

SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURY NEEDLE LACES OF THE LOW COUNTRIES

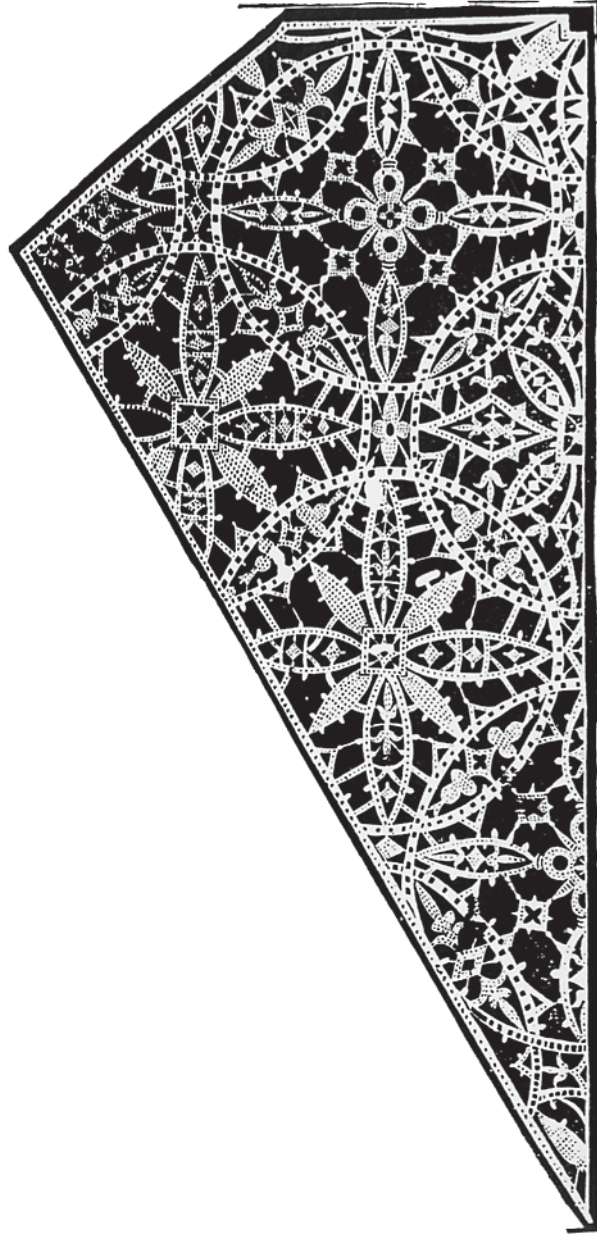
Madame L. Paulis, Curator of Laces at the Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire in the Parc du Cinquantenaire in Brussels, has been kind enough to allow our Bulletin to publish a translation of her valuable study of Early Flemish needle-point laces.

THE systematic comparison and study of laces of similar origin and identical periods often leads to very unexpected comments. One of these studies which suggests itself most vividly to the student concerns the needle-made laces of the Netherlands. In the collections, for instance, of the Musée du Cinquantenaire no mention of these laces is made until after the beginning of the eighteenth century. In his valuable works on Flemish laces, Monsieur Eugène Van Overloop had already called attention to this lack as a subject deserving study.

Certain Italian pattern books, notably the one of Cesare Vecellio, the "Corona delle Nobile et virtuose donne" published in Venice in 1617 and the "Ornamento Nobile" of Lucretia Romana, published in 1620 also in Venice, reproduce a certain number of designs of "ponti fiamenghi" or "ponti in aria fiamenghi" (Plates I, II, III).

There existed accordingly in the beginning of the seventeenth century "Flemish points" whose reputation had spread to foreign countries. In what way did these "ponti fiamenghi" differ from their Italian counterparts? To tell the truth the study of the designs of Vecellio and Lucretia Romana does not offer an answer to this question; no difference is perceptible to us between the designs they call Flemish and those they attribute to Italy. Lucretia Romana seem to establish a sort of hier-

BAVARI ALLA FIAMENGA



laurò in pon
o fiamengo di
'aga, & bella
nostra per o-
ni gentilde-
ia.

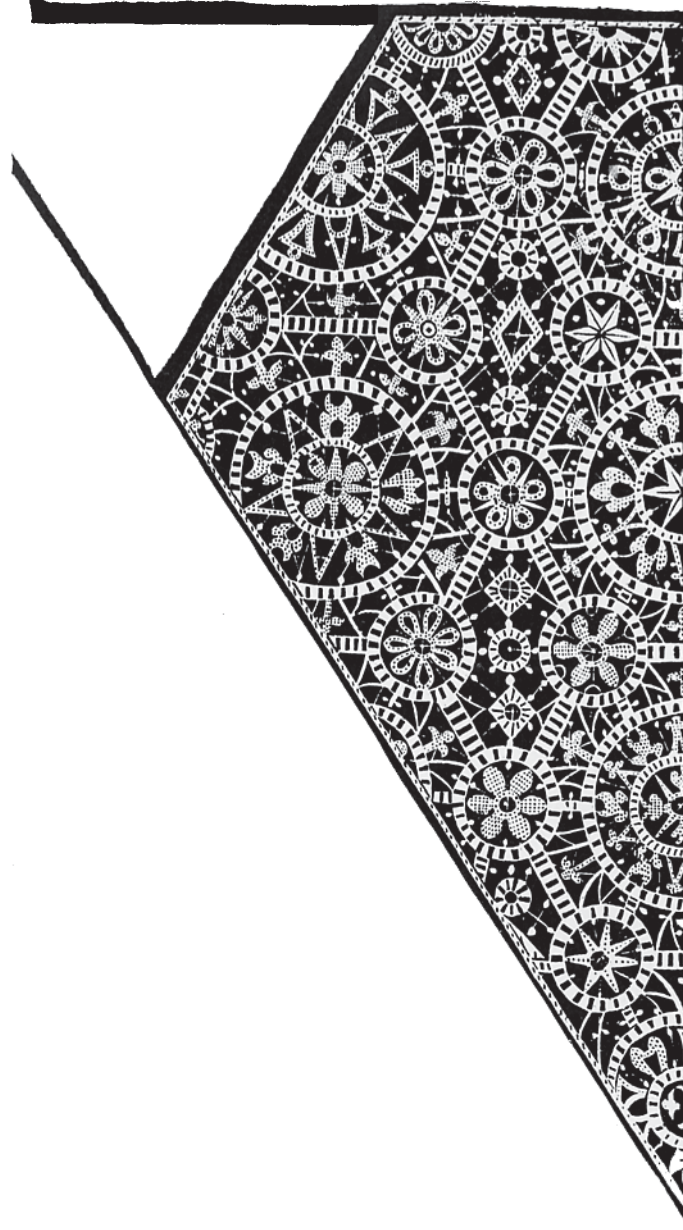
PAGE OF "PONTI FIAMENGI" FROM THE "ORNAMENTO NOBILE" OF
LUCRETIA ROMANA. 1620.

archy among her patterns. Some are destined, she says, for empresses and queens, others for princesses;—others only for “gentlewomen” or matrons, and in this hierarchy the Flemish points seem not to have risen above the degree reserved for “gentlewomen”. We might conclude from that that they were of a more modest quality than their sumptuous rivals if Cesare Vecellio had not on the other hand qualified them as “Opera bellissima” and destined them for duchesses “et altre signore grande”, and even certain of his designs are esteemed by him as worthy of queens! These contradictory statements leave us in indecision on the subject of the quality of Flemish points, but there seems to be no doubt of their importance, because these same authors repeat in various places that “ponto fiamengho—s’usa per tutta Italia” and even “per tutta Europa”. If the designs for the Flemish points cannot be distinguished from the Italian models presumably their technique differed. It seems likely that already at that time they may have had the character which they have kept till now: the Italian laces of a firm texture, and the Flemish lighter, of finer thread more loosely worked. The solid parts in all the beautiful Italian laces are extraordinarily close textured. There is never the minutest interstice in the stitches. The same solid parts in laces worked in the Low Countries since the eighteenth century lack this firm quality entirely.

Among the specimens of the beginning of the seventeenth century which were in the collection of the Musée du Cinquantenaire, the writer has noticed this difference of technique: certain laces proclaim their Italian workmanship by the firmness of their texture; others looser, less firm, compare very unfavorably with the preceding ones. In these we seem to recognize the “ponti fiamenghi”; and the character of the designs, comparable to many of the pages of Vecellio, does not contradict this impression.

After the “ponti fiamenghi” there is hardly any mention all through the seventeenth century of Flemish needlepoints. However, in the work of Monsieur A. Malotet (*La Dentelle de Valenciennes*) the author says on the subject of Françoise Badar, (the native of Valenciennes who worked her apprenticeship at Antwerp between 1639 and 1644, and who after her return to her birthplace was the real protagonist of the lace industry, in her native town) “we gather that she had probably learned to work with the needle as well as with the bobbins.” Monsieur Malotet

BAVARI DI PONTO. FIAMENGO



Bauaro à rose-
te di ponto fia-
mengo con bel-
lissimi compar-
timenti di bel-
la vista oggidì
s'v'a per tutta
Europa opera
bellissima.

PLATE II

PAGE OF "PONTI FIAMENGI" FROM THE "ORNAMENTO NOBILE" OF
LUCRETIA ROMANA. 1620.

BAVARI DI PONTO FIAMENGO



Bavaro di pon
to fiamengo
bellissimo con
Diodamore .
& altre figure.

PLATE III

PAGE OF "PONTI FIAMENGI" FROM THE "ORNAMENTO NOBILE" OF
LUCRETIA ROMANA. 1620.

bases his supposition on the fact that in 1664 a certain Marie Wéry came to learn to make "Venetian point" in the establishment of Françoise. However it may be, the absence of all documents need not lead us to believe that an industry well known during the first quarter of the century could have disappeared for a period of 75 years, and then should suddenly be flourishing at the beginning of the following century. The truth probably is that the extraordinary success of the Flemish bobbin laces at that period had turned attention from the needlepoints, these having never attained the beauty of the Italian laces.

We cannot accordingly expect to find at that period a fabric of great originality or a technique of the first rank—on the contrary, the designs would probably be inspired by what was being done in Italy and would have an execution without much character.

Among the needlepoints classed until now as of Italian production, it seems as though a methodical choice were called for. Even though the designs seem similar, the techniques differ perceptibly and some pseudo Point de Venise that is almost transparent or Point à la rose that is too light would seem to indicate a Flemish origin.

With such specimens should be included two very beautiful pieces acquired by the Musée du Cinquantenaire through the intermediary of Monsieur G. Moens of Brussels. Both are of a workmanship that seems far from resembling the Italian types, but are nearer to the Points de France of the end of the seventeenth century. The design of one of them separates itself frankly from the contemporaneous Italian type; it is freer and would seem to have been inspired by those intended for the bobbin laces of Brussels and Flanders. (Plates IV and V).

When, in 1665, Colbert founded the "*Manufactures Royales de points de France*" their purpose at first was to imitate the Venetian laces in order to supplant them, but that rôle was of short duration, and the variety, originality and beauty of the designs of the new industry soon gave the French fabric superiority over its rival. The decorations, composed in the style of Bérain, with their whimsical architectural forms, their accumulation of varied elements combined with a capricious but knowing logic, caused them to replace from then on, the Italian scrolling pattern of classic inheritance. The Flemish bobbin laces bear witness in many ways to the place which these new decorations henceforth hold. It



PLATE IV

FLEMISH NEEDLEPOINT OF THE SECOND HALF OF THE
XVII CENTURY. MUSÉE DU CINQUANTEAIRE, BRUSSELS.

would be most unlikely that needle laces of Flanders should escape from this influence. There exist, as a matter of fact, flounces of which the design recalls, a little awkwardly, the manner of the French decoration, and of which the technique shows the particular characteristics mentioned above. They represent the productions of the Low Countries at the end of the seventeenth century, or at the very beginning of the eighteenth century. In "Antique Laces of American Collectors" (Frances Morris and Marian Hague) on plate LII is shown a flounce in which one notices these characteristics of finer thread and looser stitch, which they describe as "Brussels, early eighteenth century".

The next stage in the evolution of needlepoint laces leads us to the fine products in which the "réseau" replaced the "brides" or bars. To this category belong some specimens which have a special character due to a bobbin-made réseau—the "drochel", typical of the Brussels technique, instead of the needle-made réseau as it was practised at that time at Alençon and Argentan. We possess such specimens which belong to the middle and last half of the eighteenth century. Toward the end of the century this "drochel" réseau is replaced by the needle-made réseau called the "point de gaze", which is still in use nowadays.

But between the designs of the Louis XIV period mentioned above, and the designs of the needle laces with a réseau of point de gaze might we not present the hypothesis that certain pieces might be attributed to the workmanship of the Low Countries which have hitherto been difficult to classify and which have been called either Point de Sedan—although they are lacking in the raised work characteristic of that lace, or simply "flat point" of French workmanship, although it is impossible to see either the work of Alençon or Argentan in them; or finally Point de Venise a réseau in spite of the lightness of their texture so different from most Italian work.

The most serious argument to our eyes for maintaining our hypothesis is the incontestable relationship which exists between the design of these laces and that of the bobbin laces of Brussels of the same period. Plate VI, figs. 1 and 2, show this. One cannot deny that the interpretation of the ornamental elements of these needlepoints is not what would seem natural to their technique, but resembles that of the bobbin laces of Brussels and Flanders. This fact might be taken as proof of the co-existence of the two

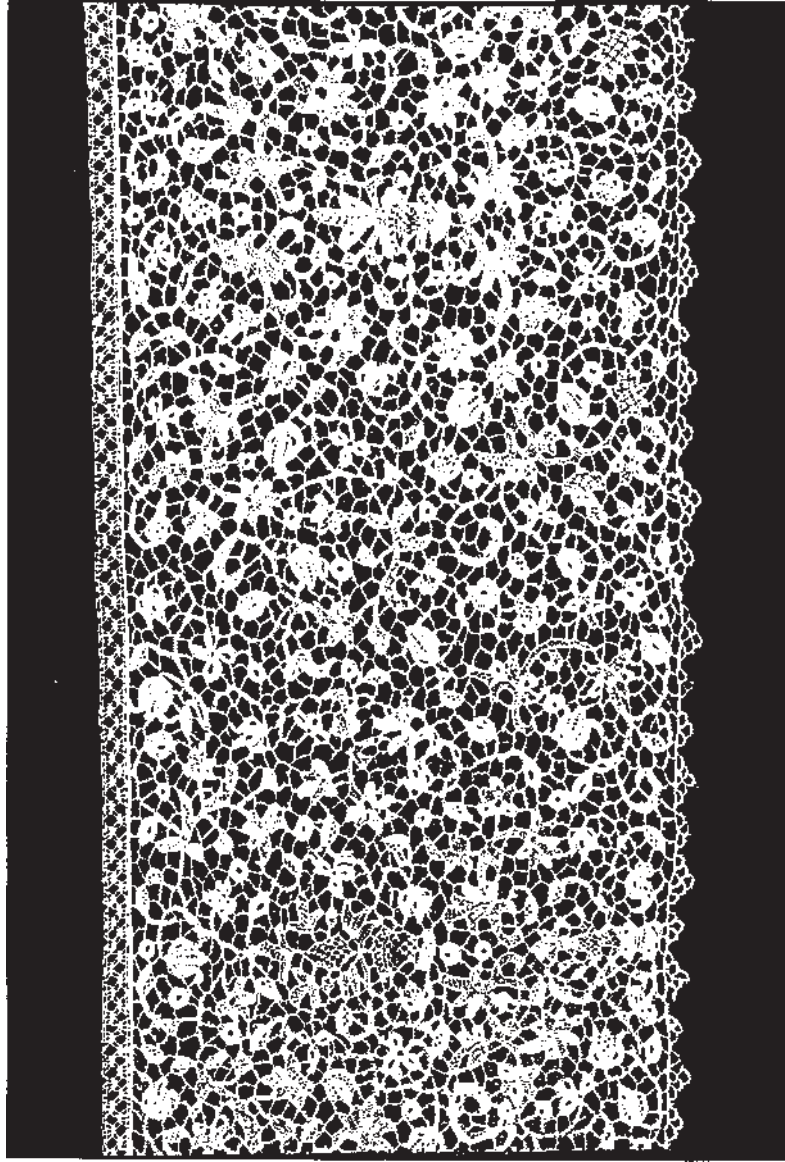


PLATE V

FLEMISH NEEDLEPOINT OF THE BEGINNING OF THE XVIII CENTURY WITH A DESIGN INSPIRED BY THE POINTS
DE FRANCE. MUSÉE DU CINQUANTEAIRE, BRUSSELS.

techniques in the same centres of production; the bobbin technique having such a priority that it imposes its forms on the companion industry.

The *Almanach des Négocians*, published in Brussels in 1762, bearing strong evidence of having been written by a dealer in lace, confirms this assertion. After having spoken as a technician, of the bobbin-made Brussels laces, the author adds: "Brussels point is worked in the same taste, with the same thread . . . but made with the needle. If sometimes the ground is made with the bobbins, which gives to such point-lace an inferior quality, the flowers are always made with the needle. There are thus two sorts of ground in needlepoint lace; the needle-made *réseau* and that made with bobbins." After a few details on the relative value and quality of the two forms of ground, he concludes:—"Brussels point is the finest of all laces, and the most costly." According to him, it is better than Point d'Alençon, which he calls "the most beautiful *after* Brussels point," because in Alençon lace "the cordon which surrounds the flowers is too heavy and becomes more so in washing and distorts the work."

Our "négocian" assures us that the manufacturers of Alençon "send many laces to Brussels to be 'grounded', which in this case acquire great value from the point of view of effect and taste, without ceasing to be Alençon lace however, and without having acquired the *privilege* of being sold as 'Brussels point'". Even in making allowance for the partiality which a tradesman would show in considering his merchandise superior to that of his competitors it seems as though one might deduce from this that there existed in the eighteenth century an industry in Brussels for needle-made lace that was beautiful, well known, and prosperous. It would be extraordinary if nothing remained of this product. We would therefore feel justified in placing beside the needle points with "drochel" ground (the typical Brussels bobbin-made *réseau*) these contemporaneous needlepoints with the artistic and technical characteristics such as we have been describing.

In the collection of the Musée Cinquantenaire at Brussels, there is, moreover, a specimen of point d'Alençon, recognizable by its strong "brode"—(what the "négocian" of 1762 called its *cordon*) of which the bobbin-made *réseau* is distinctly that of Brussels. It leads us, along with a few other needle-made fabrics of sparse decoration, to the very last years of the eighteenth century.



PLATE VI FIG. 1

NEEDLEPOINT, CONTEMPORANEOUS WITH LACE IN FIG. 2.

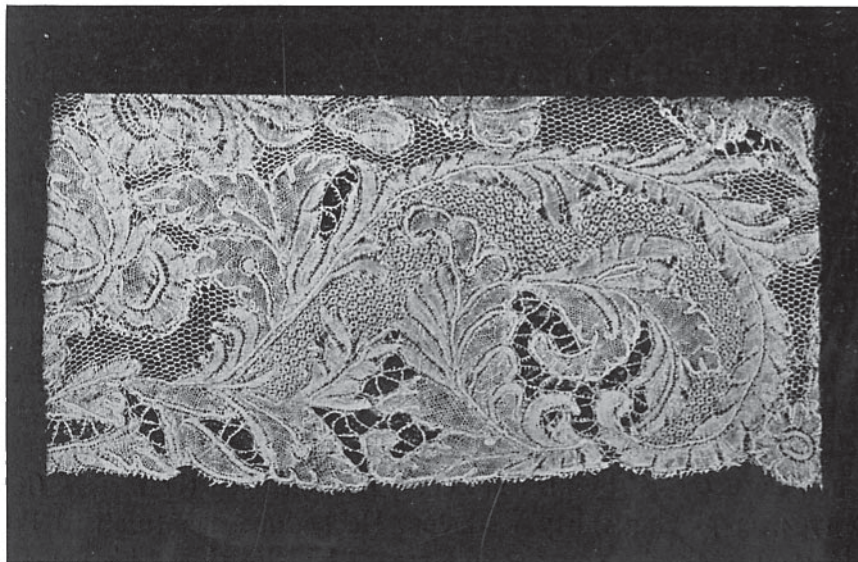


PLATE VI FIG. 2.

BRUSSELS LACE, BOBBIN-MADE, WITH A DESIGN RESEMBLING THAT OF FIG. 1. ITS GENERAL ASPECT IS MUCH THE SAME, SUGGESTING A SIMILAR PROVENANCE.