

Brussels Lace

By M. Jourdain

THERE is at present no information as to the date when the manufacture of Brussels lace began. In the eighteenth century it was famous, as Lord Chesterfield wrote in 1741, as the place "where most of the fine laces are made you see worn in England." The Béguinage was a great centre for lace-making, and English travellers often visited to buy lace.* In 1756 a Mrs. Calderwood, who visited it, gave an account of the process of lace-making. "The manufacture is very curious," she writes; "one person works the flowers. They are all sold separate, and you will see a very pretty sprig for which the worker only gets twelve sous. The masters who have all these people employed give them the thread to make them; this they do according to a pattern, and give them out to be grounded; after which they give them to a third hand, who 'hearts' all the flowers with the open-work. That is what makes the lace so much dearer than the Mechlin, which is wrought all at once."†

* "We went to the Béguinage Convent to buy lace."—Letter of Elizabeth Viscountess Nuneham, 1766. *Harcourt Papers*, vol. xi.

† *Mrs. Calderwood's Journey through Holland and Belgium*, 1756.—Printed by the Maitland Club.

Thus half-way through the eighteenth century some special characteristics of Brussels work—the low rate of wages, the division of labour, and the *specialization* of lace-workers on some branch of this work, the domination of the "masters"—is already established.

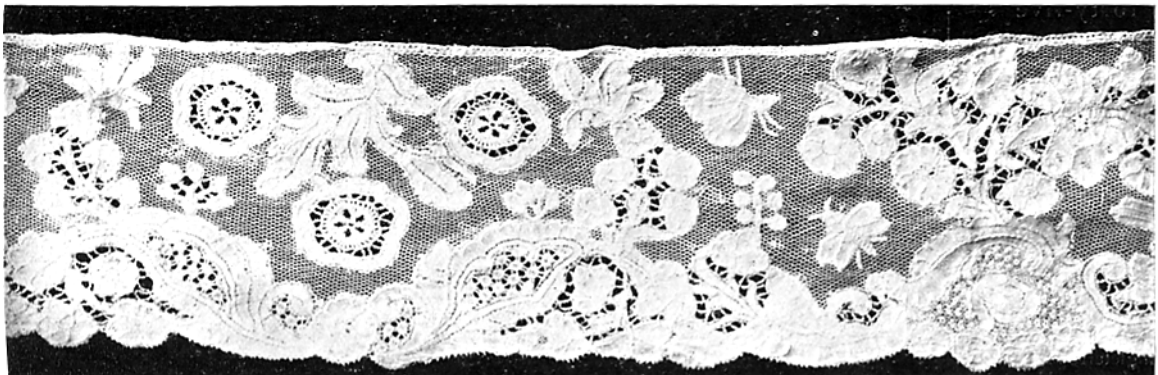
Brussels pillow lace is, as Mrs. Calderwood writes, not made in one piece on the pillow; the réseau ground is worked in round the pattern which has been *separately* made.‡ "Thus the long threads that form the *toile* of Brussels lace of all dates always follow the curves of the patterns, while in other Flemish laces these strands are found to run parallel to the edge the whole length of the lace, and *to pass* through the pattern into the réseau ground."§

There are two sorts of *toile*, one the usual woven texture, as of a piece of cambric, the other a more open arrangement of the threads, which is used for shading effects.

Relief is given to certain details of flowers and fibres of leaves by a flattened and slightly raised

‡ In old Brussels lace the ornament was worked on the pillow into the ground. Later, and at the present time, the flowers are applied to or sewn in the ground. Sometimes they are sewn on to the ground.

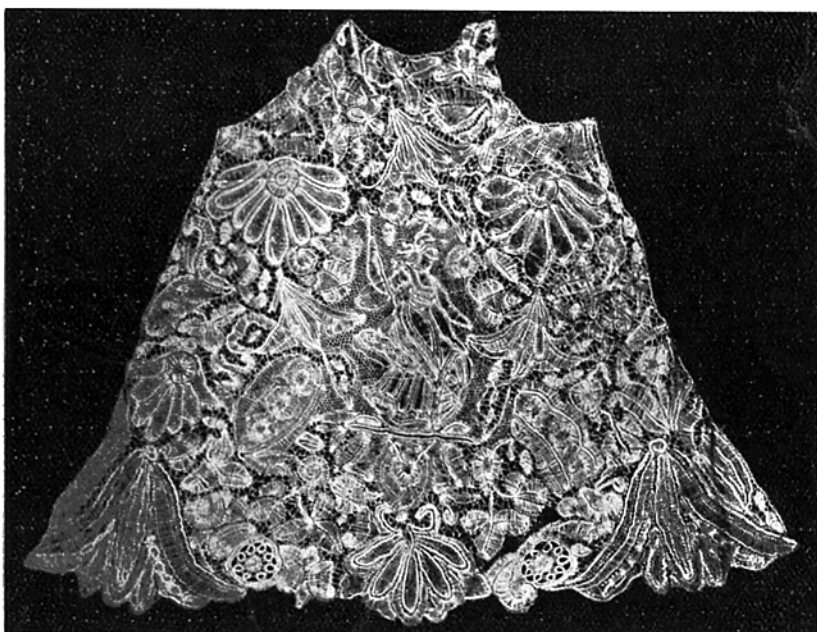
§ *Point and Pillow Lace*.—A. M. S.



BRUSSELS

EARLY 18TH CENTURY

(PILLOW-MADE)



BRUSSELS BEGINNING OF 18TH CENTURY KUNSTGEWERBE MUSEUM, DRESDEN

plaited cordonnet. A slight modelling is imparted to flowers by means of a bone instrument, which gives concave shapes to petals, leaves, and other ornaments.

There were two kinds of ground used in Brussels lace—the *bride* and the *réseau*. The *bride* was first employed, but was already discontinued in 1761, and was then only made to order.* Sometimes the *bride* and *réseau* were combined.†

The ground used in Brussels lace is of two kinds—needle-point and pillow. The needle-point *réseau* is made in small segments of an inch in width, and from seven to forty-five inches long, joined together by a stitch long known as “fine joining,” consisting of

* *Dictionnaire du Citoyen*, 1761.

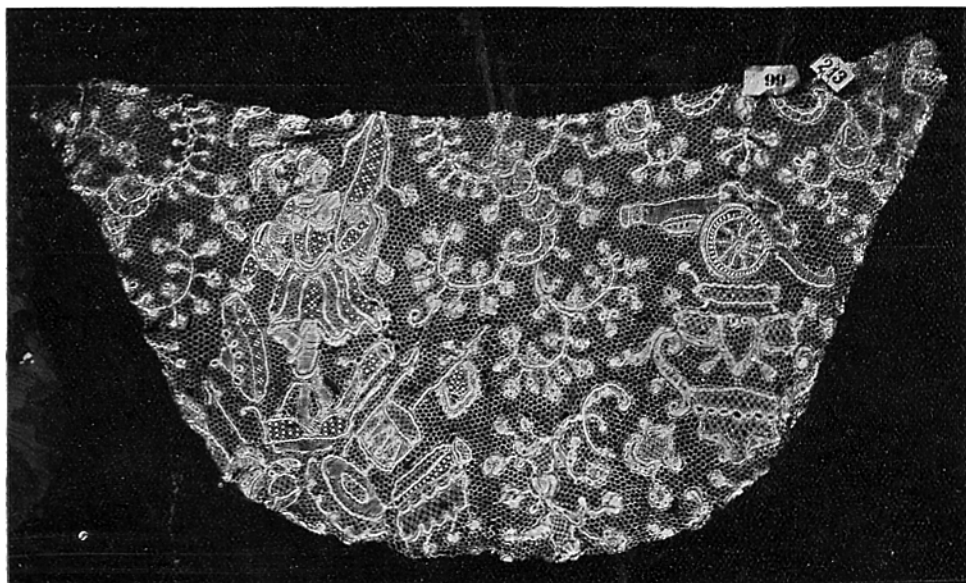
† “Une coëffure à une pièce d’Angleterre *bride* et *réseau*.”—*Comptes de Madame du Barry*.

a fresh stitch formed with a needle between the two pieces to be united. The needle-ground is stronger, but three times more expensive than the pillow, which has a hexagonal mesh, of which two sides are made of four threads plaited four times, and four sides of two threads twisted twice. Since machine-made net has come into use, the *vrai réseau* is rarely made, save for royal orders. Of course, lace-makers, so skilful as those of Brussels, occasionally made experiments with other grounds, such as the star-meshed *réseau*; but this is uncommon.

Brussels needle-point was introduced into that city about 1720, evidently in

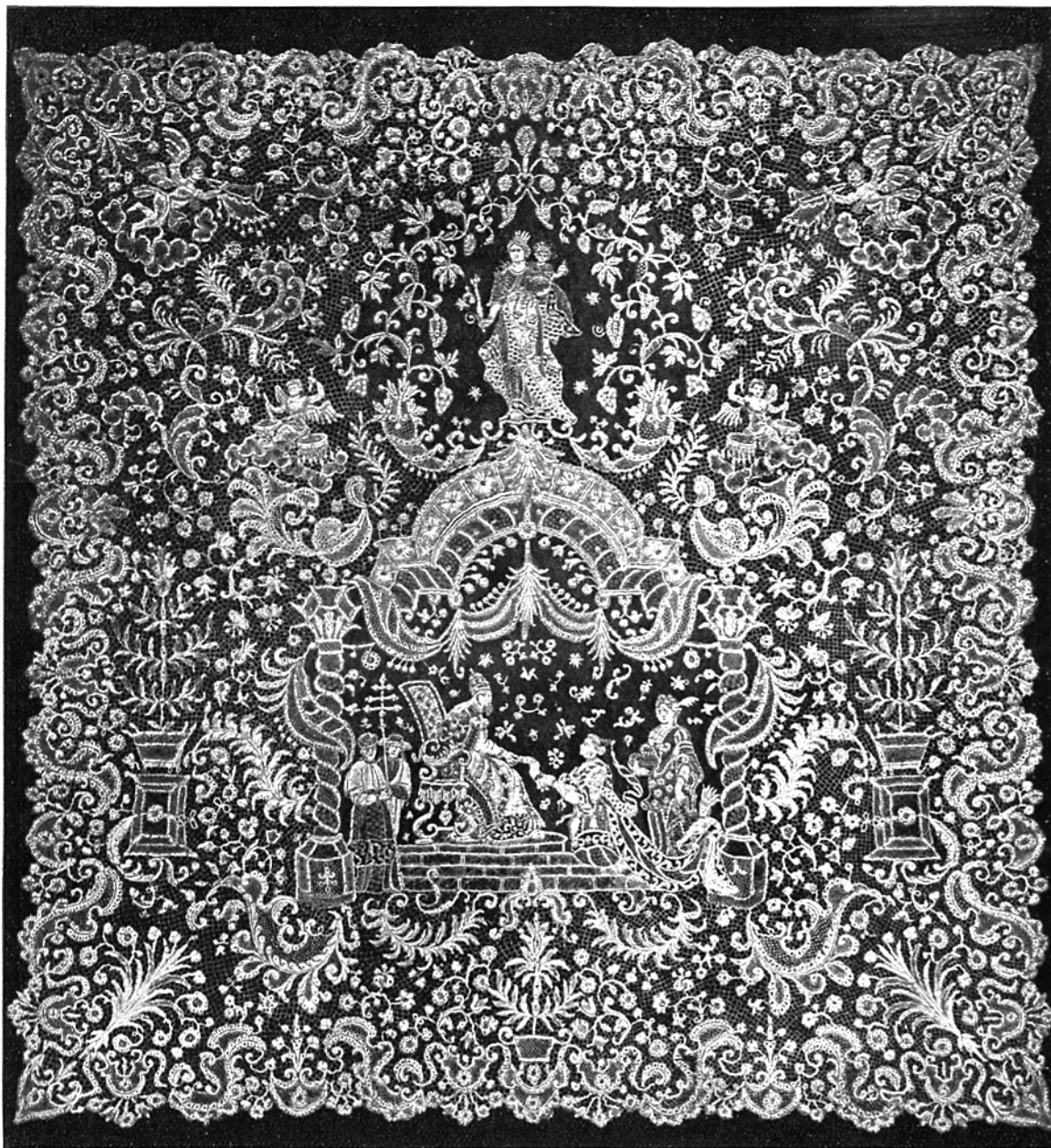
imitation of the Alençon fabric, which it closely resembles in pattern and general effect. The Brussels needle-point, however, is not so firm and precise, the *toilé* is of looser make than the French work. The button-hole stitched cordonnet—a distinguishing feature of Alençon—is replaced by a single thread‡

‡ In the needlepoint laces of Brussels the cordonnet is generally only a thread, but in some few cases it is covered with button-hole stitches, as in Point d’Alençon.



FRAGMENT OF BRUSSELS PILLOW LACE (EARLY 18TH CENTURY), SHOWING FRENCH INFLUENCE IN THE DESIGN MUSÉE DES ARTS DÉCORATIFS, BRUSSELS

Brussels Lace



BRUSSELS PILLOW LACE

BEGINNING OF 18TH CENTURY

MUSÉE DES ARTS DÉCORATIFS, BRUSSELS

or strand of threads. The Brussels needle-made *réseau* is made with a simple looped stitch.* The earliest Brussels needle-points were grounded with this needle-made *réseau*, but much of the best needle-point is grounded with the more familiar

* "Le point d'aiguille de Bruxelles fait pour imiter le point d'Alençon est loin d'avoir sa solidité et son travail artistique. Pour imiter la brode qui donne tant de cachet au point d'Alençon et qui est fort longue à faire, on l'a remplacée dans le point d'aiguille de Bruxelles par un gros fil passé dans les mailles pour entourer le dessin."—*Histoire du Point d'Alençon*. *Mme. Despierres*.

pillow-made "droschel." The Alençon "modes" are rendered with great accuracy. In this kind of mixed lace the *cordonet* is usually a single moderately thick thread. In a specimen in the Dublin Museum, the *cordonet* is like that of Alençon lace, button-hole stitched, but the stitchery is not very close or regular.†

The processes are assigned to different hands, who

† No. 40, Dublin Museum.

The Connoisseur

work only at their own special department, the first termed:—

(1) Drocheleuse (Flemish, drocheles), makes the vrai réseau.

(2) Dentelière (kantwerkes), the footing.

(3) Pointeuse (needlewerkes), the point à l'aiguille flowers.

(4) Platteuse (platwerkes), the plat flowers.

(5) Fonneuse (groundwerkes) is charged with the open-work (jours) in the plat.

(6) Jointeuse or attacheuse (lashwerkes) unites the different sections of the ground together.

(7) Striqueuse or appliqueuse (strikes) is charged with the sewing (application) of the flowers upon the ground.*

“The pattern † is designed by the head of the fabric, who, having cut the parchment into pieces, hands it out ready pricked. The worker has no reflections to make, no combinations to study; the whole responsibility rests with the master, who selects the ground, chooses the thread, and alone knows the effect to be produced as a whole.” “The same design,” writes Peuchet, “was never executed twice; continual variations were introduced.” ‡

* *History of Lace.* Mrs. Palliser.

† *Ibid.*

‡ “Le dessin est le premier objet de son attention; il (le

The fineness of thread used in Brussels lace is almost a fable. “It is made of the flax grown in Brabant, at Hal and Rebecq-Rognon. The finest quality is spun in dark underground rooms, for contact with the dry air causes the thread to break, so fine is it as almost to escape the sight. The thread-spinner closely examines every inch drawn from her distaff, and when any irregularity occurs, stops her wheel to repair the mischief. A background of dark paper is placed to throw out the thread, and the room so arranged as to admit one single ray of light upon the work.” § ||

Representation of objects naturalistically treated is one of the characteristics of Brussels work. In eighteenth century specimens accurately rendered leaves and flowers—in especial the pink and the

fabricant) le varie continuellement et ne fait executer le même une seconde fois . . . il en détache les fleurs en les piquant d'un millier d'épingles pour faciliter aux ouvrières la lecture du dessin, et les mettre à portée de l'exécuter avec exactitude. C'est lui qui juge des fonds les plus convenables pour faire ressortir les fleurs du dessin, pour donner à la dentelle l'éclat et la finesse.”

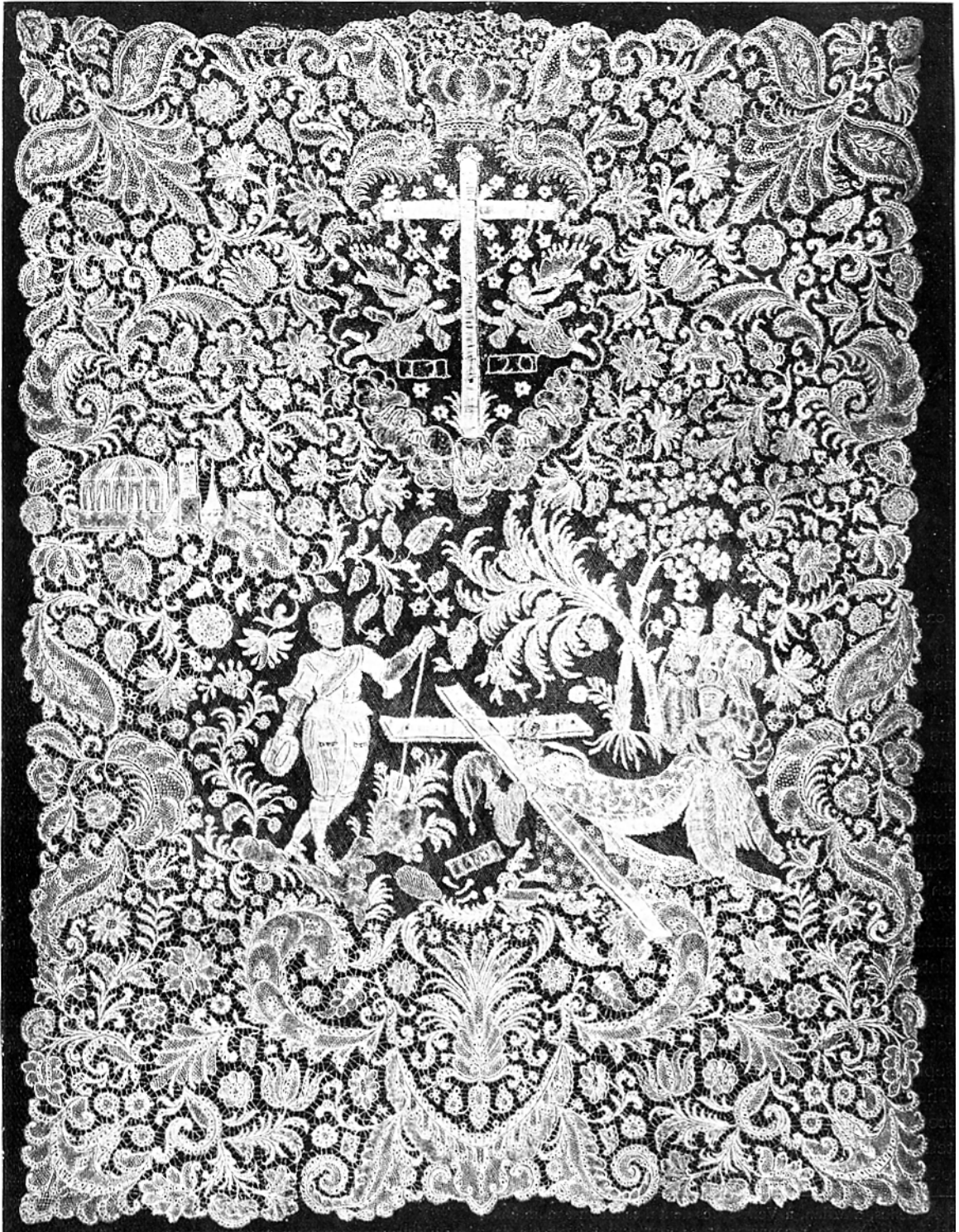
§ *History of Lace.*—Mrs. Palliser.

|| Thread spun by machine in England from Belgian flax is much used now in Belgium. It has, however, never arrived at the fineness of that made by hand, and frequently in it there are traces of cotton, which depreciate its quality.



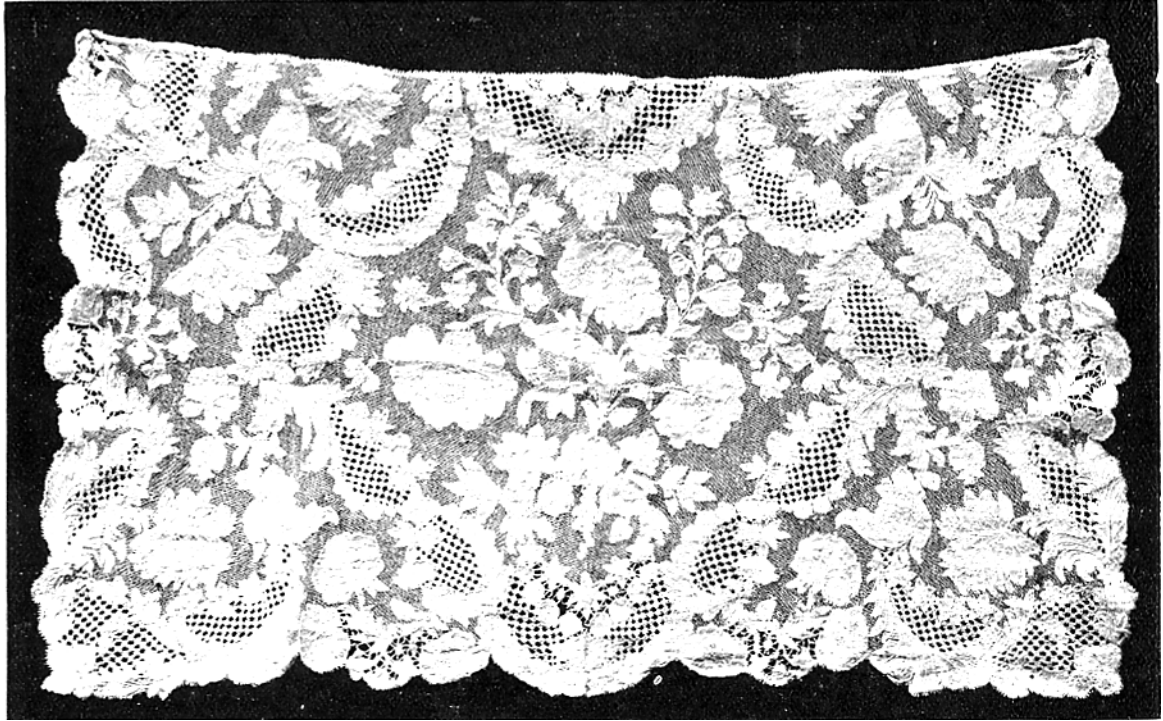
CRAVAT END, BRUSSELS PILLOW LACE, 18TH CENTURY

IN THE POSSESSION OF MISS JOSEPHS



BRUSSELS LACE (PILLOW-MADE) DATED 1720

MUSÉE DES ARTS DÉCORATIFS, BRUSSELS



CRAVAT END OF BRUSSELS LACE (PILLOW MADE)

18TH CENTURY

tulip and the rose—insects and birds are the main components of the design.*

In larger and more important pieces of the last years of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries, the structure of the design is most elaborate, and figures, "subjects," and every variety of plant-form are most skilfully rendered. In a frounce given by Madame de Maintenon to François de Salignac de la Mothe Fénélon, who was consecrated Archbishop of Cambrai in 1695, the ground is of *brides picotées*.† In the two later specimens in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Brussels (one of which is dated 1720, while the other belongs to the early eighteenth century), a centre of the *réseau* ground contrasts with the surrounding border of *brides picotées*. The cravat-end in the possession of Miss Josephs is entirely grounded with the *réseau*.

The two specimens from the Musée des Arts Décoratifs are very wonderful pieces of work. The dated piece (1720) represents the Invention of the Cross by Saint Helena, whose robe is carried by

an Eastern attendant. The second piece represents the pope, seated under a canopy presenting or receiving a document from a lady who kneels before him. His train is borne by an Eastern attendant, and her crown by a lady who stands behind her. The work upon the costumes is remarkable. Among the scroll work are angels blowing trumpets, and others beating drums.

During the reign of Louis XV. Flemish pillow-lace was much affected by the French court, and was almost preferred to point d'Alençon. This produced a certain French style of design in Brussels to meet this demand. In large designs, figures, whimsical devices, and mottoes were introduced. Some of the details are graceful and ornamental; others, again, are misshapen. There is a distinct reflection of French mannerisms in Brussels of that period,‡—the balanced designs of repeated similar groups of fragmentary floral sprays, the valanced canopy, the royal attributes, cupids, pillars, etc., and the waved bands or ribbons dividing the design into compartments, and worked with very varied modes.§

* À Gênes, à Milan, à Venise, les dentelles au fuseau moins fines de matière se reconnaissent surtout aux détails de la composition. L'ornement y reste plus conventionnel et, lorsque les personnages et les animaux y apparaissent, ils sont d'expression allégorique. Le même genre de dentelle au fuseau fabriqué à Bruxelles ou en France contiendra des détails plus réalistes, les personnages y porteront le costume contemporain, les animaux y seront représentés sous la forme active."—*Le Musée Historique des Tissus de Lyon*. R. Cox, Lyon, 1902.

† Victoria and Albert Museum, 755.790.

‡ And again at a later date, when a number of lace makers left France for Belgium after the French Revolution. To-day the influence of French design is as strong as ever.

§ The Brussels pillow-renderings of various modes, used in French needlepoint, the Argentan hexagonal mesh, the *réseau rosacée*, star-devices, etc., are very close and skilful.

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In the last years of the seventeenth and in the early part of the eighteenth century, ornamentation in the Chinese style, fantastic zig-zag forms, pagodas, and Indian or Chinese figures were introduced—a reflection of the taste that demanded negro attendants, and oriental lacquer plaques inlaid on furniture. The Chinese influence may have received an impetus from that Siamese embassy which is said to have brought over many specimens of Chinese lacquer work as presents to Louis XIV.

Two specimens of the Louis XV. period belonging to Mme. Doistau and the Comtesse Foy, which were lent to the Exposition Internationale of 1900 at Paris, are good examples of this exotic style. Mme. Doistau's piece (which is pillow lace) is a square cravat end, showing motifs of pagodas, and the long-tailed crested bird that so often accompanies them. The point lace belonging to the Comtesse Foy shows the influence of the design of Dresden china in the little kiosks, the minute landscapes, rocks and rivers, among which are huntsmen and dogs chasing stags.

Brussels in the late eighteenth century followed French laces in the change that took place on the accession of Louis XVI., when design became "thinner," and the lace appeared to be mostly *réseau*, bordered with a stiff rectilinear border of conventional design, the ground powdered with little detached flowers, sprays, and later spots and rosettes.

In the early nineteenth century pseudo-classic style of ornaments then in vogue in France influenced Brussels design. The introduction of machine-made net, upon which Brussels bobbin-made flowers were applied (Brussels appliqué), also had an influence upon design.

In France the term *Point d'Angleterre* is used for Brussels lace. This is somewhat confusing, as *Point d'Angleterre* was a term applied in the late seventeenth century to a variety of Flemish pillow lace, of which the design was in imitation of the scroll patterns of point lace of that date. Flanders lace was worn almost exclusively during the reign of Charles I. and the Commonwealth, and in 1662 an Act was passed by the English Parliament, alarmed at the sums of money expended on foreign goods, prohibiting the importation of all foreign lace. The English lace makers endeavoured to improve the national fabric by inviting Flemish lace makers to settle in England, and establish a manufacture there,* but when this scheme proved abortive they adopted the simpler experiment of smuggling in Brussels lace, and selling it under the name of *Point d'Angleterre*—a term which, like *Point d'Espagne* and "Flat Spanish," relates to the country that consumed it rather than that which produced it.

This fact is corroborated in a memorandum by the Venetian ambassador to the English court in 1695, who states that Venetian point is no longer in fashion, but "that called English point, which, you know, is not made here, but in Flanders, and only bears the name of English to distinguish it from the others." The name *Point d'Angleterre* is used nowadays, however, of a variety of Brussels lace, with many open fillings of the *bride* variety.

* Peuchet gives a somewhat different account. "Les fabricans Anglais, pour favoriser les premiers essais de leurs manufactures, achetaient beaucoup de dentelles de Bruxelles qu'ils vendaient à toute l'Europe sous le nom de point d'Angleterre."—*Dictionnaire Universel de la Géographie Commercante*, 1799.



BRUSSELS, 18TH CENTURY (PILLOW-MADE)

CLUNY MUSEUM