

# OLD ITALIAN LACE

# SEVEN CENTURIES OF LACE

By Mrs. J. HUNGERFORD POLLEN

Preface by ALAN COLE

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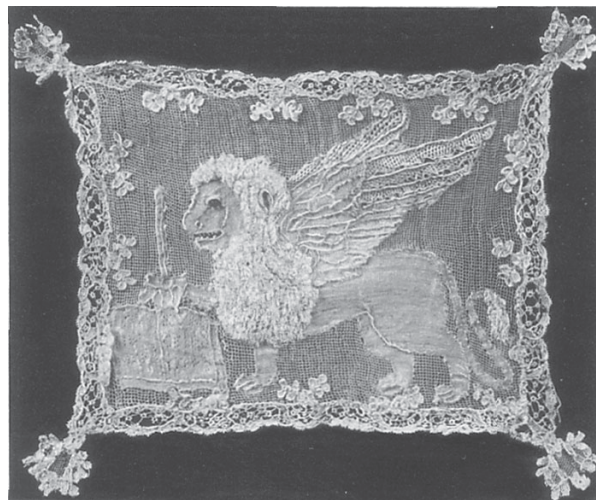
WILLIAM HEINEMANN, LONDON



# OLD ITALIAN LACE

BY ELISA RICCI

VOLUME I



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MCMXIII

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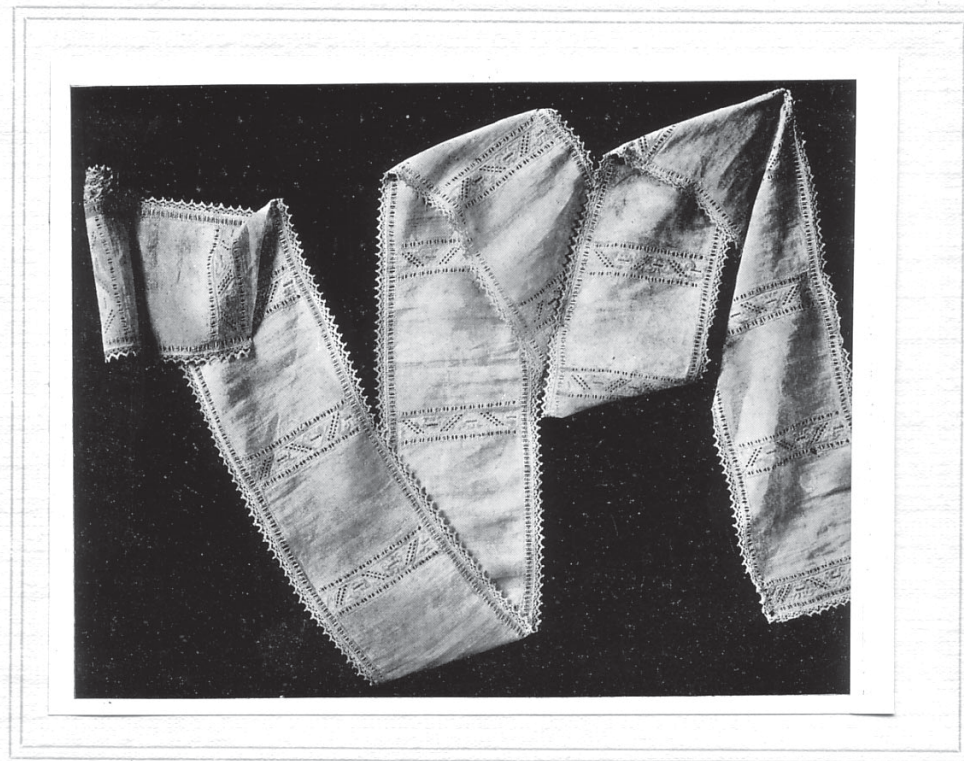
## INTRODUCTION

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HEN and where was that minor Fine Art born which seems to sum up two virtues essentially feminine in their nature: elegance and patience?

How can we discover the first origin of an art so modest as to be content to remain almost exclusively feminine and anonymous, flourishing in the silence of the cloister and the quiet of the fireside? The meek nun stitching at an altar-cloth, or the young mother happy in the preparation



No. 3 — XV century. Baby's swaddling-band. Embroidery with draw thread and *reticello*. Luck, Rome.

of baby-clothes and trimming the fine linen with the new form of embroidery, were all unconsciously building up the foundation of the History of Lace, and did not think of dating their handiwork!

But since there are people who believe the art of lace-making to be co-eval with that of embroidery, while others affirm that it is of Italian invention and relatively modern, it may be worth while to seek the truth from two impartial sources: among documents – inventories, trousseaux lists or deeds of distinguished families apportioning property – and old pictures.

It will be seen that documents and paintings are silent about lace for long centuries of time; then about the middle of the XV century they begin to murmur of the new Art, breaking into loud pæans in its praise in the middle of the XVI century, which continue throughout the XVII and even into the XVIII century.

Life in the XIV century passes vividly before our eyes in Italian pictures. Their painters took a pride and delight in reproducing details of all things which pertained to dress or furniture, no matter how exalted or how humble. Thanks to these indefatigable workers, we know not only the jewels of Battista Sforza, Duchess of Urbino, the marvellous brocaded gowns of the Benci, or the beautiful armour, pride of the Dukes of Montefeltro, but also the aspect of the most every-day trifles. Shepherds in adoration timidly hide their hands behind their coarse straw hats, and old saints gaze at us through great spectacles or, seated on stools before their reading-desks, they study bound manuscripts embellished with miniatures, surrounded by all the workaday implements of their little cells: scissors, lamps, ink-stands, water-clocks. We are familiar with XV century garb in every detail; the veil, finished “French fashion”, with a narrow embroidery, or hemmed in long stitch, forming almost a series of small tassels (see No. 4) or striped with gold (see No. 5); the fine fringed linens; large tablecloths worked in arabesque and embroidery, or bordered with friezes of griffins and dragons in the Perugian fashion.

In the inventories contemporary with these pictures, in the lists of the dowers of the more important brides of noble families, we find similar things described together with cloth, silk or gold materials, embellished with vair and ermine; in the sumptuary laws we learn the prescribed depth of velvet bands for dresses and the weight of silver for buttons and little chains, nay, even the quantity of silk allowed to work the buttonholes! And never do we come across one single mention of any material which could reasonably be supposed to be lace until the end of the XV century, when it occurs as a rare article of luxury, and towards the middle of the XVI century, when it is mentioned as an article the excessive use of which called for regulation by sumptuary law.



The first pale phantom of lace (for we will not give the name « lace » to that open-work stitch used for joining seams in sheets and pillow-slips) seems to



No. 4 - Veil with little crimped stitched border.  
Detail from Botticelli's *Magnificat*, Uffizi, Florence. (Photo. Alinari.)

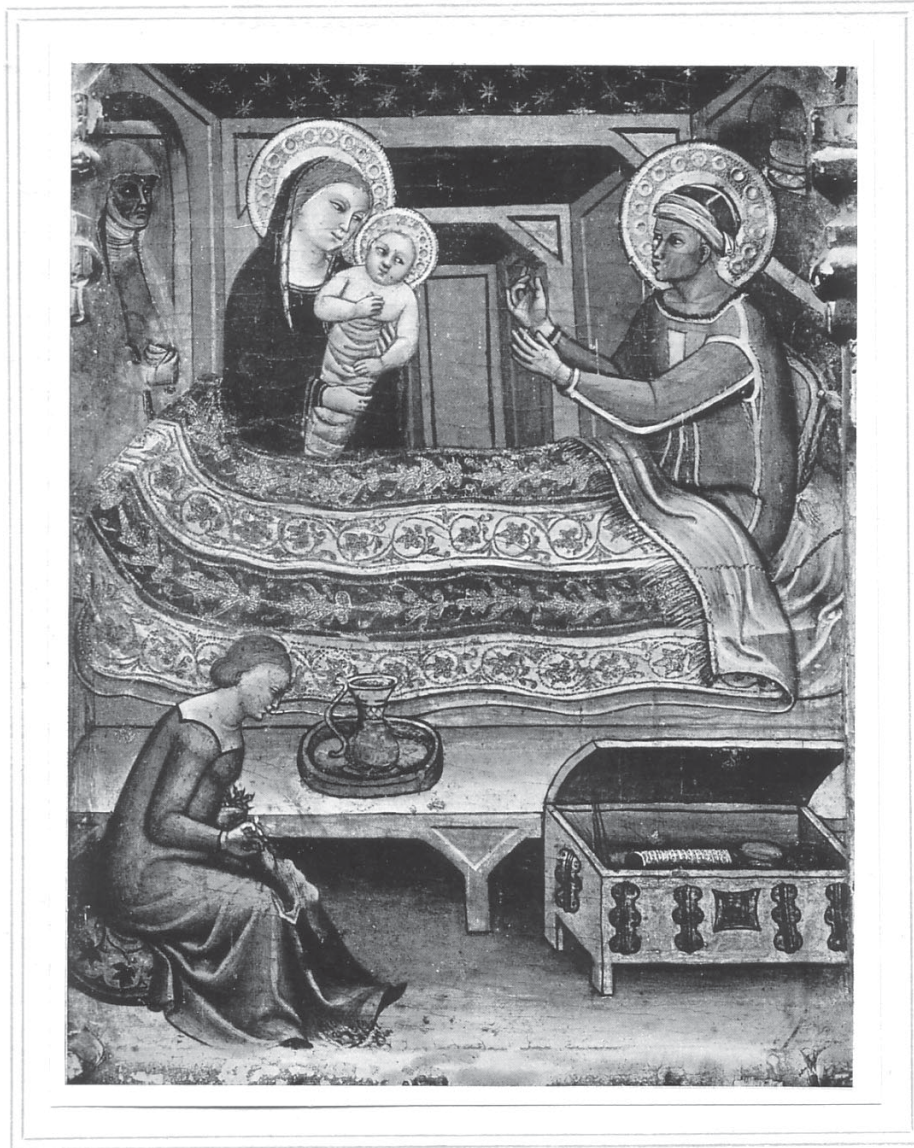
me to appear in a fresco by Gozzoli in the Church of San Gimignano, dated 1465 (see No. 7). It is only a small insertion of two meshes stitched to the hem of the coverlet of the bed in which St. Monica has her last vision. The first plain mention of lace occurs in a document of the Metropolitan of Siena, 1482, wherein is des-



No. 5 — Veil embroidered and fringed.  
Detail from Buoninsegna's altar-piece, Cathedral of Siena.

*cribed a table-cover of linen with three strips of reticello of the ordinary thread and a cross in the centre, for the high altar.*

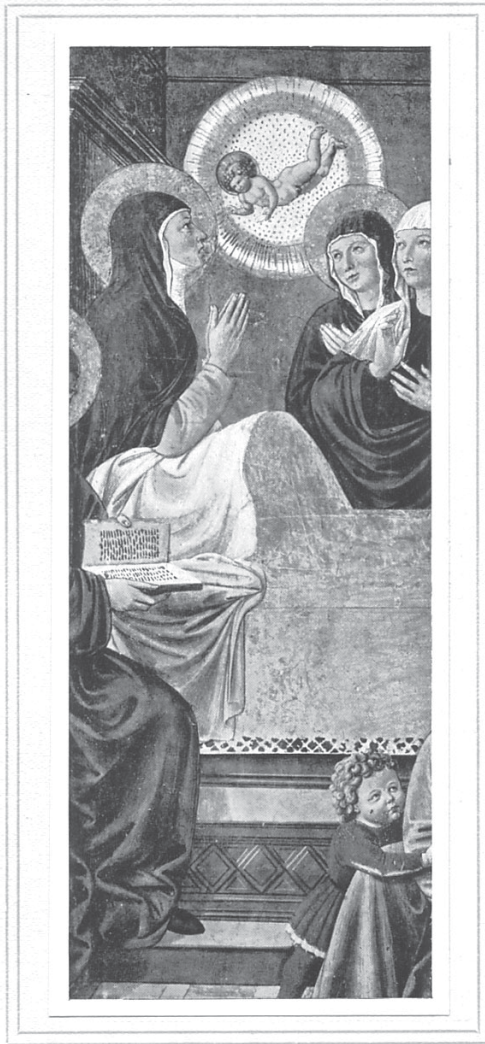
Probably the « ordinary » *reticello* strips of 1482 were contemporary with Benozzo's fresco.



No. 6 — Linen with openwork seams.  
From an altar-piece by A. de Bologna, 1369. Fermo Library.

In the wedding-trousseau of Elisabetta Gonzaga of Montefeltro (1488) the cushions were of *crimson satin with a network of gold and silver*, the shirts of Rheims linen had no decoration; *two shirts*, one of *cambric*, the other of *bombasine* were worked with gold; the tablecloths and *pillow-slips of Rheims linen* were untrimmed, but the sheets were *trimmed with gold and gold fringe*. Lastly, *three large pieces of Rheims linen, the tops worked in thread*, were perhaps fringed or embroidered.

Researches among the inventories of the leading families of Lombardy, Mantua, and Urbino have met with no success so far as mention of lace is concerned. In



No. 7 — Mesh-work insertion of wite thread.  
From a fresco by E. Gozzoli, 1465, in San Gimignano.

the inventory of the wardrobe of Lucrezia Borgia, dated 1502, minute descriptions are given one after another of the following: *embroideries for bed-furniture in silk and gold, with their fringes, and even the rings by which to hang them; tablecovers and collars and stockings (in silk mesh) and altar-cloth (of linen with black silk fringe), or of velvet embossed with gold, and veils (white striped with red)*. Lace is spoken of only in connection with *two cushions of green velvet with tassels and lace of gold*, and even then we must remember that trebly-plaited lace (*trina, triplice attrecciato*) may have been simply like *terneta*, a narrow trimming, so that we may conclude that in 1502 not even Lucrezia Borgia herself possessed a yard of lace; a fact not without significance.

The deed dividing the property of the Sforza sisters has been freely quoted to prove that lace existed in the XV century, although it may bear quite a contrary meaning. If in 1493 the sisters had but *four pieces of netting and one ribbon (binda) of two bobbins (binda does not mean lace, nor is lace of any kind made with two, or even two pairs of bobbins)* as their entire stock of lace for division, one may

ask if there was one of the great ladies of that time who was in possession of lace of any kind?

A careful student of costume tells me of the discovery of an inventory of 1492 with this entry: *three pairs of sheets of four-fold linen with wide reticello worked with fish-bone pattern and little crosses, fior. 36*; and in another inventory of 1493; *one pair of brocade pillows with covers of fiore and reticello of rezza. Fiore was*



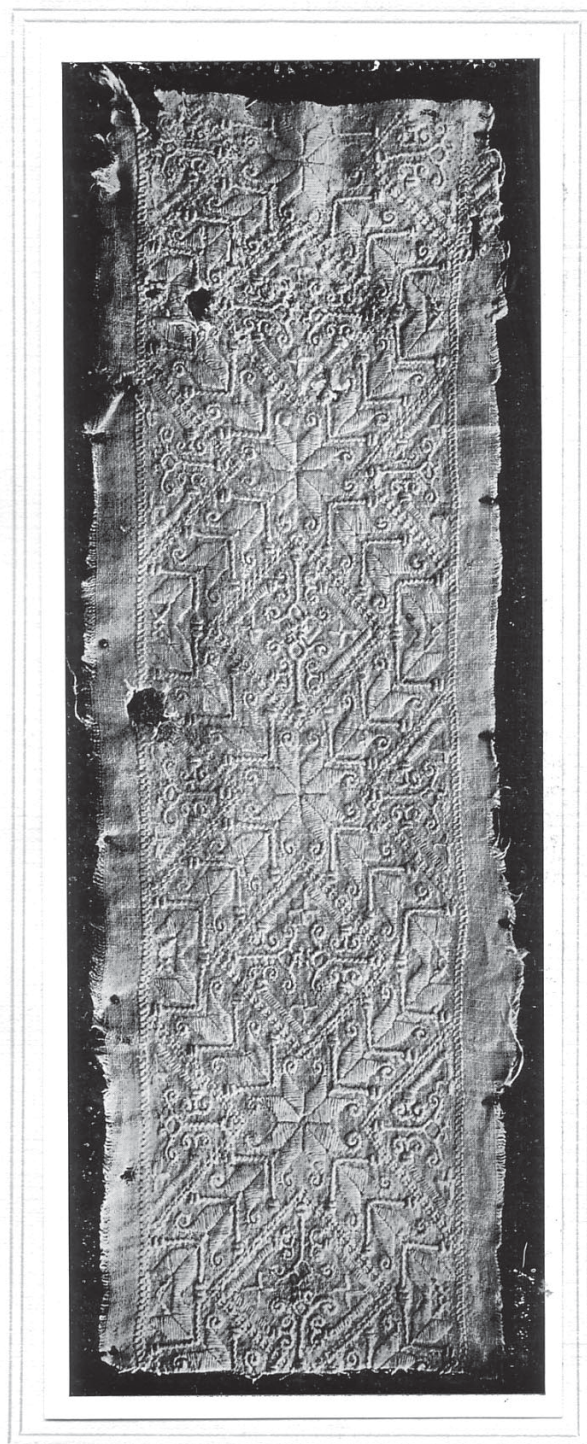
No. 8 — *Frieze of Modano lace on the bed and laces of many kinds on the sheet, the headdress of the saint, the towels, the swaddling-bands, the linen-basket etc. etc.*

Altar-piece in Santa Maria at Cortona, Birth of the Virgin Mary. By Allori, called Bronzino. Beginning of XVII century.



No. 9 — Embroidery in black silk short stitch.  
From a portrait attributed to Raphael. Uffizi, Florence.  
(Photo Alinari).





No. 10 — White embroidery without open work.  
End of XV century. Luck, Rome.

a very fine quality of linen, and *rezza* « a thread net of the finest mesh upon which various figures are made with a needle » (N. 63). The information concerning *rezza* is taken from La Crusca. But it must be remembered that La Crusca was born in 1582, while the inventory in question dates from the end of the XV century, and makes no mention either of embroidery or figured designs.

True, nearly every History of Lace refers to the sumptuary laws of Venice promulgated in 1514 against the *use of lace*; but the erroneous information is based on a sentence (either ambiguous or inaccurate) to be found in Yriarte's *Venise*. Speaking of the institution in Venice of the *Regulator of Pomps* in 1514, he includes in his list of prohibited articles the word *dentelles*. But if we examine the principal sumptuary edicts enacted by the Republic in the first half of the XVI century, we find no mention at all of lace until 1530, while even that date furnishes nothing really explicit (1).

(1) « 1530, 19th March.... Concerning ornamentation of rooms and beds... Beds are not to have upper and under sheets or pillows trimmed with silk and gold, silver, gems, pearls, embroidery, or silver-work, or worked *de ace a ago* (thread and needle) but these must be plain ».

Even admitting that in some rare cases a vague allusion may have been made to some insignificant lacis work, the fact remains that no trace of lace is to be found either in documents or paintings before the end of the XV century. In portraits by Leo-

So we see that even in 1530 (by which time Paganini and Tagliente had each published books of designs for embroidery) white linen was still generally ornamented with silk and gold — even with pearls and jewels — and the *needle and thread-work* above mentioned would seem to refer to embroidery more than to lace.

« 1535, 29th September. Gloves stitched with gold and silver, silk, thread or any other material are forbidden... at the same time it is forbidden that sheets, veils, cushions, coverlets for beds as well as cradles, be embroidered in gold, silver, or silk of any colour; but they may have a thread trimming two fingers'-breadth and no more and the seams shall have no work upon them, but shall be plain ».

In the « *thread-trimming round and on the seams* » of the bed-linen we may assume an allusion to the narrow lace in *reticello* or *ivory-stitch* used to hide the joins in the linen, and a real *reticello* lace *all round*, as is seen in some old examples.

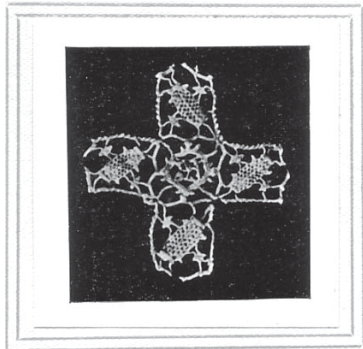
« 1542, 7th December.... and ministers hereby are empowered to demand admittance to the house and into the room of women as aforesaid (in their confinements) to see if said women have any ornaments contrary to the law of the land, that is to say: sheets worked with gold, silk, silver, or thread embroideries, or any of the bed-linen be treated with thread work broader than two fingers'-breadth, or any part of the bed, or its curtains, coverlets or anything of the kind, be of gold or silver or velvet or else embroidered, striped, embossed with gold, silver, silk or thread ».



No. 11 — Insertion of drawn thread and embroidery round neck of shirt  
From C. Crivelli's « Magdalen » (1436-1490). Gallery, Berlin.

nardo, Ghirlandajo, Parmigianino and the young Titian we discern clearly enough to be able to copy the design, an embroidery in short-stitch in very fine black silk on the trimming round the neck and wrists of their sitters (No. 9) and it is precisely these trimmings which disappear later to make way for laces which, at the beginning of their career, are nothing but a transparent white washable embroidery for ornamenting linen.

As is well known, washable body-linen was not in general use before the XV century, and throughout this century women continued to put the same work of coloured silk and gold on their linen as on rich silken fabrics. During the latter half of the century, some attempts were made to invent a trimming more suitable



No. 12 -- Little cross in reticello, imitating a jewel. Baldini, Florence.

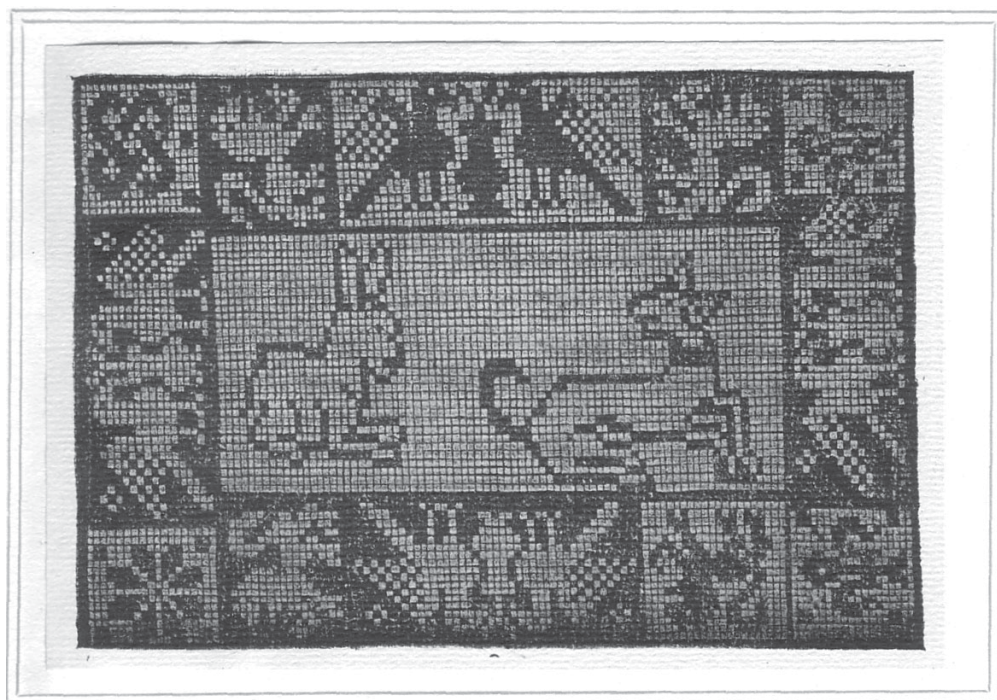
for washing fabrics, resulting in a work of white in relief upon white, satin and curl stitches mingled, and nearly always following a pattern dividing the stuff into equal squares defined by a drawn stitch in open-work (No. 10). After this first step, expert embroideresses tried new effects in transparencies, and were led unconsciously along the track towards the making of lace, an entirely new trimming differing from the art of embroidery, which had its origin in the East, in that this novelty had the double good fortune to be born in Venice and in the XV century -- that is to say in a place and at a time when work of all kinds took an artistic

form. It flourished instantly, as by a miracle.

Let not this description of the growth of lace-making be taken as a denial of the possibility that in other times and places ingenious spirits may have imagined and attempted some kind of lacework with needle and bobbins. But such isolated examples cannot be taken to prove the birth of an art which reached a perfect maturity within fifty years, thus making its date of origin almost incredible, and suggesting some remote and obscure genesis.

Some of those who cling to the idea that lace-making is of respectable antiquity make much of fragments of stuff found in the ancient tombs of Egypt; one scrap is alleged to be ornamented with short-stitch and perforations, and to date from the VIII or IX century B. C. But these examples, besides being very few in number, are not unquestionably genuine! The point is not of much importance save, perhaps, to emphasise the facts that lace-making did not emerge from an embryonic state in those distant ages, and that it died out and disappeared completely.

How can we connect this clumsy drawn thread or mesh-work with the Venice Point of twenty-five centuries later? How claim the Orient as the birthplace of lace, when that very East, who was the supreme mistress of embroidery, not only did not teach us the work, but came to learn it from us? Although China, Japan, and Persia send us materials woven with a thousand marvellous tints, or printed with



No. 13 — Design for embroidery in counted threads with coloured silks.  
From the *Universali e belli Ricami* of Zoppino, Venice, 1537.

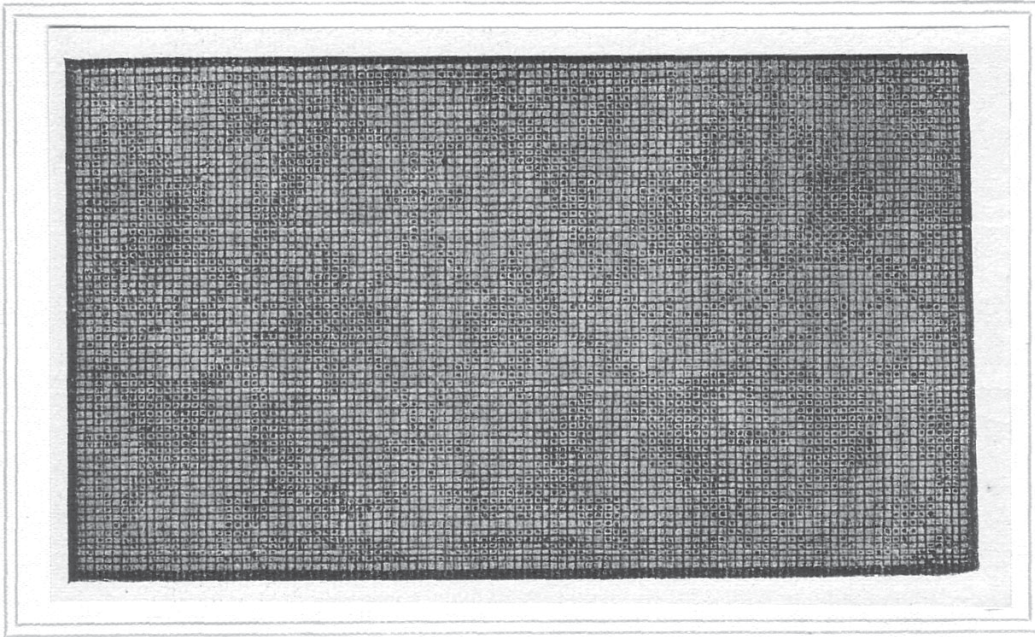
a coloristic skill and audacity the exotic harmonies of which delight even our foreign eyes, they have no thread lace, or only poor modern samples.

Again, some people perceive a white reticello cushion of geometric design in Lorenzetti's fresco of *Peace* at Siena, which would bring back the invention of lace-making to the XIV century. How delighted we should be were we really able to see the first trace of our own lovely art in that charming painting, where woman represents the highest and purest of human aspirations! But in other pictures by the same artist there are motives similar to this supposed lace in the decoration of walls, boats, aureoles of saints, and other objects where neither lace nor embroidery could possibly be used. If this hypothesis should be allowed, what a quantity

of braid, fringe, and other ornamentation might be claimed as lace, and how many works in ivory, wrought iron, filigree, and even in marble which may have suggested designs for lace might be supposed to be imitations of it.

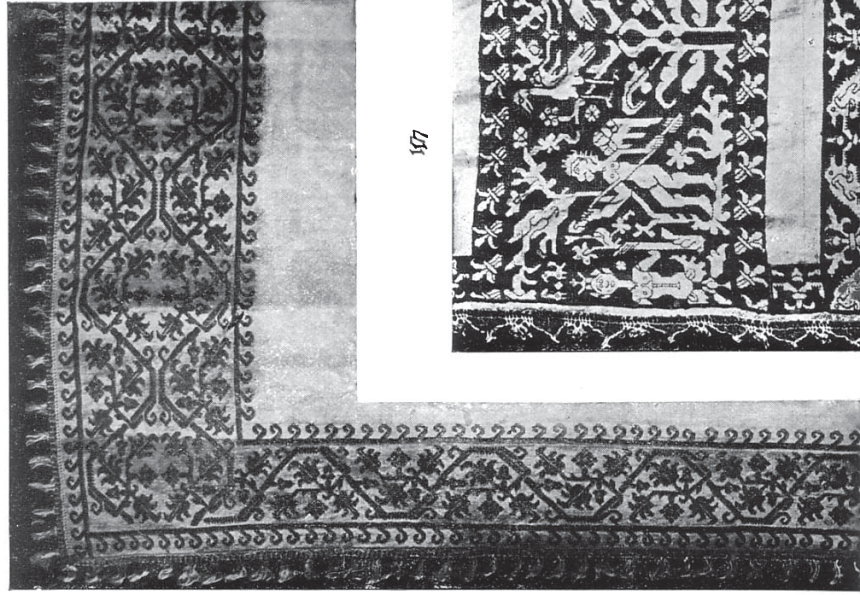
Certain is it that long after Lorenzetti, no painter — neither Ghirlandajo, Botticelli, Gentile Bellini, the Vivarini, nor even Carpaccio himself, that lover of the magnificent in women's attire, reproduced a single example of any sort of lace.

Many have thought that in Carpaccio's *Two Courtesans*, in the Correr Museum

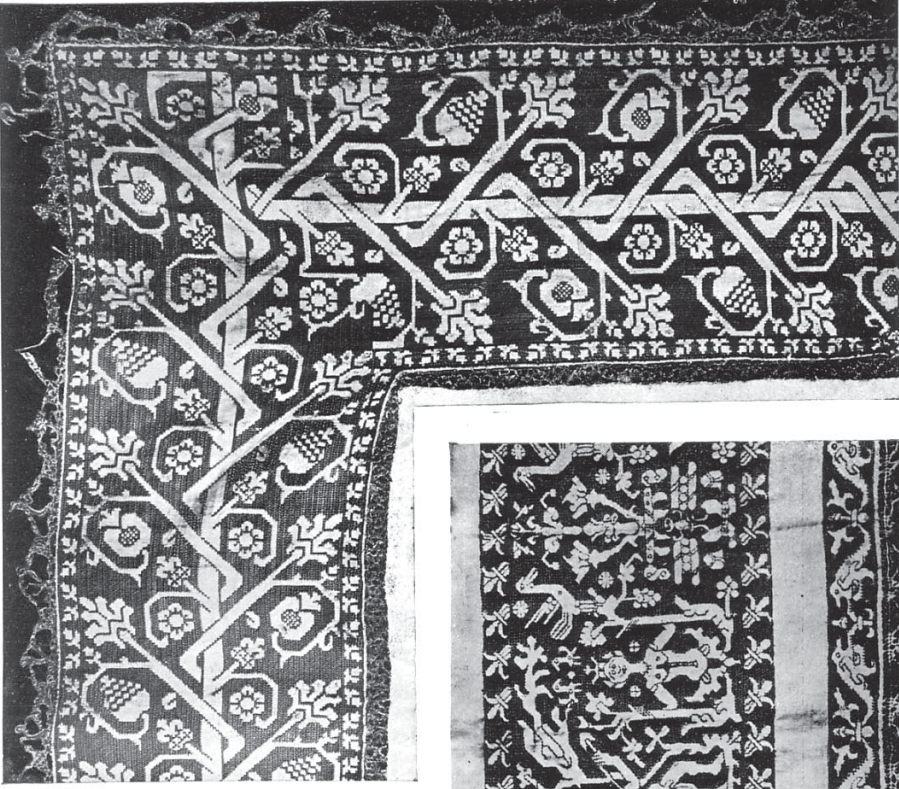


No. 14 — First designs for transparent work from the *Burato* of Paganino. Venice, 1525?

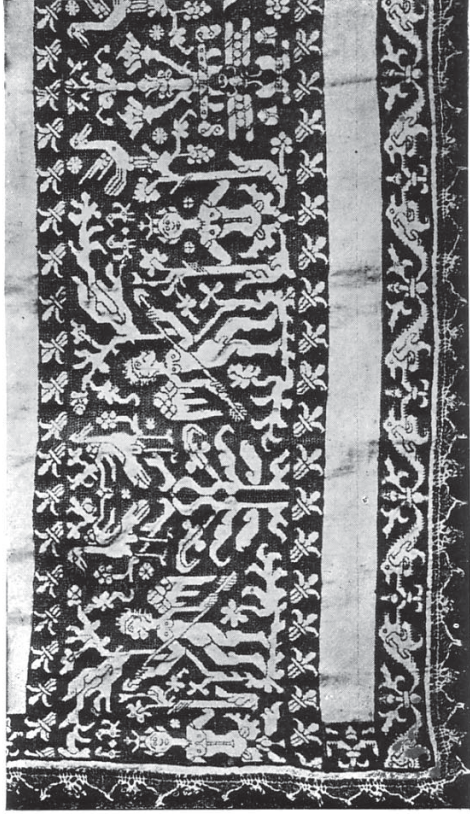
Venice, a lace edging was shown at the hem of the petticoat. But this is not the case; it is a galloon or braid, evidently one of those *Curtapise* frequently mentioned in inventories of the XIV century as borders, or ornaments for the hems of gowns. How appropriate the lovely new fabric would have been in Carpaccio's version of the *Dream of St. Ursula*! The room, the furniture, the bed wherein the fair girl sleeps and dreams her virginal and saintly dreams are adorned with exquisitely feminine objects. We can imagine with what delight Carpaccio would have trimmed the white sheet with a shadowy lace edging, where, in order to soften the line of division between it and the coverlet, he had recourse to a meagre fringe! and is it to be supposed that Memling and Van Eyck would have neglected



15



16



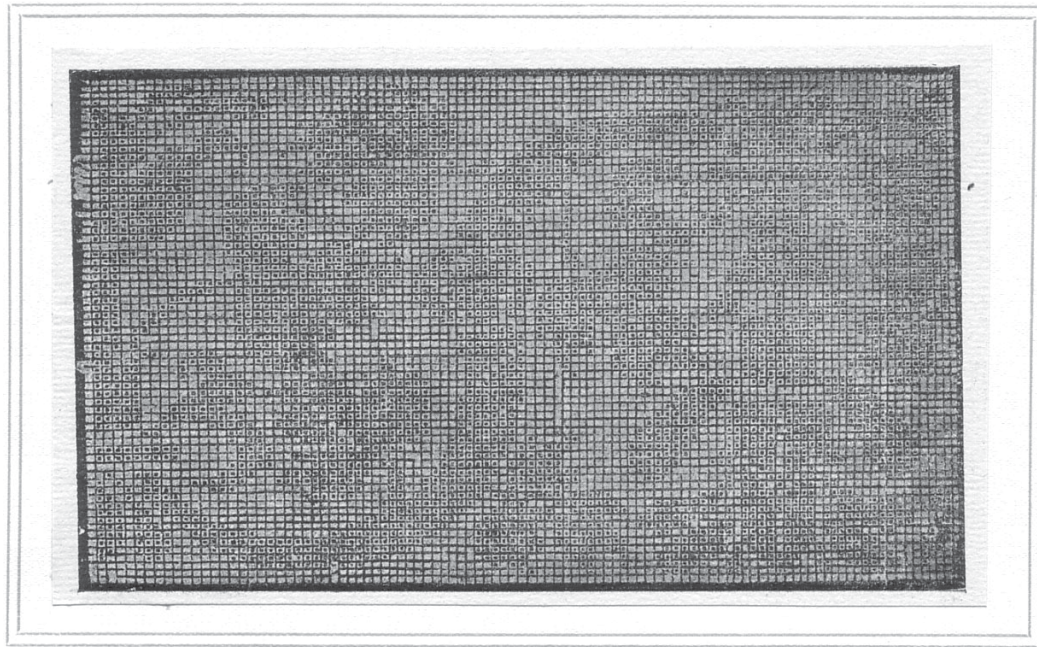
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No. 15, 16, 17 — Embroidery in colour, counted threads: in No. 15 the design is embroidered, in the others the background. Chieti Exhibition, 1905.

to adorn the Madonna's dress and veil, or have lost an opportunity of further embellishing those homely interiors which they depicted with such minutely loving care?

How is it possible to avoid drawing a significant conclusion from such omissions when we have but to turn to the portraits of Rubens, Van Dyck or Sustermans to see how the XVII and XVIII centuries revelled in the beauty of our graceful handiwork, recognising it as the most artistic adjunct for male and female dress?

A search throughout the principal Galleries of Europe has revealed nothing



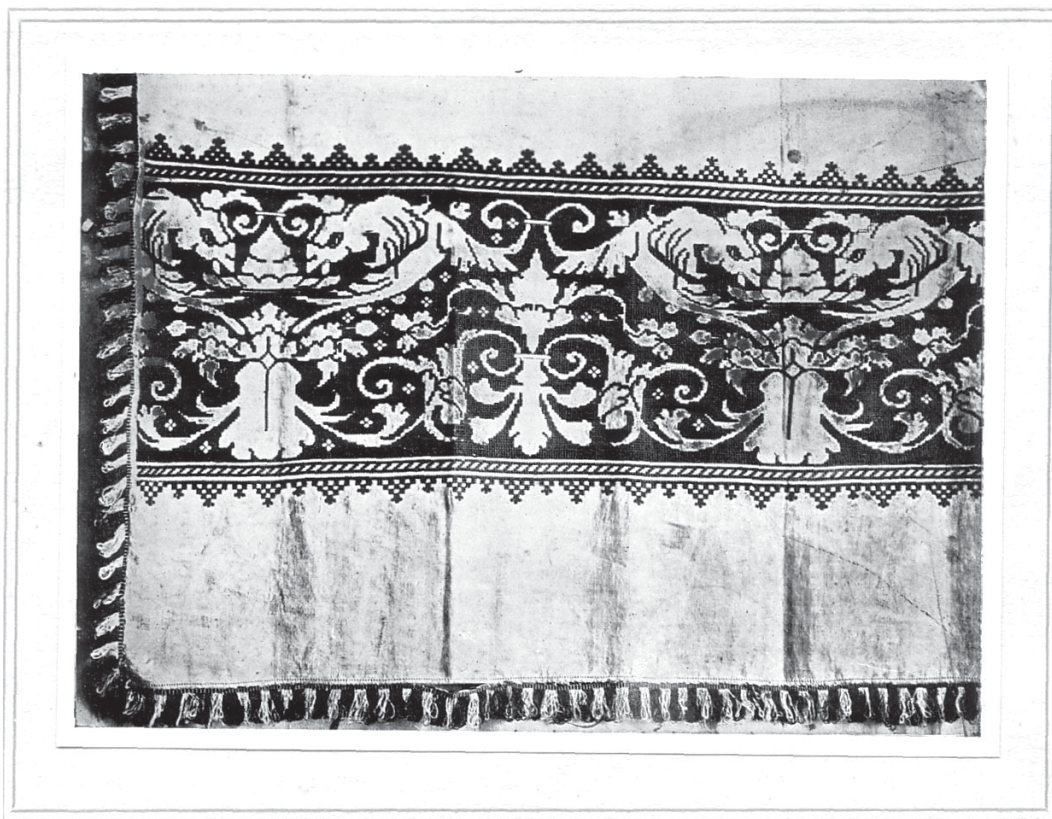
No. 18 — First designs for transparent work. Border for bed from the *Burato* of Paganini.

fresh to me save in one instance: in the Berlin Gallery, Crivelli's « Magdalen » wears a small piece of insertion of drawn-thread work round the neck of her chemisette (drawn-thread work was the first link in the chain uniting embroidery and lace (No. 11). Had Crivelli known of any more beautiful lace than this, would he not have chosen it to adorn the saint's dress?

The same conclusion is reached when we study those pattern-books of which some perfect copies are still to be found, as well as loose leaves, in private and public collections. Little books, well worn and tattered, and yet highly suggestive. The XVI century artists dedicated their books to those great ladies who were not content merely to wear the lace they loved, but wished to learn how to make it

for themselves; they still smile at us from the canvases of Titian, Paul Veronese, Parmigianino and Bronzino. The books contain patterns for every sort of feminine work; how can we wish for anything more comprehensive or more likely to assist us in our search for the origin of the feminine art *par excellence*?

Let us look at the foreign pattern-books. *La Fleur des Patrons de Lingerie*



No. 19 - Work with background in colour, counted threads.  
Chieti Exhibition, 1905.

*à deux endroitz à point croisé à point couché et à point piqué, imprimé à Lion par Pierre de Sainte Lucie dict Le Prince, in 1549, gives nothing in the way of transparent work, either in drawing or text. Some designs intended to be drawn on a foundation of small squares lead one to think they may be meant for Modano or drawn-thread. The little square, however, does not represent a void, but the mass of threads which form a background, either to be covered with stitches or left bare: for an example, see Zoppino's design (No. 13). How could this be executed in lace? The opaque ground and the transparent design are a complete*



negation of lace... Evidently we have here a design intended for counted threads in coloured silks in which the background would be stitched and the plain linen would form the design (Nos. 15-17).

The most ancient of all Italian books of design, *Il Burato* (undated, but probably contemporary with, or a little later than Colonia's work dated 1527) has some illustrations showing originality, not in the terms only, but also in the motives, which are not so small and insignificant as those for embroidery, but altogether larger and more decided, indicating a novel intention. As a matter of fact, they were intended to border beds, and to be executed on net-work, as is shown by the small black stitch in the centre of the mesh, which takes the place of an outline, or the little black square used in designs for counted threads.

Thus we see how designs for lace were born of designs for embroidery; they come to life in the first Italian *Book of designs*, *Il Burato*, and continue their career in the pages of Tagliente and Zoppino, until in Mathio Pagan's book, published in 1543, we find that *punto tagliato*, which leads the way to *reticello* and to the fairy-like *punto in aria*!



These pattern-books seem to proclaim that the first of the needle-laces were *Venetian*.

Indeed, the authors Tagliente, Vavassori, Vinciolo, Vecellio, Pagan are all Venetians, and all use the flowery language of their time when they present their works to *lovely and virtuous ladies*. Pagan claims that with the aid of his little volume « *one will find borders suitable for the adornment of every woman and of every bed with cut work, knotted work, and every other variety of stitch* »; the terms could not be more purely Venetian. The Venetian dialect was adopted as the official language of lace-making; the printers, authors, and designers were all Venetian, and of the 140 famous manuals which appeared between 1525 and the close of the century, in Germany, France, and Italy nearly 100 were printed in Venice. Later on, in 1584 and after 1590, guides to lace-making (no longer « to embroidery ») made their appearance outside Italy; but they were copied largely, if not entirely, from ours or else they were written by Italians seduced from home by flattering hopes of higher pay, like Vinciolo, who signed his admirable book published in Paris « *Vinciolo the Venetian* », and never learned sufficient French to enable him even to translate his own name correctly; *Fédéric* and *Fédérick* alternate throughout its pages.

Sometimes a foreigner published designs in Venice, like Ostans or Ostaus, and that Dominique de Sera, called in 1546 the *little Frenchman* in a book published in Venice at that date, while in 1584, in another book published by him in Paris, he signs himself boastfully, Dominique de Sera, the *Italian*.



The XVI century had throngs of ladies to whom these *pattern books* are dedicated; they filled the rooms of their palaces with all their female relatives and servants, and, inspired by artists and aided by clever hands, they created those prodigies of patience, grace, and fine taste which will pass before the eyes of the readers of this book.

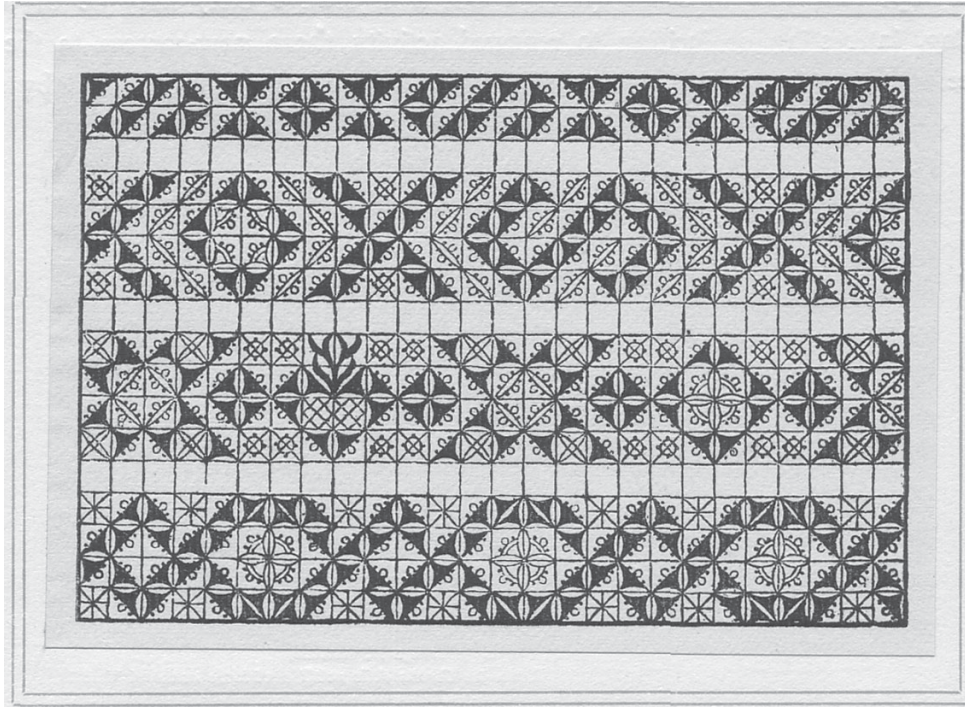
Somewhat later, in the XVII century, the white hands of our ladies will produce that cut linen foliage work (*punto tagliato a fogliami*) which is like a delicate bas-relief in ivory; and gradually we see skill become virtuosity, able to throw aside the trammels of strict rule, and create fantastic miracles of beauty as they fashion their *Rose Point*.

Thenceforth, Venetian laces were sought after by the proudest monarchs and the finest ladies of Europe. The art of convent and palace, formerly the pastime of leisure and luxury, entered into the poorest houses, and established itself as an industry so flourishing that it awoke the envy of an astute French minister, and not in vain!

At the close of the XVII century Colbert resolved to put some check on the stream of money which flowed from the country in exchange for the Italian lace which came into it. Not content with the imposition of duties and the promulgation of prohibitive laws, he decided on the course indicated in the following Edict: « that the towns of Quesnoy, Arras, Rheims, Sedan, Chateau-Thierry, Loudun, Alençon, Aurillac and others in the Kingdom shall establish the manufacture of every sort of thread-work, both for pillow and needle, after the manner of those made in Venice, Genoa, Ragusa and other foreign countries, and that the said manufactures be known as *French Point* ».

The audacious phrase was prophetic indeed! From that date our decadence began; the XVIII century saw our beautiful solid lace, with its balanced sobriety and chaste design degenerate entirely both in form and aim. No longer was the work undertaken for the adornment of the maker's house-linen, for presentation

to a church, or as a gift to beloved friends and relatives ; it was made to sell, and Venice accordingly had to follow the fashion, which she no longer gave to, but received from foreigners. Our workers sought to imitate the exaggerated fineness of French and Flemish laces, unsuited for washing with linen, and not sufficiently solid to display beauty of pattern. Their complicated foundations, which masked



No. 20 — Design for *punto tagliato*.  
From *La perfezione del disegno* of Ostaus. Venice, 1561.

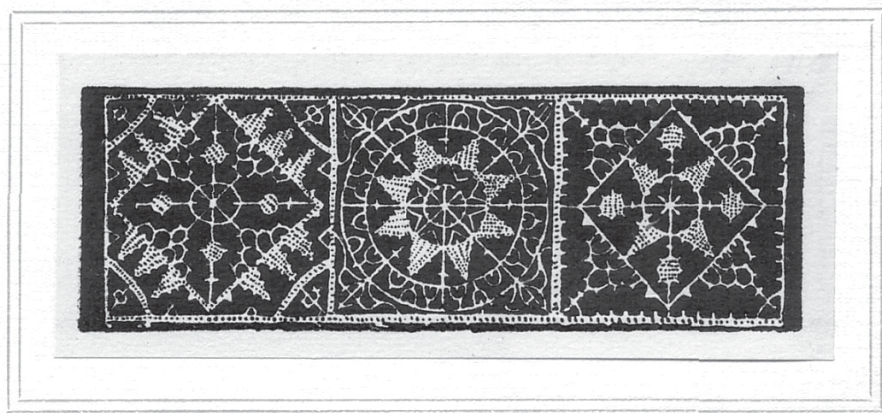
poor and incorrect designs, made them so light and vaporous that they were only fit to minister to the vanity of feminine and masculine beauty.



The illustrations which follow will tell their own tale, and vindicate the rights of our laces, since the collection is entirely of Italian Laces, sought for and chosen among the unknown treasures which lurk in the darkness of sacristies, and the jealously guarded cabinets of ladies and collectors, or which, exposed to the

*dangerous* light in the dealer's shop, have already left us on their way across the Atlantic, immediately after the photographic lens had snapped their likeness as they hesitated a moment before taking flight! They are all truly Italian, notwithstanding the fact that only too many Italians themselves have adopted the habit of speaking of « Gothic stitch, Grecian lace, Spanish Point, or French and Colbert Point ».

I hope that this museum (though but a figurative one) may be of use in teaching, interesting, or inciting to renewed activity those new-comers to the field of needle-work who are taking up the beautiful industry again, moved by something of the spirit of the past!

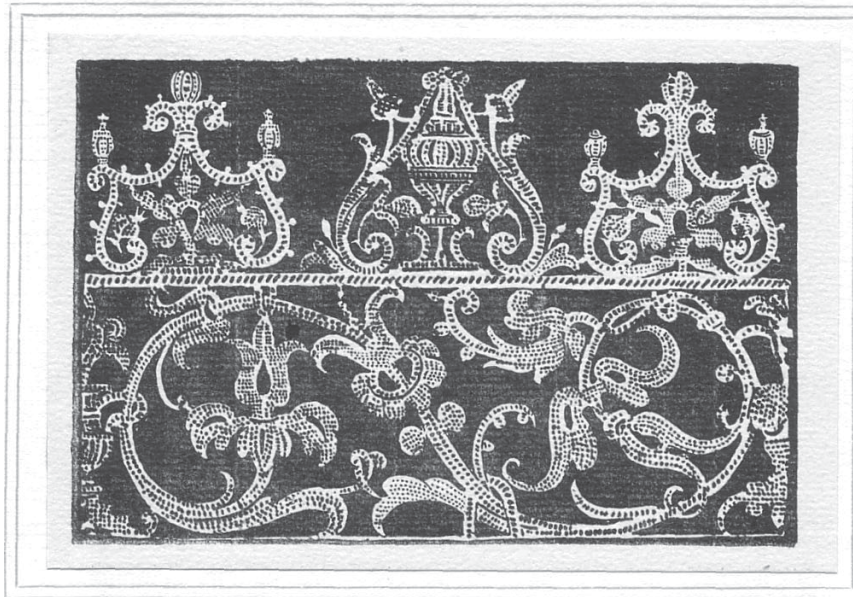


No. 21 — Design for *reticello*.  
From the *Corona delle nobili e virtuose donne* of Vecellio.  
Venice, 1592.



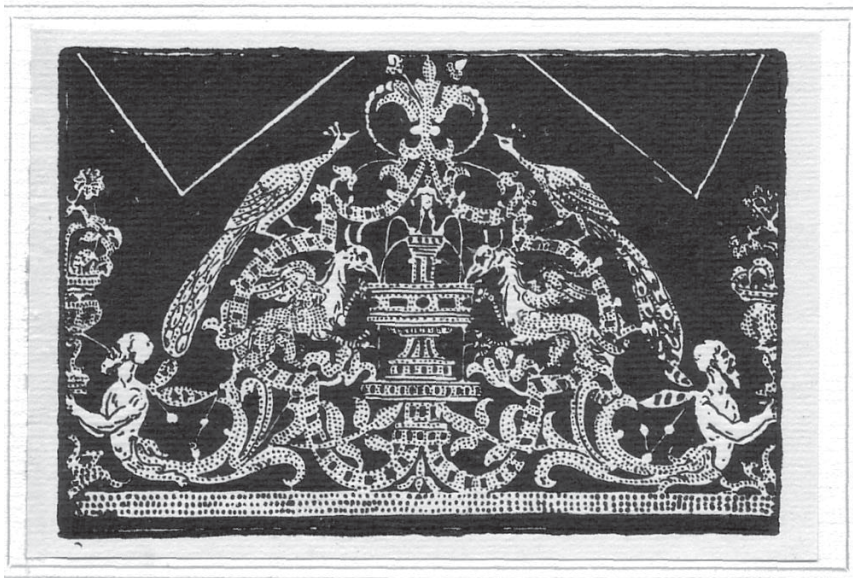
I should like to close this Introduction with some information gathered from the withered lips of old peasants in Romagna and the Marches; they say that, well within their memories, in every house, however humble; and in every lofty palace were found three articles specially treasured: they were three pieces of linen taken from the old family chest only on the day of weeping round a corpse; the sheet and pillow-case used when the dead body lay in state, and the little cloth which covered the table for the inte of Extreme Unction.

It is because they were laid aside as things too precious save for the last solemn rites, that three sorts of linen articles are found in the best repair at



No. 22 — Design for *punto in aria*.  
From the *Nova Espositone* of A. Somasco. Venice, n. d.

the present day: sheets, their seams hidden with narrow insertion in ivory-stitch, bobbin-lace, or *reticello* and enriched with wider laces top and bottom;



No. 23 — Design for *punto in aria*.  
From the *Corona* of Vecellio.

pillow-slips entirely covered with embroidery and *reticello*, sometimes enhanced with a motto or sacred symbols; and cloths in the form of towels, even richer in needle-work and lace.

Thus our art in its modesty is associated like its greater sisters with the cult of the dead.



No. 24 — From an « Annunciation » by A. Vitali, at Urbino