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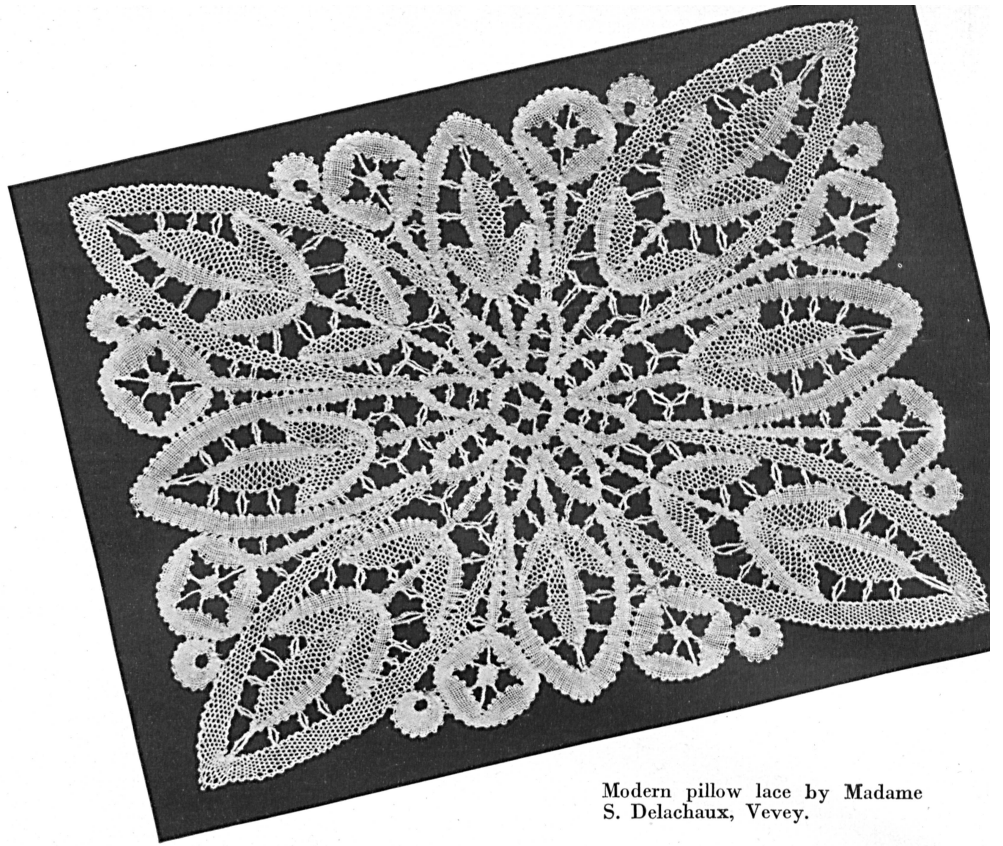
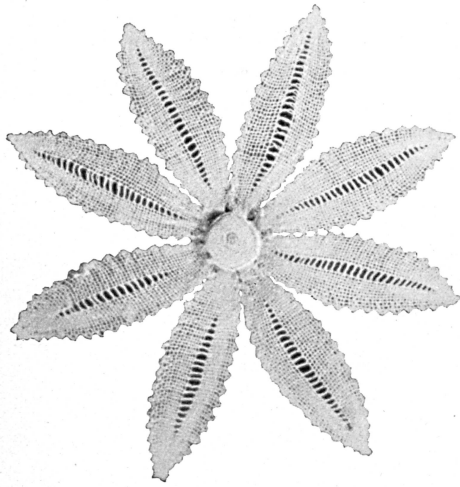
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# THE ANCIENT CRAFT OF PILLOW LACE MAKING

*Although pillow lace is no longer exported by the Swiss textile industry and the craft is unfortunately dying out, it is still a most fascinating subject of study. The few specimens reproduced in the following pages will show that the old Swiss art of pillow lace making fully exemplifies the good taste for which the national textile industry has won world recognition. To-day, the appreciation formerly shown for the products of this craft has been transferred to machine-made laces and embroideries, magnificent examples of which are also illustrated here.*





Modern pillow lace by Madame S. Delachaux, Vevey.

As early as the XVIIIth century, two specific textile crafts sprang up in Switzerland: the production of printed cloth and the art of pillow lace making. The first consisted in the dyeing of fabrics by means of delicately carved *printing blocks*, which were first smeared with pigment and then applied to the material. The second, and even more delicate speciality, was the weaving of gossamer threads, an art rather than a craft. These two very diverse crafts sprang from quite different psychological causes.

The production of printed fabrics in Switzerland arose from the need to compete, on a commercial plane, with the influx into Europe of flowered materials imported from India. Switzerland already had to hand a firm foundation on which to build up this new craft: her national industry of wood carving, whence she could draw skilled craftsmen able to create the necessary *printing blocks*. No economic considerations, however, entered into the birth and rise of the craft of pillow lace making. The story as it is told in the region of Gruyère and in the Canton of Neuchatel — the chief centres of the craft — is a most romantic one.

Early in the XVIIIth century, Colbert — Louis XIV's great statesman — adopted the policy of improving and perfecting French national arts and crafts. To this end he imported skilled labour from other countries. From Venice came looking-glass and and mirror makers, and women skilled in the making of laces. So history says! But Swiss popular tradition tells another tale. It is said that, because they did not show sufficient alacrity in obeying the summons to France, a few, particularly skilful, Venetian lace-makers were kidnapped by Colbert's men, pillow and bobbins and all. Some of these girls succeeded in escaping from their captors on the way; others fell ill and had to interrupt their journey to obtain medical care. Perhaps this is only a legend, who can tell? One thing is certain, however. Many of Colbert's Venetian lace-makers never reached France and, strangely enough, at about this same period, pillow lace making took root in Switzerland

on the farther side of the Sanetch Pass which links the Canton of Valais to the Gruyère region. On the other hand, the shape of the traditional Gruyère lace pillow is identical to that found on the Italian Riviera; it has, in the centre, a small roller which rotates and winds up the lace as the length grows. These facts seem to show that there is at least some foundation of truth in the stories still told to-day in remote Swiss chalets — stories of beautiful, persecuted young girls who found refuge in high mountain hamlets and, in their gratitude, taught their kindly, peasant hosts their dainty art.

The origin of the homecraft in Neuchatel, and especially in the region of the Jura Mountains close to the French frontier, is attributed to another historical story of exile. The making of lace or *dédliette*, as it is called in Neuchatel dialect, was the gracious gift brought by French refugees fleeing the religious persecution which followed the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. The wives and sisters of these French Protestants also introduced the use of the square, flat pillow called the *carreau*, in the centre of which are three interchangeable divisions or very small bars called *bolets*, comparable to the weaver's guide bar. In very poor families, instead of the usual lace pillow or frame, the women used peat obtained from one of the Jura valleys and carefully wrapped in a piece of cloth. The peat proved an excellent substitute for the bran usually employed as a stuffing, and the pins could just as easily be pricked into this more modest type of pillow.

For well over a century the laces produced in Neuchatel and the Gruyère were entirely different one from the other. Neuchatel lace was of the *blonde* variety, as it was termed locally, whereas Gruyère lace, specially designed to ornament the coifs worn by the women of the region was black. Towards the middle of the XVIIIth century 2793 lace-makers and 182 flax spinners were regularly employed in the making of « blonde » lace alone. In the daytime, the women would work before the window in their own homes; in the evening, they gathered together in groups and worked by the light



of an oil-lamp. In the Canton of Neuchatel watchmakers had, by that time, found a means to improve the very poor lighting power of these lamps; globes filled with blue tinted water were placed between the wick and the object on which light should be concentrated, the globes acting as a sort of magnifying glass. The lace-makers benefited by this ingenious device and were able to work at their delicate weaving though the long winter evenings. Some of these old globes are still to be seen in local museums.

Certain types of very fine lace had to be made in cellars where, owing to the dampness of the ambient air, the thread was less likely to break. A minute box-wood bobbin does not weigh very much but, it must be remembered, some of the fichus fashionable in the XVIIIth century required to be made with as many as eight hundred, or even one thousand bobbins. In order to clear the surface on which she was actually working, the lace-maker would gather the unused bobbins in small clumps, tied with a ribbon and thrown towards the back of the work. The combined weight of the bobbins was relatively heavy and liable to break the threads. Now, a single broken thread might delay the making of a piece of lace for several days so, in order to render the threads more resistant, lace-makers preferred to sacrifice their health and to live for days on end in sunless cellars.

The clicking of lace bobbins has a certain fascination and it may be this which, in course of time, caused many watchmakers to abandon their minute files and pliers and to adopt the craft at which their womenfolk were so successful. The craft still remained under the guidance of the women, however, and with fairly good results. The men specialized in the making of net which required great skill and patience; then, when a design had to be woven into the piece, the women took their place. The XVIIIth century lace-makers of Neuchatel sometimes had occasion to teach very famous pupils. Jean-Jacques Rousseau consented to take lessons in this gentle craft from Mademoiselle d'Yvernois. He learnt to weave quite pretty braids in *point de toile* (cloth point). When his teacher married, Rousseau presented her with a braid he had woven with his own hands. « Here it is, Mademoiselle, » he wrote, « here is the fine gift you desired. You must know that, to wear a braid woven by the hand which has set forth the duties of a mother is to accept the obligation of fulfilling those duties. » This historical relic is a fine, two-coloured braid, very finely woven, and it testifies to the really touching willingness of Mademoiselle d'Yvernois' famous

pupil. Another braid woven by Rousseau was presented to the Crown Prince of Prussia in 1819.

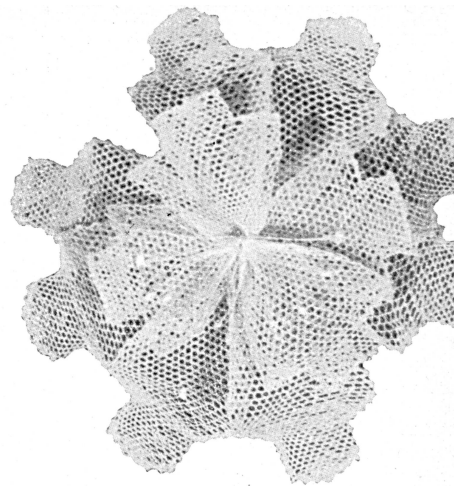
The village of Rougemont in the region known as the « Pays d'Enhaut » — a district lying to the North-West of the Rhone Valley in which the Latin and

Germanic races of Switzerland are closely intermingled — specialized in the making of a wide-netted, black silk lace. The fashion crossed the Sanetsch Pass and the Rhone Valley and was adopted by the women of Savièze, a picturesque hamlet in the Canton of Valais, to adorn their coifs. For many years, lace from the « Pays d'Enhaut » was used as a medium of barter in neighbouring districts. A Lace Fair was held every year at Gsteig. The women of the « Pays d'Enhaut » district would walk many weary miles to the Fair, through the thickest snow, bearing their dainty treasures carefully wrapped around their body, while the women of the Valais crossed the mountain barrier separating the two districts, carrying on their back foodstuffs to be given in exchange. To-day, the « Pays d'Enhaut » is still one of the richest sources of Swiss folklore and traditions and it is here that C. F. Ramuz, Western Switzerland's greatest modern writer, has situated the story of his famous novel, « La Séparation des Races ».

In the XIXth century, many factors arose to prevent a further development of this homecraft: sumptuary laws, a gradual substitution of « modern fashions » for the old, regional costumes, a general abandon of coifs, the development of machinery, an ever-growing disproportion between cost prices and the buying power of the people.

These years marked a turning point in the history of the charming craft. The technique of pillow lace making could not be transformed, nor could new *stitches* be invented; the latter was indeed unnecessary, as the old, classic « points » could meet every requirement. The designs could, however, be modified and renewed. A new field of application — interior decoration — was found for lace which, for centuries, had been used in coifs and jabots as a feminine adornment. And so, the modern lace industry was born.

M. LOEFFLER-DELACHAUX.



Pillow lace by Madame S. Delachaux, Vevey.

