

## ITALIAN LACES, OLD AND NEW.

BY ADA STERLING.

(Illustrated from photographs by M. Charles Balliard, Photographer for Metropolitan Museum of Art.)

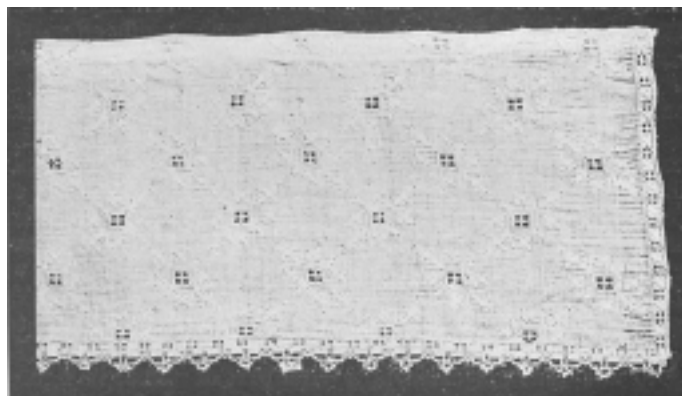


TO the student of Italian history, or to put it more exactly, of the history of Italy, no period will prove more fascinating than the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, which embraced the most affluent years of her commercial life. From the Italy of that time has radiated all that in modern times is artistic in music, in painting, in sculpture and architecture, in wood-carving and metal-working, in glass manufacture, in money-coining, in weaving, and in needlework. On every side her shores were hospitable to commerce with the convenient cities of the older civilizations that lay along the contiguous and opposite shores of the Mediterranean. In the fifteenth century she was the great market for the products of Spain and the east. Especially absorbing for the consumption of her own people those articles of luxury and ornament for the manufacture of which the Orient has always been famous, her people soon acquired a very connoisseurship in the elegant inventions of the older world. Then, almost suddenly, this accumulated knowledge was subdivided among all classes of Italians. A very fecund spirit of industry seized them, giving in concrete results a commercial supremacy that dazzled other nations for two centuries, and stimulated the northern countries into an even more powerful industrial activity.

An enthusiastic compiler of a great volume of masterpieces of industrial art says of that period: "It was like the blooming of a spring flower, with its conquering grace, brightness, and perfume." This era produced Michael Angelo, poet, painter, sculptor, and architect; Pollajuola, goldsmith, painter, engraver; Ghirlandajo, an artist as diversely gifted, but whose celebrity rests on his having devised the making of garlands light as a hair upon small jewelry, and upon his exquisite modeling of diminutive saints and virgins; Benvenuto Cellini (whose

father, as versatile, was the maker of lutes and spinets, harps, and organs; an artist, architect, and engineer, and, moreover, himself the descendant of men of strong talents and character) was also a figure of great prominence at this time, and his genius was fostered under the benign influence of the Medicis.

Now the needlework of Italy became a feature of national interest. In commercial value, as must be the case with all dress ornament, as against the less generally em-



ANTIQUE ITALIAN LACE [1400-1450].

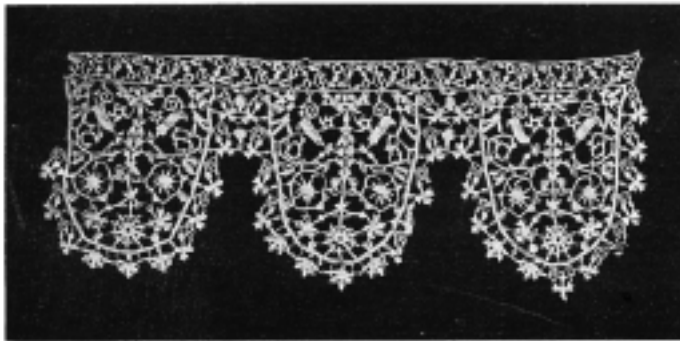
ployed and utilitarian work of the painter, the sculptor, the architect, and the lesser artists, it superseded in financial importance to the country all other handiwork. Its value as an industry in Spain had been enormous. In her awakened activity, Italy almost immediately absorbed the entire lace interests of the world. Previous to this time, Italian women, and especially those dwelling in convents, had produced not only fine lace models, but also hangings of exquisite needlework in wool and silk and linen, and as workers in the bolder field of tapestry-weaving they were considerably recognized. In the collection of ancient needlework owned by Mrs. James Boorman Johnston, and loaned recently to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, are carefully assorted and classified specimens of the work of Italian needlewomen of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. By means of these, rather than by any other models convenient

to the American student's hand, the development of lace-making may be traced with comparative ease.

In America the impulse toward a development of fine needlework, and especially of lace-making, has never been so positive as at present. In several important quarters manufacturers have engaged the services of foreign instructresses, with a view to establishing the work as an active industry, and for the first time an interest somewhat commensurate with the value of the work is actually aroused. Stories of the peasant lace-makers of Europe heretofore have acted as a deterrent rather than as a stimulus to the interest of American women in needlework. The ambition of our young country has been to earn large sums

with the quick machine in order to be able to spend lavishly in foreign countries, a circumstance that permits the American to assume the appearance of the careless purchaser of a peasant production, while disdaining to emulate what is regarded by the superficial as an occupation essentially for the peasant, and therefore not to be thought suitable in so republican a government.

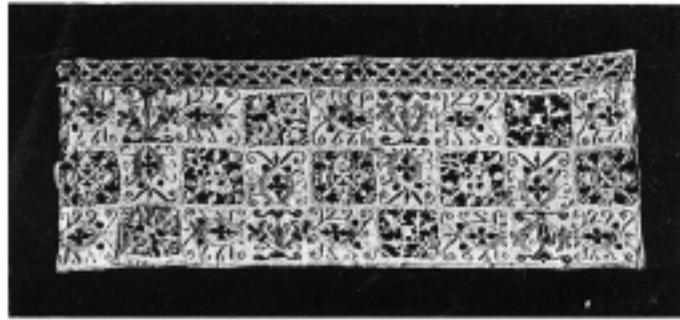
The true position of fine needlework, however, is and has been always that of an auxiliary of art; not an occupation of the untaught (though others than the book-learned may become proficient in it), but



EARLY ITALIAN RETICELLA LACE, NINE INCHES DEEP. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART.

rather the delight of women of fine fancy. A thousand poets might be quoted, and legends innumerable told of the needle in the hands of royal women and heroines, to prove how always it has been the source of occupation for cultured and refined women

of wealth and beauty, who put into their work the prettiest fancies of their quiet moments. Some of the best specimens of antique needlework in the foreign museums are known to have been made by women distinguished in history and romance. Lace-making was popularized and converted into a trade only when the commercial eye discov-



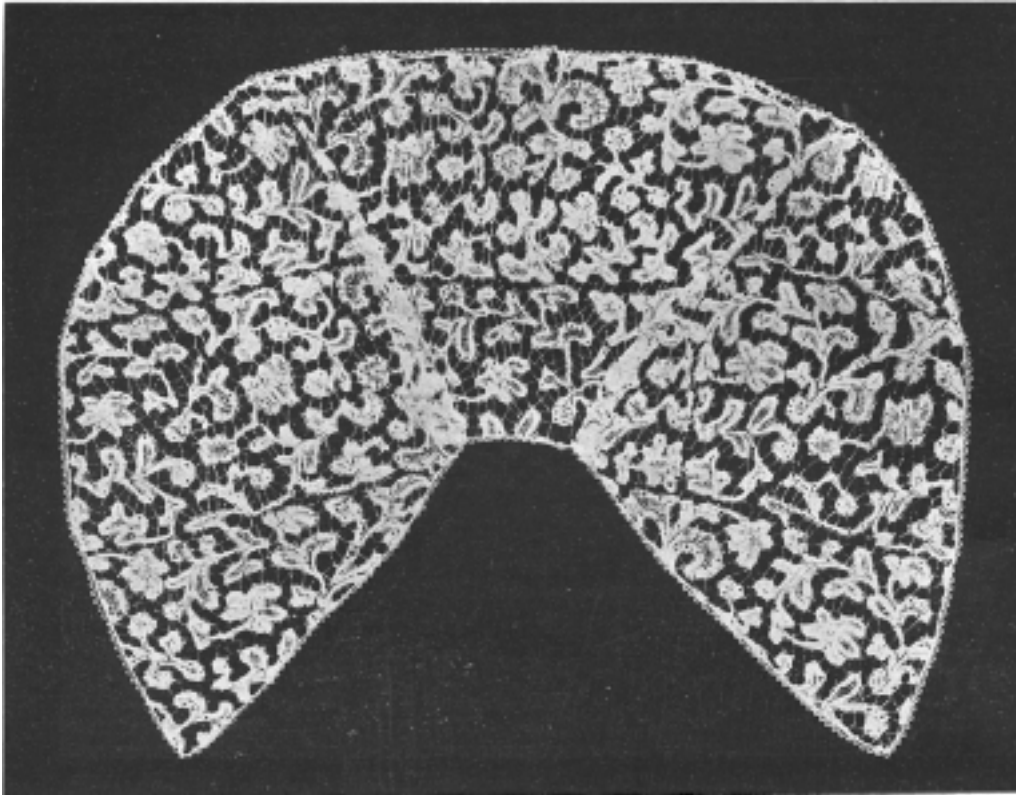
SYMBOLICAL ANTIQUE ITALIAN LACE AFTER GREEK MODEL [1400-1500].

ered its value as a form of dress ornament.

But even this discovery has not served to divorce it from other truly artistic occupations. In its earlier commercial history lace patterns, as were the designs for tapestry, for wood-carving, those for the goldsmiths, the decorations for faience and enamels, were all the careful products of the painter's pencil. The artists of the Italian Renaissance frequently lent their talents to the devising of lace patterns, for the tracing of scrolls and minute ornamentation for crystal, and even to the making of designs for wrought iron and other metal work.

The gorgeous patterns of the larger Italian laces that ornamented the albs and copes and chasubles of the robes of the pontifical circle all show their common source to have been in the invention of clever artists, familiar with the intricacies of other products of the times. For some of the more pretentious tissues of wool and silk and gold thread, the arabesques of Raphael were appropriated, and many of the patterns which later

lace-makers have repeated were penciled by artists almost as familiar. Rosalba Carriera, a famous pastel artist, began her career as a needlewoman, and on the way to a higher fame appears as a maker of Italian lace patterns. Again, in recent



OLD FLAT ITALIAN LACE [1550-1600]. PRESENTED BY MRS. R. L. STUART TO THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART.

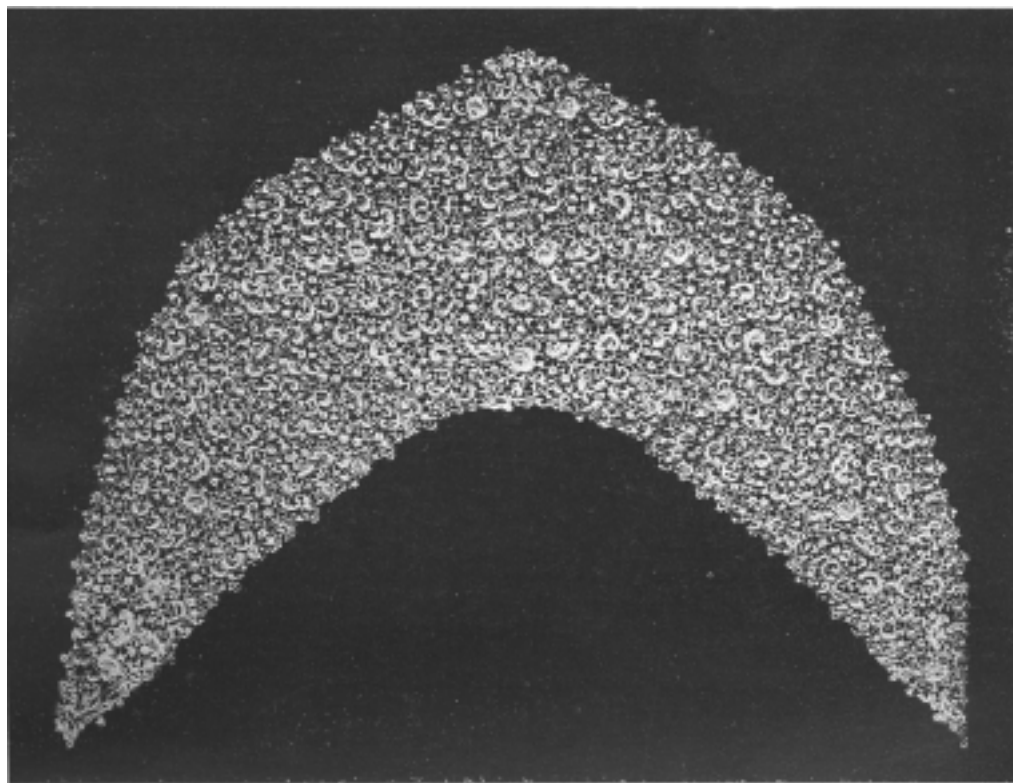
years, Sir E. Burne-Jones and William Morris have evolved designs for the workers of the Royal School of Art Needlework.

It is a question whether the revival of hand lace-making, already in a state of vigor in Italy, Austria, Sweden, and Ireland, will induce the ordinary needlewoman to return to the slow but exquisitely minute methods followed by the early lace-makers, though obviously the market for such beautiful product becomes more secure each year. Today much of the good so-called "hand" work is made upon a groundwork of woven netting that imitates perfectly the net ground which formerly was made stitch by stitch as the work proceeded. Lace braids of a hundred varieties that originally were made directly in the pattern now are purchasable in small bolts or rolls, and even by the yard. The employment of such braids, while resulting not infrequently in an effective pattern that often is satisfactory to the uncritical, reduces by fully seventenths the labor of producing a pretty trimming; but such products bear, in reality, the same relation to the genuine lace as appliqué bears to embroidery proper, as veneered

wood to the solid block, or plated metal to the pure silver.

As a first step in acquiring a knowledge of lace, whether for the purposes of making, or merely in order that lace seen may be classified, the student who is familiar with simple sewing and embroidery stitches should proceed to examine every available piece of old lace wherever it is to be seen, to separate and analyze the character of the individual stitches of which it is composed, and to trace the direction and method in which the work has been done from the initial pattern or parchment. The early specimens of Italian lace, nearly all of which were flat, band-shaped fabrics, were more or less solidly worked with even edges similar to those that finish the sides of insertions in the present day. They were applied to the garment for the garniture of which they served, in the form of bands almost exclusively. By means of such trimming on the draperies of robed figures in ancient statuary and bas-reliefs, antiquarians succeed in tracing the development of needlework to most remote times.

An illustration of the form of needlework



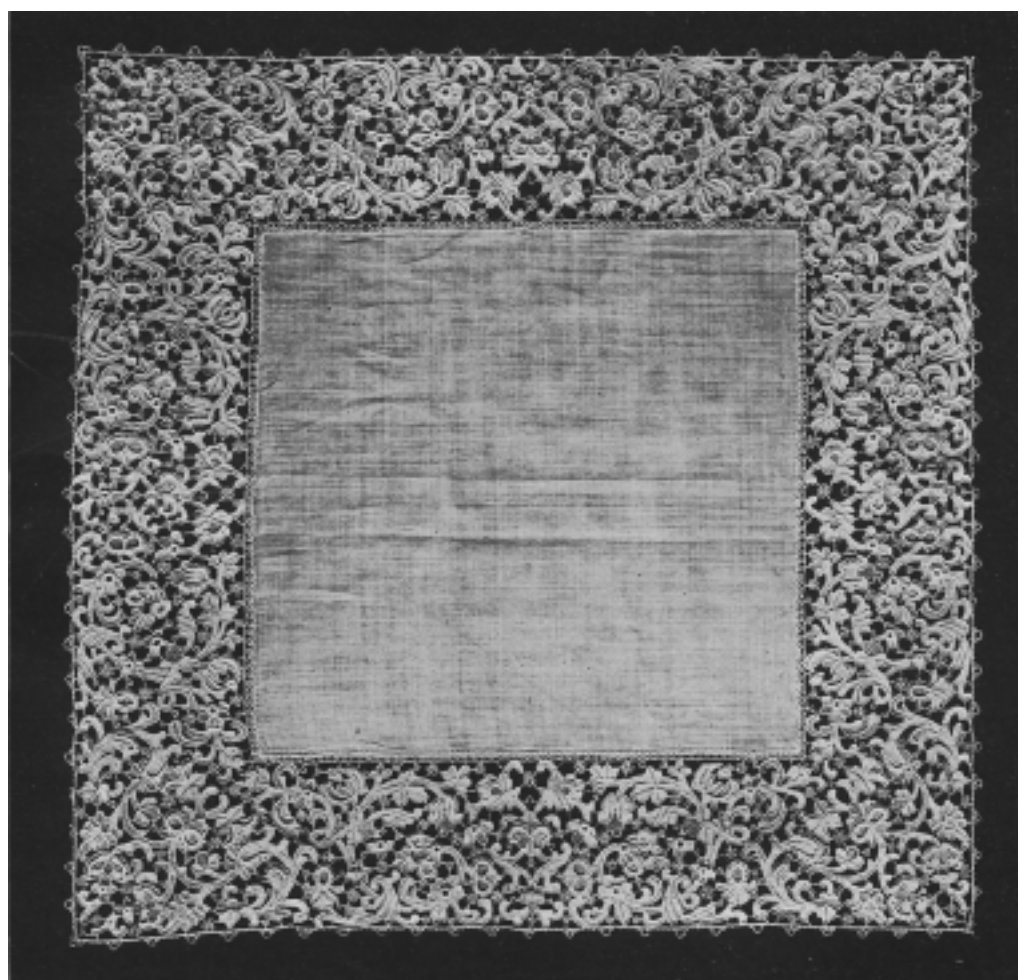
VENETIAN LACE MANTILLA. PRESENTED BY MRS. J. J. ASTOR TO THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART.

that obtained from 1400 to 1450 shows a ground so laboriously interwoven by the needle as to resemble nothing so much as a piece of well-bleached cheese-cloth with patterns worked at intervals, much after the manner of the drawn-work which may be commonly seen in the French and Mexican work of the present day. This first ground-work was little more than an exquisitely fine darning stitch, a stitch from which later was derived the close braid work that distinguished the Roman or antique flat laces of Italy, and out of which the filmy Flemish patterns were evolved.

The next step seen in the development of the Italian laces was the retiring of the close-meshed ground and the appearance of more open patterns in which the flat, button-holed bar is seen which imitated the reticella or bone laces of Greece. Next appeared the twisted *bride* or strand that connected the leading *motifs* of the design. Then the raised or padded cordonnet, finished with button-holed edge, and last, the inventions culminated in the feathery picot or loop which, as a feature of the Venetian lace, has proved the great barrier to the usurping

machine, and has defied the most ingenious attempts to imitate it.

Once the form of lace changed from straight bands to rounded and pointed garnitures, such as shoulder draperies, collars, aprons, cuffs, etc., the method of working became more defined, though a regularity of treatment was never persisted in in Italy until the reestablishment of lace-making was undertaken in 1870. Then, at last, the methods that had made the French schools of 1690 and thereafter so dominant were applied. The results are seen in such regular patterns as may be traced in the modern handkerchief here shown, in which are now repeated the old and exquisite Italian stitches, but with a precision unknown to and, in truth, disdained by the earlier workers. An examination of the Venetian lace mantilla, the most splendid feature of the Astor collection, than which a more exquisite and precious specimen does not exist in any of the collections of the new world, reveals the irregularity of the early Italian workmanship, though its unevenness proves now to be a charm and certificate of authenticity to the connoisseur of laces.



MODERN ITALIAN LACE IN THE MRS. J. J. ASTOR COLLECTION. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART.

The boldest figure in the design is that of a curled plume or coral branch, or this figure repeated in groups of two or three; but, though this constantly reappears, it will be observed that no two corresponding portions of the mantilla exactly or even nearly agree. The *motifs*, though the same, are placed irregularly over the ground of twisted and ornamented *bride*.

The patterns used by later workers at Burano consist, as did those in the schools of Alençon, of a series of corresponding sections of parchment or vellum, upon which the design to be worked has been exactly drawn. Occasionally a glazed and stiffened muslin is used, similar to that employed by architects in the draughting of their plans; also in some instances a thin glossy leather is prepared, and the pattern drawn upon it. The last named serves especially for patterns

that include heavy raised work and loose (volant) leaves. The sections are small always, in order that each may be handled easily. The outlines of the pattern are pricked carefully and at regular intervals, and the first step of the worker is "to lay in" the coarse tracing or outline thread that must be carried completely around the actual *motifs* or leading figures of the pattern and which is attached by a single stitch to the parchment at intervals of from one-eighth to three-eighths of an inch.

The outline stitches carefully traced, the groundwork is now filled in, either with the plain twisted thread or *bride* (which was so marked a characteristic of the early Italian laces, and, in fact, supplied the basis for the twisted net ground used in the Valenciennes lace exclusively), the net stitch in its many varieties, or the flat, button-holed

bar. The edges of the old laces were finished with a cordonnet or slightly padded and raised rim, and where to this the picot or looped stitches were added, they were put on after the entire work had been completed. The filling in of the *motif* is most important, and here the needlewoman's real opportunity came to execute her finest ingenuity, a single simple leaf often comprising six or more clearly defined stitches.

The final operation is to release the

finished lace from the vellum or other foundation. This is done by clipping on the under side the *fil de trace*, and picking out the same. The operation is one of much delicacy and importance, as the pulling away of even a film of the infinitesimal linen strand that has been used in working would mar the lace beyond redemption.

In a future paper the details of working the foundation stitches of the pure Italian laces will be given.