

Lace and Its Development

II. Venetian Point and Genoese Bobbin Lace

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(Illustrations from the permanent and loan collections of the Cleveland Museum)

A PROFOUND logic lies back of the general development of any craft. Political, social, and economic changes affect it, and fashion plays a most amazing part. This logic dominates the entire evolution of lace. It is observable in the earliest development of lace in Italy, and in its growth, as well as in the passing of leadership in lacemaking to France and Flanders in the late seventeenth century, and in the decadence of the craft in the early nineteenth century. It governed also the fluctuations of the mode and imbued the products of each period with that unmistakable imprint of the time-spirit which the world glibly calls a "style."

The beginnings of lace were sketched in the May number of ANTIQUES; and the story was told of the development of drawnwork from solid embroidery. The next step in the evolution of point lace was cutwork. *Reticella* grew logically from cutwork, only, in turn, to prepare the way for the technical achievements of *punto in aria*.

A knowledge of this development and an understanding of the technical differences between point and bobbin are not absolutely necessary for the æsthetic enjoyment of lace; but they do form a groundwork for a fuller and more complete æsthetic pleasure. Each succeeding development of technique only broadened the field. Solid embroidery, drawnwork, cutwork, and *reticella*, each in its turn, came to add to the *repertoire* of the needle worker, while the bobbin pattern likewise followed a definite evolution, much influenced by its sister technique. To a careful observer, the difference between these techniques—point and bobbin—is no longer a difficulty: the characteristic buttonhole stitches of needlepoint lace can be differentiated, often by a casual glance, from the woven, plaited, or twisted technique of bobbin lace.

From Cutwork to Reticella

Cutwork, as the name suggests, was a method of decorating linen by cutting rectangular apertures of varying sizes, and subsequently filling these openings with needlepoint designs. Such a system, carried to its furthest development, would leave no solid linen at all, only a rectangular large-meshed net. This, indeed, is what actually occurred: and the resultant product was called *reticella* from an Italian word "rete," meaning a net. The lace worker took the framework of cut linen, made it firm by whipping over the threads with a buttonhole stitch, and then used this as a foundation for his needlepoint stitches. Such a piece as that illustrated (Fig. 1) shows this very clearly. A small portion of the original linen may still be seen along the lower edge of the lace.

Considerable labor was involved in cutting out the linen for true *reticella*, so that it was not long before a short cut

was devised. Braids were used to form certain of the longitudinal and transverse supports of the pattern; and the rectangular framework was built up with these as a basis. This type of lacework, of course, is not pure *reticella*; but, nevertheless, it goes by that generic name. The same designs were used in this as in the original type, and the general effect of the finished product is quite similar.

This short cut, however, proved to be but an intermediate step to a further and more far-reaching development. The labor of cutting out the linen having been somewhat lessened by the use of braid, clever workers discovered that even this braid foundation was not essential. They found that the desired pattern could be worked out, stitch by stitch, without the necessity for building on a foundation or for following the more or less fixed patterns which the rectangular groundwork demanded. The result was called *punto in aria*; literally, a stitch in the air. With this new discovery, new horizons were opened for the worker. Complete freedom of design became possible, governed only by the dictates of taste.

In cutwork, the openings cut in the material had to conform in shape to the crossed threads of the warp and woof of the linen. Hence they could be nothing but rectangular. Any great variation from the straight line or geometric pattern, was practicable only in the embroidery upon the linen or in the needle stitches.

At first, *reticella* designs were purely geometric, usually straight lines, circles or segments of circles, bounded always by a rectangular framework. Tentative efforts to introduce a flowing curve were sometimes discernible. With *punto in aria*, curved lines of any form became possible. The rectangular framework, the geometric patterns, could be thrown to the winds. The possibilities, of course, were not fully realized at once, and they were fully achieved only by slow and painstaking effort, until, the new freedom gained, the road lay open for the marvellous technical creations of the later seventeenth century raised *Venetian point*, which was but *punto in aria* in its fullest and most perfect development.

The Point Lace of Venice

Venice was the greatest centre of lacemaking in the sixteenth century. Of course, lace-craft quickly spread, and other important centres developed with quite definite individualities, but the Queen of the Adriatic maintained, for years, her position as leader, particularly in the field of needlepoint. The very large number of pattern books published in Venice, and in the Venetian dialect, supports this conclusion with certainty. Indeed, a careful study of these dated documents gives a veritable resumé of the history of lace design and enables the student to grasp its evolu-

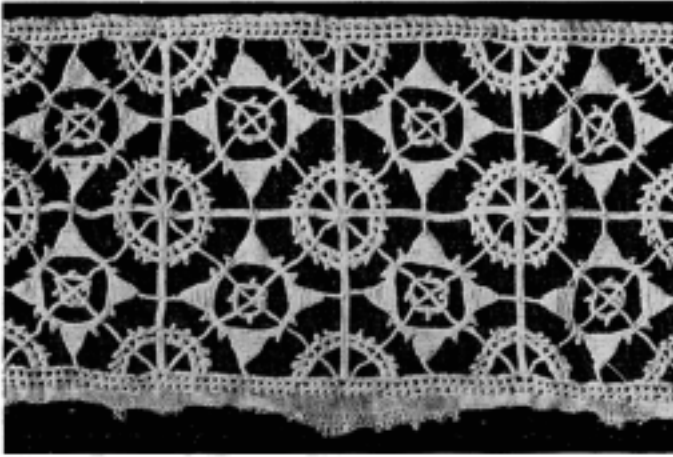


Fig. 1 — RETICELLA (*Venice, late sixteenth century*)
Based on cutwork patterns. Observe that skeleton of the design consists of squares and diagonals, supporting geometrical figures. Some of the original fabric shows at bottom.

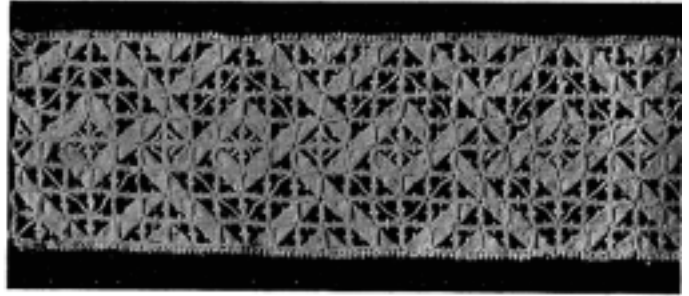


Fig. 2 — RETICELLA (*Venice, late sixteenth century*)
Based on cutwork patterns.

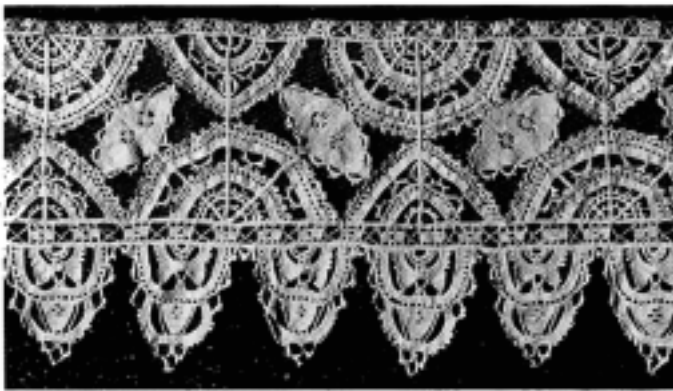


Fig. 3 — PUNTO IN ARIA (*Venice, late sixteenth century*)
Based on reticella design.

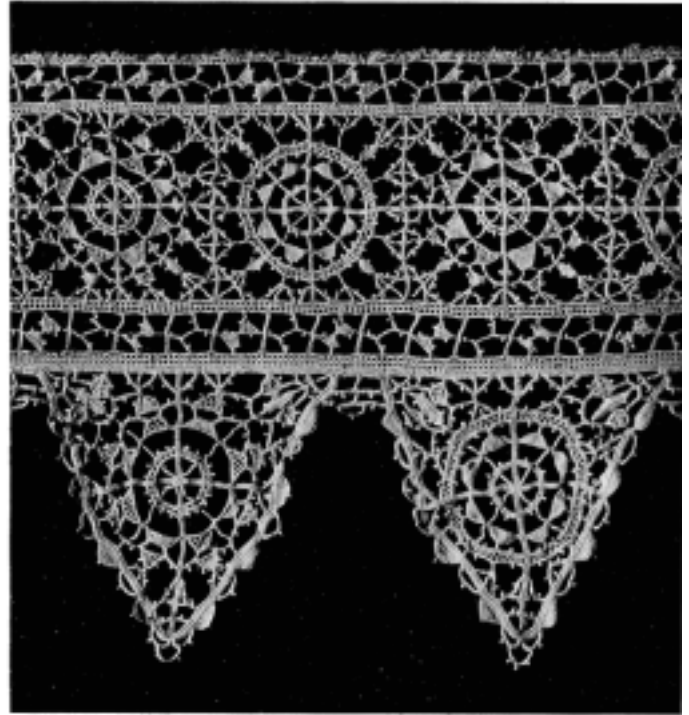


Fig. 4 — RETICELLA (*Venice, late sixteenth century*)
Based on cutwork patterns.

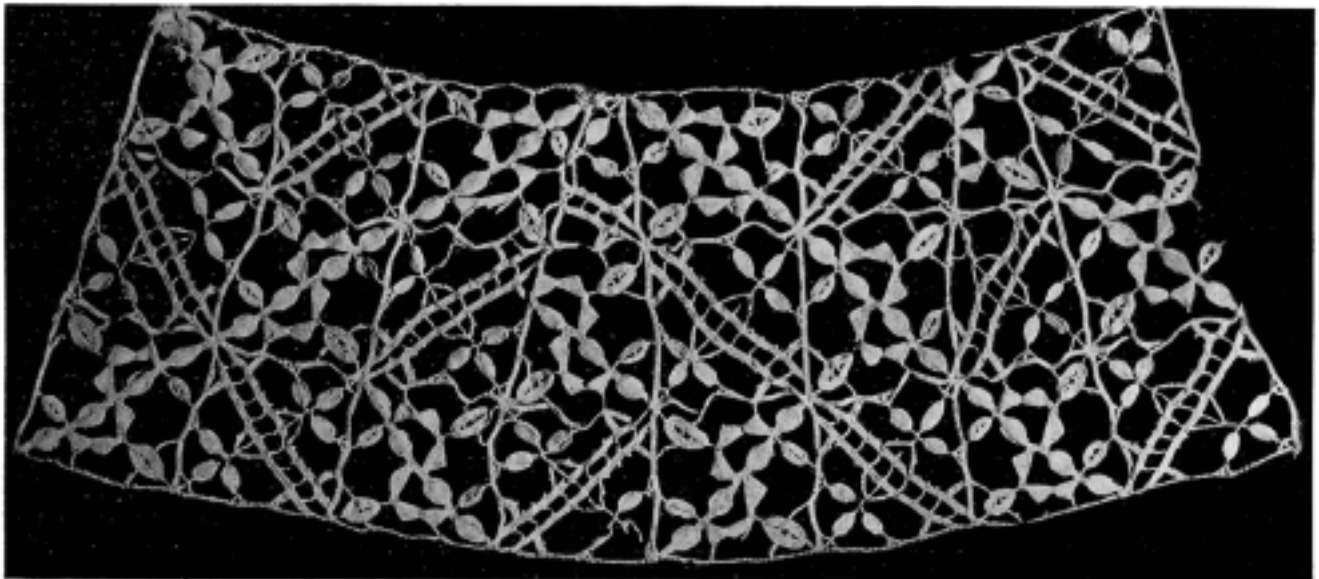


Fig. 5 — PUNTO IN ARIA (*Venice, late sixteenth century*)
Based on reticella design. Note the strongly marked basic framework in 1, 2, 4; its diminution in 3; its still further concealment in 5

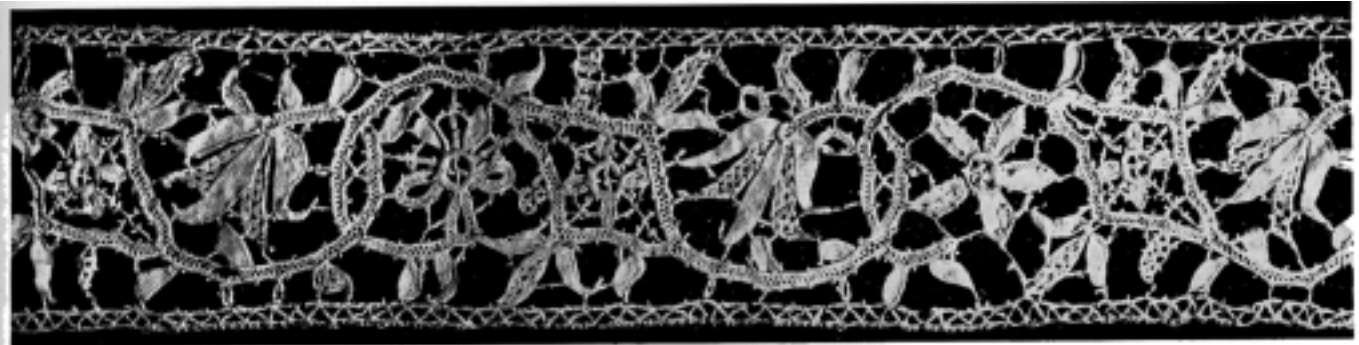


Fig. 6—PUNTO IN ARIA (Venice, early seventeenth century)
An early use of the scroll, and somewhat tentative. Compare with Fig. 7.

tion. Each publication, naturally, exhibits the latest fashion and allows the observer thus to date, approximately, the beginnings of each new mode. But the books do not—nor could they—tell for how many years each pattern continued to be made, after its first popularity had passed,—by lovers of older fashions or by workers not in contact with the most progressive elements of the social world. Many of the examples illustrated here may have been made at any time within a considerable term of years, but they represent no less truly the general trend of taste and design of a specific period.

It was not to be expected that workers thoroughly versed in the creation of cutwork would change their patterns markedly in their early attempts at *reticella*. Nor did they. Ostaus, in his pattern book, *La perfettione del disegno*, published in Venice in 1561, gives a series of designs for *punto tagliato*, or cutwork. The characteristics of many of these patterns are interlacing diagonal lines. Such a pattern occurs in an example of *reticella* illustrated (Fig. 2). The solid portions of the design are worked in with needle stitches to simulate the solid linen background

of cutwork, though the characteristic rectangular framework of *reticella* appears throughout. In another piece (Fig. 1) the artist has also attempted to give the effect of a cut-

work pattern by the repetition of little solid triangles. Even such a fully developed example of *reticella* as Figure 4 shows traces of this same treatment. This piece is illustrated, however, as summing up the best in *reticella*:—a well-ordered simplicity of design and a thoroughly successful repetition of simple geometric motives.

The same interesting evolution took place when *punto in aria* began to replace *reticella*. The technique developed in advance of the patterns. Hence *reticella* designs were translated into the new technique. Then certain free transcriptions began to be used, and a new type of pattern was finally created. In Figures 3 and 5 the artist retains the rectangular framework of *reticella*, although, in the second piece, he shows considerable freedom in the forms. However, it is in Figure 6 that true *punto in aria* reveals itself. Even the pretense of using a now unnecessary rectangular framework is thrown overboard. A certain hesitancy and awkwardness is observable in the scrolls; but, nevertheless, complete freedom of fancy and design has been achieved. It is only necessary to study the superb collar illustrated (Fig. 7) to discover the scroll treated with complete certainty.

This piece, in its remarkable organization of design, emphasizes the height of achievement reached in the new technique. Design has thrown off for all time the

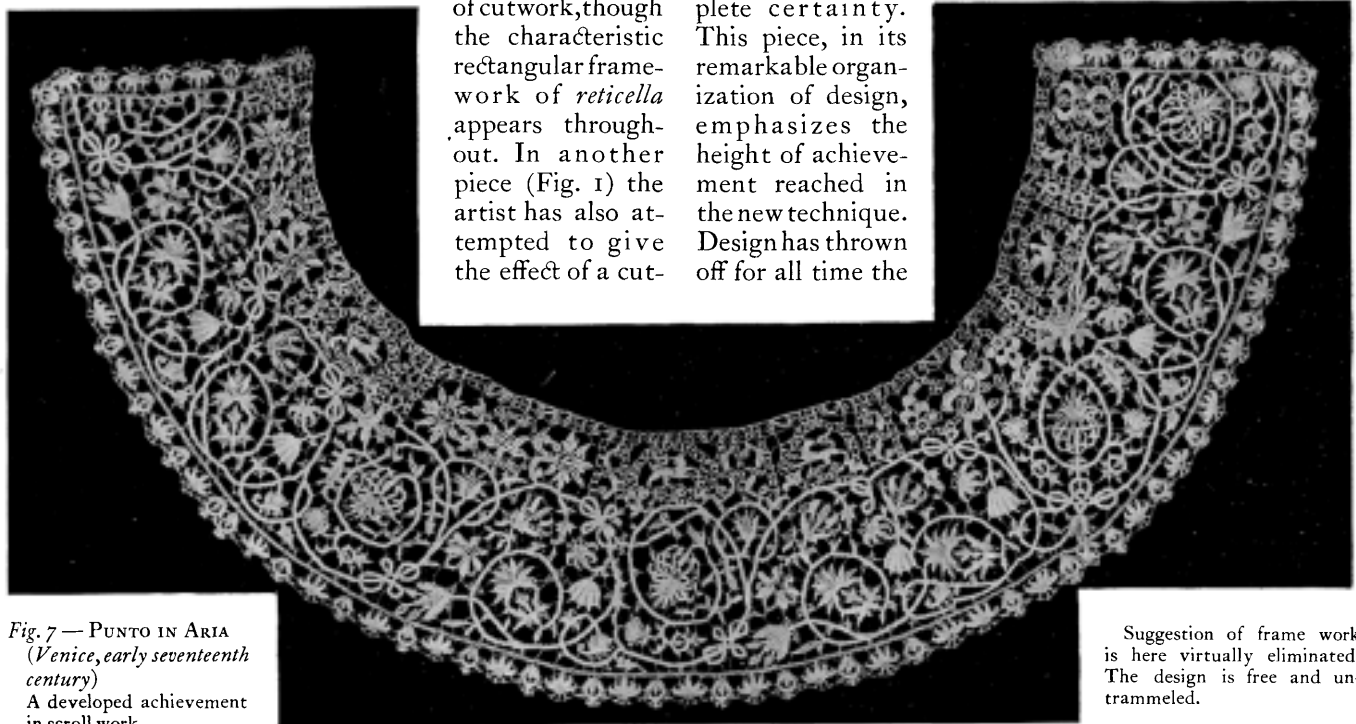


Fig. 7—PUNTO IN ARIA
(Venice, early seventeenth century)
A developed achievement in scroll work

Suggestion of frame work is here virtually eliminated. The design is free and untrammelled.

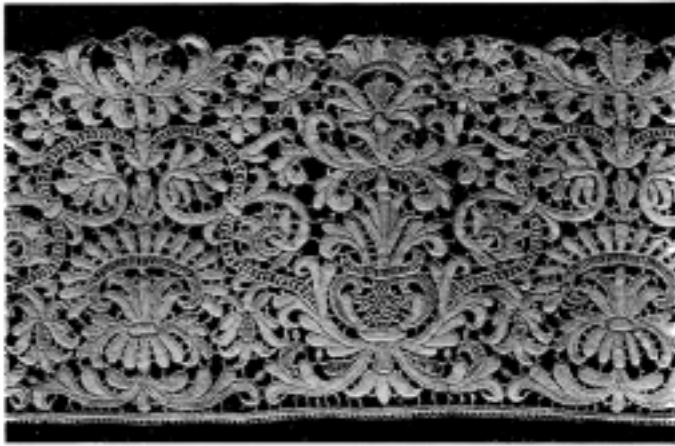


Fig. 8 — PUNTO IN ARIA (Italian, early seventeenth century)
Excellent example of Renaissance design.

shackles which had, in large measure, both defined and justified its earlier successes. New triumphs were to come; but in them the worker many times came close to the verge of bad taste. That he did not often offend was due only to the innate refinement of the Italian craftsman.

Another example of *punto in aria* is shown (Fig. 8). It is an excellent example of Renaissance design, displaying marked order and balance. It may be of northern workmanship. Contrast this with the beautiful piece (Fig. 9), which is a direct outgrowth of such a pattern. What a new spirit is manifest! The Baroque has conquered, and the clarity of the earlier scrolls is interrupted by rather meaningless whirls and volutes. This is to be a quality characteristic of the later seventeenth century art. The technique is the same. In fact, nearly all point lace made since 1600, which is not to be classified as *cutwork*, *reticella*, or as some other definite technique, is *punto in aria*. The flat and raised *Venetian point* are of this type, as are, likewise, the eighteenth century needlepoint laces with net ground. However, it is customary to refer to these merely as point lace, or by a more particular name. The term *punto in aria* is generally applied to those laces only which immediately followed *reticella* in development, and are marked by Renaissance rather than by Baroque design.

Bobbin Lace in Venice and Genoa

What was Bobbin lace doing in the meantime? Apparently in the sixteenth century point lace was the more fashionable and more sought after. This seems a reasonable statement, since the design of quite a large proportion of bobbin production was based on needlepoint. Towards the very end of the sixteenth century, however, certain publications began to bring out new modes. As a result, while point and bobbin show the same general evolution of style, designs more particularly adapted to the requirements of each technique began to develop.

The single most famous pattern book was *Le Pompe*, published at Venice in 1557. Many of its motives suggest the growth of the patterns from older braided trimmings (Fig. 14). Such patterns are characteristic of the early Venetian bobbin. Few bobbin lace copies of *reticella* were ever made in Venice; for by the end of the sixteenth century the curved line had definitely invaded bobbin design. The pattern books of Isabetta Catanea Parasole, one of which was published in 1597, emphasize this. Figure 15a shows a more or less tentative use of the curved line; figure 15b shows its complete triumph. Both pieces are characteristic of Parasole's models.

Peculiar to Italy were the distinct individualities of her cities. Venice, as a personality, was quite as distinct from Genoa as Florence was from Rome. Yet, the art of all had a family resemblance in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They were all engaged in the same general movement, although the individual application was entirely personal.

Venice was, undoubtedly, the greatest centre for point lace, although her bobbin craft was distinctive. Genoa, on the other hand, seems to have loved bobbin more than point. This was her especial forte. In the sixteenth century, her bobbin copies of *reticella* were extraordinary achievements, technically and artistically. The millet seed constituted the favorite motif. This, at any rate, is a reasonable supposition; for the motif repeatedly appears in laces made in many places in the Mediterranean world, —places definitely within the sphere of Genoese influence.

Much the same growth of pattern is manifest in Genoa bobbin lace as in the needle point of Venice. In three little

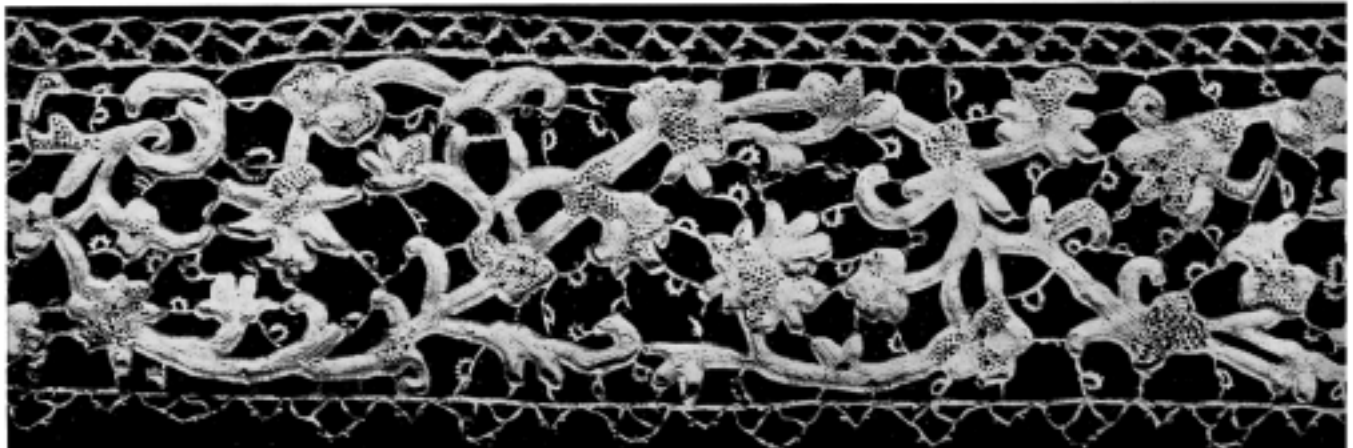


Fig. 9 — PUNTO IN ARIA (Venice, seventeenth century)

Compare with Figs. 6 and 7. Characteristic of late seventeenth century work, the scroll less clearly defined because interrupted by rather meaningless branching forms.

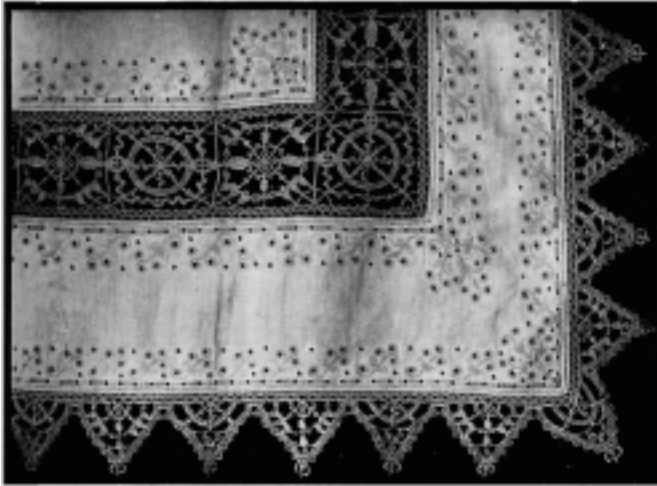


Fig. 10 — BOBBIN LACE (Genoa) late sixteenth century.

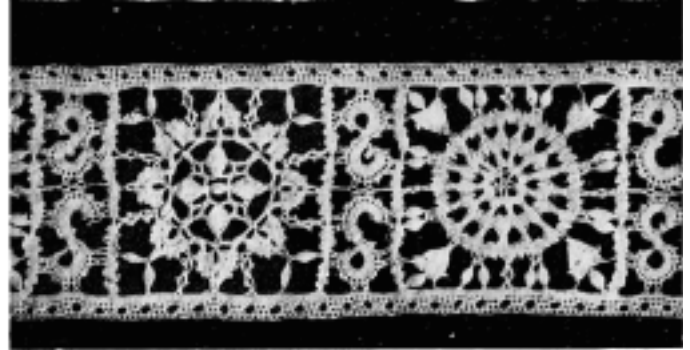
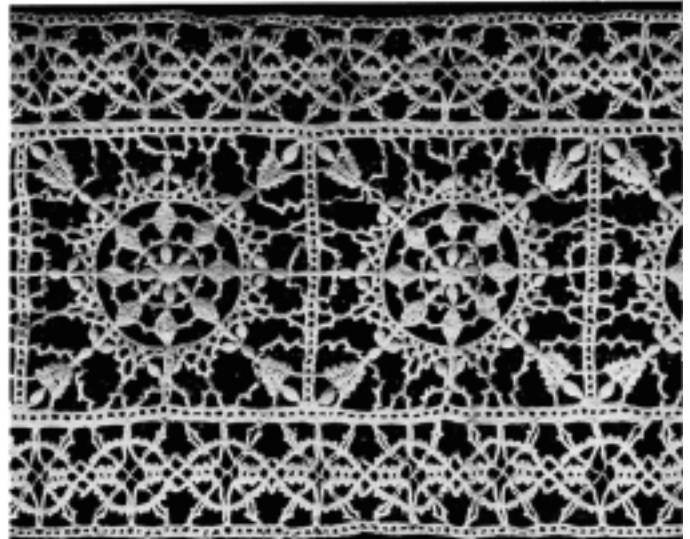


Fig. 12 — BOBBIN LACE (Genoa, late sixteenth century)
Shows the influence of reticella patterns.

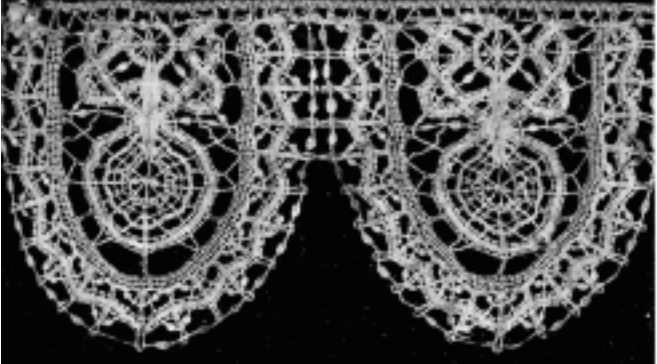
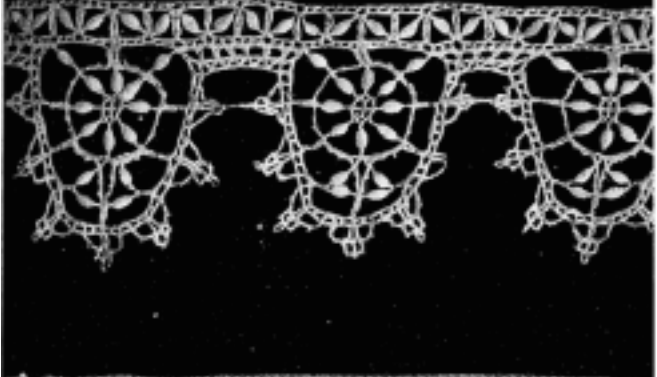
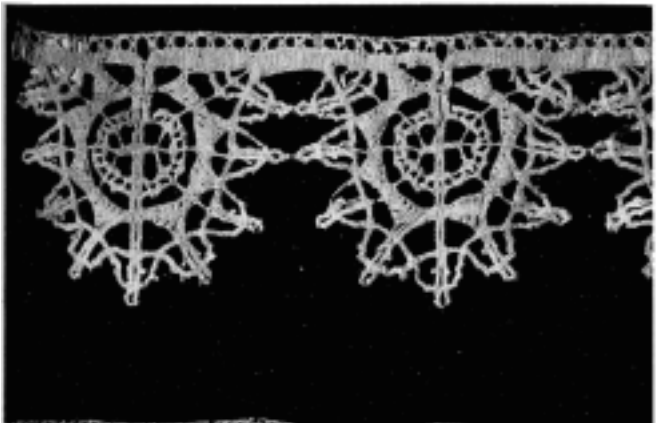


Fig. 11 — BOBBIN LACE (Genoa, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries)
The upper pattern is based on cutwork; the middle on reticella. Note the change from a pointed to a rounded character.

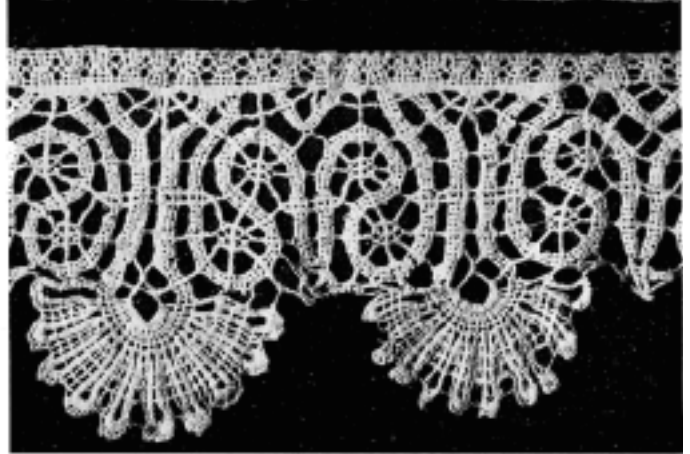
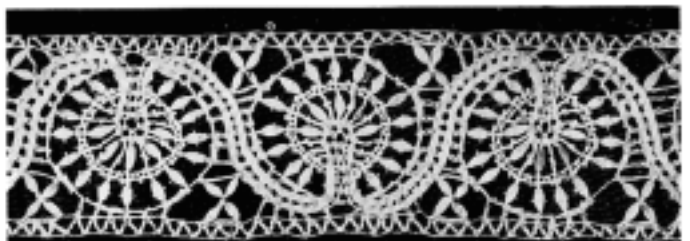


Fig. 13 — BOBBIN LACE (Genoa, seventeenth century)
Based on reticella

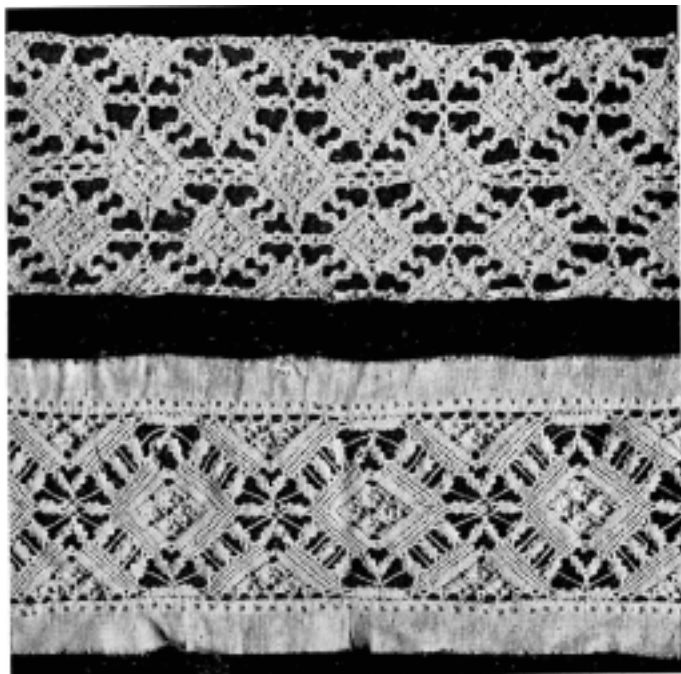


Fig. 14 — BOBBIN LACE (*Venice, sixteenth century*)
 Designs based on the patterns in *Le Pompe*, which was published in 1557.

bobbin edgings are graphically illustrated (Fig. 11), first an attempt to simulate cutwork in the solid triangles, then the copying of *reticella*, and, finally, the full seventeenth century independent style. The change from a pointed to a rounded character in the points is also to be observed. The influence of *reticella* models is again shown in Figures 12 and 13. Other examples show the tentative use of flowing lines and the final complete realization of patterns peculiarly adapted to bobbin technique.

Point and bobbin craft had developed meanwhile in France and Flanders, where products were so little different from Italian models that it is now hard to differentiate them. Italy was the style centre, and other nations did not wander far from her patterns.

One fact in the progress of lace-making up to this point—the seventeenth century—is worth special observation: lace patterns and lace technique are entirely self supporting. The extraneous assistance of a ground of netting has not yet appeared. That is in accord with the inevitable logic of lace origin. Lace was the outgrowth of embroidery. Simplified to lowest possible terms, it might have begun with punched holes,—their shape and size restrained by buttonhole stitches, and their effectiveness increased by some such vine or leaf pattern embroidery as occurs in the cloth shown in Figure 10.

When the aperture is enlarged, the shape of the basic

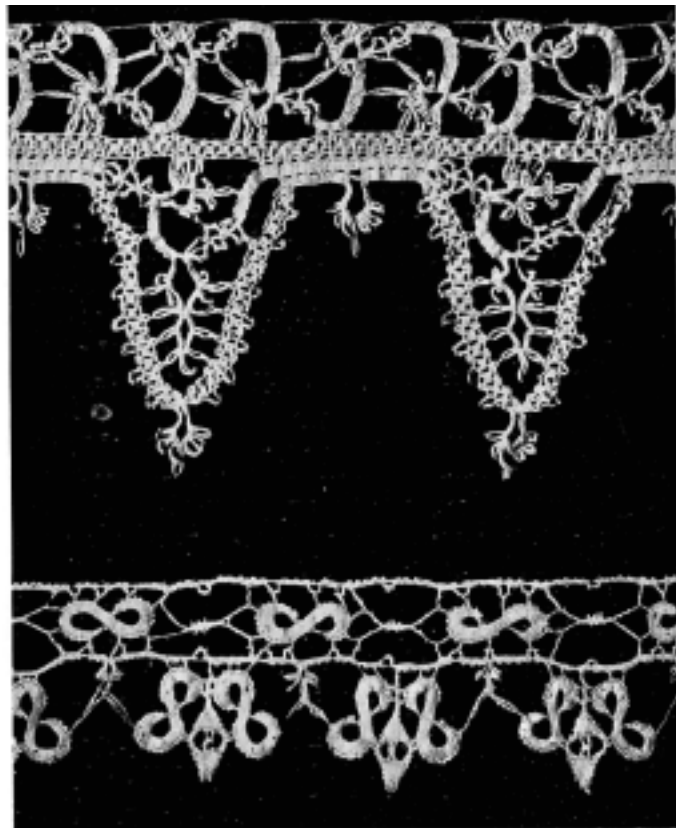


Fig. 15a and 15b — BOBBIN LACE (*Venice, early seventeenth century*)
 Designs based on patterns of Isabetta Catanea Parasole.
 a. The beginning of the use of the curved line.
 b. The curved line successfully achieved.

material must, as a first requirement, be retained in its proper shape. That implies a rectangular opening whose rectangularity is maintained by strong vertical and horizontal elements which, in turn, are braced by diagonals. In short, the skeleton of early lace may be likened to a truss of thread. Upon this skeleton of straight lines a wheel like pattern inevitably develops. From that the step into the scroll is a short one. That step, however, involves abandonment not only of the textile base, but of the geometric tradition which had grown up with it, and had continued after that base had been quite abandoned.

Thus *reticella* grew from *cutwork*, and *punto in aria* grew from *reticella*. Yet *punto in aria* has its structural limitations. It must carry supporting and bracing lines with the pattern, and by such lines the pattern is inevitably restricted.

(In the next article, the story of lace will be carried on with the development of Venetian point and the Milanese *punto di Milano*.)

