

Feminine traces, of thread and transparencies

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*....to twist and ply threads as subtle
as lovely words,
and make with them roses,
labyrinths, chains,
clouds of lace and gauze,
webs of tulle to hitch stars...*

-Gregorio Martínez Sierra, 1907

Wherever there are family memories and mementos, old trunks are never far away. To open them reveals bits of thread, sewing and patterns, often yellowed by the passage of time: crochet, knits, needle lace, embroidery, openwork, patterns drawn and written by hand. This is the case of the family textile collection that belonged to Soledad A. and her mother Rosa P. , which have been rediscovered and honored anew by the sunlight in the cyanotypes of Justine Graham.

The feminine tradition of embroidery and lacemaking arrived in the Americas with the European conquerors, and as such we must seek its roots and history on the other side of the Atlantic.

Lace, an open, decorative textile, originated in sixteenth century Europe simultaneously through two different techniques: needle lace and bobbin lace. Needle lace is crafted with just one thread and one needle, while bobbin lace involves intertwining many threads wound on wooden bobbins. Lace were made first with linen, then with silk and metallic fibers and finally, in the nineteenth century, with cotton. Both types of lace were named for the geographic locations in which they were produced, the most renowned of which include Brussels, Chantilly, and Crete. The finest laces involved the talents and abilities of three specialists: the artist who created the designs on paper; the person who transferred the designs to patterns; and the lacemaker who worked the threads directly over the patterns.

This delicate textile has evolved over the centuries in response to the many variations in European fashion. As a decorative element it has been present in the wardrobes of men, women and children. During the sixteenth century in Europe, lace could be found at the neckline and on sleeves, while in the seventeenth century it was showcased in the oversized neck ruffs used by both men and women. In eighteenth century portraiture, lace appears at the necks and sleeves of gentlemen's shirts, and on the necklines, sleeves, and occasionally even the skirts of ladies in the royal courts.

Europeans' love of handmade lace lasted until the end of the eighteenth century. The decline of the craft began around the time of the French Revolution and was accelerated by the 1809 invention of a machine that could create the tulle base, saving tedious manual labor. By the mid 1800s, handmade and machine-made laces were often combined: for example, a bobbin lace might be applied atop a machine-made piece of tulle. The introduction of machine-made lace also increased the number of designs available.

When a great shift in fashion occurred at the end of the eighteenth century, bringing with it a simplification of silhouettes and suits, the more stylized dresses were complemented by fine shawls and fichus made of lace. For men, this period marked a more sober style stripped of adornments, including lace. During the nineteenth century, lace remained present in women's fashions, whether in the form of accessories such as collars, handkerchiefs, mantillas, and fans, or decorating crinoline skirts. Even toward the end of the century lace was still found at the neckline and on the sleeves of ball gowns.

Around 1900, lace became fashionable, and the century began with a profusion of black and white laces -sometimes combined- that covered the entire body, coexisting with light gauzes and tulles. During this period, lace was also quite commonly used for parasols and fans, to say nothing of the elaborate bridal and baptismal gowns that would be passed down from generation to generation, featuring finely crafted lace accompanied by delicate embroidery.

The creative space

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the public sphere was a primarily male space, and women were relegated to the realm of the private. In the traditional society of the day, particularly in elite families, it was believed that women ought to remain cloaked in privacy, and devote themselves to being good mothers, wives and housekeepers. Their education included certain domestic occupations; essential among them was needlework. It was in the context of the everyday that women practiced and refined their embroidery skills, sewing, and traditional knitting, done with knitting needles. Additionally, they created lace with crochet, bobbins, tatting, and needles.

Knowledge of these crafts was passed down from mother to daughter, from grandmother to granddaughter, but learning also occurred in more formal educational contexts. At the schoolhouse, the schoolmistress would teach different manual crafts and techniques at the same time as the prayers that all girls were expected to learn.

The industrialization of the textile industry slowly drew this domestic labor out of the home. By the late nineteenth century, women began to abandon their total dedication to such domestic occupations as spinning, knitting and embroidery. As the new century wore on, clothing began to be sold ready-made, and homemade clothing became a senseless luxury due to the time required for its elaboration. Women suddenly became consumers and began to purchase what they had previously made at home with their own expert hands.

Despite this process, there are still women who value and care for the centuries-old legacy of techniques for creating knits and embroideries, whether working in groups or inside their own homes. Lace, whether the result of a woman's silent and meticulous labor or the ingenious operation of a machine, will always be admired for its beauty and fragile materiality, as an element worthy of preservation and appreciation.

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