

Origins and History of Lacemaking

Although there is no definite date that can be given for the 'invention' of lace, it is most likely that lace arose in the early sixteenth century. Fine nets and open woven fabrics had a lace-like effect and are known to have existed for centuries.



Bobbin lace evolved from braids and trimmings worked in colourful silks and silver-gilt threads and was used as surface decorations for both dress and furnishings.

Three forms of embroidery provided the origins of needlelace:

1. Little loops and picots decorating the collar and cuff edges of shirts and smocks
2. Open-work seaming, linking widths of fabric
3. Cutwork - this started as a decorative stitching worked within a small space cut out of linen. As the spaces became larger, leaving only a grid of the original thread, elaborate patterns could be worked.

Lace has evolved from other techniques, but it is impossible to say that it originated in any one place, although the city whose name was first associated with lace is Venice. Venice was an important trading centre and it was there that the first known lace pattern books were printed.

By the 1600 quality lace was being made in many centres across Europe including Flanders, Spain, France and England.

Fashion has always driven lace production. Towards the end of the sixteenth century ruffs and standing collars demanded bold needlelace. Through the early years of the 1600s these were gradually replaced by softer collars requiring many yards of narrow linen bobbin lace, as well as an increasing demand for gold and silver lace to edge gloves, shoe roses, jackets and sashes. By the middle of the seventeenth century linen lace was again worn flat. Through the eighteenth century lace became increasingly delicate, often worked in extremely fine linen threads with increasing use of mesh grounds.



The industrial revolution in Britain brought with it a profound change in lacemaking. The first machine lace was made towards the end of the eighteenth century, but it was not until 1809 wide net fabrics was produced that did not unravel when cut. Although there was a short period in the 1860's when bold laces were fashioned and could not yet be copied by machine, it became increasingly difficult for lacemakers to make a living from their work. In England most of the handmade lace industry had disappeared by 1900, although there were a number of small organisations that supported lacemakers with patterns, training and an outlet for their work.

There are a few parts of the world where hand-made lace is still produced for sale, but increasingly through the twentieth century lacemaking became a craft undertaken for pleasure.



The year 1976 saw three significant events in the British lace world: the formation of The Lace Guild, the publication of Pamela Nottingham's *The Technique of Bobbin Lace* and the first polystyrene pillow. The polystyrene pillow allowed lace students to no longer spend their first class stuffing chopped straw into a fabric bag to make a pillow and the added bonus the new pillows were much lighter and easier to carry around. Before 1976 only a handful of lace books were available so there was a real need for publications of books with clear patterns and instructions.

Bobbin lace is made by braiding and twisting lengths of threads,, which are wound on bobbins to manage them. As the lace progresses the weavings are held in place with pins set in a lace pillow.