

EARLY DESIGN IN LACE BY MRS. JOHN HUNGERFORD POLLEN

WISH, without being unduly technical, to point out the claim to supreme excellence of a period of lace design, which for a reason I have not hitherto heard given, has been almost entirely ignored of late years. Before studying the design in question, it must be remarked that it is obvious that limitations of material, quite as much as lack of invention, or of intention, contributed in the past to delay or to circumscribe the results desired. This is as true of lace as of the marvellous achievements of the present day resulting, for

example, from discoveries in steel, aluminium, etc., fine materials, without which inventions, however marvellous and desirable, were impossible to carry out.

To trace rapidly the development of lace work from the earliest times to the beginning of the sixteenth century will be sufficient for the present purpose. The earliest foundation of lace work was the knotting or twisting of threads by hand or by bobbins worked in a frame. Woven linen, with threads drawn or cut out, also served as a foundation. The results can be seen in the darned

Early Design in Lace

nets and fringes of the sculptures of Nineveh, and in the actual lace found in Egypto-Roman tombs of the first to the third centuries, preserved to us by the desert sand and the wonderful climatic conditions.

Later we have no specimens to point to, until in the *lacis* or knotted thread work (Italian, *modano*) and linen lace work of the thirteenth and following centuries, we see so clearly the very stitches and design of the earlier fabrics that it is plain that the art was never lost. Workers, whether Babylonian, Coptic, or Italian, could darn exquisite patterns on net-work, or by ingeniously cutting and sewing over threads in the linen, obtain those beautiful and intricate effects called *reticello*, now the generic term for all lace of geometric design whether needle or bobbin made. *Reticello*, as a strictly lace term, implies a foundation of linen, and is therefore in the same class as drawn or cut linen work; this obtains, even although the linen threads are often completely covered by needle-point. Fig. A [PLATE I], represents a true *reticello*: the edge shows the linen threads. Many examples of this exist, and are depicted by Cimabue, Giotto, and other painters of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Early in the sixteenth century, workers, not satisfied with the limitation of material, and also, as can be shown, incited by examples from the East, began to discard the knotted thread foundation, and to use less and less of the linen, and more of the unfettered needle guided only by the heart and brain. This transition can be observed in Fig. B [PLATE I], where the merest threads are left as a lattice background to the interlacing strapwork which, as well as the conventional floral pattern, is worked entirely by the needle. Thus came into being the wonderful *punto in aria*, a name which has never been translated into another tongue and expresses the glory of the first lace work created solely by the needle. Signora Elisa Ricci speaks of the perfection of style and of the elegance, combined with simple exactitude of design, in the early *punto in aria*, which she calls the most Italian of all laces.¹ At the same time it must be said that it is more plainly inspired by the East than any previous or subsequent fabric, and, in fact, I claim for Persia the fame of having given to Venice her pre-eminence in the matter of lace design. It is uncontested that the commerce of Venice in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was largely with the East. I think the influence of Persia is clearly shewn in the designs for *punto in aria* in its first development from Oriental sources. Photographs of Persian tiles [see Fig. C, PLATE I] in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and other early fourteenth-century tiles in the Salting Collection may be mentioned, and leave us no doubt of this. We see the hyacinth, the dog-rose,

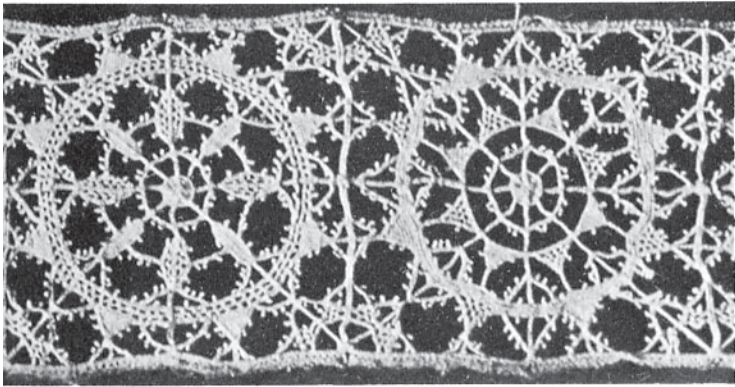
¹ Ricci (Elisa), *Antiche Trine Italiane*. Bergamo, 1908

the iris, and the carnation, favourite flowers of the Venetian lace-workers, and more than that, the interwoven stems producing patterns of the utmost variety and elegance. The design of Fig. D [PLATE I] is a flowing, somewhat intricate, arrangement of stems, very Persian in character; the points are expressed by carnations, rosebuds, and hyacinths. Peacocks, hounds, and stags are introduced at intervals; every line is to express a certain meaning; every line is *voultu*, a chief characteristic of this period. This specimen appears to have been made for a wedding, and the crowned serpent, crest of the Visconti family, is introduced.

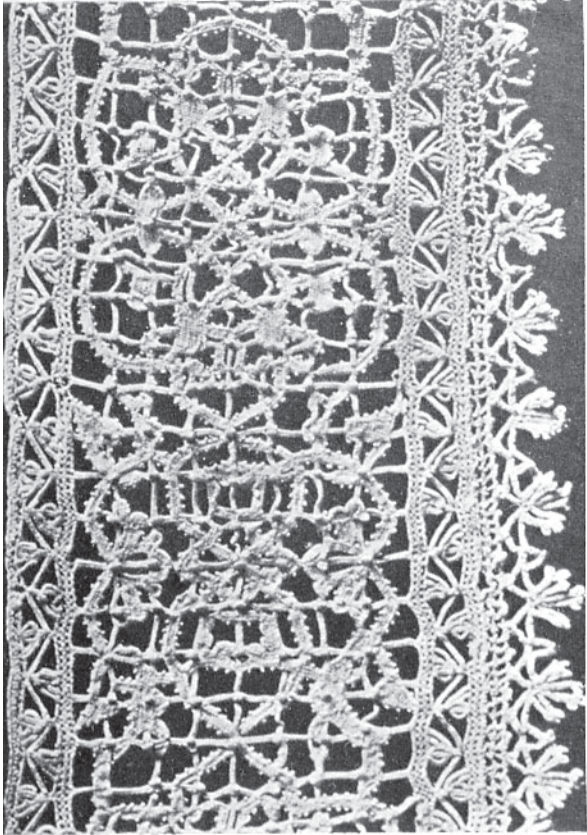
Later laces became more magnificent and loaded with ornament; stitch was worked on stitch in lavish variety, forming the raised or rose point of the seventeenth century, universally known as Venetian. Fine scrolls, with conventional leaves and blossoms, so contrived as to cover the spaces symmetrically, were all that was desired—a change indeed from the “mostre bellissime”, carefully thought out in the early pattern-books of Vinciolo and Vavassore. To find the well-ordered freedom of a classical orientalism we can look only to the early *punto in aria*.

And now, having established the origin, we have to mourn the vicissitudes of these beautiful designs. Many of the pointed laces were no doubt used for collars, and these went out of fashion before the end of the seventeenth century. No doubt these collars were not convenient; they were easily torn and required an iron or wire support. A collection of these supports is in the Munich Museum. Whatever the reason, the sad fact remains that hardly any of this lace, when worked in points, has survived in its integrity. Under the excuse of repair, or change of fashion, the beautiful and exact Persian designs are now usually found mangled and altered past recognition. This mangling is unfortunately apparent not only in some of the specimens at Berlin and Vienna, but also in some of those in our own Victoria and Albert Museum. As a natural consequence, the extraordinary merit of this lace is overlooked by historians of lace with one notable exception, Signora Elisa Ricci. The object apparently was to make, at any cost, a straight edge to the lace; the points were ruthlessly cut off and sewn in, upside down, or at any angle that occurred to the worker, thus making a deplorable patchwork. Such was the condition of the beautiful lace before it was restored [PLATE I, D].

Fig. E [PLATE II] gives another example of this. The restoration to its original beauty is represented in Fig. F [PLATE II], where the points have been replaced. In some specimens, pieces have been cut away and lost irreparably; but when new work was added to straighten the edge the restoration was comparatively easy, as in the fine specimen shown in Figs. G and H [PLATE II].



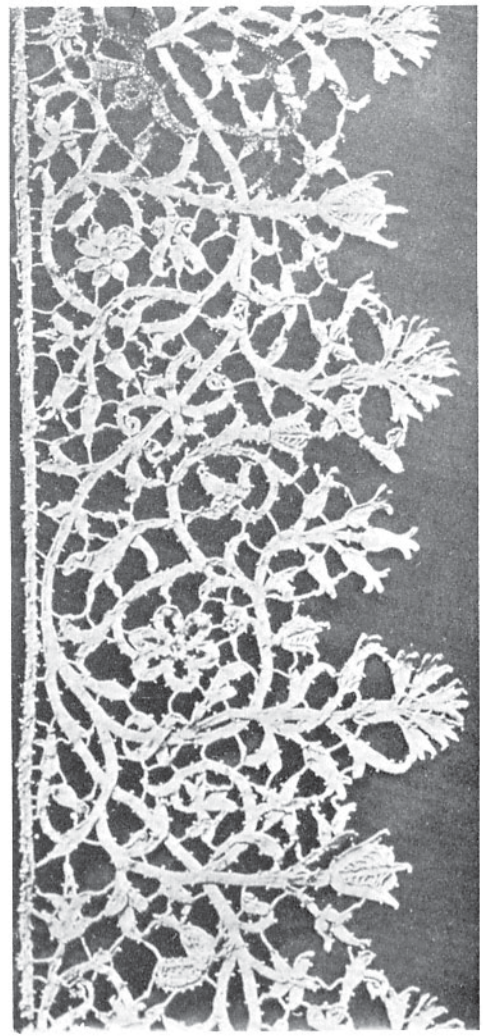
(A) RETICELLO, EARLY SIXTEENTH CENTURY. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION



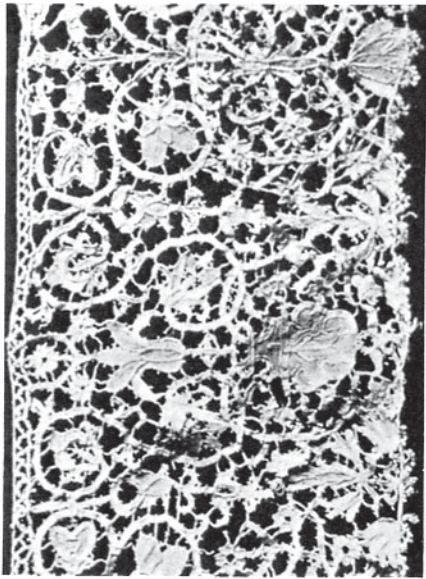
(B) RETICELLO, TRANSITION STAGE, FIFTEENTH CENTURY. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION



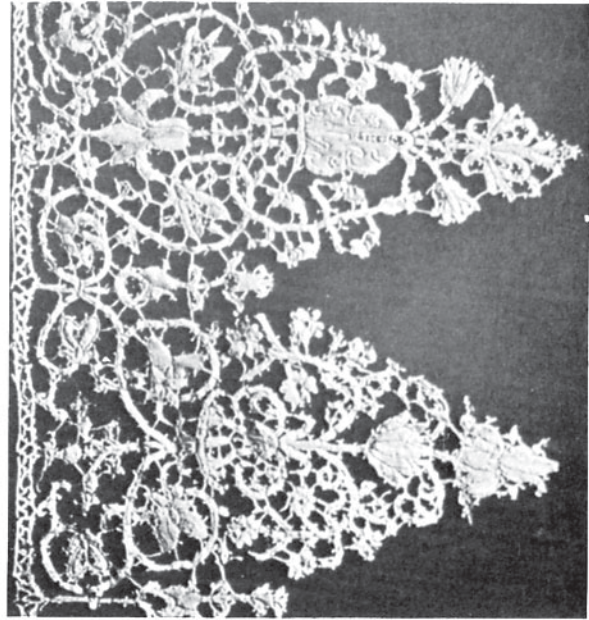
(C) PERSIAN TILE, FOURTEENTH CENTURY. VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM



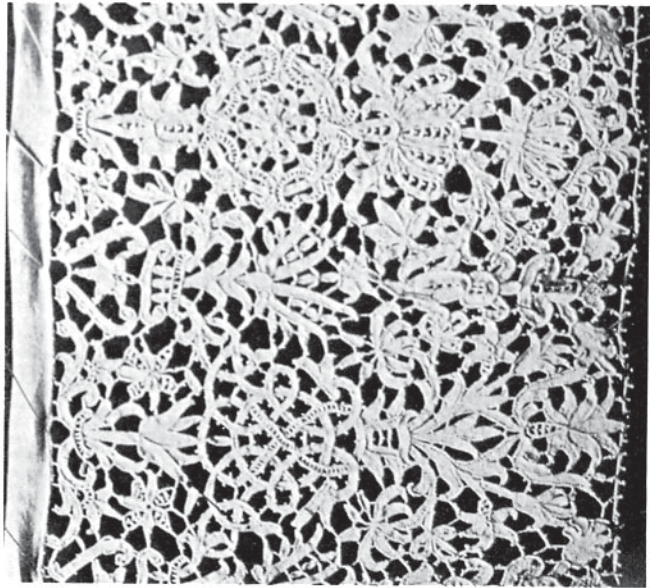
(D) PUNTO IN ARIA, EARLY SIXTEENTH CENTURY. VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM



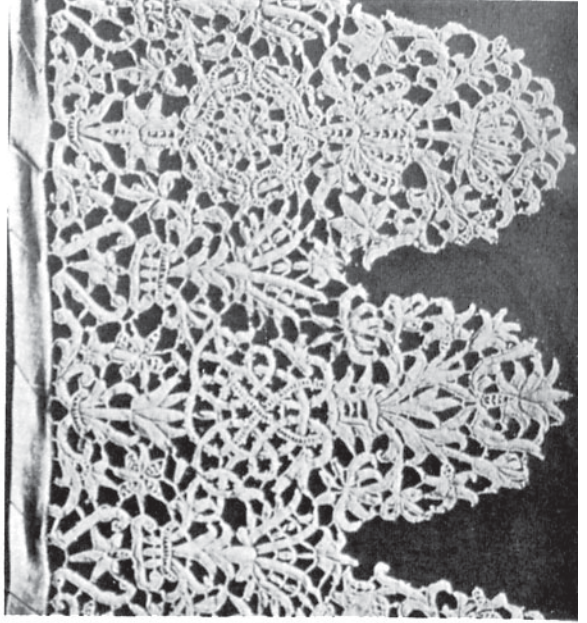
(E) PUNTO IN ARIA, INJURED STATE, VENETIAN SIXTEENTH CENTURY. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION



(F) THE SAME AS FIGURE E, RESTORED



(G) PUNTO IN ARIA, INJURED STATE, VENETIAN EARLY SIXTEENTH CENTURY. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION



(H) THE SAME AS FIGURE G, RESTORED

Early Design in Lace

Finally I appeal to possessors of these rare laces to note carefully any mutilations, and to remember that fragments are better preserved as such, if restoration is impossible. To draw together the worn or torn parts, or to join in odd pieces is fatal.

The object should be to endeavour, however worn or ragged the fabric, to detect and preserve the intention of the original worker, so that justice may be done, however tardily, to the most true, careful, and beautiful lace designs existing.