

Threads Into Lace

Lace is an ornamental openwork fabric formed by looping, interlacing, braiding, or twisting many varieties of fine thread and ribbon. Lace is used primarily as decoration on clothing or pillows and upholstery. In the 17th century, the Englishman Thomas Fuller said that lace “doth neither hide nor heat” and that it is “nothing save a little thread, descanted on by art and industry.”

The distant origins of lacemaking are found in Stone Age workings of threads and fibers used to make knotted fish nets or gauze fabrics. Ornamented openwork fabrics existed in ancient Egypt and Peru, as evidenced by specimens found in burial grounds. Some simple lacemaking techniques may have developed in the Middle Ages in the Near East, but fully developed lace did not appear until the Renaissance, at which time it was a primarily European creation.

The word “lace” is derived from the Old French *laz*, from the Latin *laqueus*, which means noose or snare, of which the lace-creation process is reminiscent.

Despite its distant precursors, lace did not become widespread until the 16th to 17th centuries, when several diverse economic factors occurred. First, improvements in soapmaking and a generally rising standard of living led to the increased use of washable table linens, bedclothes, and undergarments. It became possible, therefore, to adorn and enrich these reusable items with washable ornamentation—lace. Second, pins became abundant and cheap, a factor necessary for the widespread production of lacework.

Elaborate hem-stitching and narrow lacelike insertions are shown at the seams of linen garments and cushions in some late 15th-century Flemish and Italian paintings. There is some question about whether lacemaking originated in Flanders or Italy, but it is generally accepted that the type of lace known as “needle lace” was developed in Italy, while “bobbin lace” originated in Flanders.

In making needle lace, a pattern is drawn on paper or parchment and fixed to a stiff cloth backing; then, a thread is tacked along the outlines of the pattern through both the parchment and the cloth. A fine needle and single thread are used to complete the pattern on the paper, with longer stitches to support the

loops and knots—but the needle never penetrates the cloth backing. When the pattern is finished, the tacking stitches are cut away and the paper and the cloth backing are removed, leaving only the ephemeral pattern plucked out in thread alone. Originally, needle lace was made by amateurs, particularly nuns, but in later centuries, as patterns became more complex and demanding, the work was taken up by professional lacemakers.

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Bobbin lace, also called pillow lace or bone lace, is made not with a single needle and thread, but with numerous bobbins—as few as 12 or as many as 1000! A pattern is drawn on paper or parchment and attached to a firm pillow. The pattern is pricked along its outlines, and then pairs of needles and bobbins are hung from each pricked spot. The threads are carefully woven, twisted, or braided together. So complex were some bobbin laces that the finest specimens have a hundred threads to a square centimeter; one fold or flap on a larger garment could take a lacemaker ten months, working 15 hours a day.

By 1600, lace had become a highly desired and luxurious fabric and, because of the great quantities worn by both men and women, an important article of commerce. Fine laces were considered status symbols among the wealthy.

There are many types of lace, ranging from delicate handkerchief edgings nearly as insubstantial as cobwebs, to sturdy tablecloths with patterns so thick and heavy they are sculptures made of thread. Until about 1800, most lace was white because the threads were made primarily of linen, which was difficult to dye with fast colors. After 1800, though, cotton thread became more prevalent. Threads of wool and other animal hair, metal, silk, and aloe fiber have also been used, as well as artificial fibers such as nylon or rayon.

The French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution greatly changed the character of lace production in the 19th century. With the European backlash against aristocratic ways, fashions changed drastically, requiring no lace on men’s garments (except for ecclesiastical purposes) and little on women’s clothing. This changed around 1840, when the style again called for lavish amounts of lace on women’s clothing, creating a new demand. Women wore large shawls of black or white lace, and crinoline skirts covered undergarments ornamented with yards of lace edgings. By this time, bobbin lace could be made on a machine, using cheaper (and less durable) cotton thread instead of linen, thereby making lace production simpler and less expensive. Even common citizens could now afford lace.

Despite the ease and efficiency of mechanical lace manufacturing, enormous quantities of hand-made lace were still produced from 1840 until around World War I. One fabulous dress, made in 1870 for the Empress Eugenie of France, is worked in extraordinarily fine detail, depicting realistic lilies, carnations, roses, pansies, and honeysuckle, in full-colored thread. Florence Nightingale, disparaging machine-made lace, once said that “no gentlewoman ever wears anything but real lace.”

Prior to World War I, lace continued to be made by hand in many European countries; some of the finest came from Russia. In Belgium, girls began their apprenticeship as lacemakers when they were only six or seven years old. China in particular produced a great deal of cotton-thread lace for export to Europe and the United States. Women in poverty-stricken regions were encouraged to take up lacemaking as a means of supporting themselves. A more recent example of this was the lacemaking industry in New York City’s Lower East Side at the beginning of the 20th century.

By 1920, the hand-made lacemaking industry had nearly vanished, due to cheaply manufactured machine-made lace and decreasing demand. Currently, hand-made lace is still produced in some of the old centers, such as Bruges and Brussels, but only as a tourist attraction and for souvenirs.

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FOR FURTHER READING: *Lace* by Virginia Churchill Bath (Regnery, 1974); *Victorian Lace* by Patricia Wardle (Praeger, 1969); and *Lace Making* by Marian Powys (1959).