

Spanish Blonde Lace

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Illustrations from the author's collection

THE ever-changing cycle of capricious fashion has, in the last two or three years, seemed to centre on various phases of things Spanish, and we have witnessed suddenly awakened interest in the rich adornment of the dark beauties of Spain. Paris discovered new and modern possibilities in the old embroidered shawl as the material for evening wraps, *par excellence*, and the happy possessors of old heirloom pieces of the soft and rich blonde laces have brought them out to help give a Spanish atmosphere to northern cities and places of fashion otherwise lacking in romance. But while many have discovered a fascination in the mantillas of old Spain, where the national head-dress still preserves its own, other beautiful examples of Spanish handicraft have remained but little known and have but recently begun to attract the attention of collectors.

The real Spanish blonde, though lacking the historical merit and museum value of many sister laces, has yet a very well-defined place of its own, and much fine and clever handiwork has entered into its production. Unfortunately such a quantity of poor imitation machine - scarfs and mantillas have been thrown upon the market for the past few decades that comparatively few persons realize the worth and merit of the genuine blonde. The uninitiated know only those heavy-patterned products which are distributed to the unwary at Gibraltar and similar ports, where unfortunately they are eagerly seized upon at prices too low for hand work and usually too high for the machine product. When it comes to lace, the Spanish señora or señorita prefers the simple net when she cannot afford the real figured lace. Though many times a traveler in Spain, I have almost never seen one of these modern scarfs worn by a Spanish lady. That is why I am venturing a brief history of blonde lace and the mantilla, with a few illustrations. Spain has always been known as the land of blonde lace, having produced much

of this product herself, and having absorbed much produced in France for the Spanish market. This term, *blonde*, by the way, derives its name from the natural color of the silk used. When, later on, the silk was bleached to a silver white or dyed black, the same term was retained for the different shades.

I am inclined to believe that the merits of Spain as an early lace-producing country and as one establishing certain styles of her own have been somewhat overlooked. Our histories of lace tell us that blonde lace appeared at the end of the seventeenth century, but in El Greco's painting, *The Stripping of Christ*, we find that the painter has portrayed his daughter wearing a mantilla of white Spanish lace.* The picture dates from about 1579. Spanish lace of fine texture, therefore, appears to have been made in the latter part of the sixteenth century. From this time on, through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there is much mention of Spanish blonde. By the time of Louis XIV it was made in black as well as natural silk color, and through compliment to the Sun-King's Spanish consort it was, at that time, very popular at the court of France.

By the eighteenth century the mantilla had become the universal head-dress of every class in Spain. The court dowager paraded in rich bobbin-tissue; the woman of the well-to-do class of La Palma, in black taffeta trimmed with blonde; while the peasant

woman of La Mancha appeared in a mantilla of white muslin in summer, and of flannel garnished with ribbons in cold weather. Since the Spanish lady has appropriated and nationalized the mantilla as a head-dress, the manufacturer of Spanish blonde has been largely absorbed by that characteristic adjunct of Spanish feminine attire.

The mantilla was a development of the earlier *manto* or

*See *Old Spanish Masters*, by Timothy Cole, N. Y.: Century Co. for description of this painting.



Fig. 1 — THE SPANISH MANTILLA (1850)

The Duchess of Montpensier, Infanta of Spain, in mid-century costume of heavy black embroidered silk. Observe the draping of the mantilla over a high comb, which thus protects the hair from too close contact with the scarf.



Fig. 2 — MANTILLA FLOUNCING (late eighteenth century)
An unusual and beautiful piece of blonde.

celo with which the Spanish ladies were wont to veil the face, after a custom probably derived from Moorish women—a remnant of Oriental influence in the Peninsula, of which Spain has preserved many. As late as the nineteenth century the mantilla was thrown over the face, and it is often referred to as serving the double purpose of cloak and veil. To-day, the Spanish señorita seems to prefer to wear her mantilla with its ends no longer free, but bunched at the bosom and fastened with a rose or a carnation. Com-

parison of older Spanish paintings with those of the present will show the change in style of adjustment, the modern seeming far less romantic than that of older times, when the freer use afforded such possibilities of intrigue and incognito.

The eighteenth century was a period rich in blonde made into mantillas. At that time this head-dress was universally worn; peasant as well as aristocrat used lace for a head-covering on every occasion, the quality varying naturally with the rank and means of the possessor, though sometimes mantillas of extremely rich lace were possessed by those whose poverty in the matter of the necessities was in striking contrast to the magnificence of their apparel. But the mantilla has always been held as sacred property and could not be seized for debt. Three distinct types have belonged to the Spanish toilette:

White blonde—used on state occasions, birthdays, bull-fights, and Easter Mondays.

Black blonde—for church wear.

Mantilla de tiro, black silk trimmed with velvet—for other occasions.

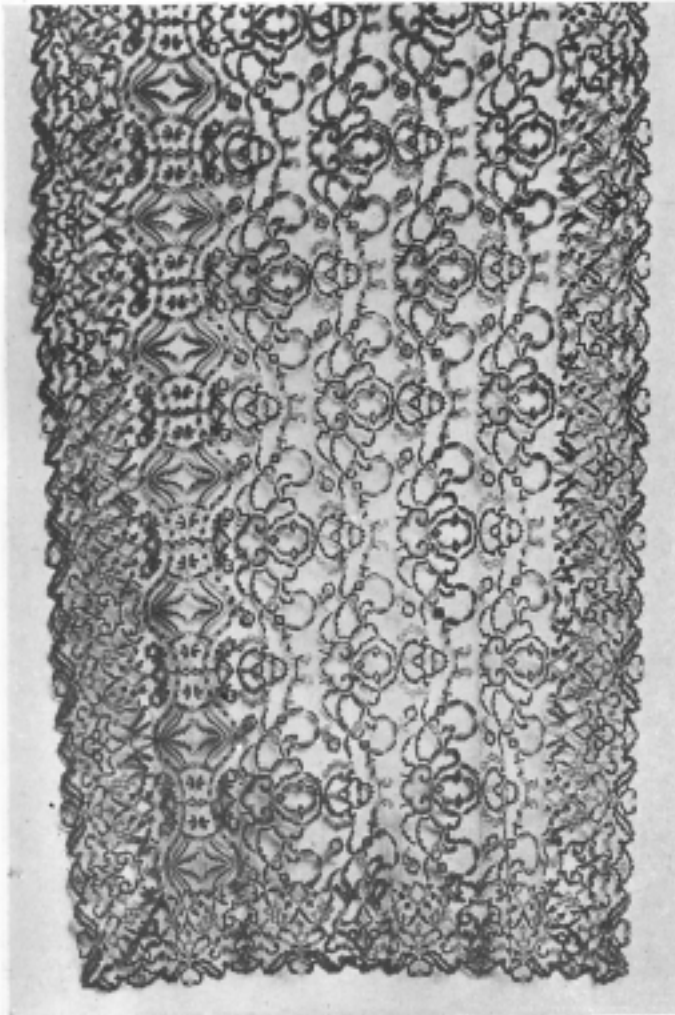


Fig. 3 — SCARF OF BLACK BLONDE (style Louis XV)

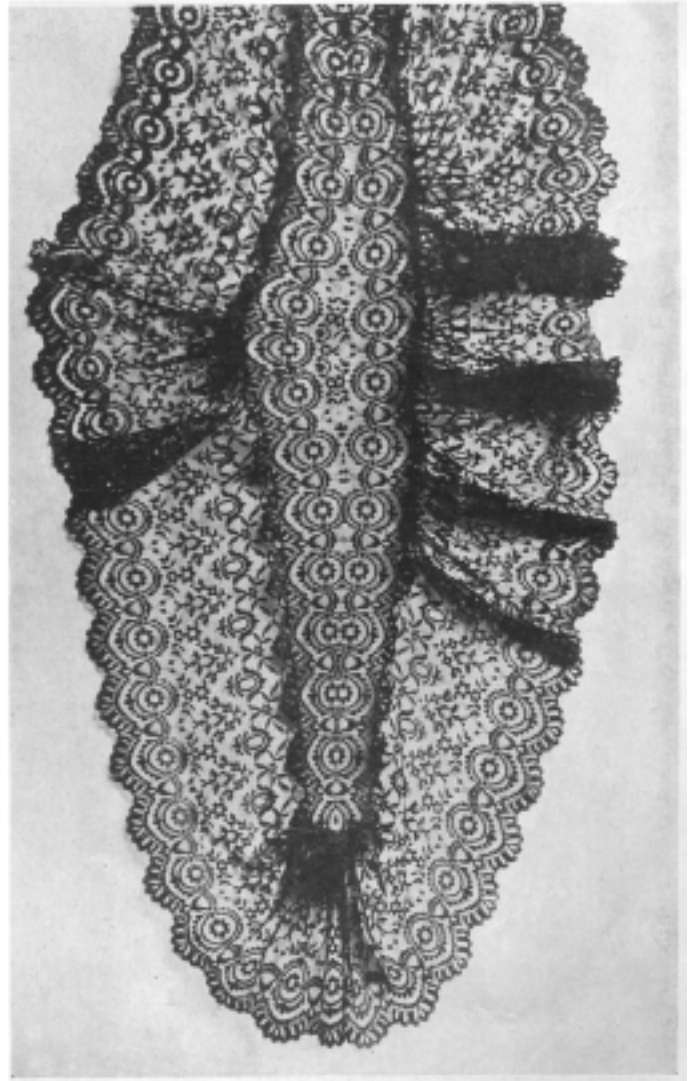


Fig. 4 — A MANTILLA

In the nineteenth century blonde lace was extensively worn, particularly from 1805, when it was the rage in Paris, through the reign of Napoleon III, whose wife, the Empress Eugénie, delighted in the transparent brilliancy of this, her favorite lace. About 1860 there was a revival of fine blonde production, and some very exquisite mantillas were shown at the London exhibition. These ranged in price from twenty to one hundred and fifty pounds.

The illustrations here shown present a few designs of the old bobbin blonde, and two of embroidery on net, which has been extensively used in both silk and thread.

Figure 2 is a portion of a mantilla flouncing of the late eighteenth century. This is a very unusual and beautiful piece of blonde; of a *réseau* of double silk threads, loosely twisted so that tiny meshes alternate with larger ones, and this arrangement varying in several different *réseau* of patterns within the flower designs. The heavy silk *toile* gives a shimmering contrast to the fine gossamer-like *réseau*. A delicate and rich piece.

Figure 3 is a large scarf of black blonde, of the style Louis XV, producing by alternate heavy and light pattern

the effect of sunshine and shadow. This represents the best type of black blonde.

Figure 4 is a mantilla, also of black blonde, showing the full flouncings, which fall in graceful folds as the centre of the narrow central portion is draped over the high Spanish comb. Such pieces one still sees worn by the Spanish court ladies when they appear on gala occasions. The scarf (Fig. 5) is a product of the period 1860, when some very fine blonde was produced. This is in some ways a typical Spanish design, with its rich and bold border surrounding the graceful simpler pattern of the inner portion. It is a lustrous, creamy silk thread, soft and shimmering.

Figure 6 is of approximately the same period; more rigid in its much repeated design, but offering interesting contrasts in its skillfully achieved effects of shading and in its characteristic Spanish border.

In the small scarf of black (Fig. 7), whose pattern is darned upon a fine machine-net, we encounter a bit of that very popular darned lace which has been extensively used for scarfs and mantillas, since it is less expensive than the bobbin. This again is a typical Spanish pattern.

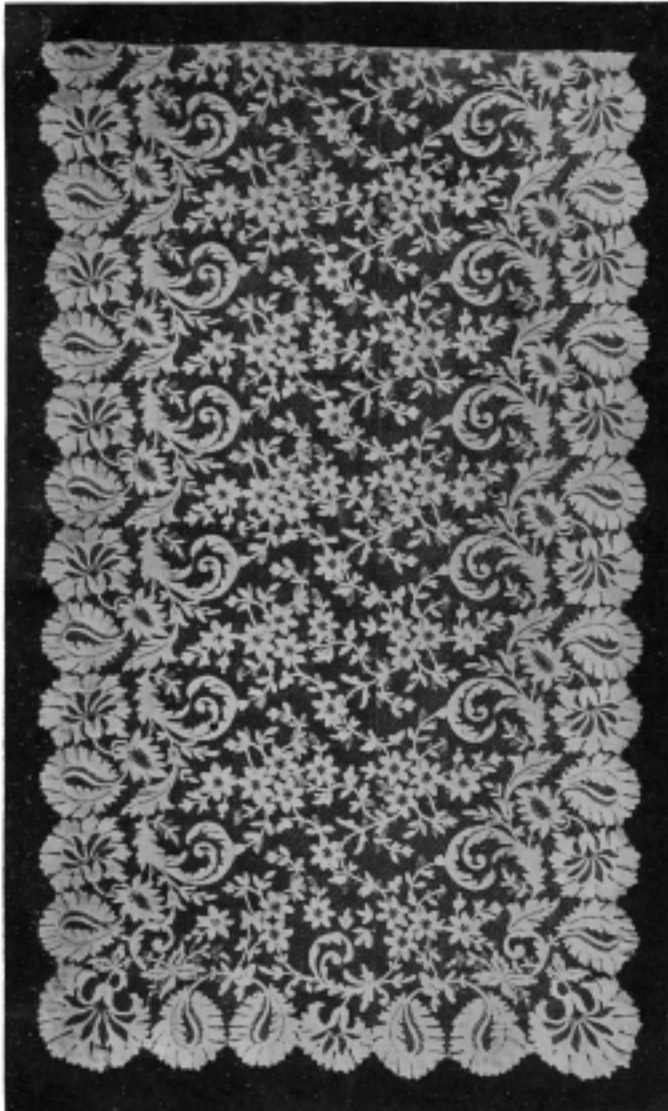


Fig. 5 — SCARF (mid-nineteenth century)

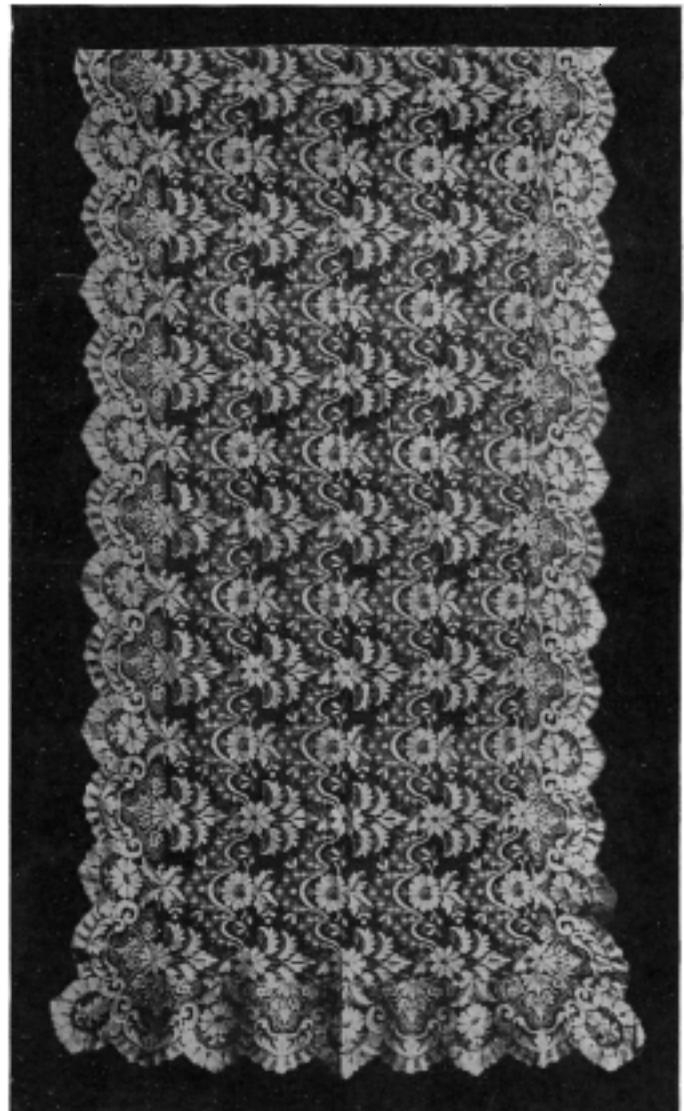


Fig. 6 — SCARF (mid-nineteenth century)



Fig. 7 — SMALL SCARF
Pattern darned on fine machine net. Compare border with that of Fig. 5.

Figure 8 shows a modern piece which, however, exemplifies an ancient Spanish custom: that of basing lace pattern on mosaic and tile decoration. Here is depicted a portion of the Hall of the Ambassadors at Granada, with Moorish inscriptions and a border of characteristic Moorish tiling. The photograph hardly does it justice, since it flattens all detail and produces a papery aspect that is not particularly attractive. As a matter of fact, the piece really possesses merit of workmanship, whatever its defects from the standpoint of propriety in design. Technically perhaps it is not to be classed as lace, since it consists of embroidery upon net, carried almost to the point of solid pattern.

According to some authorities,

Spain is really to be credited more completely with being a lace wearing, than a lace manufacturing country. Most of the thread lace that was used in the Peninsula appears to have been imported from Italy and from the Netherlands.

Much of the so-called Spanish point is not to be distinguished from Venetian point. A good deal of it, no doubt, was imported into Spain for ecclesiastical purposes. The overrunning of the country by the French from 1807 to 1828, and the subsequent closing of the monasteries in 1830 brought much of this ecclesiastical lace into non-ecclesiastical possession, particularly in France. Quite naturally it was assumed to be Spanish lace, and was so named.

Thread bobbin laces appear to have been imported from Flanders and were sufficiently popular to encourage imposition of heavy duties for the purpose of reducing the volume of traffic in them. But more distinctly Spanish than any of the thread lace, perhaps quite as Spanish as the blonde lace, is the lace of gold and silver which attained its greatest popularity in the third decade of the seventeenth century.

These laces, which strongly appealed to the Spanish love of gorgeous display, were used for every imaginable type of trimming, including that of clothes, bed linen and burial caskets. Perhaps the love of silk lace is akin to the older love for the metallic tissue. The appeal of silk lace is to a luxurious, rather than to a fastidious taste, and its appearance has in it a suggestion of wealthy splendor more quickly sensed by the general than is the chaste elegance of needle point or bobbin thread.

For the manufacture of the earlier blonde credit is pretty generally given to France. But in the nineteenth century Spain produced a large part of her own supply, devising the patterns after her own taste. Those were the great days of blonde lace, which was used not only for head and shoulder scarves, but for dress trimming as well. Figure 1 reproduces a picture of the Duchess of Montpensier clad in mid nineteenth century garb: a gown, low cut across the bosom, and glorified with a full skirt of shimmering satin whose two flounces are heavy with black blonde lace.

Thus exquisitely to decorate and to be decorated by a fine and rich fabric, if not quite so praiseworthy as to have designed and made it, is perhaps a rarer accomplishment.



Fig. 8 — AN ARCHITECTURAL TREATMENT
A modern example that is better than it looks. Based on tile patterns in the Alhambra.