

# ***Bobbin Lace Partlet from 1545 Northern Italy***

*by Baroness Briana Etain MacKorkhill*

## **Brief History of Bobbin Lace**

The origins of bobbin lace have been the subject of scholarly debate for hundreds of years. Both Venice and Flanders claim to be the birthplace. Certainly both places were centers of the lace trade and production. Some recent scholars have put forth that it actually developed independently and concurrently. Irrespective of where it developed, it quickly gained popularity and began to be used for a variety of household items and later on, garments.



At first, bobbin lace was closely linked to braids and other forms of passementerie (trim) used in the early sixteenth century and was frequently made with silk and gold or silver metals. Bobbin lace became a technique by which metal threads in particular could be easily manipulated. It was the manufacture of the silk and metal braids to be used on rich materials for furnishing and dress that drove the development of bobbin lace. These metal bobbin laces first appeared in royal and other accounts throughout Europe. Bobbin lace was first utilized more as a trim, stitched flat to the fabric like braid, rather than hanging free like the edging of a ruff. As it matured, the structure became more stable and it was used to more cheaply imitate the fabulously expensive *reticella* and *punto in aria*, and was used in the same ways.

The earliest bobbin lace was made up of 4-thread braids which would interlace each other where the pattern lines crossed. ***LePompe 1559*** is the earliest Italian pattern book and the woodcuts are easily identifiable as bobbin lace. Most are braided guipure-type laces. Some of these show what looks like 5-hole ground as a way of crossing two braids or groups of braids. Some show markedly rectangular narrow geometric strips which are evidently some kind of torchon. There are extant examples of gold or silver gilt lace in almost exactly the same designs as the braided ones from ***LePompe***.

## Methodology

Searching through my books, I came across a blown-up photograph of the portrait of Eleanor of Toledo's partlet. I have always admired that



portrait but my eyes have always been drawn to that partlet. This time however, I realized why. With the increased magnification, I noticed that the artist had meticulously painted each thread making up the weave of it. Then I started to follow the line of the threads, and thought about how it must have been put together. Now I have read many different theories of its manufacture, but I'd never seen it put forth as bobbin lace. And yet the pattern coalesced in my mind. I saw how it was worked on a diagonal in the picture, even how it was crossed through each of the intersections surmounted with a pearl. This was certainly a possible early form of braided bobbin lace.

So my next step was to try it out with regular thread. I had some bobbins already set up with thread of green and white. Since it was just for trial, I used those. I first set up my pattern. I knew that standard bobbin lace, required bobbins in sets of two. This design, however, has plaits between the intersections. To plait would require at least three, so that set the plait at four. Each starting pin would, therefore, have to support eight bobbins, four for each direction. If I wanted it to be four inches wide, then I would have 40 bobbins in the final design. The trial pattern turned out to be too elongated in the length of the diamond, but the pattern did work. Working out the crossing was my next hurdle. I tried crossing each thread separately, but it made the intersection too bulky. I next tried crossing two bobbins at a time and that produced a nice, smooth intersection.

My next challenge was in finding the right thread. I wanted gold. Not just gold colored but Gold. And not just the normal weight of thread - this needed to be more substantial. First, I tried the gold wrapped crochet thread. Because of the weaving necessary, the gold came off the thread and looked blotchy. Not going to work at all. My search continued.

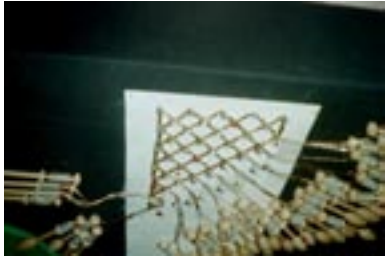
Another roadblock was that my original lace pillow's bolster was not wide

enough to accommodate my pattern. I was fortunate enough to have a friend offer to let me have a round pillow to try. I covered it with suitable fabric and thought I was ready to go. When I tried the first “gold” thread I discovered that the pillow was not sufficient in diameter to provide enough flat working space to keep the bobbins from pulling the weaving from the pins. I decided to use a large flat piece of foam large enough to work my lace on.

Meanwhile, my search continued for the perfect size and color cord. I remembered some very thin gold cord that I had purchased long ago to couch on something. I found it and tried it on just eight bobbins. Just enough to see if that thickness was what I was searching for. It worked! Now to find it again. After looking in several fabric and craft stores, I found one very similar. It was a little darker gold than the original but would work fine. I bought the whole unopened roll of 50 yards, thinking that it would be plenty to carry out my design. It possesses the look of the gold cording that the original had, even though it is a synthetic. At 50 cents a yard, it was affordable too, funding the project being an issue also.

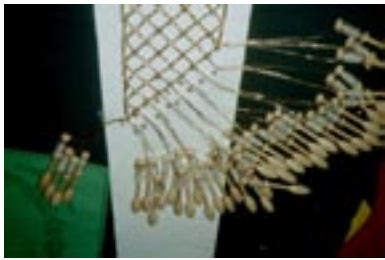
I used graph paper to set up my pattern and then pricked it onto poster board weight paper - they would have used velum or parchment. I attached the pattern to the covered foam pillow (they would have used sand or sawdust filled pillows; money still being an issue, I chose the foam) by putting small nearly headless pins along the very edge so that they would not catch the bobbins as they were worked. I started at the left hand corner and hung my eight bobbins on the first pin. I used extra long pearl headed pins because they were the sturdiest pins I had and offered the extra length to accommodate the increased size of the thread. Each plait is four full passes before a juncture. They then split with two on either side of the pin supporting the opposite direction of bobbins. By keeping the weaving as flat as possible the intersections are much smoother.

Each diagonal row is worked from the right to the left with the end being crossed with the straight set from above. The first set becomes the straight set for the row below. (See pictures of lace in progress.)



As you can see from the first example with the gold cord, tension was a major issue at first. That was compounded by the fact that the cording would not stay wound on the bobbin. By some judicious use of tape, elevation of the pillow and learning how to gently coerce the fibers to stay woven, slowly the tension got better. After I realized it was necessary to wrap the bobbins

I tried using a scrap of cloth the appropriate width to keep the thread from unwinding and simply tied them as they might have done in period when presented with this kind of problem. It worked pretty well.



However, one more issue popped up that had to be addressed. I had wound about 30 inches to each bobbin, not knowing how much it would take. About 3-4 inches from the bottom, I started to run out of cording on each bobbin. Because the sets are started

at different times, I had to replace them as they ran out. It was very frustrating to get that far to only run out of the original thread. I addressed that situation



in the second attempt by starting the bobbins with 40 inches each. This time it was just the right length. I had plenty of thread to finish the piece without having to worry about running out. I purchased a second unopened roll of 50 yards to do the second set and ended up needing about 38 yards more from a third roll. Finding more proved to be another obstacle but with some calling around and an hour road trip, I was able to acquire the last of the cord I needed to complete the project.

The final challenge was tying them off. I tried several different methods. I tried

to tie them as I usually did with regular thread. A big knot that is unacceptable was the result. I tried to tie each set of four after crossing them with the other set of four. Two slightly smaller knots ensued. What I determined that I would do was to cross them at the bottom, take two of the four and cross them as if to tie them but that secured the thread from losing the tension. After those were done I gather all eight lines and bound them with regular thread similar to how a hand woven belt is finished with fringe. I then attached a piece of bias tape to each intersection to provide stability. I had originally



intended this piece to be separate but once the bodice was complete and I tried

it on, it was immediately apparent that the partlet would need to be attached to the bodice. I ran a running stitch along the edges to the front and back of the bodice. It can still be easily detached by removing the running stitches. The pearls are attached only on the side closest to the neck so that it would fit under the shoulder of the dress easier, thereby giving it a smoother appearance. For security sake, each pearl was individually sewn and tied on. The risk of losing several pearls at a time is just too high.

### **Materials used**

Belgian bobbins – wooden bobbins

Flat pillow - would have been filled with sawdust or sand. I used foam because of cost.

Long pearl-headed pins – to handle the heavier threads

Gold cording – synthetic because of cost – see above

Pearls – had to use synthetic pearls – budget could not handle the use of real ones.

Yellow thread used to bind the ends together

White thread used to sew the pearls on

White bias tape for the ties



### **Bibliography**

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# Visual References



**Eleanor of Toledo, Duchess of Urbino painted by Agnolo Bronzino 1545. Florence.**

*Note the direction of the weave of the partlet. Also the inspiration for the placement of the pearls. See how the partlet lays under the bodice and passes over the shoulder*

**Pope Alexander III receiving the submission of the Emperor Frederick I (detail) by Giorgio Vasari, 1560's Venice.**

*Note the same open weave of the partlet. This one appears to be constructed of ribbon and is not worked on a diagonal.*



**Venetian Province of Treviso, Republic of Venice  
Paolo Veronese, Detail from fresco, 1570s Venice.**

*Note that this one is a later version than the top one but still the design is popular.*

**Lady with Egret, 1540 Venice**

*Note the general layout of the partlet.  
Open at the front and fills the neckline  
on both shoulders*



**“The Concert” (fresco detail) Giovanni Antonio Fasolo, 1565 Venetian Province of  
Vincenza, Republic of Venice Vincenza, Villa  
Campiglia Negri de’ Salvi**

*Note the shape of the partlet.*

**Bernadino Licinio, 1533: Por-  
trait Of A Woman Venice, The  
Republic of Venice  
Dresden, Galleria de Stato**

*Note the layout of the partlet.*

