

Писанчева Б.К., докторант, Софийский Университет «Св. Климент Охридски», Болгария, София, бульвар Цар Освободител, 15, e-mail: bistri4ka@gmail.com

Pisancheva B., PhD Candidate, St. Climent Ohridski University of Sofia, Bulgaria, Sofia, 15 Tsar liberator Boulevard, e-mail: bistri4ka@gmail.com

Improvisation in Lacemaking Импровизация в художественном кружевоплетении

Abstract. The paper discusses some new applications of traditional bobbin lacemaking techniques applied by the author as a possible direction in the development of bobbin lace. Improvisation and interpretation embedded in specific author's works, the elements inherited from the classical models and the freedom of implementation, along with the transformation of the familiar and the continuity of the skill, are studied through the theory of French philosopher Michel de Certeau and his *The Practice of Everyday Life (L'Invention du Quotidien)*.

Keywords: bobbin lace, cultural technology, improvisation, strategy, tactics, development of tradition, imagination, inventing everyday life, art, creativity, motivation.

Аннотация. В статье описаны некоторые новые способы использования традиционной технологии плетения коклюшечного кружева, созданные автором, которые позиционируются как одно из возможных направлений развития коклюшечного кружева. Импровизация и интерпретация в индивидуальных авторских работах, унаследованное от классики и ее свободное приложение, трансформация известного и передача умений рассмотрены посредством теории «Изобретение повседневности. Искусство делать» французского философа Мишеля де Серто.

Ключевые слова: коклюшечное кружево, культурная технология, импровизация, стратегия, тактика, развитие традиции, воображение, изобретение повседневности, искусство, креативность, мотивация.

Making bobbin lace is a process of interlacing threads that results in the production of fabric. When making this type of lace, one can always change the direction in which the resulting patch is growing; in comparison with loom weaving, here one has endless possibilities of creating a wealth of diverse figures. When filling out a specific model, one has to observe certain requirements inherent to a complex technology, while also observing a range of strict rules. Despite of the common movements in lacemaking, there are quite a lot of specifics in the actual application, which may give rise to differences in the ways of making.

Lacemaking is a creative endeavor where, as in any other human activity, both observing and breaking the rules is being practiced. Updating the technology in line

with the development of its possibilities and rules is a natural process which can be neither accelerated, nor halted.

Improvisation and the creating of free models require imagination and idiosyncratic thinking departing from the prescriptions of training. A good approach would be for the lace maker to put aside the established movements repeated over the centuries and intentionally turn her back to the predominant habits and customs. Here comes the question posed by Todor Hristov: “Is a person free if their actions are restricted and they are afraid of punishment?” [3]. In addition, innovators seek the approval of their audiences.

People often make new models thinking they are creating something unique when they are simply changing the drawing or the style of the image, not being aware of the repetition in their work. According to Todor Hristov this is “a conviction that it is always others who are oppressed, that despite how oppressed we are, we fortunately are free.” [3]. The creation of new ways of making lace only happens when rules are changed, on the basis of their deep understanding.

The position of most contemporary lace makers is that, along with preserving the tradition, the new should be allowed. Progress and development are happening everywhere and lace makers should not stay fixed in one place and time.

The norm is needed; when observed, it prepares and regulates the observer’s expectations. Classic lace is appreciated. Authored models are being created, sought after, made and contemplated for the sake of aesthetic enjoyment, without any departure from the conventional, however. Items are made applying “copy” and “paste” to the same elements, keeping the trajectory of the usual application; made out in the same way, with no change whatsoever, thus excluding the active participation of even a minimal dose of imagination when it comes to both creation and reception. On the other hand, whatever has been devised through free combination, requires caution, keeps the interest of the observer alive, provokes him/her to anticipate the unusual, and to expect risk. This can be tiring and drive away the observer who expects the repetition of the familiar found in the classic examples.

Every innovator is bound to meet the disapproval of a portion of the general public and critics, but despite of it, is willing to take the risk. This gives rise to more questions which cannot be answered unequivocally. Why have so many different variations been created so far? Is there an end to inventiveness? What does development constitute of? What is driving things forward? Why are we always looking for something new? Who are the people who would not stay put? When does an “aha-moment” happen? Can anyone come up with a new technical solution? How does one come up with a peculiar application; do we need to exterminate it or value it as something rare? How do ideas emerge, what makes their implementation delicate, headlong, or problematic? How does one capture what is new?

Deviation, mistake, moving away from the routine – is this how invention comes along in the living and spontaneous lacemaking? In the dissertation I am currently working on, I summarize and present the responses of my interlocutors – people who make lace in the present day. The conversations are lengthy and rich, as

described by Luce Giard: «conversations of a marvelous freedom, rich in unexpected information» [2]. The opinion of the majority of lace makers is that improvisation is process belonging to the individual, representing a person's own level of freedom, manifesting itself in a different way with each individual artist.

How do you recognize the invention? Are you aware that an invention is happening or you realize it afterwards? How do you know whether your discovery is productive? Is it fear or exaltation that you are feeling? Do you remember at all? How does the awareness come about - straight away or gradually? Do you have the feeling that this is something valuable or you just find it interesting? How do you come to the right solution, the right tone? Do you wander around or do you put your finger on it right away? Are you able to nurture your idea, to cultivate it, to refine it, or do you let it come through on its own? If you could dance, would you follow the steps of the dance while walking in the street? How do you experience harmony?

How do you decide what happens in the future? Where is the boundary between freedom and belonging, between insecurity and the absolute confidence that you are right? Does rivalry or competition help you? What serves you more – competition or cooperation? What transports you to a different, higher space? What makes you unusual, exceptional? Talent? Courage? Character? What makes you strong?

Do you experience moments of lack of confidence and when do hesitation, stress, and doubts appear? Doubts: is it easy to choose a particular solution? How do you know whether it is right or enough? Do you feel like making something in a different way, experiment with materials, colors, drawing? Do you make series, cycles, which complement each other and suggest to each other details that may have been missed? How do you know what is valuable? What attracts you? What is it that you value? What makes you seek perfection, make patterns more difficult, and try and find out: what would happen if I did this or that? Is this achievable by just anybody?

I am going to transfer these questions, which are applicable to any aspect of human activity, to the making of bobbin lace. Can bad-quality work be attributed to the desire to be free in what one is doing? How does one determine which restrictions and rules are to be kept and which are the ones that can be changed? Where does the boundary between the permitted and the unacceptable lie? What interpretations will result if rules are changed? How is lace observed and what is seen in it? How does the creation of an item – always a different one – happen? When there is no answer, or the answer is impossible, there comes mystery. And then, what would satisfy your curiosity? Questions, answers, questions with answers, and impossible answers... brief, easy, complex, or different every time... This helps us get to know each other, but does it matter after all? The result stays on when we have been gone, the way it has been staying on for hundreds of years before we were born, and with the hope that after we have been gone there will be others, similar to us – restless and seeking. Some proudly state that they have not changed a single figure in their lives, not a single movement of the ones inherited from their tradition! Others, who are unable

to repeat what has been invented before them, are not able to anchor themselves in a quiet, safe, and beauty-proof place.

This rich pool of options made me fascinated by Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* which I read through the improvisation in lace making – the field where I discover my different kinds of motivation and decisions in the art of making, “an art of combination which cannot be dissociated from an art of using.” [1].

The French philosopher finds parallels between talking and walking in the city. I discover the routes of making lace, as described in the routes of walking: «But he also moves them about and he invents others, since the crossing, drifting away, or improvisation of walking privilege, transform or abandon spatial elements...» [1].

Lacemaking can be seen as the building of a road, circumnavigating imaginary obstacles, «going beyond the limits» [1], outlining and encompassing a given figure, enveloping spaces that have remained inside or left on the outside. When the work has been done, the trace that has been left behind entices the gaze to follow it again and again, to seek the methods of creating closeness or separation, to discover the points of connection and tear off. This is crafting combinations of specific locations which do not allow for the obvious to be seen; they replace the expected, they make the depicted stand out depending on the background – contrasting or harmonious. This is where the difficulty of perception caused by the unexpected is referred to: «The paths that correspond in this intertwining, unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility» [1]

The examples of intriguing inventions which Michel de Certeau would call «poaching and ruse» [1]. are discovered both in the practices of the past and nowadays. For example, when working in zig-zag one achieves uniformity and evenness of pace reminiscent of the swing of a pendulum. When I violate the regularity of pace, I achieve semblance with the natural irregularity of the live movement, which is unpredictable. Becoming a slave to symmetry and the rules of the technique, makes work mechanical and too close to that of a machine, depriving it from variety and surprise.

The free combinations of different techniques result in a graphic trace which is difficult to follow, as if left by the «the Brownian movement» [1]. of particles, caught in the outline of the thread. This type of drawing relates lace to graphic sketches and liberates it from observing any order. In this kind of lacemaking, the process of making does not lend itself to management and is unpredictable, since it is the result of interesting and clever inventions of each of the practitioners.

Seen as a process of change of technique, the history of lace forms a line of practical discoveries. There have always been seekers of innovation who find ways of development in directions unknown so far. In his *The Practice of Everyday Life* Michel de Certeau calls them: «tentative moves, pragmatic ruses, and successive tactics...» [1]. applying «the network of an antidiscipline» [1].

If what has been written about the making of lace is taken out of its context and we imagine that it is about walking, speaking, writing, drawing, composing and playing music, such shared argumentation might be discovered as well. Some artists

find it amusing to improvise or provoke. They both create obstacles for themselves and then come up with solutions by discovering how to solve a problem which is of relevance to them only. They choose a sequence of moves and apply a logic only relevant to the particular moment in order to get out of the situation of entanglement, they observe the dictatorship of rules and contain their rebellion as artists. The minute problems in the detail require overcoming based on “procedures of everyday creativity” [1].

If one undertakes to study the problems faced by different practitioners and the ways they overcome them, one would discover a lot of common. In a natural way “... culture articulates conflicts and alternately legitimizes, displaces, or controls the superior force. It develops in an atmosphere of tensions, and often of violence, for which it provides symbolic balances, contracts of compatibility and compromises, all more or less temporary” [1].

Creativity can bring about unexpected results which can expand the options of implementing the initial idea.

The implementation of unconventional materials in an unusual context is connected with overcoming a range of unexpected problems of a practical nature. It is difficult to determine in advance whether this would be rational or impractical, whether the provocative fabric would match or interfere, whether it would be harmonious or irritating, whether discovering, collecting, processing and then subordinating these materials would be worth the time and effort, when the desired effect is only vaguely imagined.

All makers have their own little discoveries – the tricks they embed in the steps of their activity. “Leaving aside the multimillennial archeology of ruses as well as the possibility of their anthill-like future, the study of a few current everyday tactics ought not to forget the horizon from which they proceed, nor, at the other extreme, the horizon towards which they are likely to go” [1].

The combination of a range of practical resources, which have been accumulated with experience and over time, can lead to unconscious practical decisions, which vary among makers. When people who make lace meet, they share among themselves these “ruses” – unconscious and habitual for one, or seen as the discoveries of genius by another. It is normal for problems and mistakes to provoke the seeking of ways to overcome them, and for the approach of dealing with them to be specific for each person.

What is the “extent to which intelligence is inseparable from the everyday struggles and pleasures”? [1]. The interaction between the maker and the requirements imposed by the technique is quite interesting. Familiar with the traditional ways of making, the artist seeks and finds ways to implement new approaches. This is the direction in which I study, describe, and disentangle the reasons and impulses which guide the work of innovators, led by Certeau’s curiosity to analyze “the relations between a certain kind of rationality and an imagination” [1].

The isolation of the lacemaking regions in the past created the conditions for the birth of differences. Transferred from generation to generation, these differences

became deeply rooted and, in some cases, the common is now difficult to uncover. The differences in the ways people work become more prominent mostly due to the impossibility of communication and information sharing. People involved in the arts often enter into heated arguments about what is right, what is impermissible, what is identical to the original, how to preserve tradition, how to encourage the new, how to differentiate between art and kitsch. Actual applications, however, are usually admired because of the unknown ideas and the specific approaches – the ones invented by anyone using their hands when working and coming up with their own minute rationalizations. Born out of practice, created by the desire to overcome a problem, these approaches offer a range of solutions.

Seen through Certeau's theory, lace making can be represented by the following strategies and tactics:

Strategic ideas are formed based on the thorough understanding of the technology, the choice of style, material, color, and the clear vision of the desired final result. Tactics are part of the actual performance of the movement of the bobbins that leads to the permanent entangling of the threads that have been wound on them. The succession of the hands' movements manages the sequence of appearance of the thread on top or beneath the other with which it exchanges positions. This is how a strip is woven. The purpose of the hands' movements, when they move the bobbins, is to observe the order that leads to the desired density or airiness of the patch that is being made. In addition to the movements described, where a specific material result is present, development and building up is observed in the piling up of numerous interlacements when the strip grows and positions itself in the space.

Lace has to be observed over a long period of time. Each time new aspects are seen, different details are discovered, close- or loose-knit figures stand out – it is not possible to digest the lace item at first glance. Lace is positioned in space, occupies space, and builds up space.

Thus, the making of patches of lace can be represented as “practices that invent spaces” [1], it is the “movement of strata, a play of spaces” [1]. The trace left by the movement of the hands, the bobbins, and the threads, disappears, just like it happens in walking, the trace is being replaced. But while the space woven by the movements is filled in, the traces of steps – circling or crossing – remain imaginary after the arrival at the end of the route. Lace is improvisation with a specific, tangible result, while walking is lost in the transition. The displacement of the actual woven piece is determined by the pins which are placed at the end of each row. The pair of bobbins which performs the active movement circumvents the last pin and continues its work in the opposite direction, entangling the passive bobbins, when its movement is alternating between left and right.

Thus, for each need a technical solution is found, one determined by the practical work, in order to make it easier and faster, or to bring about some desired effect. Certeau calls these “products of a craft ... tortuous knowledge, sharp sinuosities, perforating ruses, and incisive detours...” [1] which allow “an indefinite combinative system” [1]. In addition to weaving and positioning on the pattern,

tactics are needed when making decisions which concrete threads are to leave their place in order to perform connections and filling in a neighboring section, and how to return back in action in their original positions. These actions require resourcefulness and a peculiar type of logic, which are sometimes acquired with training and experience, but there are some which innovators invent on their own and for the first time, thus discovering new paths for achieving something.

The strategy consists in determining how to begin the item, how to enter the figure, what route of implementation will be chosen for the physical movement of the bobbins, how to exit the work and, if needed, how to go back.

There are no limitations in lace making as long as the imagination and technical skill of the makers are powerful enough to come up with new applications. Improvisation and interpretation in lace making are a territory for makers who have already mastered the skills and the medium of expression, for the periods of maturity, when development is something sought after intentionally and new practical solutions are discovered.

Several consecutive interruptions of work before the end of the row create a gap that increases the transparency of the section. This could be an accidental error of ignorance or neglect. However, when making elements of nature in which there is no symmetry, the deliberate use of such a "mistake" leads to the successful avoidance of the habitual, replaces the involuntary following of orderliness and removes the rhythm from the movements.

There is no barrier to human ingenuity when acting in a particular situation. Working without a blueprint holds mysteries; one decides what needs to be done on the go. Bold and free improvisation leads to individual applications that cannot be repeated by the same maker or another one. This is where the enchantment of discovery, surprise, and novelty are hidden. This is art.

Rejection of the peculiar and non-standard exist in all areas of human activity. But why do people continue to seek the exception, the different, the original? Everyone has their own motivation, drive, criteria, and reasons. What does it mean for an author to be free? To be his/her own master - master of his/her thoughts, decisions, and choices?

When the way of working is changed, the result is more emotional than practical. People share that they experience a feeling of lightness and enjoyment due to the ability to choose, a feeling of independence, detachment, non-belonging. It takes courage to choose or make the decision on your own, or to face the consequences of your decisions despite the loyalty and belonging to the region, school, or master that have been imposed for tens of years and are extremely binding.

What for one is natural, habitual and easy, seems unattainable, mysterious or impossible for another.

Is there a way for us to learn to be free? Freedom is sought only by the person who experiences their situation as insufficient, and wants to change it.



My way of making bobbin lace:

Making lace is for me a play of curiosity by which I transport myself to a different world, different from the one we live in. I am making something concrete, observing strict rules, but if I want to play the way I enjoy it, a way that is remembered, I fall into tricks and follow my own rules; I make it in a way which I see as “well-played”.

When I make landscapes my way, I seek ways to apply the inadmissible and the forbidden. I am led by the mystery and purposefully seek the mistake. To be able to make the unthinkable and unimaginable in the realm of bobbin lace, I need to know the norms well and find a way of breaking them. I am prepared to meet with the negative reaction of the traditionally-minded defenders of the old. I am not alone; there are other inventive colleagues who discover different, ingenious uses, expand applications, and find a new type of logic.

My work resembles free dancing. The technique, however, has its rules. I study the classic ways of working and seek ways to transform the resulting figures. Being well informed and acquiring new skills help me be spontaneous by providing me with the means of expression. I try to be clear with myself about the technique I am going to use for a given element, but I do not always stick to my original decisions. In the process of making I



often change my approaches and trust myself that this will lead to better and more interesting results. I prefer to mix opposites of a different nature – thin and thick when it comes to materials, dark and light when it comes to colors, thick and transparent when it comes to texture. Freely and following my impulses, I decide whether to fade the nuances together or to interchange them abruptly.

I value the question “Why not?” How to make something out of lace in a way that has not occurred to anyone so far? I sometimes make my discovery unknowingly, without realizing it. Sometimes I try to repeat the movements outside the initial context and this proves impossible.

In the case of the lace interpretations of Paul Cezanne’s landscapes, I obey the author’s shapes and colors, and closely follow the actual painting. However, I have complete freedom to decide on the most successful approach and what to ignore and what to give prominence to. My responsibilities are related to lace only:



texture, relief, accumulation of threads, dense or empty sequences. The transformation of oil and watercolor into threads making up lace is like writing for me: how do I tell a story, what shall be the first sentence? How do I draw the first line, where should it be, what it should be like? I know the story, but I need to present it in parts, to break it down to moments, key or insignificant, to put them together. I need to arrange the details and explanations around the

basic storyline, to entice the gaze to follow the interruptions or the uninterrupted fillings. It reminds me of reading. The type of impatient reading when you skip passages out of curiosity; when I am interested and fascinated, I seek favorite moments, expressions, direct speech, descriptions, intense scenes, tension, in a single breath and during a single night. If all is clear, it becomes tedious and I stop at the second sentence. When I begin working on a new painting, I do not know what is waiting for me at each turn, when I am going to change the active with the passive bobbin which will change my vision or the fabric, or when a thread is used up when I will change it for another color. It becomes clear to me afterwards, when it is all done, read, ordered, each element has played its part, the figures have been made of fabric and color, and I cannot wait to get back to the making so that I see what will happen next.

The background I will choose for the lace is yet another mystery – inevitably visible, able to change and determine the effects that will become dominant.

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