

Unusual lace creations at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Madrid

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1 The article by Ana Cabrera La Fuente, *El Museo Nacional de Artes Decorativas en sus primeros años (1912-1930)* reproduces the appendices to the Royal Decree which established the creation of the National Museum of Industrial Arts.

2 Aurora Gutiérrez Larraya played a key role in the creation of the National Museum of Decorative Arts, as the historian Joan Miquel Llodrà has demonstrated.

3 Javier Fernández explains the history of this incipient Museum of Lace and participation of the writer and anthropologist Carmen Baroja, one of the first historians of art in our country and author of the book *El encaje en España*, Editorial Labor, Barcelona, 1933.

The origins of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Madrid

The National Museum of Decorative Arts in Madrid was set up 1871, following the example of the South Kensington Museum (today the V&A) in London. The museum was created to revive the original aims of the universal exhibitions of promoting craftsmanship and trade, and of improving the training of workers in industry. A Royal Decree of 1912¹ later established the creation of the National Museum of Industrial Arts.

The first directors of the museum were Rafael Domènech and Luis Pérez Bueno, but they were soon joined by experts in the various fields. In textiles, important contributions were made by Aurora Gutiérrez Larraya, a designer in lace, *batik*, and leather.² The museum had a strong educational mission, and sought to make contact with other European institutions; indeed Domènech, Pérez and Gutiérrez travelled abroad to learn about the work underway at various European museums. The museum was organized into eight sections, seven containing pieces (stone, metal, wood, earthenware, textiles, graphic arts, and ivory, shells and leather), and an eighth section dedicated to education.

The stocks came from state museums or government agencies, and there were also some acquisitions. The acquisitions were mainly old Spanish pieces, or foreign pieces with a Spanish influence; finally, for educational purposes and also to enhance the museum's international dimension, the museum also purchased items with contemporary designs which reflected the transformation of the decorative arts in the museum's early years, from the UK, Denmark, Germany, Austria and elsewhere in Europe.

In 1927 the museum changed its name to the National Museum of Decorative Arts, since it was decided that certain artistic items could not be catalogued under the heading of *Industrial Arts*. Curiously, in the 1930s, the Museum of Lace was created as a part of the National Museum of Decorative Arts, but the museum lasted only a short time, and it was soon transferred to the Museum of the Spanish People along with the stocks from the Museums of Regional and Historical Costume and Popular Art.³

Entrance hall. National Museum of Decorative Arts. Madrid.



4 ARBETETA MIRA, Letizia: “La colección textil del Museo Nacional de las Artes Decorativas. Su contenido e historial museológico”. *Boletín de la ANABAD*, 1994.

5 The article by Ana Cabrera, “El Museo Nacional de Artes Decorativas en sus primeros años (1912-1930)”, reproduces a photograph of these samples.

The textile and lace collection

The collection consists mainly of flat, untailed fabrics from private households, or civil and religious garments. The oldest are a set of Coptic textiles from the second century. The aim of the collection is to represent the diversity of textile techniques: brocade, embroidery, *passementerie*, batik, lace, and so on.

The textile collections of the **National Museum of Decorative Arts** were acquired mostly between 1913 and 1916, according to Letizia Arbeteta Mira in her article *The textile collection of the National Museum of Decorative Arts*. The main criterion for acquisition was that the fabric had been made in Spain, and priority was often given to pieces made using traditional craft techniques.

While awaiting further studies to identify sources, all kinds of historic textiles obtainable in Spain, whether Spanish or not, entered the collection. Among religious garments accessories such as *mantillas*, gloves, bags, belts, etc. were acquired, but this important representation was missing among the Museum’s collections, perhaps because religious garments were not considered “national” and only the design and embroidery of the fabrics was considered of interest.⁴

The first directors of the museum seem to have looked for pieces in the Balkans and Russia, considering them to bear similarities to popular Spanish creations. An example of this group is the **fabric fragment CE23551**, with orange and ecru bobbin lace braid made in Europe. The description states that it comes from central Europe, from the Czech Republic or Slovakia. Slovak traditional art is characterized by the use of different colours according to region and religion: Lutherans and Protestants made white lace, and Catholics used colours.

Since the initial acquisitions, the museum has increased its stocks of textiles through auctions and thanks to private donations. In the case of bobbin and needle lace, the first acquisitions seem to have corresponded to lace samples that were made in Spain, catalogued on small cards.⁵ Arbeteta mentions the collection of metallic lace known as *Point d’Espagne*. This lace had been widely used in Spain since the late sixteenth century and over the years has been applied to religious clothing and furnishings.

Fan no. CE18006, attributed to Ricardo Mateos García. National Museum of Decorative Arts. Madrid. MNAD_CE18006a.



The collection of lace fans

6 Belgian chiffon is characterized by needle lace motifs on a tulle background. Duchess lace, named after the Duchess Maria Henriette, future queen of Belgium and a patron of lace work, is made on bobbins. These techniques emerged in Belgium in the mid-nineteenth century and were widely used in making collars, fans, and clothing accessories. In the late nineteenth century a new kind of lace appeared that mixed the two styles and created highly decorative results.

Among the bobbin and needle lace pieces at the museum, perhaps the collection of fans is the most interesting. Most are from Belgium, made in chiffon needle lace; others combine Gauze point and the Duchess lace characteristic of that country.⁶ The fans date from the second half of the nineteenth century; made in the romantic style, they are also called *alfonsinos*. These pieces were highly valued by the Spanish aristocracy and bourgeoisie, and in fact the prestige of Belgian lace endured until the first quarter of the twentieth century. The design is a floral theme with large roses on a tulle background as seen in the fans no. [CE04985](#) and no. [CE12202](#) surrounded by lobe shapes and large leaves with a highly decorative, naturalistic design. Together, the fans stand out for their technical quality and in some cases they present painted scenes of domestic life or scenes depicting romance and recreational activities. The rods of the fans are usually made of fine materials. This type of fan, which was often given to brides, remained popular throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth, when modernism began to impose its new styles. After the First World War, these objects lost importance as the fashion and ornaments of the 1920s took hold.

Among the fans in the collection, two unique pieces are particularly interesting: the numbers [CE18006](#) and [CE27222](#). The first is attributed to Ricardo Mateos García of Salamanca, who was probably the designer or a shop owner. The piece dates from the second half of the nineteenth century. It is a *pericón*, a large fan used in flamenco dance. Its uniqueness lies in the painted scene that occupies a large part of the fan, with two female figures. One is in the central

7 *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, no. 172, 19 July 1977, p. 31.449.

8 Two articles in *ABC* and *El Diario Vasco* reported the purchase and the origin of the pieces.

9 The two lace making centres began their activity in the second half of the eighteenth century. They reached their peak in the nineteenth century, before the advent of the textile industry.

part of the fan, dancing, and next to her is an angel with a tambourine; on the right we see the inscription *Dubais*, who may have been the author of the scene. On the left is another female figure, carrying a lute and dressed in Turkish style. The two scenes are framed by bobbin lace work with a design of ferns, palm leaves and flowers twisting around the drawing. It is certainly an original creation, far removed from the symmetrical structures found in other pieces, and it incorporates motifs inspired by the tastes of the early twentieth century. The quality of the work and especially the originality of the design suggest that this was an exclusive commission.

The second fan, no. [CE27222](#), was acquired in 2007 for 10,077.60 €⁷ from *Subastas Segre* in Madrid. This fan had belonged to Queen Maria Cristina (1858-1929). According to press reports,⁸ it came from a buyer in Brazil who purchased three objects from the heirs of Queen Maria Cristina – a Fabergé box, a brooch and the fan, all documented and authenticated. The fan was made by the jeweller's *Leitao*, in Portugal. We do not know the reason for the gift or when it was made; *Leitao* was founded in 1822 and is still operating, and in fact is the most prestigious jeweller's in Lisbon.

The fan acquired by the National Museum of Decorative Arts is made of bobbin lace and has exquisite working in the rods, inside a velvet-lined box. The rods are simple, but the guards are richly decorated with symbols of the royal family: the Golden Fleece topped with a royal crown, two coats of arms, of the Spanish and Austrian royal families, and other symbols like the lotus flower, the Greek cross and the letter M inside a circle of gold. All these details are made with applications of 18 carat gold, platinum, diamonds, sapphires and polychrome enamels.

The backing of the fan, made of bobbin lace, is not particularly notable in terms of its technique. According to the documentation the lace was made in Belgium, but the technical and stylistic features do not necessarily identify it as such; it could in fact have been made in Portugal where historically there were two major production centres of bobbin lace, in Vila do Conde and Peniche.⁹ Portuguese lace was made with bobbins and the designs are often floral or geometric and naturalistic. The design of this fan is highly original, with a structure of pointed arches inspired by neo-Gothic styles; this architectural design is far removed from the floral designs of most of the lace of the romantic period of the second half of the nineteenth century and reflects neo-Gothic tastes, closer to the modernist aesthetic with its revival of medieval elements. According to the description of the piece, the fan is late nineteenth-century; but the description also quotes Javier Benito Alonso, an art historian, who believes that the precious stones were cut in the early 1900s. The architectural design of the lace also suggests that the fan was made after the turn of the century.

Fan made for Queen Maria Cristina by Casa Leitao of Portugal. National Museum of Decorative Arts. Madrid. MNAD_CE27222a and MNAD_CE27222b.





Household items

10 M^a Ángeles González Mena and Natividad Villoldo have studied the typology of the *soles* of the different areas of Spain, which began to be made in the sixteenth century.

11 The Marès Lace Museum of Arenys de Mar preserves many examples of Venetian lace from the Francesca Bonnemaison collection, which probably correspond to pieces made at the School for Women founded by Bonnemaison.

A large group of the lace article in the collection of the National Museum of Decorative Arts are cloths and tablecloths used for the decoration of the household. Many are in the popular tradition, like pieces [CE21950](#) and [CE21387](#) with the characteristic *soles* we find in several areas of Spain: radial forms made with a needle and repeated throughout the fabric, and framed inside a quadrangular structure.¹⁰

In addition to these works of popular tradition, there are also two more complex pieces. The first, number [CE25598](#) is a large tablecloth measuring 550 x 210 cm. The centre is made with a mixture of embroidery and needle lace; around it is an organdy fabric with embroidered insertions. The centre is lavishly decorated with flowers and leaves, and includes figures representing a group of people dancing hand in hand dressed in eighteenth-century clothes. The motifs were made in buttonhole stitch and contoured to give more relief to the figures. This type of needle work is called Venetian lace – not to be confused with the productions of the 1500s and 1600s, since this form dates from the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth. In spite of the name, this lace was not exclusively made in Venice, and in fact the same technique was also used in Spain.¹¹



One of three tablecloths made by Casa Zaida in 1929. National Museum of Decorative Arts. Madrid. CE21681.



12 Official State Gazette, no.. 51, 1 March 1977, p. 4867.

The last work is undoubtedly one of the most elaborate, in terms of both its technical quality and its design. It is a set of three tablecloths, two circular and one oval with catalogue numbers CE21680, CE21681 and CE21682. The pieces were made in 1929 by the Casa Zaida in Madrid and were presented at the Hispano-American Exhibition in Seville, where they won a Medal of Honour. These pieces were donated to the museum in 1977 by Consuelo Díaz Prieto and Arturo López Rodríguez, in memory of Quintina Rodríguez Díaz.¹²

The three tablecloths represent several scenes from the story *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha*. The two circular ones, CE21680 and CE21681, are divided into four arcs with small flowers in needle-made lace, framing four distinct scenes from the Don Quixote story. The oval tablecloth, no. CE21682, is divided into six arcs with small flowers in needle-made lace. This piece represents six scenes from the novel and between the scenes are portraits of the protagonists. All the scenes are in needle-made lace, both the motifs and the tulle background.

Needle-made lace is not very common in Spain. From the technical perspective these pieces are closer to Belgian needle lace; certainly, if they were created by Casa Zaida, they would have been made by the best workers.

Stylistically, these pieces constitute a clear departure from the standard floral designs, and strive to represent literary scenes in which the human figure is the protagonist. This would have required a considerable effort on the part of the textile designer.

The set of lace creations at the National Museum of Decorative Arts in Madrid: a collection worth studying.

In this short article we have only given a brief outline of this unusual collection. It is a first attempt, based on a consultation of its online catalogue and a study of the pieces in two visits to the museum, but we expect that a deeper study will uncover some more gems. The pieces made by the last lace makers to the Royal Household, now in the possession of the museum, and Joan Miquel Llodrà's ongoing study of Aurora Gutiérrez Larraya, the textile expert who assisted Rafael Domènech in the early days, suggest that there may well be more important specimens stored in the museum's drawers and cabinets. ●

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