

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Textile Society of America Symposium
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

9-2012

A New Interpretation of Certain Bobbin Lace Patterns in Le Pompe, 1559

Laurie Waters

LaceNews.net, lswaters619@comcast.net

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>

Waters, Laurie, "A New Interpretation of Certain Bobbin Lace Patterns in Le Pompe, 1559" (2012). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 754.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/754>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

A New Interpretation of Certain Bobbin Lace Patterns in Le Pompe, 1559

Laurie Waters

lswaters619@comcast.net

Early Bobbin Lace Pattern Books

Given the scarcity of dated bobbin lace samples of the mid 16th century, researchers rely heavily on early pattern books of the 16th and 17th century to chart the development of the art. The earliest pattern book mentioning bobbin lace is the “Nüw Modelbuch, Allerley Gattungen Däntelschnür” by an author known only as “R. M”. It was printed in 1561 by Christopher Froschower in Zurich¹. Unusual for a work of this date, it contains a statement that the author has been teaching lacemaking in Zurich for twelve years, and that the craft was brought from Venice by merchants twenty-five years earlier in 1536. This is the earliest written statement we have by a practitioner of the art. One of the patterns in the Nüw Modelbuch is shown in Figure 1a, and is a type of lace is often associated with insertions meant to join two pieces of cloth together. The pattern book indicates that the top motif is called the ‘Rose’, and further states that thirty-two bobbins are needed to work the pattern.

The title page of the Nüw Modelbuch, shown in figure 1b, is the earliest representation of a bobbin lacemaker known. The bobbins hang off the pillow, and the lacemakers appear to be working with an ‘underhand’ position, while securing the work with pins with the right hand. The bobbins themselves hang off the front of the pillow. This technique survives today and is referred to as ‘working in the air’, and is especially useful for executing plaited laces. It can be contrasted with developments in Flanders where an overhand position is used, and the bobbins are laid flat on the pillow and manipulated with the fingers. This facilitates the turning of corners in the pattern.

The next work to mention bobbin lace is “Le Pomp, Opera Nova, nella quale si ritrovano varie & dinerse sorti di mostre, per poter far Cordelle ouero Bindelle, d’oro, di Seta, di Filo, ouero di altra cosa ...” printed by Giovanni-Battista and Marchio Sessa for Matio Pagano, Venice. Volume 1 contained thirty plates, first appearing in 1557, and reprinted in 1558 and 1559. Volume 2 also contained 30 plates, first appearing in 1560, and reprinted in 1562². The patterns are similar to the 4-thread plaited designs of the Nüw Modelbuch, but now seem more appropriate to a tape-lace technique. Unfortunately there are no explicit working instructions in Le Pomp, and interpretation of the patterns is left to the lacemaker. The only suggestions are in the title, where it is stated the laces can be worked in gold (oro), silk (seta), and

¹ A recent reprint and analysis of this work was done by Claire Burkhard, “*Fascinating bobbin lace, Patterns from the first book of bobbin lace to be printed (1561) in the German language with instruction for making and using them*”, Paul Haupt,

² Reprints of this work include “*Venetianische Musterblätter aus dem 16. Jahrhundert für Passementerie-Arbeiten und verwandte Techniken*“, F. Paterno’s Nachf., Wien, 1879 – volume 2 only.

Santina M. Levey and Patricia C. Payne, “*Le Pompe, 1559, Patterns for Venetian Bobbin Lace*“, Ruth Bean, Bedford England, 1983 – complete volume 1 and 9 plates from volume 2.

“*Le Pompe, Ein venetianisches Musterbuch von 1562*“, Editha Fischer Verlag, 1993 – volume 2 only.

An online version is available at <http://visualiseur.bnf.fr/CadresFenetre?O=IFN-8622058>.

thread (filo). Other terms in the title such as ‘Cordelle’ and ‘Bindelle’ are unknown, but probably refer to a fine cord used in earlier passementaire techniques.



*Figure 1a, left. Page showing the ‘Rose’ pattern at the top from the Nüw Modelbuch.
Figure 1b, right. Plate from the Nüw Modelbuch showing a bobbin lacemaker.*

An example plate from Le Pompe is shown in Figure 2a, and are very similar to those in the Nüw Modelbuch. The patterns are also expanded into more elaborate tapes in Figure 2b, but with largely the same edge treatment.

Little was published specifically for bobbinlace after these two works until the appearance of Isabetta Catanea Parasole’s “Speccio delle virtuose donne”, published in Rome in 1595. In the interim period patterns were dominated by reticella needlelace, which developed out of cutwork embroidery. Cesare Vecellio in his “Corona della nobili et virtuose donne” published in 1591 claims that these patterns could be interpreted in bobbinlace, but the adaptation would be difficult using modern techniques. Lacemaking centers like Genoa developed more faithful adaptations of these patterns in plaited bobbinlace in the late 16th and early 17th centuries³.

Interpretations of the Early Patterns

In making bobbinlace, the worker uses pairs of threads attached to small spindles, one pair in each hand. The basic movements consist of lifting one thread over the adjacent one, left over right (a ‘cross’) or right over left (a ‘twist’). A four-thread plait is extensively used in early plaited bobbinlaces associated

³ An excellent historical account is contained in Santina M. Levey, “Lace, A History”, the Victoria & Albert Museum in association with W. S. Maney & Son Ltd., 1983.

with Venice. It is a simple repetition made with four threads; cross the center pair, then twist both the right and left hand pairs simultaneously. There are many variations on how to handle intersections of two or more pairs. Areas of solid cloth are made by using several pairs of bobbins, called ‘passives’ (the warp), and one weaver pair (the weft). In the ‘closed’ working method the weavers are threaded through the passives by working the weaver pair and the adjacent passive pair together; crossing the center two threads, twisting the two side pairs, and crossing the center two threads. The first passive pair is dropped, and the weavers repeat this pattern with the next passive pair. Many edge treatments are possible. The weavers can simply twist several times, and reverse direction to go back through the passives with the same pattern. A pin is used to secure the twisted weavers in place, often forming a little loop, or picot at the edge of the cloth. Another edge treatment which is clearly seen at the end of the 16th century involves using a separate pair of edge bobbins. In a common variation, the weaver pair twists several times, exchanges place with the extra pair, and twists again before working back through the passives.

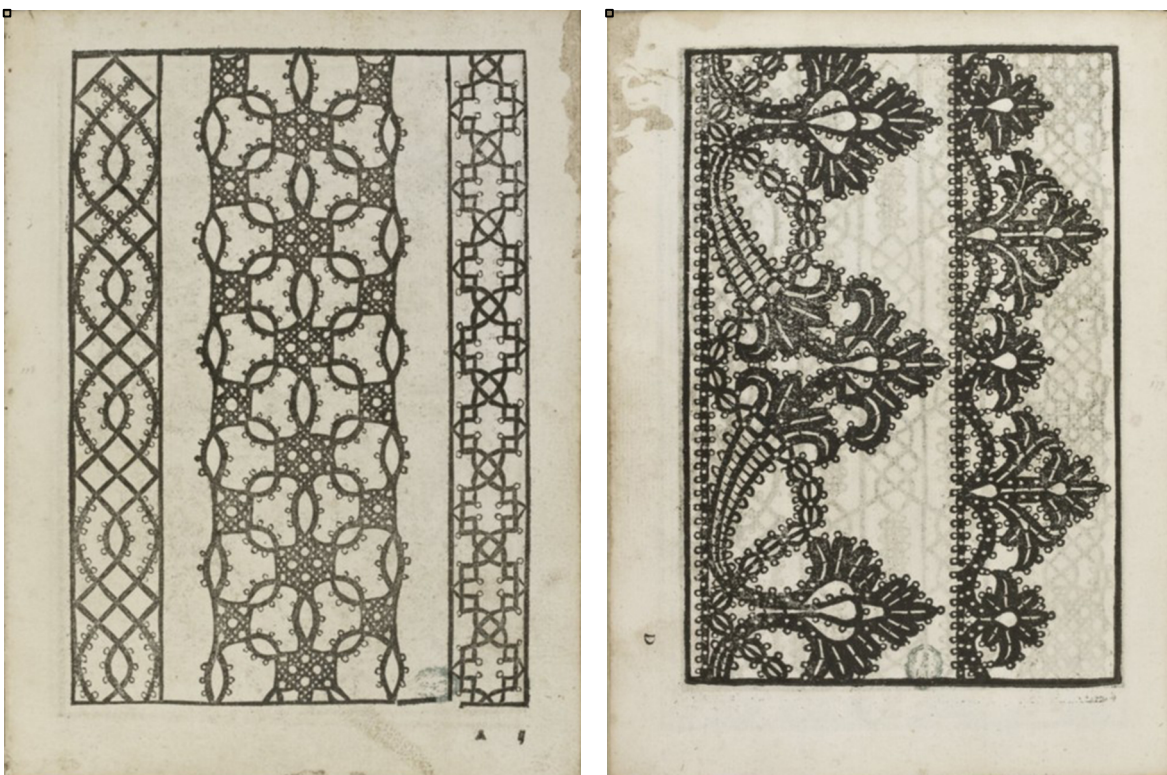


Figure 2a, left. The second pattern page in the first volume of Le Pompe.

Figure 2b, right. The last pattern in the second volume of Le Pompe.

In 1906 the Belgian researcher Mme. Lucie Paulis published a technical analysis of the patterns in *Le Pompe*⁴. She attempted a duplicate the left-hand pattern of figure 2b (Figure 3). In this piece one can see the 4-thread plait forming the oval chain, and the weaver as it traverses back and forth through the passives. Picots on the tape sections are formed by twisting the weavers several times before coming back through the passive pairs. It is unclear how they were formed on the plaited parts. In the original pattern there are also a number of places where one ‘picot’ touches another, and Paulis assumes that this

⁴ Paulis, L., “*Le Pompe*” *A Study of the Technique of Sixteenth Century Bobbin Laces*”, *Bulletin of the Needle and Bobbin Club*, New York, vol VI no 1, 1922 pp. 2-13.

cannot be done without drawing at least one thread of the first picot through the second, and passing the bobbin through the loop formed in an operation known as ‘sewing’. This technique has been used in her example. Parts of the design which widen were assumed to be managed by cutting off passive threads when not needed, and adding new passive pairs when more are called for. This is a technique routinely used in modern bobbinlaces. Holes in the tape are formed by occasional switching weaver and passive pairs, and the lattice-like structure in the scalloped pieces below the looped chains are done by twisting the weaver pair several times as it traverses the cloth.

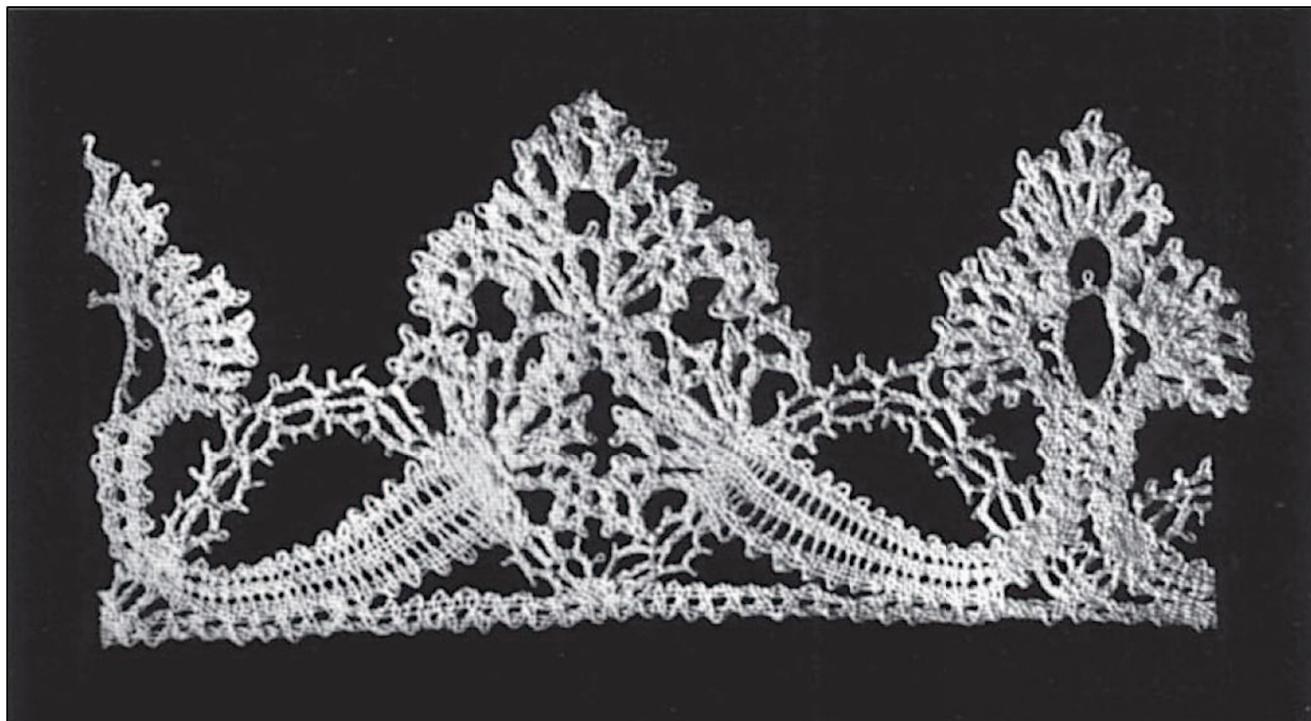


Figure 3. The Paulis reconstruction of a complex Le Pompe pattern.

A second attempt at interpreting this same pattern with current techniques was done by Santa Levey and Patricia Payne in their work, “Le Pompe, 1559” cited in footnote 2. Here an attempt has been made to negotiate pointed corners and sharp curves in a more complex manner than in the Paulis example. Both these reproductions are acceptable interpretations of the Le Pompe patterns, but without reference to original material, much is guesswork.

An excellent survey of possible lace predecessors in painting was done by Rosemary Shepard⁵. Unfortunately very few positively identified pieces have survived from the time of Le Pompe. The fashion for use of precious metals in laces of this period also lessens the survival rate. We are left with little direct evidence of how early lacemakers addressed the rather complex technical questions involved in making the curved forms of Figure 2b. Yet a few candidates do survive, such as Figure 4 from the Victoria and Albert Museum. In contrast to the Paulis work, it has a very solid appearance, and involves 4-thread plaited picots. The clothwork is done with weavers and passives. Picots and larger loops are done with both twisted weavers and 4-thread plaits.



⁵ Rosemary Shepherd, “An Early Lace Workbook; Bobbin Lace Techniques before the Baroque”, Lace Press, Australia, 2009, Part 2.



Figure 4. Bobbinlace border, Venice, 1580-1600, 3" in height. © Victoria and Albert Museum.

Another interesting example is shown in Figure 5, again from the V&A. Rather than the weaver-passive technique, this lace is entirely done in plaiting. The wider tape portions have multiple strand plaits, while those along the top consist of 4-thread plaits aligned side by side, and joined by weaving periodically. The picots are all 4-thread plaits. At this early period experimentation in how to interpret ambitious patterns such as those found in Le Pompe is expected, and these two V&A examples may represent boundaries between a plaited and a woven tradition.



Figure 5. Border, second half of the 16th century. © Victoria and Albert Museum.

Analysis of a Newly Discovered Lace

Figure 6 shows a section of a newly discovered lace, purchased from a London dealer. No information is available on its history. It is an exact duplicate of the Le Pompe example on the left of Figure 3b, the same pattern replicated by Paulis. The size of the portion shown is 5 inches by 2.5 inches, and the height corresponds very well with the size of the woodcut pattern in the original publication of 1560. The height is also not too different from the piece shown in Figure 4. The entire length is 78 inches, and there is one join visible at the left end of Figure 6. It is cut at both ends, indicating an even longer original length. The thread is linen, spun 2 ply S, single Z. The threads measure a little more than .1mm in diameter.



Figure 6, left. A section of the newly discovered lace. Author's collection.

Figure 7, right. A closeup of the bottom edge of the border. Picots are 'sewn' together within the red circle.

The fine thread and close weaving in this piece give it a very dense yet light appearance, almost as if it were cut from cloth. But close-up examination reveals some interesting bobbinlace techniques, some known, some not seen in modern work. The capability of the lacemaker to handle the complex form is both extraordinary, and at the same time experimental. Figure 7 shows illustrates several features in a closeup of the bottom edge. The 4-thread plaited picots can clearly be seen along the edges. The two picots in the red circle are joined by the 'sewing' technique described above, so in this Paulis is correct in her assumptions. The clothwork is very tightly done, not at all like the passive/weaver techniques used in the Paulis example. To form the lattice structure, pairs of threads pass from the upper to the lower tape, and join with pairs coming from the lower to the upper tape, forming a 4-thread crossed structure.

Figure 8 shows another closeup of the back side of the piece, at one of the highest points. The lacemaker seems to have tried various techniques to delete and add threads in order to negotiate curves, and this is not always consistent along the whole piece. Here bundles of threads are gathered together when not needed, and passed to another section where more are called for. Late 17th and 18th century Flemish laces often pass threads behind motifs when adding separate mesh grounds to a lace, however the passing within a motif itself is encountered very rarely. In this piece it has a rather experimental feel, as if the worker is trying to decide the best way to get around a complex curve. In modern work lacemakers simply cut off extra threads when not needed, and add new passive pairs when more are called for.



Figure 8. Closeup of the backside of one of the highest points, showing the gathering of unneeded threads and passing them to areas where they are needed.

One of the most interesting things about this lace is the actual weaving of the solid cloth lines, which are quite elegantly done. The edges of the tapes are completely smooth, which is very unusual, and allows no place to put a pin into the pattern to secure the stitches. Pin placement was likely done at the picot sites. In a straight tape section, the weaver pair works through the passives, make one twist, and the lower thread returns across the passives accompanied by a thread at the edge left over from the previous set of weavers. The second weaver thread becomes the new edge thread (Figure 9). Picots are formed

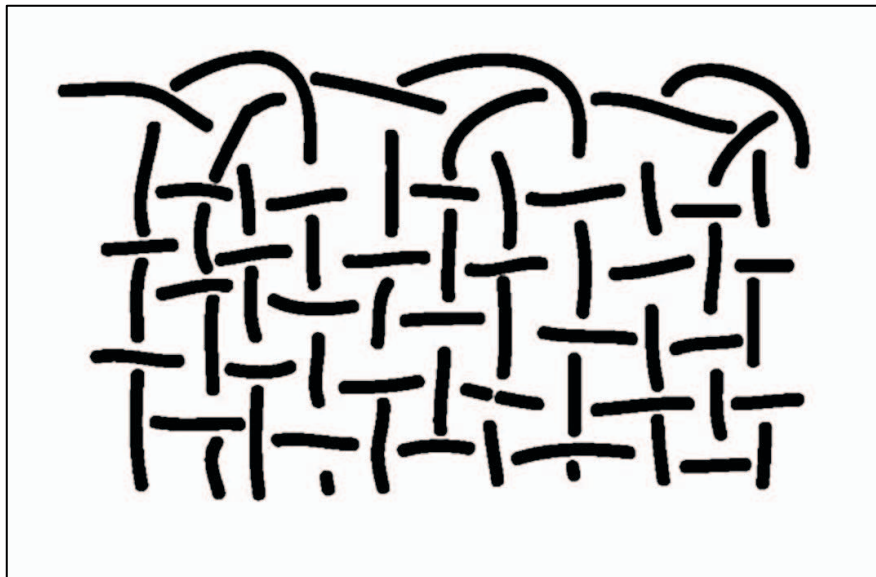


Figure 9. A diagram of the straight edge of a tape showing the pattern of the weavers (verticle) passing through the passives (horizontal).

by the weavers and the first set of passive threads worked through the leftover edge thread. The actual technique is not easy to discern since so many parts of this lace deal with accommodating curves, picots, and holes. Straight edges in complex bobbinlace weavings like this are very unusual. It is more common to see the weavers twisted together and immediately return across the passives, or exchange places with a supplementary edge pair, which then does the return. This creates an open edge to motifs, which is evident in Flemish and Italian bobbinlaces by the end of the 16th century. Although it is possible that bobbinlaces like this example could have been made on the pillow in figure 1b, the reorientation of the work needed to negotiate curves might point the way toward a pillow and overhand working method more suited to turning the work.

Conclusion

Without a reliable scientific analysis such as carbon dating, the date of this piece will remain uncertain. However several factors argue in favor of an early origin. The 4-thread plaited picots, the unusual cloth weaving technique, and the rather experimental handling of excess threads argue for an early date. The size of the piece closely matches the original pattern. Although some designs were reprinted in other works, *Le Pompe* was not in print very long. Printings of the first volume are known for 1557, 1558 and 1559, and the second in 1560 and 1562. There is also no pictorial evidence that this style was popular for over an extended period, so it is unlikely it would have been duplicated later for commercial reasons. The work is also a very finely worked interpretation of a difficult pattern, unlikely to be a casual reproduction of a later date.

Two factors might point to a later date. The thread used in the new piece is quite fine, although few pieces of this period survive for comparison. Laces used for insertions and borders of household linens, like those seen in Figure 1a, tend to be much heavier. And the piece is in very good condition, considering both the long length, and lack of damage. This kind of survival is unusual. Dating is a general problem for laces of the 16th and 17th century, especially with needlelaces where 19th century copies are extremely well done. There is a great need for scientific dating surveys of early collections to attempt to solve this problem.