

**T**his is a story about designing a fan leaf for a set of painted ivory fan sticks. Two artists, a fan maker and a bobbin painter, collaborated magnificently to create the fan sticks. The designer of the fan leaf, yours truly, undertook to be a third artist.

In the summer of 1986, a lacemaking friend from England brought me a little ivory fan and some painted wooden bobbins used in making an especially delicate variety of lace. The bobbins were painted with a fairy tracery of turquoise and sapphire and emerald, faintly evoking Moorish designs and Byzantine splendor long-ago seen and barely remembered.

Dreaming endless vistas of fans and Moorish bobbins, I wrote to the fan maker, asking for a set of ivory sticks with pierced designs that could be sent on elsewhere for painting. My letter brought a nice reply: Mr. Brooker, the fan maker, was deep into fans for Andy's and Fergie's wedding, but as soon as he could, he would.

I wrote to Mr. Biggins, the bobbin painter, told him to expect the fan sticks, and offered him carte blanche as to what he would paint on them. What I received was far in spirit from my moresque wooden bobbins. A chromatic spell of English songbirds, feathers aquiver and throats vibrating, sat one to a fan stick as on a picket fence. They sang among ivy leaves and roses by a cottage in the English countryside, though the vines and tendrils were the same as those on my bobbins. These were English birdlings at home amid Moorish arabesques.

What sort of fan leaf could I design that would bear such an East-West freight? It would be made of needle lace, the lace above all other laces. It would have to be monochrome. With all those brilliant bits of red and green and gold fluff perched on the sticks, and those penetrating, blue and sapphire tracteries, it would be madness to compete in color. No, the lace would be creamy and quiet, depending on its opulence of texture for effect.

*Above: Step one, the pencil sketch. Center: Fan sticks crafted by John Brooker, painted by Barry Biggins—the inspiration for Ortolan Pie. Photography by Joseph Loveman.*

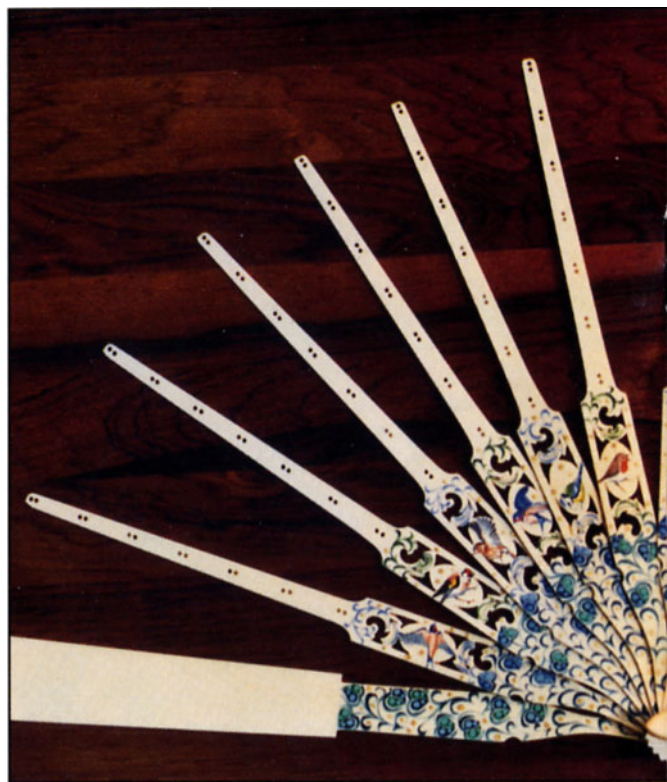
Made for those fan sticks and no others, my fan leaf would have to have a bird on it, a single great bird with a curved neck arching around in a smooth loop to a spread-out tail. The bird, by its size, its singularity, its exotic textures, would declare its own uniqueness, its difference from those other birds next door.

Fitting a fan leaf to a fan is a stringent job. The fan has to open and close. An extra centimeter too much or too little, and it doesn't fit. In addition, there is the matter of the fan sticks visible through a semitransparent lace. The fan sticks should, ideally, be incorporated into the fan leaf design.

Mr. Biggins had perched a bird on each fan stick, limiting the space within which he could work. My single bird would not carry that limitation, but it would have to take notice of those fan sticks somehow (not to mention the birdlings thereon), and it would have to fit itself between the upper and lower curves of the fan leaf, the size of which would be dictated by the size and number of the fan sticks.

Ignoring the Audubons, the Roger Tory Peterson, and the *Birds of North America* strewn among my embroidery books, I found on my bookshelves an exotic by an eighteenth-century Edo artist, Utamaro, detailing the intensely private lives of some Japanese birds. These birds are not so different from our own, or from the singing birds on my fan sticks. They are composed of feathers and fluff; they eat worms; they dive for fish. The remarkable quality about Utamaro's birds is that they disclose themselves doing these things a half-inch away from the viewer's nose. The worm that gets away poses a dilemma: am I rejoiced for the worm, or frustrated for the bird? Either way, neither bird nor worm nor I have any privacy. We are in it together.

In this mood I look through Utamaro's book, and lo, on the last page, there sits my bird. Not sitting, exactly, rather he is crouching and looking shocked. He does



# Ortolan

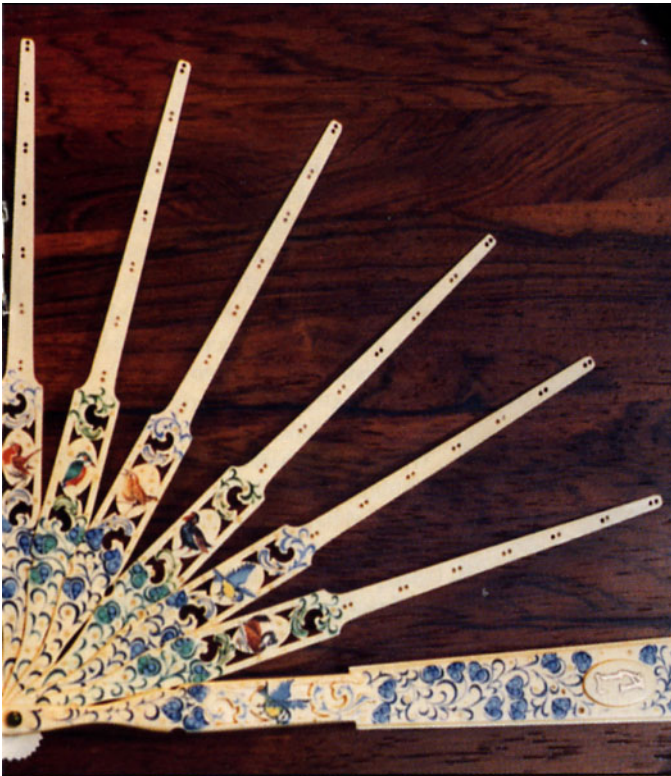
By Aurelia

**“Dinner! Partridge nightingale ice cream”**

not have the long, looping swan's neck I wanted for him, nor the cloth-of-gold Byzantine tail. But he is my bird, no doubt about that.

With tracing paper and a soft, smeary, number one pencil that makes a mess but releases the spirit, the deed is done. My bird is out of Utamaro's pages and is now crouched on tracing paper, waiting for destiny. I lay him against the outline of my fan. Alas, he doesn't fit. One wing spreads out over the top of the fan, the other falls down over the sticks. His claws have nothing to hold on to. His disbelieving eyes have nowhere to look. And yet, intrinsically, he is the right size. A smaller bird would be lost in that semicircle. He is just right. But how is he to fit?

Shears! Carefully I dismember the bird. Now he is a little heap of tissue paper: a head, two separated wings, a body, a tail,



# an Pie

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pudding, robin stew,  
cream, ortolan pie?"

claws. On the fan he goes, feet first, grasping the shoulders of the fan sticks. On top of the feet goes the body. The upper wing has to be moved about until it stays within the confines of the fan's outline, and the lower wing is tucked under the body horizontally. Oddly, this distortion does no real damage to the bird's integrity. It does give him a look of muscular strain, such as he might have for the instant before his wings are fully raised in flight—not a posture that could be maintained for any length of time, but one that involves every nerve and muscle for a critical few seconds.

The magnificent thing about tracing paper is that it can reflect every passing impulse of the designing mind. Move here, move there. Everything is visible, anything can be tried. A discarded idea is no loss and leaves no mark. My remodeled bird,

anatomy now suited to his eventual fate, is stuck together permanently with Scotch tape.

Only the head remains unattached. I move it about without much success. It seems to belong nowhere on this altered body. Suddenly the eyes catch sight of the twelve English birdlings. The parted beak seems to be stifling a scream. Dinner! Partridge pudding, robin stew, nightingale ice cream, ortolan pie! The head, requiring only a stroke of the pencil for a smallish loop of the neck, is attached to the rest of the body. My bird will spend his life sitting on my fan, watching his unsuspecting dinner. He has come to life, and in my gratitude, I give him a bold crest, which Utamaro, with other purposes in mind, forgot. I also give him his Oriental tail.

What to put with this bird? Bending and crouching, he needs about two-thirds of the fan space all to himself. But the remaining third? Should he be a bird in a tree, sitting on a branch, with a nest nearby? Hardly. Too cot-

tagy and domestic, not at all right for my wild Byzantine bird.

I begin to doodle. A forest theme maybe? Huge, veined leaves? I doodled one or two. Not bad. I doodled six or seven and connected them by a graceful, drooping stem to follow the outlines of the fan and fit the space. Whoever said only God could make a tree?

I heard a small, hard noise, as of bone grating against bone. I looked up. There was my bird, eyeing the leaves.

"What is the sense of putting me with a potted plant?" he seemed to ask.

"A potted plant!" Outrage. Silence. I looked at my doodles. It was indeed a potted plant, a cast-iron, dime store dracaena that had prospered only too well, a commonplace cliché.

"You didn't take enough trouble with it." He shrugged his Scotch taped shoulders.

I erased the dracaena and faced that empty third.

Nothing occurred to me. By and by came a twinge of regret for the dracaena, but I beat it back. The bird was right.

As every creative mind knows, the thing to do when inspiration doesn't strike is to turn the attention to other things, secure in the faith that something will eventually turn up. Accordingly, I turned my attention to the stitches I would use for the bird himself, that mere outline in spite of his sass.

I wish I could say that a fully fleshed-out lace design sprang from my brow like Athena from the brow of Zeus. Not so. The truth is that among all the stitches of needle lace, three are closest to my heart: the knotted double buttonhole ("Thirteenth Lace Stitch," if you are addicted to the DMC *Encyclopedia of Needlework* [Dillmont, 1972]); the cloth stitch (corded stitch in Lovesey [Lovesey, 1980]), the very bread and butter of needle lace; and Alençon stitch ("Twenty-third Lace Stitch" in the DMC), the lacemaker's best friend. This last makes the queen of needle lace reseaux (backgrounds). Done very close and fine it makes a queenly filling too. Done fine, it takes forever to do, an advantage when you are stalling.

My mind wandered back to the empty background. Idly, I began to slip a bit of branch under those grasping claws.

"Look," said my bird in a patient and reasonable way, "I'm not a real bird. I don't need a branch to sit on."

We stared at each other, and as I looked, his eye began to iridesce, a blue-green shimmer with flashing lights. A magic bird! I backed off slightly from that stare and realized that the space immediately about him had begun to pulsate, like his eye.

"The fire bird!"

Did he just barely nod at this? The thought of my Oriental bird, now a fire bird, seized me. I could see him, iridescent, intact, against a moving curtain of flames. But how to render fire in lace, and in cream color at that? I wanted something cascading and rhythmic, subtle yet powerful and insistent, coming in relentless waves yet controlled, yet decorative. About all this my bird had nothing to say. He held on to the fan and looked down at the unsuspecting English birdlings.

Flames. I drew a few parallel straight lines. "Curve them a little," I thought. With a set of plastic ellipse templates, I began to draw a few parallel curves—hard





*"His cheek would be in long, smooth lines of vertical cloth stitch running up to the top of his head."*

to do, and rigid and motionless when done. At some point I slipped and used the wrong ellipse, losing my perfect parallel. I was tired and somewhat discouraged. I held the paper at a distance and wondered if I could get away with that last curve.

What was that? Some discord beginning? Not with the bird, but between that

last curve and his preceding fellows? I drew another curve, again not quite parallel. The whole group of lines seethed. Zeus! I had it! Out came curve after curve, each one falling progressively away from the parallel. Presently my bird sat before a curtain of movement, and I sat looking at the fire, exhausted and thrilled.

Hunting for the stitch, the right stitch

in which to render fire, I looked first in that lacemaker's palace of Arabian nights, that treasury of jewels to make the mind reel with desire, Carlier's *Tresor de l'Art Dentellier* [Carlier de Lantsheere, 1922]. Plate 9 is a page full of narrow bands that might offer something to my curves, particularly the "Lisière des Points de Rose," or, a tape for rose point. Plate 15 shows gorgeous filling stitches, particularly one "Barrettes en Rateaux." "Rateaux" is outside my dictionary, but whatever they may be, I want them. Added to the "Lisière" of Plate 9, they confirm my feeling that fire has triangular points in it somewhere. Curves and angles, sharp and smooth, all of it forced together to give movement.

At this point, enter the Freudians who maintain that nothing is ever forgotten. Everything is there, waiting to be rediscovered. Somewhere, buried in ten-year-old seminar notes, I learned something called "Les Venises" from a teacher named Gunnel Teitel. This was a lisière, all right, containing barrettes (surely en rateaux!), and my much-loved Alençon mesh stitch as well. Once exhumed from memory, les Venises took no time to jump right out of my files. I had even done a sample. And I had the stitch for fire!

Armed now, and strengthened, I faced that bird again.

"You," said I, tentatively engaging. But he made no move and continued to study the English menu down below.

The head of a bird is covered with feathers like all the rest of him. But the head feathers are somehow different, shorter, flatter, of a more interrupted texture.

And my bird has a cheek stripe from eye to crest that could be used as a foil to emphasize texture.

When in doubt, use cloth stitch,

my rule of rules. His cheek would be in long, smooth lines of vertical cloth stitch running up to the top of his head.

I have now used two of my three favorites, Alençon and cloth stitch, so the rest of the head has got to be done in the third, knotted double buttonhole.

Knotted double buttonhole is a very interesting stitch. Done all of a piece in the



same color, it is a settled, neat, obedient, and harmonious stitch. But if the odd rows are done in one color and the even rows done in something closely related yet different, the appearance changes dramatically. The stitch looks grainy, boxy, interrupted—in a word, ideal for a bird's head feathers. Gütermann's 100/3 silk comes in at least half a dozen creams and ecrus, each varying slightly from the next. Two of those made my bird's head. A third made the cheek.

A bird's shoulders, controlling the wings as they do, ought to be sturdy. Cloth stitch again, but cloth stitch with a difference. This bird's Byzantine shoulders should gleam with unnatural power. Two strands of Marlitt's four-stranded rayon floss in a somewhat pale ecru took care of that. I ornamented the cloth stitch with the decorative holes laid in diamond shapes so characteristic of rose point, and sat back, pleased.

*"Somewhere, buried in ten-year-old seminar notes, I learned something called 'Les Venises' from a teacher named Gunnel Teitel."*

The tail would have to be fantastic. No cloth stitch here. Hardly anything could be ornamental enough. Sweeps of curve, feathers clustered into rings, scallops, ovals, festoons. There is a stitch called festoon stitch, *punto festone* in Italian. It is nothing but simple buttonhole stitch, vari-

ously known as tulle stitch and point de Bruxelles. Widely spaced, it is perceived as a series of tiny festoons, airy, delicate, looping, graceful.

Upon this ground of festoons, I made an armature of running stitches, took them in and out of the loops, went back over the running stitches three or four times to give firmness, buttonholed closely over them, and lo—the scallops, ovals, rings are there, the most Byzantine of peacock's tails.

I hardly dare lay claim to an invention, least of all in a well-worked-over field like lace. But I haven't seen this technique before; no book that I know shows it. So I do, in fact, claim it as my own.

Back to the bird. Partly because I am fond of repetition, for its own hypnotic sake, in embroidery, in music, in poetry, and partly because I can't get enough of this new armature-over-punto-festone, I give him a back to match his tail. He has



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*"Into a tree that bird shall go, just to show who's boss. I drop three big leaves down in front of the fire."*





Finished at last, *Ortolan Pie* by Aurelia Loveman.

also an underside, a little of which shows underneath his tail. For this place—downy, furry, quiet—I use my armature technique (Shall we call it “Ortolan stitch?”) over a ground of fine, close, Alençon mesh.

Standing back to look at him, I confess I am impressed. So is he. But not a word out of him, not a quiver, so cool butter wouldn’t melt in his beak.

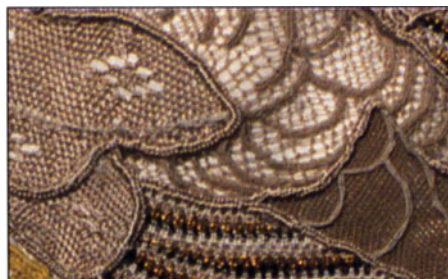
Only his wings remain. Here I may safely let go, having proved by means of cream-colored fire and a monochrome plan that I have no intention of competing with Mr. Biggins’s bright English birds. So the wings are knotted double buttonhole in four stripes of cream, beige, brown, and gold metallic, which produces a natty, smartly tailored effect. I give him a gold beak and golden claws. And for an eye, I lay a golden couronne down just over his cheek, and put an iridescent blue-green bead on it. Finished!

And yet, not finished. Into a tree that bird shall go, just to show who’s boss. I drop three big leaves down in front of the

fire. They are exactly like his wings, knotted double buttonhole, stripes, and all, though without gold.

“That’ll cut you down to size. Not much more than a leaf yourself.”

But my magic fire bird has the last word after all. He flexes and retracts his gleaming gold claws, just like a cat, and peering downward at the birdlings below, settles himself comfortably back among his Venises. “Okay, enough, what’s for dinner?”



“Shall we call it ‘Ortolan stitch?’”

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An accomplished lacemaker, weaver, embroiderer, writer, and lecturer, Dr. Aurelia Loveman has won numerous awards for her work. *Ortolan Pie* was featured in a recent exhibition at the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore where she is Lace Consultant. Her articles have appeared in *Needle Arts*, the *Bulletin of the International Old Lacers*, the *Bulletin of the Needle and Bobbin Club*, and *Lace*, the publication of the British Lace Guild.