

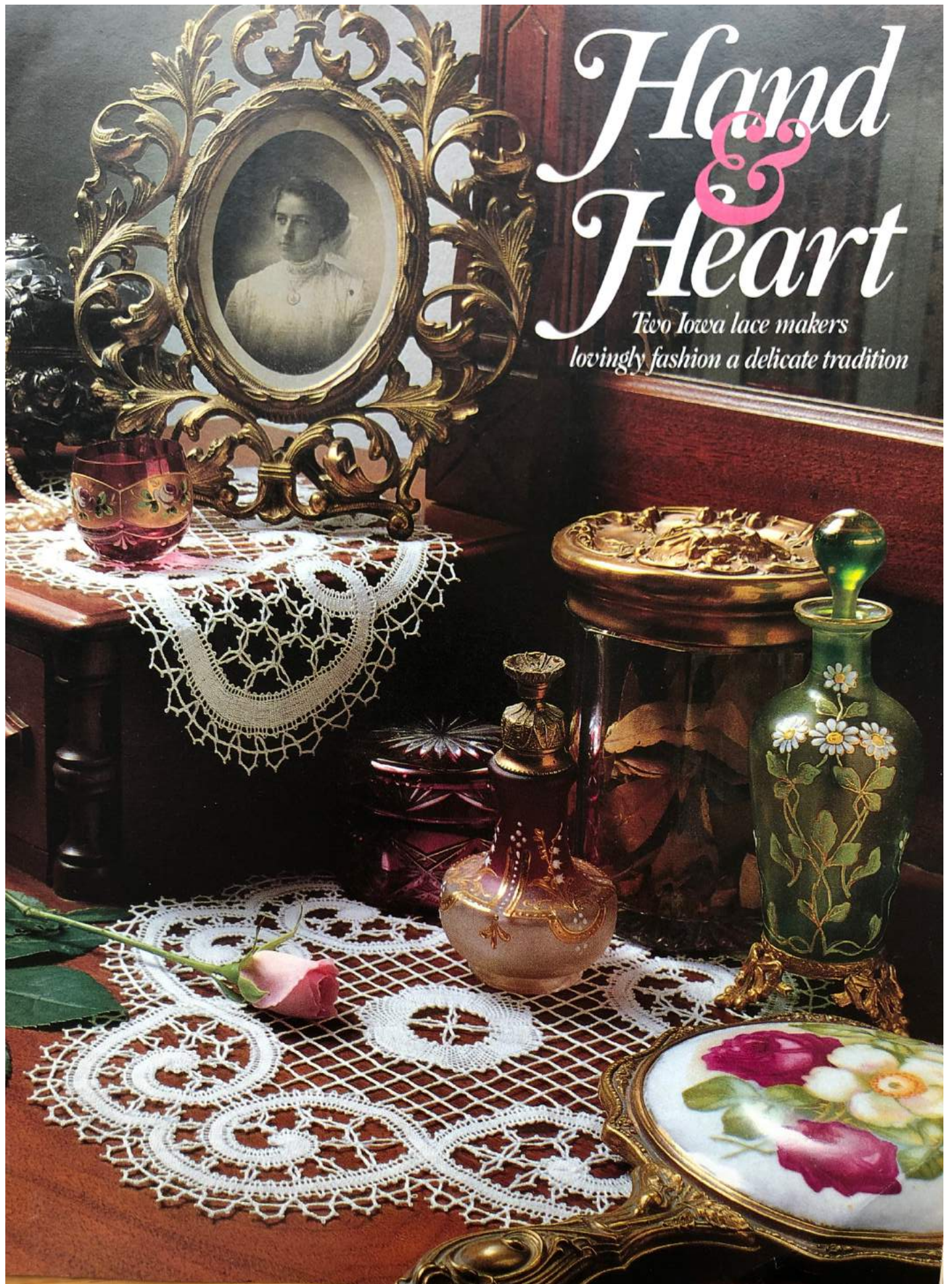
Country Home

DECORATE
WITH WHAT
YOU *Love*

Style
Secrets *from*
16 WELCOMING
HOMES

Hand & Heart

*Two Iowa lace makers
lovingly fashion a delicate tradition*



Hand & Heart

By Deborah Hufford



"I love to work with a needle and thread. Lace making is part of me. It's like an old friend."

Genevieve Nahra Mougin



It has been 70 years since Genevieve Nahra Mougin sat on her mother's lap and,

with the awkward little fingers of a child, tried to form the simple loop from which Phoenician needle lace is made. Today, many years and millions of stitches later, lace making is second nature to her. Her nimble fingers fly knowingly, automatically, through the most intricate stitches even as she talks and laughs.

"I was seven when I first learned to make lace. I've always loved to work with a needle and thread," says Genevieve, who lives in Bettendorf, Iowa. "Lace making is a part of me. It's like an old friend."

Indeed, her lace is more than a friend; it is an integral part of an ancient ethnic heritage practiced by her mother, her grandmother, and Middle Eastern women centuries before her. Phoenician lace is so old that some scholars believe it predates its better-known cousin, European

lace, by more than 1,000 years and was introduced to Europe by 12th-century crusaders.

Genevieve, or Genny, as her friends call her, is among a handful of women in the United States who still practice the ancient and obscure artistry of Phoenician lace making, also called Armenian, Syrian, or Arabian lace. The lace is often composed of concentric circles of very intricate geometric designs.

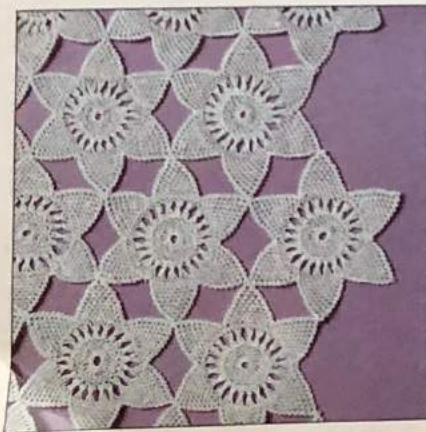
The daughter of turn-of-the-century Lebanese immigrants and the oldest of 11 children, Genny's lace making was not a child's idle pastime but a partial means of survival for her large family. Her parents had fled what was, even then, a war-torn Beirut to come to a land of peace and promise. Genny's mother brought with her the valuable expertise of lace making. When Genny was old enough, she too made lace, and together they would churn out doilies, handkerchiefs, and pillowcases.

Continued on page 114

Above: Genny Nahra Mougin continues an ancient ethnic legacy—Phoenician lace making—practiced by her mother and grandmother in their native Lebanon. For

her old-world artform, she uses fine linen and silk thread from France and a cache of needles imported from Germany. The smallest is a tiny sliver of silver only an

inch long. Opposite and below: Genny's lace is often made up of concentric circles of intricate designs, a characteristic pattern of Phoenician lace.





“My aunt used to carry the lace around door-to-door in heavy suitcases and sell it to wealthy people,” she says.

A particular source of inspiration for Genny was her 1950 pilgrimage to Lebanon where she visited her grandmother and took in the richness of her parents’ native culture. She remembers visiting a museum in Beirut where she discovered how ancient her art was. “I saw some lace that was made of straw by the ancient Phoenicians before Christ. It was beautiful.”

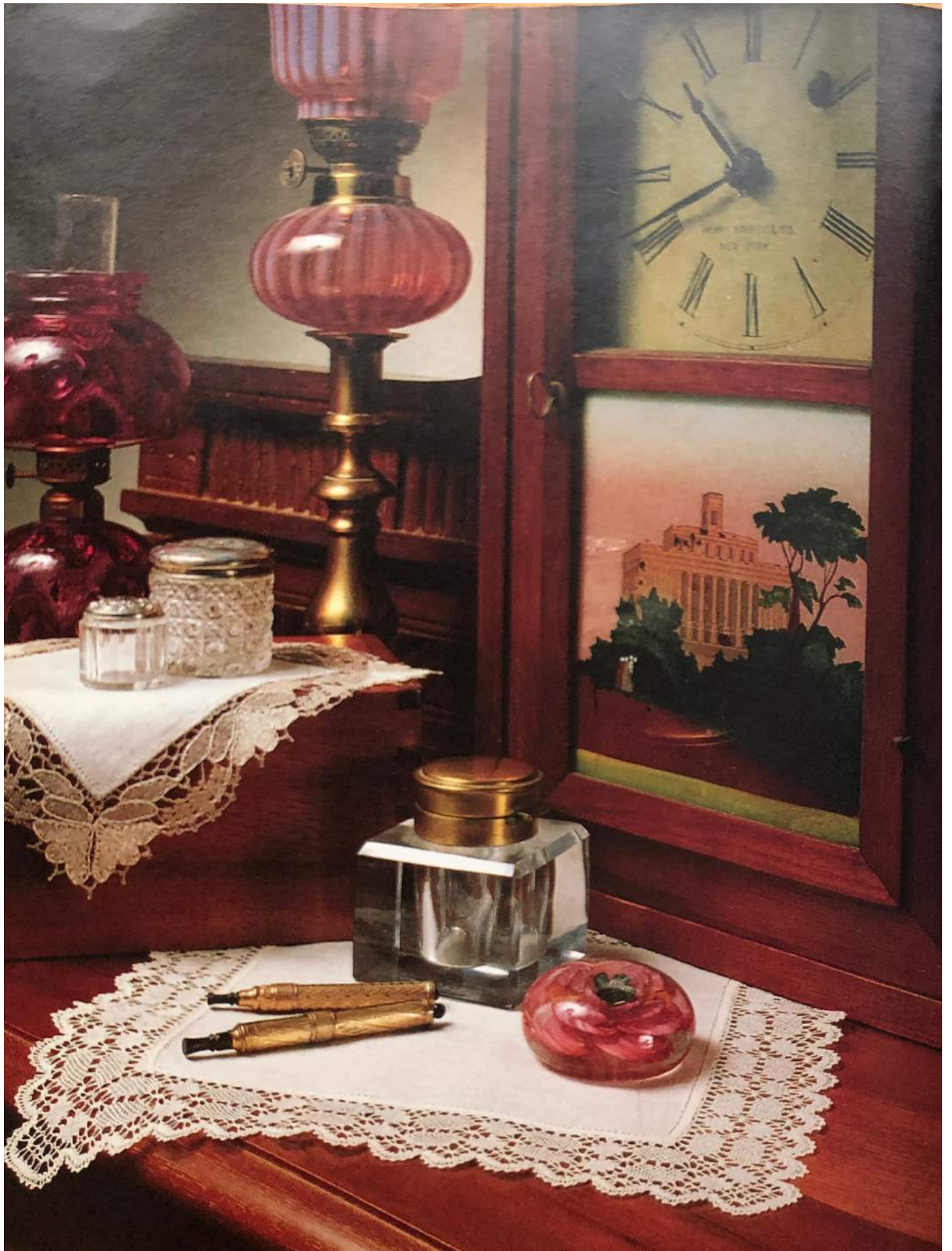
Over the years, Genny has learned to create most of her designs without a pattern. Her most ambitious project is a 48-inch round tablecloth she began in 1933 as a bedspread for her trousseau. “I stopped working on it during World War II because thread was so scarce,” she says. Years later, she completed it as a tablecloth instead.

One of her prized pieces is a baby pillowcase made of stars designed after one her mother had made long ago. Genny has also tried to copy a butterfly motif from her mother’s repertoire. “My mother had a head scarf—a babushka—that had beautiful lace butterflies. I’ve tried and tried that design but I’ve lost it. That’s the trouble with doing things from memory,” she says.

Genny has continued her ethnic heritage through a folk art apprenticeship program in which she taught others her skill. The legacy of her lace is also preserved in the Iowa State Historical Society building where her huge tablecloth is part of the permanent collection, and she has received accolades from the Iowa governor.

In 1984, Genny received her crowning laurel. The National Endowment for the Arts awarded her the Heritage Fellowship as “a master traditional artist” who has helped to shape artistic traditions and to preserve cultural diversity in America. The commemorative plaque hangs above Genny’s favorite living room chair. There, she sits making her lace; her familiar stitches become delicate links in time that bridge generations and continue an ancient and elaborate tradition. □





Hand & Heart



“Bobbin lace has opened up a wonderful world for me. I’m challenged by all there is to learn.”

Doris Southard



Doris Southard is a bobbin lace maker, but to watch her it seems she must be a wizard. She sits before a half-moon pillow of emerald velvet. In the center of the pillow is a maze of hundreds of pins from which radiate a multitude of thread strands. The ends of the strands are wound around decorative little bobbins made of wood, bone, porcelain, and glass, bejeweled with glittering beads, and bearing hand-painted, carved, or etched designs.

Her hands move deftly and rhythmically, intertwining the linen threads with the bobbins. As she works the bobbins click in a musical cadence like chimes. Ever so slowly, a lace design begins to take shape within the cluster of pins.

The elaborate process seems magical but, insists Doris of Cedar Falls, Iowa, “bobbin lace making is actually very simple. There are only two basic movements: ‘twist’ and

‘cross.’ Most lace making is based on variations of those two elements.”

Doris should know. She is one of the foremost American experts of bobbin lace making and she has been a prime instigator in its revival. Among her accomplishments, she has authored a book on bobbin lace making, she has demonstrated the craft in a video, and for the last 20 years she has taught classes and given seminars across the country.

“Today there are over three thousand bobbin lace makers in the United States. There’s been a revival in Europe as well,” she says, adding that bobbin lace originated in Europe in the 16th century or earlier.

Yet, for all the energy she has devoted to promoting bobbin lace making, she shrugs off any credit for its growing popularity. “What I’m maybe responsible for is making it easier for beginners to learn. I had a difficult time when I first started.”

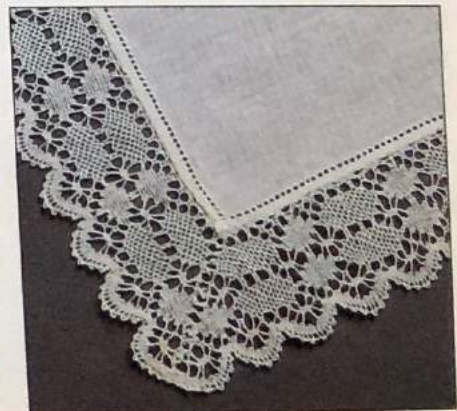
Doris was first inspired to learn bobbin lace making when she read

Continued on page 115

Above: Doris Southard is a nationally recognized bobbin lace maker who plies her craft by intertwining threads through a pattern of pins in a pillow. She guides

the threads with elaborately carved bobbins. Below left: Doris fashioned this lace edging from a contemporary design by the Finnish lace maker Eva-Liisa

Kortelahti. Below center: Bloemwerk is a heavier Belgian lace with flourishes. Below right: Tørchon lace is a coarse lace that is relatively simple to make.



a magazine article about it in 1950. "Back then there were very few books on the subject, there was no place to get equipment, and it took me years before I even found another person who made bobbin lace," says Doris.

When she could find no sources for tools, she improvised. Her original equipment bore little resemblance to the elaborate bobbins and pillows she now uses. "My first pillow was a roll of toilet paper," she laughs, "and I used clothespins for my bobbins."

Doris started teaching bobbin lace in 1968 at the local YWCA. Since then, she has introduced thousands to her craft. Students usually start with simple designs that require few bobbins. "The more intricate the design, the more bobbins are required," she says. "Bobbins are really fascinating. In the old countries men would make them for their fiancées as symbols of marriage proposals. They would put romantic inscriptions on them. Many are valuable collector's items today." Doris' collection includes many antique, handcrafted, and international bobbins. She has used as many as 120 bobbins for a lace design, but she says extremely detailed traditional lace may require a thousand bobbins.

Most of Doris' work includes traditional forms of lace. Her favorite laces are called *Tønder*, a Danish lace characterized by delicate flower, leaf, or geometric designs, and *Bloemwerk*, a simple, heavier Belgian lace.

"It surprises me that young beginning students who master the art become more traditional. They strive to do really fine old traditional designs," Doris says, but adds that she encourages students to make whatever type of lace satisfies their creative instincts.

Lace making has provided a boundless outlet for Doris' own creative instincts, too. "Bobbin lace has opened up a wonderful world for me. If someone would have told me thirty years ago that I'd be doing all this, I never would have believed it. I'm constantly challenged by all there is to learn about lace. I never tire of it." □

