



A Tall Tale: Revisiting a Historical Giraffe by Kristina Ott

A special treat at the 2/15/14 meeting of L.A.C.E. was to see Janice Blair's newly completed lace project -- a pictorial style piece complete with a giraffe and a lush leafy garden.

But there's more to this story than an experienced lacer completing a pattern. I talked with Janice to find out more about the makings of this piece, an initial rendition of a new design by Holly Van Sciver incorporating a historical giraffe motif.

Description

What style of lace is this piece in?

The piece is Bedfordshire lace, and is based on a lappet designed by Thomas Lester who was a famous lace designer/dealer in England from 1820 to 1905. Anne Buck has written a book about the dealer and his designs but it does not have a picture of the giraffe. This piece was probably designed around the time that the Regents Park Zoo in London had just opened as a number of laces had exotic animals in them. Maybe the designer had not seen an actual giraffe, as I would have drawn a patchwork shape for the hide rather than holes.

What are the dimensions of the piece?

It measures 13 ½ x 5 ½ inches

Is it an original design?

This was designed by Holly Van Sciver but the central part of the pricking existed in the original lappet mentioned above.

Intention

Is this a piece that the designer wants to develop into a pattern? Is it for some other use?

Holly is reworking many of Thomas Lester's designs in various forms and I have worked two previous pieces. I am not sure what her intention is for this piece other than producing a pleasing picture.

Pattern

What kind of drawing or pattern are you given to work from?

I had two prickings of the same design, one had shaded parts for the cloth stitch or half stitch. Holly did provide a complete pricking for the whole thing. I took close-up photos of the giraffe in a book that Holly had at convention last year. I wish I had taken more photos of the whole picture as I only had a poor scanned copy of the actual giraffe in the lappet.

What was indicated: pinholes, shapes, other?

Pinholes and leaf tallies were the only clues I had.

Did you have to determine how to lace it? How do you go about doing that?

Yes, I had very little instruction. Actually Holly and I discussed the start and how the old lacemakers had worked the holes in the giraffe. (I developed my own way of dealing with the small circles of gimp around the holes. The old lacemaker ended her holes by taking the gimp thread sideways into the lace. I used magic threads to pull the gimps around and up the sides of the holes.) Usually you work down the lace but to keep the flow of the leaves, I decided to work the top outer oak leaves starting at the top left, working sideways across and leaving out pairs to go into the lace where necessary. Once the top border was worked, I then started working down the lace. At the bottom, I again turned the pillow to work the ferns towards each other, working the larger bottom leaf last.

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Did you enlarge the designer's pattern and map out how you would lace it most efficiently or effectively? e.g. how many bobbins, where to start/end

I enlarged the pricking onto two pages so that I could write my directions down, such as where to add rolled talleys and whether to do half stitch or cloth stitch in the solid areas.

Are you documenting what you're doing so that a detailed pattern can be developed?

I did make notes on my work paper where Holly needed to make changes such as missing pinholes or lines, or where the pinholes were too cramped for the design. Once a lacemaker gets to this level of work, they are used to making decisions themselves rather than ask for instruction.

Did you have to consult the designer about problems or perhaps suggestions for improvements before the work began?

I did ask advice on working the large fern leaves as I could not see from the original picture how threads were carried down from one part of the leaf to the next part. Holly suggested taking pairs out in plaits from one lobe down to the next lobe to wait until they were needed. Thick plaits of say 3 pairs could be used to move larger number of threads down, or just two threads could be twisted and left to join in later.

Thread

Who decided which thread to use? Why was that thread used?

I decided on what size thread to use as I prefer not to work in very fine thread which is hard to see for me. I used 80/2 Egyptian cotton and enlarged the pricking by 125% for the actual work.

Bobbins

What kind of bobbins did you use and why?

I used International Squares as that is the largest number of bobbins I have in one style. It is easier to work with the same style of bobbin on the pillow rather

than mixing types. I did have to add a few extra bobbins such as all my Richard Pickle square bobbins to supplement my International ones but I tended to use them for gimps.

What's the average number of bobbins being used at one time? What's the largest number of bobbins being used at one time?

The most bobbins I had on the pillow at one time was about 340 but in Bedfordshire lace you are constantly throwing back pairs and then adding more in as the work progresses. I would say there was an average of 200+ across the work at any one time.

How do you keep them grouped or separated?

I used the flat tongue depressor type holders. Piling them up caused problems until I solved that by using elastic hair bands from the \$1 store to corral them into piles. Each one held at least 10 bobbins and I did have piles of about 8 holders on top of each other. I soon ran out of my supply and made simple ones out of larger depressors from the craft store. I made them by stapling down ¼ elastic at both ends of the wood. I had to be careful the staples did not catch the threads in the piles. The hair bands stopped them from tumbling over into the work. I saw that idea on a pillow in Europe where large elastic bands were used but I did not have a supply of large enough bands and thought of the hair bands. An added plus was that the bright colors showed up amongst the bobbin piles. As I would run out of free bobbins, I took them from the ones thrown back, winding the leftover thread from one onto an empty bobbin.

Pins

What kind of pins did you use and why? How many pins were used?

I used long silk pins from Hancock Fabrics. I know I purchased about 2,000 from them as the work progressed and I already had a large stock of the same pins from a previous large piece I had worked. Probably at least 3,000 pins in the center of the lace, then many were reused once I was about halfway down the piece and could move the large quantity of thrown back bobbins out of the way. I also used a whole box of Bohin Picot pins which are thicker than regular pins.

The whole of the outer edges of the lace were picots and there were many picots in the work.

Working It

Did you have to push most pins down in order to work the pattern?

Yes, the pins were all pushed down as I worked the lace. I was disappointed when pulling out the picot pins and some of them had barbs on the point and pulled the picots out of shape.

How many hours would you say you worked on it?

I started the work at convention in August 2013 and finished in January 2014. I worked on it many days in the week but work and home did interfere with my lacing time. It is hard to say how many hours it took as I did not keep a record. Maybe 15+ hours a week, so probably 400 hours.

Do you consider yourself a slow, medium, or fast lacer in this style?

I think I am a fast lacemaker in most styles of lace but in this Bedfordshire, there are many times when you have worked an area that you look at it and decide that there may be a gap or something that needs to be reworked. Unfortunately this means that sometimes you have to undo a lot of other areas of work to get back to where you want to make a change. Sometimes areas were worked over and over again until I was satisfied with the area. Bedfordshire lace is really up to the worker to decide how it should look. I prefer to have the cloth areas very dense whereas someone else might prefer a gauzier effect.

Did you have to consult the designer about problems or perhaps suggestions for improvement while the piece was in progress?

I did send Holly photos of the work in progress but other than our first discussions, I was on my own.

Finished Piece

Did the designer find that the finished piece surprised her in any way?

Holly always sounded delighted in her emails to see the

lace "come to life" and she was looking forward to showing it to others at the California Winter lace conference.

Did the finished piece surprise you in any way?

I was happy with the piece when it was finished, even happier that I was able to do the last fern at the bottom and only end up with a few bobbins to sew in when it was finished. Starting that leaf, I still had over 200 bobbins on the pillow.

Is there something you would do differently if you worked it again?

Some areas with rolled talleys looked too cramped. A rolled talley is made like a long straight talley but then you roll it up over a pin and it creates a raised look to the lace. Holly had suggested doing three tallies in some areas but after doing two on one circular part I decided it would be too difficult to do three. I think it would have looked neater with one central talley on each cloth stitch or half stitch circle.

Is there something the designer wishes she might have done or will do?

Holly was happy with the piece but said she could see where things could be improved (whether she meant her design or my working of it, I don't know). Another lacemaker started the piece at convention using a finer thread and a smaller pricking so it will be interesting to see how her piece looks when it is finished.

Thank you Janice!

Original lappet and enlarged working diagram of new design. Note birth sac under giraffe. Photo by Janice Blair.



Original lappet and enlarged working diagram of new design. Note birth sac under giraffe.
Photo by Janice Blair



Work in progress. Photo by Janice Blair.



Shown working on a needlelace Owl February, 2014 is Janice Blair (on the left) and author Kristina Ott.