

## Lacemakers

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**O**N our arrival in Europe to study the lace-makers, our minds were full of traditions and anecdotes about their customs and conditions. Since the origin of point lace has been conceded by all to Venice and that of bobbin lace by many to the adjacent provinces, it was to Italy that we went first.

The lace industries in Europe are of two kinds: the factories in or near large cities, and the cottage or village-industries in fishing hamlets and hill towns. With the exception of a few convents, it is in the factories that point lace is produced. The lace is called point simply from its being made with a needle. Venice, Brussels, Vienna, Moscow, Athens and Florence have establishments for the training of lace-makers and the production of lace. At these places are sold also all kinds of laces made in the surrounding country as well. Thus, in the shop of Signor Navone in Florence one buys not only the points of Venice and Burano but also *torchons* and heavy silk laces from the fishing villages of Santa Margherita and Rapallo, the guipures from Cantù, near Como, and the revivals of early drawn work from the convents at Assisi.

Santa Margherita on the Riviera di Levante, some seventeen miles from Genoa, was full of interest to us. Our acquaintance in Boston with a family of lace-makers who had come from that town, their enthusiastic descriptions of the place and the excellent character of the lace produced there, drew us early in our journey to Santa Margherita. The men seem to be engaged in one of two pursuits, either fishing or keeping hotels. The women apparently all make lace; at least they all know how to make it. The town is arcaded. In the morning, the women sit with their cushions under the cool shade of the arches and in the afternoon, on the beach. Many are at work on wide scarfs of white or black silk

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lace, which require enormously long cushions and several hundred bobbins. These hang tied with tapes in bunches. When, in the process of the work, the maker needs to use one of these bunches, she removes the tape with a movement so deft that the bobbins fall free and in place. Why she doesn't have to sort them is a mystery even to those familiar with making bobbin lace. The trick seems to be only the result of manual dexterity acquired by practice begun at the age of four. After you watch her a few minutes, she will rise from her work, disappear into the house only to reappear at once with a finished scarf of glistening white silk. This she silently unfolds with a touch so loving that it at once becomes to you a precious thing. Then, this Margherita proceeds to adorn her pretty head with it. As she quickly draws it about her throat she smiles and says: "For the *teeater*." No French milliner ever adjusted a Paris hat with more convincing skill. You see the scarf, the beguiling smile and the lovely face. The combination is irresistible. You buy the scarf. When you examine it you find the design good, the execution skilful and the material worthy of both. The patterns for these peasant laces in Italy are generally excellent. They have been handed down from the best period of the Renaissance and are true to the principles of decorative design. These patterns are either geometrical or highly conventional flower-forms, scrolls and vines: all characterized with the beautiful restraint peculiar to the best period of Italian art. The one fault with the working-patterns is that new ones are pricked from old ones. This is demoralizing to the production of lace, because the design is soon distorted. The habit prevails, however, among lace-makers of all parts of Europe. When we began our work in Boston, the pricking of patterns became at once a serious matter. I was confronted with a task that threatened to confine me wholly to supplying our girls with fresh patterns. I saw that some mechanical method of reproducing designs must be employed. I found that by dotting all the pin-holes for the pattern on a piece of tracing cloth, I could produce a working pattern by the process of blue printing, just as an architect makes his working-plans. In case of lace with fine mesh-grounds, the design can be dotted on cross-section tracing-paper. This



The American Type  
Lacemaker in the Arts and Crafts Lace School, Boston, Massachusetts



A Foreign Type  
Belgian Lace Maker



Lacemakers at Palestrina, Italy

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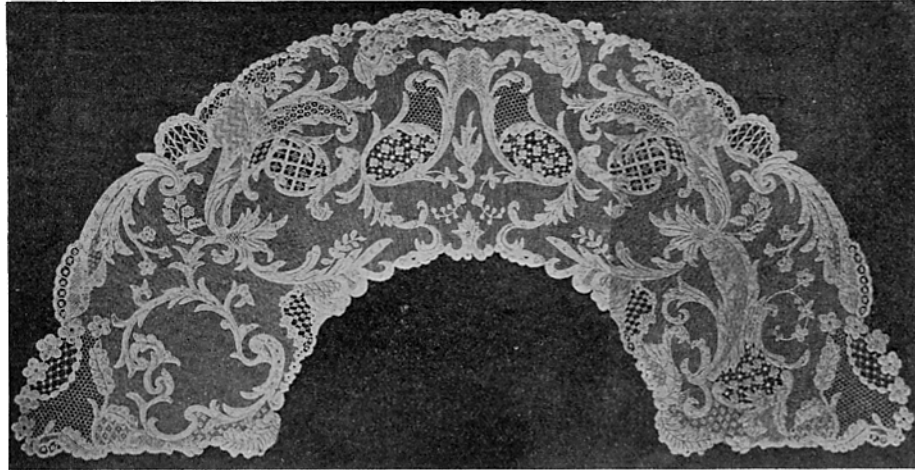
paper comes in the scale of millimetres, so that it is just right for the finest mesh. As each mesh worked requires a pin, and there are six hundred and twenty-five meshes to the square inch, some idea will be had of how accurate a working pattern must be and how quickly one pin-hole can be torn out into another. Our girls make their own blue prints as they require them; thus at once enjoying temporary recreation from lace making and still accomplishing something necessary to the work. The blue has proved to be the most practical color over which to work the finest threads.

From Santa Margherita we journeyed north to the foothills of the Alps to Cantù. Quite unaware that it was a *fiesta*, we found the place overflowing with excitement. A horse-fair and a cattle fair were in progress. In the square was a side-show that would have done credit to "our own Barnum." It was in a circular tent adorned without with pictorial representations of strange creatures. Perched on a step-ladder outside, was the showman washing the paw of a gorilla, which obligingly put it out from behind the canvas screen. After much soaking and soaping, the black paw was wiped on a clean towel. As no black came off, the onlookers were presumably convinced that the creature was genuine. The showman seized a drum on which he beat a tattoo, shouting in his native tongue: "Two cents, two cents, step right in!" This remarkable find only tended to depress our spirits and we thought: "We shall never see lace-makers at work to-day, with all these attractions in town." Just around the corner within hearing of the showman's voice, we came upon a group of women, young and old, rattling their lace bobbins with industry and devotion. All along the streets we saw them under arbors and sheds working as if no *fiesta* were close at hand. In one yard, we saw seven women with their cushions, while a man sat among them stringing the beans for dinner.

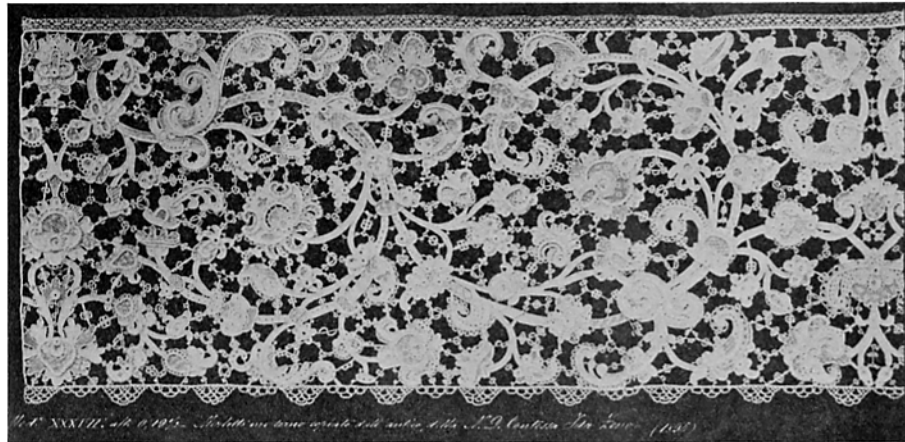
We went among all classes of lace-makers in Venice, from the factories around St. Mark's Square far down the lagoon to Palestrina and Chioggia. With the exception of the colored silk lace called Polychrome, there is no bobbin lace made in the city. The point laces are made there and at Burano. The bobbin laces are made in the fishing villages down the lagoon. I

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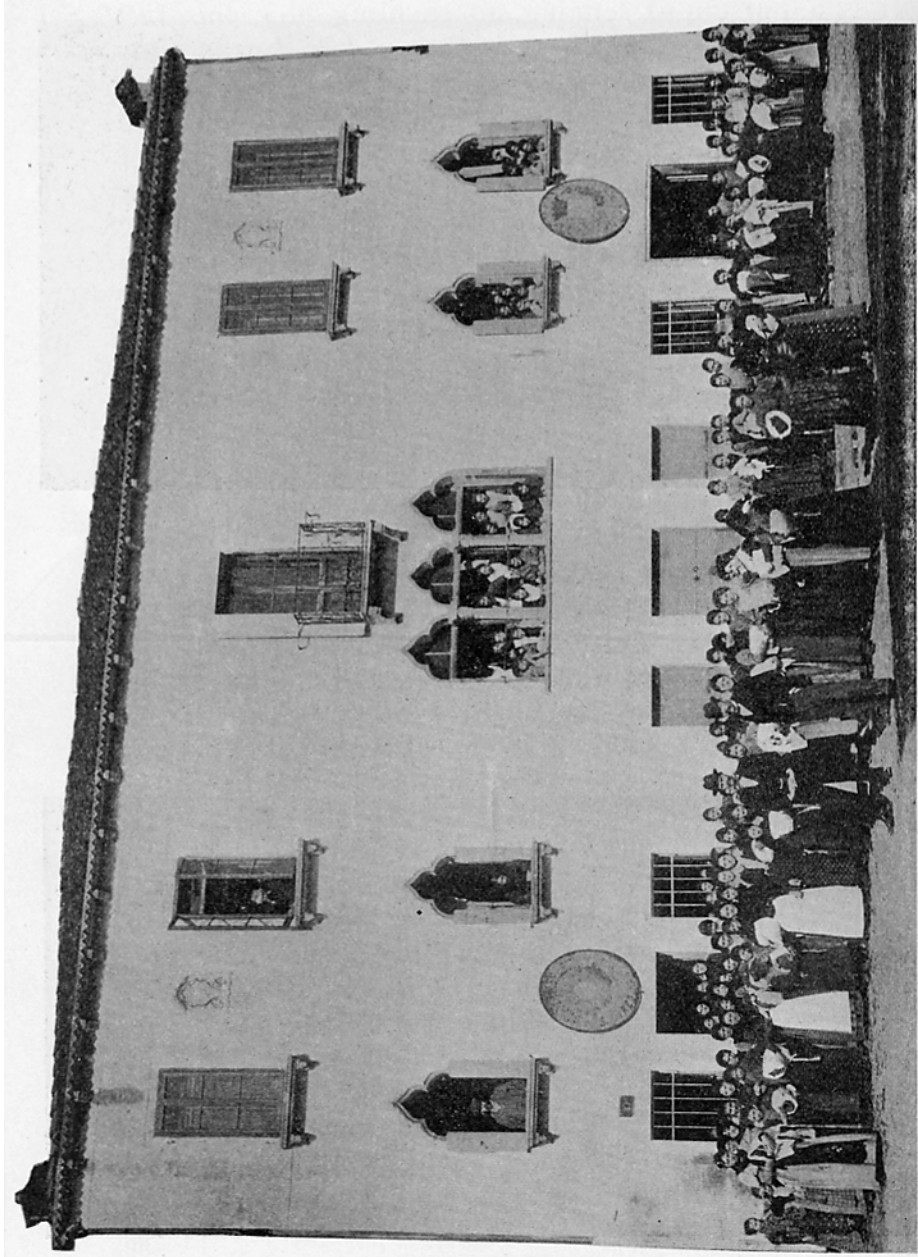
had some difficulty visiting the lace factories by myself. They keep spotters all over the city to convey the tourist to the shops. When you arrive your guide presses electric buttons at the lower door, and several times on the way up stairs. These light electric lamps and summon a suave dame who receives you. But they also, unless my instinct misleads me, announce the approach of Americans, and one of those electric buttons when pressed by the guide, raises the price of the lace. One day, after much maneuvering, I escaped the guides and went into a big shop behind St. Mark's. In a recent book on lace, the writer states regarding these very workers in Venice: "The girls are not allowed to talk because they get into mischief—but they may sing." On my way up stairs I expected to hear the song. Instead, a storm of chatter greeted my ears: the noise becoming Babel as I approached the room. Mentally reproaching myself for believing all I found in books, I entered. The girls politely reduced their chatter to a murmur. I looked about for the unhealthful conditions I had heard prevailed in these factories. I found a large, light, airy room, beautiful young girls, certainly happy at their work, and exquisitely clean. My one criticism was that there were too many of them for ideal conditions of sedentary labor. At Burano in the Royal Lace School under Queen Margherita's patronage, I found splendid conditions. The girls work from nine to twelve, and from two to four. The patterns are all dark colors. They wear clean cotton dresses and *dark* cotton aprons. Take note, feminine reader, you who put on a dazzling white apron when you sit down to fine work! It was my good fortune to see the girls come out at noon. They wear a cotton kerchief pinned over the head to keep their hair clean. Their shoes are simply a sole of wood held on by a leather strap over the instep. At every step, the wooden sole clicks on the street. As the girls poured out of the shop, the noise of their shoes reached us a block away, until the whole three hundred pairs of wooden soles clicking over the stone pavement produced in me much the same feeling as the musical rattle of hundreds of lace-bobbins. When I hear it blended with the soft voices of my girls, it suggests at once the combination of industry and the joy of youthful content. I was full



Fan: Leaf Point, from the Burano School



Rose Point, antique design, from the Burano School



Royal School of Lace-Making, Burano, Italy



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of theories when I went to Europe: my experience with the girls in our shop had been that lace-making first of all is a joy to the worker. It is a pursuit so refining, so enobling, that this fact alone is a plea for our industry in Boston. In Europe, my theories proved true. In the lace-making villages, the women are of superior type. They are never idle. Their manners and voices are gentle. Their work is a constant joy. Never did I find one who admitted it a strain upon the eyes. Do not believe all the constantly published paragraphs about lace-makers going blind in factories! The lace is no longer made under painful conditions—in damp cellars. Good lace-makers are valuable to their employers and skill is to be treasured, not abused. They do not work in dark rooms at all, but in upper stories of well-lighted and well-ventilated buildings. Personal cleanliness is essential at all times.

In Belgium, I found the wages less, since living is dearer. And I found the lace less interesting by far. Quantities of common *Duchesse* lace are produced for the American tourists. It is made mosaic fashion. All the flowers, leaves, and scrolls are made in tiny villages and sent to the factories to be put together. A family will make only roses for generations and another will make leaves. An agent collects these bits and takes them to the neighboring factory, be it Brussels, Ghent or Antwerp. Instead of an artist making a design and the lace-makers executing it, the artist makes his design out of the flowers and scrolls brought to the factory. The results are atrocious. Natural roses with layers of petals, scrolls which begin but go nowhere in particular, flounces in which every portion of the design stands up aggressively and suggests in no way the pendant character of the lace. Oh, it is all so hopelessly bad, both bobbin and point lace! And the Americans are responsible. They run after mere prettiness of detail, pretty roses that "look so natural." Some of the point lace is very fine and beautiful in execution. But what is the first thing in rare lace to attract one? It should be the pattern. Lace to be valuable need not be excessively fine. Belgian laces in minuteness of detail seem to warp the judgment of many into thinking them superior to all others. But the Venetians with their faithful reproduction

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of old designs that suggest in no way natural flowers, are far in advance of all other nations at present.

My disappointment in Belgium was great. One thing comforted me and that was my visit to the *Béguinage* of St. Elziabeth in Ghent. A *Béguinage* is a settlement of single women. There are several in Belgium and some in Holland. The women are self-supporting. They pay into the treasury each year a fixed sum of money. The vow they take upon entering the community is not irrevocable, but few ever care to go back into the world. Young girls, orphans largely, enter a sort of convent school until they are old enough to do some kind of work intelligently; then they are allowed to go to live two or four together in one of the little houses which line the streets in blocks. When we approached our *Béguinage* in Ghent, we found it surrounded by a high brick wall. We knocked at the gate and were admitted by the portress: a genial Flemish woman in white coif and dark blue gown. I asked in American French to be directed to the lacemakers. She replied in Flemish French that they were in number 115. The settlement appeared similar to the Yale campus before the old brick dormitories were demolished. Churches and schools occupy the center, surrounded by grass and old trees. The place is two hundred years old at the least. Our way led to the left, down a street between low blocks of brick houses separated from the street by gardens with high white-washed garden walls of stone. Each house was numbered and had the name of its patron saint on the gate. We saw one of the sisters standing near a pretty Flemish girl working on a cushion cover. We asked her in French for No. 115. With a smile at my husband, she said: "Id iss foorder up." At last we found it and knocked loudly. A slide opened in the gate and there appeared an eye, part of a large nose, and a bit of white coif. The gate opened and we were admitted. We asked for lace. The owner of the eye and the large nose invited us into the house, which was a clean, trim little place, with stone floor and white washed ceilings. The walls were tinted blue. The sister produced her wares: all *Duchesse* lace. Then she brought out a mirror, and began to dress me up in collars, cuffs and *fichus* with so engaging a manner that

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I found myself buying recklessly. She was French, while her three companions in the house were Flemish. One cooks for the family and we saw her pan of biscuit in the oven in the kitchen later. It was a sight to make us forget lace and remember how hungry we could be. A third sister does sewing, and a fourth is a nurse: truly an unique household in a settlement of industrious women.

I came away from my experience among the European lacemakers with great satisfaction, and full of confidence in our endeavor at home. I was still surer that those bright Boston girls with their adaptability, their devotion, their sweet loyalty to their work which they know to be experimental, would accomplish our purpose at no distant day.