THE GRANDEUR OF LACE

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“Grandeur” is not a quality commonly attributed to lace. In a word-association test it is phrases like “lavender and lace,” “ribbons and laces,” even “arsenic and old lace,” that would more readily come to mind; all these reflect the idea that lace is something delicate and trifling, ornamental and old-worldish, and, most essentially, feminine. Its fragility is thought of as characteristic also of its users, who, in the present age of athletic and robust young women, are believed to be always elderly ladies, old-fashioned and aristocratic but sweet and gracious, even if, on occasion, dramatically given to homicide.

It is true that lace has always been an article of luxury, with no practical use whatever; even embroidery is more functional, for it can indicate the rank of sergeant or mandarin. A lace curtain diffuses light and blocks the eye no more efficiently than one made of plain net, however effectively it may proclaim social status. Lace, in fact, like jewelry or marble staircases, has always been an advertisement of rank—since its beginnings, indeed, one of the most unabashed examples of conspicuous consumption, a luxury of luxuries.

But luxury, though today it means great comfort, once meant great grandeur, and the craft of lace-making was brought to perfection at a period when grandeur was far more important even than cleanliness to men and women of social pretensions. It was then also thought fitting that the richest products of human ingenuity in their most up-to-date manifestations should be used in the service of God. Lace, as a distinctive form of decorative art, appeared rather suddenly about the middle of the sixteenth century, at first as a washable ornamentation of linen; its immediate popularity is connected with improvements in soap-making. But its possibilities were too great for it to be long hidden on underclothes, and, from its first timid appearance at the extremities of shirts, lace quickly advanced to positions where it met the eye of every beholder. Soon it took its place alongside precious stones, cloth-of-gold, silk embroidery, and brocaded velvet as a recognized symbol of wealth and honor, on the costume of the nobleman and prelate, as drapery for an altar or the cradle of a princeling. From about 1600 for over a century the artistic styles of the times made it inevitable that the forms it took should well deserve the adjective “grand.” Lace of this period, the baroque, is massive rather than airy; its patterns are abstract and solemn rather than naturalistic or whimsical; it shows that “utmost possible enlargement of the unit of design” that Roger Fry has noted as characteristic of the style. So successful were the lace-makers in carrying out this program (which might be thought alien to the very idea of an open-work fabric) that other minor arts of the period often seem to reflect their achievements: the contemporary woven silks of Lyons are known as “lace-like,” and visitors to the Museum who glance at a gros point
Detail of the border of a linen alb with punto in aria needlepoint lace, Italian, late xvi or early xvii century.
The larger inserted medallions contain symmetrical flower-filled vases alternating with double-headed eagles under an imperial crown; the latter show that the garment was made in the Holy Roman Empire, which then included much of Italy. The irregular shapes of most of the insertions suggest the reaction against renaissance stability and symmetry that appeared with the mannerist movement. Bequest of Mabel Metcalf Fahnestock, 1931

de Venise flounce before they study the Grinling Gibbons staircase from Cassiobury Park cannot fail to see a resemblance. One of Gibbons' most famous tours-de-force, in fact, is the reproduction in wood of a lace cravat, and Bernini found lace as good a test of his skill as laurel leaves.

The stages by which lace ascended to a dominant position among the textile arts can be followed with remarkable clarity in the sixteenth-century pattern books; the Metropolitan Museum has an outstanding collection of these, of which a catalogue is in preparation. The information so obtained can be supplemented by the study of paintings and prints showing lace in use on costume and furniture; surviving specimens can thus be dated. But it is significant that lace pattern books, so numerous in the late sixteenth century, ceased to be published soon after 1600. The craft, from being a pastime for talented amateurs, had become professional. Attractive as the early laces are in their simplicity and occasional naïveté, with beautiful designs of renaissance clarity or mannerist liveliness, it is the professionally made baroque laces that show the heights to which this extraordinary technique could attain.

For extraordinary it is. The transformation of the green flax plant, or even the hank of plain linen thread, into the sculptural white scrolls of a piece of Venetian gros point is as astonishing as the metamorphosis of a bowl of dough into a cake, or heaps of sand and potash into the windows of Chartres, especially when we remember that human hands alone, without the application of heat or other violent chemical processes, or the addition of coloring matter, have brought about the miracle. In few other decorative arts is the labor of mind and hand so all-important; here are no precious raw materials (gold, silk, ivory), no secret processes or guild mysteries; a good designer and an able worker are all that is needed. Even the skill that facets a diamond
Detail of a flounce in gros point de Venise, Italian, xvi\textsuperscript{ii} century. The high relief of this lace gives it the appearance of sculpture; between the highlights of the thickest raised portions and the dark interstices of the design a variety of filling patterns provides intermediary grades of shadow, increasing the resemblance to a bas-relief. Mabel Metcalf Fahnestock collection, gift of Ruth Fahnestock Schermerhorn and Faith Fahnestock, 1933

from an unprepossessing pebble merely uncovers latent beauty, whereas the lace-maker creates it. Lace, said Thomas Fuller, the seventeenth-century English divine, is “nothing save a little thread, descanted on by art and industry.”

Fuller, though a clergyman, did not disapprove of lace. He wrote: “Let it not be condemned for a superfluous wearing, because it doth neither hide nor heat, seeing it doth adorn.” He added that it gave employment to children (lace-makers, like ballet dancers, must acquire their art at a very early age), and that its manufacture in England saved “some thousands of pounds yearly, formerly sent overseas to fetch lace from Flanders.” This attitude, though in strict accordance with mercantile economic theory, was an unusually enlightened one for a man in Fuller’s position; moralists, and even statesmen, were more apt to condemn all such expensive superfluities. Their fulminations are instructive: the importance of lace can be gauged from the amount of abuse it received and the legal actions taken against it. A famous French edict of 1660, a \textit{Déclaration contre le luxe des habits, carrosses et ornements}, prohibited the sale of imported lace, and even of French lace more than an inch wide. Everyone, “tant hommes que femmes,” was forbidden to wear a long list of rich adornments, and the use of lace on \textit{canons} (knee ruffles), which was said to have caused “un excès de dépense insupportable,” was absolutely prohibited. The law, like all sumptuary legislation, was a failure.

The surviving laces of the seventeenth century
Chasuble made of several pieces of gros point de Venise lace, Italian, xvii century. These solemn laces may have been originally intended for other uses, but they have been put together with great skill, perhaps at the time when such heavy lace was becoming less fashionable for secular use. Hewitt Fund, 1910
Above: Detail of a portrait of a man by Pieter Cornelisz. van Slingeland (1640-1691). The subject wears a collar of Venetian gros point lace. The patterns of the two halves are exactly the same, not mirror images; if a collar precisely like this one were to be discovered today the suspicion would arise that it had been made up from two sections of a flounce. Purchase, 1871. Below: Collar of gros point de Venise; the two halves have been carefully designed to be mirror images of each other. Italian, xvII century. Gift of Mrs. Edward S. Harkness, 1930.

are so often in the form of flounces of various widths that it is seldom possible to say how they were originally used. Though the fabric was generally now very definitely meant to be seen by all, and often could only be washed with difficulty, there is evidence that it was still used on the underclothes that it was originally invented to adorn: Pepys, in the Privy Garden of Whitehall Palace (which was perhaps not quite as privy as it should have been), saw “the finest smocks and linen petticoats of my Lady Castlemaine’s, laced with rich lace at the bottom, that ever I saw.” Presumably they were hanging on the line to dry. (He adds, characteristically, “and did me good to look upon them.”) Probably even wider flounces must have decorated the équipage de bain, “garni de point de France et fort magnifique,” that was given by Madame de Maintenon to Madame de Chevreuse. The great horizontal bands today stretched soberly across museum cases may have known such uses, or they may have adorned altars or the linen rochets of great prelates; there are many portraits of princes of the church showing them swathed in lace from above the knee. Even liturgical vestments, the most solemn of garments, could be made of lace, though surviving examples are rare.

But the most persistent use of lace, which has lasted even to our own day for women, and Scotsmen in full dress, is as ornamentation at the neck and wrists. The great “Elizabethan” ruff used yards of comparatively uninteresting, geometrically patterned lace, but the collar of the later seventeenth century presented a more challenging opportunity to the designer, with an interesting shape that could be treated as a unit. Even the sober Dutch burgher of the mid-century could wear such an all-lace collar over his somber black suit. A somewhat later use of the lace at the throat is as two panels fastened to the ends of a linen scarf; they appear frequently in portraits of men, falling negligently even over steel breastplates and shoulder-pieces. Armor and lace alike were ineffective against the weapons of the day, worn indeed, both of them, merely “pour le faste et pour éblouir les yeux,” to quote a contemporary poem. The few extant examples of these scarf ends are sometimes wonders of intricate design in a confined space, though already many of them can hardly be called “grand.”

With the change from baroque to rococo, in
fact, the word “grandeur” as applied to lace begins to be a misnomer. Except for the clergy, men now wore it only at the throat and wrists. It became a lighter fabric: “With eager beat his Mechlin cravat moves, He loves, I whisper to myself, He loves!” wrote Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, early in the eighteenth century, but the transports would have had to be ecstatic indeed to have caused a *gros point* collar of the previous century to quiver. The noble scrolls of the earlier lace, silhouetted sharply against empty space, were replaced by sparser and more agile patterns on a regular ground. The ground (itself a fine achievement, technically) increases in importance at the expense of the pattern; by the end of the eighteenth century the latter is often reduced to a few sprigs scattered across a wide, uniform expanse. Just as the wig, enormous and solemn when worn by Charles II and Louis XIV (and any man of their time with any pretension to gentility), became progressively smaller and lighter until it was blown away forever in the great winds of social change at the end of the century, so lace, once equally indispensable to the well-dressed man, was suddenly found to be superfluous. Men ceased to be peacocks, and even women, for a while, lost interest in lace; when it became fashionable again, in the mid-nineteenth century, its function had changed. Like the fan and the muff (once also used by both sexes), it was now for women only and its use by men was almost unthinkable. Even on vestments it was considered a frivolous addition by those who wished to see only medieval splendor in the Church. The rich, elaborate Victorian lace flounces and shawls now taken from trunk or bank solely for brides, are often *tours-de-force* of naturalistic design and technical skill, but they lack the noble grandeur of laces made before sex discrimination set in.

The history of lace as an art form is brief, for, however we may judge the Victorian examples, there is no question but that today its life is over. This brevity of existence is one of the curious
Detail of a flounce of a variety of point de France frequently known as point de Sedan. French lace designers lightened the forms of Venetian gros point and introduced a regular ground. The pattern, however, in the early xviii century, remained dense, and, though based on leaf and flower forms, quite unnaturalistic. There is much less relief and a greater use of half-tones than in Italian lace so that the over-all effect is closer to grisaille painting than to sculpture. French, first half of the xviii century. Gift of Mrs. Edward S. Harkness, 1938

problems of this strange fabric. Why did it appear so late in time, when most handicrafts have histories reaching back to primitive man? (The existence of lace-like techniques in ancient Egypt and Peru merely adds to the difficulty, as no real artistic development took place before the sixteenth century.) Why is it, unlike almost all other textile inventions, purely European? (Again, the exceptions, such as the Turkish oyah lace, are trivial.) Why is it monochrome, generally white? One art historian who has seriously concerned himself with these questions is Moriz Dreger, who, nearly fifty years ago, proclaimed lace to be the “Blüte,” the fine flower, and “das echteste Kind,” the truest child, of the Renaissance. He discussed the renaissance idea of pattern, in which frame, background, and design are all sharply distinguished, each element being an entity in its own right; the preference of the Renaissance for form rather than color; its conception of the artist as creator; its love of unadorned raw materials (marble statues as against painted wooden ones); and connected all these characteristics with the renaissance discovery of the individual. Then he claimed lace to be the art form that most clearly expressed all these tendencies. “Lace arose with the Renaissance and will vanish only when the last reverberation of the note then struck, which resounds through the baroque, the rococo, and later periods, has finally died away.” Half a century later, as we look at the arts in their modern forms, we may well feel that that note can be heard no longer.

The quotations from Moriz Dreger are from his Entwicklungs-Geschichte der Spitze, Vienna, 1910.