

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Textile Society of America Symposium  
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

---

1992

## Lace Production On The Island Of Pag, Croatia, From 1900 To The Present

Vjera Bonifacic  
*University of Alberta*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

---

Bonifacic, Vjera, "Lace Production On The Island Of Pag, Croatia, From 1900 To The Present" (1992).  
*Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 561.  
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/561>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

LACE PRODUCTION ON THE ISLAND OF PAG, CROATIA,  
FROM 1900 TO THE PRESENT

VJERA BONIFAČIĆ

Department of Clothing and Textiles, 115 Home Economics  
Building, University of Alberta, Edmonton AB, Canada, T6G 2M8

INTRODUCTION

In her publication "Peacocks and Penguins: The Political Economy of European Cloth and Colours", Jane Schneider (1978) describes the flow of gold and slaves from northern Europe to the Middle East in exchange for colourful textiles, during the Middle Ages. Schneider argues that European-made black cloth and clothing constituted both practical and symbolic means to resist luxury textiles from the Orient, and in this way reverse the balance of trade and power. I believe that, a few centuries later, lace played a similar role in this process; utilizing locally grown and processed white linen thread and the intensive labour of European women, lace (as a totally European luxury textile) had both symbolic and economic implications for the development of European civilization from the 15th century onwards.

Between the 15th and the 18th century, the Roman Catholic Church played an important role in this process by utilizing the free labour of nuns to make elaborate ecclesiastical textiles decorated with lace (Gusic, 1969). In the secular domain, the aristocracy developed an insatiable appetite for the ever evolving quality, as well as sheer quantity, of lace. The lower classes were involved in the production of lace in specialized workshops, but sumptuary laws prevented them from wearing much of it.

In the early 19th century the production of handmade lace declined throughout Europe, being partially replaced by machine made lace. As the 19th century progressed, however, the reaction against machine made products resulted in a revival of the trade in old antique lace, and renewed production of handmade lace which continued well into the 20th century (Kraatz, 1989). Only it was now a different Europe. Aristocracy competed with museums to acquire rare, antique lace. Museums sought prestige, while dealers sought material profits, by negotiating the standards of authenticity of antique lace. At the same time, newly produced lace was displayed as 'women's art' on trade fairs and exhibitions in European capitals. The majority of the new production was no longer centered around monasteries and specialized workshops, but around central schools in European cities, which ran subsidiary lace schools and home industries in rural areas (Pfannschmidt, 1975). The consumption of lace was no longer restricted to the Church and aristocracy, but spread to the emerging bourgeoisie, and even to the lower classes and peasant populations (Bezić-Božanić, 1984; Polemitou, 1980; Schneider, 1980).

This paper deals with lace production, consumption and trade in the rural town of Pag, on the island of Pag, which is situated on the Dalmatian coast of Croatia. While the tradition of making needle lace is likely as old as the town itself, which was built in the late 15th century, the focus of this paper will be on lace made between 1900 and 1990. My research has shown that lace has played a variety of roles in Pag society during this century: it was displayed in various church rituals; in the secular domain, it was exchanged in dowry, and stored as heirloom wealth. Furthermore, lace was exchanged and sold on local and European markets. After a brief decline in the 1950's, tourism sparked a revival of its production. Intercultural trade generated new social functions for lace and altered its appearance at several points in time. This paper will explore both continuity and change in Pag lace in terms of technique, design, symbolism, and social function, including its place in gender roles and relations.

#### LACE IN ECCLESIASTICAL TEXTILES

Both the main cathedral and the women's Benedictine monastery in Pag hold large collections of old lace from the period before 1800 (Fig. 1). These textiles were made by nuns in the Benedictine and possibly Franciscan monasteries in Pag, who produced great amounts of lace to decorate the interior of the church and the priest's vestments (and not their own). While this production no longer extended into this century, the local women informed me that old lace continued to be displayed every year during important church festivities.

In the last ten years, the production of lace for the church was revived on a rather large scale. Only, it was not nuns who made the new lace, since they no longer possessed the skills to do so. Instead, one nun designed the overall images, while the local women took turns working on different sections (Fig. 2).

To compare the old altar cover with new ones: the basic technique, small elements of design, and style of the lace (which is free reticella and 'punto di aria') are very much the same in those objects, even though they were made centuries apart. The overall design of recent textiles, however, is somewhat simpler, and quite obviously contemporary.

#### LACE IN THE SECULAR DOMAIN: DOWRY

In the Mediterranean area, lace decorated textiles were part of the dowries of aristocratic women prior to the 1800's, spreading down to the lower classes during the course of the 19th century. In her article, "Trousseau as Treasure: Some Contradictions of the Late Nineteenth-century Change in Sicily", Jane Schneider (1980) convincingly argues that lace in Sicilian dowry, at the turn of this century, was both an economic and a symbolic capital. Aside from its appraised



monetary value at the time of the wedding, and its market value at times of commoditization, lace was also a measure of the honour and status of the bride, since it was associated with: 1) female seclusion, purity, and sexual restraint, and 2) with elite goods. Schneider considers that the economic and symbolic values of lace in dowry did not contradict, but rather reinforced one another. Lace was the central part of Sicilian dowry at the turn of this century precisely because it was multifunctional.

In Dalmatia, as in Italy, dowry was regulated by statutory laws since the Middle Ages. Bezić-Božanić (1984) examined the archival records of dowries of both the aristocracy and the lower classes from the 17th, 18th, and beginning of the 19th century, and conducted ethnographic research in the 20th century, on the island of Vis, which is situated south of Pag. She writes:

Depending on the wealth of the family, the girl received her dowry in the certain amount of cash value. In reality, she did not receive cash, instead every item of clothing, jewelry, and others, were appraised and included in that amount. The remaining sum was given later in several payments, or in the form of goods.... In the past, clothing in the dowry of the aristocratic women did not differ from that of women from lower classes, except for the quality of cloth, lace and embroidery. Only the shirt, this main clothing item, was passed down from generation to generation, until it transformed into a night shirt at the turn of the century. Without a large number of night shirts decorated with lace and whitework, not a single girl got married on the island of Vis until the 1950's. (p. 417)

My own research in the town of Pag has revealed the centrality of lace in dowries of all young women in the first half of this century. The more lace decorated shirts in the dowry (some brides brought as many as 100 shirts), the higher the honour and the status of the bride and her family. In Pag, too, shirts were passed down in dowry from generation to generation, and therefore signified good lineage. In the first half of this century, however, young women also worked very hard to prepare new shirts for dowries, since, at that time, they could hope to maintain or improve their social standing only through a good marriage.

The style of lace is reticella still bound to cloth (Fig. 3). It is more geometric and compact than the free reticella and 'punto di aria' styles we saw in the ecclesiastical textiles. One could ask the question: when and how did the lower classes acquire the skills of the reticella technique, which in the past was restricted to women from noble families? The answer is related to the fact that, in Pag, the general population had access to public education since the early 19th century (Zemljar, 1983, p. 21). We have evidence that the superintendent of schools in the region, Don Frano Bulić, introduced lace making for girls in the Pag public school

around 1880 (Filipović, 1943, p. 18).

#### LACE MADE FOR EUROPEAN MARKETS

At the turn of this century, Dalmatia was a province of the Austrian Empire. In its capital Vienna, the Imperial Central School for Lace-making and the Teaching Institute for Home Industries was founded in 1890; the latter became responsible for 40 subsidiary lace schools in rural areas (Pfannschmidt, 1975, p. 15). We must consider that women in rural, east-central Europe had skills in making bobbin lace; women in Dalmatia, by contrast, which was a part of the Republic of Venetia prior to becoming an Austrian province, had skills in the early Venetian style of needle lace, reticella. As I mentioned earlier, there was a revival of interest in all styles of antique lace in Europe at the turn of the century. This explains the travels of the Viennese Natalia Bruck-Auffenberg to Dalmatia in 1904. Bruck-Auffenberg (1912) writes:

Two shirts from Pag that have been housed for decades in the Austrian Museum were the sole inspiration for my research on Dalmatian folk textiles... Even though the shirts were large and made out of coarse material, they nevertheless revealed a true reticella technique; enough reason to come to the idea of opening a school... Between 1904 and 1907, when the lace school in Pag opened under the personal care of the Empress Marija Jozefa, a large industry of lace was already in place, which triumphed on many exhibitions... Several thousands of commissions came to Pag every year. I was instrumental in providing the proper linen or Belgian thread... After several years of modern schooling, no order of reticella is a problem, while a few years ago women refused in tears to do a round collar or rounded cuffs.

It is obvious from this description that the opening of the lace school and trade with Vienna, turned Pag into a lace production center on a scale previously unknown. Even though trade with Vienna eventually declined with the collapse of the Austrian Empire in 1918, the lace school continued to operate, and lace production in Pag continued to be strong until the second world war (Fig. 4). A variety of local and outside mediators were involved in the design of lace products and their marketing in many Yugoslav, European, and even North American cities (personal communication).

In order to fully appreciate the significance of this large scale production and trade, and the impact it had on the whole town of Pag, one has to consider that the period between 1900 and 1946 was one of continuous crises in Dalmatia. Falling prices of agricultural products, the phyloxera blight that destroyed vineyards, and manufactured goods that disrupted the production of local handicrafts, forced men to leave their families in search of employment in larger cities or in the Americas (Foretić, 1969; Wolf, 1982). The men were also forced to fight in the two World Wars.



Many never returned. Women stayed behind facing even more responsibilities than was usually assigned to them in the area. This is what the women related to me about their life at that time:

After the days work at home and in the fields, we gathered at night to save on oil for the lamp. We made lace late into the night, then took it early next morning to the store, and exchanged it for food. Young women would sometimes exchange lace for cloth and thread to make lace decorated shirts for their dowry. This direct barter for goods was only one avenue of exchange. Women also worked on commissions for other merchants, mediators, or trade associations, for which they were paid in cash.

The lace items made for outside trade varied, but they were all either fashion accessories or items intended for interior decoration (Figs. 5 & 6). Because women now received school training, they actually expanded and improved their skills in needle lace techniques through this commercial enterprise. For example, they learned how to make free reticella, separated from the cloth, because the market demanded it. They did not exercise much artistic freedom in the overall design, however, since designs were usually determined by mediators or by clients.

#### THE DECLINE OF LACE PRODUCTION IN SOCIALIST YUGOSLAVIA

Immediately after the second world war, in socialist Yugoslavia, the lace school in Pag was closed, and young girls gained equal opportunities to enter schools, universities, and get jobs (personal communication). Many moved away and married outside of Pag. Education, rather than dowry, determined young women's marriageability. Lace production of dowry items declined almost overnight.

When it comes to lace made for trade, about 70 already trained lacemakers were gathered in a cooperative, offered a salary, and for the first time received a social security package. However, the attempts to market their products in Yugoslav cities kept failing. After some fluctuations, the cooperative folded in 1958. Many women were forced to seek other employment. It was hard on them, since they had no other skills or education. The change from such honorable work as lacemaking to manual work in factories and offices was painful and difficult to compensate by economic security alone.

#### REVIVAL OF LACE PRODUCTION WITH TOURISM

The development of tourism in Pag gained momentum during the 1960's, and soon became the major source of income in Pag. Old lacemakers grasped that their former customers from European cities were walking through the streets of Pag, and started making lace by the open windows. They made small, round doilies, and even some new designs of their own. The

response from both tourists and the local community was larger than anyone could have expected. Tourists loved the staging of lacemaking, and indeed bought lace souvenirs. Soon after, printed materials promoting tourism in Pag featured photographs of lace objects and lacemakers as the special attraction, unique on the Adriatic coast (Fig. 7).

Local people started to buy lace to give away as presents or to decorate their homes. Someone got the idea of framing lace, and soon there was hardly a home in Pag without framed lace, often in the sections of homes that are rented to tourists. The women lacemakers certainly restored their honour.

#### DISCUSSION

In the first half of the century, lace played two major roles in the town of Pag:

- 1) Lace made for trade played a crucial role in the economy of the town, and literally sustained the whole community through the years of unexpected crises of wars and hunger. The available literature on the history of Pag does not give adequate recognition of the major role that women played in the economy of the town at the time; I intend to revise the written history through this research.
- 2) Lace made for dowry played an important role in marriage strategies. It is important to emphasize that lace, by being a woman's wealth, gave women some control over their destiny. First of all, mothers could pass down valuable lace to their daughters; secondly, young women could apply themselves in preparing lace for dowry, and thus hope to improve their marriage prospects.

While techniques were quite similar, the designs of items in these two parallel yet distinct productions remained strictly separate. The designs of lace items that were traded, were dictated by the changing markets. Lace in dowry had to be in the form and design of traditionally inherited shirts, in order to represent both the economic and symbolic capital of a bride.

In socialist Yugoslavia, both of the above productions declined rapidly, mostly due to the new educational and professional opportunities for young people, as well as changes in gender roles and relations. As well, the demand for lace in Europe declined in general after WWII.

The revival of tourist and local trade in lace, in recent years, is much smaller in scale, since only old lacemakers are involved in it. The economic role this trade plays in women's lives, or in the economy of the town, is not as crucial or urgent as the described trade before the second world war. The designs of the new trade objects are



simplified versions of the old trade items. The local community, however, created new symbolic meanings for this lace. In the process of defining "us" versus "others", the new lace and its makers became symbols of connections with their own past, thus easing the crises of identity that the development of international tourism created on this previously isolated island.

When it comes to lace in new ecclesiastical textiles, I mentioned that the designs were quite obviously contemporary (such as the explicit writing of the year, or the flowers). What about the social functions of these new textiles, is there any connection between visual and social symbolism at work here? I think so. First of all, not long ago the Roman Catholic Church introduced many innovations into the traditional service, church music, interior decoration of churches, sound technology, etc., in an effort to reach out to its followers and be heard again. Secondly, in Croatia in particular, in the recent years, the Catholic church played a prominent role in the political process of the decline of socialism and the rise of new political forces. I think that the new ecclesiastical textiles, through their quantity and through their visibly contemporary design, signify the renewal of the Catholic Church in general, and in Croatia in particular.

In conclusion, lace in both the local context of the Pag community, and in a wider European context, has a long history. Moreover, being a luxury textile, it has a complex semiotic potential (Appadurai, 1986, p. 38). Hence it becomes readily implicated in the strategies of various social groups to gain power by using lace production and/or consumption to gain economic and/or symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1990; Schneider, 1987). I think that a number of such functions are evident in my analysis of lace production and consumption in Pag in this century.

Secondly, in contrast to Schneider's black cloth, lace production is implicated in the history of European gender roles and relations. However, while on the one side lace production was a vehicle of oppression of various women's groups, at the time of social change and shifts in power, it had the potential of becoming a subversive force. In this paper I have attempted to show that in this century, with the exception of the production of ecclesiastical textiles, women in Pag used their skills in lacemaking to further their own interests, those of their families, and of the whole community. I think that, given the narrow options open to their generations, the lace makers deserve recognition for their spirited and constructive contributions in upholding the life of Pag society, especially at this time of a senseless war that is destroying the former Yugoslavia.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The field and museum research for this paper was conducted in 1990. Funding for the research was provided by grants from the Alberta Museums Association, Province of Alberta Graduate Scholarships, and a SSHRC Doctoral Fellowship.

I wish to thank Milan Dimić for many valuable discussions related to this work, and for his continuing interest in my research.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Appadurai, A. (Ed.). (1986). The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bezić-Božanić, N. (1984). Svadbeni običaji na otoku Visu [Marriage customs on the island of Vis]. Rad Kongresa Folklorista Jugoslavije, 31, 417-421.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). The logic of practice (R. Nice, Trans.). Cambridge: Polity Press. (Original work published in 1980).
- Bruck-Auffenberg, N. (1912). Dalmacija i njena narodna umjetnost [Folk art of Dalmatia]. Vienna: Umjetnički Nakladni Zavod Anton Schroll.
- Foretić, D. (1969). O ekonomskim prilikama u Dalmaciji u drugoj polovici XIX stoljeća do prvog svjetskog rata [Economic conditions in Dalmatia in the second half of the 19th century through to WWI]. In J. Ravlić (Ed.), Hrvatski narodni preporod u Dalmaciji i Istri [Croatian National Movement in Dalmatia and Istria]. Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska.
- Filipović, S. (1943). Žena i dom [A women and her home]. Zagreb: Hrvatski Krugoval.
- Gušić, M. (1969). Čipka i bijeli vez u Dalmaciji [Lace and whitework in Dalmatia]. Split: Etnografski Muzej.
- Kraatz, A. (1989). Lace: History and fashion. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Pfannschmidt, E. E. (1975). Twentieth century lace. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Polemitou, O. (1980). Tradition and economics in village folk crafts: The Lefkara lace making and silversmithing traditions. Doctoral Dissertation. (University Microfilms No. 81-12, 469).
- Schneider, J. (1978). Peacocks and penguins: The political economy of European cloth and colours. American Anthropologist, 5, 413-447.
- Schneider, J. (1980). Trousseau as treasure: Some contradictions of late nineteenth century change in Sicily. In E. B. Ross (Ed.), Beyond the myths of culture: Essays in cultural materialism (pp. 323-359). New York: Academic Press.
- Schneider, J. (1987). The anthropology of cloth. Annual Review of Anthropology, 16, 409-448.
- Wolf, E. (1982). Europe and the people without history. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Zemljar, A. (1983). Pag otok [The island of Pag]. Zagreb: Turistkomerc.



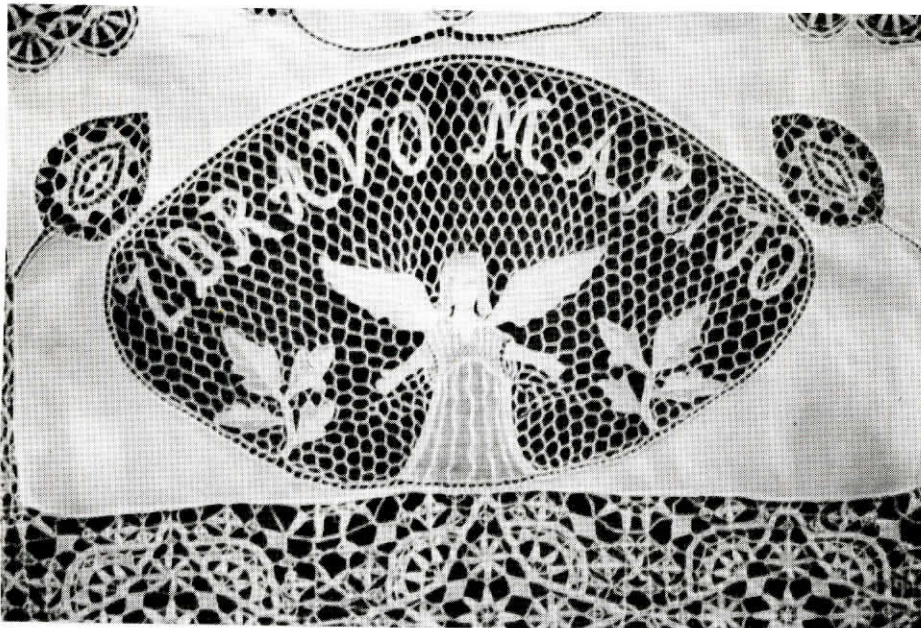
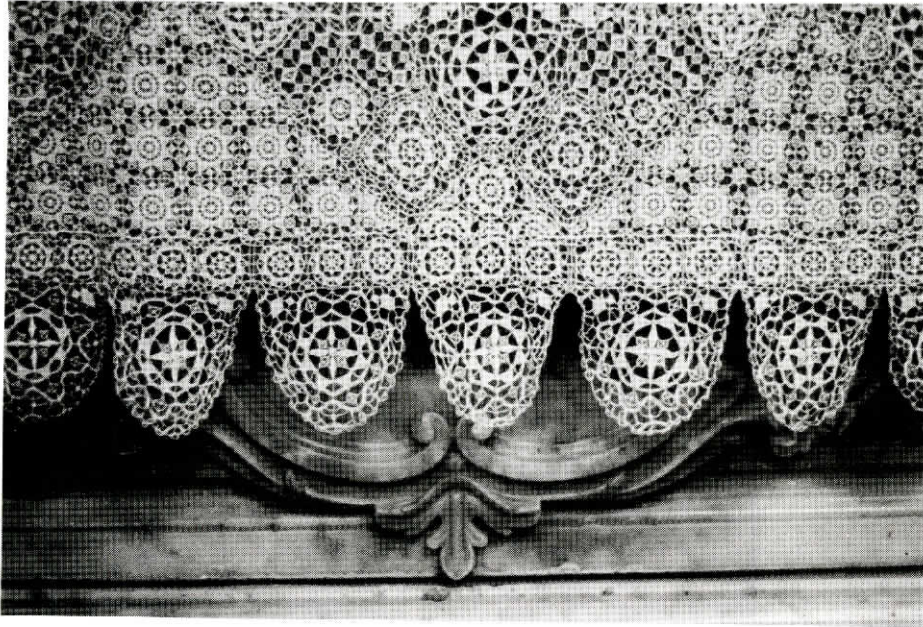


Fig. 1. Altar cover, most likely made before the 1800's, from the Cathedral of Sv. Marija in Pag.

Fig. 2. Detail of a contemporary altar cover from the Cathedral of Sv. Marija, made during the 1980's.



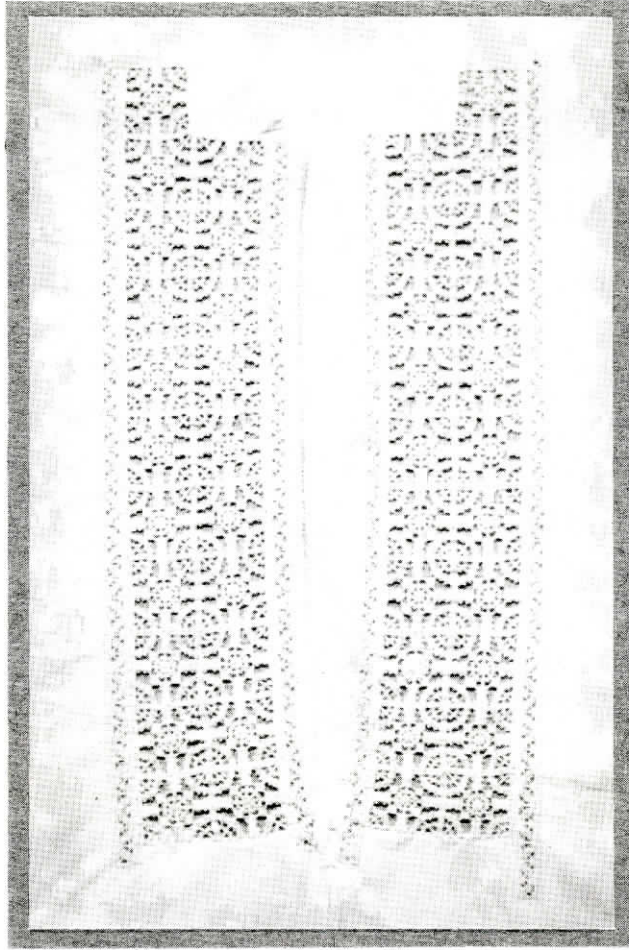


Fig. 3. Lace decorated shirt, a key item of Pag women's dowry in the first half of this century.

Fig. 4. Lace making school in Pag; a class of 1936/37.

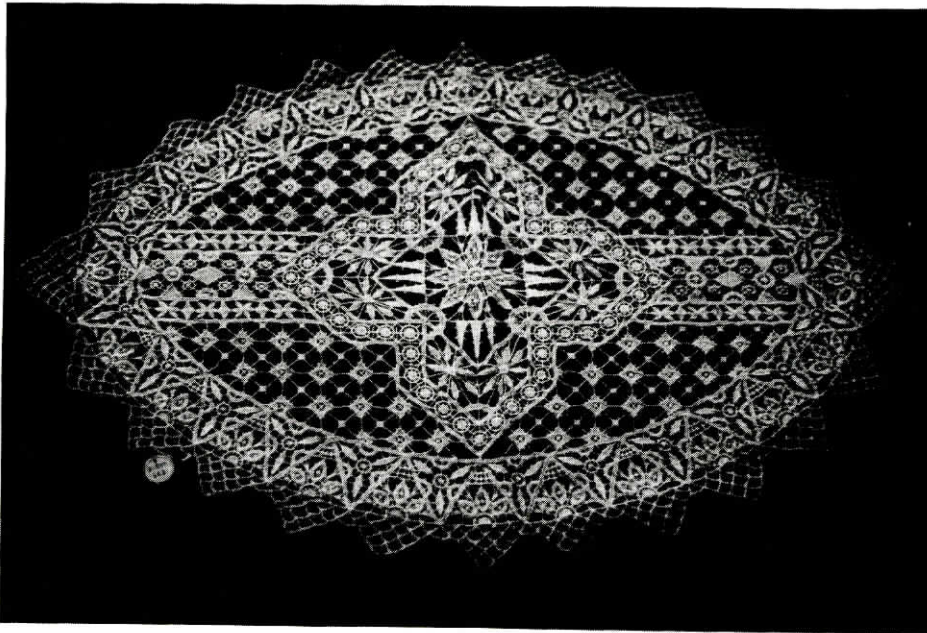


Fig. 5. & 6. Lace collar and a doily, made in Pag in the 1930's for European markets.





**BRODOKOMERC — HOTELI**

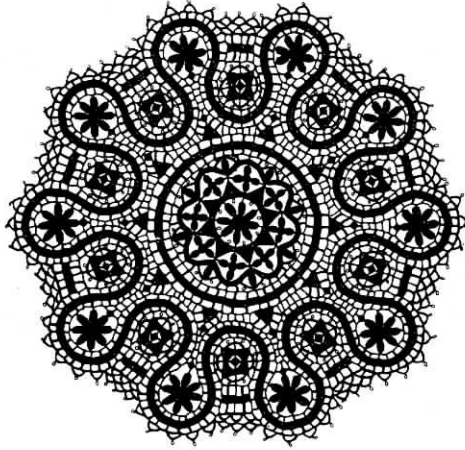
OOP »HOTELI PAG«

51290 PAG, ŠETALIŠTE V. NAZORA BB

Tel. 051/891-117; 891-145

Telefax: 051/891-015

Telex: 24 667 BROD HP YU



PREISLISTE IN DEM

**1990**

HOTEL BELLEVUE  
PRIVATUNTERKUNFT  
FERIENWOHNUNGEN

Fig. 7. One of the tourist brochures featuring a typical contemporary lace item made for both tourist and local markets.