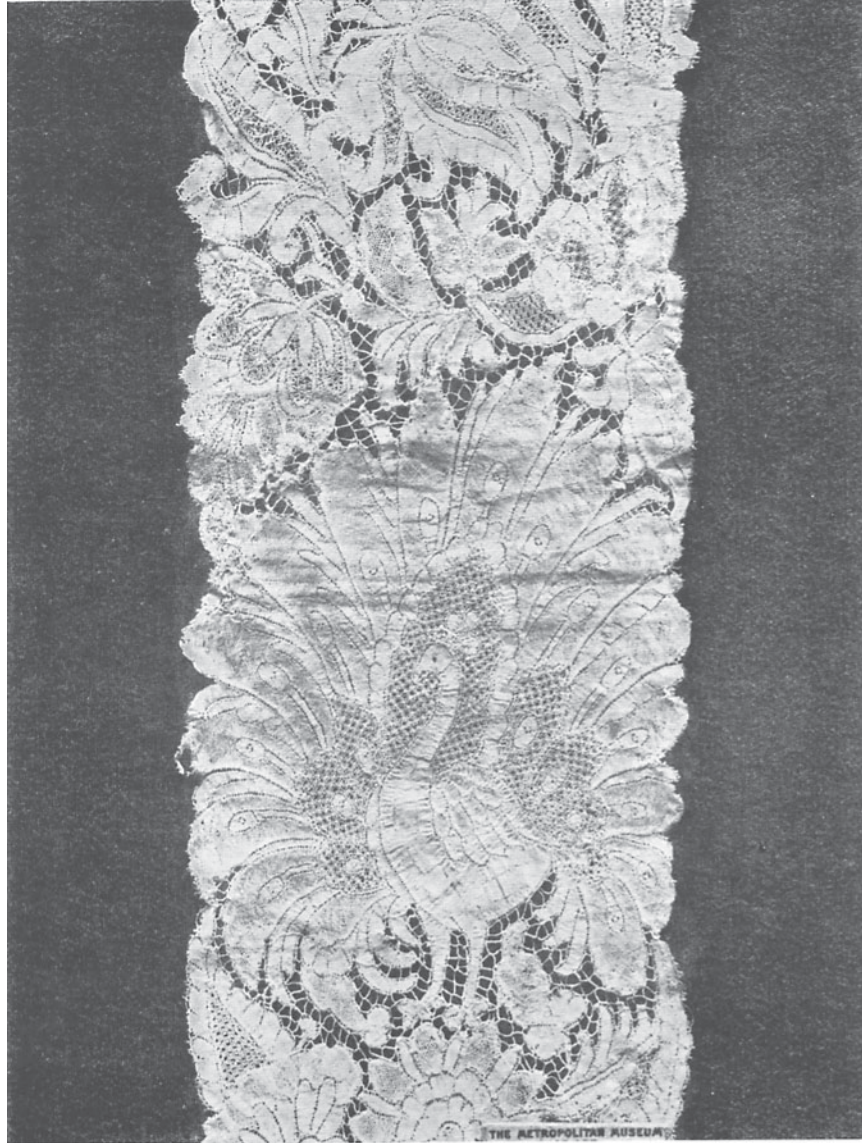
The French report of the same exposition, expresses a different point of view!

“The Exposition of 1867 demonstrates beyond all question that France holds to-day the first place in this rich industry, and that she had not a single competitor to fear. Belgium, which holds the second place, has, so to speak, placed her industry under the tutelage or the patronage of the largest French houses. Some French concerns have factories at Brussels where all the work is executed on their patterns and under their instructions. The town of Ypres has obtained a gold medal and the Maison X (of Brussels) a silver medal; but it is purely accidental that the Maison X of Paris did not take on its own account this double award as all of these pieces were ordered by them and worked according to their instructions on designs sent from Paris. Which proves,” he concludes, “that in that as in many other things, matters progress more favorably there when directed from here.”

But, unfortunately, while Belgium profits largely from the beneficent influence of French taste, she also is obliged to share the misfortunes of her neighbor. In 1870 both countries suffered from the war between France and Germany, and its effects are clearly shown in the Exposition of 1878. The manufactories of Grammont are “no longer a competitor for French products.” Brussels needlepoint and the application on tulle as well as Malines “show much decline,” while “Duchesse” lace, new only in name, has made its appearance as a debased descendant of the Brussels lace of the early eighteenth century. Valenciennes lace is perhaps the one most in demand. The designs of this are rather naturalistic and, like the workmanship, show little originality and vitality.

And what are the present conditions? I wish that I might state with confidence that to-day lace has recovered, or is about to recover, its former splendor; but we are far from that goal. Before the War fifty thousand workers were employed at lace making. How many of them are still so occupied? No statistics can tell; for those compiled by the Minister of Industry and Labor cover only such workshops as employed a minimum of ten workers. Lace has become a rural industry, a cottage craft, and many workers have thus been overlooked by the inspectors.

The outlook is discouraging, and, despite the efforts of those who are endeavoring to stem the tide, the future is unpromising. As for Fashion, it is quite mad; styles change not only once, but many times a year; and



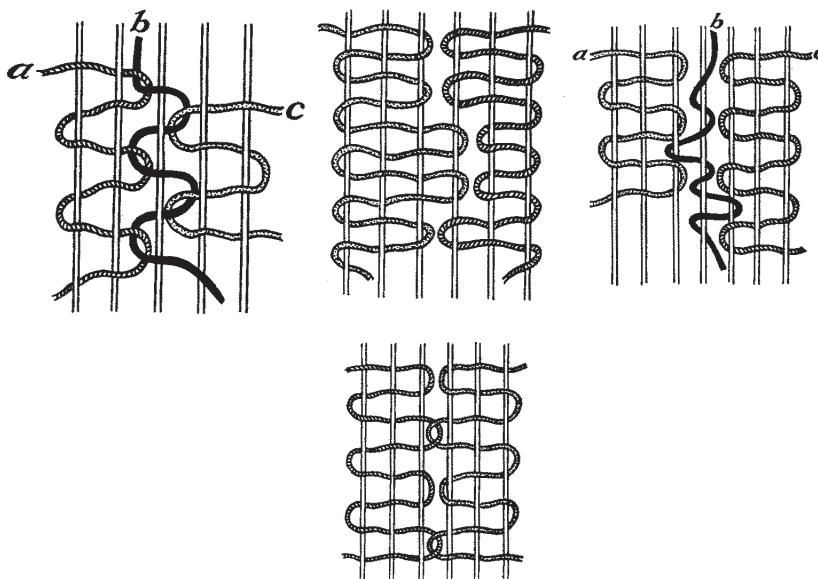
DETAIL OF A LAPPET. BOBBIN LACE

BRUSSELS, EARLY EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

(THE CROWN BELONGING TO THIS SET IS SHOWN IN MRS. PALLISER'S HISTORY OF LACE,
PL. XXXVII, FACING P. 116. BOTH PIECES ARE NOW IN THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM)

under these conditions how can an industry of such slow and patient labor conserve its existence? On the other hand the machine supplies the shop keeper with laces too beautiful and too inexpensive for the serious competition of handmade laces, despite their superior qualities. It is a second source of wasted effort. Fortunately, however, the luxury of the table and of the home is reviving the art a little, and perhaps the future of the lace industry lies in this direction, in the laces of heavy thread,—which have great decorative possibilities,—laces that are quickly and easily made, and sufficiently strong to withstand wear and tear. Having developed from passementerie, lace would then have reverted to its original type, thus completing the cycle; for heavy lace such as is used in furnishings is, in a way, similar to the old passementerie.

The exquisite lace shown in our last illustration represents an example of the greatest technical perfection achieved during three centuries and a half of labor; and through all these years the memory of so many agile fingers, trained eyes and patient hearts consecrated to the realization of a true ideal and to the creation of a beautiful art, abide as a testimonial to attainment gained by steadfast application wisely directed.



DIAGRAMS OF ANCIENT PERUVIAN LENO WEAVES

BY COURTESY OF THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY