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Lace

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“On all sides, on every counter, was a stream of white Spanish blonde as light as air, Brussels with its large flowers on a delicate mesh, hand-made point, and Venice point with heavier designs, Alençon point, and Bruges of royal and almost religious richness.”¹



Point de Gaze Border

University of Rhode Island Historic Textile and Costume Collection
62.99.230

Handmade lace figures prominently in Émile Zola’s *The Ladies’ Paradise* as one of the most intoxicating wares available for sale at the fictional Parisian department store. The handmade lace in particular incites “a mad desire” among the well-heeled female patrons, leading in some cases to their financial and moral ruin.² Zola repeatedly employs the seductive powers of lace as a metaphor to represent the excesses of female preoccupation with fashion and the accompanying excesses of consumption. As a purely decorative object of great value and beauty, lace has seduced consumers of fashionable dress for centuries. This seduction arguably reached its apogee in the mid nineteenth century when the availability of a wide variety of both machine- and hand-made lace enabled its inclusion in almost every element of female dress.³ A length of 3 1/2-inch wide needle-lace border from the University of Rhode Island Historic Textile and Costume Collection is a superb example of the type that Madame de Boves may have stolen from *The Ladies’ Paradise* when “ravaged by a furious, irresistible passion for dress.”⁴

Based on an assessment of techniques and design, this needle lace border is a type of Brussels needle lace known as Point de Gaze.⁵ The use of cotton thread and the design of floral motifs interspersed among architectural elements suggest that this border dates to the mid nineteenth century.⁶ Point de Gaze was developed in the nineteenth century as a less expensive alternative to Point d’Alençon and quickly became one of the most popular styles of lace during this period.⁷ It was valued for its light, gauzy appearance and its highly decorative motifs that suited the taste for ornament of the Second Empire.⁸ Point de Gaze was worked into a number of garments and accessories such as shawls, veils, fan pieces, as well as flounces and borders to trim women’s clothing.⁹ A lace border of this kind could be used to trim a lavish gown such as the one that Madame Desforges and her friends discuss with envy in Chapter Three.

By the mid nineteenth century, machine-made lace was widely available, although handmade lace continued to be popular as a luxury item among the wealthy classes who prospered in the Industrial Age.¹⁰ To meet this demand, handmade needle lace such as Point de Gaze was made by large international firms that employed hundreds of skilled lacemakers in France and Belgium.¹¹ Zola indicates that Mouret even employs his own lacemakers to produce some of the wares available at The Ladies' Paradise.¹² Despite its highly organized mass production, handmade needle lace was quite expensive and represented the high end of the lace market.¹³ Such lace served as a sign of wealth and status for those who could afford to purchase it. This Point de Gaze border is thus not only an object of exquisite beauty, but also a product of nineteenth century industrial prosperity and the resulting expansion of consumer culture. The nouveau riche customers of The Ladies' Paradise were just the class of women who would have desired to adorn themselves with the conspicuous finery of handmade needle lace.

1. Émile Zola, *The Ladies' Paradise*, trans. by Ernest Alfred Vizetelly (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1895), eBook edition, 934.
2. Zola, 933.
3. Santina M. Levey, *Lace: A History* (Leeds: W.S. Maney & Son Ltd, 1983), 98.
4. Zola, 939.
5. Elizabeth M. Kurella, *Guide to Lace and Linens* (Norfolk, VA: Antique Trader Books, 1998), 30, 39, 52, 186.
6. Clare Brown, *Lace From The Victoria & Albert Museum* (London: V&A Publications, 2004), 15, 17.
7. Brown, 14.; Kurella, 186.
8. Anne Kraatz, *Lace: History and Fashion* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1988), 123, 126.
9. Kraatz, 143-149.
10. Kraatz, 118.
11. Levey, 98-99.
12. Zola, 764.
13. Brown, 16.

