

Almagro Lace

A centuries-old handcraft

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Almagro has historical links to the Order of Calatrava – first in the thirteenth century and later through the Fugger family of German bankers – that have been fundamental to the history of the city. The grandson of the Catholic Monarchs, Charles V, took on enormous debts with the Fugger bank in order to buy the electoral votes to become Emperor of Germany. Some of these debts were repaid with the income of the Order of Calatrava, which controlled properties including the mercury mines of Almadén, which were key to extracting silver and gold from the ores shipped to Spain from the New World. The *Fúcares* – the Spanish adaptation of the surname Fugger – set up their offices in Almagro and administered the Order's revenue for over a century. It was precisely during this period, spanning the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, that Almagro began to prosper as an economic and cultural force and the city took on more attractive appearance.

Almagro lace-makers in the 1930s.



Figure A. Blonde lace from Almagro. Fine silk thread for the point ground and a heavy silk thread for the solid areas and the gimp. Photo: © María Greil.



1 Part II, published 1615, chapter LII, letter from Sancha to her husband Sancho in which she writes: “Sanchica makes bone-lace, and gets eight maravedis a day, which she drops into a till-box, to help her toward household stuff; but now that she is a governor’s daughter, she has no need to work, for thou wilt give her a portion without it”.

2 “... said don Quixote ... How can it be that a girl who can hardly manage twelve lace bobbins can open her mouth to disapprove of the histories of knights-errant?...”. Part II of *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*, chapter VI.

3 This can be concluded from the texts of Hermann Kellebenz on the Fugger’s banking operations in Spain and Portugal. He writes that the industrialists Johann von Schüren and Johann Schedler married women from Almagro, which would indicate that they arrived in Spain unmarried. See *Los*

The years that followed saw the city fall into a slow decline, but Almagro has remained famous for its bobbin lace, and there is evidence to suggest that the craft can be dated back some distance in history. As we learn from Miguel de Cervantes in *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*, lace was already being made for sale in the early part of the seventeenth century¹, so an industry already existed in La Mancha. We do not know what type or what quality of lace was produced, although the number of bobbins that were used² suggest that it cannot have been of particular complexity. Perhaps local linen was used in its creation, since the fine threads must have been imported from abroad.

How did bobbin lace find its way to Almagro? There are a number of theories, but none that are fully supported by historical record. According to one, it may have arrived at the turn of the sixteenth century when Juana la Loca passed through Almagro from Flanders; another suggests that the Fugger family may have brought knowledge of it with them some years later. The latter theory is highly questionable, since the company is thought to have sent its delegates abroad without their wives and families³, and it is the women who would have demonstrated this handcraft to the local population.

Fugger en España y Portugal hasta 1560, Junta de Castilla y León. Consejería de Educación y Cultura. Salamanca, 2000, p. 653. There are also references to affairs between the family’s representatives and Spanish women, as well as illegitimate

children. See the news story dated 23 November 2013 on a talk by Arcadio Calvo, the official chronicler of Almagro, about Isabel Fugger, the illegitimate daughter of Jorge Fúcar Ilsung with Isabel Pinedo <http://goo.gl/6zPe2B>.

The Municipal Museum of Bobbin Lace and Blonde. Photo: © Almagro City Council.



4 Colección Alcabala del Viento, no. 61, *Almagro 1751*, Centro de Gestión Catastral y Cooperación Tributaria, Ediciones Tabapress (Grupo Tabacalera), Madrid, 1994, pp. 89-93.

5 Presumably a reference to linen.

6 GRUPO AL-BALATITHA: *Los pueblos de la Provincia de Ciudad Real a través de las descripciones del Cardenal Lorenzana*. Caja de Ahorro de Toledo. Obra Cultural. Toledo, 1985, p. 59.

We can infer that lace was present in the city, but documentary sources that might confirm this disappear from the history of Almagro until the time of Charles III of Spain, under whose reign the Ensenada census of 1751 recorded 20 lace dealers and 2 sellers of lace⁴. Several years later, in 1782, Cardinal Lorenzana gathered new information on Almagro, in which it was recorded that: *la fabrica y manufacturas estavlecidas en esta villa es la de encaje de hilo⁵ fino y basto, blondas y rehedezillas, que por los mismos vecinos de esta villa se ban a vender a todas las partes del reino* [the factory and manufacturing established in this town are of fine and course thread, blonde lace and nets, which by the people of this town are sold to all parts of the kingdom]⁶. This again provides evidence of a large number of people involved in the production of bobbin lace. Nothing is said about who these people were or what conditions they worked in, but we can infer that lace was made by women working in homes across Almagro and neighbouring towns, whose knowledge was passed directly from mother to daughter without the need for formal learning. What is clear is that these women created a sizeable artisan industry from which a great many male intermediaries grew wealthy.



Typical blonde lace displayed at the Municipal Museum of Bobbin Lace and Blonde. Photo: © Almagro City Council.

7 Doctoral thesis of Victoria López Barahona: *Las trabajadoras madrileñas del siglo XVIII. Familias, talleres y mercados*. Departamento de Historia Moderna. UAM, Madrid, 2015, p. 276 et. seq. For more information on the subject, see also José A. Nieto Sánchez: *Las artesanas madrileñas en el Antiguo Régimen*, Taller de Historia Social, <http://goo.gl/ofLJpf> and Victoria López Barahona: *Las trabajadoras madrileñas en la Edad Moderna*, Taller de Historia Social, <http://goo.gl/6HTEJ6>.

8 GARCIA RUIPEREZ, Mariano: *La industria textil en Castilla-La Mancha durante el siglo XVIII*. At the 1er Congreso de Historia de Castilla-La Mancha, Vol. 8, 1988, p. 374.

9 AHN. Consejos. Legajo 1525. Expediente 4. We draw on the fascinating study by Carmen Sarasúa, which contains an image of the piece referred to here, *La industria del encaje en el Campo de Calatrava. Siglo XVIII-XIX* (1995). The study can be read

In the eighteenth century, during the Enlightenment, the court of Madrid saw the creation of several bobbin lace school-workshops⁷ for impoverished women, supported by state funds. As in the rest of Europe, lace did not fall within the framework of a particular guild, belonging perhaps to the sector of *passementerie*. Laws excluded women from the guild structure, such that their work was not considered a qualified occupation and was poorly remunerated. Women who sold their produce did so for a pittance and with no official recognition, obliged by the necessities of the period⁸. Indeed, the work was in some cases more than a means of supplementing the household income, often constituting the family's only salary. Speed was vital to these lace-makers, who needed to produce as much as possible in the time available to them, yet quality was also important as competition was fierce. In Almagro, the situation was much the same.

The story of María Correas, then, should come as no surprise. Almagro-born, unmarried and resident in Madrid, in 1793 she sought permission to open a “school of lace and blonde lace”. To demonstrate her skills and acquire the teaching accreditation needed to open the school, she took an examination that required her to design and produce a sample of blonde lace. Her exquisite work won the approval of the examiners, and on 29 January 1794 she was officially awarded the title of *maestra*⁹. The work produced by María Correas is surprising for the fine thread used in the ground and the solid part of the motifs, presumably silk¹⁰. However, in the present we would not class this

online at the author's website: <http://goo.gl/4UBkM9>.

¹⁰ On the subject of silk in the Iberian Peninsula, see:

Comisión Española de la Ruta de la Seda: *España y Portugal en las rutas de la seda. Diez siglos de producción*

y comercio entre Oriente y Occidente, Universitat de Barcelona, Barcelona, 1996.



11 LARRUGA, Emilio:
*Memorias Económicas y
Políticas*, Vol. XVII, Madrid
1787.

12 MADOZ, Pascual:
*Diccionario Geográfico,
Estadístico, Histórico de
España y sus Posesiones de
Ultramar*, Vol. II, p. 65, voz
“Almagro”, Madrid, 1847.

13 Doctoral thesis of
Victoria López Barahona:
Las trabajadoras..., p. 344.
Although the author gives
a different name for María
Correas (María Carreras), on
the strength of the details she
provides I believe them to be
the same person.

Lace-makers in the 1950s. From the photographic archive of Almagro City Council. The image is from a private photograph, scanned for an exhibition organised by the City Council.

examination piece as “blonde lace”, describing it rather as a “plain lace of continuous threads with a point ground and gimp (vein), without additional pairs”, since neither the design nor the technical characteristics coincide with current notions of this style, accented by the contrast between an extremely light point ground made with fine twisted silk thread and solid parts in thicker silk, with pairs of bobbins added or removed at the maker’s discretion. Once again, we return to the uncertainty of knowing exactly what kind of lace was produced in Almagro.

The reformist airs of the Enlightenment and its school-workshops did not find their way to Almagro, but progress came through other means. According to Larruga¹¹ and Madoz¹², Manuel Fernández and his wife Rita Lambert arrived from Madrid in 1776 to open in Almagro “*una fábrica para hacer encajes de hilo y seda enseñando a fabricarlos a varias mujeres y niños de los pueblos adyacentes*” [a factory to make plain and silk lace, teaching the technique to women and children from the surrounding towns]. Perhaps María Correas¹³ was among these local employees and acquired from Rita Lambert the knowledge of fine lace that she demonstrated in her examination.

In 1796, the brothers Juan Bautista and Félix Torres, from Mataró, opened “blonde lace factories in Almagro and the neighbouring towns”. This answers the question as to the origins of Almagro’s blonde lace (Fig. A), which would presumably have been a modification of the Catalan technique. The quality of workmanship must have been excellent, and we learn that “*en 1841 los encajes y blondas de Almagro conseguían la medalla de oro en una exposición nacional en competencia con las blondas catalanas, que solo pudieron alcanzar la de plata*” [in 1841, lace and blonde lace from Almagro won the gold medal at a national

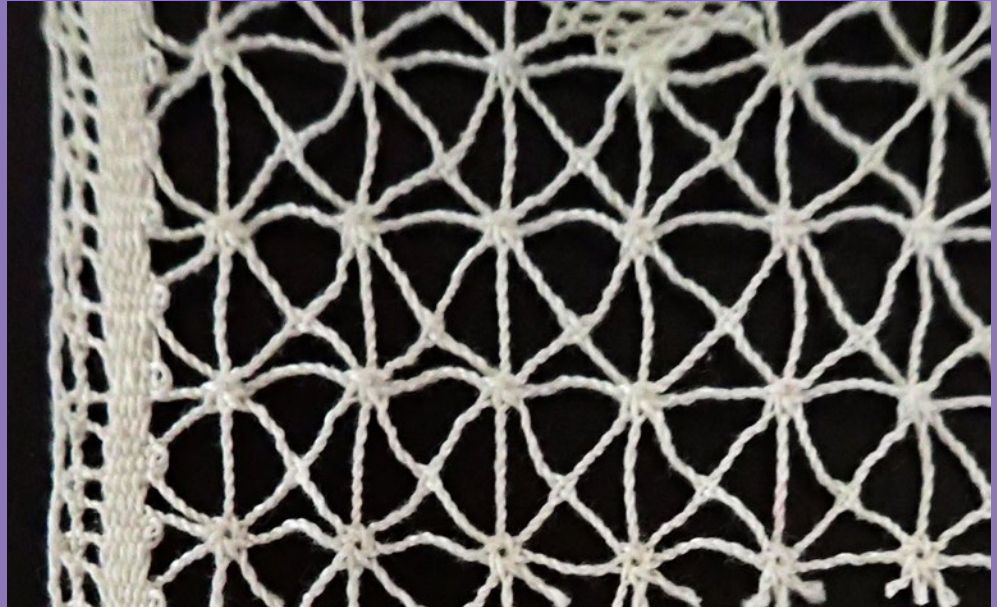


Figure B. “La bruja” stich from Almagro. Photo: © María Greil.

14 BARBA, Cándido: *El encaje de bolillos. Estudio etnográfico*. Diputación de Ciudad Real-Área de Cultura. Biblioteca de Autores y Temas Manchegos. Ciudad Real, 1986, p. 23.

15 Letter dated 1 May 1896 in Buenos Aires. The trading company *La Portuguesa*, which specialised in importing lace, is contacting Manuel Miñones, of Ponte do Porto, a seller of Galician lace. The text can be read in the *Reseñas Históricas* section of the website <http://goo.gl/zSaZ7Z>.

16 La Exposición Vaticana Ilustrada, versión de ‘La Esposizione Vaticana’ órgano oficial de la Comisión Promovedora, no. 47, Barcelona, 6 January 1889, p. 375.

17 BARBA, C.: *El encaje...*, p. 24.

18 Obituary in *Cronista Almagreño*, no. 116, February 2012, p. 34.

19 SANCHEZ-HERMOSILLA, Fr. Francisco: *Fr. Pedro Gerard y el Sindicato de Encajeras de Almagro* in *El Cronista Almagreño*, no. 29, march 2004, p. 18-19.

20 MARTINEZ CERRO, Manuel: *Encajeras Peninsulares Reunidas*, in *El Cronista Almagreño*, no. 81, December 2008, p. 39-40.

exhibition in which they competed with Catalan blonde lace, which was awarded silver]¹⁴. Almagro lace won renown beyond the borders of Spain and by 1886 it was being exported to Spanish America¹⁵.

Other sources attest to the quality of more ornate varieties of Almagro lace. The jury responsible for classifying the objects presented to mark the Sacerdotal Jubilee of Pope Leon XIII in 1888 awarded a gold medal to the “board created in Almagro, Ciudad Real, for an alb with gold and silver lace”^{16,17}.

Through the research of the Almagro local Francisco Sánchez-Hermosilla¹⁸ – sadly no longer with us – we learn that a Dominican Friar, Pedro Gerard, was known for his work with the most disadvantaged social groups in Spain in the early years of the twentieth century, and that these groups included the lace-makers of Almagro. It was perhaps Friar Gerard, then, who drove the creation of the Christian Union of Women Lace-Makers of Almagro. Only a few details are conserved about the organisation, recorded in a single folder “containing documents about a lace-makers’ union”, thanks to which we know that the union existed and was active until at least the early 1920s¹⁹. Among these documents are the General Regulations for the Mutuality of the Union of Women Lace-Makers of Almagro, signed by the Board of Directors and dated 27 February 1914. After Friar Gerard’s death, however, the uncertainties of Spanish society of the time put an end to this initiative to safeguard the rights of Almagro’s lace-makers.

In 1926 a number of lace-making workshops across Spain, including those in Almagro, formed an association to create the company *Encajeras Peninsulares Reunidas S.A.*, intended to be a major project that united producers across the profession. The aim was to establish a rational model for exporting Spanish lace, and a year later the Spanish American market took 90% of the total national production. However, its preference eventually turned to lace produced in Belgium due to the favourable currency exchange, and the Spanish project was halted by serious financial difficulties²⁰.



Figure C. Torchon lace which is not original from Almagro. Photo: © María Greil.

21 For example, *punto de la bruja* is produced in both Almagro and Camariñas, but the pairs are crossed differently. For the Galician version, see CANOURA, Concepción: *Raizame do encaixe galego*, p. 5; for the version produced in Almagro, see Fig. B.

22 The Danish case is illustrative: PETERSEN, Jette: *Tonderkniplinger og deres navne*, Tonder Museum, Tonder, Denmark, 2000.

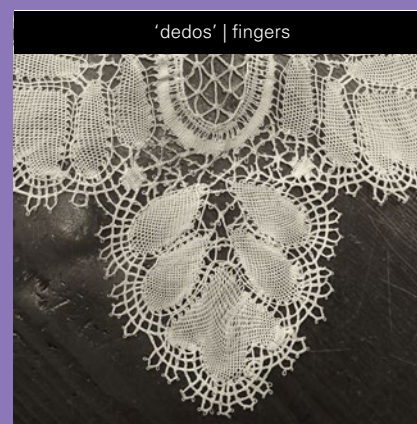
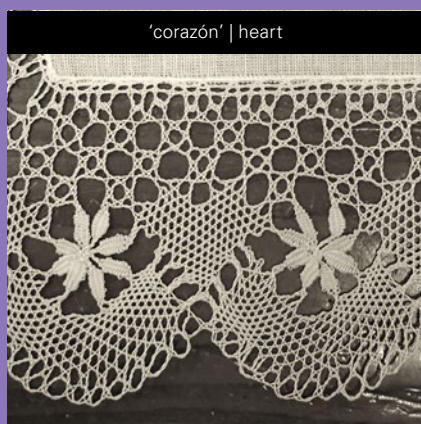
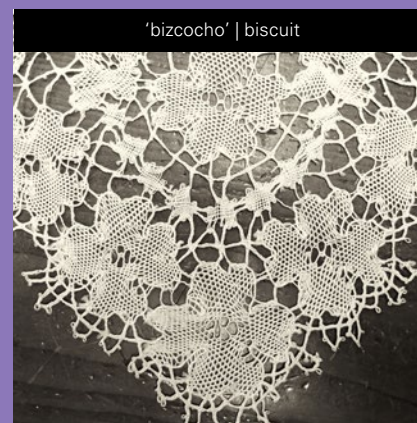
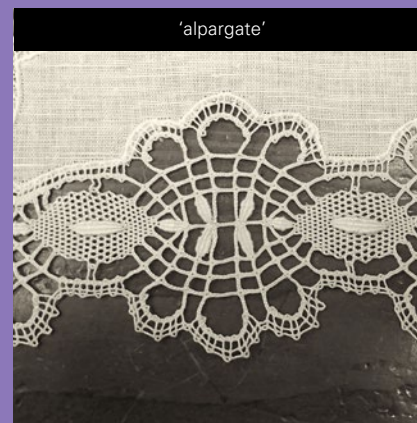
23 Information provided by Julia at *Artes El Villar*, Plaza Mayor 43, Almagro, <http://goo.gl/ZyZU7t>.

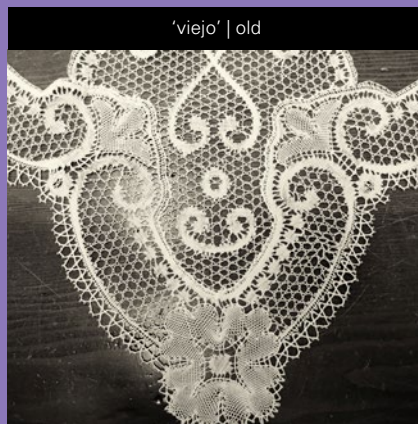
Almagro lace, now made with cotton thread, has qualities all of its own, but it also shares a number of characteristics with the Galician lace made in Camariñas²¹. As in other areas with a lace tradition, different forms are given distinct names²² that make them easy to identify and are immediately recognised by lace-makers²³, for example “la flor cubana” [Cuban flower], “avellanas” [hazelnuts], “las guindas” [cherries] and “las plumas” [feathers]. The influence of blonde lace is immediately apparent, both in the design and the technique; the original lace from Almagro was made in the guipure style, with numerous pleats and lanceolate leaves. This may have been typical of the very earliest Spanish lace, which would have found its way to Almagro. Nowadays it is also common to find “popular” or “torchon” lace (Fig. C), which is lighter in appearance.

As tastes evolved and our way of life changed over the course of the twentieth century, lace became outmoded and unwanted and interest in its production largely fell away. In Almagro, however, lace-making continued and the city strove to recover the identity of its textile past. Interest in traditional arts and crafts was rekindled, and in the 1970s Almagro’s impressive cultural heritage saw it named a national heritage site. Lace-making is now considered a legacy of the city’s past and receives official support from municipal authorities, although this extends only to teaching, which is offered at the Universidad Popular and the Museo del Encaje y la Blonda (printed manuals and research publications are notable for their scarcity). Lace is sold across the city and has become a major tourist attraction, together with the famed local aubergines, the Classical Theatre Festival and the Plaza Mayor.

Demand from uninformed and largely undemanding customers has led to a focus on quantity over quality. Times have certainly changed, as has Almagro with them, but we might ask whether the same applies to those anonymous lace-makers who continue to pursue their craft.

Different lace models made by Almagro lace-makers today. Photos: © María Greil.





Conclusion

Almagro and the surrounding area are renowned for the production of bobbin lace. It is not known precisely when or how the craft emerged, but evidence stretches back over several centuries, carried out by women in the domestic environment. Though production has fluctuated over the years, lace is still made in the area to this day and the industry is carefully conserved as a mark of identity of the city and a valuable tourist attraction. ●

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