



THE EVOLUTION OF ALENÇON LACE.
BY MRS. F. NEVILL JACKSON.

THE story of the gradual development of Alençon lace is one of the most interesting pages in the history of hand-made lace: a knowledge of the circumstances connected with the birth of the factory and the vicissitudes which have since befallen the great industry is essential for the collector, because the design and mode of workmanship vary according to the period to which the specimen belongs, each successive stage being marked and unmistakable.

The earliest productions were Venetian in character; in fact, they so closely resemble the fine Venetian point of the middle of the seventeenth century that they are hardly to be distinguished. This is accounted for by the fact that it was in Venice that Colbert, the Minister of Louis XIV., procured his lace instructors: as early as 1653 he was in correspondence with lace merchants of Venice concerning patterns suitable for making in France.

It was from Italy that the love of lace-wearing had come, Catherine de Medici having introduced the mode on her marriage with the French King; and though in her day it was chiefly the gold, silver and points coupés of the period which were worn, later, the fine points of Italy and Flanders were adopted with enthusiasm, and the demand for them led to the establishment of the great industry at Alençon.

Sumptuary edicts were issued in France against luxury during a period extending over two centuries; the finances of France were in a parlous condition; the people were ground down by taxes; yet the land-owners and great nobles with difficulty found money to pay for the extravagant fashions of the Court; they paid enormous sums to the Italian and Flemish lace merchants for the ruffles, jabots, flounces, and lace trimmings which were required for Court dress.

But laws regulating the wearing of lace were issued in vain. The King himself disregarded them, for we are told that immediately after two edicts had been issued in 1577, Henry appeared at the meeting of the States of Blois with his cloak trimmed with many hundreds of pounds' worth of gold lace. No wonder that with such an example the nobles also disregarded the laws.

Even though dealings with Flemish merchants were prohibited under "penalty of corporal punishment," the fashions of lace wearing extended from the elaborate lace shirts and "cols rabattus," or turn-down collars (which had now in Louis XIII.'s reign succeeded the ruffs), to the boots of the men, which were profusely ornamented at the tops, the wide space between the leg and the turned-over leather of the high boot being filled up with ruffles of lace; the women also wore extensively lace-trimmed garments, caps, aprons and capes in double tiers; lace rosettes ornamented the men's Court shoes; garters edged with lace were worn below the knee, which gave rise to the epigram—

"Wear a farm in shoe strings edged with gold,
And spangled garters worth a copyhold."

It was at this time that Colbert determined to turn to account the extravagant wearing of lace, and more edicts were issued forbidding the wearing of Spanish, Italian and Flemish laces, French lace only being permissible; but French lace was made only in inferior quality, nothing but what was contemptuously called "beggar's lace" being procurable of native manufacture. This fabric was something like the Torchon of the present day, of loosely-twisted coarse thread, and the dainty and discriminating lords and ladies would have none of it.

Colbert was not to be deterred, for he was determined to keep in France the enormous revenues spent on lace in foreign countries. In 1665 he procured Venetian instructors, who taught the art of lace-making at the Chateau de l'Onray, at Alençon, in France, as it had been carried on for many years in Italy.

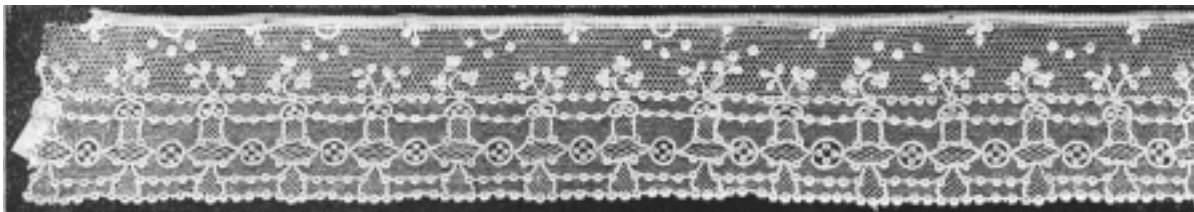
The Connoisseur.

The instructors found intelligent pupils in the French lace-makers, who had been accustomed to make the twisted and plaited thread laces and imitate the old point coupé of Italy. There was much prejudice to be overcome, but eventually the French women became expert makers of the new fabric.

Madame Guilbert, a native of Alençon, who was the manager of Colbert's lace factory at l'Onray,

France," which was the first Alençon lace, can be clearly traced.

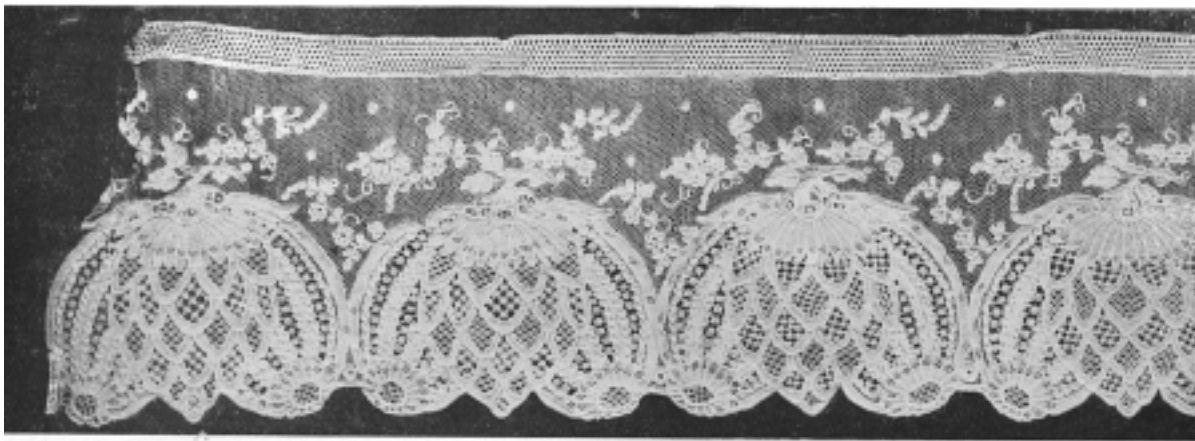
The fortune of the Alençon factory was made, for the making of the lace for all who were received at Versailles, or attached to the Royal household, was no small undertaking, to say nothing of that large crowd whose flounces, bed-trimmings, dressing-gowns, head-dresses, ruffles and cravats must be in



ALENÇON LACE, LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.
EACH MESH OF THE GROUND IS MADE WITH THE NEEDLE-POINT.

brought to Paris some of the first specimens of the work done by the French pupils of the Venetian teachers. Colbert, who had the true French eye for effect, arranged a supper party at Versailles for the King. After supper His Majesty was invited to inspect the lace, which had been carefully arranged in a room hung with damask. Louis was delighted; he ordered a large sum of money to be

the fashion, even though they were not in the Royal circle. A grant of 36,000 francs was made for the manufacture of the "Point de France." A company was formed, eight directors were appointed, with salaries of 8,000 livres a year, to supervise the doings of those employed at the factory, and lace schools were also set up by Colbert at the Chateau de Madrid, and it is likely also at Argentan (although



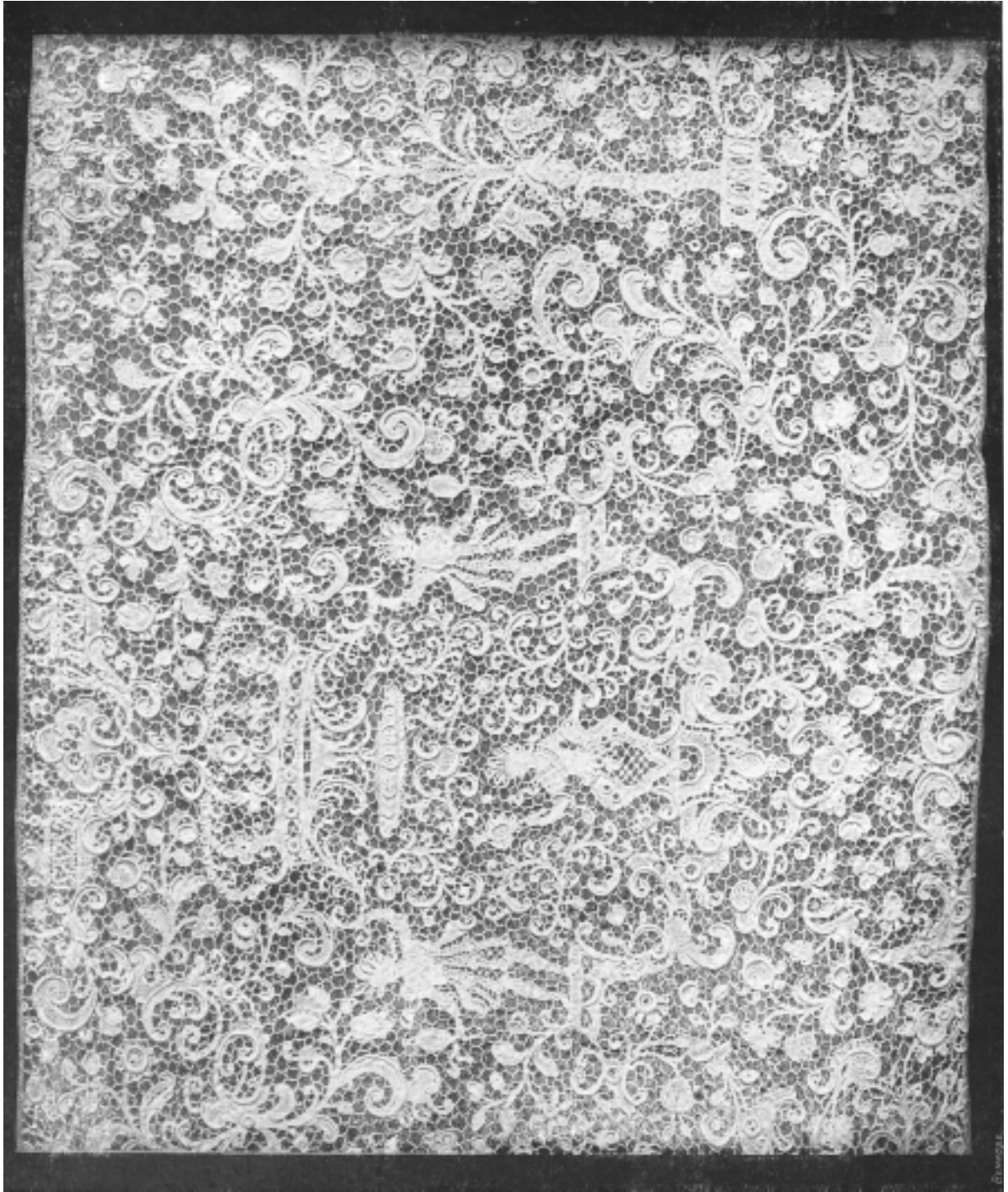
BORDER OF NEEDLE-POINT LACE (ALENÇON) WITH PATTERN OF SMALL SPRIGS
AND BORDER OF PENDANT PINE-APPLES AND BLOSSOMS. ABOUT 1850.

given to Madame Guilbert, desired his courtiers that no other lace should be worn in his presence, and called the new fabric "Point de France."

Our third illustration is an example of Rose or Raised Venetian Point of the period, in which the inspiration for the methods in making "Point de

no mention is made of this centre in the ordinance), whose productions have earned almost equal fame with that of Alençon.

It will be understood, therefore, why until 1678 Alençon point strongly resembled Spanish and Venetian points, the designs being those used in



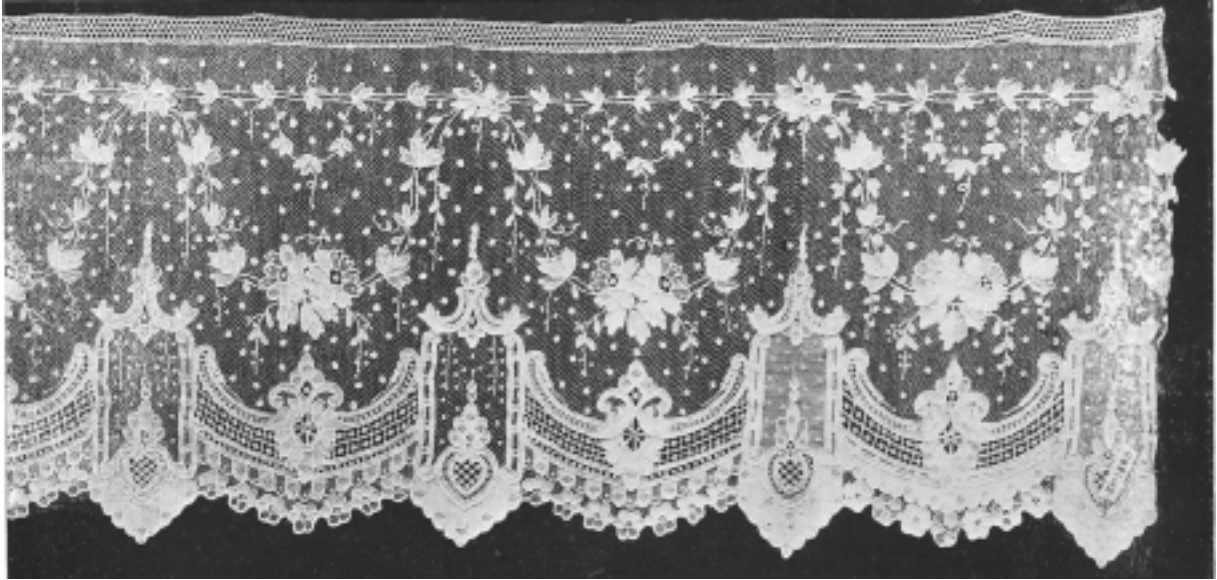
RAISED
VENETIAN OR
ROSE POINT
LACE.
SEVENTEENTH
CENTURY.

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Italy, the stitches identical. After that period Alençon lace begins to have characteristics of its own, and can no longer be classed in the general term of "Point de France."

Connoisseurs in lace consider that from the time that the Venetian influence was thrown off the lace deteriorated; the exquisite raised effects resembling carved ivory in richness, but more beautiful on account of the softness of colouring which the

it became a mere border. The semé or powderings continued during the Empire period, the Napoleonic bees being used for the powderings of the lace supplied to Josephine. These spots and dots are still used in connection with designs from real flowers which are now in vogue. Point d'Alençon was called a "winter" lace on account of its being of a thick and firm make; this firmness is due to the padded cordonnet, to which also it owes the



NEEDLE-POINT LACE (ALENÇON) WITH PATTERN OF FLORAL FESTOONS SEMÉ WITH DOTS, AND WAVED BORDER OF CONVENTIONAL DESIGN, 7 INCHES WIDE. LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY.

ivory can never attain, were replaced by lighter and more flimsy designs. Soon after the death of Colbert, the patterns were chiefly flowing and undulating, shewing the effect of the Renaissance tendency in the arabesques. Small figures and heads were frequently introduced, then came the eighteenth century garlands and bouquets; and it is interesting to notice that fashions in decoration which affected the style of ornamentation in the houses and furniture of the period were also seen in Alençon lace.

At this time escutcheons and lozenges of finer ground appeared in the lace of Alençon, just as the painted medallions of Boucher were inserted in the panels of the salons of the time. Then, when in furniture the ornate legs of tables and chairs gave place to more stiff and upright designs, so the lace patterns became more rigid and angular.

In Louis XVI.'s reign the Reseau or ground in Alençon was first semé with spots, tears or insects, and the pattern of the lace shrunk and dwindled until

excellent preservation in which the lace is usually found, being far superior in this particular to Brussels point.

The cordonnet in Alençon lace made in France was padded with horse-hair; occasionally specimens are found which have had the padding withdrawn, doubtless because of its tendency to shrink and draw up when washed. In Alençon lace, or Argentella, as it is called when made in Italy, the cordonnet is flat.

In England during the eighteenth century Alençon lace was known as Point à l'Aiguille. It was during the reigns of Louis XIV. and Louis XV. that Alençon was at the height of its glory, and the most extravagant prices were paid for the lace; not only were articles of clothing trimmed with it, but the beautiful fabric was used as bed furniture, valances, trimmings for bath-covers and bed-spreads. Altars in the churches were hung, the surplices of the priests trimmed with it; and the King gave away

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to his Court favourites cravats, ruffles and complete robes. Before the Revolution in 1795, and before the Edict of Nantes, when France lost many of her most skilled workers, the annual value of the manufacture was estimated to be 12,000 livres.

During the French Revolution the Alençon lace factory became almost extinct, and many of the workers were killed on account of their connection with the hated aristocracy, as caterers to the luxury of the age; others fled from the country, so that it was with difficulty that sufficient workers could be found to carry out the splendid orders of Napoleon I., for he saw prosperity to France in the revival of the lace industry. One of his gifts to Marie Louise was bed furniture of great richness: tester, coverlet, pillow-cases, and edgings for sheets were all made of the finest Alençon, the royal arms on elaborate escutcheons being worked on a ground of *vrai* or needle-point *Reseau*, powdered over with bees, the Napoleonic cypher.

The Alençon lace factory fell with the Empire: the old workers died, and no young ones were trained to take their place; the Duchess d'Angoulême tried to revive the industry, but her own handsome orders alone could not coax it back to prosperity. In 1830 there were only two or three hundred lace workers employed in the neighbourhood.

Ten years later the old women were gathered together, and another effort was made, but it was

found that the method of making many of the most beautiful stitches had been forgotten, and the peculiar quality of the old ground was a lost art. At the Exhibition of 1851, however, some fine specimens were shewn, and in 1856 splendid orders were given for the layette of the Prince Imperial; the coverlet of his little bed was of Alençon, the christening robe, mantle and head-dress, and the three baskets were all trimmed with the beautiful point; twelve dozen embroidered frocks were each profusely trimmed with the point, as also were the nurses' aprons.

In 1859 the most costly work ever executed at Alençon was exhibited; this was a dress valued at 200,000 francs, which was purchased by the Emperor Napoleon III. for the Empress.

At present the finest modern Alençon point is made at Bayeux and at the Royal lace factory at Burano. It is interesting to watch the pretty Italian girls at their work in the large, airy, vine-clad room, which is the headquarters of the lace schools on the island, and astonishing to mark the rapidity with which the fine meshes of the Alençon ground are made, each mesh completed with the point of the needle and deft twist of the fine flax thread, the dainty cordonnet sewn on and the intricate *jours* and fillings achieved which helped to make Alençon point one of the most beautiful fabrics the world has ever seen.

