



ALENÇON AND ARGENTAN LACE PART II BY M. JOURDAIN

THE new manufactures had the advantage of high-handed protection on the part of the government. On November 17, 1667, appears a fresh prohibition of the selling or wearing of passements, lace, and other works in thread of Venice, Genoa, and other foreign countries; and on March 17, 1668, *Iteratives*—prohibitions—to wear these as injurious to a manufacture of point which gives subsistence to a number of persons in this kingdom.

In 1670, an Englishman travelling in France notices the efforts of the French government to protect the Points de France. "They are so set (he writes) in this country upon maintaining their own manufactures that only two days ago there was publicly burnt by the hangman a hundred thousand crowns worth of Point de Venise, Flanders lace, and other foreign commodities that are forbid." * Later, in 1680, it is stated in *Britannia Languens*, a discourse upon trade, that "the laces commonly called Points de Venise now come mostly from France, and amount to a vast sum yearly." In 1687 the fourth Earl of Manchester † writes from Venice of the excessive dearness of the point made there, but is confident either at Paris or England one may have it as cheape, and better patterns." †

Colbert's scheme was thus crowned with success. Boileau, in his *Epistle to Louis XIV.*, alludes to the disappointment of Flanders and Italy, robbed of their golden revenues from France :

"Nos voisins frustrés de ces tributs serviles
Que payait à leur art le luxe de nos villes."

And the Venetian Senate, according to Yriate, regarded this emigration of workers to France as a

* R. Montagu to Lord Arlington: MSS. of the Duke of Buccleuch, vol. 1., *Hist. MSS. Comm.*

† MSS. of J. Eliot Hodgkin, Esq., *Hist. MSS. Comm.*, 15th Report, Appendix, Part II.

crime against the State, which they wished to obviate by the following decree:—

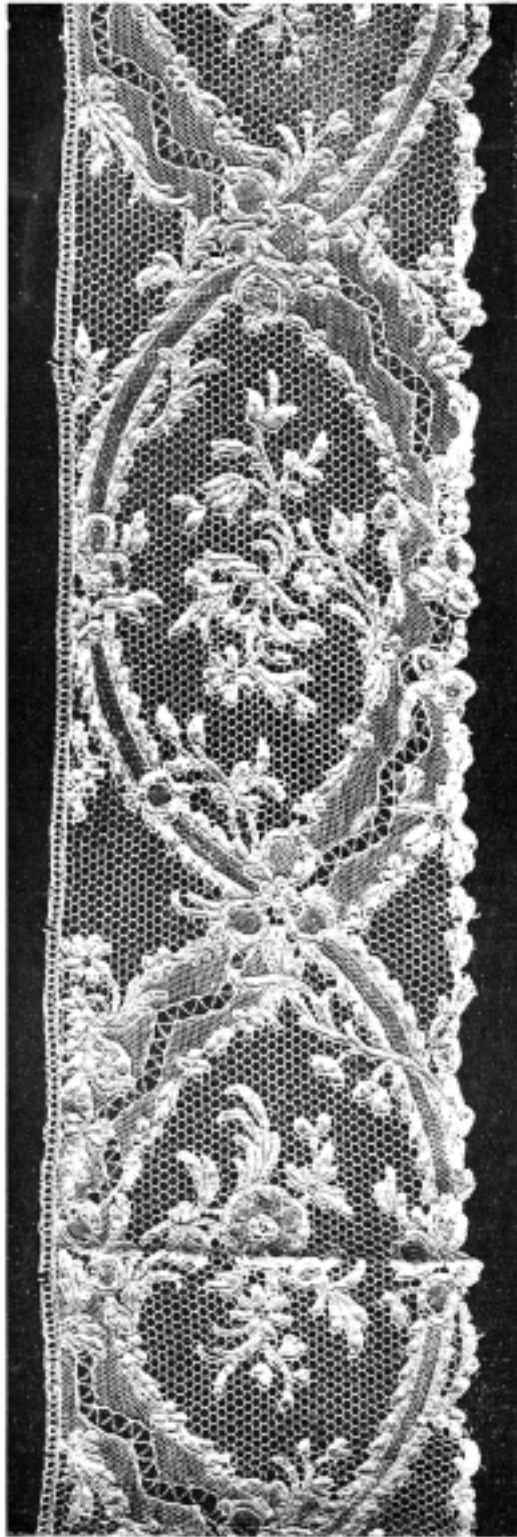
"If any artist or handicraftsman practises his art in any foreign land, to the detriment of the Republic, orders to return will be sent him; if he disobeys them, his nearest kin will be put in prison, in order that through his interest in their welfare his obedience may be compelled. If he comes back, his past offence will be condoned, and employment for him will be found in Venice, but if, notwithstanding the imprisonment of his nearest of kin, he obstinately decides to continue living abroad, an emissary will be commissioned to kill him, and his next of kin will only be liberated after his death."

It is probable that the Italian style continued in vogue for some time after the introduction of the Points de France into Alençon, and Colbert himself is depicted in a cravat of Italian design. It must be borne in mind that the *réseau* ground was made at Venice, as well as the pearled *bride*, and there is a distinct resemblance between the old Burano point and Alençon. As Mrs. Palliser writes, we have reason to believe that "much of the soi-disant Venice points are the produce of this infant manufacture." In 1677 the *Mercure* announces: "They make now many points de France without grounds, and 'picots en campannes' to all the fine handkerchiefs. We have seen some with little flowers over the large, which may be styled 'flying flowers,' being only attached to the centre." In 1678 it says, "The flowers, which are in higher relief in the centre and lower at the edges, are united by small stalks and flowers, which keep them in their places, instead of *brides*. The manner of disposing the branches, called 'ordonnances,' is of two kinds: the one a twirling stalk, which throws out flowers; the other is regular—a centre flower, throwing out regular branches on each side." "What can these be but Venice patterns? The flower upon flower, like 'fleurs volantes,' exactly answers to that point in high relief, vulgarly styled by the lace-makers, caterpillar point."

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Point d'Alençon is made entirely by hand, with the needle upon a parchment pattern, in small pieces which are assigned to different workwomen, and afterwards joined by invisible seams, following as much as possible the outlines of the pattern. There were in 1705 ten processes, including the design—*le dessin*, *le picage*, *la trace*, *les fonds*, *la dentelure*, or *bride à picots*, *la brode*, *l'enlevage*, *l'éboulage*, *le régilage*, and *l'assemblage*, each of which is carried out by a special workwoman. Sometimes the number of processes amounts to twenty or twenty-two. The design, engraved on a copper plate, is printed off upon small numbered segments of parchment ten inches long. Green parchment has been in use since 1769, at least, at which date it is mentioned in an inventory of the goods of Simon Geslin.* The green shows up any faults in the work more clearly than the natural-coloured parchment. "The pattern is next pricked upon the parchment, which is stitched to a piece of very coarse linen folded double. The outline of the pattern is then formed by two flat threads, which are guided along the edge by the thumb of the left hand, and fixed by minute stitching passed with another thread and needle through the holes of the parchment. When the outline is finished the work is given over to the *réseuse* to make the ground," either the hexa-

* April 13th, 1769.



POINT D'ALENÇON EIGHTEENTH CENTURY PERIOD, LOUIS XV., SHOWING IN COMBINATION THE ALENÇON RÉSEAU AND THE ARGENTAN HEXAGONAL BRIDES WIDTH, 3½ INCHES

gonal *bride* ground or the delicate *réseau*, or a third variety of grounding, which consists of button-hole stitched skeleton hexagons, within each of which is worked a small solid hexagon connected with the surrounding figure by means of six little ties or *brides*. Lace with this variety of ground has been called Argentilla. In making the flowers of Alençon point, the lace-maker "works the button-hole stitch from left to right, and when arrived at the end of the flower, the thread is thrown back from the point of departure, and she works again from left to right over the thread. This gives a closeness and evenness to the work unequalled on any other point." After the different modes are completed, the threads which connect the lace and parchment are severed by a razor passed between the coarse folded linen that backs the parchment, and the various ten-inch sections of the lace are delicately and invisibly united. When finished, a steel instrument, the *aficot*, polishes the flower; in earlier times, a lobster's claw or a wolf's tooth was used for the same purpose.

Point d'Alençon is the only lace in which horsehair is introduced along the edge to strengthen the *cordonnnet*. It is related of a collar made at Venice for Louis XIV. that the lace-workers being unsuccessful in finding sufficiently fine horsehair, employed some of their own hair instead, in order to secure

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that marvellous delicacy of work which they aimed at producing. This lace cost two hundred and fifty golden écus (about £60).

The *Dictionnaire du Citoyen* in 1761 disapproves of this introduction of horsehair, and declares the cordonnet thickens when put into water, and that the horsehair edge also draws up the ground and makes the lace rigid and heavy.

The manufacture of Alençon has been subject to many vicissitudes; it was almost extinct, when Napoleon revived it by his "golden patronage," but it again fell with the Empire. So low had it fallen, that in 1831 there were only between two and three hundred lace-workers. A fresh attempt was made in 1840 to revive the art, and assemble the two hundred aged women—all the lace-makers remaining at Alençon—but the difficulties of the revival were great. The new workers drawn from other lace-making districts, already taught the grounds peculiar to other laces, would not master the art of making the pure Alençon *réseau*. As the Alençon makers say, "Elles bâtarisent les fonds."

The designs of Alençon point under Louis XIV. are flowing and undulatory, ornamented with fillets, garlands, "cornes d'abondance," pouring forth sheaves of flowers. Under Louis XV. the same taste prevails, and the designs are marked by flowers, capriciously wreathed and intertwined, scarcely begun, never ending, "into which are introduced haphazard

patterns of a finer ground, much as the medallions of Boucher or Vanloo were inserted in the gilded panellings of a room, the whole wreathed and garlanded like the decoration of a theatre."

Towards the end of the reign, and during the reign of Louis XVI., a change came over the national taste. There is no more of the elegance and conventional grandeur of the earlier style; the flowery designs give way to somewhat angular and bizarre arrangements of conventional garlands and small flowers. With Louis XVI. began the ground *semé* with *pois*, *fleurons*, *larmes*, *rosettes*, which toward the end of the century entirely supplanted design, and continue in favour during the Republic and the First Empire.

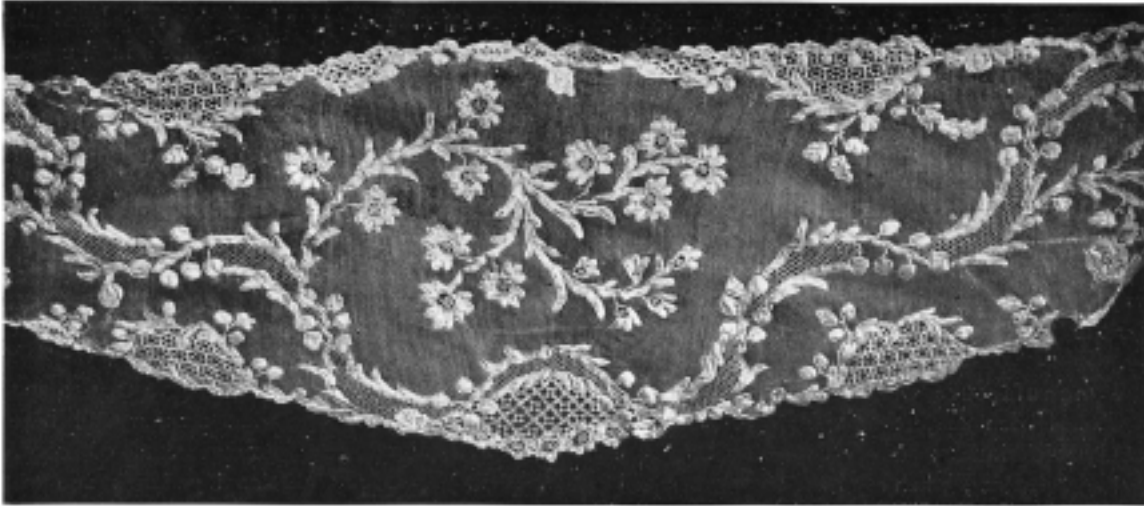
In Argentan, whose points long rivalled Alençon, a *bureau* for Points de France was established at the same time as the *bureau* at Alençon, also under the direction of Madame Raffy, who writes to the "Grand Colbert" to thank him for an "arrêt," published at Argentan to the sound of a trumpet, that the lace-makers of the little town are to work exclusively for the "bureau de la manufacture royale."

Point d'Argentan has been thought to be especially distinguished by its hexagonally arranged *brides*, but this has also been noticed as a peculiarity of certain Venetian point laces. The Argentan *bride*-ground is a large six-sided mesh, worked over with the *point noué*, or button-hole stitch. Each side of



POINT D'ALENÇON BORDER
PERIOD, LOUIS XV. (EARLY)

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ALENÇON LOUIS XV. (LATE)

Photo by A. Dryden

the hexagon is about one-tenth of an inch. An idea of the minuteness of the work can be formed from the fact that one side of the hexagon would be overcast with some nine or ten button-hole stitches. The ground was therefore exceptionally strong. So little is the beautiful workmanship of this ground known or understood, that (writes Mrs. Palliser) "I have seen priceless flowers of Argentan relentlessly cut out and transferred to bobbin net to get rid of the ugly old coarse ground."

"At the present time it is usual to consider Point d'Alençon as a lace with a fine *réseau*, the work of which is hexagonal in form, with the flower or ornament worked in fine point stitches, closely resembling the gimp or ornament on the *Point de Venise à réseau*, and outlined by a cordonnet of the finest button-hole stitches, worked over a horse-hair or threads, while Point d'Argentan is a lace with a similar work as regards flower, ornament, and cordonnet, but with a hexagonal *bride*-ground, each *bride* of the hexagon being covered by the finest button-hole stitchings." *

With a view of shewing the intimate connection which existed between Argentan and Alençon, Mr. Dupont states that Argentan was a branch factory or *succursale* of Alençon; that Argentan is in almost all respects the same as Alençon work. "Les trois sortes de brides comme champ sont exécutées dans ces deux fabriques (writes Madame Despierres), et les points (d'Alençon et d'Argentan) ont été et sont encore faits par les mêmes procédés de fabrication et avec les mêmes matières textiles." The two

towns, separated by some ten miles, had communications as frequent as those which passed between Alençon and the little village of Vimontier, eighteen miles distant, where one workman in particular produced what is known as the true Alençon lace. If a work were made at Argentan, it was called Argentan; if at Alençon, Alençon; though both might have been produced from the same designs.

In 1701, the manufacture was decayed and extinct, when it was revived by a merchant mercer at Paris, one Sieur Mathieu Guyard, who claimed that "himself and his ancestors had for more than one hundred and twenty years been occupied in fabricating black silk and white thread lace in the environs of Paris. He applies for permission in 1708 to employ six hundred lace-workers and re-establish the Argentan fabric, and begs to have the royal arms over his door and to be exempted from lodging soldiery.

Guyard's children succeeded him, and his draughtsman and engraver, Montulay, was replaced in 1715 by Jacques, who, in his turn was succeeded by his daughter, who took as her partner one Sieur de La Leu. In 1744, on the occasion of the marriage of the Dauphin, Guyard's factory broke into open war with a rival house, whose factor, du Ponchel, asserted that Mademoiselle James enticed away his workmen; and claimed protection on the ground that he worked for the King and court.

"But, on the other side," writes de La Leu, to the intendant on the behalf of Mademoiselle James, "It is I that supply the 'Chambre du Roi' for this year, by order of the Duc de Richelieu. I, too, have the honour of furnishing the 'Garderobe du Roi,'

* A. S. Cole, *Cantor Lectures on the Art of Lace-making*.

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by order of the grand master, the Duc de la Rochefoucault. Besides which, I furnish the King and Queen of Spain, and, at the present moment am supplying lace for the marriage of the Dauphin." Du Ponchel rejoins, that he had to execute two "toilettes et leurs suites, nombre de bourgognes et leurs suites" for the Queen, and also a cravat, all to be worn on the same occasion.

Du Ponchel appears to have had the better interest with the controller-general; for the quarrel ended in a prohibition to the other manufacturers to molest the women working for Du Ponchel, though the Maison Guyard asked for reciprocity, and maintained that their opponents had suborned and carried off more than a hundred of their hands.*

De La Leu, who, by virtue of an ordinance, had set up a manufacture on his own account, applies in 1745 to have 200 workwomen at Argentan, and 200 at Carrovges, delivered over to his factor in order that he may execute works ordered for the King and the Dauphin for the approaching fêtes of Christmas. This time the magistrate resists. "I have been forced to admit," he writes to the intendant, "that the workwomen cannot be transferred by force. We had an example when the layette of the Dauphin was being made. You then gave me the order to furnish a certain number of women who worked at these points to the late Sieur de

Montulay. A detachment of girls and women came to my house, with a female captain (*capitaine femelle*) at their head, and all with one accord declared that if forced to work, they would make nothing but cobbling (*bousillage*). Partly by threats and partly by entreaty I succeeded in compelling about a dozen to go, but the Sieur de Montulay was obliged to discharge them the next day.* I am, therefore, of opinion that the only way is for M. de La Leu to endeavour to get some of the workwomen to suborn others to work for him under the promise of higher wages than they can earn elsewhere . . . and I have promised him that, in case any appeal is made to me, I shall answer that things must be so, as the work is doing for the king."

Forty years later, Argentan is still very flourishing, and Arthur Young † estimates the annual value of its point at 500,000 livres. From these data, we may conclude that the reigns of Louis XV. and XVI. were the periods when Point d'Argentan was at the height of its fame and prosperity. The industry died out in the storm and stress of the Revolutionary period, but though temporarily re-established in 1708, Point d'Argentan died out in 1810. §

* November 12, 1745.

† In 1788.

§ It has been revived again with some success by MM. Lefébure, 1874.

* Mrs. Palliser, *History of Lace*.



ALENÇON PERIOD, LOUIS XVI. (WIDTH, $3\frac{1}{2}$ INCHES)

Photo by A. Dryden