DIANA AND ENDYMION
IN BRUSSELS LACE

BY MARION PRESTON BOLLES
Assistant Curator in charge of the Textile Study Room

The coverlet illustrated on the facing page is an excellent example of the design in vogue from the closing years of the eighteenth century to about 1830, which reached its complete expression during the reign of Napoleon I and became the basis of the official court style. This coverlet is part of a recent gift, one of many with which Mrs. Edward S. Harkness has enriched our lace collection in recent years. It is bobbin lace, with the motives separately worked and applied on bobbin ground, a remarkably large piece for so delicate a medium, for it measures eighty-two by eighty inches.

In the center we see depicted the myth of Diana and Endymion, the sleeping shepherd with whom the goddess fell in love, a very appropriate subject for lace intended to be used in the decoration of a bed. There are many versions of the story. The following is from Gayley's Classic Myths: "One calm, clear night Diana looked down upon the beautiful Endymion, who fed his flock on Mt. Latmos, and saw him sleeping. The heart of the goddess was unquestionably warmed by his surpassing beauty. She came down; she kissed him; she watched over him while he slept. She visited him again and again. But her secret could not long be hidden from the company of Olympus. For more and more frequently she was absent from her station in the sky, and toward morning she was ever paler and more weary with her watching. When, finally, her love was discovered, Jupiter gave Endymion, who had been thus honored, a choice between death or perpetual youth united with perpetual sleep. Endymion chose the latter. He still sleeps in the Carian cave, and still the mistress of the moon slips from her nocturnal course to visit him. She takes care, too, that his fortunes shall not suffer from his inactive life: she yields his flocks increase and guards his sheep and lambs from beasts of prey."

This lace has been called a coverlet, but it may possibly have been made for a curtain, to be hung either from a frame against the wall behind a bed or from a baldachin placed above it. The type of bed in use from the close of the eighteenth century to the 40's of the following century was usually modeled after the classical couch with out-curved ends and as a rule was placed with the long side against the wall. The baldachin supported curtains which fell outside the headboard and footboard. An outstanding example of such draperies occurs in a famous garniture de lit given by Napoleon I to Marie Louise at the time of their marriage. It had been intended for the Empress Josephine, but making so large a piece of lace takes a long time, and before it could be completed the emperor had divorced his first empress and arranged to marry the Austrian princess. The bedspread has no pictorial motive as ours has but is sown with Napoleonic bees.

A contemporary account shows us how the delicate beauty of such lace draperies was used to dramatize a social gathering during the time of the Consulate. The story is told by Mrs. Bury Palliser in her History of Lace. She had it from an elderly English lady who visited Paris in 1801, when the English flocked to the Continent after the Peace of Amiens, and who was so fortunate as to receive an invitation to a ball at Madame Récamier's. "The First Consul was expected, and the élite of Paris early thronged the salons of the charming hostess, but where was Mme. Récamier? 'Souffrante' the murmur ran, retained to her bed by a sudden indisposition. She
would, however, receive her guests couchée. The company passed to the bedroom of the lady, which as still the custom in France, opened on one of the principal salons. There, in a gilded bed, lay Mme. Récamier, the most beautiful woman in France. The bed-curtains were of the finest Brussels lace, bordered with garlands of honey-suckle, and lined with satin of the palest rose. The couvrepiède was of the same material. . . . The lady herself wore a peignoir trimmed with the most exquisite English point. Never had she looked more lovely—never had she done the honours of her hôtel more gracefully. And so she received Napoleon—so she received the heroes of that great empire. All admired her 'fortitude,' her dévouement, in thus sacrificing herself to society, and on the following day 'tut
Paris s'est fait inscrire chez elle.' Never had such anxiety been expressed—never had woman gained such a triumph."

Our lace was made in the early years of the nineteenth century and has the neoclassic feeling typical of the days of Madame Récamier. The distinction of the design suggests that it may have been derived from the work of a contemporary painter. The name of Jacques Louis David (1748-1825) comes first to mind. This great exponent of classicism, who had been official painter to the emperor and his
court, lived in exile in Brussels from 1815 until his death in 1825. As the workmanship of our piece is undoubtedly Flemish, it has been suggested that the central motive may have been taken from a drawing by him. We have not, however, been able to find in his work anything related to this design, nor have we found in the works of any other artist of the time a painting or drawing which might have served as inspiration for it.

We know of two other examples of Brussels lace of the Empire period very similar in style
to ours; in fact the working of the bobbin figures in these two pieces, with their needle-point details, seems from illustrations to be exactly the same as ours and suggests that all three may have had a common source. The pieces to which we refer belonged in 1914 to Alfred Lescure of Paris, according to an illustrated catalogue of his collection written by E. van Overloop of the Musée Cinquantenaire, Brussels, in that year. One is a cushion cover, the other is called a voile or a couvre-pied. The design of the cushion cover shows a returning warrior being welcomed by his wife; the subject of the voile is taken from the story of Apollo and Daphne. Unfortunately, M. van Overloop expresses no opinion about the origin of the designs. Another piece of lace with designs very like ours was formerly owned by the late Michael I. Pupin of Columbia University, who is said to have given it to the Museum in Belgrade.

From a technical point of view the important thing about our lace is the ground. It is made with bobbins and is the sort known as vraie réseau, or droschel. The development of this ground proves an interesting illustration of the way in which changes in style bring about the working out of new techniques. In the eighteenth century, when the pattern of lace covered a large part of its surface, the ground was worked to fill the small space left, and was joined to the motives by hooked joining. In the latter part of the century lace became simpler, and the fashion, as this particular example shows, was for light forms widely scattered on the ground. This resulted in two technical difficulties: keeping the ground evenly stretched in spite of its natural elasticity and suppleness, and keeping in play the great number of bobbins needed to make so large an area of net. To do away with these the ground was made in strips about an inch wide and varying in length from seven to forty-odd inches. Narrow pieces like these could be very evenly worked, and then joined together to make the ground, by use of a special stitch known as point de raccroc, or, as it was called in English, fine joining. The resultant ground was one of the marvels of the Brussels lace industry. It was also enormously expensive because of the time and skill necessary to make it, to say nothing of the initial cost of the extremely delicate thread, known to have been as high as £240 a pound. The droschel was very much in demand among those who could afford it. But these were few, and the makers of machine lace saw their opportunity to develop a market in machine-made net to which the handmade bobbin designs could be applied. The result was that in the decade between 1830 and 1840 the droschel was completely superseded.

The coverlet is on exhibition in Gallery H 19 on the second floor.

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