

OLD ITALIAN LACE

SEVEN CENTURIES OF LACE

By Mrs. J. HUNGERFORD POLLEN

Preface by ALAN COLE

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• This sumptuous volume, with its admirable 120 plates of full sized illustrations should secure a wide circle of admirers... The plates are throughout admirable examples of modern illustration. > ATHENAEUM.

WILLIAM HEINEMANN. LONDON



No 1. — After Giuseppe Bonito. *The Work-Mistress.*

From the Giardini Collection at Naples.

The Mistress has left her lace-pillow for a moment in order to show a pupil how to make a stocking, while another is netting, a third sewing, and the fourth is making bobbin-lace.

OLD ITALIAN LACE

BY ELISA RICCI

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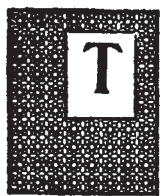
BOBBIN LACES:

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No. 3 — M. A. Franceschini (1648-1725). Detail of decoration in the Palace of Justice at Bologna. Group of little boys playing with various feminine implements; one child is in the act of throwing away a large lace-pillow from which bobbins depend.

INTRODUCTION



THE two laces of Italy are like two sisters, needle-made lace being the elder and bobbin-made the younger: or, to use another figure of speech, needle-lace is the classic tongue of Italy and the bobbin-make is its provincial dialect; clear, vivacious, emphatic, sharing the merits and defects of the populace.

Our needle-laces are each and every one of Venetian origin, (if we except the drawn-thread work of Sicily, which is more embroidery than lace) and take their names from the manner in which they are worked: *reticello*, *punto tagliato*, *punto in aria*, i. e. mesh-stitch, cut linen work, stitch in the air.

The bobbin-or pillow-laces are described as being Venetian, or Genoese, or Milanese, or of Abruzzi according to the places whence they spring, and it is interesting to notice how tenaciously they cling to the characteristics of their respective

birthplaces. As might be expected from their popular origin, they are less individual than the aristocratic needle-laces.

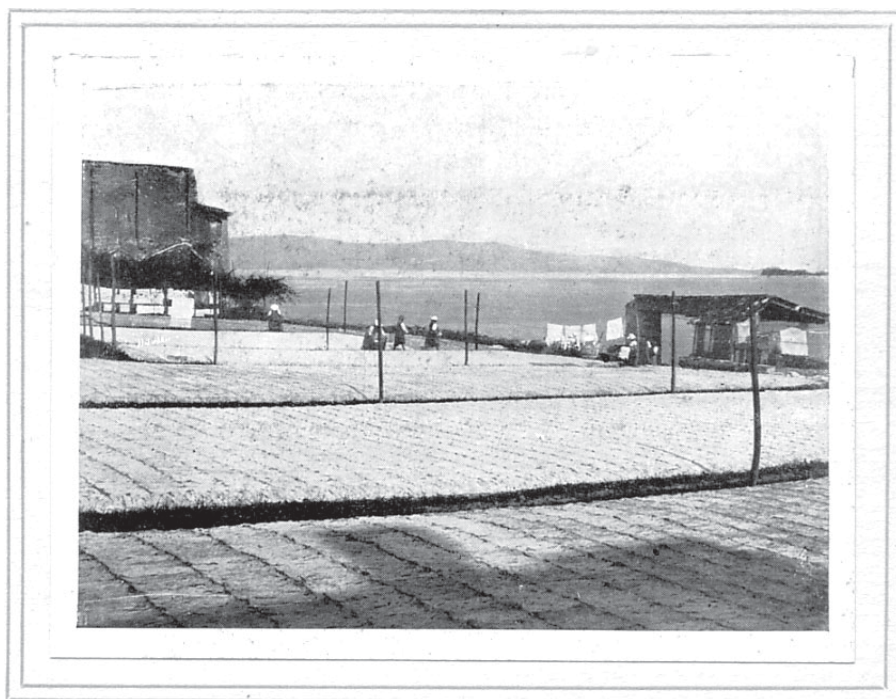
Just as peasant-costumes vary infinitely in divers regions, and yet show a rigidly conservative character in individual districts, every detail being fixed and prescribed, so does the bobbin-made lace vary very noticeably in each province, but it is not modified by individual caprice as is the case with needle-lace.

Generally speaking, if pillow-laces do not possess the accuracy of design, the relief and the delicate perfection of needle-laces, they can boast of greater firmness

with less rigidity, and by reason of their technical peculiarities, their designs are more synthetic and simple.

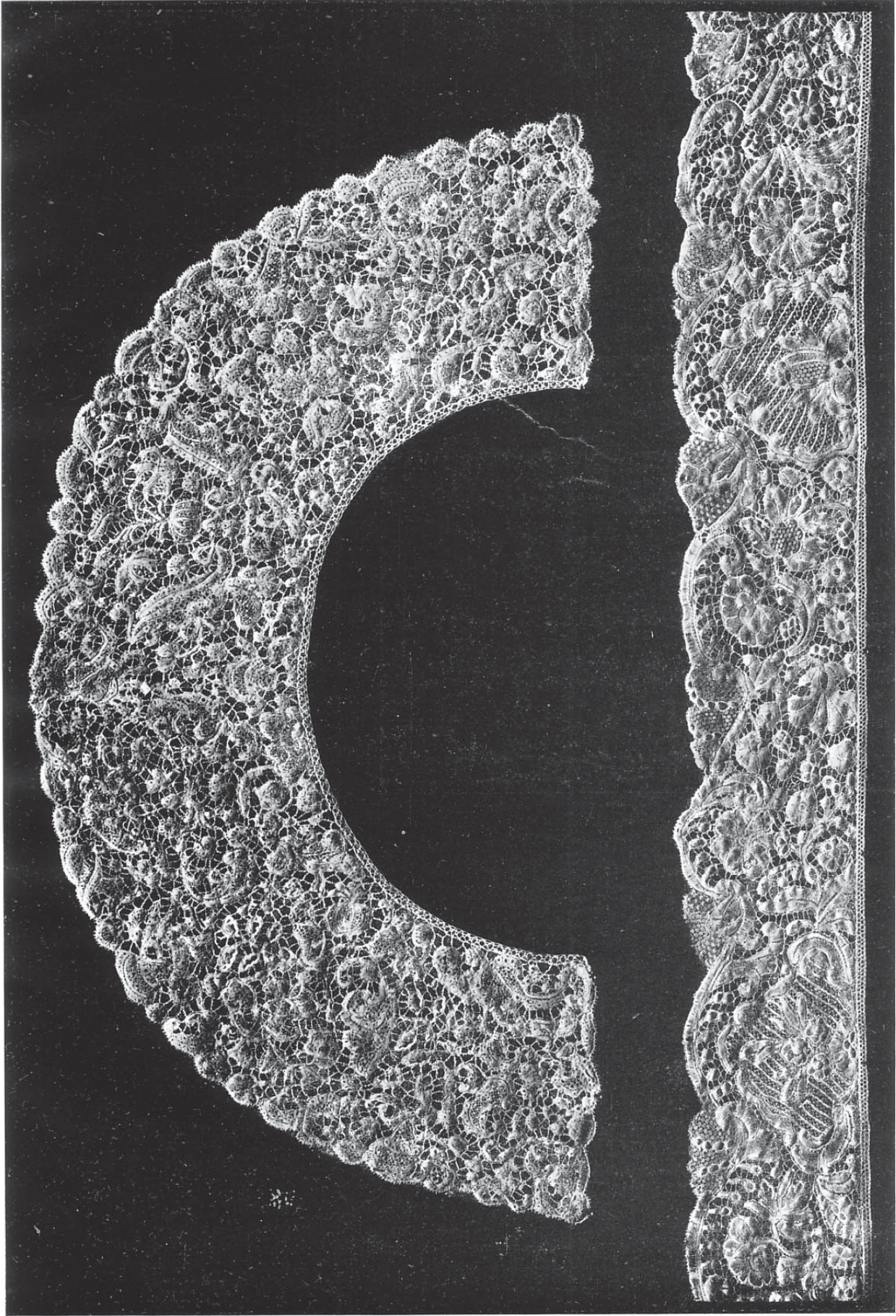
These special characteristics, joined to the quality of thread used (very noticeable in this lace-work, which assimilates closely to weaving) make Italian bobbin-laces even more diverse from foreign ones than needle-laces.

In Italy the most precious thread came from Salò, a smiling hamlet



No. 4 — Bleaching thread at Salò.

lying on the shore of Lake Garda. Tradition asserts that Salò sent its thread (*refi*) throughout the markets of the civilised world as early as the X century; but more sober history does not assign an earlier date than the latter half of the XVI century for the activity of Salò in collecting raw thread from Crema, Cremona, and Bergamo and setting to work to *cure, bleach, teaze, sift, and work* it (terms still to be found in Salonian documents), sending it forth into Italy and the whole world. This industry of « curing » thread has given the name of « Cure » to the South shores of the lake, where may yet be seen great masses of thread bleaching in the torrid rays of the burning sun. In Pizzichi's *History* we read that « Cosmo, King of Tuscany, desired to see the process of curing thread, the staple industry of the district, which furnishes thread for the whole of Italy ». Even in the middle of the XVIII century, full 75 houses were concerned in the thread business.



No. 5 — Collar and lace of Flemish bobbin-work. Baldini, Florence.

The old Italian laces composed of beautiful, fine, even, glossy thread demonstrate that the *Salò Cures* well deserved their reputation for excellence, although they could not attain the extraordinary delicacy of the almost impalpable thread of Haarlem, said to have cost 2500 francs per kilo. Still, had our national character been other than essentially practical, or had our trend in all art not been towards simplicity and joyousness, we Italians would have been able to barter and exchange our coarser thread for the finer kind produced in Flanders. But our women have ever been more talented than plodding, and bobbin-lace-workers were content to conquer in the field of beauty, originality, and freedom in design, without seeking to unite with these the miraculous, fairy-like texture of foreign-made laces.

The legends which tell of the origin of bobbin-made lace are so different in Venice and Bruges that they serve to illustrate the characteristics of the two productions:

Once upon a time in Bruges there lived a poor girl, loving and beloved by a boy even poorer than herself; notwithstanding unceasing toil, they were unable to earn sufficient to enable them to marry.

Serena — that was the girl's name — seeing her old mother languishing in poverty, made a vow to the Virgin that, should she descend from Heaven to help them with a miracle, Serena herself would give up the boy she loved. Shortly afterwards, the following occurrence befel: One day whilst Serena and her lover were sitting under a tree, a spider's web fell into Serena's lap; it was woven so finely that the girl's attention was arrested and she said to her companion « Why should I not copy this design with the finest thread I can find for my bobbin? » The lad stretched the girl's apron, containing the web, upon four twigs of the tree and Serena took it home, where she set herself to copy it at once. As her thread persisted in tangling and knotting, the lad, not knowing he was working against his own interests, invented a method of keeping each strand firm and separate by twirling the ends round tiny morsels of stick.

Serena's work was most successful and found favour in the eyes of the wealthy ladies of Bruges; and the humble cottage was filled with gold but not with happiness. Anxious to fulfil the condition of her vow, Serena at length found strength to tell her betrothed she could never become his wife. But the Virgin Mary would not exact the sacrifice of the girl's happiness, and, on the anniversary of her first gift, she dropped into Serena's lap another web in which were woven words absolving her from fulfilment of her vow.

The Venetian version is as follows: The daughter of a fisherman had a

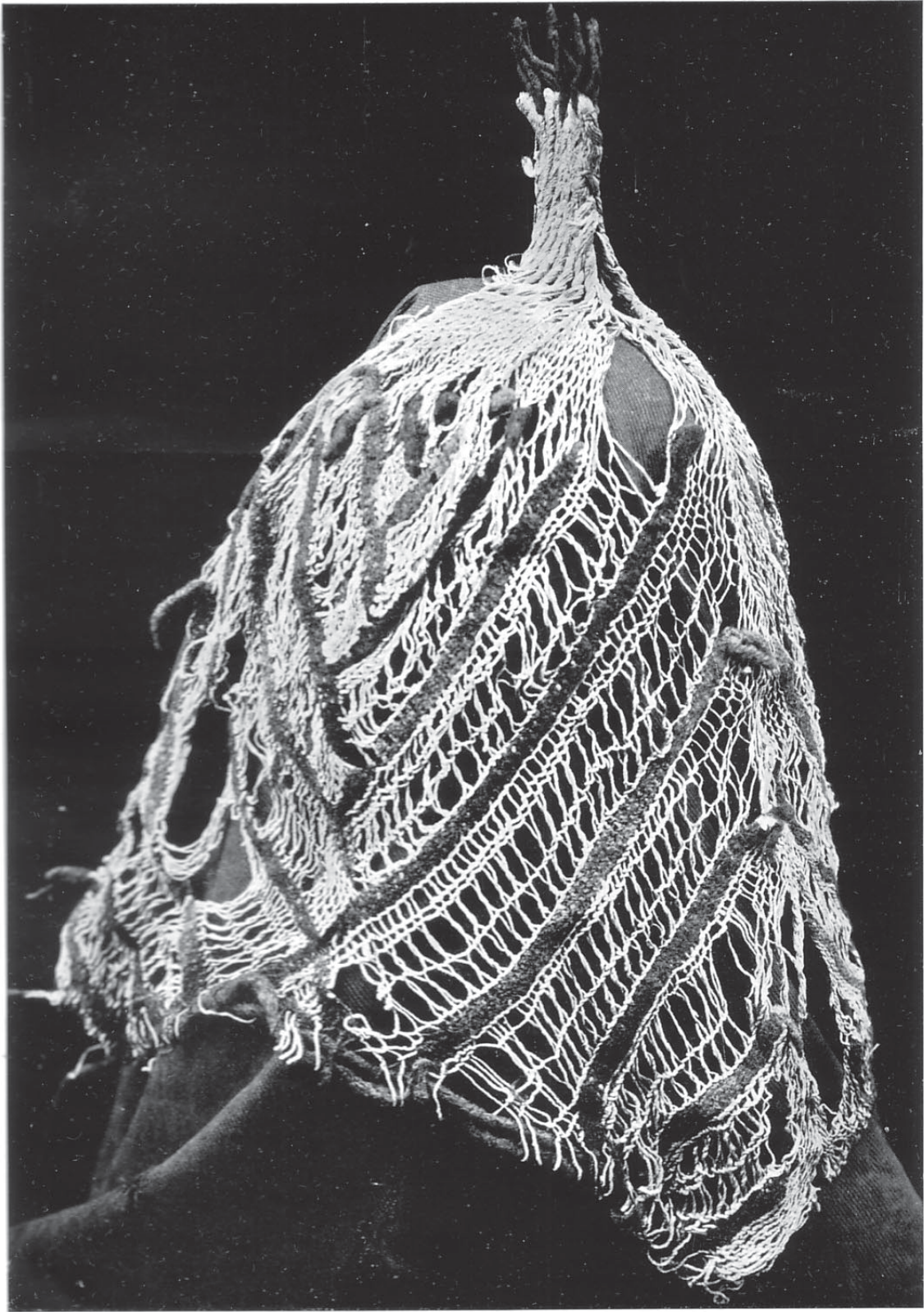
lover who was also a fisherman. One dreadful day the Doge of Venice declared war on the Sultan and summoned all young men (whether in love or no) to follow his banner into the East. At the moment of bidding his girl farewell, wishing perhaps to hide his tear-filled eyes, our sailor plunged into the sea, and noticing a lovely seaweed floating by, plucked it to give the girl as a last pledge of love. Whilst the lad was away fighting by land and sea, his betrothed passed the weary hours in netting for him the most beautiful fishing-net ever seen on the shores of the Adriatic ; made of thread as fine as hair and strong as steel, with each mesh of exactly perfect dimensions, the work seemed to have been done by magic fingers. Ceaselessly busy with her net, the girl never took her eyes off the seaweed which was always fresh and beautiful and green, unfading as the love which had picked and received it on that far-off day.

One morning, see! the net is finished! the last knot tied, the last mesh made perfect, and home comes the warrior, as unlooked for as he is welcome, whole and hearty in every limb. Half-crazed with delight at seeing him once more, the girl spread out her net in the sight of all the rejoicing villagers..... marvellous to relate, in the midst of the meshes there was woven a lovely weed similar in every detail to the love-token snatched from the bottom of the sea. Thus the Flemish laces sprang from the miraculous cobweb, and the Venetian from the delicate weed woven by love into the precise and formal fishing-net.

Perhaps it were wiser to content ourselves with such innocent tales as the foregoing, instead of striving to find the true origin of the art which seems determined to evade us.

Such a slender art, this lace-making! not strong enough, apparently, to bear the weight of research or history, or conceited enough to force a mention of the author or date of its beginning. We may suppose it to be of age-long antiquity, modified now and then by some trifling change, until, unexpectedly, it sprang into full vigour under new impulses.

Towards the close of the XV century, people generally developed a desire for the wearing of clean body-linen and were not slow in devising means of embellishing shirts, coifs, bed-borders, sheets, and pillow-slips with something which would wash along with the linen. In this way we trace needle-made lace as coming from its immediate predecessor coloured embroidery, while from woven braids and trimmings of gold and silver and silks are evolved the bobbin-laces which, for a whole century, keep the names, terms and character of *passementerie*. We are not in a position to assert that all coloured *passementeries* were made with bobbins; indeed, from the fact that throughout the XVI century our laces

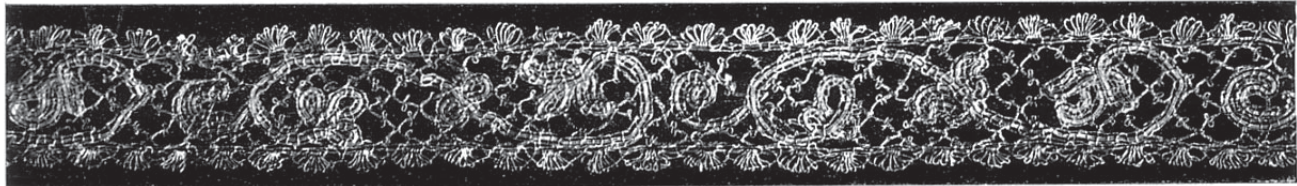


No. 6 — Coptic coif.
Poldi-Pezzoli Museum, Milan.

were described in France as *bobbin-passementeries*, (*passements aux fuseaux*) we may argue that other trimmings were not made with bobbins.

This quaint and seemingly trifling instrument dominates the lace-making trade in every country in Europe ; although so humble and simple in shape, we find the bobbin impose itself on the nomenclature of France as we have just seen, of Italy (*fuselli, mazzette, piombini*), of England (*bobbin or pillow lace*), of Germany (*Klöpplspitze*), of Spain (*palillos de randa*).

There are many who suppose that the little shuttle which performs the double duty of winding and holding the thread, is of the remotest antiquity ; but we confess ourselves unable to identify the bobbin in the spindle found during the



No. 7 -- Gold silk trimming made by bobbin work. (XVII century).
Aghib, Leghorn.

excavations at Antinoë, or in that shown in an ancient Chinese picture of a lady plaiting and knotting a net, mentioned in the book on lace by Pagès, published in Paris 1905.

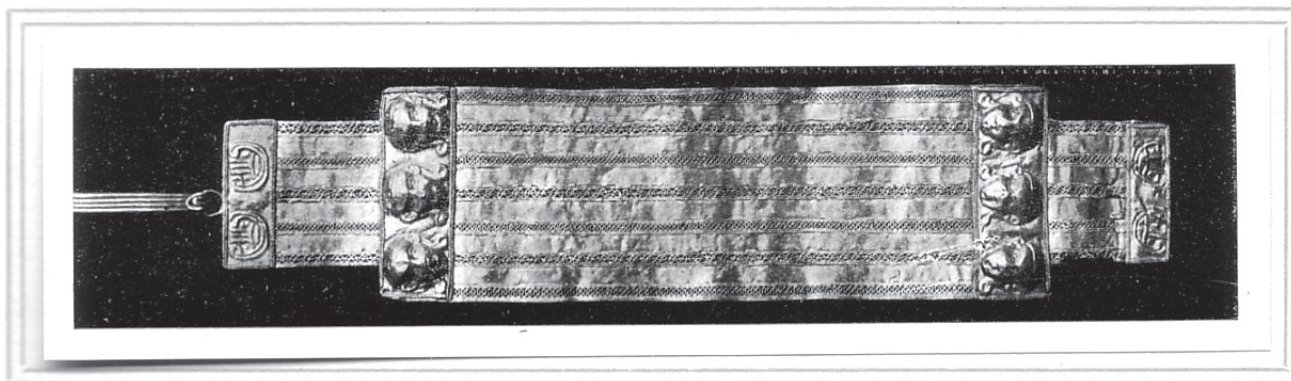
In the same way we cannot discern lace among the fragments of formless meshes with no design found in those same tombs at Antinoë and preserved in the Cluny Museum, or seen in the Coptic Coif in the Poldi-Pezzoli Museum.

We will repeat here what has been said already about needle-lace : even if the ancients had discovered, without using them, the means by which they could arrive at results which were not seen until much later, it is no proof that the arts of modern days are rooted so very far into the past. Many modern scientific and mechanical discoveries have their origin in laws known centuries ago ; for instance, the art of incision, old as the world itself, had to wait until the Renaissance before it blossomed into the marvels of printing ; in like manner did the seed of our trifling Art lie inert until the proper time for it to flourish.

At all events we have proof that when those remote civilisations determined

to cultivate any art, they lifted it to a pinnacle of absolute perfection, as is proved by their materials, their jewels and their embroideries. One has only to glance at two necklaces found at Vetulonia, here shown in photographs kindly lent by Professor Luigi Milani. In them the golden thread traces an open-work of such marvellous delicacy as to have the appearance of the finest lace and gives the impression that it was copied from a real piece of thread-lace. And does not the refined luxury of Etruscan garments suggest that had their wearers wished for lace trimming, that lace would have been of the best and finest ?

But as needle-lace had no more distinct forerunner than unbleached cloth coarsely perforated and stitched in the style of the rudimentary mesh-work of An-



No. 8 — Example of goldsmith's work from Vetulonia.

tinoë, differing but little from the Coptic, it is negatively proved that lace — as we understand the term — was unknown to our forefathers.

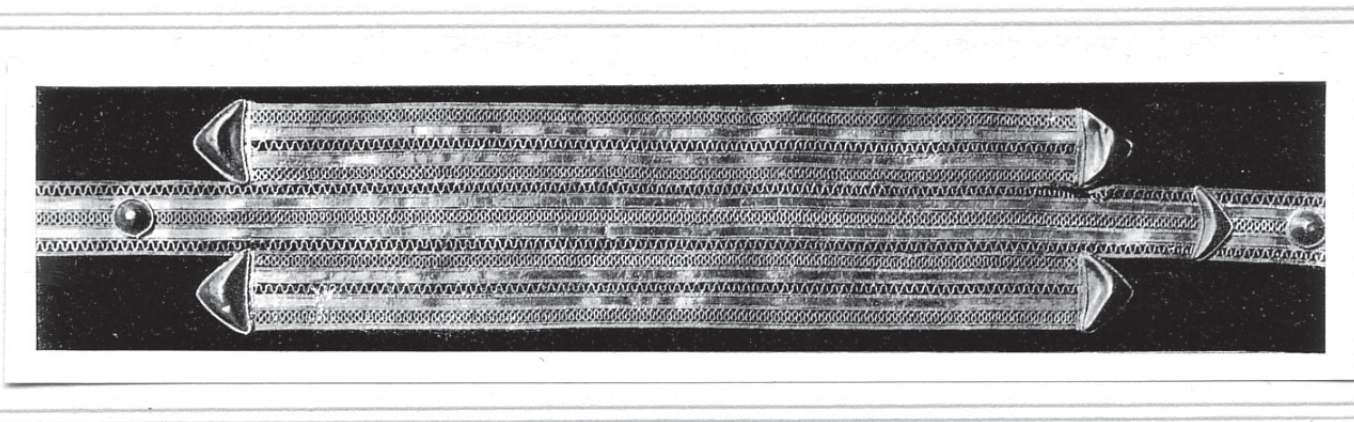
Bobbin-lace, like needle-lace, begins to find chroniclers in the XV century.

As yet we are unaware of lace being explicitly mentioned in any record earlier than the *Libro dei Creditori e Debitori del Registro di guarda-roba Estense* quoted by L. Gandini in his book on the Este family, published in 1896. When the Queen of Hungary, daughter to the King of Naples and wife to Matthias Corvinus was expected at Ferrara in 1476, her sister, Eleanor of Aragon, Duchess of Ferrara and wife of Ercole I, busied herself in urging her 18 maidens to hurry on their work of weaving a braid of gold and crimson silk, which was to be made with bobbins, and was destined to ornament the bedroom of the Queen of Hungary, who was expected to arrive shortly.

Here we seem to come upon the very moment in which trimming, hitherto always woven on a loom, was made by means of bobbins. Certain is it that the trimming in question, which occupied the thoughts of the Duchess and the

fingers of her maidens, must have been much superior to the gimp or braid commonly used on furniture.

In documents of the XV century, we read of *frixeti facti de ossi* (friezes or borders made with bones), and *tarnete facti de ossi* (galoons made with bones) and there are persons who take this to mean: made with bobbins. We do not agree with this interpretation. In the marriage a nuptial settlement of Giustina Borromeo, wife of Marquis Stanga, dated May 21, 1493, the following entry appears: *A cloak of mulberry satin with a trimming of silver all round, done with bones.* But as the entry next to it notes *a cloak of black gold brocade facta a letere et a fungij* and yet a third *a cloak of mulberry gold made with a vine and*



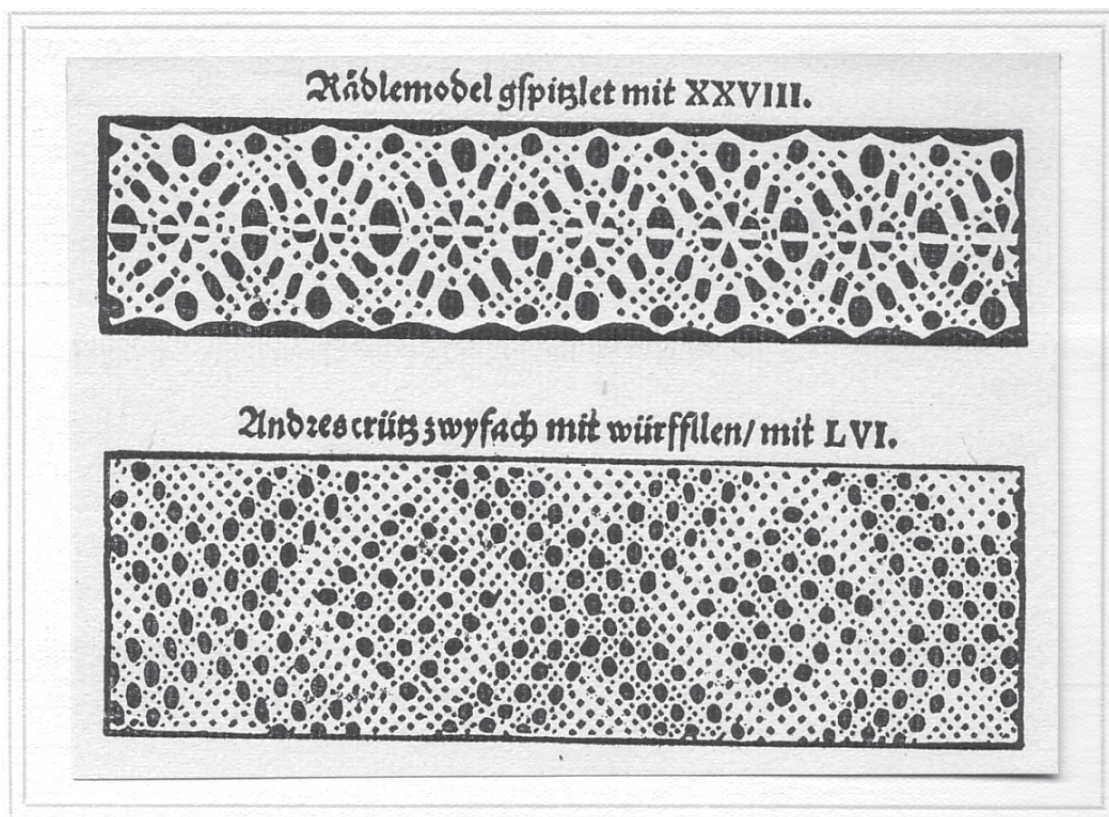
No. 9 — Example of goldsmith's work from Vetulocia.

silver stripes we take leave to suppose that as the « black brocade » was covered with a design of Gothic or other letters and mushrooms, and the « mulberry gold » bore vine-leaves and bunches of grapes in silver, so the *tarneta* showed some conventional design of bones.

Moreover there is no evidence that bobbins were ever made of bone and they are designated *piombini* (leaden weights) as early as 1476; in any case our lace of fine white thread had not appeared on the scene, for not until 1536 do we find undeniable proof that bobbin-made laces were established in Venetian hands, and were turning into a flourishing and satisfactory business as mentioned in a book published at Zurich by Froschower in 1560.

The book contains designs of bobbin-lace only, with notes as to the number of bobbins required for the manufacture of each example of lace, besides a notice giving information on the subject of design; stars, roses, wheels, etc., preceded by a kind of little lecture very different in style from the language held to those *Illustrissime* to whom Vinciolo, Vecellio, Ostaus and others address the prefaces

of their books of patterns and designs for embroidery and needle-laces: « From among the divers arts invented and practised for the good of humanity, we wish to mention the Art of making Bobbin-lace which arose in our country about 25 years ago and quickly took root amongst us. It was imported into Germany from Italy for the first time by Venetian merchants in 1536.... »



No. 10 — German-Swiss designs for pillow-lace.
From the « New Modelbuch », Zurich (1560 c.).

Do not these words, written by a foreigner in the XVI century, resolve any uncertainty concerning the Venetian origin of bobbin-lace still, hotly contested by Flanders? Why should Zurich have waited to receive the first laces from Venice, if Flanders, who traded with her as freely, and was also so much nearer, could have provided them as well?

The Preface goes on: « And when several clever women and young girls shall have taken up the work with delight, recognising as well the great good they can do themselves and others by copying this art and popularising it throughout the land, they will not merely be content with imitating, they will conceive fresh and beautiful designs for themselves. »

Indeed the designs printed by Froschower in 1560 (that is a few years after the appearance of « *Le Pompe* », another book of models for bobbin-lace printed in



No. 11 — Frans Hals. Nurse and Child.
Museum, Berlin.

Round the infant's cap, collar and cuffs a pillow-lace similar to the patterns of Mathias Mignerac of Paris, 1605. On the chest, insertion of reticello.

Venice, of which we shall shortly speak more fully) although based, like our own, on existing designs for coloured trimmings, already show many new characteristics, in 25 years they have become acclimatised, modified or altered so as to appear to their new public more beautiful than the original, that is to say more German than Venetian.

In like manner we see needle-laces establish themselves on French soil within a very few years, while in Flanders the bobbin-laces acquire a fineness never imagined or attempted by Italian women.

Let us continue to read the unaffected and simple prose of our honest man of Zurich, who demonstrates the true utility of bobbin-lace: « When, years ago, the method of trapunto and relief was in vogue, there is no telling how much time was taken in making a collar or bib or anything of the sort, joined to heavy expense to the person by whom it was ordered. On the contrary now, a bobbin-lace may be acquired for little money and in much less time, because the cost of production is so much reduced. Formerly, too, collars and other articles were adorned with threads of gold and coloured silk occasioning vast expense and trouble in cleaning or washing with soap; now all this is reformed and trimmings are of thread capable of resisting the wear and tear of the wash-tub. »

As the book tells us clearly, the bobbin-work was born and flourished among the women and girls of the middle-classes and the populace. We cannot fancy the clumsy pillow on the lap of ladies who were used to work needle-lace in their magnificent saloons filled with gallant company; the making of needle-lace was a coquettish occupation in which white hands and lovely jewels flashed advantageously, the article was a pride and ornament even before it was finished and worn. Direction-books for bobbin-lace are few in number and intended evidently for a humble class of worker; not to these was suited that embroidery in which fine ladies were as expert as paid work-women or cleverer, even, since time is the chief necessity for the accomplishment of beautiful embroidery. Besides this, in the XVI century bobbin-laces were used profusely on the seams of bed-hangings and other curtains and on sheets; or, again, to finish with tiny points the edges of embroidered linen, or the work of cut linen and *reticello*. For example, in 1567, among articles furnished to Mary Stuart we read of « a bundle of narrow lace to sew on the seams of the bed-curtains, measuring 10 ells. » One can understand that great ladies would not care to undertake such lowly toil.

On the other hand, an occupation both easy and pleasant, not trying to the eyes, allowing of a considerable freedom for superintending housework, or the play and sleep of the children, shortening the tedium of unoccupied hours and occupying

the mind while permitting the body to rest, is just the thing to be sought after by townswomen whom it enabled to adorn their own houses and clothes with a charming and aristocratic ornament, and is peculiarly welcome to country-women of lonely villages in far off mountains, for by it they can embellish their picturesque clothes and earn the money which is always scarce in their homes.



No. 12 -- After the manner of P. Longhi. Country Pleasures: Correr Museum, Venice. One lady embroiders *linea*, another winds thread, a third works at pillow-lace, while others chat and amuse themselves.

Can anybody explain how and why this lace-industry has sprung up in so many lonely spots in quarters of the world most remote from each other or from large centres? No one has ever found a plausible reason for the undisputed fact.

Even of late years, when a revival of artistic feeling seems to be stirring in every field of work, although we are conscious of a renewed interest being awakened in this delicate art, we are not able to locate the moving spirit. Fifty years or so ago a woman in service at Cogne, Val d'Aosta, taught two or three compatriots how to make bobbin-lace; these taught others. During wintertime the women of that region employ themselves by making simple laces which are sold in the neighbourhood and have given rise to a local fashion of wearing a large collar of

starched lace. The work is done on a cylindrical cushion, empty inside, covered with striped material which serves as guide to the worker who makes her lace without a design. The pins are thick, with coloured heads. The rude cushion, the large pins, and absence of design are sufficient to mark *Cogne* lace unmistakably.

Again at Sansepolcro in Arezzo, ten years or more ago, the two daughters of the village schoolmaster learned from an old foreign woman how to make bobbin-lace. To-day, by virtue of these industrious, clever girls, a lace-school of pure Italian bobbin-work flourishes exceedingly at Sansepolcro, being one of the best in the land. If within the century *Cogne* and Sansepolcro should become centres of an important industry, what satisfactory explanation of their origin could they bring forward, had there been no written record of these beginnings?

But it is not with invariable justice that a name is singled out for celebration. At Annaberg in the Hartz Mountains a monument was erected in 1834 to « Barbara Uttmann, died January 14, 1575. Inventor in 1567 of bobbin-made lace which made her the benefactress of the neighbourhood ».

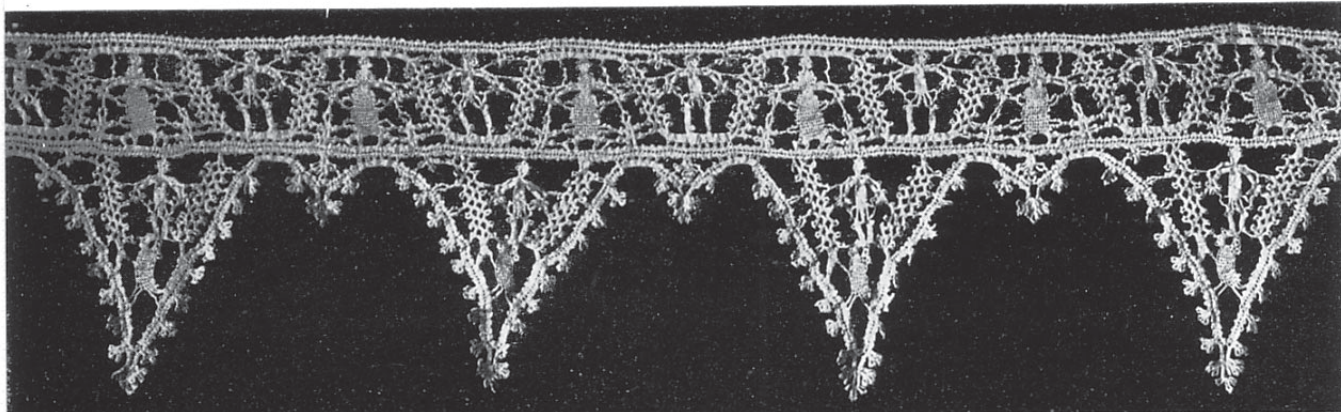
We know that « *Le Pompe* » appeared in 1557, and the book assumes in those for whom it was published: a knowledge of lace-making and familiarity with the handicraft which can only be acquired by long practice. Moreover Froschower's little book taught us that the art of bobbin-lace had been introduced into his country by Venetian merchants in 1535. So, if Barbara Uttmann be deserving of a monument for having introduced and organised a new and profitable feminine industry, it is erroneous to assert that she *invented* the art of bobbin-made lace!



No. 13 — Workers of pillow-lace in middle-class houses. From Zatta's « Goldoni ».

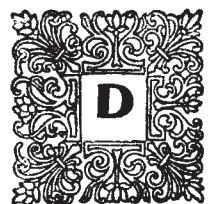
I.

VENICE.



No. 14 — Insertion and edging with figures.
Sangiorgi, Rome.

VENICE.

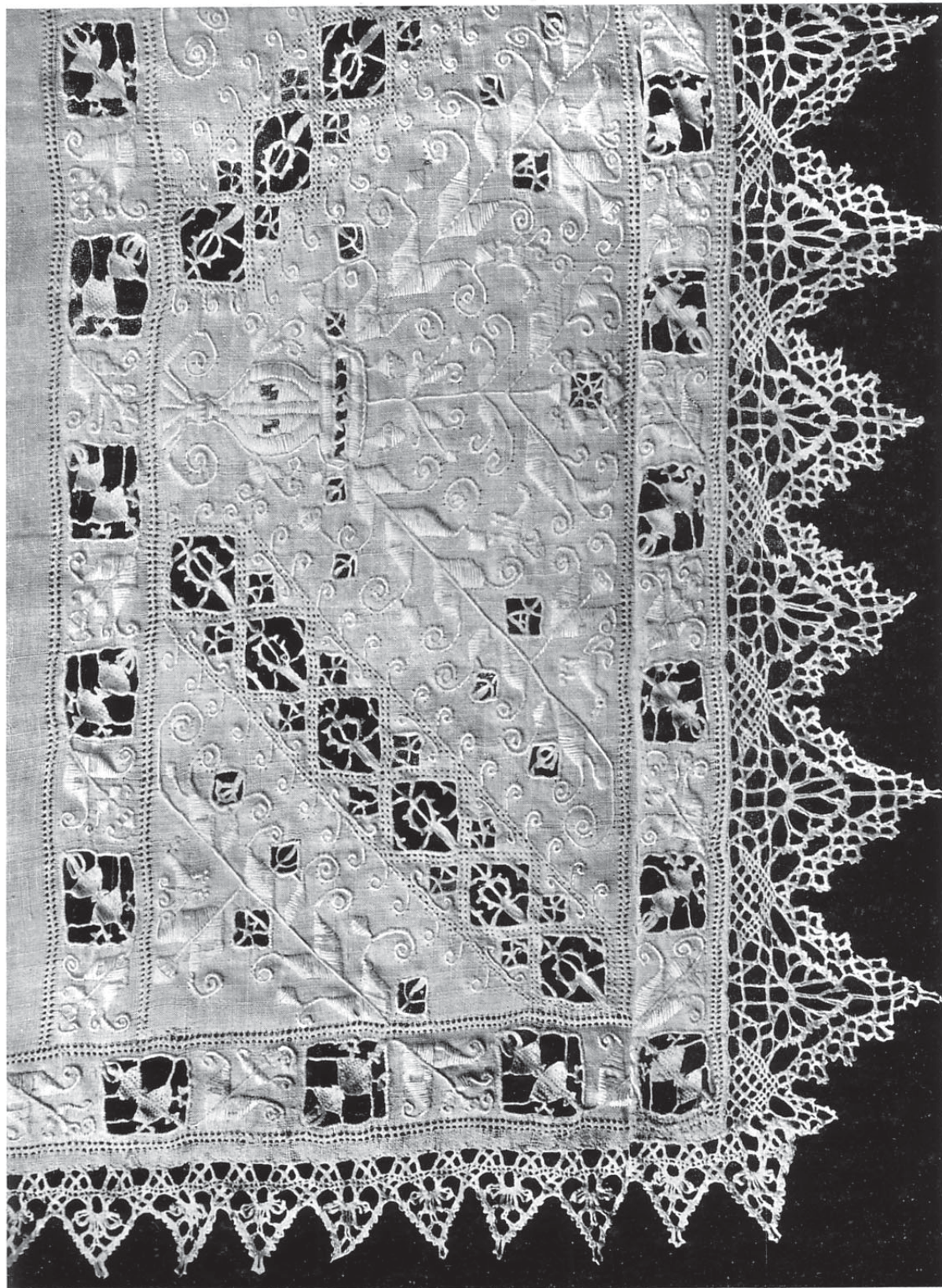


DURING the XVI century Venice was the Queen of fashion and made what laws she pleased throughout her domain. The Orient brought all its dazzling magnificence to lay at her feet; marble, gold, jewels, stuffs, embroideries glowing with colour. Guided by the taste of her own native artists, Venice delighted in choosing what pleased her from among the heap of eastern models with their suggestions and hints for novelties; refusing what was tawdry, throwing the veil of her own innate refinement over barbaric glitter, and softening all by the marvellous glamour with which she invested everything she touched or that surrounded her: the sea, her palaces, the very sky itself. The excessive richness of oriental objects with their exuberant characteristics was artfully toned and subtly altered until exact perfection was reached and all Europe acknowledged the supremacy of Venetian treatment in all things pertaining to Art and the Beautiful. In the XVI century, the adjective « *Venetian* » had the same magic that « *Parisian* » has to-day.

In this way, from coloured and golden embroidery, Venice evolved the white variety; and from white embroidery her needle-point lace, transforming heavy trimmings encrusted with gems and stiff with gold and silver and silk (the accompany-



No. 15 — Bobbin-made edging round a table-cloth ornamented with embroidery and *reticello*. From the Ida Schiff Collection, Florence.

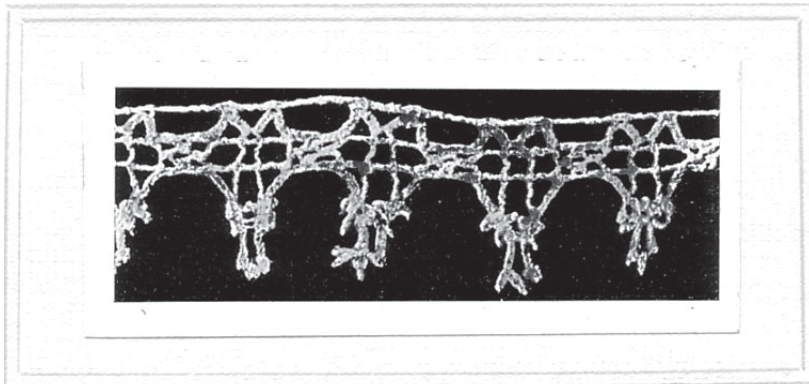


No. 16 — Bobbin-made edging round a table-cloth ornamented with embroidery and *reticello*. The Ida Schöff Collection, Florence.

ing ornaments to such rich materials as brocades, cut-velvets and damasks) into light lace of white thread destined to perform the same service to white linens of every make, from the coarse *boccasino* to the finest lawn of Rheims.

The white transparent trimming was useful for hiding seams in sheets, bed-hangings, or shirts; it became the custom to border and finish off rich embroideries of *punto tagliato* and *reticello* forming cuffs and collars, with those sharp points which are the most graceful adjunct to any sort of lace open-work.

Thus it was that Venice started her lace-making, both bobbin and needle-varieties, each sort being used for the same purpose; and not only Venice herself, but more successfully still such places as Murano, Chioggia, Burano and most famous of all, Pellestrina, set up their schools.

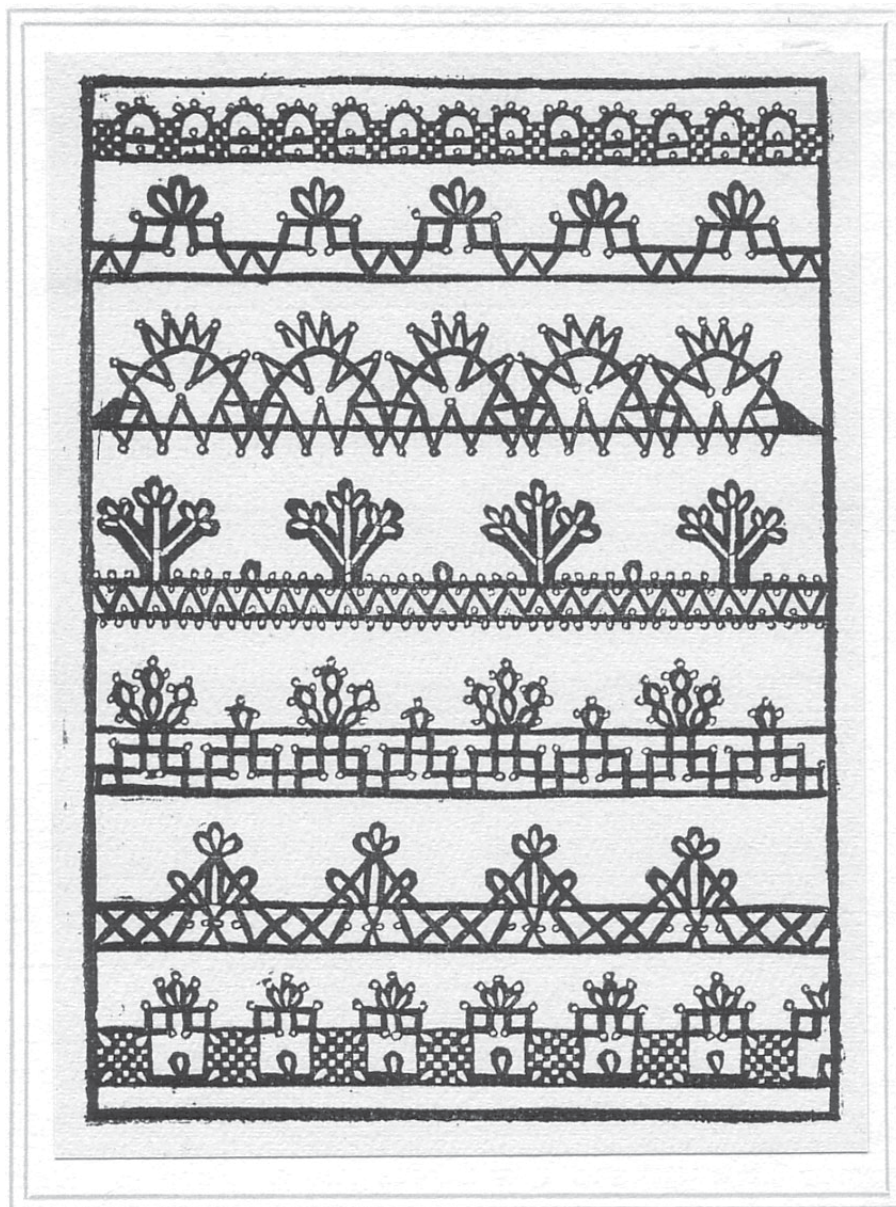


No. 17 — Little edging similar to designs shown in « Le Pompe ». (See next page).

Even to-day the lace-makers of Burano sing an old sort of sing-song, which must be many hundreds of years old; it is in dialect, and metrical translation is impossible, but the following is the sense of the old ditty: « From Tesera in Gospero I come hither in a boat in order to have some lace made. It will be put on a cushion which is like a sort of sieve full of apples.... When you have finished it (the lace) send it me by your little girl and I will give her a piece of cheese, an apple, a pear, a knot of garlic, a nut and a chestnut for her to take with her to school. »

In some districts, even in these modern days, a very modest recompense is all that is held necessary to give a pillow-lace-maker! Very probably those little lace edgings with tiny points were made by the thousand yards to finish the huge seventeenth century ruffs, and the makers were content with their wages of « a pear, an apple and a knot of garlic » which, after all, may have been delicacies highly prized by the fisherman's daughters as they sat at their pillow or cushion, working on sea-shore or door-step, laughing, chattering, making light-hearted love.

Anyhow, the author of the designs published about 1560 by Froschower of Zurich says, as we have seen, that even so far back as 1535 Venetian merchants had carried into Switzerland bobbin-lace of so lovely a quality that the women of the country set themselves at once to copy it. He leaves us to suppose that he



No. 18 — Little edgings from « Le Pompe »,
Venice, 1557.

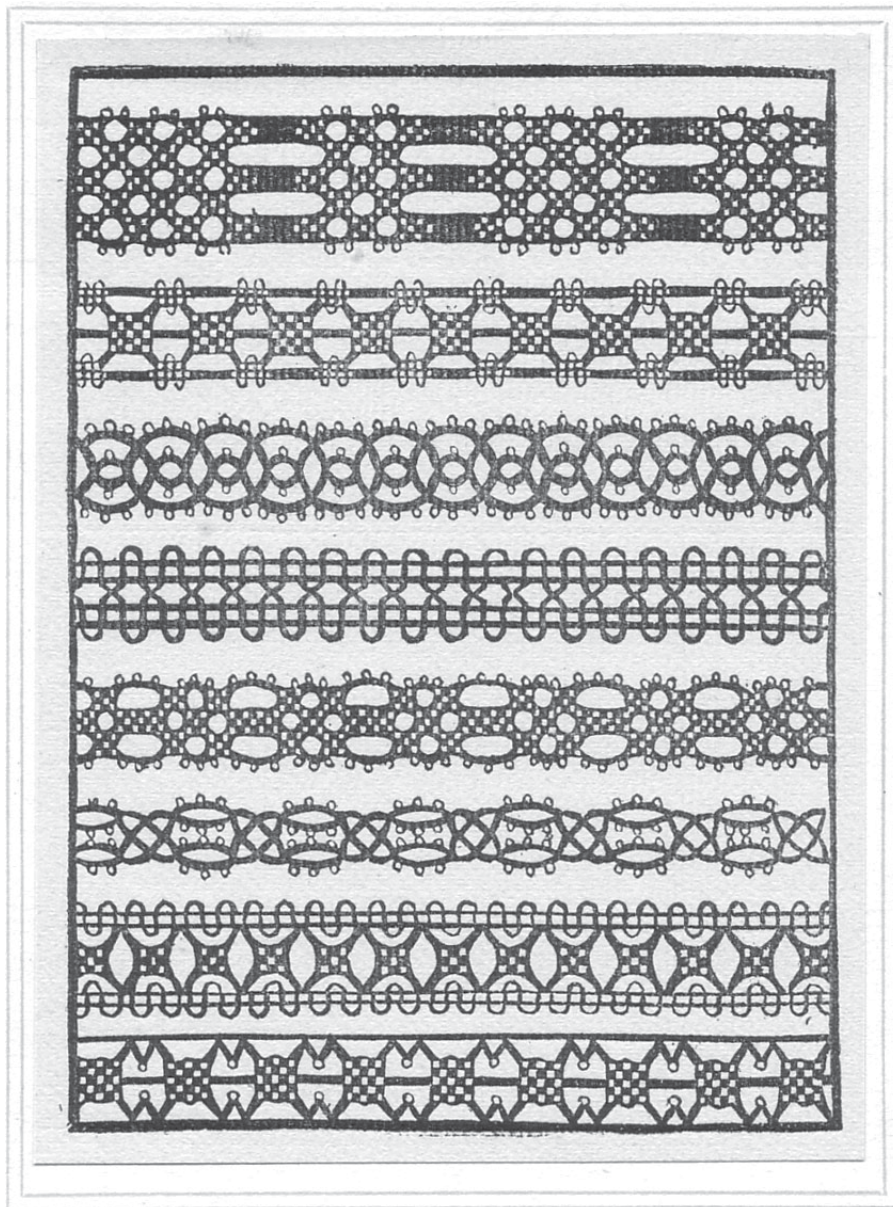
is talking of Venetian work, but the supposition is confirmed absolutely by the illustrations in the Zurich book, which are the same as those which appeared some years before (1557) at Venice in a book whose title may be translated « *Pomps. A new book giving directions how to make small braids or ribbons of gold, silk, thread or any other material.* » In some of the German book-plates we notice how much



No. 19 — Angelo Bronzino. Portrait of two Architects. Naples Museum. (Photograph by Anderson).

The lace collar is similar to designs in « Le Pompe », Venice, 1557.

more confused and intricate in design are the early foreign laces than our own, but the Venetian models which had entered Switzerland 25 years earlier, while betraying that they had been modified during the process of acclimatisation, clearly retain the nature of their place of origin. Indeed the two books plainly show that



No. 20 — Insertions and braids from « Le Pompe »,
Venice, 1557.

there was but one source from which these trimmings could spring; we use the word « trimmings », because in these earliest times lace was more of a braid to lay upon the surface of materials than insertion to be placed between two strips. The front page of the book *Pomps* clearly states that its designs are for little braids or ribbons of gold, silk or thread: and the precious book with its model drawings