

Revival of Needlework in Italy



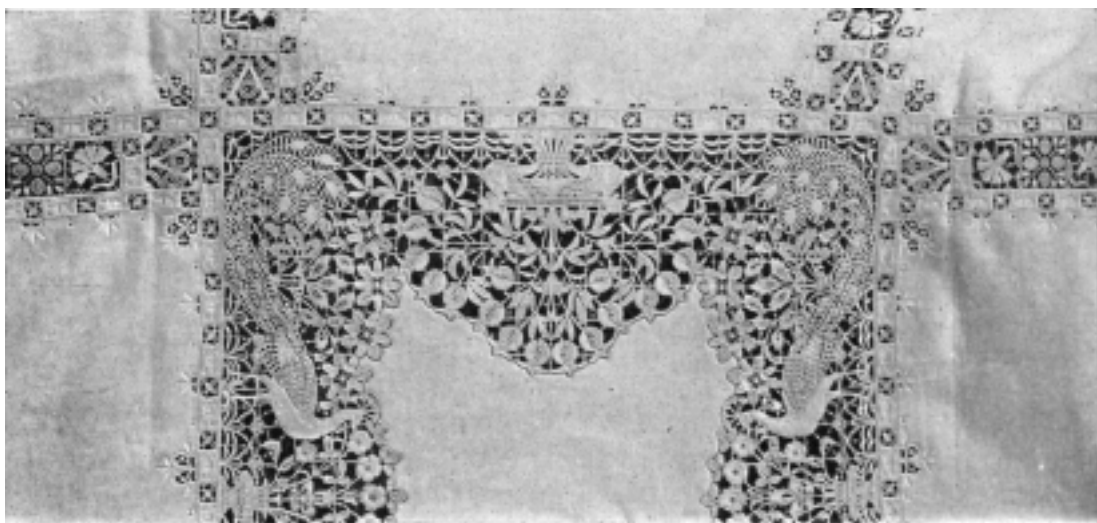
NEEDLEPOINT : PORTION OF TABLE-CLOTH MADE FOR MRS. FREDERICK VANDERBILT OF NEW YORK
ÆMILIA ARS SOCIETY, BOLOGNA

THE REVIVAL OF NEEDLE- WORK IN ITALY. BY ELISA RICCI. (*Translated by Miss C. Macfarlane.*)

Forty years ago, feminine industries in Italy (and perhaps not only in Italy) were in that lingering, half-alive condition which is worse than death. Men regarded needlework (which even the workers considered a mere pastime) with contemptuous pity. Lace-making was practically at a standstill : children and very aged folk amused themselves with crocheting. In a few provinces, it is true, a little pillow lace was still made, but very badly. Young ladies passed their youth in embroidering sheets and coverlets for the bridal bed, with no thought of design, proportion, or harmony. Oh ! those immense, atrocious bedspreads in "mesh" stitch, crochet, and other trivial work !

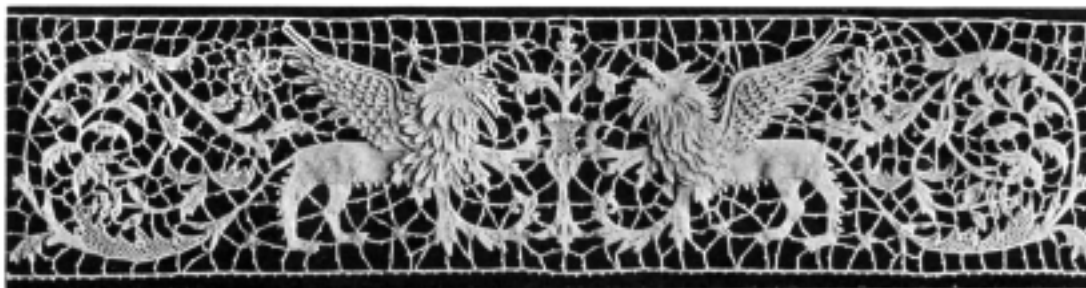
At that time those antique pieces of lace for which we now search so anxiously, buying them for more than their weight in gold, were still to be found in some of the old houses ; they were regardlessly cut up and given to children to play with. The owner of a paper mill once told me that his mother had occasionally found the most precious pieces of old lace in sacks of old rags sold by the pound !

Public taste had fallen to this level when two people, out of pity and hoping to improve matters, started a movement which was to help Italian women to raise their modest handiwork to the dignity of Art. During the winter of 1872, the cold in Venice was so intense that the lagoons were frozen over and the inhabitants of the various islands whose livelihood depended almost exclusively upon the profits derived from fishing, were faced with



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CROCHET WORK EXECUTED IN THE BECCADELLI WORKSHOPS, BOLOGNA

starvation, especially in the island of Burano, which in the ancient archives of Venice is always pityingly qualified as "our poor Burano."

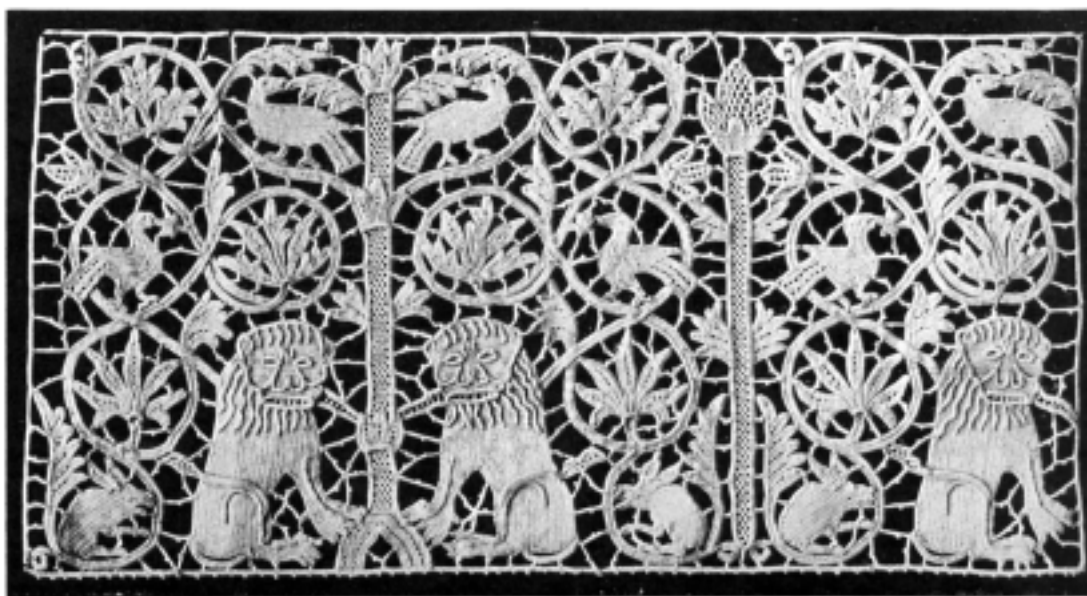
A Venetian, distinguished alike for his generosity and resourcefulness, and a Venetian lady, possessed of singular virtue and qualities—energy, order, culture, spirit, amiability and graciousness—evolved a plan to relieve permanently such want and poverty. Paulo Fambri and the Countess Andriana Marcello, after many other attempts had proved futile, decided to revive the ancient industry of Burano Point lace. It was a very dead Lazarus they sought to resurrect. Among the Venetian ladies, none could be found who knew how to work the stitch. All the lace-makers had died out, save one, a half blind old woman of seventy. Her name was Cencia Scarpriola, and in her youth she had made lace.

Cencia was called forward: "Do you remember how the stitch is made?" Yes, she remembered. "Will you show us how it is done?" Yes, she

would show them. In short, the active old lady showed the stitch to the village schoolmistress, who in turn taught it to the women-folk of Burano.

Countess Marcello instituted an active search for old samples of the Point to study and copy. Paulo Fambri provided the capital necessary to place the industry upon a firm footing. He cheerfully lost almost the whole of his fortune in the enterprise. Queen Margherita, who at that time was a very young Crown Princess, became president of the committee and took fervent interest in the work, helping it forward with many gifts and important orders. With that whole-hearted sympathy which was so characteristic of her, she frequently pored over her old pieces of lace, in the hope of discovering the secret of some more than usually complicated and difficult stitch. Thus lace-making in Burano was revived, and like good seed planted in good earth, flourished and spread rapidly.

After Venice, Bologna. In this studious and

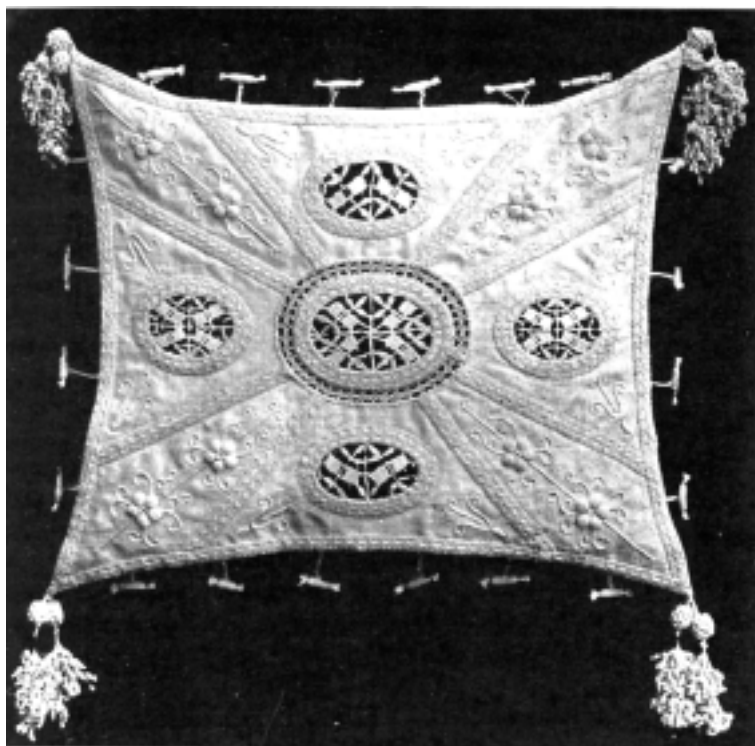


CROCHET WORK EXECUTED IN THE BECCADELLI WORKSHOPS, BOLOGNA



NEEDLEPOINT LACE.
AEMILIA ARS, BOLOGNA.

Revival of Needlework in Italy



CUSHION COVER MADE IN THE MARAINI WORKSHOPS, RIETI, UMBRIA

In this instance the prime spirit of the enterprise was Countess Lina Cavazza, who started by personally teaching the "*punto a reticello*"—which is the mother stitch of the wonderful family of needle-made laces of Italy—to a few young girls who in their turn, when pupils became over-numerous, taught the newcomers. *Reticello* has the advantage over Burano Point, of being less fine and consequently quicker to make; it is stronger and more practical, it costs less and is peculiarly Italian.

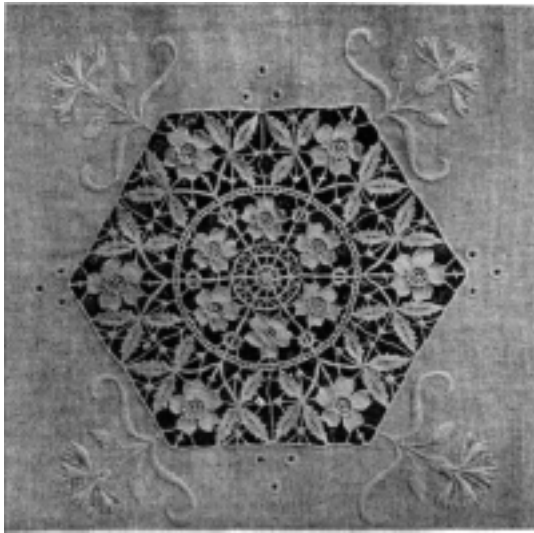
This industry quickly spread from Bologna all over the Peninsula and found favour with the ladies of Sicily. In Puglie

wide-awake city, disciples of that "New Gospel of Art" which came to us out of England, formed a society called "*Æmilia Ars*," about which something has already been said in this magazine. Their aim was to revive those arts termed "minor" or "lesser" arts, and to impart a little more beauty to life by giving a touch of beauty to everything we come into contact with in the daily course of life. The arts of lace-making and embroidery, like younger sisters, timidly followed in the wake of the arts of iron and woodwork, gold and precious stones, and to-day the name of "*Æmilia Ars*" lives and is chiefly famous for the achievements of those smaller sister arts.



CUSHION COVER MADE IN THE MARAINI WORKSHOPS, RIETI, UMBRIA

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DETAIL OF COVERLET SHOWN BELOW

Umbria, Tuscany and Lombardy, and in fact everywhere, the "Æmilia Ars" may claim to have given new birth to the antique *reticello* laces of Italy.

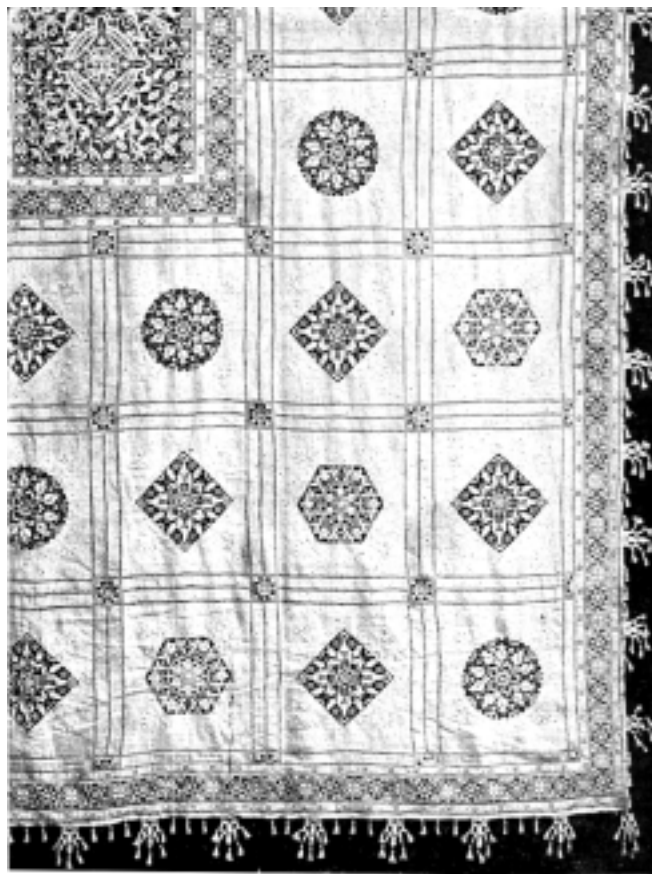
The story of the revival of lace-making in Bologna, so similar to that of Burano, could be told with but little variation of the revival of textures woven by hand on the old looms and in the olden style, in Perugia, Calabria, Abruzzi and Sardinia. But the flower of feminine industries is that of lace-making and it is still, artistically and commercially, the most important; it is towards the revival of Italian lace that Italian women of every class of life are working, with their whole hearts and fortunes.

Throughout the long Peninsula this same new and splendid solidarity unites the woman of intellect and the worker, who has suddenly developed the most un-hoped for aptitude. The lady seated at the loom looks searchingly into an antique piece and strives to discover the secret of its texture, while frequently the peasant seated beside her will take the very harness her grandmother used before her and, simultaneously, instinct will leap to life and she will show the happiest facility for her work.

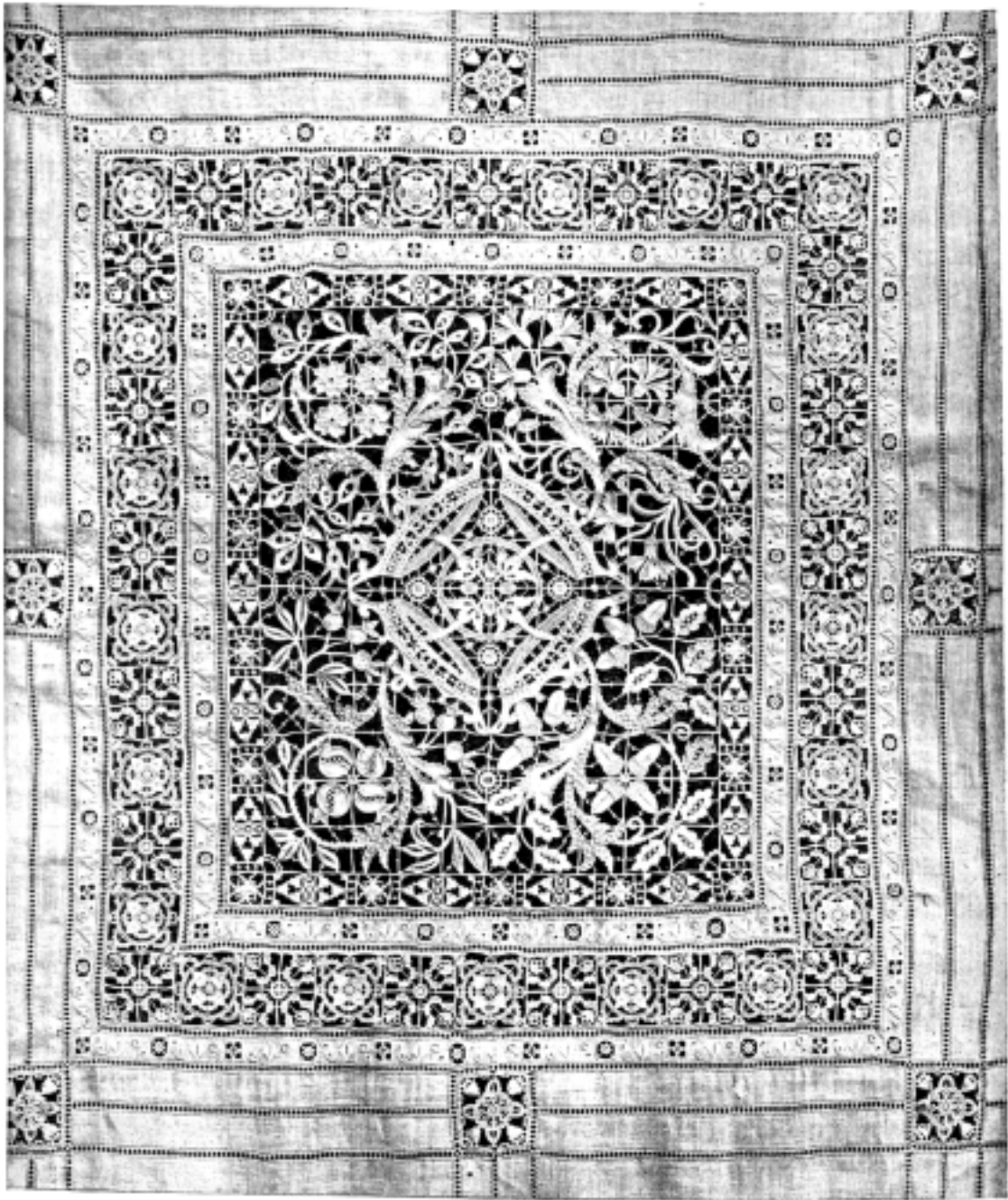
It is related that Queen Margherita

seeing a girl manipulating the bobbins on her lace pillow with lightning rapidity, asked her: "How do you manage, little one, to pick up the very spools you need without even looking?" "They fall into my hands," the child answered naively. It is to this great facility for learning their task and the real joy these humble folk find in producing work that is not mean and also the very feminine nature of everything appertaining to the industry that the rapid success of this little renaissance is due.

But, having lit these little altar-fires to Art throughout the Peninsula, it became urgently necessary to assure a supply of fuel so that they should not die out. These old arts were revived, it is true, upon the old ground and amidst the same people, but at a period and in an atmosphere totally different. Ladies no longer expended their energies for the Church in decorating altar-cloths. No longer were they impelled by deep feelings of piety to fill those old chests in the sacristies with "white treasury" as the piles of priestly vestments, delicately

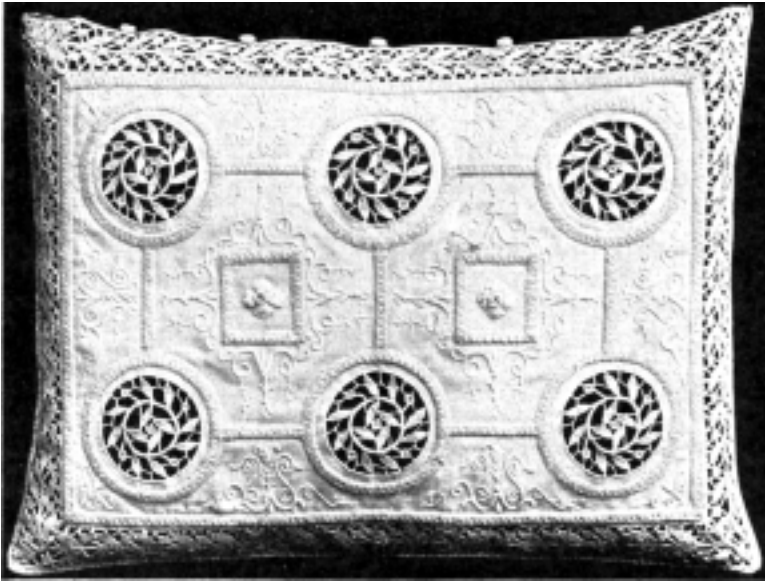


PORTION OF A COVERLET WORKED IN NEEDLEPOINT FOR MME. P. OPPENHEIM OF FRANKFORT. ÆMILIA ARS, BOLOGNA



CENTRE OF THE COVERLET SHOWN
OPPOSITE. ÆMILIA ARS, BOLOGNA

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CUSHION MADE IN THE MARAINI WORKSHOPS, RIETI, UMBRIA

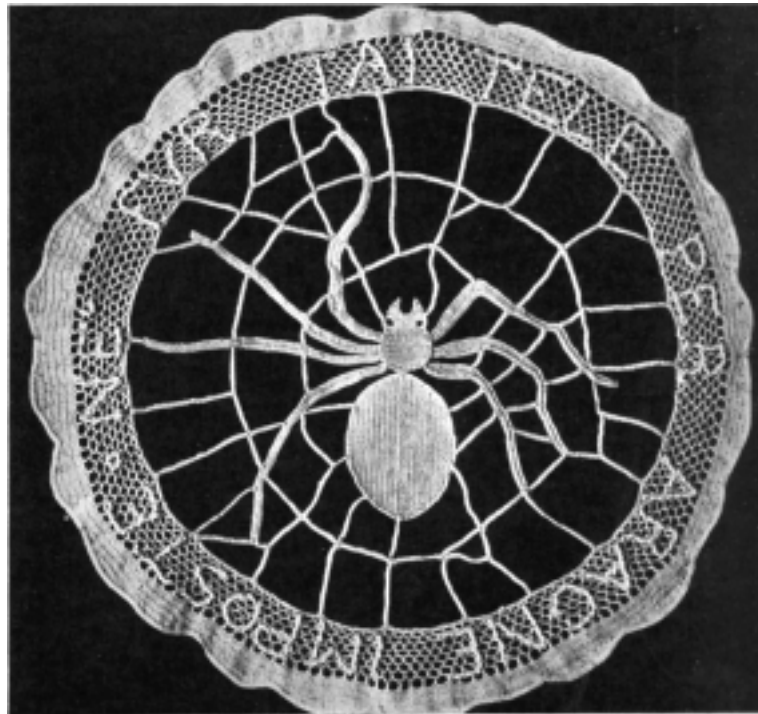
perfumed with lavender, were called. Times have changed and only a very few peasants, who until now have not felt the stimulus of increasing want or newer aspirations, still work, as in old times, for themselves, the home, and the Church.

The worker of to-day usually wishes to enjoy the fruit of his own labour and to this end the finished work is converted into money at the earliest opportunity. The new economic institutions helped to foster the revival of these ancient arts by collecting the output of the small and scattered districts and the larger and more fortunate ones, gathering them together and sorting out the various objects—so different in origin, aspect and value—and selling them. But this was not all; in some cases it was necessary to encourage production, in others to restrain it, and above all it was essential that the work should retain a certain local character and possess sufficient artistic merit to render it acceptable to people of good taste and

to distinguish it from other purely commercial articles.

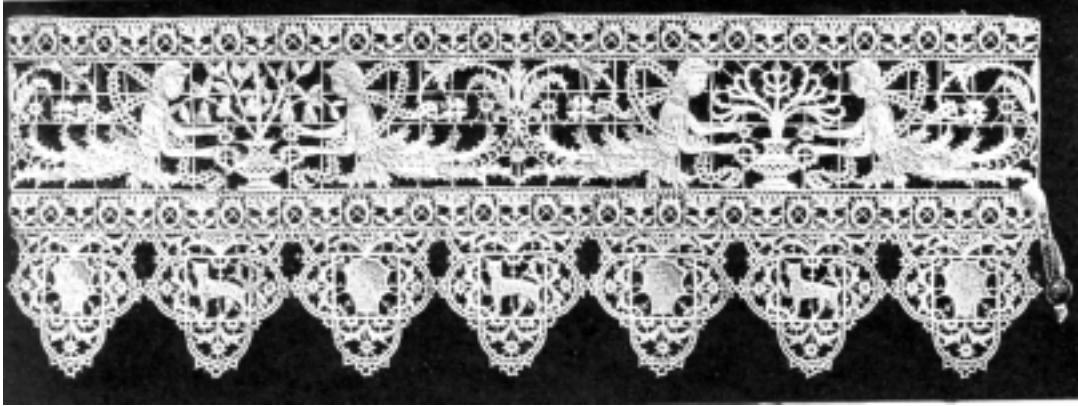
It was due to the efforts of a very intelligent and wonderfully energetic American lady, the Countess Cora di Brazza, that an institution was formed which would give unity and stability to this new feminine enterprise; her infectious enthusiasm and strong personality succeeded in sweeping away every obstacle and a co-operative society was formed in Rome under the title of "*Industrie Femminili Italiane.*" A lawyer drew up the necessary articles of association, the

capital was raised, and a large shop was opened in the heart of Rome. Besides the administrative committee, a committee of twenty-four patronesses was formed, whose duties were to watch over the artistic progress of the scheme. A board of experts was nominated to decide upon the work to be accepted and to fix prices. The society was able to



CROCHET WORK EXECUTED IN THE BECCADELLI WORKSHOPS, BOLOGNA

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NEEDLEPOINT LACE CONTAINING THE DEVICE OF THE BENTIVOGLIOS. ÆMILIA ARS SOCIETY, BOLOGNA

open up large markets abroad for the ever-increasing output of labour at home and give to the enterprise, not only good management, stability and discipline, but a certain stamp of national unity and sound solidarity which has won sympathy for their work in every foreign country. The patronesses do not limit themselves to the guidance and instruction of the workers: they throw themselves heart and soul into the sale of the articles. They cheerfully turn themselves into commercial travellers and exhibit the latest merchandise in their palaces, villas, and in the large hotels.

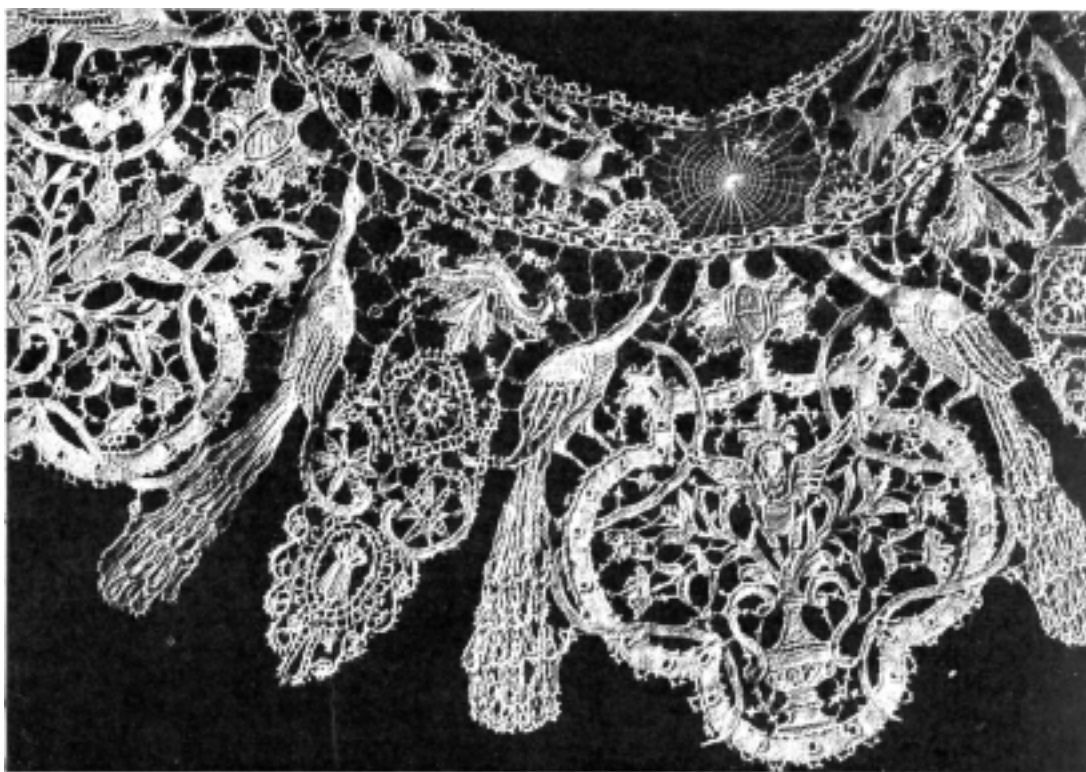
The Milan Exhibition of 1906 gave the Insti-

tution a splendid opportunity to present to the world in general an idea of the work it had accomplished since its formation in 1903. A collection of the most beautiful work produced by the women of Italy during these few years was exhibited, to the wonder and admiration of the public, in a large and well-lit room hung entirely with white. This exhibit, which represented so much work and so many moral and material efforts, was burnt to the ground and reduced to ashes shortly after the opening. The shock was great, but the society quickly recovered and in less than a month was able to surprise the public with an entirely new exhibition.



ABAT-JOUR OR SHORT CURTAIN IN NEEDLEPOINT. ÆMILIA ARS, BOLOGNA

Revival of Needlework in Italy



PORTION OF A COLLAR WORKED IN VENETIAN POINT (*Photo Perazzo*)

Although from an artistic point of view these works are copied from old models which are nearly always characteristic and peculiar to certain districts, they are modified and adapted in form and application to the tastes and needs of daily life. Thus, Sicilian drawn-thread work formerly used on "Giraletti" (bed-drapery), which hygiene has banished, is now used chiefly for blinds and for blouses. But the method of working is the same and the actual designs are identical with the old patterns. This little revival has sprung from a desire to return to those splendid old forms which it has started to copy. The style, as well as the technical part which our workers have re-mastered, is really the natural taste of our people.

When little by little, and almost unconsciously, the older traditions were abandoned in search of newer ideas, these ideas, although new, could not be anything but Italian, and thus it is that even the original creations of our most sincere artists bear a faint and badly dissimulated trace of classicism from which they cannot free themselves. Why should they try? Vice versa, the foreign needlewoman who imagines that she is faithfully and exactly reproducing, stitch for stitch, an old pattern, manages to introduce a modern touch which is not visible in the old pattern.

These two facts are clearly demonstrated by two examples—one is the collar with peacocks, of which a portion is reproduced on this page. In this every detail was faithfully copied from the "Corona delle Nobili Dame" by Cesare Vecellio: peacocks, ornamentation, figures, not a single detail was invented. And yet, even to one who is not very familiar with old lace, this beautiful collar at once appears modern: modern precisely for its very design and composition, which has involuntarily, in fact against every intention, succeeded in being of typically *modern style*.

The opposite happens when Italy is looked to for *modern style*. At Bologna the "Æmilia Ars," a Society founded with really modern artistic intentions, had the great fortune to meet with the support and directorship of two cultured and exquisite artists: Alfonso Rubbiani and Achille Casanova. They began by reproducing with positive genius some old models, found in a rare and precious old volume belonging to Marchesi Nerio Malvezzi, but when they began to create new styles, such as the magnificent Vanderbilt tablecloth (p. 197), underlying the fresh, gay and delicate personal note of the design, one nevertheless felt something of the nobility of an older and traditional art.

E. R.