

A BESTIARY IN LACE

By
Marian Powys

In the old lace designs, strange animals are often introduced. Sometimes these are so cleverly set among the foliage that they are hard to find; often they make a grand central motif, facing each other or back to back on either side of the Tree of Life.

In the earliest laces may be found many human and animal forms and well-drawn, natural flowers. They come in the cut and drawn work that preceded the *Punto in Aria*, and they are found in all the 16th-century pattern books. In lacis, both knotted filet and buratto, they are moving about, prancing and springing, quarreling and making love, devotedly following mankind or fiercely on the attack.

In the later laces, quiet domestic animals have their place.

All through the story of lace, birds dominate many a pattern; peacocks with tail spread or proudly trailing behind, doves gently cooing, and eagles proud and fierce, but most of all the falcon in hunting scenes. Parrots, flamingoes and tropical birds all have their place in lace, as do many little fluttering singing birds – robins, wrens and thrushes.

In the *Corona delle nobili e virtuose donne*, a book of designs by the Venetian, Cesare Vecellio, first published in 1591, birds and beasts play their part – a lion baited by fierce birds, the figure of a monkey-man and “Madonna Volpe,” the Fox Lady; “che fatte voi?” “What are you doing?” is written under her picture, in some editions. The book ends with a pattern composed exclusively of grotesque beasts, twenty creatures within bars, as if in a travelling circus or zoo – elephant, rabbit, fox, camel, dragon, lion, leopard and different kinds of dogs (Pl. I).

Illustrated from a Spanish filet panel of the 16th century is the King of Dogs, so proud and masterful, leaping on high, watched by his little friend, who might have been painted by Velasquez (Pl. II).

From an early Italian buratto cover is a hunting scene with a handsome hunter wearing a feathered hat and long strong boots; his hound seems reluctant to chase a Unicorn, remembering perhaps the tradition of this creature’s invulnerability, but in this forest there is good sport

anyway, with wolves and wild deer, boars, eagles, hares and rabbits. This is an original cover of the time, with buratto panels inserted in hand-woven linen, and finished with an edging of pillow lace in gold (Pl. III).

From Russia comes a quaint hanging in drawn thread, formerly in the collection of the Countess Pushkin, and now in the Brooklyn Museum. Cows, sheep and goats are quietly grazing in the park surrounding the stately houses of their owners, while shepherd and herdsman with bow and arrow defend them from lion, tiger and stag. At the bottom is attached a Russian pillow-made border in the manner of Milanese lace (Pl. IV).

Lions and eagles add interest to a beautiful *volant*, or flounce, of *Point de Venise à Rose* of the 17th century in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The eagles poised on the highly decorated branches and the lions prowling about are so well treated by the lace designer that they in no way interfere with the beauty of line, which is so essential in lace (Pl. V).

The Lion Rampant in the right hand corner of the illustration is enlarged (Pl. VI), so that all the stitches are clearly seen and any able needlewoman could follow them. But, even so, the King of Beasts shows all his stately grace and dominating power. First a low, reverberating growl, then a tremendous roar, making tremble all living things.

The King of Beasts comes again in a lighter mood in a grand Milanese flounce of the 18th century. This lace, fourteen inches wide and a great length, is crowded with life-sized birds and wild beasts and some huntsmen, moving quietly through the forest. As many as thirty living creatures can be found in one repeat. The foliated scroll pattern and typical Milanese ground make a rich setting for this woodland scene (Pl. VII).

In the fine Flemish pillow lace known as *Point d'Angleterre* is the scene of Abraham prevented by an angel from sacrificing his son. The angel points out the ram caught in a thicket, ready to give his life for Isaac. The ram is worked in relief, showing his woolly coat, with a background of the finest and most difficult stitch in all lace, the *Vrai Droschel*, every tiny mesh composed of four threads braided and then twisted on either side. Below are different fillings or modes; the dominant one is that called the "Swing Cutwork" in English Devon pillow lace of this kind (Pl. VIII).

The littlest hunting scene is to be found in a narrow border of *Fausse Valenciennes* or *Binche* only two inches wide, the rider guided and protected by a guardian angel flying above (Pl. IX).

In a veil of *Point d'Alençon*, said to have been made for Marie Antoinette, are gardening tools and exotic birds perched among the vines in the *Petit Trianon*. The laces of this period are often dotted with little sprays, "semé de larmes," sown with tears. But there is no weeping or tears in this happy place of tranquility and calm combined with an impression of gaiety. The ground is the needlepoint *Réseau ordinaire* with the *Petit réseau* in places. There are many different fillings or stitches occurring in the wings of the birds, in the vases and in the very roots of the climbing plants: "à nez en queue," "à nez en chaînettes," "écailles," "mosaïques," all skillfully balanced and worked out in a masterly manner (Pl. X).

A rich and rare jungle scene in hand-knitted lace, "Merlino," from Sicily, has beautiful living birds, parrots and peacocks enjoying the fruit and flowers among shapely palms. There is a delightful order in this wild forest life. Passion-flowers and roses, tulips and anemones, bleeding-heart and jessamine are all delicately poised in place (Pl. XI).

In the First World War, when some lace centers were submerged under water, the lace-makers worked out designs of the unshapely creatures that came with the sea – crawling things – a record of those disastrous times (Pl. XII). These laces were presented in gratitude to Queen Elizabeth and to the wife of Brand Whitlock from Toledo, Ohio, who was American Ambassador at that time. These distinguished people, with some others, helped the lace industries through the war. Lace suffered much more in the Second World War. But a thing of such beauty will surely survive and the pleasure of making lace, such delicate intricate work, will fascinate many in time to come.



Plate I Plate from Cesare Vecellio, *Corona delle nobili e virtuose donne*, Venice, 1601. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1918.

Plate III Lacis, buratto cover. Italian, XVI century. Collection: Marian Powys. Photo: Fred Burrell.

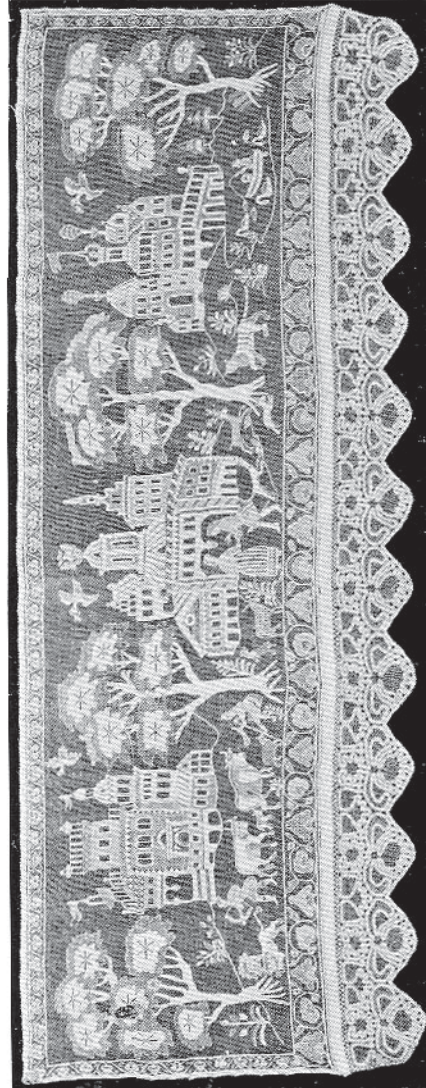
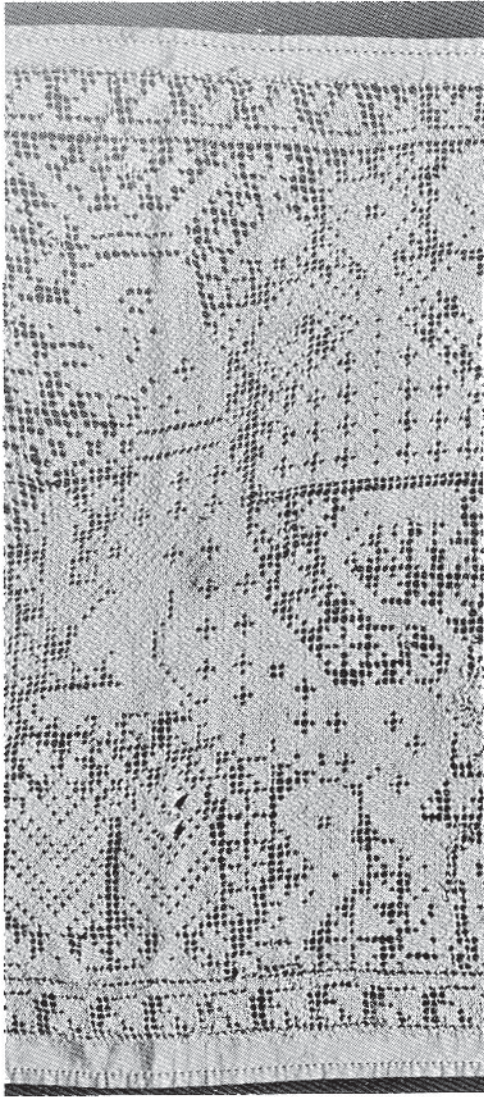


Plate II Lacis, knotted filet. Spanish, XVII century. Collection: Marian Powys.
Photo: Fred Burrell.

Plate IV Border, drawn thread work. Russian, XVIII century. Courtesy of the
Brooklyn Museum.

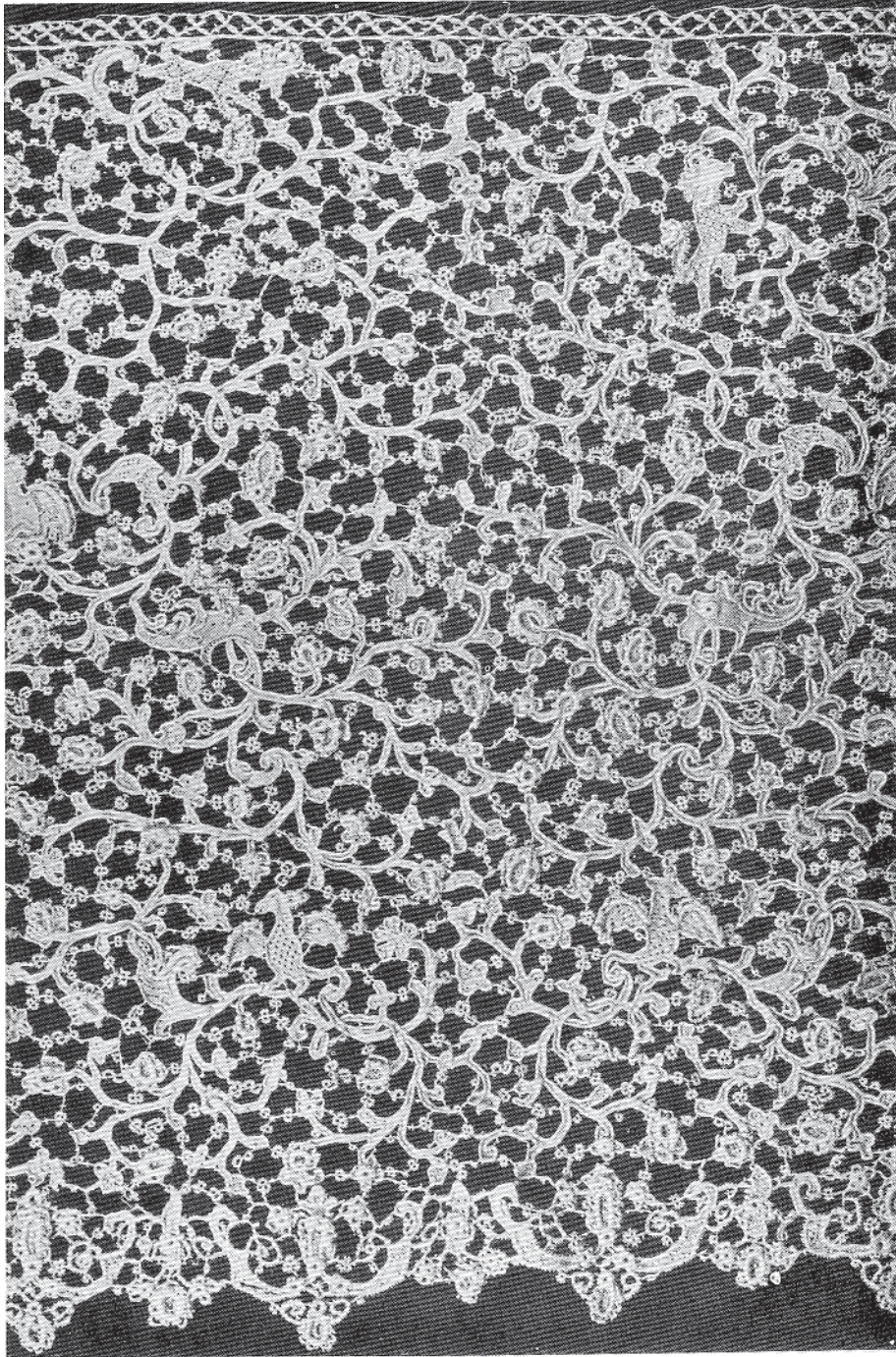


Plate V Flounce, *Point de Venise à Rose*. Venetian, XVII century. Detail. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Mabel Metcalf Fahnestock Collection, the gift of Ruth Fahnestock Schermerhorn and Faith Fahnestock, 1933. Photo: Michael Braun.

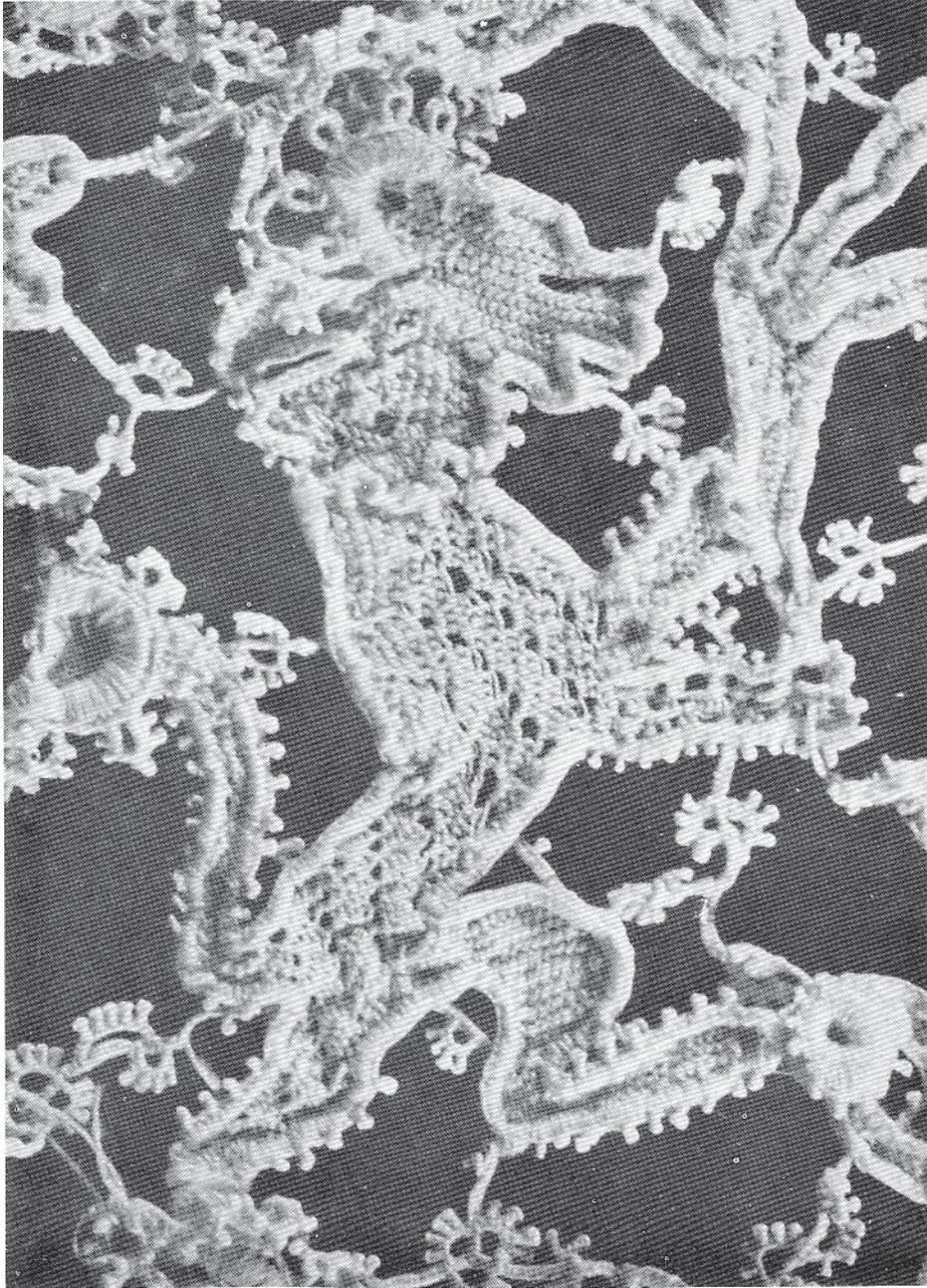


Plate VI *Point de Venise à Rose*. Lion rampant, enlarged, detail of Plate V.



Plate VII Flounce, pillow lace. Milanese, XVIII century. Formerly in the Collection of Dr. Wiener.

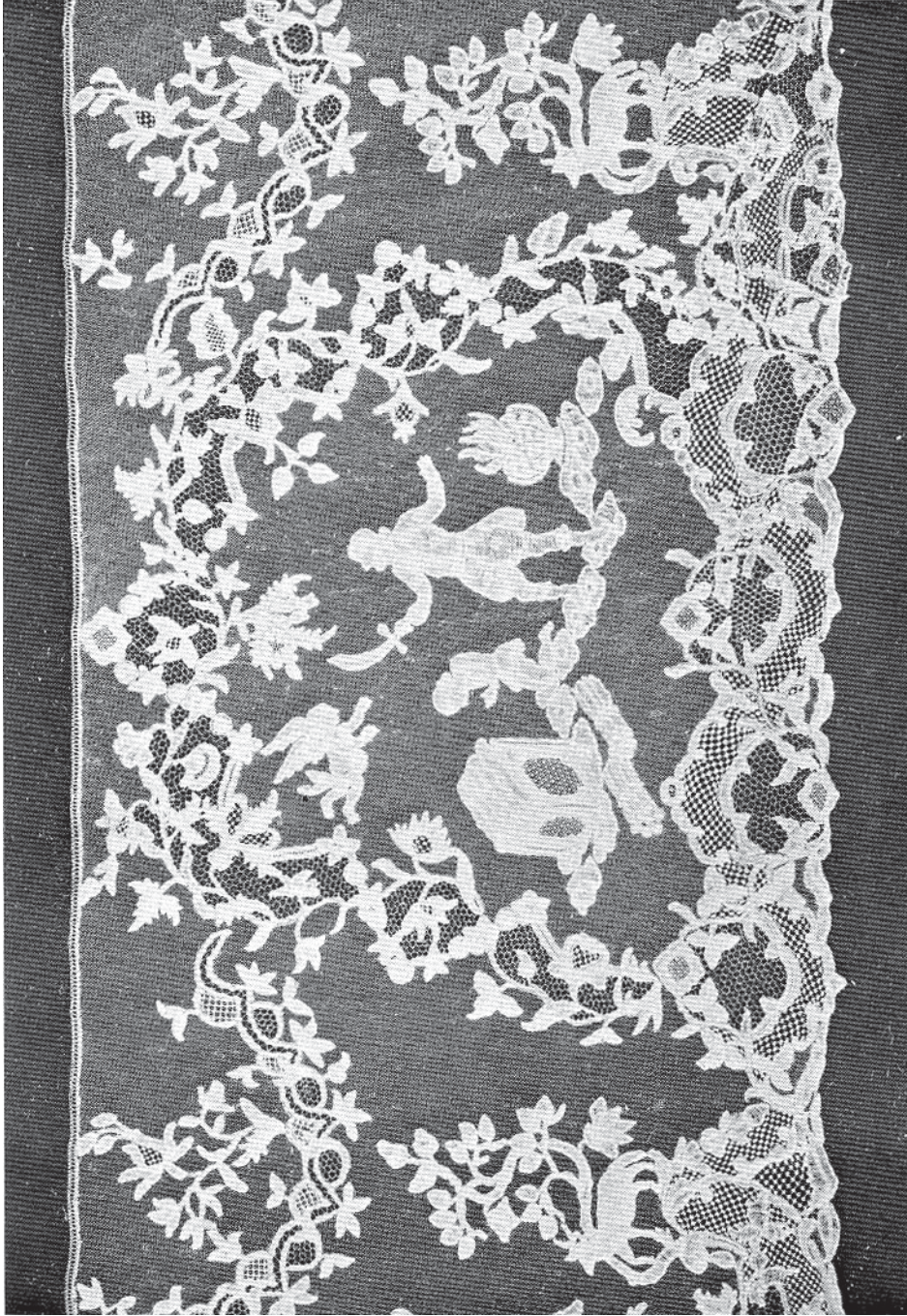


Plate VIII Flounce for ecclesiastical use, pillow lace, *Point d'Angleterre*. Flemish, XVIII century. Formerly in the Collection of Mrs. William Bliss. Photo: Frances Pellegrini.

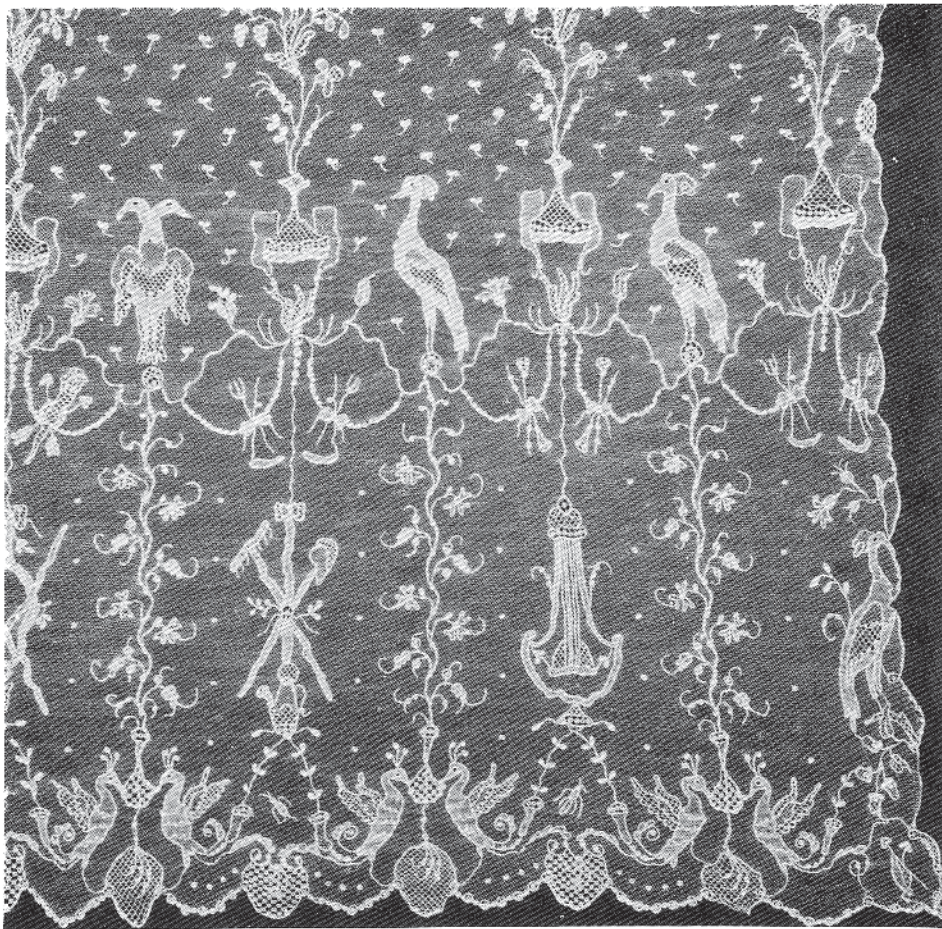
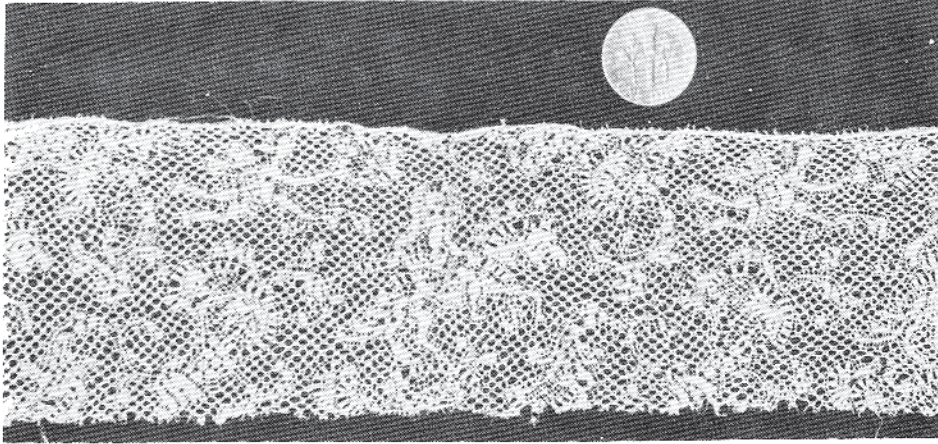


Plate IX Border, *Fausse Valenciennes* or Binche. Flemish, early XVIII century. Collection: Marian Powys. Photo: Fred Burrell.

Plate X Veil or Panel, *Point d'Alençon*. French, late XVIII century. Collection: Marian Powys. Photo: Frances Pellegrini.

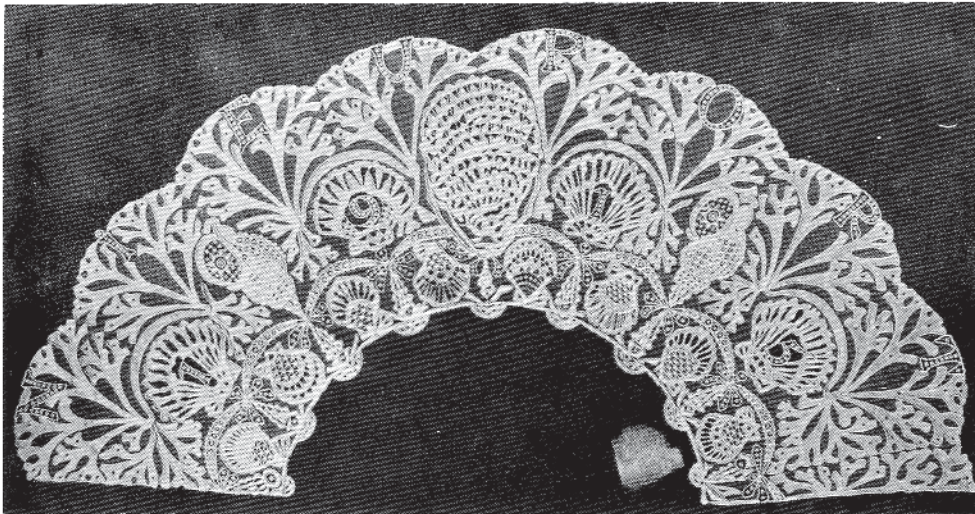
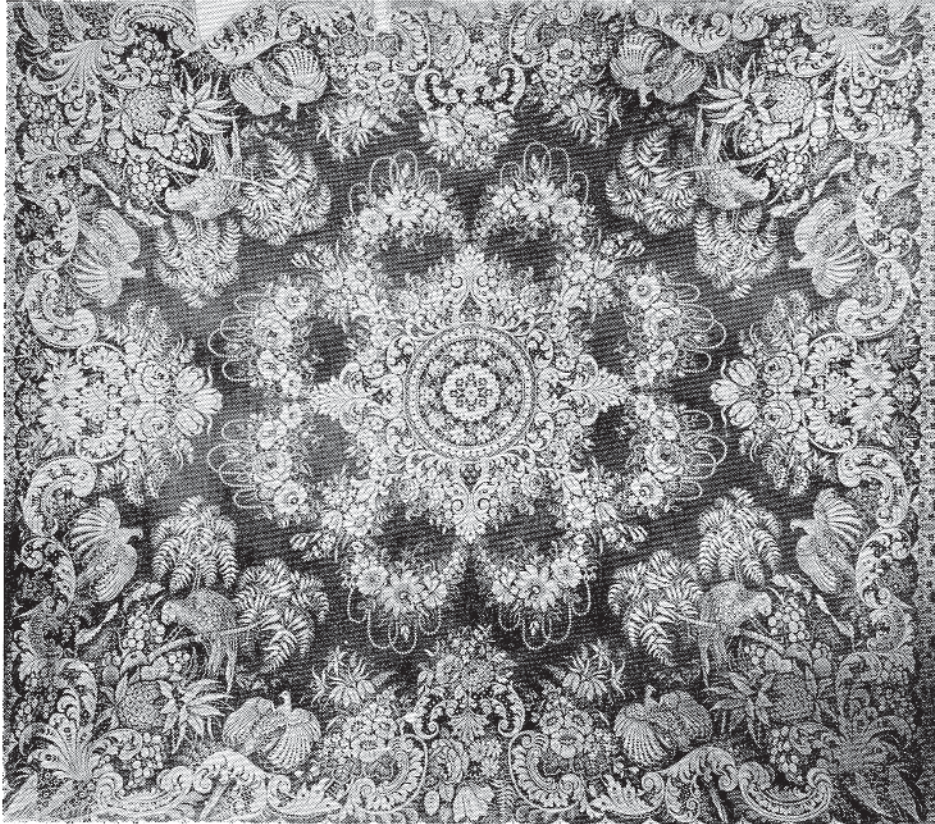


Plate XI Cover of knitted lace, "Merlino." Sicilian, XIX century. Location unknown.

Plate XII Fan of Brussels needlepoint, *Point de Gaze*, designed by M. De Rudder. Belgian (Nieuport), dated 1915. Photo: Paul Becker.