

# ECCLESIASTICAL LACE ANCIENT AND MODERN: A COMPARISON

✿ WRITTEN BY MRS. F. NEVILL JACKSON ✿

## PART I

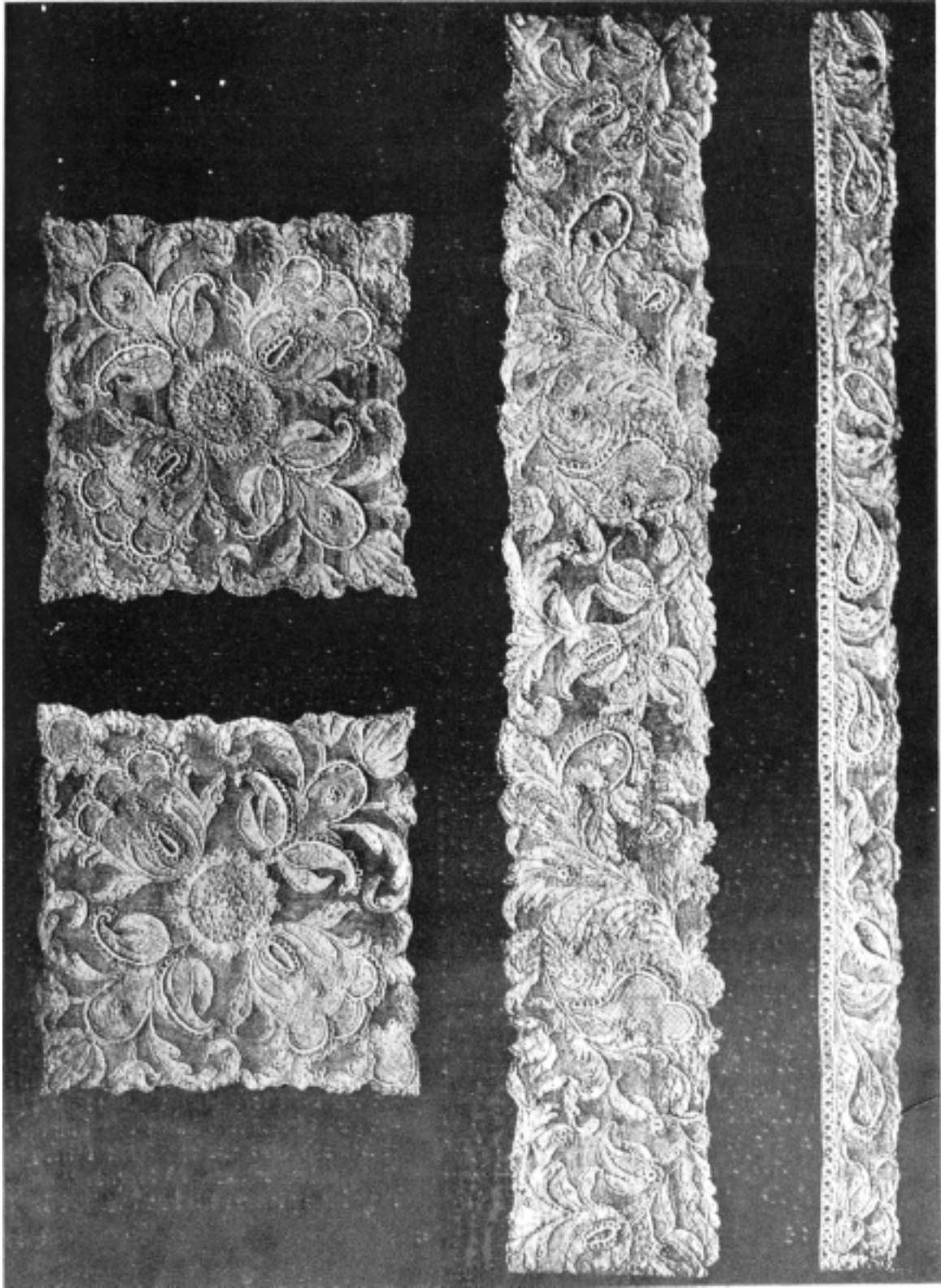
**T**HERE is no type of lace which is used for church purposes alone to the exclusion of other kinds; ecclesiastical lace includes all types; for since the days when St. Dunstan himself is said to have designed patterns to be worked by the nuns and St. Cuthbert's grave clothes showed 'a finger's length of cutwork,' that earliest of all forms of open-work ornamentation, up to the present day, the finest productions of the lace-maker's art have been devoted to the service of the church.

Our subject is divided into two classes: lace which from its design shows that it was originally made for the ornamentation of vestments, for the dresses of the statues of saints in the churches, or for hangings, altar-linen and other accessories of public worship; and lace which, after being used for other purposes, has been dedicated or bequeathed to the service of the church, as for example in the eighteenth century when Barbara, sister of the king of Portugal, was married, she solemnly dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, at the church of Madre di Dios, the jewels and dress of finest needle-point which she had worn at her wedding. Madame de Maintenon also presented a fine bobbin-made flounce of seventeenth-century work to Fénelon when he was consecrated archbishop of Cambrai. As a modern instance of lace made for lay use being converted for ecclesiastical purposes we may mention the dress of fine modern Alençon which was one of the best examples in the Paris exhibition of 1859; this was bought by Napoleon III for the Empress Eugénie, who after quitting Paris had it converted into trimming

for a rochet and presented it to Pope Leo XIII.

There is also a comparatively small number of examples which, though ornamented with ecclesiastical emblems and objects connected with sacred history, were made for and have always been used by the laity. Amongst these the larger number are of laces or darned netting, which on account of its facility in working lends itself largely to elaborate pictorial representation; such pieces were used for bed-hangings, window-curtains, and table-covers at a time when the spirit of the age demanded an ostentatious display of familiarity with the text of the scriptures. The puritan ladies of England embroidered and worked in 'hollie' point many christian emblems as trimmings for their personal and household linen. Such, however, cannot be called ecclesiastical work.

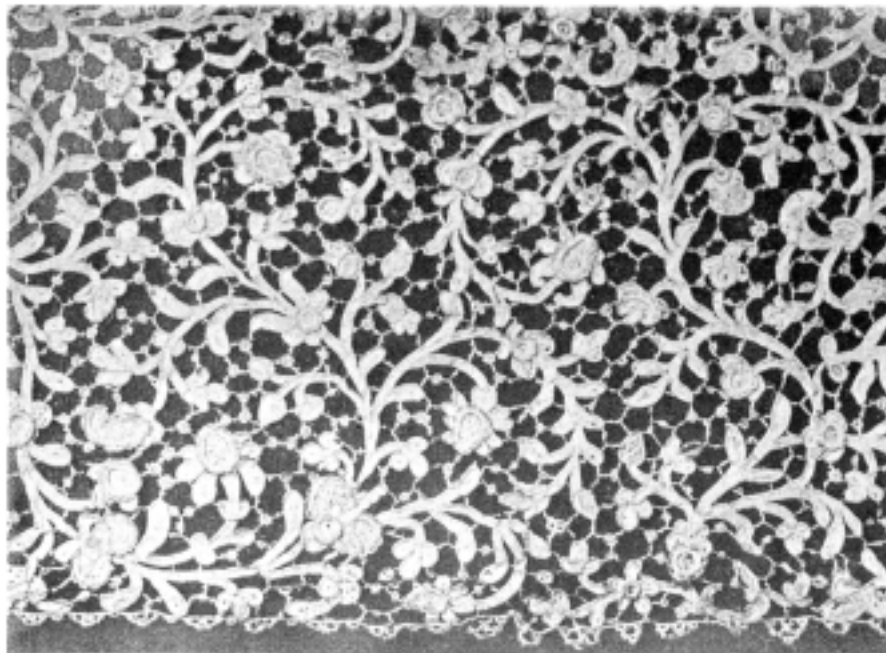
The reason that in studying church lace we find much of the finest quality is obvious; piety and devotion have prompted the richness of the gifts, and the fabric, at any rate in past centuries, was generally made in convents, where time has not the same commercial value as for the workers without the walls. This has often been the reason for the superb enrichment of the design; the worker, who was frequently the designer as well in the seventeenth century, put in modes and stitches gratuitously as it were, because of the love and devotion in her heart. Lace was long called 'nun's work,' and even to the present day the term lingers in remote districts. Nor was it executed solely by females; in some of the early pattern books of the sixteenth century men are represented as working with the needle, and the books are written 'for the profit of men as well as women.' Some of these



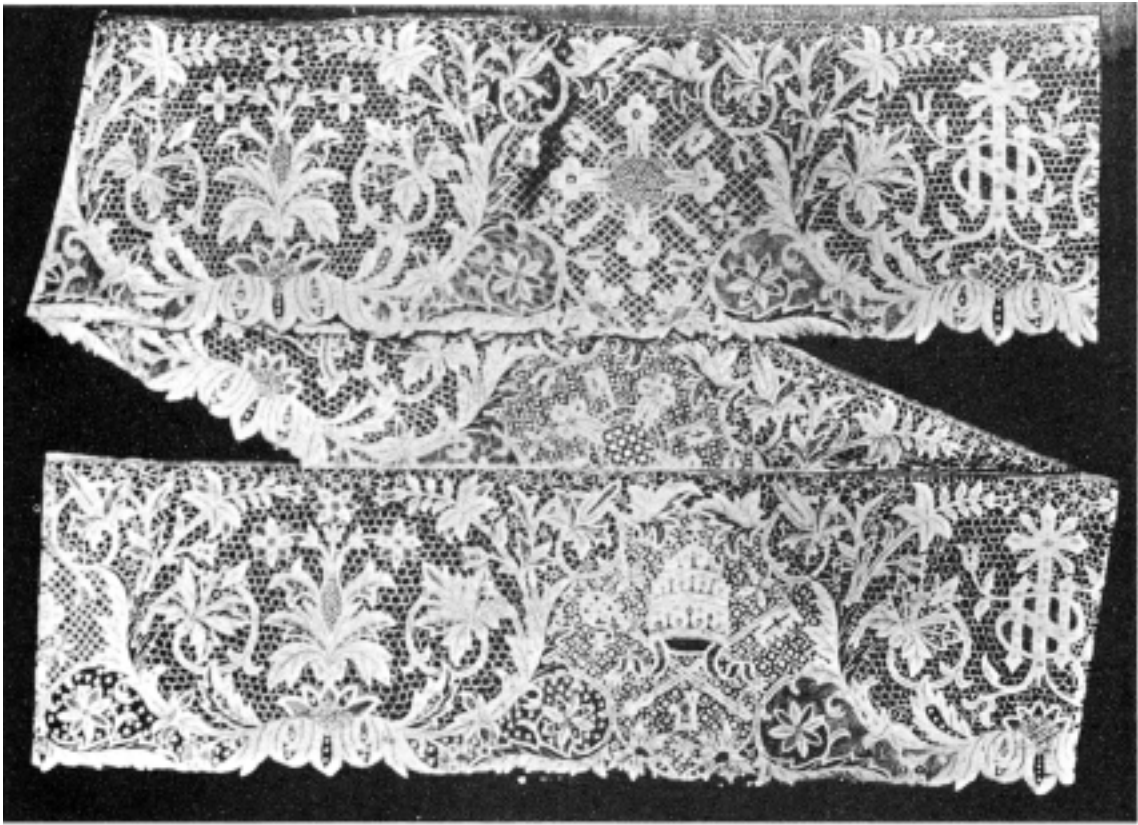
SILK NEEDLE-POINT LACE; ITALIAN, SEVENTEENTH CENTURY



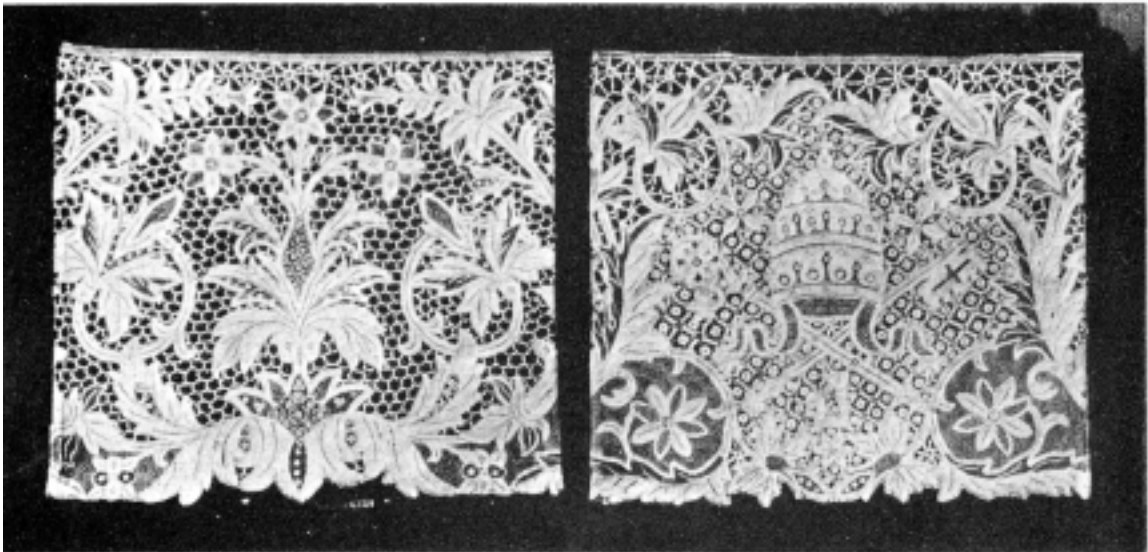
ALB OF VENETIAN ROSE-POINT LACE, SEVENTEENTH CENTURY



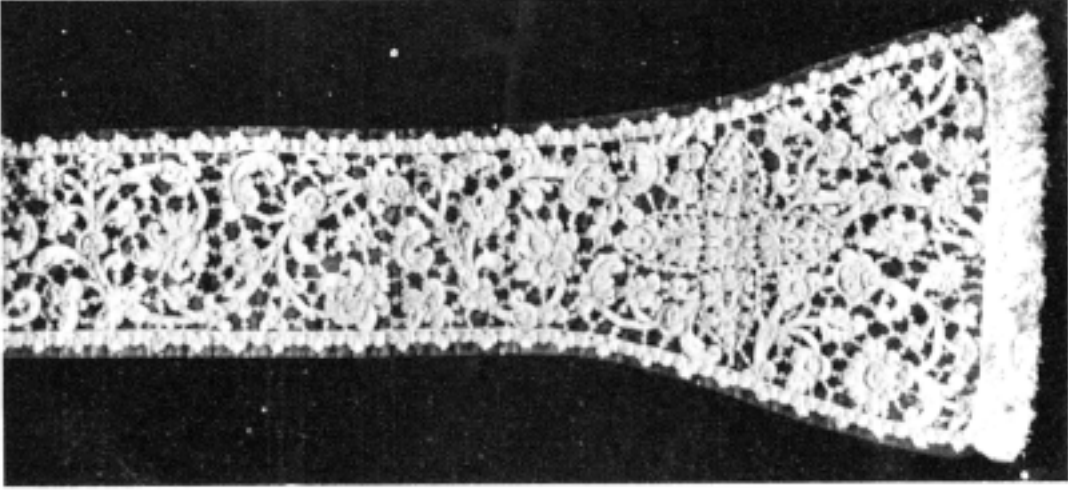
DETAIL OF THE SAME



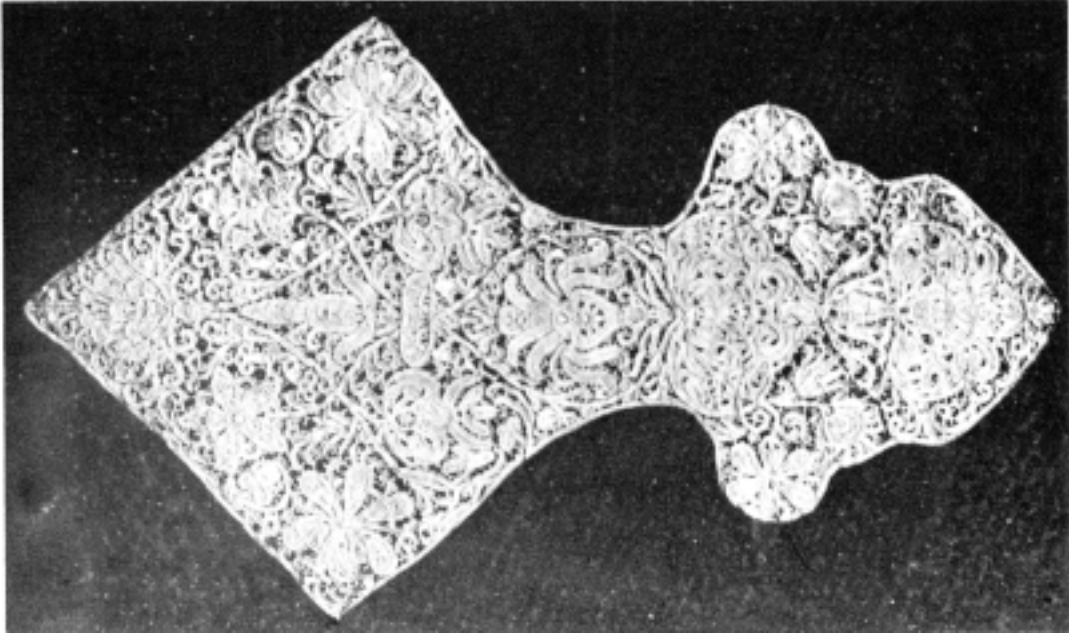
MODERN NEEDLE-POINT LACE MADE IN IRELAND IN 1887



DETAIL OF THE SAME



STOLE OF NEEDLE-POINT LACE, PROBABLY MADE IN VENICE  
IN THE SEVENTENTH CENTURY



ITALIAN NEEDLE-POINT LACE OF THE SEVENTENTH CENTURY

books were composed by monks, and many have been found in the libraries of monasteries.

It is in the quality of the design that the ecclesiastical lace of the nineteenth century compares so unfavourably with that of earlier date. Let us not blame the artists: are there not periods in the history of nations when events, discoveries, lines of thought and teaching, all combine to produce a superiority which shows itself in every form of art and handicraft? Such a combination gave us the lace of the seventeenth century, and the lack of artistic development in the nineteenth century results in the productions some of which we are able to reproduce for comparison.

Let us take as an example of superficial artistic training the method of obtaining designs for what is considered to be one of the *chef d'œuvres* in church lace of modern times, the set made at the Presentation convent, Youghal, co. Cork, in 1887, for presentation by the Roman Catholics of Ireland to the late pope, Leo XIII, on the occasion of his jubilee. The authorized account is almost pathetic in its revelations of simplicity and ignorance:—'The Sisters soon learned that a knowledge of drawing and design was imperative, and accordingly several of them devoted themselves during the short intervals snatched from teaching in the poor schools to drawing. Later on a drawing master was requisitioned to give lessons and a drawing class was established in connexion with South Kensington Institute. All the designs of the lace have been furnished exclusively by the Sisters. It may be noted that experience has proved some knowledge of the material work is necessary for the preparation of suitable designs. On several occasions designs have been sent in by drawing masters and other certified artists, and though they look well on paper, the sisters knew full well they would never suit, and of course they discarded them.'

All honour to the sisters who snatched an

hour from the arduous duties of teaching; Ecclesiastical but we no longer wonder that in the Irish Lace Ancient needle-point laces we miss the dignity and beauty that a thorough knowledge of A Comparison artistic methods and history of artistic traditions alone can give. Be the style never so simple, a subtle knowledge must underlie the tracery of the lines. The naturalistic treatment, that refuge of the imperfectly trained, is not the highest form; the mere imitative rendering of any object, whether it be of leaves, flowers, a cross, or the triple crown of the papacy, shows that the designer sees the natural objects but does not necessarily use them intelligently for his purpose. The seeing accurately should be a means of study with regard to lace designing, not the end. There must be deeper study. The mode of development of vegetable growth will then be found to rest on laws of regularity and symmetry. When the designer of lace uses naturalistic ornament he is devoting his labours to pictorial and not to decorative art. I do not say that mere pictorial ornament is always and altogether unsuitable for lace, but I assert most emphatically that it is not the highest form of lace decoration, and should usually be avoided.

After the fine period of Byzantine art to which the beautiful early lace designs of Italy are not a little indebted, Flanders and Italy produced the finest specimens of lace, and it was not until the masters of decorative art had been attracted to France by Francis I and were actively patronized by the succeeding house of Bourbon that the French predominance in artistic training and execution became especially noticeable. Strange to say, it was through political changes that art in lace design and lace-making gradually spread beyond Italy and Flanders, the homes of its youth after leaving the Byzantine cradle.

When Colbert, the far-seeing minister of the great Louis, established royal manufactories of tapestry and furniture, he also subsidized and founded the lace factory at the