

Bobbin lace handkerchief edging By Lucia de Moranza

Lacemaking in Europe is thought to have evolved out of two main paths in the mid to late 16th century. From the embroidery side of things, cutwork and drawn thread work emerged into needlelace, and from the passmasserie and weaving side of things, bobbin lace is thought to have emerged. Italy and Flanders both attempt to claim to be the originators of lace, but there is little evidence that it could not have been both at about the same time. Le Pompe is the classic marker of dating bobbin lace, a pattern book that was published in 1557. (Ricci p15)

I chose to do a tape lace handkerchief edging out of silk thread. There is mixed evidence for this style of tape lace being within our period. An Italian lace in the V&A dated to the second half of the 16th century shows an interior border of bobbin lace that hints towards tape lace. (Figure 1)



Figure 1 Italian bobbin lace late 16th century V&A T.297 - 1975

In Levy's book, she has an excellent photograph (Figure 2) showing the development from a thinner braid lace that's more akin to the needle lace style, along through to the wider braid associated with tape lace. The first lace is dated 1600 – 1625, the second and third are dated 1570 – 1625 and the fourth to 17th century. (Levy fig 114)

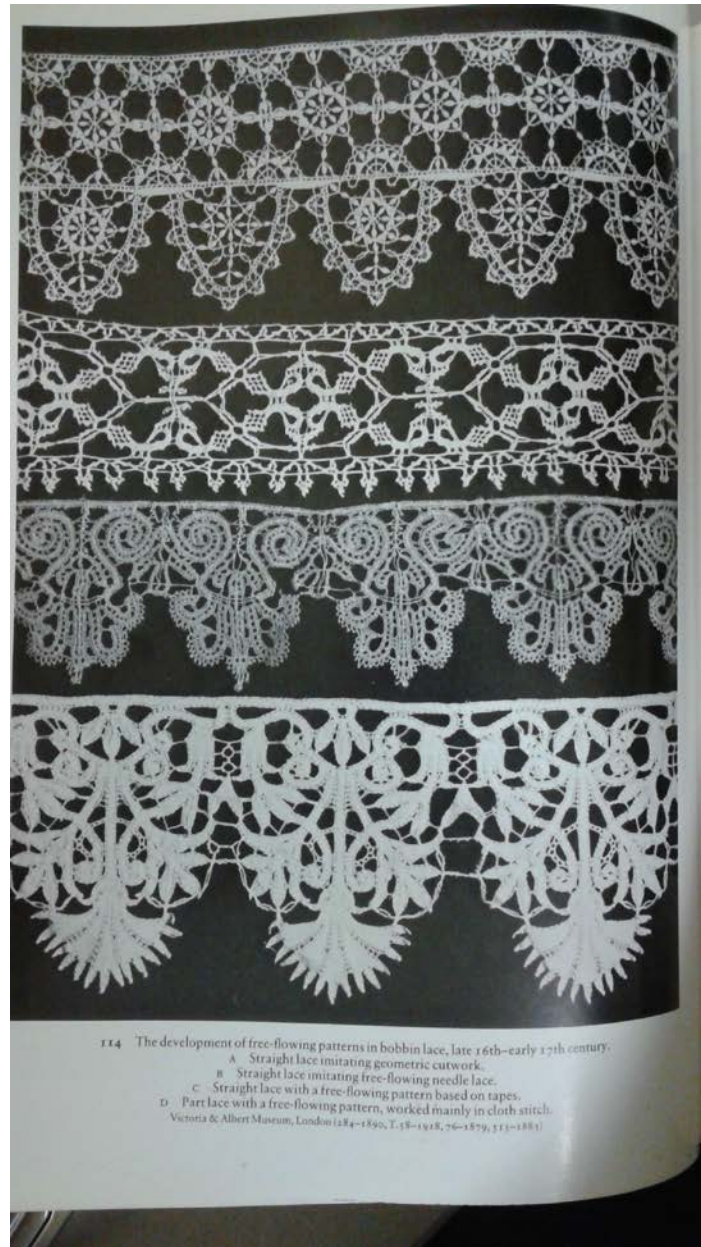


Figure 2 Changes in bobbin lace (Levy Fig 114)

There is a piece in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Figure 3) that is very similar to my chosen piece, which is dated to the 16th century, but with no further details. It seems likely that my particular pattern of tape lace sits right on the edge of SCA period, probably tipping just ever so slightly post period, but it is not unreasonable that someone, somewhere might have been working it a shade before 1600.



Figure 3 Flemish or Italian Bobbin lace 16th century The Met 09.68.74

I chose to do a pattern that comes from a 1910 German pattern book, *Die Kloeppelspitzen* #47. As the pattern is square, I decided to work it on my cookie pillow. It is a modern ethafoam pillow, 16" in diameter covered in a dark blue probably cotton fabric. It is light, easy to transport (important in a larger project such as this) and you can approach it from any angle. While I prefer working on my bolster pillow, the nature of the twisting tape and working a square motif meant that the cookie pillow was the better choice. The pillows in period appear to be not so far off a modern cookie pillow, although most appear to be rectangular rather than circular. They would have been stuffed very firmly with sawdust or dried grasses.

I originally started with the pattern as presented on the lynx lace site, scaled to what seemed like a reasonable size for the piece I wanted. (Figure 4) I printed out the pattern, pieced it together to form a full square and glued it to a piece of card. Printer paper is thin enough that

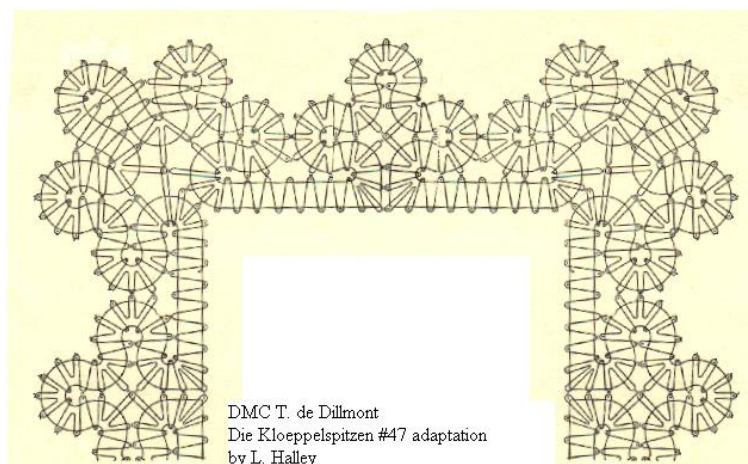


Figure 4 Original pattern from lynx lace

pins have a tendency to rip through it, and not hold the pattern well, so I prefer to back it with cardstock or thin cardboard. In this case, I find that old file folders are a nice thickness. Patterns have the holes pre-pricked, both to save your fingertips and to help ensure accuracy of pin placement even when you can't see the holes for having thread in the way.

The directions on that site noted that I would need twelve bobbins, and I wound them in pairs with silk thread. (Guttermann S303 spun silk thread, 27 wraps / cm) I decided on silk as it was common material for lace in period, and I knew this thread to be lovely to work with. It is also easily accessible and quite reasonably priced, which are bonuses. The bobbins I've used on this piece are homemade bobbins that consist of a thin wooden dowel that has had square wooden beads strung on it and glued in place. Period bobbins would have been whittled or turned, there is some speculation that they might have used small leg bones (such as from a chicken or other bird). My homemade bobbins hold quite a lot of thread (important for a larger piece) and I had all twelve available and not already in use when I was starting this piece.

After hanging the bobbins and working a short section of tape, I decided that I hated it. It was too thin, the tape didn't have any substance to it, and it was just bad. (Figure 5) Unpick that work. Take two was a slightly different working of the tape (extra twists in my cloth stitch), and it looked worse. (No photographic evidence of that hot mess.) I was faced with the choice of adding more bobbins to fill out the tape, or reworking the pricking. I had used all of that style of bobbins that I had (and can't seem to find any more of those beads every time I check), so adding more bobbins would have been of a different style and weight and that didn't appeal at all. It is more challenging to keep good tension with bobbins of different weights, and messes with the rhythm of lacemaking. Reworking the pattern came up as the best option.

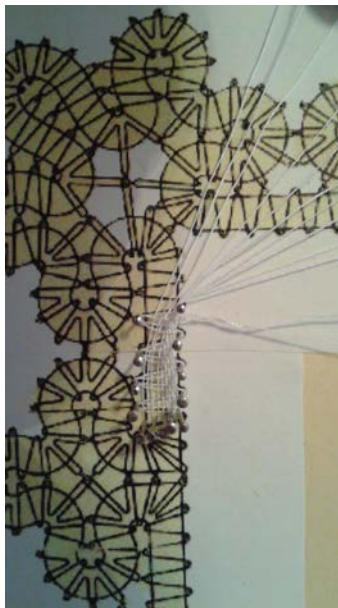


Figure 5 Sad tape

I compressed the pattern down a bit and decided to add repeats on each side, such that it wasn't unreasonably too small for a hankie edging. A photoshop guru friend adjusted the pattern and made it square for me. I then printed it out and glued it to another card and pre-pricked all the holes, again. (Figure 6)

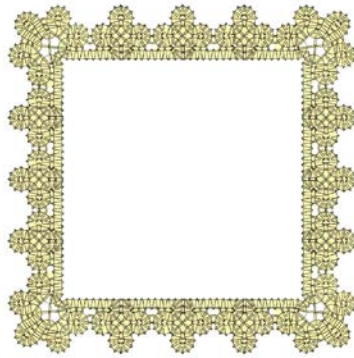


Figure 6 Lace pricking, take two.

Tape lace is, at its core, a never ending serpent of cloth stitch, periodically broken up by sewings. To translate that into normal language, the bobbins are used to weave the tape (cloth stitch: two pairs of bobbins and cross, twist, cross) along the template provided by the pricking, and anywhere the tape touches, you connect the tape together, using a technique called a sewing. It basically makes a little loop through the loop that you put down previously, such that the whole thing doesn't fall apart at the end. A crochet hook is used to pull one of the threads of the worker pair up through the loop, and then you feed the other bobbin of the pair through that loop and pull tight, replacing the original pin.

At this point, it was a slog of work, not complicated anymore, but just a lot of it. By the end, it took me about two hours to work each cloverleaf repeat, and each of those held about eighty pins. The next 40 hours or so looked like variations on Figure 7.

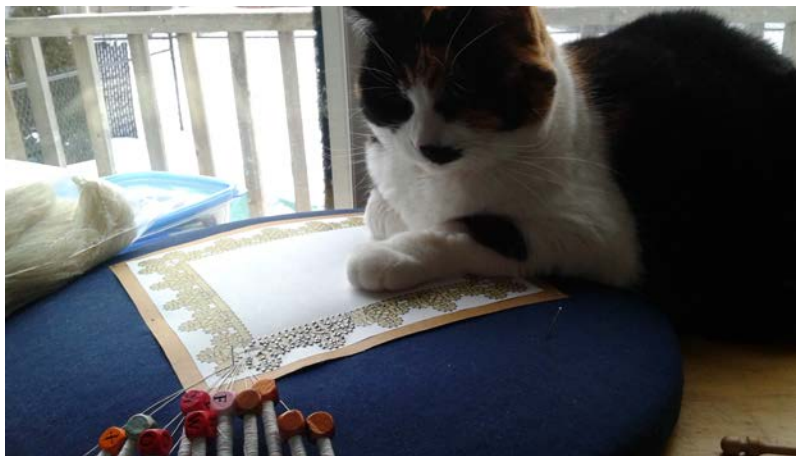


Figure 7 Lace in progress with 'helper'

Coming back around to the end, connects me back to the start of the piece. At that point one does sewings into the original loops where the bobbins were hung, ties a little knot and then cuts off the bobbins. (Holding of breath and prayers optional, but common accompaniments) The threads are then woven in, as carefully as one might manage. Common wisdom is to leave the lace on the pillow for a day or so just to have it all settle into place, and then you slowly and tediously remove the over 1000 pins that are holding your lace to the pillow. I sewed the edging (using the same thread it was made with) to a cotton/silk blend fabric centre.

This piece, all in all, probably tallied up to about 50 hours of work, about a thousand pins and about a hundred yards of silk thread. It was my second tape lace piece, the first being a small linen Christmas ornament, and by far the largest bobbin lace piece I have done to date. Once I got the hang of the sewings, I really enjoyed working on this. The movements became very rhythmic and meditative, very much entering into the realm of muscle memory rather than needing to be thought about for every cross and twist. This piece is my Trillium exchange piece this year, and I hope my exchange partner likes it half as much as I enjoyed working on it.

Bibliography

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Webpages:

The Lace Guild: <http://www.laceguild.org/craft/history.html>
Lynx Lace: <http://lynxlace.com/>