


ANCIENT LACE IN THE ROYAL MUSEUMS, BRUSSELS
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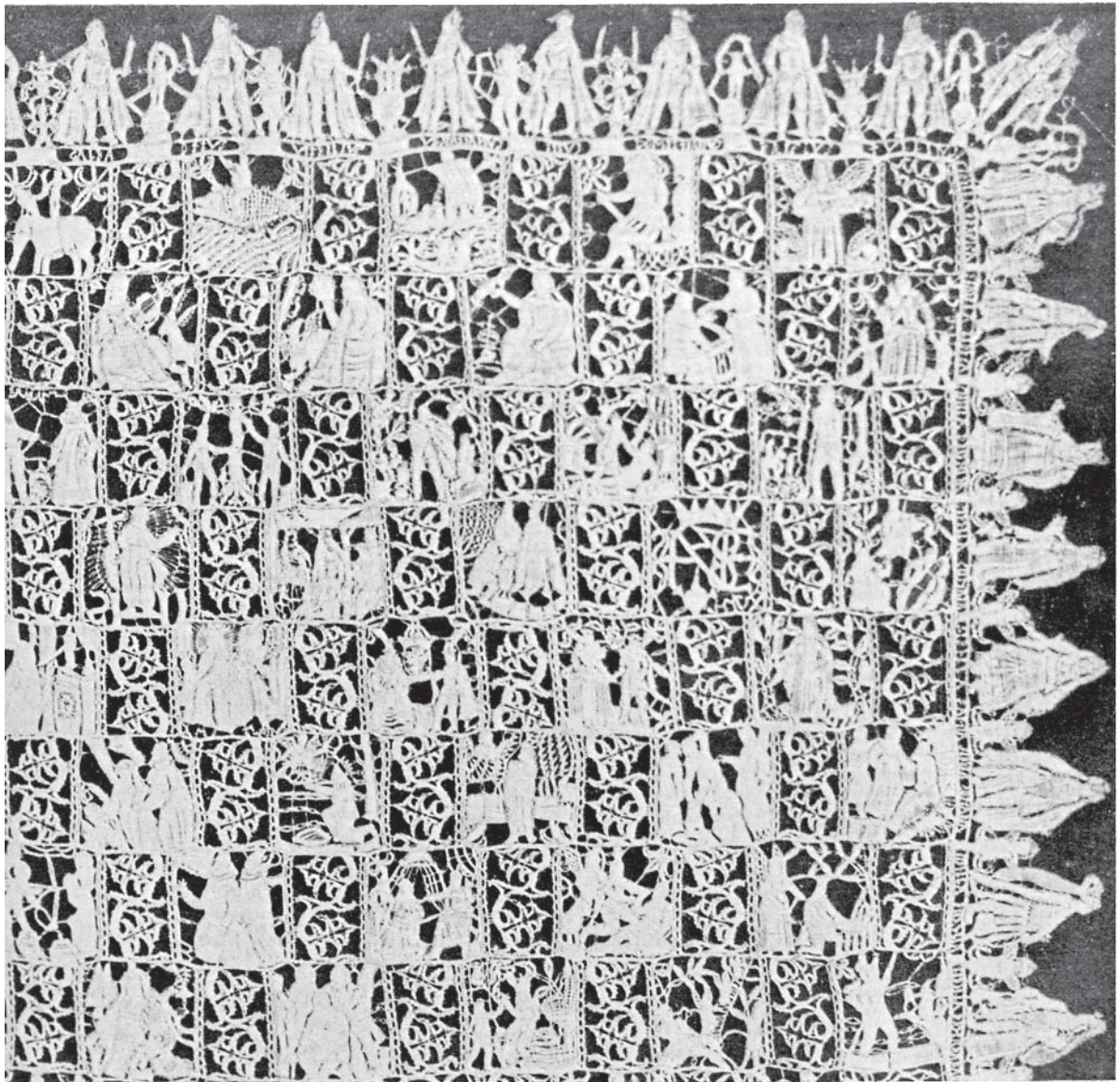
ONSIEUR VAN OVERLOOP'S magnificent book on the lace collection in the Brussels museum is a work of art in itself, and it may safely be said that on account of the size, accuracy and excellence of the illustrations and the

competence and technical acumen of the descriptions, no such record of Flanders lace exists¹. The author has done for the lace of the Netherlands

¹ *Dentelles Anciennes des Musées Royaux des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels à Bruxelles.* Par E. Van Overloop, Conservateur en Chef. Bruxelles: Van Oest & Cie, éditeurs. 120 fr.



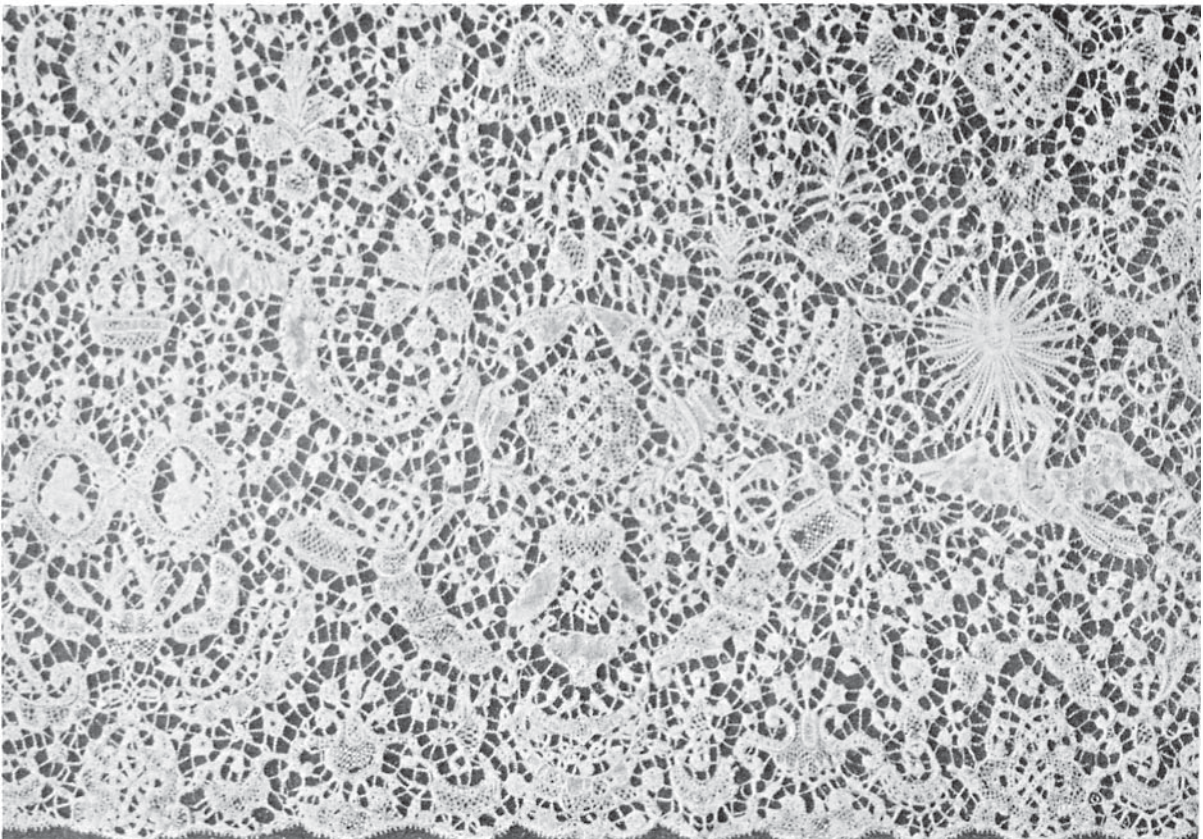
(A) DENTELLE DE FLANDRE (DÉTAIL) 1670



(B) DENTELLE DE BRUXELLES AUX FUSEAUX. COUVREPIEDS OU NAPERON (DÉTAIL) 1599



(C) DENTELLE DE FLANDRE (DÉTAIL) 1670



(D) DENTELLE DE BRUXELLES AUX FUSEAUX (DÉTAIL) 1708

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what Signora Ricci has done for Italian lace, and his book is a treasure of beauty for amateurs of lace itself, and also of utility for designers of all kinds of textile fabrics. The hundred large plates (38 by 25 cm.), details from many of which are repeated on a larger scale, are so clearly reproduced that the lace-maker can easily count the most minute stitches, and trace their progress from *mailles rondes* and *mailles à cinq trous* to the *maille drochel*, etc.

Before passing to the main subject, the true Brussels lace, attention must be drawn to the important notices and examples of the other kindred and neighbourly laces, Brabant, Flanders, Holland and Mechlin. These are all illustrated, and the discovery and study of their various characteristics will be of great interest and advantage. It is a cause for congratulation with M. Van Overloop rather than for complaint that his illustrations are absolutely necessary to the general study of the subject; those which accompany these remarks [pages 330, 331] scarcely suffice to give some idea of certain pieces. But in these fine plates we can identify the effective, if somewhat awkward, scrolls of Brabant, the bold outline of the delicate Mechlin in which every pattern is reminiscent of Alençon, and the shadowy films of Binche and its twin sister Valenciennes. M. Van Overloop gives also a good example of *filet* work, dated 1534, and some specimens of that fine embroidery on muslin and lawn which appears to have been made all over Europe in the eighteenth century. It was certainly made in Schleswig, and also in Bohemia. English authorities, following Mrs. Bury Palliser, have attributed this work to Denmark, and have called it *Tøndern*—the specimens illustrated in plate 100 are from Dinant. The needlework is rivalled only by that of Manila; the design is for the most part of conventional flowers, in the style of the Venetian *point à réseau*.

The variety which it is customary to call plaited lace is represented by four early specimens of Flanders edgings (plate 81). The patterns resemble the Italian pointed edgings of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; in fact, one of the patterns is copied from Isabella Catanea Parasole's book, published at Venice in 1615. A linen cloth called *drap de Circoncision*, of the time of Louis XIII, illustrated in plate 78, is an important example of Flanders lace; the insertions and vandyked edge remind us of the collars worn in portraits of the Stuart period. Another piece, of later date (plate 82) is a rather loosely made copy of the well-known needle-made *point de France* of the second half of the seventeenth century. The complete abandonment of the geometrical style of design in the seventeenth century may be observed in plates 69, 70 and 71. But here, for once I must differ from M. Van Overloop, who compares the

Flanders lace of that epoch with the Milanese. If ingenuity and a display of skill in introducing a variety of fillings should be the main object of the worker, then M. Van Overloop's verdict must be accepted. But if to render clearly and distinctly the designer's idea is the highest merit in the lace-maker, surely the faithful rendering of a simple continuous design such as the piece illustrated here [PLATE I, A], a detail from plate 69, No. 1, which strongly resembles Milanese work, compares favourably with the detail opposite [PLATE II, C], taken from plate 69, No. 2. In the latter the design has been confused really by the lace-worker's anxiety to give a variety of stitches and technical novelties.

The careful, close execution and also a certain awkwardness of design, often found in Brabant lace, are well exemplified in the pieces illustrated plates 12, 32 and 33.

The specimens of Mechlin are most instructive; the earliest designs are somewhat stiff. M. Van Overloop, of course, dates the most beautiful examples, those which he gives in plates 54, 55 and 56, about 1770; they rival the lovely garlands and flowing designs called *rivières*, of the *point d'Alençon* made at the same period. Binche is well represented in plates 72 and 73 by a very remarkable example dated by internal evidence 1730. The very unusual width, 0.24 m., was obtained by making the parts separately, as far as possible according to the patterns, and then joining the separate strips by means of the *accroc*; the joins, however, can be detected. The composition is very varied, including a Papal jubilee with emblems, the grapes of Canaan, the mystical Lamb, and other Biblical subjects, and extends the whole length (3.13 m.) of the piece without repetition, which also adds to the interest of this specimen. The whole background is covered by beautiful conventional flowers. Some examples of the fine close work of Valenciennes, of early eighteenth-century date, are given in plate 74.

When we come to Brussels itself, the needle-point must have the place of honour. Only one early specimen is represented (plate 90), but the work is of supreme excellence. The design is of the first half of the eighteenth century; the bell or pagoda style of the edge and the ground spotted with small detached flowers foreshadow the fashion of the time of Louis XVI. The patterns, which include religious emblems, are joined by a needle-made *réseau* of extreme fineness; a peculiar stitch is used, differing from the well-known *point de gaze*.

The famous and historic cover (plate 84), a detail of which is illustrated here [PLATE I, B] is, of course, to many, the most interesting object in the whole collection. It was worked to commemorate a curious survival of mediæval customs, the Ommeganck, the

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principal pageant of the city of Brussels in the sixteenth century. It started on Palm Sunday from the Church of Notre Dame du Sablon (built in the fifteenth century). Although this procession had its origin in the outward dramatizing of Christian mysteries, yet, as is seen in old pictures and other representations, all the civic corporations took part in it, especially the guilds in their military array, and even the reigning Sovereigns or their representatives. Dated 1599, this cover was presented to the Archduke Albert and his wife Isabella on their inauguration as rulers of Brabant. They are represented and identified by their monograms, as well as King Philip II and numerous other personages with their armorial bearings. Scenes from the Old Testament, such as the Vision of Jacob, the Trials of Job, and the story of Jonah, are given, with the Annunciation, the Adoration of the Magi, etc., from the New Testament. We also have S. Christopher, S. George, and incidents from the legend of the life of S. Gudule who died at the beginning of the eighth century, and was, with S. Michael, patron of Brabant. The upper edge of this wonderful piece (which measures 1.72 by 1.32 m.), is formed of figures of Roman Emperors; the names, Julius, "Tiberias" Caligula, Nero, Augustus, etc., are clearly rendered; the side edges have figures of sibyls arranged in like manner, Sibylla Persica, Libica,² Delphica, Cumana, Europea, "Ægyptia" etc. Signora Ricci, in her book on Italian Bobbin Lace, refers to this cover as a "monument of the lacemaker's art".

In another example of early Brussels work, illustrated in plate 21, the design aims at following the "candelabra" idea which is common in large pieces of about 1690, but the whole effect is confused and a large space is covered rather aimlessly with small formless patterns joined by *brides à picots*. A variant of the same class of design, illustrated in plate 26, has a *réseau* ground which probably dates it about 1700.

Perhaps the finest example of this period is the historical piece (plate 23) of which we reproduce a part here [PLATE II, D]. Two portraits under an imperial crown represent the Emperor Charles VI and his wife Elizabeth of Brunswick; their mono-

² The spelling here is as in the lace.

gram is also introduced. Below the portraits are two hearts, and one may conclude that the date was that of the marriage of the two royal personages, 1708. The interlacing stems, canopies, trophies and knots are very clearly and finely executed, as is also the eagle soaring towards the sun, a favourite emblem of royalty. The patterns are joined by beautiful *brides à picots*, and the fillings of *point d'esprit*, etc., are arranged so as in no way to detract from the intention of the design.

The most perfect example, technically speaking, of Bobbin work in the collection is a very fine and characteristic piece reproduced in plate 1. The difficult *réseau drochel* had not yet appeared, but every other stitch and filling is carried out perfectly. The subject is the Seven Dolours of the B.V.M. The candelabra idea at the four corners, the angels with emblems, still more the work of the central figure, all are of intense interest and beauty. Another elaborate subject, The Finding of the Cross by the Empress Helena (plate 9), the date of which is 1720, is also a noteworthy specimen of perfect workmanship; while some extraordinarily beautiful designs and workmanship, applied to Lappets and Cap Crowns, may be seen illustrated in plates 45, 46 and 49; in some of these the *réseau drochel* is used, certainly adding to the brilliancy of the pattern.

It was not until the eighteenth century that the fairylike fabric produced by Brussels bobbins established and enthroned itself. Forty or fifty beautiful specimens presented to us, dating from 1750 to 1880, are a monument of enterprise, ingenuity, and excellence of technique. On the question of proposing the laces of this period for imitation much might be said as to the appropriateness of such ambitious designs for the delicate filmy fabric in which they are expressed. Here it may be mentioned that the interest of these wonderful pieces is much heightened by the fact that there is no possibility at present of producing thread of equal tenacity and fineness. The threads of these laces were spun and twisted by the human finger, an agency which no machinery has been able to rival. The laces of the Royal Collections in Brussels are really unique, and it is a source of rejoicing that they are collected and in safety, and that such a worthy record exists of them.