

# Notes on catalan bobbin lace according to the snapshot from the weekly paper *Nuevo Mundo* at the beginning of World War I (1914-1915)

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<sup>1</sup> STEVENSON, David: 1914-1918. *Historia de la Primera Guerra Mundial*. Barcelona, Círculo de Lectores, 2013, p. 56.

Before World War I broke out, the world powers that would end up facing off thought that investing in military spending would discourage armed conflict. Polish banker Ivan Bloch predicted (*La Guerre Future*, 1898) that an outbreak of hostility would be so destructive that no one would come out ahead. He foresaw a war in the trenches and exhaustion, with defence being more powerful than offence and in which a prolonged killing would lead to colossal social and economic chaos. But European leaders didn't consider this idea<sup>1</sup>.

On 28 July 1914, after the assassination of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, this empire declared war on Serbia. Between 1 and 13 August, war broke out among the countries in Central and Western Europe, aligned in two blocks: the Alliance of Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire; and the Entente of France, Russia and England.

The German plan was to quickly conquer France by invading Belgium. On 20 August, the Germans entered Brussels. By the end of 1914, Antwerp, Mechelen, Cambrai, Ghent and Bruges had fallen, as had Valenciennes and Reims in the French canton. Industry was paralysed in a whole swath of towns known for their bobbin lace. The social and economic chaos quickly had a negative impact on the world economy.

Spain remained neutral, busy managing its decadence after losing its last colonies, calming conflicts in northern Africa and dealing with regional conflicts, including Catalan aspirations for self-government that in 1914 would lead to the creation of the Commonwealth of Catalonia.





### **An initiative of *Nuevo Mundo***

- 2 Henceforth *NM*.  
3 *NM* issue 1083, 10/10/14,  
p. 10.

*Nuevo Mundo* (1894-1933)<sup>2</sup> was a weekly paper published in Madrid that was one of the first to include photographs. Two and a half months after the war broke out, in the “Las mujeres” section, Cristóbal de Castro Gutiérrez published an article called “La guerra y las mujeres”<sup>3</sup>. The author took advantage of a report by Efrain Boeri in the Neapolitan paper *Il Mattino*, showing how the war had destroyed Belgian lace-makers and was endangering the industry in France, Austria, Hungary, Germany, etc.

*“There is a considerable vacuum in the universal market. Growing demand in the United States, Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Cuba and all of sumptuary America; consumption in neutral countries in Europe, for now, and the belligerents themselves when peace-time returns, require careful, firm attention from the nations that manufacture lace.”*

That October, the Venetian Chamber of Commerce held a congress with lace producers from Venice, Milan, Bologna, Padua, Verona, Rome and Naples. The goal was to study global consumption, estimate the impact of the loss of Franco-Belgian manufacturing and promote manufacturing and sales of bobbin lace through consulates and chambers of commerce.

De Castro called on Spanish businesspeople in the sector to hold their own congress. The work, essential done by women, could improve their economy. It was urgent; the Italians could get a monopoly on lace exports at the expense of other production areas like Spain. But it wouldn't be long before Italy was



Prominent members of the Organizing Committee of the National Lace Competition which was planned for 1915. NM issue 1092, 12/12/1914. On the right, Josepa Huguet Crexells.



- 4 *Gaceta de Madrid* issue 262, 19/09/1914, p. 758.
- 5 NM issue 1086, 31/10/1914, p. 14.
- 6 NM from issue 1083 (10/10/1914) to issue 1110 (17/04/1915).
- 7 NM issue 1087, 07/11/1914, p. 7 and p. 21.
- 8 NM issue 1092, 12/12/1914, p. 16.

also immersed in the conflict. On 23 May 1915, they declared war against the Alliance. Zeppelins would soon start bombarding emblematic cities like Venice and Padua.

In September, Spanish Prime Minister Eduardo Dato passed<sup>4</sup> a Committee for Initiatives to attract Spanish production and trade projects during the war. De Castro, in October<sup>5</sup> wrote: “Arte y utilidad. Trabajo para las mujeres”, in which he included the call for this initiative. With support from politician Juan de la Cierva, chairman of this committee, he anticipated the call for a National Lace Exposition, bringing together lace-makers and manufacturers.

23 issues of the NM weekly<sup>6</sup> over the course of six and a half months comprise a small dossier with articles (22 pages) and photographs (19 pages) providing a snapshot of the world of handmade lace in Spain.

In November<sup>7</sup>, a new section was added, “Exposición Nacional de Encajes”, in which writer Miguel España collected information on the main lace-making regions of the time: Galicia, Almagro, Alacant, Extremadura, Catalonia, etc.

On 12 December 1914, the creation of an organising committee was announced<sup>8</sup>, presided over by Marquesa de Squillache. The other members were: feminist educator María de Maeztu, Cristóbal de Castro, Nicolás M<sup>a</sup> de Urgoiti and Josefa Huguet Crexells, older sister of Pilar Huguet, who that year published *Historia y técnica del encaje*. The exposition was inaugurated in early February 1915 at the Ministry of State.



Griffon. Use of figurative guipure for curtains. The tacks in the background are notably irregular. Catalan lace, circa 1914. Photograph, M. España. NM issue 1109.



- 9 NM issue 1097, 16/01/1915, p. 29.
- 10 NM issue 1089, 21/11/1914, p. 21.
- 11 “El encaje de bolillos en Arbós”, NM issue 1097, 16/01/1915, p. 29; photographs issue 1098, 23/01/1915, p. 28.
- 12 NM issue 1108, 03/04/1915, p. 28; issue 1109, 10/04/1915, p. 28.

Demand for lace stagnated at the beginning of the war, leading the price to fall in proportion to the lack of orders and creating a stock of merchandise. In Spain there was no treaty or land or sea transport tariffs to protect the trade of local goods. The financial crisis made it impossible to receive funds from clients in America. Trade was blocked, so orders were, too. Production was left up to the lace-makers who either waited in hopes of better times or sold their products at a loss to wholesalers<sup>9</sup>. They weren’t under contract, income was irregular and, therefore, their situation became increasingly precarious.

The information in NM on Catalonia first appeared in a small article in 1914<sup>10</sup> mentioning that the ‘rander’ (lace traders) from Palamós were interested in participating in the exposition, sending a scrapbook to the paper with photos of local lace. Later, two issues from January 1915 covered bobbin lace in Arboç del Penedès (Tarragona)<sup>11</sup>. In April, lace from Arenys de Mar and the work of the Castells brothers were featured<sup>12</sup>. Arenys de Munt and Sant Andreu de Lllaneres, mentioned briefly, round out the short list of Catalan lace-making locations that doesn’t reflect the real state of handmade bobbin lace in the middle of the second decade of the 20th century.



Group of lacemakers working on Carrer Rafael Casanova in L'Arboç del Penedès in front of Ca l'Altet, followers of Cal Blai. In the foreground, the lacemaker Conxita Altet Romagosa. Circa 1913-1914. Postcard L. Roisin, issue 14 ARBOS. *Confeccionando encaje catalán*. Edt. Barcelona.

Without much luck, M. España presented Arboç as a town where people only made lace for entertainment before the Peninsular War (1808-1814), but after the town was burnt (1808) turned to lace-making out of need. He even dates blonde lace to this period. Really, however, most women in late 18<sup>th</sup>-century Arboç were already making blonde lace and the town was on the bobbin lace manufacturing and trade route in southern Catalonia. This biased view possibly came from writings and accounts from the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century from weaver Anton Sans Ventosa.

In early 1915, he said:

*“The work done today in Arboç is for appliqués, headboards, tablecloths, doilies, tray covers, table runners, bed linens, towels, etc. On the bed linens and towels, above all, they do truly beautiful work...the patterns are always different and vary widely, as they are always coming up with new things.”*

The operators in Arboç earned between 6 and 8 reals a day, 2 more than the best lace-makers.



▲ Fragment of a hunting scene made by Casa Castells (1914-1915). Museu d'Arenys de Mar, reg. no. 9492.

▼ Label from Casa Joaquim and Marià Castells (1911-1930). Museu d'Arenys de Mar.



After reading about the initiatives of NM, Barcelona-based exporter Gaietà Hidalgo had travelling salespeople and catalogues for the American markets ready in just days. He is the one that invited M. Espanya to visit Arenys. Surprised by the agility of the business, he gave in when he saw the designs made by Marià Castells Simon for Casa Castells.

*“...the meticulousness with which these industrialists manufacture their lace is extreme, not one of the pieces they make uses a pattern that is not exclusively created by and for the Castells brothers.”*

So, at that time Arenys de Mar was the most important producer of bobbin lace in Catalonia, and of all the lace traders in Arenys, Casa Castells was the oldest (1862) and most significant, known for its originality and highly valued in the Spanish, American and European markets. Arenys de Mar was where most of the exporters lived, while Arenys de Munt was home to the majority of what can be called artisan workers. They earned 2.5 pesetas a day and the best, 4 pesetas or more. The difference in price from other regions was due to their original patterns. Showing the amount of lace still produced, both in Arboç and in the towns along the Catalan coast, from Barcelona to Palamós, the journalist noted the significant difference in terms of the level of development of lace production compared to other parts of the peninsula. He questioned the extent to which Catalan lace making needed official help to expand its radius of action.

13 FARRÉ HUGUET, Joan Ramon: *Rescatant el vell arquetip de l'aranya. Un recorregut per la iconografia de les puntes al coixí de l'Arboç durant el segle xx*. Vilafranca. Edicions i Propostes Culturals Andana. 2018.

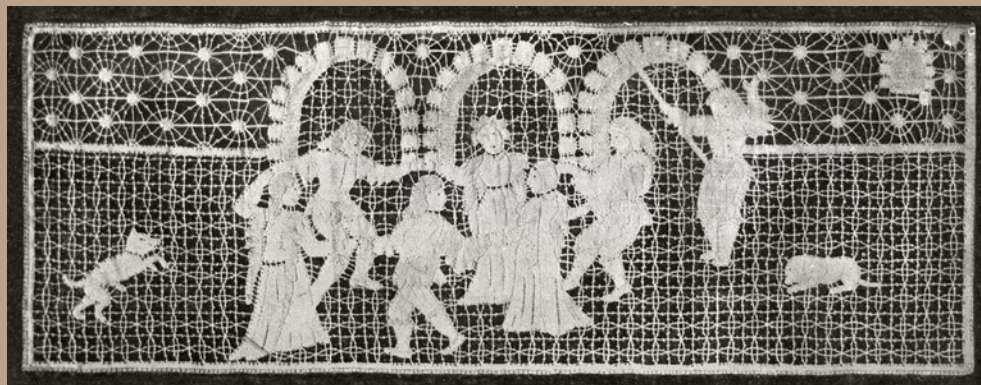
14 TREPAT i MASSÓ, Adela M<sup>a</sup>: "La dentelle ancienne dans les patrons d'Arbós del Panadès", *Travaux artistiques et scientifiques de 1<sup>o</sup> Congrès international des Arts Populaires. Prague 1928*. Paris, Editions Duchartre, 1931, Vol. II, pp. 77-78.

## Photographs of Catalan bobbin lace. Importance of figurative lace

The three pages published in *NM* with graphic material on Catalan lace included 15 photos of lace making. Of these, seven showed essentially plant-based motifs (flowers, leaves, branches and bouquets): corner pieces for bed linen, table linen, collars and appliqués for curtains and blinds. The other eight photos show appliqués for curtains and bedspreads, table runners or frontals, or simply squares of bobbin lace, all with figurative human and animal motifs. This could be just what the journalists selected, but we have noted this slight predominance. Although it shouldn't surprise us. Human and animal figures had been introduced in Catalonia in the second half of the 19th century as an innovation, along with the simplification of the artistic appearance of handmade lace when faced with the strong competition from machine-made lace. Most lace traders who used original patterns included figures. Although it was not well received by some, more conventional sectors, which preferred complex geometric and plant designs, considering them more appropriate for this textile discipline, it is true that they became popular, had their place and evolved over time<sup>13</sup>. In 1915, figures made of bobbin lace were common in Europe and other parts of Spain, however production was considerable in Catalonia and specifically in Arenys de Mar and Arboç. The diversification of a single pattern was also characteristic, lending exclusivity to the work compared to serial machine production. In the review of Spanish lace making in *NM* we did not find any figurative lace from Galicia, Extremadura or Novelda. There are, however, three figurative appliqués among the 15 pieces photographed in Almagro, and above all in Monòver we also see a significant presence of figurative work: five pieces out of the eight total. It is important to note that four of the Catalan pieces are figurative scenes, featuring several figures (human and animal) making up a story: hunting, popular dances or fantasy figures. Monòver also had a hunting scene. We would have to look into whether this phenomenon is an indicator that the places where they were created and made had been using figures for some time and moved beyond just individual figures.

Of the photographs from Arboç, we can say the scene of deer hunting is the one Adela M<sup>a</sup> Trepas Massó commented on in the message read in Prague at the 1st Congress on Public Art in 1928<sup>14</sup>. Created by Casa Blai in Arboç, it supposedly won a prize in Madrid around 1912-14. The lace maker, photographed in the same shot, was Conxita Altet Romagosa, daughter of Sebastià Altet Sans of Cal Blai, who was in turn the son of Eulàlia Sans Parera, from the lineage of lace traders in Arboç that had been making and trading lace

► Catalan figurative bobbin lace s.p., with a dance scene or popular game. On the upper third of the piece, the circular pattern in the background, laid out in a regular fashion, ensures the tacks are even more orderly for a wider stitch. On the lower two-thirds, the background is large braided openwork. Circa 1914-1915. Photograph, M. España. *NM* issue 1109.



Evolved figurative bobbin lace. Hunting scene. Casa Castells from Arenys de Mar. The figures are framed by the ornamentation itself, a story about hunting on a background of branched cable stitch with edge stitching. In the middle, two griffins facing each other on either side of a plant shape, in the Renaissance style, with a background done in mesh and branched stitches with edge stitching. Circa 1914-15. Photograph, M. España. *NM* issue 1109.

**15** SIMÓN ABELLÁN, Pere: *L'Arboç (1807-1836) segons l'Anton Sans, teixidor de lli*. L'Arboç Town Hall, 2002, p. 15.

**16** MATEOS PÉREZ, Prudencio: "La Sociedad española de Amigos del Arte", *Villa de Madrid* issue 94, 04/1987, p. 74.

**17** VALVERDE, Marqués de: *Catálogo de la Exposición de Lencería y Encajes Españoles del siglo XVI al XIX*. Madrid, SEAA, 1915.

for at least two generations. In 1764, the grandfather, Anton Sans Vilaplana, opened a shop in the renowned Cal Blai, and his father, Anton Sans Ventosa, mentioned previously, we know commissioned and traded lace in various parts of Catalonia, Alcañiz and, above all, Valencia<sup>15</sup>.

### Another exposition takes the place of the National Lace Exposition

On 19 May 1915, at the National Library in Madrid, the *Exposición de Lencería y Encajes Españoles del siglo XVI al XIX* (Exposition on Spanish Lace and Linen of the 16th to 19th century) was inaugurated, sponsored by the *Sociedad de Amigos del Arte*. This association, with ties to the crown and state subsidies, was made up of a long list of aristocrats and members of the bourgeoisie. With only male members, its mission was to safeguard the essential values of Spanish art. Eduardo Dato and Juan de la Cierva (supposedly the protector of the *NM* initiative) are on this list of friends of the arts<sup>16</sup>. The government finally supported digging out old examples from private collections. The catalogue has a famous preface by Marqués de Valverde<sup>17</sup>. At the end of his notes it read:

*"... the models presented here... Shall serve to preserve true Spanish patterns, to be one day reproduced in modern works, safeguarding our particular good taste from times past."*



Bobbin lace work made by the Escola de Puntaires d'Argentan. Offering from the Comité de Secours aux Blessés Militaires to the Red Cross Committee of the USA. Homage to the assistance received during World War I. National Museum of Washington. Postcard of A. Lejeune ed. *Dentelles véritables*, Paris. After 1918.



18 *NM* issue 117, 05/06/1915, p. 4.  
19 *NM* issue 1161, 07/04/1916, p. 11.

As a luxury consumer, the aristocracy always acted as a cultural oligarchy regarding the value and use of artistic products. The textile arts and lace, specifically, are particularly indebted to the more well-off customers who commissioned pieces, which gave them the right to control and set the criteria. Urgoiti wrote letters, to no avail, to Minister of Development Javier Ugarte calling for official protection for the *NM* initiative to host the exposition supporting producers and lace makers<sup>18</sup>. Ugarte promised help, but added:

*"I don't believe it is in the best interest of those involved in the exposition that it takes place at the same time as that of the Amigos del Arte."*

Urgoiti's proposal to hold the inauguration to that autumn was welcomed, but in April 1916 De Castro was still waiting for Spanish lace makers to participate in an exposition<sup>19</sup>. In the end it was all devoured by possibilism.

Undoubtedly, the decline of foreign lace makers during the war allowed handmade bobbin lace in Spain, and particularly in Catalonia, to revive and increase production. However the same thing happened with machine-made lace and the textile sector in general. A supposedly short war extended throughout Eastern Europe, the Orient and the African colonies. The United States, which had enjoyed unprecedented economic prosperity, when faced with the dangers of a submarine attack, declared war on Germany in April 1917. The Great War would rage on until November 1918. ●