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Lace

Once the ultimate signifier of wealth, this delicate fabric has a political and largely female history, explains Kassia St Clair

During the 16th and 17th centuries, wearing lace was a statement. And that statement was a blunt one: I have wealth, taste and power, and the proof is displayed upon my person. When King Henry III of France, for example, wanted to intimidate his own Estates General (an advisory legislative body) in 1577, he turned up wearing 4,000 yards of lace. Queen Elizabeth I owned reams of it, too: a single petticoat belonging to her had more than eight yards of silver lace worked onto it. Laws were passed specifying who could and could not wear certain kinds. And, in the mid-1660s, the French finance minister embarked on a daring spree of industrial espionage in an effort to move the focus of the lace industry from Venice to France, largely so that Louis XIV, the Sun King, would at least be supporting French industry with his extravagant purchases.

Lace is an effective signal of privilege because it is purely decorative. It does not keep the wearer warm, dry or modestly covered, it snags with alarming ease and (particularly the traditional white kind) needs vast amounts of cleaning, pressing and starching to look its best. Its precise origins are difficult to pin down, but it was



'Red Lace Curtains', from approx £345, &Drape (anddrape.com)



From top 'Sicily Lace' pillowcase, £327, and top sheet, £433, both Once Milano (oncemilano.com); a portrait of Queen Elizabeth I (with a fine lace ruff) by Nicholas Hilliard; *Lean on Me, Lean on Me 01* artwork in lace by Jingyi Li, £4,400, Gillian Jason Gallery (gillianjason.com)



PICTURES: CECILIE JEGSEN, ALEXANDER COOKE, ALAMY, SHUTTERSTOCK/LEAN ON ME 01 (2025), ARTWORK BY JINGYI LI, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, ABSENT GALLERY (CHINA), AND GILLIAN JASON GALLERY (UK)



Clockwise from left 'Orsina' lace curtain, £265 per m, Sahco (sahco.com); 'Kinship II' floor lamp by Lana Launay, approx £4,965, Love House NY (lovehouse.ny.com); 'Ribbon' lace-effect sheer, £144 per m, Harlequin (harlequin.design); 'Cosette Lace' wallcovering in 'Sand', £156 per roll, Schumacher (schumacher.co.uk); Madonna in a lace look by designer Maripol at the 1984 MTV Video Music Awards



definitely in use by the mid-16th century. It evolved from other kinds of decorative needlework including filet embroidery (which was increasingly being used to decorate the edges and seams of fine linen in the 15th century) and passementerie trimmings fashioned from braid or cord. Most lace was made with linen thread, which came from flax, an effortful crop to grow, process and spin. Other kinds were made from black silk, often used to add subtle texture to darker fabrics, or threads made from metals including gold, silver or copper, which were popular with royal courts.

Lace-making was done by women, the skills and techniques passed down through generations and among friends, so that particular geographic areas became adept at certain styles. Lace can be made using either bobbins or needles. Needle laces are built up using detached buttonhole stitches, usually over a pattern. Bobbin laces are also built up over a design that is pinned to a pillow or board to keep the design taut and flat. The bobbins, each of which is wrapped around with a length of thread, are plaited, twisted, knotted or woven together over the printed motif, using pins placed in the pattern to hold the stitches being worked in place. Simple designs might need only a handful of bobbins; more complex pieces require up to 600, and a great deal of planning and expertise to complete.

Today, most lace is made by machine. Hand-lace-making persists in some places, but is no longer an assumed skill possessed by women and used to fill their idle hours. As a result, the statement that lace makes – if not its beauty – has all but disappeared.

