

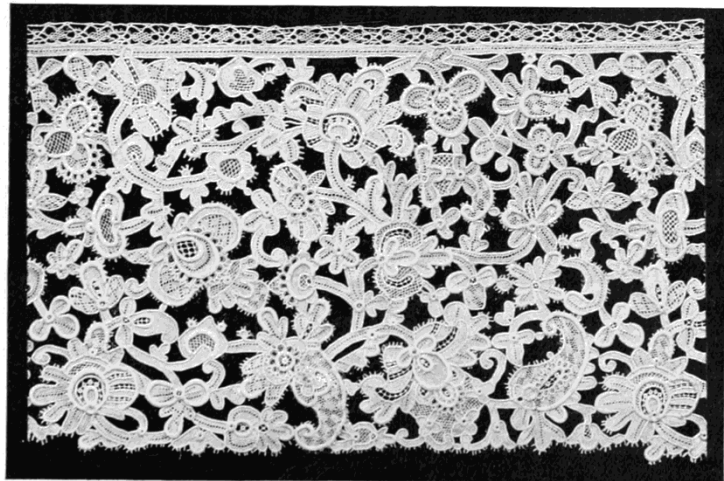
INTOLACE

Devon Guild of Craftsmen: Saturday 14 September – Sunday 3 November
Thelma Hulbert gallery: 14 September – Saturday 2 November

The shortest definition of lace is ‘a textile patterned with holes which are created by the manipulation of threads’. The four essential characteristics of a textile that endow it with the right to be called lace are that it must be made of **threads**, it must have **holes** which form an essential part of the **design**, and are deliberately made by **special movements** of the threads. Within this definition we find various sorts of lace including embroidered, needlepoint, bobbin and machine lace.

Examples of elaborate net fringes, drawn thread and cut work have been found on Egyptian mummy wrappings providing evidence of lace, or lace-like textiles, over 3,000 years old. Lace appears in the Bible with Exodus xxviii referring to a blue lace to be used for the adornment of the high priest Aaron. So, right from the beginning, lace was valuable and bestowed status on its wearer.

Greece and Italy were the first European lace making countries with 16th and 17th century Venetian Point or Point de Venise (right) recognised as one of the most beautiful laces and the one to which every modern lace owes something. A lot of early lace was made by nuns in the convents of Southern



Europe as altar decorations and for the robes of priests. Initially, outside of convents, lace patterns were handed down in lace making families and kept secret. The first book of patterns given to the world was by a Venetian who became ‘Pattern-maker for Needlework and Laces’ at the court of Henry III¹. Under the court’s influence and subsequently that of Louis XIV², the hand lace industry flourished in France with lace schools opening in many French towns. Lace making also spread from Italy to Spain and, when the Spaniards overran Flanders and the Low Countries, lace making went with them. In turn the religious persecutions of 1568 drove many Flemish lace makers into exile with groups settling in London, Devonshire and the Midlands. These are the origins of Honiton, Northampton and Buckingham lace. It is fair to say

¹ 1551 - 1589

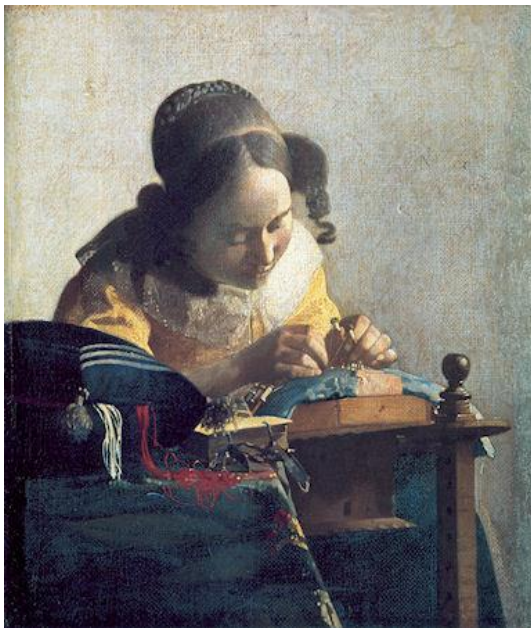
² 1638 - 1715

that lace came into its own during the Renaissance as Europe emerged from the hardships and austerity of the medieval age.



Honiton lace (left) is considered to be England's representative lace as it was the favourite of three English queens, Adelaide (wife of William IV), Queen Victoria and Queen Alexandra. Victoria's four-yard long wedding veil, flounce and trimmings were made entirely of Honiton pillow lace at a cost of £1,000 and, on completion, the pattern was destroyed so that a reproduction would be impossible. Adelaide's dress had a wreath of flower sprays on the skirt which spelled out her name and Alexandra's had a design of Prince of Wales feathers interlaced

with ferns. Honiton lace was made in numerous homes at the time of Victoria's wedding and the cottage industry was given a significant boost by her patronage.

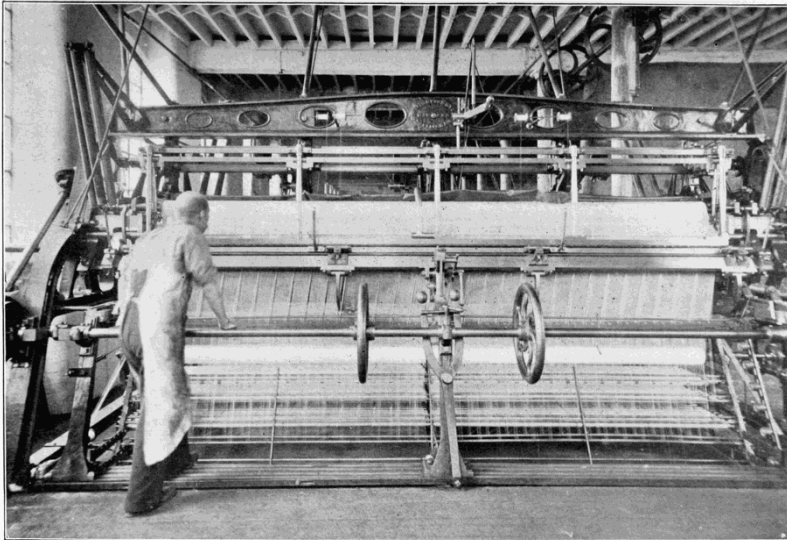


This portrait of Queen Consort Adelaide, (right) painted by Sir William Beechey in 1831, shows her swathed in plenty of lace. In contrast Johannes Vermeer's painting, *The Lacemaker* (left), painted between 1669 – 1671, shows the concentration on the face of his subject and the precise positioning of her hands. The wearer and the maker; both display the complexity of lace.



John Ruskin, Victorian art critic, expounded his view of the relationship of lace maker and lace wearer with the following; *'The whole value of lace as a possession depends on the fact of its having a beauty which has been the reward of industry ... That it proves by the look of it the ability of the maker; that it proves by the rarity the dignity of the wearer.'*

With the advent of lace making machines, an engineering feat that took some time to accomplish, the utility of lace increased enormously. Many more of us could wear lace and dignity was not the main motivation.



Lace making machines had to essentially combine the mechanisms used respectively by the knitter and the weaver and the embroiderer, a problem that absorbed many inventors, and finally resulted in the bobbin net machine which first produced a net of one inch width. At the start of the 19th century, a Nottingham

mechanic, John Leavers, hugely improved the design resulting in the Leavers lace machine (above). In turn this was improved by a Jacquard attachment (named after its inventor Joseph Marie Jacquard), which was not a specific type of loom or machine but an 'add-on' which allowed each warp thread to be lifted independently of the others. By the early 19th century, Nottingham was the most productive centre of machine made lace in the world.

Lace: rich in history, metaphor and contradiction; once made by nuns for the glorification of altars and priests and then prized as personal adornment by the wealthy aristocrats of European courts. Lace both obscures and reveals; it is used to symbolise both virginity and eroticism, appears fragile but is really quite strong and, after centuries of production is still loved by consumers, makers and fashion designers with equal appreciation.

'I consider lace to be one of the prettiest imitations ever made of the fantasy of nature; lace always evokes for me those incomparable designs which the branches and leaves of trees embroider across the sky, and I do not think that any invention of the human spirit could have a more graceful or precise origin.'

Coco Chanel, April 29, 1939

No wonder then that contemporary makers and artists find so much in lace to explore, comment on and re-interpret. The makers in this exhibition have used drawing, print, ceramic, metalwork, jewellery, glass, animation, textile, projection, mixed media, collage and digital technologies in their work, all of which reference lace textiles, past or present, and perhaps through the diverse range of materials, skills and ideas, shows us something about its future.

Teresa Whitfield's astounding ink drawings, meticulous and beautiful, impart a sense of amazement at her control of the pen and, in turn, bring to mind the skill and patience of the lace maker. Teresa's statement refers to the on-going discussion about the loss of crafts skills in a digital age, but her own contribution to this, her

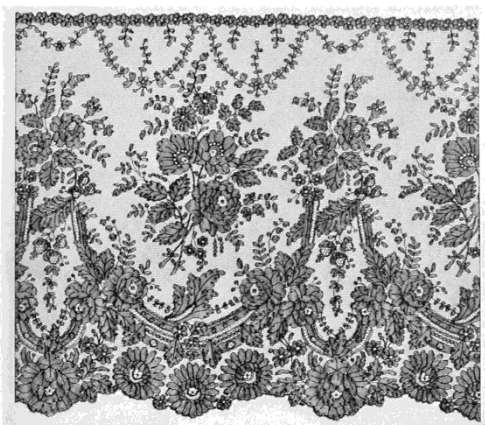
drawings, are a most eloquent comment on the virtual disappearance of lace making by hand as a cottage industry.

Imogen Luddy's table of delights includes multiple materials and making techniques. The napkins remind us of things we were once supposed to say, and things we were not supposed to do, at the table and the cake stand is, as she says, eclectic. The pierced steel table top with its mix of vintage and digitally enhanced accoutrements is a twenty-first century blend of old and new and is surprisingly inviting.

Elaine Wilson's rich, mixed-media collages are the result of carefully built up layers of material fixed with layers of resin. Like several of her fellow exhibitors, Elaine uses the lace maker's trademarks, attention to detail and a careful, repetitive way of working. Her collages also express another fundamental aspect of lace, its ability to both obscure and reveal what lies beneath.

Susie Needham's photograms also pay homage to the skill, patience and sensitivity of Honiton lace makers; her evocative images show the influence of the natural world on lace makers' patterns and, somehow, the static, one-dimensional representation of collars and a doll's dress highlight the industrious rhythm of the maker's hands.

There are too many exhibitors and exhibits to mention them all but we hope that our exhibition visitors enjoy this journey into lace, contemporary, conceptual and traditional, and that all visitors have found their way to our Member's Showcase room where Caroline Biggins, Devon Guild member, lace maker and teacher is showing her traditionally based Honiton lace. Caroline gives some facts and figures in her statement and tells us that her exquisite piece of lace *The Elements* comprises 1,120 hours of work.



Finally, and frivolously, the sample of lace (left) is the one that The Big Bopper³ sang about (Chantilly) and, given that lace was once worn by men just as much as women, let's see what a contemporary lace look for men (right) might consist of.



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³ Chantilly Lace by Jiles Perry Richardson – US singer-songwriter (1930-59). The song was also covered by Jerry Lee Lewis