

A VANISHED ART.

BY GEORGE TROBRIDGE.



FIG. 1.—“FRONT” OF EMBROIDERED MUSLIN.

THE caprices of fashion have often been the cause of the destruction of a thriving industry, ruining the capitalist and driving the operatives to seek some new occupation, perhaps, after they have been brought near to starvation while waiting wearily for times to improve. So it was years ago with the Coventry ribbon trade, with the crinoline steel manufacture, and the artificial flower industry. These in turn were utterly crushed, as they had been called into being, by the decrees of the fashion maker.

When a ridiculous custom, such as the wearing of hooped skirts, is condemned by the court of fashion, we cannot feel sorry, however much we may deplore the dislocation of trade which necessarily ensues; but when, in addition to causing loss to manufacturers and distress among workers, a delicate and beautiful art is extinguished, we have every cause for regret.

In the early years of Queen Victoria's reign a favourite decorative element of ladies' attire was

embroidered muslin, in the form of collars, cuffs, sleeves, chemisettes, etc. This was chiefly produced in the north of Ireland, though the demand came through the merchants of Glasgow, who doubtless found cheaper labour among the Irish peasants than in their own country, or, perhaps, recognised the special aptitude of Irishwomen for delicate handicrafts like lace and embroidery. In course of time an enormous trade arose, and thousands of women and girls were employed, chiefly in the counties of Down, Tyrone, and Donegal. County Down has always been the principal centre for embroidery work, and many persons can remember when “spriggers” were to be seen plying their needles at nearly every door in little towns like Bangor, Newtownards, and Donaghadee, as well as in the country districts. The pay was small, even the most efficient workers seldom earning more than four shillings a week; but this modest sum was a welcome addition to the scanty wage of the agricultural labourer; and, when several members of the family were engaged at the work, as was not unfrequently the case, their joint earnings raised the household into a condition of comparative comfort. To give some idea of the extent of the industry, I may mention that one firm for a long time paid eighty pounds a week in wages in a small country town; which would mean the employment of at least four hundred women and girls.

After the terrible famine year, efforts were made to extend the industry to the distressed districts, and, to this end, agents visited various parts of Mayo and Sligo, taking with them parties of trained workers to instruct the women of those localities. In this work many charitable persons in Belfast interested themselves, and doubtless something was done to alleviate distress, though the industry never took firm root in those counties, and has long since been extinct there.

On the occasion of Queen Victoria's visit to Belfast in 1849, she was pleased to inspect a display of embroidered muslin, expressing her admiration of the work, and selecting some specimens for her own use.

This great business and interesting craft came to a sudden end owing to two causes: the failure of a leading Glasgow firm of merchants, and a change of fashion. Whether the failure

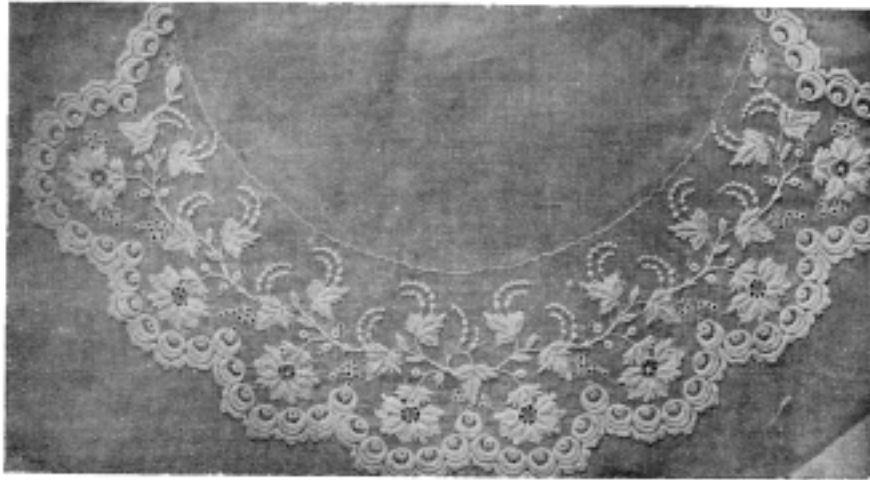


FIG. 2.—COLLARETTE OF EMBROIDERED MUSLIN.

was caused by the change of fashion, or the change of fashion arose out of the failure, it would perhaps be difficult to decide. Possibly one had as much to do with the matter as the other. Ladies were beginning to tire of embroidery, as they tire of other pretty things; and so trade fell off, and the firm found itself insolvent, with an enormous stock of embroidered goods on hand. These were suddenly thrown upon the market, embroidery became common, prices went down to an unremunerative point, and so the trade collapsed.

This embroidery on muslin was locally known as “sewed (*sic*) muslin,” and old inhabitants of Belfast still recall the palmy days of the trade of fifty years ago. Apart from its importance

as a branch of local industry, it is worthy of being remembered for the intrinsic beauty of the work produced. Until I saw some of this—there is not much in existence now—I was disposed to think that the fondness of old age had exaggerated the glories of former days, as it often does; but having seen, I am conquered, and am constrained to confess that “the half had not been told me.” By the courtesy of Mr. Samuel McBride, whose firm of Robert McBride & Co. had large dealings in this line of business many years ago, I am enabled to present the readers of *THE MAGAZINE OF ART* with some illustrations of this beautiful lost art. The charming character of the designs needs no comment from me; they are really

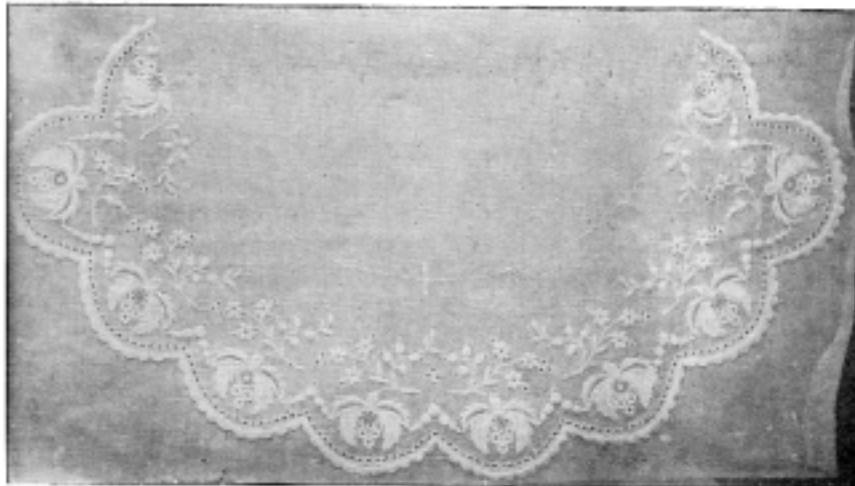


FIG. 3.—COLLARETTE OF EMBROIDERED MUSLIN.

surprising considering the period at which they were produced, and could scarcely be improved for their purpose. The workmanship of the best specimens, to which, unfortunately, the small scale of the illustrations fails to do justice, is excellent in every respect. Great variety of texture is obtained by the different stitches employed, and the introduction of open-work, "spoking," lace stitches, etc. Pierced embroidery, such as young ladies employed themselves with thirty or forty years ago, is also largely used, but seldom with satisfactory effect.

The specimens here given have been chosen rather for their design than for their technical points. More ambitious pieces, such as robes, flounces, skirts, etc., were sometimes executed, and are treasured by their owners now as precious heirlooms. Messrs. Robinson and Cleaver, of Belfast, possess an elaborate specimen in the form of an overskirt, which is a *tour de force* of the embroiderer's art. It would be impossible, however, to reproduce it successfully on a small scale.

Little need be said in explanation of the illustrations. Fig. 1 is a lovely example of the kind of thing that ladies used to wear before they took to "dickies" and stand-up collars. Note the general daintiness of the design and the subordination of masses in the details; and the interesting decorative treatment of button

and button-hole in the collar and overlapping portion of the front. Pierced and open work are used sparingly but most judiciously. Figs. 2 and 3 are collarettes of much beauty. The scalloped edge of Fig. 2 is an admirable feature, and is exquisitely worked in the original. The cuff, Fig. 4, is another excellent specimen, delicate in treatment and perfect in workmanship.

It need scarcely be said that all the designs are not equal to these. An examination of some old pattern books shows that a great deal of the work was commonplace and inartistic; but it is fair to judge an art by its best examples, and it cannot be denied that these are all that they should be.

This beautiful art is, as I have said, practically lost. It survives only in the form of embroidered handkerchiefs, for which there is still a demand. It would certainly be worth reviving, but present circumstances do not favour a renaissance—at least, not in the North of Ireland. Most of the old sewed-muslin workers are dead and gone, and the secrets of the craft remain with but few to-day. The class of women, too, who formerly worked at the trade are now fully employed in a kindred, though less delicate industry. Unless it could be re-established in some other part of the country, I fear its former glories will never be restored.

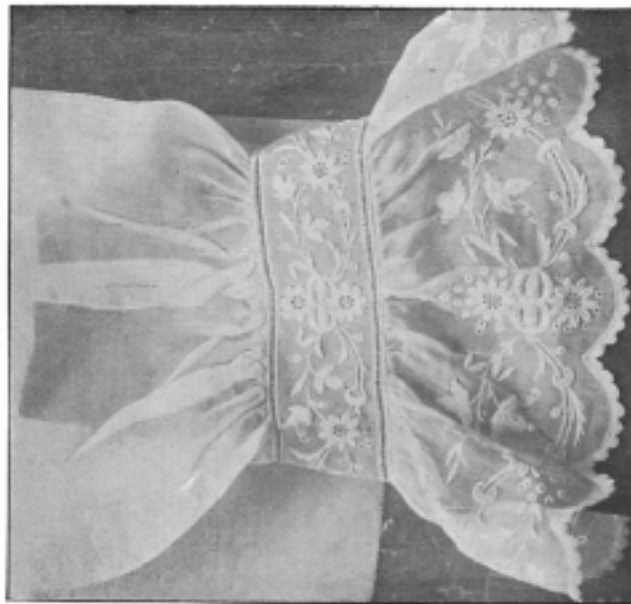


FIG. 4.—CUFF IN EMBROIDERED MUSLIN.