

Argentan Lace

By M. Jourdain

OF all the Point de France centres, Alençon, with its neighbour Argentan (the two towns are separated by some ten miles) produced the most brilliant and the most permanent results; and at Argentan, which has been mentioned in 1664 as having long learned the art of imitating Points de Venise, a bureau for the manufactures of Points de France was established at the same time as the bureau at Alençon. Early "Argentan" no doubt produced point of the same type as that of Alençon, and the two laces only began to be distinguished when Alençon adopted the réseau ground.

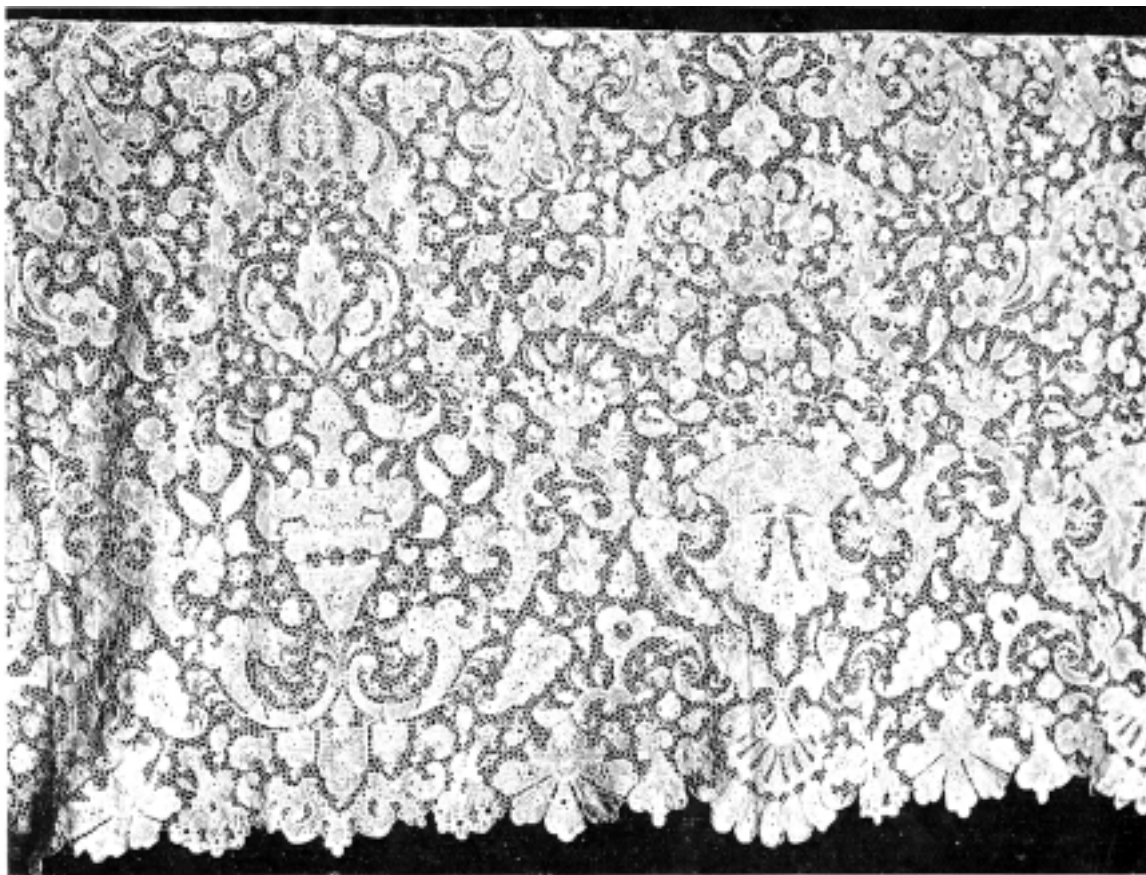
"Argentan" is the term given to lace (whether made at Alençon or Argentan) with large bride ground, which consists of a six-sided mesh, worked over with button-hole stitches. "It was always printed on the parchment pattern, and the upper angle of the hexagon was pricked; * the average

side of a diagonal taken from angle to angle, in a so-called Argentan hexagon, was about one-sixth of an inch, and each side of the hexagon was about one-tenth of an inch. An idea of the minuteness of the work can be formed from the fact that a side of a hexagon would be overcast with some nine or ten button-hole stitches."

In other details, the workmanship of the laces styled Alençon and Argentan is identical; the large bride ground, however, could support a flower bolder and larger in pattern, in higher relief and heavier, than the réseau ground.

Peuchet writes in the late eighteenth century that the bride ground of Argentan was preferred in France, and that the workmanship of Argentan was superior to that of Alençon: "Elles ont de beaux dessins pour le fond, et pour la régularité des yeux, de la bride et du réseau." He adds that lace was sent from Alençon to Argentan to have the "modes" made and also the "fond" and the bride ground.

* *History of Lace.* Mrs. Palliser.



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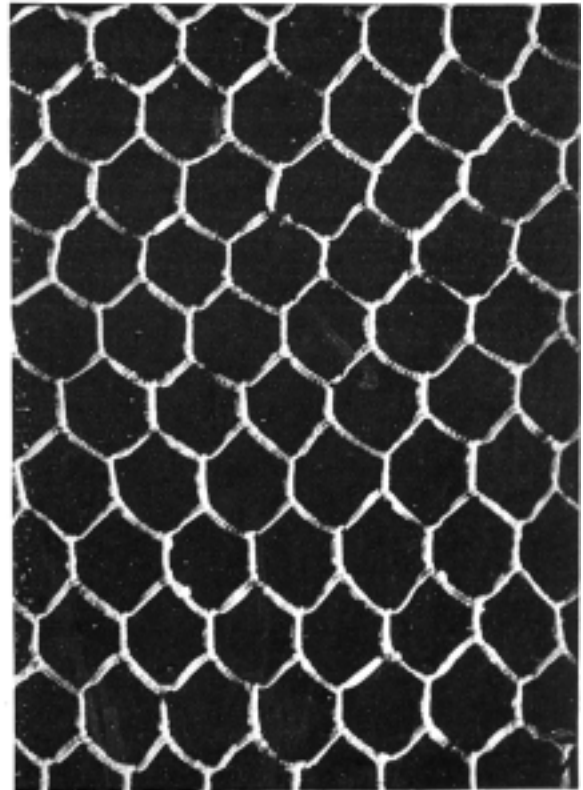
“The two towns had communications as frequent as those which passed between Alençon and the little village of Vimoutier, eighteen miles distant, where one workman in particular produced what is known as the true Alençon lace.”* As Peuchet writes, the “fabricants” of Alençon † could have the “fond” and the “bride bouclée” made by the workwoman employed by the “fabricants” of Argentan. At Alençon all the varieties of bride and réseau were made, while at Argentan a speciality was made of the bride ground.‡

Towards the beginning of the eighteenth century, when the manufacture had fallen into decay, it was raised in 1708 by one Sieur Mathieu Guyard, a merchant mercer, who states that “his ancestors and himself had more than one hundred and twenty years been occupied in fabricating black silk and white thread lace in the environs of Paris.”||

In 1729, Monthulay, another manufacturer, presented the contrôleur général, M. Lepeltier des Forts, with a piece of point *without any raised*



PIECE OF ARGENTAN (ENLARGED) SHOWING “TOILÉ,”
“CORDONNET,” AND “MESH”



ARGENTAN MESH (ENLARGED)

The *bride picotée*—a survival of the early Venetian teaching—was also a speciality in Argentan point. It consists of the hexagonal button-holed bride, ornamented with three or four picots. The secret of making it was entirely lost by 1869.§

work, representing the contrôleur’s arms ¶—a novel departure in the fabric. It will be seen that specimens of Argentan belong entirely to the Louis XV and Louis XVI. period. The fabric was checked by the Revolution, and died out, after a short revival in 1810. In 1858 Argentan point had become rare, and the introduction of

* A. S. Cole.

† “On vient même d’Alençon faire faire des brides et des fonds à Argentan et on y achève des modes.”

‡ Les trois sortes de brides comme champ sont exécutées dans les deux fabriques, et les points ont été et sont encore faits par les mêmes procédés de fabrication, et avec les mêmes matières textiles.—*Histoire du Point d’Alençon*.

§ In January, 1874, with the assistance of the Mayor, M. Lefébure made a search in the greniers of the Hôtel Dieu, and discovered three specimens of point d’Argentan in progress on the parchment patterns. “One was of bold pattern with

the ‘grande bride’ ground, evidently a man’s ruffle; the other had the barette or bride ground of point de France; the third *picotée*, showing that the three descriptions of lace were made contemporaneously at Argentan.”—*History of Lace*. Mrs. Palliser.

|| *History of Lace*. Mrs. Palliser.

¶ *Histoire du Point d’Alençon*.

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cotton, about 1830, instead of the linen thread from Lille, Mechlin and Nouvion, debased its quality.*

The design for Alençon and Argentan is identical, though its sequence is more easily studied in the more important manufacture of Alençon.

As M. Paul Lecroix has observed, France never failed to put her own stamp on whatever she adopted, thus making any fashion essentially French, even though she had only just borrowed it from Spain, England, Germany, or Italy.

This is especially true of French needlepoint lace, of which the technicalities and design were borrowed *en bloc* from Italy. Gradually, however, the French taste superseded the Italian treatment, and produced a style which, no doubt, owed much of its perfection and consistency to the State patronage it enjoyed and to the position of artistic design in France, a fact which was noticed early in the eighteenth century by Bishop Berkeley. "How," he asks, "could France and Flanders have drawn so much money from other countries for figured silk, lace and tapestry, if they had not had their academies of design?"

During the Louis XIV. period, until the last fifteen years of the reign, Points de France were made with the *bride* ground, and to judge by the evidence of portraits, preserved in general the rolling scroll of Venetian rose-points. Some specimens, however, show a French influence in the composition of the design, a tendency which (as when expressed in textiles, or metal) led to a style of symmetrical composition, with fantastic shapes. A certain "architectural" arrangement, and the use of canopies, with scroll devices on either side of them, which Bérain uses, is certainly met with in lace. In an interesting specimen illustrated in *Le Point de France*, plate 3, two winged figures support a royal crown over the sun in splendour, the emblem of the Roi Soleil. In the edge the fleurs-de-lys alternates with a heart. An ornament in this piece consisting of two S's, *addorsed*, and surmounted by a miniature canopy, is of not uncommon occurrence, and also a somewhat grotesque cock. The King's monogram, the interlaced L's, and the *flamme d'amour* arising from two hearts, are also met with, a compliment of the royal manufacture to its royal patron.

Two very interesting specimens of Point de France are in the collection of Madame Porgès, and were exhibited at the Exposition Internationale

of 1900 at Paris. The first, a fragment, has as central *motif* the sun in splendour surmounted by a dome, or domed-shaped canopy, flanked by two trophies of crossed swords and flags. Another piece in the same collection has a young man attired as an antique warrior, wearing a huge helmet with the double eagle as a crest. Above his head is the closed crown of a royal prince, supported by two angels. Above this crown, again, is a small Bacchus astride a wine-cask. The *motif* of two dolphins suggests that the piece represents the Dauphin, the son of Louis XIV. Two Indians, with the conventional kilt and upstanding crown of feathers, offer the warrior flowers. Below are the Dauphin's two sons, the Duc de Burgogne and the Duc d'Anjou, as young warriors, crowned by flying genii. The Dauphin treads upon a characteristic trophy of arms, cannon and standards.

In a Swiss collection there is a somewhat later piece, a square cravat end in the centre of which is a lady seated at an organ; beneath an ornate canopy various figures play various musical instruments—a lyre, a violin, a violoncello, castanets, while two figures sing, holding a music book. Light, fantastic, short scrolls fill up the ground. Two somewhat similar cravats in the Victoria and Albert Museum (Bolckow Bequest) have, among various *motifs*, a draped and scalloped canopy above the figure of a lady in full toilette, seated upon a bird with displayed plumage. Below her is a fantastic pedestal with balanced rococo and leafy shapes on each side of it; immediately above the flanking shapes are small figures in fancy costume. On the upper right and left of this central group is the half-figure of a lady with a cockatoo (in one piece) and the half-figure of a lady with a little dog under her arm (in the other). Below, to right and left of the large central group, is a smaller vertical group of a flower vase on stand with blossoms radiating from it, and beneath this is a gentleman playing a violoncello and a lady playing a lute (in one piece), and a spaniel (in the other). All these objects are held together by small bars or brides à picots.

In Venetian rose-point laces of the same period, probably owing to French influence, design was more frequently vertical and balanced upon either side of an imaginary central line. At the end of Louis XIV's reign lace, in cravats, ruffles and flounces was worn fuller † or in folds, a hanging

* À partir de cette date (1830) les fabricants commencent à introduire le coton dans les fonds et le rempli.—*Histoire du Point d'Alençon*.

† "À la fin du règne de Louis XIV. les rabats ne se portaient plus à plat mais froncés sous le nom de cravates." (Lefébure.)

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pattern, or one in which the arrangement of details is conspicuously vertical* was found more appropriate than horizontal arrangements of ornament which require to lie flat. This symmetrical tendency owes something to the personal taste of Louis XIV. Madame de Maintenon writes in one of her letters that the King was so fond of symmetry in his architecture that he would have people "perish in his symmetry;" for he caused his doors and windows to be constructed in pairs opposite to one another, "which gave everybody who lived in his palaces their death of cold from draughts."

A specimen of early Point de France of this period, where the vertical arrangement is most

basis, while treating the detail somewhat naturalistically.‡ Lace, which is largely influenced by contemporary textiles and embroidery, was not without its influence upon certain brocades and silks of the Louis XIV. period, where small trellisings and spots like the *à jours* so generally introduced in the larger pieces of lace, are met with.§

The réseau ground, introduced about 1700, naturally introduced a finer, more minute floral genre of design; and after suffering a severe check in the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes and the death of Louis XIV., a new style began to declare itself, associated with the reign of Louis XV.



ARGENTAN, THE UPPER PORTION BEING FILLED IN WITH THE "RÉSEAU ROSACÉ" GROUND, THE LOWER WITH THE "ARGENTAN" GROUND

noticeable, is No. 747-70 in the Victoria and Albert Museum, a tablier of needlepoint lace scalloped with patterns of pine-apples, flowers, leaves and conventional forms, upon a hexagonal ground of *bride à picots*. The lines of the flower are more broken and "cut up" than in the Italian designs, and the "convention" is clumsy. Another very early piece is 552, '68 of the same collection, a large scrolling design upon a hexagonal *bride* ground.

The former specimen shows a tendency, which later distinguishes French design,† to the planning of the lines of the design upon a conventional

* This vertical arrangement may be noticed in certain French portraits, as, for example, in the point lace in the portrait of the Duchesse de Nemours, by Hyacinthe Rigaud.

† In contrast to Italian work, conventional except when under French influence both in the basis of the design, and in treatment of ornament, and to Flemish work, naturalistic in both.

Here, as in furniture and decoration generally, the symmetrical tendency was overthrown, and oblique and slanted *motifs* were the fashion. The impoverishment of the kingdom towards the end of the reign had had its effect upon trade. Many manufactures had disappeared, and those remaining lost two-thirds of their custom. A

‡ In French brocades of the seventeenth century the shapes of the flowers and leaves are more detached from one another and distinctly depicted than those of contemporary Italian patterns.

§ "In a piece of satin and coloured silk brocade, period Louis XIV., French, late seventeenth century, the bands forming the ogees are broad and elaborated with small trellisings and spots, which lace fanciers will recognise as being very similar to the *à-jours* so frequently introduced into the large point de France, point d'Alençon, and point d'Argentan of the later years of the seventeenth and earlier years of the eighteenth centuries. A greater variety of effects arising from this characteristically French adaptation of lace devices is given in the embellishment of the leaves and flowers of a piece of olive-green satin damask woven in white silk."—*Ornament in European Silks*, p. 140. A. S. Cole.

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more simple and saleable genre of lace was substituted for the important pieces of Louis XIV.'s reign. As the design became thinner the *réseau* ground filled up its deficiencies, while to give it "interest" enclosures of a finer ground were introduced and *à jours* filled with light and open patterns.

The floral patterns of the period no doubt result from the fact that French designers had from very early times peculiar encouragement to draw and paint from plant forms of great variety, which were cultivated in public gardens. French textile patterns of the seventeenth century are full of effects derived from a close adherence to natural

are two flags and two Tribune's fasces; and an example where a trophy of flags depends from a central ornament. In a specimen in a private collection cannons and flags are skilfully combined with floral ornament.

Certain exotic features and "chinoiseries" are to be noted in lace as in the decoration of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century.* The appearance of Indian figures in lace is a curious reflection of the taste of the time. Such figures invariably show the odd kilt-like skirt reaching to the knees, and on the head circlet of upstanding feathers of the conventional savage of the period; sometimes a hunting implement is slung across



FLOUNCE OF ARGENTAN, IN THE POSSESSION OF MRS. FINCH

forms, the expression of which pervades their art in a more lively and dainty manner than in the corresponding Italian patterns. Yet another *motif*, introduced into lace from textiles, is the Louis XV. wavy riband pattern generally enclosing a rich variety of grounds. The twining ribbon patterns, encircling flowers within their spiral volutions were amongst the most popular products of the Lyons factories at the close of the seventeenth century. Tocqué's portrait of Marie Leczinska (1740) shows that a pattern of sprays of flowers entwined in a double serpentine ribbon or ribbon-like convolution, was fashionable at that date.

The ribbon *motif* can be seen in the illustrated examples in its usual form of undulating lines, dividing the ground into oval compartments, from which a spray or flower springs. The introduction of military "trophies" can be seen in another, which shows a tree hung with a shield behind which

the shoulder. Other figures of a pseudo-Oriental character are also to be found—a pendant to the taste which demanded negro attendants, Oriental lacquer plaques inlaid upon furniture, and Indian gods in the boudoirs.

In textiles, design towards the latter part of the eighteenth century became † still more simplified.‡ Alternating straight stripes and bands running vertically up and down the pattern are mingled with small bunches of flowers, sometimes with tiny detached sprays and spots. *C'est le ligne droite qui domine!*§ These straight stripes, which appeared towards the last year of Louis XVI.,

* The influence of Chinese decoration upon porcelain and goldsmiths' work died out somewhat earlier. A vast quantity of plate was decorated in the Chinese manner in the years 1682-84, and a few pieces are found up to 1690.

† Ornamental textile fabrics. *M. Dupont-Auberville.*

‡ "Nos mœurs commencent à s'épurer, le luxe tombe."—*Cabinet des Modes*, 5 Novembre, 1790.

§ Rouaix. *Les Styles.*

were retained during the Republic and the Consulate. It is interesting to note that the output of examples of this type coincides in point of time with the period when the finances of France were suffering considerably from the extravagances both of the Government and of individuals during the reigns of Louis XIV. and XV.* Lace follows closely the developments of textiles.

In lace, instead of wreaths, ribands, or festoons undulating from one side of the border to another, we have a stiff rectilinear border of purely conventional design, the reflection of the dominant straight line of decoration.† In textiles also, as in lace, *semées* became more widely separated.

In lace, under Louis XVI., it became the fashion to multiply the number of flounces to dresses and to gather them into pleats, so that ornamental *motifs*, more or less broken up or partially concealed by the pleats, lost their significance and *flow*. The general ornamental effect of the lace of the period depended upon the orderly repetition and arrangement of the same details over and over again. The spaces between the *motifs* widened more and more, until the design deteriorated into *semées* of small devices, detached flowers, *pois*, *larmes*, *fleurons*, *rosettes*. The design usually only ran along the edge of a piece of lace, the upper portion was *réseau*, little disguised. The *réseau* was all-important; there was only "sur les bords de la dentelle quelque chose sans caractère et sans art qui avait le prétention d'être du dessin. Deux ou trois semblants de feuilles se détachent d'un semblant de tige grossièrement dessiné, portant à son extrémité un semblant de fleur, et c'était tout."‡

The prevalent fashion in costume of the period did not exact such ornamental elaboration of laces as had distinguished even the preceding reign.§

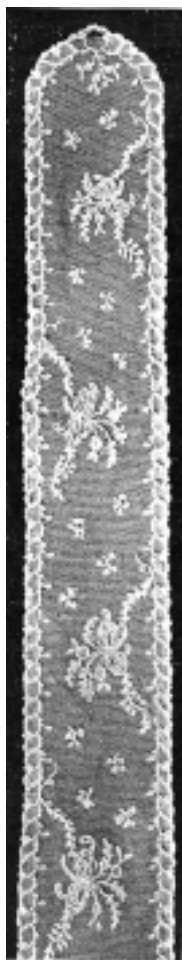
An illustration of the diminishing use of lace, is a portrait by Drouais, of Turgot (1778), showing but a small ruffle or edging to his shirt front, instead of the full folds of a deep cravat. A characteristic specimen of Louis XVI. lace is 1235, 1888, of the Victoria and Albert Museum, with its Louis XVI. knots, its *semées* and the thin appearance of the design and its straight edge. No. 1588—'72 shows a *réseau* of thick threads, which was a deteriorated substitute for, and of later date than the small hexagonal brides ground. A great deal of lace of this date is straight-edged and shows two grounds, the finer *réseau* as a border and a coarser variety for the upper portion, covered with a very simple design or *semé*.

The minute picots on the cordonnets of the little sprays of flowers and ornament of the lace of this period should be noticed. The sharp, thin appearance of the work is chiefly due to the use of fine horsehair used as the foundation line of the cordonnet of every ornament, upon which the fine threads have been cast. In earlier Alençon the horsehair was used along the border of the piece only.

The Empire style follows with its decided phase of heavy classicism.|| At first the small *semées* was used, but instead of the rose and tulip leaves, laurel and olive leaves were substituted. In lace, Roman emblems and attributes were introduced; and the Napoleonic bee appears on some pieces of Alençon specially made for Marie Louise. A triangular piece of Brussels *vrai réseau* of this set with bees of Alençon point is shown in the illustration. Large spaces of *réseau* with *semées* and a straight-edged border continued in fashion.

In the Porgès collection are one or two Empire pieces showing coats-of-arms, garlands and draperies held up by cords and tassels, and the foliage of the oak and laurel ornament, the lace destined for the wives of the chevaliers of the Legion of Honour.

The laces of the Restoration are heavy and tasteless.



ARGENTAN LAPPET
(LOUIS XVI.)

|| Napoleon is represented in a specimen of Mechlin of this period in the costume of a Roman Emperor.

* Ornament in European Silks. A. S. Cole.

† The straight line in furniture was the result of the revival of "classic" taste and imitation of classic models.

‡ Compare the last lace bill of Madame du Barry, 1773:—"Une paire de barbes plattes longues de 3/4 en blonde fine à fleurs fond d'Alençon. Une blonde grande hauteur à bouquets détachés et à bordure riche. 6 au de blonde de grande hauteur façon d'Alençon à coquilles à mille poix."

§ According to Wraxall (Memoirs ed. 1815, I, 138), the total abolition of buckles and ruffles was not made till the era of Jacobinism and of equality in 1793 and 1794. Sir P. J. Clerk, though a strong Whig, wore "very rich laced ruffles" as late as 1781.