

**The Embroidery Legacy
of
Maria Grazia Carmina
and her Family**

M.G.C.



South Australia has a rich textile history going back to the First Nations Peoples who created baskets, bags, nets, cloaks and aprons from various fibres. Successive waves of migrants from Europe, Asia and Africa brought with them textile traditions, including embroidery. Much of this rich heritage is cherished in families. Family collections tell us much about our heritage and deserve to be both documented and studied. They are an important part of South Australia's collective knowledge as well as global textile history.

This booklet is the result of examination of one such collection, that of Maria Grazia Carmina Tedesco, nee Cocchiaro, who arrived in Australia from Torrecuso, Benevento, Italy in February 1951. Her embroidery collection is in the hands of her daughters Lia and Lena, who generously provided access and information, as well as items of their own.



Lia and Lena's Adelaide family is from the village of Torrecuso near Benevento in the Campania Region of Italy. Their mother, Maria Grazia Carmina (known as Carmina) embroidered her own trousseau, as part of her dowry, before she was married and came to Australia. She taught her daughters to embroider. Lena was a diligent embroidery student - Lia much less so.

Carmina's skill goes back many generations. This beautiful tablecloth is an example of the work of Carmina's Great Aunt Battista, sister of Carmina's grandmother, Maria Grazia Cusano. On heavy linen, the border is crocheted and it has an inserted crocheted panel. The corners on both the insert and the border are beautifully and precisely executed.



In Lena's collection are a number of cloths woven by Battista. Battista was born around 1860, and would have been weaving these pieces around 1880. The panels are about 60cm wide and joined almost invisibly. Presumably this reflects the width of the home loom on which they were woven. There is a variety of patterns to the woven pieces.



Lia also has some examples of Battista's work in her collection, showing a variety of ways to deal with the fringe left at the end of the work, as well as further patterns to the weave.

These are substantial bedspreads, using three or four panels joined together.



In the Campania Region (as in many other parts of Italy, and indeed, the world) a woman's dowry was an important part of the marriage contract. While a groom brought a house (or part of his parents' house in which the couple would traditionally live) and certain items of furniture to a marriage, the bride brought linens, bedding, cooking utensils and clothing - usually enough to last throughout their married life. Agreement to the marriage depended, in part, on a signed agreement between the parents of the couple to the value and equivalence of what each brought to the marriage. There were rules and conventions as to what each was expected to provide. The process involved marriage valuers. Carmina's mother, Consiglia Zotti, was such a marriage valuer.

Each family engaged a valuer. Before the wedding the parties would meet, with their valuers, at the groom's house. The family would each indicate what their son was bringing to the marriage by way of property and goods. The family's valuer would indicate her/his estimated value of each item. The other broker could dispute the value and they would negotiate until they agreed. The process would be repeated at the house of the bride's family. At the end of the process, the value each family was contributing was totalled and negotiated until equivalence between the two contributions was agreed.

The agreement reached was then taken formally, by the bride, groom and their fathers, to a public notary. The value of the bride's contribution was then contracted as a mortgage on part of the groom's house. Should the wife die before her husband (as frequently happened, particularly in childbirth) and the husband remarry, the mortgage on part of his house acted as a safeguard and inheritance for her children.

A few days before the wedding, the bride's family would assemble at her home, collect the items to be taken to her new home (her fiancé's home) and carry them through the street in procession, the more valuable items in front and lesser items behind. The whole village would come out to watch and comment. Carmina remembered being part of several such processions for members of her family. She also remembered accompanying her mother to family homes to value the dowries. If the families did not agree on the equivalence and exchange of property, the marriage did not go ahead.

While Carmina had an extensive dowry, it was not valued in this way. Things began to change at the end of World War II. At that time emigration also ramped up.

Carmina's mother had a shop in Torrescuso that sold fabric, sewing and embroidery supplies and items for girls' dowries. She also taught embroidery to the village girls. Carmina perfected her stitching in the shop with her mother.



Amongst Lena's collection of embroidery are pillowcases she made with her mother, as her mother taught her to embroider as a child. The pillowcases are rectangular in shape, but longer than those commonly used in Australia. They are edged with drawn-thread work - not easily achieved on the closely-woven linen. There is an embroidered motif suggestive of a stylised carriage in the centre. It appears to be the work of a young learner, practising stitches.



This pillowcase has a large flower in the centre. The outline of the flower appeared, on first glance, to be appliqued (left). It is in fact, shadow work, with closed herringbone evident on the reverse side (right), a technique that appears in much of Carmina's work. The reverse side of this one indicates it is an 'apprentice piece'- likely used to teach Lena the technique. The French knots in the centre, which appear random on the right side, are in fact worked in a circular pattern, either from centre out or outer edge in.



In Carmina's dowry were several panels that would be laid across the pillow end of a bed to cover the sheet turnover. Rather than embroidering the sheet itself, an embroidered panel was laid over the sheet turnover and removed on going to bed (the same principle as an English pillow sham, but for the sheet rather than the pillow).



When Carmina arrived in Adelaide, she and her husband took in boarders and she used what she had - her dowry linen - for their beds. Consequently, much of her linen wore out. A couple of these covers, however, survived.

This one features cut-work, with numerous bars and a Punto Gigliuccio (sometimes referred to as pea stitch in English practice) edge. Carmina seems to have enjoyed this edge, been good at it, and used it frequently. It is worked by removing threads, creating a punto a giorno (hemstitch in English embroidery) edge at the top and bottom, then a punto a quatro (a version of what is known as four-sided stitch in English embroidery) row on either side, and pulling the central threads into bunches as part of the second row of punto a quatro.





Another sheet turn-down uses more shadow work and the outlined dots so prominent in the blue piece on the next page. This is entirely in white and also incorporates pulled thread work. The satin stitch dots in this piece are each outlined with eight back stitches.



Lia's favourite is, perhaps, this sheet worked in blue by her mother, at least 75 years ago. It features shadow work and beautifully executed padded satin stitch on the flowers, leaves and small dots around the edge. Every dot is padded, satin stitched, then outlined with tiny backstitches.







This fine piece is a table covering, beautifully woven and edged with what appears to be knitted lace. Carmina's skill is very evident in this white-work tablecloth featuring buttonhole, wave and single faggot stitch - as well as in the crocheted placemats she made for Lia.





There is a woven piece on which Carmina has embroidered her initials, but we do not know if she made or purchased the woven fabric.

It is likely, however, that she embroidered the handkerchief below as a young woman. The buttonhole-stitched flower petals appear elsewhere in her work, and the satin stitch dots that recur in her mature work are present here without their precise and effective back stitch outlines. The edge is a simple crochet.



There is evidence, too, of mending on this piece, a corner patched, presumably, to repair a split on the turn. The edge of the piece, as on many of the other pieces, is punto a giorno.

Many, like the one below, are hemmed at one end (the more embroidered one) with punto gigliuccio and at the other end with punto a giorno.





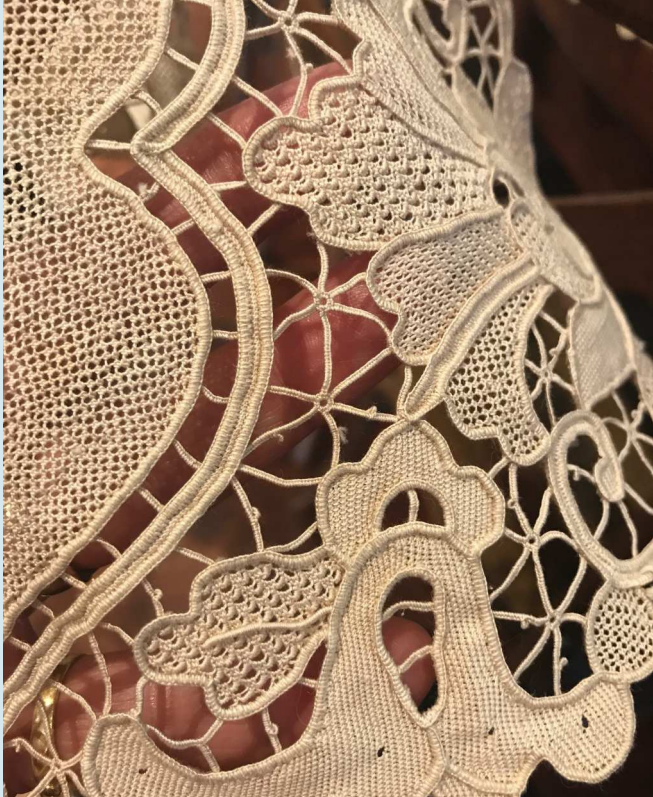
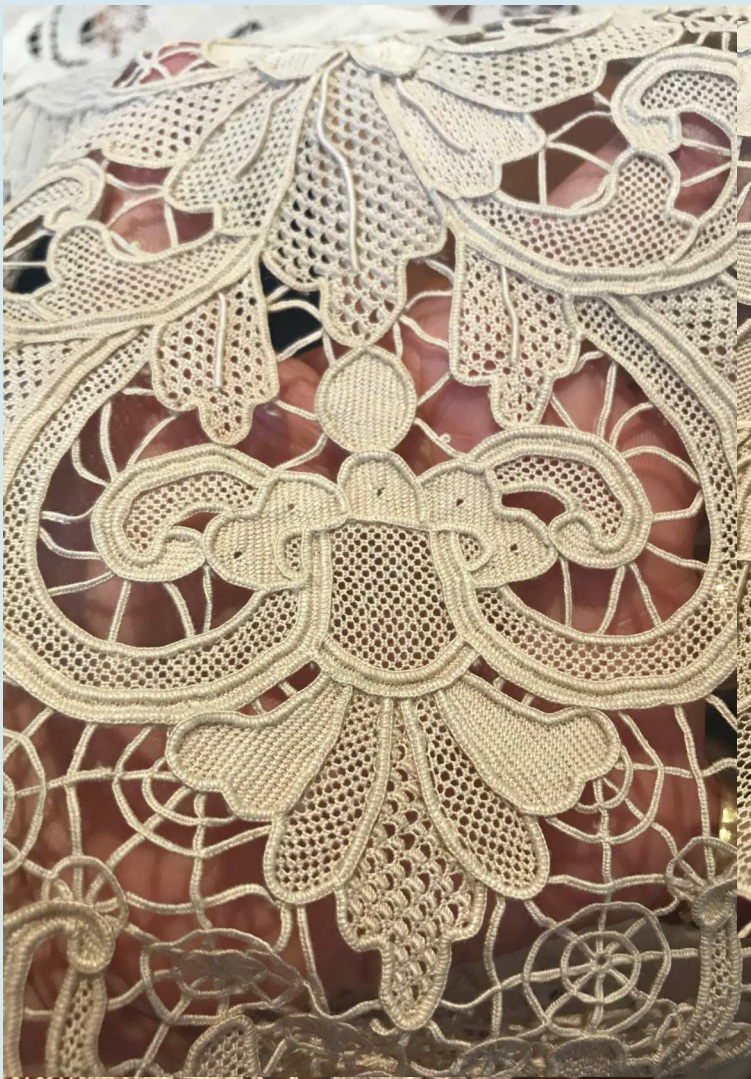
Within Lia's collection are a number of pieces given to her by friends and relatives (including her mother) or which she purchased herself while travelling. The large woven towel below, with cross stitch borders, and a deep crocheted border was a gift to Lia.

She is uncertain of the origin of the woven piece on the left, which has embroidery and a crocheted insert, as well as crocheted border. The border is a single band added on. The motifs of crosses, squares and flowers are not evenly distributed, suggesting perhaps that it was originally the edge of a different shaped piece.

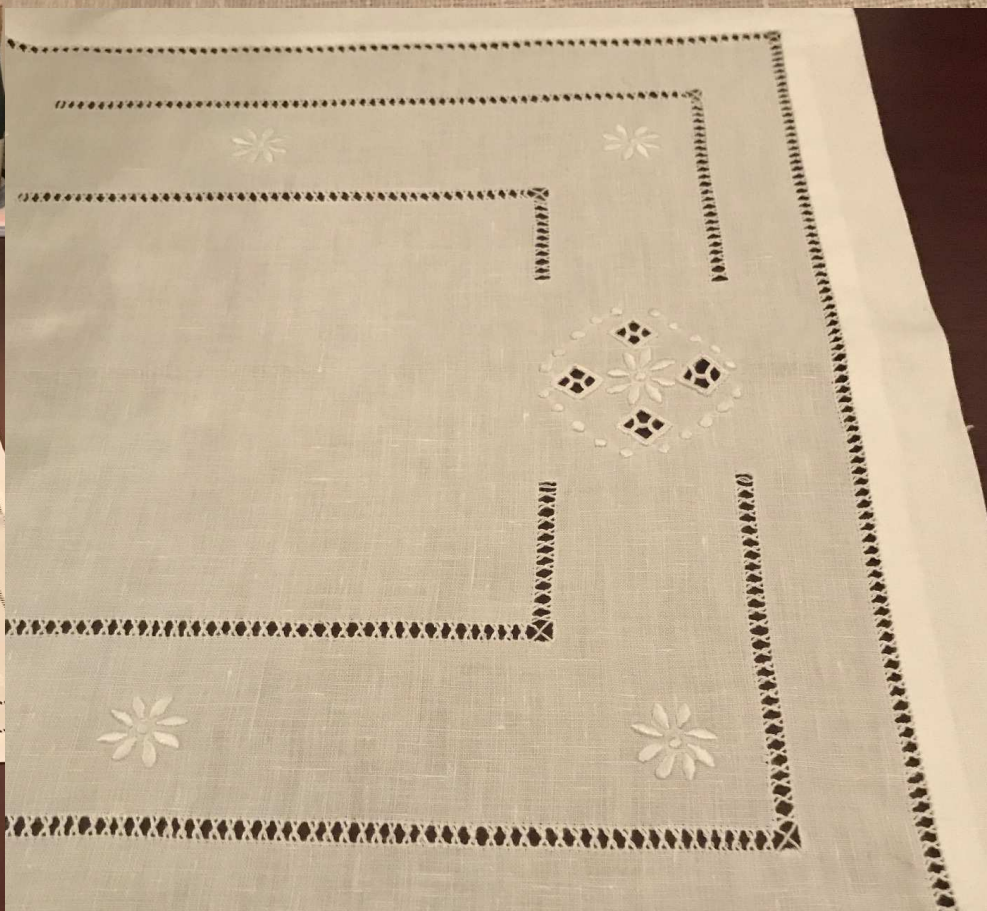


This set - tablecloth, placemats and serviettes of Venetian lace was bought in David Jones for Lia by her mother, Carmina. Lia uses it and treats it with great care.





This table runner was a gift to Lia from a friend on a significant birthday. It was made and purchased in Torrecuso. It is interesting to note the satin stitch dots and drawn thread work in punto gigliuccio - very like her mother's work.



Finally, Lia has a jacquard linen runner which she bought in Puglia. It has an elaborately knotted fringe.



Notes

Drawn thread work became popular and widespread in Italy in the 16th Century and cut-work in the 1600s.

The following references are useful:

<http://www.lospillo.com/shop/negozio/riviste-sfilature/sfilature-punti-a-giorno-5schemi-e-spiegazioni-per-realizzare-centri-liste-tovaglie-bordure-tende-copriletti-lrsf000060/>

punto gigliuccio parte 1 (angoli e punto a giorno)

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=VaKAMUczzqE>

punto gigliuccio parte 2 (punto quadro e punto gigliuccio)

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=hUQ4y9whVTY&t=1388s>

Bage, Patricia, Punti a giorno e sfilature semplici. Guida al ricamo, Il Castello, 2008

Gostelow, Mary, Embroidery: traditional designs, techniques and patterns from all over the world. Marshall Cavendish, London, 1977.

WILSON, Lilian Barton (c. 1910). The Priscilla Italian Cutwork Book. Containing Directions for Italian Hemstitching, Picota, Tassels, Fringes, Simple Cut Work and Gros Venise Needle Lace. Priscilla Publishing Company.



A record of the embroidery legacy of
Maria Grazia Carmina Tedesco (nee Cocchiaro)
who was born in Torrecuso, Benevento, Italy in June 1925 and passed away in
Adelaide in December 2017.
It has been compiled by Jillian Dellit with information provided by her daughter
Lia and from access to her embroidery.

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