

INTRODUCTION.

Many of you will know the wonderful book by Gertrude Whiting "Old Time Tools and Toys of Needlework. Basically it tells of her trips around the world looking at her special interest of Needlework.

What I have to tell you in the modern age may seem a little strange, but it would appear that Ms Whiting preferred the company of her own sex. This was so embarrassing (presumably she was "out") that her rich family sent her around the world presumably so that they might rather not be embarrassed by her! The allegation that I have said I have never seen in print, but my source seems to be very reliable. Anyway, attitudes of the older generation has resulted in our gain, as there is no one I know that writes so well and uses language so well as she does when it comes to writing about her love of the tools and toys of needlework. I am always enthralled to read her.

Many of you will know that recently, I finally got to have made for myself a copy of a "Venetian Glass bobbin" which she illustrates on page 207 of her book. Then I got to read her chapter entitled "Beautiful Bobbins", and suddenly I remembered that she had some very interesting and "different" things to say about bobbins that we no longer seem to talk about.

Dear reader (trying to copy Gertrude a little bit) please do not interpreted what I have to say wrongly, but our modern discussion on lace bobbins has been highly influenced by the work of Christine and David Springett. There's is the first book devoted totally to lace bobbins, and was the result of a great deal of innovative research. It opened up to those of us who were studying bobbins from Thomas Wright and Charles Freeman, plus a bevy of antique dealers who have written on the subject, a whole new vista about lace bobbins. I am personally very grateful to them for their work, I use it every time I study a bobbin and I would not be without it; however they laid down a pattern of study and identification that worked very well for what they wanted to achieve, and we have all followed it, sometimes to the detriment local history and those collectors and students of lace bobbin who lived in former years.

Today, as you read this, you will hear a little of what Ms Whiting had to say about these "Beautiful Bobbins". Not all that she said, but those things I feel add some feeling and some life into these wonderful tools.

HOW DOES GERTRUDE THINK?

We will get a clue by me quoting a verse of her own which she first presented in "A Lace Guide for Makers and Collectors"; it goes:

*Oh, such merry tools these,
Quaintly carved and turned,
Tinkling, trying to please
With the lullabies learned
As they twist, mingle, toss
In life's take, give and cross!*

Lovely, don't you think?

We continue to get insights into her nature as she retells one of the legends, in great detail, about the “invention” or beginning of lace. I am sure that you will have heard it, at least in some shortened form before; but in telling it she is telling you how deeply she feels, not technically but emotionally, about her love of lace. This same feeling comes through when she talks about lace bobbins in so many ways. In her words she even tries to pass on the love of lace to those who have never made lace.

She does not shy from definitions, nor the practicalities of the craft, but the beauty of lace and the bobbins, particularly those bobbins that have spangles is emphasized so frequently. I find it very interesting that she adopted the word “sticks” for the most part when she refers to bobbins. I always understood this to be a term that originated from the East Devon lace makers, but perhaps it was wider spread than I thought. I am sure one of you readers can put me right on that matter... (Please do)

She reminds of the origin of bobbins and quotes the first use of the word “Bobbins”. Apparently in 1496 Eleanor of Aragon, Duchess of Ferrara... supervised her 18 handmaidens, in the art of braiding gold and silk with *bobbins*. Now that is interesting, I missed that when I went to the Oxford Dictionary to write my article on “First Words” to trace the word bobbin in its earlier usage.

She continues to suggest that in Italy glass was an early material from which bobbin were made, and even suggests that lead in some form may well have been a source for weighting these bobbins. I need not say that does she shy away from the theory of bones as bobbins, twigs as bobbins or fish bones for pins. They are all mentioned and she offers her opinions as she sees fit.

WHAT DOES SHE LOVE ABOUT BOBBINS?

I would say it in one word -Spangles-, but she insists on using spangles, Jingles, gingles as alternatives. Nowadays we have tended to apportion special meanings to each of these words, or even use more modern terms (from Springett) but she uses them interchangeably for these parts of bobbins.

The beads are special to her, the millefiori group gets her special attention; but Pompadour, Kitty Fisher and the various colour “cuts” all get attention. She talks about the structure of the traditional spangle and all the add-ons that makers interestingly included on their spangles from time to time. As with all her discourses we get a good parcel of history to go with it. Just listen to her chatting on about spangles and beads; *One frequently find red cuts between two white one; but opaque pale yellow beads with blending of blue fused in while the bead is hot, clear amber balls, light and deep green beads and scrolled ultramarine ones are also usual. Some of the bottoms are faceted, some are of jade, coral, carnelian; many beads were made at Bedford, and many jingles are fashioned with lace-makers’ tokens from their employers, with quaint old coins, or with historic buttons.*

If only I could say it like that instead of: “there are 9 beads 6 are usually square cuts with different colours and bigger pretty bead at the bottom”. ☺

A MODERN DAY SLANT!

With all this rich language of writing, I would never have thought that she would use a modern business technique when it comes to creating and selling bobbins. She attributes to the bobbin

maker a very real ability for marketing, but she does not use this term. Listen to what she says though: *“Local bobbin manufacturers and dealers were not slow to take advantage of anything that caused as much excitement as suicides and executions.”*

Of course names on bobbins would be a good seller, as always the theme of love, when it comes to young lasses in lace schools, would always be popular; but we must remember that those young lasses became married women and wanted to record the names or the births of their children, perhaps sadly too their deaths. The bobbin maker pandered to all of these sources for increased sales.

She continues through the various types of bobbins and the various styles of decoration, that were available to the lace-makers’

DESCRIPTIONS AND TERMS FOR BOBBINS THAT SHE USED.

We talk of leopards for the pewter dots on our bobbins. She talks about the “Pegged”, spotted leopards. She goes on to talk about when the metal was corroded it reminds one of some formidable studded dungeon door! She further comments that the incrustation renders them rough and unclean. I was surprised to find that she believed that some of the leopard spots in bobbins were not pewter but silver, and she talks about these spots shining more with the handling of the bobbins. I have to be honest and say that I have never looked for silver spots on leopard bobbins, but I will from now on.

She talks of the pewter butterfly bobbins (Beds fly) in a beautiful way. *“How these flitting fairy bobbins flash as they ply upon the lace pillows”.*

When it comes to tigers she has this to say: *“Their coruscating glow makes one feel as though one were amongst the scintillating colours of a Tiffany’s studio”*

She loved the dyed bone bobbins and when they in turn were further decorated, this too sends her into delightful words of joyous description.

The pleasure she has in describing the bobbin makers’ skill in creating church windows, lanterns, mother and babes, jack in the box, cow and calf and bitted bobbins, reflects awe in their skill and delight in their beauty.

She moves into the South Bucks bobbins with their Huguenots, trolleys, trailers, quills and tallies. Huge Yaks are recorded along with cheeky bobtails and worn out dumps. Downton gets a picture differing from what we currently know as Downtons but who am I to question one who was actually there.

The East Devon bobbins (Honiton) get good treatment with snippets of history and customs that awaked someone like me to all sorts of possibilities when it comes to analyzing the those Devon bobbins that are decorated.

CONCLUSION

With that she moves on to what we call “continental bobbins”, which she describes with equally glorious use of English adjectives, all strung together in a manner that reflects the love and enjoyment which Gertrude Whiting had for lace bobbins. If only I could sit at her feet and hear her talk about all her experiences and everything she knew about bobbins, I would be in Seventh Heaven! 😊