

Eighteenth Century Bobbin Lace Band

At the Museum at FIT

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Figure 1

Lace Band

Possibly Flemish, C. Eighteenth Century

Linen Bobbin Lace

Width: approximately 9cm; Length: approximately 2-3 m

Museum at FIT, New York (2004.62.32)

Gift of Jo A. Bidner, 2004



Figure 2

Detail of primary motif

Design and Aesthetics-Construction

This lace band is an example of eighteenth-century bobbin lace. Bobbin lace-making developed in the late fifteenth century, most likely in Italy. (Levey 1993, 217) The technique developed from passementerie braiding methods. In order to make a piece of bobbin lace, a set of threads are wound in onto anywhere from half a dozen to several hundred pairs of bobbins. (P. Earnshaw 1994, 61) The bobbins are hung in pairs on a firm pillow with straight pins. The design is mapped out on a piece of card called a “pricking.” The pricking, as its name implies, has holes pricked wherever a pin will need to be inserted in the process of making the lace. The threads are then worked into a variety of stitches over the pricking, with straight pins stuck into the work to hold its shape until the lace is stabilized.

The characteristic bobbin lace stitch is the cloth stitch, or whole stitch, which is an “over 1 thread, under 1 thread” type stitch and resembles a plain woven muslin fabric when completed.

This is the stitch used in the filled-in *toile* sections of bobbin lace. The other basic stitch in bobbin lace is the half-stitch, or lattice-stitch. It has more of an open diagonal “lacy” look to it.

These two basic stitches are the foundation for almost all the other stitches in bobbin laces.

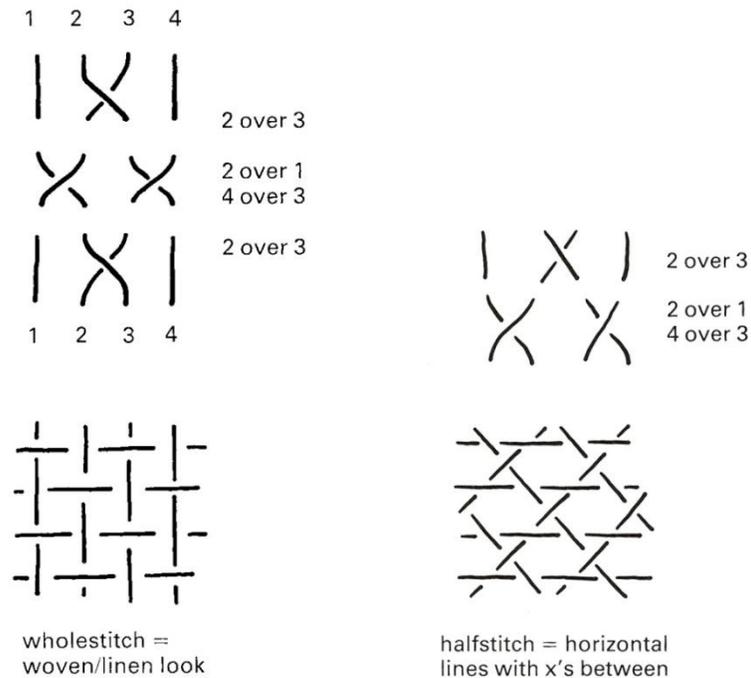


Figure 3

Illustrations of how the basic stitches are formed. (Stott 1988, 17)

This lace band is likely a Mechlin lace. Mechlin laces have several defining characteristics, the first of which is the ground, or *reseau*. The Mechlin *reseau* is a hexagonal mesh characterized by having four threads plaited 3 times on the two vertical sides and two threads twisted twice on the remaining 4 sides. (Cook and Stott 2002, 25) The *reseau* of this lace band is executed in this way. (Please note that the word vertical refers to the orientation of the

plaits while the net is being worked, not necessarily the orientation after the finished lace is being worn or used.)

Mechlin lace is constructed *à fils continus* or “worked across”, that is, the whole lace is worked on the bobbin pillow in one piece with a constant number of bobbins rather than having motifs and the ground worked separately and then assembled after each part is completed. Another defining characteristic of Mechlin lace is the *cordonnnet*, a heavier thread outline around the motifs. The threads from the ground are worked over the cordonnnet and into the toile ground. (P. Earnshaw 1994, 85) As one can see in the detail photograph of the lace band to the right, it has the distinctive plaited and twisted hexagonal ground and a cordonnnet which has been inserted as the lace was worked in one piece.

This piece of lace also has a lightweight edge of what appears to be a seam allowance at the top, separate from the rest of the pattern, which suggests that it was designed to be shirred or sewn into a seam at one edge only.

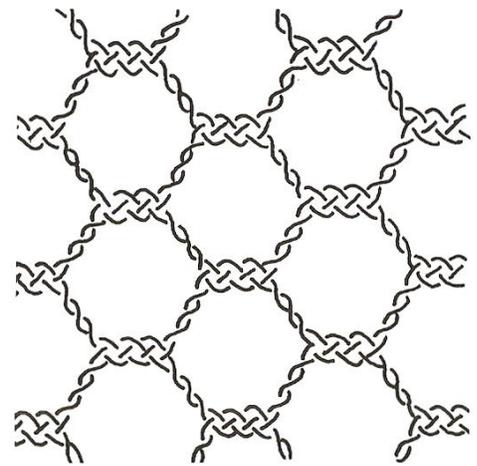


Figure 4- Structure of Mechlin Reseau (Cook and Stott 2002, 25)

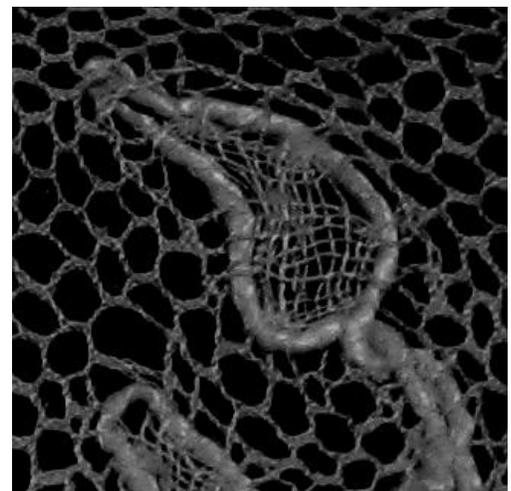


Figure 5- detail from the top right-hand side of the central motif

Note the hexagonal Mechlin ground with its distinctive plaiting and twisting and follow the threads from the ground, over the cordonnnet and into the toile area.

Design Aesthetics- Imagery and Uses

The light airy qualities of Mechlin laces made them well-suited to the elaborate fashions of the eighteenth century. The heavy, highly dimensional Venetian needle laces of the previous century were unsuitable for shirring into the frothy ruffled fashions then in vogue.

A piece of lace like this one, could have been used in a number of ways. As it is a lightweight lace band, it would have been suitable for shirring into *engageants*, the multiple-rowed sleeve ruffles on women's dresses. It also may have been worn at the neckline of a chemise, which would have peeked out the neckline of a dress, or adorned the edges of a *fichu*, a lightweight shawl. (Boucher 1983, 304) It could have also been shirred onto a man's shirt sleeve cuffs, or jabot worn at the neck. Laces of this type were also used in home décor, and it could have adorned a ladies' dressing table.



Figure 6 Roslin: The Martineau de Fleuriau Family, 1785.

Collection of The Marquis and Marquise de Gontaut. (Boucher 1983, 301)

Note the entire family is outfitted in lace. The lady is wearing lace engageants and lace-trimmed fichu, the man is wearing a lace jabot and cuffs, the young boy is wearing a shirred lace collar and even the lady's maid is wearing a lace cap.

The relative ornate-ness of pattern dates this piece most likely dates it to the early to mid-eighteenth century. By the mid-to-late eighteenth century, the designs of Mechlin laces had simplified to tiny floral motifs swimming in a sea of reseau. (P. Earnshaw 1982, 109) The fashions of that period used large quantities of lace in ruffles, and the pattern of the lace was secondary to its airy texture and abundance.

The motif on this lace is an architectural urn-shape with a trefoil in the center of it. Other trefoils and floral sprays flank the central motif. The trefoil motif is significant because nearly all Mechlin laces have it. The trefoil was part of the coat of arms of the town of Mechlin. (Kraatz and Earnshaw 1989)

Cultural, Social, Historical & Economic Context

The eighteenth century was a period of unprecedented social mobility. Sumptuary laws no longer were in effect, the market for finery had opened up to the wealthy merchant classes and an “aristocracy of wealth supplanted the hereditary nobility.” (Boucher 1983, 294) Even the lower classes wore some laces. “*Ladies’ maids wore as much lace as their mistresses and peasants put on lace with their Sunday best just like city-dwellers.*” (Kraatz and Earnshaw 1989, 74)



Figure 7- Portrait of the Actress Peg Woffington, Attr. Jean-Baptiste van Loo; English; about 1738.

The subject is wearing a cap, sleeve ruffles and fichu trimmed in Mechlin lace. (Browne 2004, 12)

The fashions dictated enormous quantities of lace be used for each ensemble. A set of engageants for a woman's dress used over 4 meters of lace. (Kraatz and Earnshaw 1989, 77) As there were more people than ever before wearing more lace than ever before, the demand was great.

The expenditure on lace was also great. A single *el* (about 1.2 meters) of Mechlin bobbin lace in 1765 sold for 95 *livres* in France. At that time, an average lacemaker in Valenciennes, France earned about 156 *livres* a year. (Kraatz and Earnshaw 1989, 77) Queen Anne of England was reported to have once bought 83 yards of Mechlin for £247. (Lowes 1908, 127)

The importation and exportation of lace was big business. In order to protect their own industries, several countries outlawed the importation of laces. (P. Earnshaw 1994, 14) Despite efforts to encourage people of fashion to buy local laces, the illegal smuggling of imported laces was rife. This was especially true in Britain. There are many anecdotes about lace being smuggled in, despite the best efforts of the excise men. One story involves £6,000 worth of French lace being smuggled into England in the coffin of a deceased bishop. (P. Earnshaw 1994, 16) The ban on the importation of Flemish laces to England was repealed in 1699, and after that Mechlin became extremely fashionable there. (P. Earnshaw 1994, 85)

Comparanda

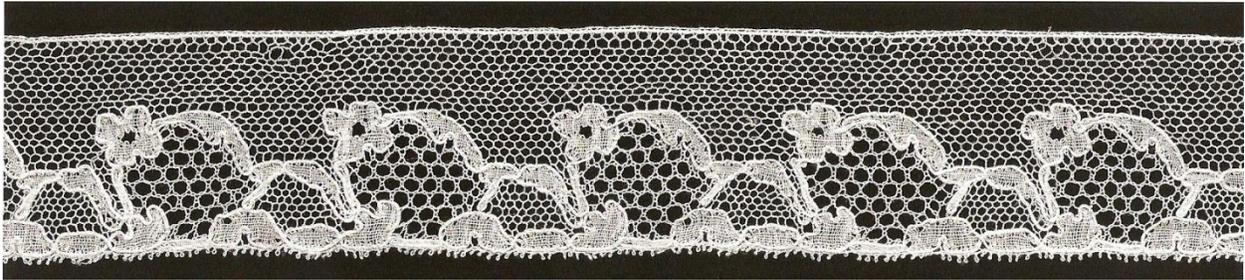


Figure 8- Danish Tønder bobbin lace border; c. 1780-1800; Victoria & Albert T.130a-1953; 3.5cm x 38cm

This Tønder lace edge is similar to the lace band from FIT in several respects. They are both bobbin laces. They both have two relatively straight edges, giving the lace an overall square-ish look. They also are both made as a trim of continuous yardage, with a repeated motif. They both have a hexagonal mesh reseau, and toile motifs surrounded by a cordonnet.

This piece of Tønder lace, however, has a much smaller repeat and the design is rather uninspired and repetitive-looking. According to the catalogue entry for this piece of lace, as the Tønder industry was catering to a lower-end market, it never established its own distinctive style of lace and its laces were very often copies of Mechlin designs with a “simple twist net ground.” (Victoria and Albert Museum n.d.) This lace definitely seems to fit that description. Another interesting thought about Tønder lace is that lacemakers from Flanders were encouraged to move to Tønder in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and therefore Tønder laces could very well have been made by Flemish lacemakers living there. (P. Earnshaw 1982, 41)



Figure 9- Alençon Lace Band; Eighteenth Century; MFIT #X441

This Alençon lace edge dates from approximately the same time as the Mechlin lace band. However, while Mechlin laces were made with bobbins, Alençon laces were made by a needle lace technique. Needle laces evolved from embroidery and cut and drawn work techniques. They were created by attaching a thread structure to a pattern made of parchment with couching stitches, and then filling in the pattern with buttonhole stitches. Once the pattern was filled in, the couching stitches were removed, and the completed piece of lace was taken off the pattern. The earlier needle laces were heavy and ornate, but this piece shows the amazing airiness that could be achieved even in a needle technique, once the fashions moved towards lighter-weight laces. This lace band would have been worn in the same ways as the Mechlin lace band. Its design is small and repetitive, but also light, pretty and delicate. With its edge of seam allowance, it is suitable for being shirred into ruffles, and was possibly designed to be used in a set of engageants, as the lace is wider in the middle and tapers on the two sides. In order to be elegantly attired in the eighteenth century, engageants were worn longer at the backs of the sleeves. (Kraatz and Earnshaw 1989, 74)



Figure 10- Mechlin Lace Edge; early nineteenth century; 18cm wide (P. Earnshaw 1994, 86)

This Mechlin lace edge dates from the early nineteenth century, so it is a bit later than the eighteenth century Mechlin lace band. It depicts a hunting scene and is also more ornate than the eighteenth century lace band. It has a beautiful scallop with picots at the edge, unlike the eighteenth century band which has a straight edge. It also has a more dynamic design-- an asymmetrical composition depicting a fox being chased by a hound, rather than the more static and formal urn and floral motif of the lace band.

They both however, share a similar construction technique, with the Mechlin reseau and toile motifs outlined by a cordonnet. This piece is also two times wider than the other and would have been worn differently, as the fashion for engageants had passed long before this was made. Its more intricate pattern also suggests that it was worn flat to showcase its design, rather than shirred into ruffles, like the Mechlin laces of the previous century. Another detail that supports this is the more ornate character of the seam allowance edge. The eighteenth century lace band has an extremely simple lightweight seam allowance, suitable for shirring. The seam allowance on this lace edge has a more complicated stitch to it, and may be too heavy to be shirred into elaborate ruffles.



Figure 11- Bobbin Lace Sleeve Ruffle; Brussels; c. 1700; 16.5cm x 96cm; Victoria and Albert #T.2-1966; Gift of Miss M. Vigers

This Brussels lace engageant is an amazingly beautiful example of bobbin lace. It differs from the Mechlin lace band in its size, complexity, and construction. The choice of motifs however, is similar.

The Brussels lace engageant is much larger than the Mechlin lace band- nearly twice the width at the center. Like the Alençon example, this piece of lace is shaped to be an engageant, longer at the back than the front. The Mechlin lace band is straight. As a large scale Brussels lace, this ruffle was constructed *à piece rapportées* and would have been made in pieces, that is, each motif and the reseau would have all been



Figure 12- detail of central motif

worked separately and then attached together at the end. (P. Earnshaw 1982, 24) This allows for greater flexibility of design, and speeds production, as multiple lacemakers can work on the same piece of lace simultaneously. The Mechlin lace is worked across all at once by one lacemaker.

Both pieces of lace have urn and floral motifs, but the Brussels lace engageant is much more elaborate and it is an engineered piece, rather than something that could have been purchased as running yardage like the Mechlin lace band.



Figure 13- Mixed Lace Lappets; Brussels, c. 1750; 11cm x 64cm; Victoria and Albert #T.107A-1916; Gift of Margaret Jardine

This set of eighteenth century lappets is an example of mixed lace. Mixed lace is so-called because it incorporates both bobbin and needle lace techniques in one finished piece of lace. In this case, the net ground is bobbin lace and the motifs and fancy grounds are achieved with needle techniques. This makes the mixed lace stiffer and less drape-y than the softer and airier Mechlin lace band.

Like the Brussels engageant, and unlike the Mechlin lace band, this pair of lappets is an example of an engineered lace piece with a specific end-use in mind.

Lappets were worn attached to a lady's headpiece or hairdo, and were obligatory court wear from 1660 to the nineteenth century. (P. Earnshaw 1982, 97) The lappets were either worn hanging free off the back of the head or worn looped up and secured with a pin. They often comprised part of a set of laces that included a lace cap with a little ruffle. (Kraatz and Earnshaw 1989, 74) A complete set of laces could cost £200 pounds in 1760. (P. Earnshaw 1982, 97)



Figure 14- Bobbin Lace Apron; Brussels; c. 1690-1700; Victoria and Albert Museum #T.101-1970;
102cm x 126cm; Gift of Lord and Lady Dunboyne

This Brussels bobbin lace apron differs from the Mechlin lace band in most respects, but does show some similarities in choice of motifs.

Like the Brussels lace engageants, and unlike the Mechlin lace band, such a large piece of bobbin lace was certainly constructed in parts and then pieced together.

This apron and the Mechlin lace band share a similar theme of formal urn shapes and foliate sprays. This apron, however, has a much more densely arranged design, with much less empty reseau showing. The repeat is also, as would be expected from such a large piece, much larger and much more ornate.

Another detail worth noting is that unlike the Mechlin lace band, this lace apron does not appear to have a cordonnet outlining the motifs, the differentiation of reseau and motif is only achieved by a change in stitch and density.

Aprons were decorative as well as utilitarian garments in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. (Boucher 1983, 443) A lace apron such as this one would have cost a considerable amount of money, and was considered a luxury garment.

Bibliography

Abegg, Margaret. *Apropos Patterns for Embroidery, Lace and Woven Textiles*. Bern, Germany, 1978.

In this beautifully illustrated book, Margaret Abegg elucidates on a sequence of European printed pattern books as recorded by Professor Arthur Lotz whose *Bibliographie der Modelbücher* published in Leipzig in 1993 will remain the standard work on the subject. These patterns, most of them woodcuts, are not only shown together with patterns of comparable textiles and lace but, are also juxtaposed with their counterparts in paintings, especially portraits.

Browne, Clare, *Lace from the Victoria and Albert Museum*. London: V & A Publications, 2004.

This lavishly illustrated book has a small amount of text providing a basic history of lace from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries, but its real strength is in its 100 high quality photographs of laces from the Victoria and Albert Museum's collection.

Boucher, François, *20,000 Years of Fashion: The History of Costume and Personal Adornment*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1987

This general survey of costume history has many great illustrations, though, unfortunately, most of them are in black and white. Despite this, it is still a good resource for putting the lace pieces into context of where they fit into the fashions of the period.

Cook, Bridget M., and Geraldine Stott. *The Book of Bobbin Lace Stitches*. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2002.

This instructional book illustrates 262 different bobbin lace reseaus and stitches with photos of examples, drawings of the stitches, and instructions and prickings for each stitch. It is a wonderful resource for understanding what differentiates the various reseaus and fillings, as in photographs, they are often hard to distinguish.

Earnshaw, Pat. *The Identification of Lace*. Buckinghamshire, England: Shire Publications, Ltd., 1994.

Pat Earnshaw, a known authority on the subject of lace, covers the history and development of lace from early white work to the development of bobbin lace. She also includes machine made laces. This compact book includes a glossary and bibliography.

. *A Dictionary of Lace*. Aylesbury, Bucks, UK: Shire Publications LTD, 1982.

This book is just that, a dictionary of lace terms defined and illustrated. It is a great and easy to use resource.

. *Lace in Fashion: From the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Centuries*. London: Batsford Ltd., 1985.

The book is a historical summary with 200 black and white illustrations and four color plates. Earnshaw presents the significance of lace through detailed photos of actual pieces of lace to explain their construction and contemporary portraits, many of which are unfamiliar, showing lace worn on dress and as an accessory. It is an excellent resource in the study of different types of laces and how lace was used on clothing.

Hudson Moore, N. *The Lace Book*. New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1904.

The date of this book cannot detract from its purpose of “showing specimens of lace and its wear in famous portraits.”

Jones, Mary Eirwen. *The Romance of Lace*. London: Staples Press, 1951.

Jones traces the history of lace according to geographic region: Italy, the Low Countries, France, Other European Countries and Britain. The book aims to convey how the story of lace is irrevocably linked with changes in costume and manners. Each chapter contains photographs that illuminate the described characteristics of the different lace types and styles from medieval times to the twentieth century. Many of the photographs come from British sources such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Needlework Development Scheme in Glasgow, The National Museum of Wales and the author's personal collection.

Kliot, Jules & Kaethe, *The Art of Netting*. Berkeley: Lacis Publications, 1998

This book is essentially a compilation of antique network instructions and patterns from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, accompanied by some instructive text on methods of making netting and guipure lace.

Kraatz, Anne, translated by Pat Earnshaw. *Lace: History and Fashion*. New York: Rizzoli

International Publications, 1989.

Accompanied by 180 illustrations, this survey covers the history of lace from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries.

Levey, Santana M. *Lace: A Visual History*. London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 1983.

The book is a comprehensive account of lace, its history and the way it was used from the early sixteenth century to World War I. It is organized chronologically and contains over 600 clear illustrations, including more than 100 portraits showing lace-trimmed clothes and related woven silks. Santana Levey, former Head of the Textile Department at the Victoria and Albert Museum explains the different types of lace as they emerge. She contends that lace is an art form and places it in the context of fashionable dress. The material in the book is compiled from diaries, inventories, letters, accounts and newspapers.

. "Lace." *Textiles 5,000 Years: An International History and Illustrated Survey*. Jennifer Harris Ed. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993. 217-223.

This is a concise survey including eleven black and white photographs of choice examples of lace.

Lowes, Mrs. Emily Leigh, *Chats on Old Lace and Needlework*. London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1908.

This illustrated volume covers lace and needlework history, methods of identification and uses. It even includes a list of prices that a collection of laces sold for at Christie's in 1906. Its primary focus, however, is lace of England and the British Isles, devoting whole chapters to the laces of different regions in Britain.

Meulen-Nulle, L.W. *Lace*. New York: Universe Books Inc, 1964.

Meulen-Nulle's book covers the uses of lace throughout several centuries. Various types of lace are described and accompanied with in-text illustrations.

Page, Eleanor, *Lace Making*, Pitman's Craft for All Series. London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons Ltd., 1930.

This instructional book explains the different stitches and methods of making both bobbin and needle laces, while providing a small amount of historical background and limited illustrations.

Simeon, Margaret. *The History of Lace*. London: Stainer & Bell, 1979.

The book offers an informative view of lace and serves as a good reference book for both general readers and informed collectors of lace. It covers needle and bobbin laces from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. It contains over 140 black and white illustrations of period extant pieces, a glossary of technical terms and an appendix that explains how to identify and date antique lace. Simeon also suggests places to purchase old lace and how to clean and repair it.

Stott, Geraldine, *The Bobbin Lace Manual*. London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1988

This is another instructional book, written in clear, easy to follow language and 229 diagrams and illustrations explaining many of the basic techniques used in bobbin lace making. It also includes patterns and a list of stockists of lace-making supplies.

Exhibition Catalogs:

The Cooper-Hewitt Museum. *Lace*. New York: The Cooper-Hewitt Museum: The Smithsonian Institution's National Design Museum, 1982.

A thirty-two page pamphlet published in conjunction with an exhibit which coincided with the opening of the Museum's Study Collection Center. It follows the history of lace using two dozen photographs in black and white from the museum's extensive collection.

Thurman, Christa C. *The Magic of Lace*. Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2001.

This twelve page brochure highlights the exhibit with expanded catalog entries. The objects chosen represent the wide range of lace types the museum holds and includes clear black and white photographs.

Online Sources

The Art Institute of Chicago: Textile Collection images online.

<http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/textiles/index.php> [accessed September 29, 2007]

The Art Institute of Chicago has an extensive textile collection including handmade laces from the early seventeenth century through the eighteenth century from the many lace centers of Europe. Although the Textile Department it closed while new building is being

constructed, click “Selected Works” when you’re on this page and view over 1000 textiles; about fifty of these are lace.

The Kent State University Museum. “Lace: The Art of Needle and Bobbin.”

<http://dept.kent.edu/museum/exhibit/lace/main.htm> [accessed September 27, 2007]

The Kent State University museum has an extraordinary collection for laces ranging from the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries. This exhibition showcases pieces that are both needle, bobbin and machine lace. The exhibition aims to prove the romanticism of lace while highlighting the prestige and beauty.

Marla Mallett. “The Structures of Antique Laces”

<http://www.marlamallett.com/lace.htm> [accessed October 21, 2007]

This site features examples of bobbin, needle and other handmade laces from the personal collection of Marla Mallett. Each example is well photographed and has a detailed description with background information.

Philadelphia Museum of Art. Search the Collections: Textile and lace images online.

<http://www.philamuseum.org/collections> [accessed September 2, 2007]

There are about fifty examples of lace from the collection with good descriptions and cataloging.

Victoria and Albert Museum. Search the Collections: lace images online.

<http://images.vam.ac.uk/indexplus/result.html> [accessed October 5, 2007]

The V&A uses a very broad definition of lace in their online site. From any garment in their collection which includes lace to the smallest rare fragments. It even includes marble busts with carved lace. When each thumbnail is opened there is an extensive catalog listing.