

## Torchon Basics

### *About Torchon Lace*

Lace Resources International provides this Information Note **free of charge**.

This material is original work, written by Judith Markham for Lace Resources International. Similarity to material from any other source is entirely coincidental.

This free Information Note remains the property of Lace Resources International and the information contained in this free Information Note is covered by international copyright conventions.

You may use this free Information Note for your personal use. Distribution of this material for any *for profit or non-profit* activities, including teaching, requires special licensing. Contact Lace Resources International for details:

Via Web page            [www.laceresources.com.au/license](http://www.laceresources.com.au/license)

Via e-mail                [admin@laceresources.com.au](mailto:admin@laceresources.com.au)

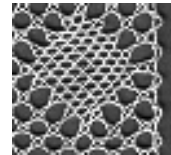
Via snail mail            Lace Resources International  
                                  PO Box 465  
                                  Moonee Ponds, Victoria 3039  
                                  Australia

## What Is Torchon Lace?

A bobbin, or *pillow lace*, torchon lace is a regular, geometric lace that fits loosely into the category of *grounded* laces. Loosely because, in most of the laces that fall into this category, the ground stitches are simple and are used to accentuate the heavily patterned areas. Torchon differs in this respect, often having less pattern area than ground stitch areas. The reason being that torchon lace has a great many traditional ground stitches that are highly decorative and lend themselves to use as a feature.

Grounded laces are those where the pattern and net is worked together, with threads travelling from section to section without any break in the working.

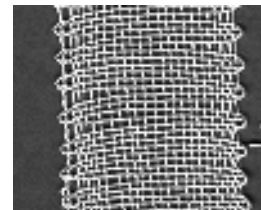
Originating in France in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, torchon lace is characterised by both the angle at which the patterns are plotted and worked (45-degrees to the mounting edge) and, in the pattern areas, the extensive use of an open weaving stitch that forms diagonally crossing lines of threads. This weaving stitch is called *half stitch*<sup>1</sup>.



All torchon shapes worked in the body of the pattern are sharply angular.

This was the simplest of the grounded laces to make and was, therefore, the cheapest of the commercially made bobbin laces. An old name for it is Gueuse, or beggar-woman's lace<sup>2</sup>, referring to the open or 'holey' texture and the extensive use of half stitch in the pattern areas.

At the time, the prized dress laces were exceedingly fine, with very little space between the stitches, and with pattern areas worked primarily in an even weaving stitch that resembles closely woven fabric. This stitch is called *cloth stitch* or linen stitch. Additional threads were added into the cloth stitch areas to make the work very dense and were discarded when no longer required. Any use of half stitch, as a weaving stitch, was minimal indeed. Torchon lace has always differed from those finer laces, not only because the thread was very coarse to suit its (then) intended end uses, but because each torchon pattern requires a constant number of threads in the working. The result of a constant number of threads is a more open texture in the woven cloth stitch areas.



Torchon lace was primarily intended for household use such as table linen, curtains and bed linen, but it was also used by the less wealthy in the population to trim underclothing, night attire and garments such as cloaks. Today, there are no restrictions on the end use of this lace; if you wish to work with heavy thread for a tablecloth there is

---

<sup>1</sup> The example top right shows a diamond shaped block worked in half stitch and surrounded by individual ground stitches.

<sup>2</sup> Mincoff, E & Marriage, M. S. Pillow Lace – A Practical Handbook, Ruth Bean: Bedford 1981.

a suitable thread available and if you wish to work in fine thread, you can draw up a suitably fine pattern. With the ready availability of threads, plain and coloured, fine and heavy, we can design for any garment or other use we wish, on any scale we wish and there will usually be a thread suitable for us to use. If we cannot find a particular colour in the thread size we wish to use, often it is possible to dye the threads ourselves.

Historically, torchon has always suffered from what can only be described as 'a very bad press'. One reason was the open texture of the lace, which was so different to the closely woven, highly prized laces. Another reason was to do with the (apparently) poor quality of thread used in its manufacture<sup>3</sup>. I say "apparently" because, in printed articles of the day, it is not always clear whether the lace was assumed to be of inferior quality just because it was inexpensive, whether it actually was of inferior quality throughout its manufacture, or only at the end<sup>4</sup>. Either way, it was a stigmatized form of lace and the stigma stuck. Even today, in some lacemaking areas, torchon still carries a degree of stigma with some teachers considering it to be a lace only for beginners. A prejudiced attitude that totally ignores the very many complex stitch formations traditional to the lace, and the range of practical applications.

Over several years of teaching bobbin lace, I have developed a great appreciation of torchon for the following reasons:

- It offers practical applications well beyond the majority of other laces.
- Offers a vast array of decorative grounds that add a range of textural elements to the patterns.
- The design possibilities are very exciting.

Of the five laces I was taught to make, torchon and Honiton lace, are the two that have provided me with the most scope for original design. I don't mean just building Torchon patterns by rearranging the common elements, but using those many and varied elements to achieve intended outcomes and playing with those elements to explore possibilities.

Below is a listing of items that can be made using torchon lace techniques but, obviously, you must start at the beginning and learn gradually. At the beginning, you will have to learn stitches and work simple pieces, such as edgings for handkerchiefs, tablemats etc. Gradually you will build the skills necessary to work more complex pieces. Later, if you wish to take on the whole complexity the craft offers, then you can start to design your own patterns and who knows where that might lead!

---

<sup>3</sup> References to Torchon Lace may be found in many diverse places, ranging from the Complete Oxford English Dictionary, to library collections of 19<sup>th</sup> Century household journals and trade advertisements.

<sup>4</sup> At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, machine made lace cost so little that the hand made lace manufacture could not compete. In attempting to keep down the cost of the hand made lace, often thread of an inferior quality was substituted, designs became simpler and the quality dropped. The finer forms of lace suffered the most, as these laces took longer to make and the price had to reflect that.

**What items can be made with this lace?*****Dress lace***

- Collars: one or two piece round collars, square, sailor, upright or shawl.
- Cuffs: deep or shallow, straight or shaped.
- Dress yokes
- Frills or ruffles for sleeves or necklines
- Trimming or insertion pieces for lingerie

***Edging lace:***

- Either straight lengths or worked with right angle corners for handkerchiefs, table linen or bed linen, vanity sets etc. May be narrow or wide.
- Doilies and mats that can be circular, rectangular or square.

***All lace:***

- Square or rectangular mats made solely of lace
- Panels for inserting into fabric

***Miscellaneous:***

- Bookmarks, hair bands and other accessories.
- Panels for mounting or framing
- Wall hangings
- Lace patchwork

**What thread can be used?**

Threads suitable for making Torchon lace include crochet cotton (No's. 20 to 100), pure linen thread from coarsest to finest, many sewing machine cottons and silks, other silk threads, some synthetic threads and a range of specialist lacemaking threads manufactured from strong Egyptian Cotton.

The thread size is dependent upon the grid size used for laying out the pattern.

## The Structure of Torchon Lace

Torchon patterns are graphed on squared graph paper, along the diagonal (45 degrees) without any deviation in the stitch spacing<sup>5</sup>. Consequently, the pattern elements within the body of the lace are all angular, geometric shapes. The shaped, outer edge of the lace is the only place where curves will be found in true torchon patterns. Patterns featuring woven elements with rounded sides, within the body of the lace, must be called mixed laces.

Torchon patterns should be boldly patterned and the patterned areas should be highlighted by the selection of the surrounding ground stitches. The lace is very much about weight and balance and this is achieved through the judicious use of woven areas and variously textured ground stitches.

The pattern elements may be worked in either **half stitch weaving** (see p.1) or **cloth stitch weaving** (see p.1). The use of half stitch in the pattern areas, or the borders of torchon, is a primary and distinctive characteristic. There is no other lace that incorporates half stitch weaving in either the quantity or frequency of Torchon Lace patterns.



---

<sup>5</sup> The exception being the shaped outside edge of the headside element.