

## FIFTY YEARS OF THE NEEDLE AND BOBBIN CLUB

ON February 8th, 1916, a small group of people interested in lace met in a classroom of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and created the Needle and Bobbin Club; "a name was chosen, officers elected and the aims of the club and its by-laws decided," wrote Miss Gertrude Whiting, founder and first president. Miss Whiting had studied lace-making in Europe and, on her return, had organized "fortnightly gatherings of a congenial group of friends;" for six years these ladies had met "to ply the bobbins and discuss lace matters," until Miss Whiting, encouraged by Miss Bessie E. Merrill of Pittsburgh, decided it was time to form a club. She told her plans to Miss Frances Morris, then an assistant curator in the Metropolitan Museum, where she was in charge of the textile collections. Lace was one of her main interests, so she was delighted to co-operate with Miss Whiting and wrote to "twenty or thirty enthusiasts, nineteen of whom at once sent encouraging replies."

The letter that called the lace lovers together is reproduced on p. 4. How many people actually met at the Metropolitan Museum is not known, but a list of Charter Members, with twenty-eight names, has survived. The first printed list contains 142 names, and in June, 1916, when a notice of the Club was printed in the *Metropolitan Museum Bulletin*, the membership was said to be over two hundred, the figure at which it stands today.

The Charter Members included most of the great American collectors of lace, whose gifts and bequests have made the museums of the United States as rich in this field as those of Europe: Mrs. Harris Fahnestock, Mr. Richard C. Greenleaf (the only man, though two others joined in the first year), Mrs. Bayard Cutting, Mrs. George Blumenthal, and many more. The name of the Club was obviously chosen because needles and bobbins are the tools used to make the vast majority of laces. But embroideries are also made with needles, and bobbins (though of another type) are used by weavers, so it is not surprising to find among the Charter Members several collectors with wider interests. Mrs. DeWitt Clinton Cohen made a varied and very choice collection of many types of textiles, now unfortunately dispersed, and Mr. Greenleaf's waistcoats and other objects, all bequeathed to the Cooper Union Museum, are as fine as his lace. The minutes of the first meeting have not survived, but one can imagine a lively debate about the scope of the Club, for the first printed statement of its aims or objects are not exactly those listed in the letter signed by Miss Whiting and Miss Morris; lace is the only textile mentioned in the letter, but the statement changes this to include all handmade fabrics.

ONE WEST SEVENTY-SECOND STREET  
NEW YORK CITY

Dear Mrs. Cole, January 17, 1916.

It has been suggested by some of us, who are interested in lace, that a club be formed:-

- To encourage and maintain interest in the fabric;
- To promote the lace industry in the United States;
- To afford opportunities to meet and discuss lace;
- To be notified of sales, lectures and exhibits;
- If possible, to visit private collections, and see pictures

of distant collections; and perhaps, to circulate a brochure or monograph.

If interested, you are invited as a charter member, to be present at the first general organizing meeting, to be held in one of the class-rooms of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, Tuesday, February eighth, at two-thirty.

Cordially

Gertrude Whiting  
Frances Morgan.

The objects of the Club were, as printed, "to encourage and maintain interest in hand-made fabrics; to promote these industries in the United States; to afford opportunities to meet and discuss lace or allied subjects; to be notified of sales, exhibits, and lectures; if possible, to visit private collections or see pictures of distant collections, and perhaps to publish a brochure or monograph." Thanks to this fortunate enlargement of the interests of the Club, the members who were recruited during the first year included amateurs of several kinds of textiles, such as the samplers collected by Mrs. Henry E. Coe, now in the Cooper Union Museum. Though many first year members were great lace collectors, such as Mrs. J. P. Morgan, Jr., and others, like Mrs. Albert Blum, joined later, there have been distinguished members who were not concerned with lace, including Mrs. Lathrop C. Harper, whose eight hundred samplers are now in the Metropolitan Museum, Mrs. William H. Moore, whose oriental textiles are at Yale University, Miss Elizabeth Day McCormick, whose costumes and embroideries are in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss, who, with her husband, created Dumbarton Oaks, the great center for Byzantine and early medieval studies, in Washington. The Club was described in *Vogue* in 1926 as "that organization of lace and embroidery collectors that is so hard to get into—because the demands are so

high in the way of virtuosity and appreciation—, so impossible to think of getting out of, because the true collector's spirit ceases only with life itself.”

The main purpose of the Club has remained the same throughout the fifty years of its history, though its aims are now rather differently defined. They are, today, “to revive, encourage and maintain interest in fabrics and textile arts; to stimulate and promote such interests and arts . . . ; to publish bulletins, brochures, books, patterns or other articles of interest; to announce matters of special interest; possibly to maintain educational courses, classes or lectureships. . . .” Lace is no longer specifically mentioned. And, in the formal language of a legal entity (the Club was incorporated in 1923), there is no need to mention the important aim or object or purpose that throughout the history of the Club has been so successfully achieved, the gatherings of a congenial group of friends that had given Miss Whiting her original idea.

Strangely enough, the publication of a bulletin is not listed among the objects of the Club in 1916, though this was to be perhaps the most unusual and certainly the most permanent of its achievements. The fifty years of the blue-covered *Bulletin of the Needle and Bobbin Club* will be discussed later, but, to recapture something of the spirit and atmosphere of the year 1916, Vol. I, no. 1, is worth study. This issue of the *Bulletin* has several pages of advertisements: five shops had lace for sale in New York, Boston, and Washington. Others would repair lace or copy old examples. The “young women of the Italian colony of New York” worked embroideries and laces: Pratt Institute offered courses in “millinery, cookery, marketing and laundry-work”, and was exhibiting privately-owned samplers and quilted bedspreads. Teachers' College, Columbia University, had an instructor in lace-making, and a teacher of bobbin lace was prepared to give particular attention to “children and nervous patients for whom physicians advise the work.” In the “Club Notes,” an appeal was made for funds to pay a teacher of poor invalid children, for “lace-work teaches cleanliness, patience, perseverance, order, dexterity, and a love of the refined.” A suitable teacher was available, the New York City Charities Department would supervise the undertaking, and “all that is now lacking is \$900.00 a year for an instructor's salary.”

Year by year, the *Bulletin* shows how the Club's objects were attained. At first, the promotion of the “industries” of hand-made textiles was very important. A “travelling collection of lace and needlework for study purposes” was put together in 1919; it contained about 180 examples of lace



and over 70 of embroidery, mounted on 139 cards. Later numbers of the *Bulletin* record that this collection was sent all over the country with the co-operation of the American Federation of Arts, until 1932. By 1920, the educational side of the Club's activity was so prominent that a separate organization, the Guild of the Needle and Bobbin Crafts, was set up to teach textile arts to immigrants; "the immigrant of America is a victim and a menace, and it is totally unnecessary for him to be either," Miss Whiting quoted from a pamphlet put out by the People's Institute, under the title, "The City Where Crime is Play." In some respects, evidently, New York has not greatly changed. The Guild had a shop on East 54 Street in 1926 and seems to have remained active through 1928.

As late as 1934, the Club's annual luncheon party was enlivened by the "usual exhibition of needlework by members," but in the present, more specialized age, educational work for amateurs is the province of the Embroiderers' Guild, and various charitable organizations have taken over the Club's concern for the handicrafts of the poor. The Club had yet other charitable activities in its early days. In the second issue of the *Bulletin*, June, 1917, an advertisement described lace that was to be sold "for the benefit of poor cottage workers in Ireland whose means of livelihood has been destroyed by the war," and in June, 1918, an appeal was made for young lace-makers from the war zones of Europe; "\$100 will clothe and feed a child for one year." The Club responded nobly and pledged itself to support a refugee lace-maker for a year, and at a "rag

market" in Miss Morris' home in November, 1918, over \$400 was raised, so that by the following October no less than eleven girls had been assisted by the Fund for Needy and Orphaned Lace Makers; one of them, Marie Courcel of Marbreejols, the twelve-year-old daughter of a widow, had "helped in the support of the home since she was seven years of age." If she is still alive, Marie Courcel is nearly sixty and has seen her homeland invaded a second time. An impressive *diplôme de marrainage* was given to the Club by the "Association nationale française pour la Protection des Familles des Morts pour la Patrie," which is reproduced in the 1922 *Bulletin* and on page 6.

Later charitable donations aided causes less closely connected with the Club, for sums were raised for the Red Cross in 1943 and 1944, and for the Friends' Service in 1945. But, late in 1964, an opportunity arose once more for the Club to "encourage and maintain interest in hand-made fabrics" in a most practical way. The Cooper Union Museum was about to put on exhibition a remarkable group of modern hand-made textiles, recently presented by Elizabeth Gordon. No funds were available for a catalogue, and, without a catalogue, an exhibition is gone forever when it is taken down. The response of the Club was immediate and unstinted; the well-illustrated and scholarly catalogue, "The Wonders of Thread: a gift of textiles from the collection of Elizabeth Gordon," Cooper Union Museum, 1964, carries the statement, "The printing of this catalogue has been made possible through the generosity of members of the Needle and Bobbin Club." This publication is of immediate use to everyone interested in modern textiles and, when these textiles in their turn are no longer modern but have become historic, it will be available on library shelves to illustrate 20th-century style and to indicate where some actual "monuments" (to use the art-historical word) can be located and studied.

Under the heading of encouraging and maintaining interest in textiles should perhaps be listed the Club's gifts to the Metropolitan Museum: a flounce of early 18th-century Flemish bobbin lace, given in honor of the 50th anniversary of the museum in 1920, and a lace handkerchief made for the marriage in 1853 of Leopold II of Belgium and Marie Henriette of Austria, given in 1924. Both pieces are recorded in the Club *Bulletin* and in that of the museum. The handkerchief cost \$350. Some gifts and bequests of individual members to museums have been mentioned, but there have been, of course, very many more, and to places as far apart as Kansas City and London. A number are illustrated later in this *Bulletin*.

Two other objects of the Club have been consistently achieved through-

out its history. The founders wished “to afford opportunities to meet and discuss lace or allied subjects” and “to visit private collections or see pictures of distant collections.” There were two such opportunities in 1916; Dr. Rudolph Meyer-Riefstahl spoke to the Club on Coptic tapestry, embroideries and network, “weaves that mark the earliest authentic data in the history of lace,” and the Right Reverend Charles H. Brent, Protestant Episcopal Bishop of the Philippine Islands, gave a talk on the lace-makers of Moro and showed examples of their work. By 1919, the phrase “allied subjects” was being interpreted broadly, for the Club heard a lecture by Miss Morris on the collection of rugs in the Metropolitan Museum, “illustrated by stereopticon slides,” and the following year Mr. M. J. Robinson addressed the annual meeting on “The preparation of flax for spinning.” Lectures, however, were not very frequent in the early years of the Club, as meetings were usually held at members’ houses, and an inspection of the owners’ collections provided sufficient entertainment and instruction for the afternoon. Sometimes works of art owned by several members were brought together for a one-day exhibition. In 1926, for example, Mrs. Charles B. Alexander lent her ballroom for a display of fans from the collection of Mrs. Laurent Oppenheim (now in the Metropolitan Museum) and of shawls.

But, as early as 1920, the *Bulletin* listed not only the “aim” of the Club—“to stimulate and maintain an interest in handmade fabrics”—but also its “advantages,” of which the first was “lectures on kindred topics by eminent authorities.” Every member throughout the history of the Club has enjoyed this advantage, for lectures have been given every year on subjects as varied as the ancient trade routes of the Old World, medieval Saracenic costume, the batik industry of Java, the excavations at Dura Europos, textiles and costumes of Guatamala, Cape Breton home industries, contemporary methods of textile production in Japan, Chinese court robes, the revival of silk-weaving in Siam, Venus and Adonis in Coptic tapestries, ancient Greek dress, smocks and smocking, Nigerian weaving, and English chintz. The eminent authorities have included Mrs. Guy Antrobus, Prof. A. J. B. Wace, Sir Eric MacLagan, Dr. Alfred Salmony, and many more. Of recent years, as the number of textile collectors on a large scale has diminished, and since few members now have private houses in New York City, monthly lectures throughout the winter have been the standard means of bringing the Club together. But the hospitality of the hostesses who provide refreshments on these delightful occasions is as warm as ever, though provided in rented halls, and “the pictures of distant collections,” though now kodachrome rather than stereopticon slides, are as fascinating and informative.



**Miss Gertrude Whiting.**

Founder. President, 1916-1923.

Honorary President, 1938-1951.

Photograph courtesy of Whiting India Guilds, Inc.

Visiting private collections, however, remains a very popular activity and, with modern methods of transportation, the Club has recently been able to make excursions more frequently and with more ease. In 1932, a "special car" took members to see Mr. Henry F. du Pont's unequalled collections, and four years later, it was again "a special car on the Pennsylvania railroad" that took them to Wilmington to enjoy an outdoor lunch and the lace and embroidery collections of Mrs. William K. du Pont, but, thirty years later, such trips have been made by bus. The textile collections of Yale University, the Philadelphia Museum, the Brooklyn Museum, and elsewhere have been visited in comfort by this means, as well as a number of beautiful houses and gardens; in 1963, the Club took to the air for the first time and flew to Boston to see a superb costume exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts.

Another of the original objects of the Club, to keep members informed of sales, exhibits, and lectures, was faithfully carried out in the early years, as can be seen from the notices in the *Bulletin*. Exhibitions at the Pratt Institute, the Metropolitan Museum, the Philadelphia Museum, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Portland Art Association, the Minneapolis Institute of Art, and elsewhere, a sale of lace in Paris, and similar current events are reported. But, with the increased use of publicity by museums and galleries, such data have become less important. During its first decades, the Club also provided other advantages for its members, such as a circulating library ("books free for one month; two cents a day rental thereafter") and working patterns for lace and embroidery, some of which were published in the first few issues of the *Bulletin*, while others could be purchased cheaply. Impressive exhibitions were staged by the Club; Valenciennes and Binche lace in 1917, ancient embroidery in 1920, historic laces and jewelry (shown at Cartier's) in 1925, and Lyon silks in 1927. There was also an Amateur Auction in 1922, which one can imagine to have been very lively, and which raised about \$1000 for the Guild of Needle and Bobbin Crafts, previously described. Here, again, other organizations have taken over such functions.

The most remarkable achievement of the Club was at first put forward as a tentative promise: "perhaps to publish a brochure or monograph." Yet it is the Club's publications that distinguish it from so many groups of friends with common interests, groups that have formed themselves into clubs, flourished—perhaps for fifty years or more—and disappeared, leaving no records but memories. A *Bulletin* was actually under consideration from the beginning and the first number was published ten months later. In it, in 1920, appeared the preliminary announcement of the most sumptu-





**Miss Mary Parsons.**  
President, 1923-1928.



**Miss Marian Hague.**  
President, 1928-1934.



**Miss Frances Morris**  
President, 1935-1943.  
Photograph courtesy of the Cosmopolitan Club.

ous lace book in existence, *Antique Laces of American Collectors*, with a text by Frances Morris and Marian Hague, priced at \$60, \$55 to Club members. When Part V of the publication became available in 1924, the price to non-subscribers had been raised to \$75. There are 184 pieces of lace illustrated on 104 plates in the folio volume. These were then owned by thirty-four collectors and two museums; seventy-five of them now belong to the Metropolitan Museum and 21 to the Cooper Union Museum. The smaller, text volume contains an authoritative, well-illustrated account of the laces of the American colonists, planned by Mrs. Charles W. Townsend and completed after her death, as well as Miss Morris' article, "The development of lace collecting in America." The notes to the plates of the larger volume are unusually detailed and, with the accompanying diagrams (by Mme. L. Paulis) and photographs, constitute in themselves an excellent history of lace.

The Club's other separate publication is on a smaller scale. Volume 14 of the *Bulletin* (1930) was largely devoted to a transcription of the 17th-century poem, *La Révolte des Passemens*, frequently quoted by writers on lace, but not easily found in its entirety. In 1934, a forthcoming translation was announced, which appeared, in an attractive binding, the following year. The French original is included and there are valuable notes by Miss Whiting, with a wealth of delightful illustrations.

But, even more to its credit than these two books, for fifty years, through two world wars and the depression, the Club has published its *Bulletin*. This is a truly remarkable record for so small a group with such specialized interests. At first, indeed, as has been mentioned, some support was furnished by advertisers, but after 1933 this was no longer forthcoming, and the *Bulletin* has for over thirty years been paid for entirely by the Club. The first editor was Mr. Richard C. Greenleaf (who also designed the Club emblem, with its crossed needle and lace-bobbin in a *reticello* frame) but, from 1923 to 1929, his name appears only as member of the publication committee under the chairmanship of Miss Frances Morris. Mrs. Howard Sachs, co-author, with Miss Nancy Andrews Reath, of *Persian Textiles* (1937), then became editor, a post she filled until 1942, when she was succeeded by Mrs. William N. Little. Mrs. Little had retired in that year from the Metropolitan Museum, where she had been a member of the staff from 1920. She had taken Miss Morris' place there in 1929 and contributed frequently to the *Museum Bulletin*. She wrote two books, *Early American Textiles* (1931) and *Eighteenth-century Costume in Europe* (1937), and articles for the *Needle and Bobbin Club Bulletin* on crewel embroideries (1927), Spanish chintzes (1942) and textiles from

the excavations in Orléans Cathedral (1944). In 1956, Miss Edith A. Standen, who had held the same position at the Metropolitan Museum from 1949, took over the editorship.

At first, some of the *Bulletin* articles can be said to have been primarily of personal interest, such as an anonymous "Memory of Bruges," or a lively account by Mabel Foster Bainbridge of a trip to Devonshire to study lace-making, but Miss Morris wrote a scholarly contribution on lace-bobbins for Vol. I, no. 1, and as early as 1920 the Victoria and Albert Museum asked for the complete file. Since then, such articles as Tassilo Adam's "The art of batik in Java" (1934), George Middleton's "Imitations of hand-made lace by machinery" (1938, 1939), Nancy Graves Cabot's identifications of design sources (1946, 1949), Peter Thornton's "An 18th-century silk designer's manual" (1958), Louisa Bellinger's "Textiles from Gordion" (1962), Elsa E. Gudjónsson's "Traditional Icelandic embroidery" (1963), and Natalie Rothstein's "Nine English Silks" (1964) have made the *Bulletin* an essential part of any library that caters to textile specialists. The two indexes, covering the years 1916 to 1960, make the information easily accessible to the student. And what nuggets of out-of-the-way information there are! Where else could one find a list of tapestries, rugs and embroideries designed by the artist Arthur B. Davies (1934), or an article on the lace used on Bohemian bonnets (1920)? There is historic interest, too, in the accounts of lace-makers in Europe during World War I, or the note on a lecture in 1940, when "some nylon stockings, then about to appear on the market, aroused much interest." The illustrations have always been excellent, a necessity for an art publication; the first color plates appeared in 1959, thanks to Mr. and Mrs. Norris W. Harkness. The Club can well be proud of its *Bulletin*.

But a club is primarily people, and men and women are not as long-lived as the printed word. What sort of people made and supported the Needle and Bobbin Club for half a century? There have been over a thousand members during this period, naturally mostly from New York City and the eastern sea-board, but even in the first printed list of names there are members from California and Texas. A number of Europeans have belonged and belong to the Club and several distinguished foreign scholars have been elected honorary members. But it has been the presidents, of course, who have always been primarily responsible for the operations and *esprit de corps* of the Club. Miss Gertrude Whiting, the first holder of the office, has these entries (among others) in the *Bulletin* indexes: "founder of the Needle and Bobbin Club—assumes leadership of

the Guild—collection shown—compiler of bibliography—facilitates publication—helps with India party—lectures—presides at meeting—resignation as president accepted—testimonial dinner to—Club meets at residence of to see exhibition of dolls—in memoriam—‘Swiss lace patterns’” (an article written from her notes). Miss Whiting said that she first became interested in lace when, as a little girl, she saw an Irish lace handkerchief in the coming-out wardrobe of her older sister. Later, she was graduated as professor by the Institut Professional Neuchâtelois de Dentelles and her skill is attested by the lace sampler she made and reproduced in her book, *A Lace Guide for Makers and Collectors* (New York, 1920). This sampler which is only nineteen inches high and twenty-three wide, is made up of no less than 144 bobbin lace grounds and fillings, all different, and many of them invented by the maker. She bequeathed this *tour-de-force* to the Metropolitan Museum. Miss Whiting’s other book, *Tools and Toys of Stitchery* (New York, 1928), contains a great deal of information that is hard to find elsewhere. She was also deeply concerned with helping the industrious poor; one may imagine that it was largely due to her that the Club, in its early years, took so much interest in supporting charitable handicrafts. In 1928, she visited India and organized the still flourishing Whiting India Guilds, which supervise and market in the United States the work of Indian women; anyone who has heard Miss Whiting describe the difficulty of persuading an embroidress in that country to make a dozen doilies all exactly alike and all delivered in an immaculate condition will appreciate the perseverance, patience, and devotion of this remarkable woman.

Miss Whiting was president for seven years; forty-nine people attended the testimonial dinner in her honor in 1923. She was succeeded by Miss Mary Parsons, a Charter Member, and in 1928, by Miss Marian Hague, who had been vice-president from the beginning. Miss Hague, who is happily still with us, though no longer able to be active in Club affairs, needs no character sketch; her name has appeared on every list of officers, most recently as honorary director. The Club has been one of Miss Hague’s life-interests, surpassed only by her own remarkable collection of lace and embroidery and, perhaps, the Cooper Union Museum. She has lectured to the Club and written articles for the *Bulletin* over and over again. Her enthusiasm, energy, generosity, and goodness will never be forgotten.

Miss Hague’s term as president expired in 1934 and she became first vice-president. Miss Frances Morris took her place. Miss Morris, as has been mentioned, was a professional, an associate curator (in charge of textiles) at the Metropolitan Museum from 1922 to 1929. She was a



**Mrs. Norris W. Harkness.**  
President, 1960-.

pioneer when she began her work there in 1896, for the then director had an aversion to women as museum staff members. An article on lace over her initials appeared in the first volume (1905-6) of the Metropolitan Museum *Bulletin* and almost every year afterwards she published the most important textile acquisitions in the periodical. Besides her part in *Antique Laces*, already described, she translated Henri Clouzot's *Painted and Printed Fabrics*, adding her own "Notes on the history of cotton printing, especially in England and America," which was published in 1927, and was co-author of the *James F. Ballard Collection of Oriental Rugs* (1923). She also wrote a number of articles in various art magazines and started the catalogue of the Morgan textiles at the Cooper Union Museum. But her greatest achievement is the lace collection of the Metropolitan Museum, which, thanks to her friendship with the great collectors, notably Mrs. Edward S. Harkness (a life member of the Club), is quite possibly the finest in the world. During Miss Morris' presidency, the Club celebrated its twenty-first birthday in 1937; Mrs. DeWitt Clinton Cohen gave the party, with an "imposing birthday cake bearing the Club insignia lighted by twenty-one candles." The twenty-fifth anniversary was marked by a meeting at the Metropolitan Museum in February, 1942; Mrs. Robert C. Taylor read a brief historical sketch of the Club's activities since its organization.

The following year, Mrs. Frank B. Rowell was elected president, an office she held until 1960. During this long period, the pattern of the Club as it now exists was established, with lecture meetings in the winter months and occasional outings or "safaris" in spring and fall. One meeting was always sponsored by Mrs. Rowell, either in her apartment or at the Colony Club; her Christmas parties were especially memorable. Few even of the most recent members do not have vivid memories of Mrs. Rowell; a sparkling enjoyment of life was perhaps her most conspicuous and delightful characteristic, and her management of the Club and its activities was clearly a great source of happiness to her. She communicated this unflinching zest to all the members, to whom, indeed, she came to represent the very spirit of the Club. When, at a very great age, she retired and was replaced by the present president, Mrs. Norris W. Harkness, the Club was indeed fortunate in finding so able a successor. Mrs. Harkness has shown as great a devotion as any of her predecessors to the Club, and the second half century of its existence could not begin under better auspices.