

Tatting - Origins and History by Rebecca Jones

Although many sources give many derivations for the origin of the word 'tatting' no one really knows for sure. Some say because tatting is made up (or was originally) of small pieces joined together it thus resembles rags and tatters. 'Tatters' is Scandinavian in origin - from the Old Norse *taturr* and *toturr*, both meaning rags. It has also been suggested that whilst working at their lace women tatted and gossiped, but derivation is not very

In Europe it is a popular craft. The German word for tatting is *Schiffchenarbeit* meaning 'the work of the little boat' (i.e. the boat-shaped shuttle); the Italians call it *occhi* meaning 'eyes', referring to the rings which make up the lace; the Turkish say *makouk* which is their word for shuttle; the French call it *frivolite* and the Swedish word is similar - *frivolitet* - which again the character of the work. (South American ladies also call tatting *frivolite*, probably from the Spanish and Portuguese connections.) The one which I find has the nicest sound to it is Finnish - *sukkulapitsi* - which combines two words which describes the whole thing - *sukkula* meaning shuttle and *pitsi* meaning lace - shuttlelace. There has even been a move in some circles to change the name of tatting to shuttle-lace, which, while it may be a good idea for up-dating the craft, would be very hard to put into common use.

Tatting is believed to have evolved from knotting, which in various forms is a very ancient type of decoration for clothing. The Egyptians used knotting as decoration on ceremonial dress and a mummy was found with a skirt overlay of knotted rings which look very much like tatting. The early Chinese also used knotting and couched their knotted designs into their embroideries. These eventually found their way to Europe and knotting was popular for the decoration of furnishings and embroideries in Medieval times - Chaucer even mentions it in his *Canterbury Tales* (1387).

Knotting was worked by winding the thread onto a shuttle and then making a series of knots on the thread at close intervals so that the work looked like a string of beads. However, it did not become really popular until the seventeenth century when it is thought that the Dutch, due to their trading in the East, brought new forms of knotting from China and made it commonplace in Europe. It is not quite clear where the transition from knotting to tatting took place, but it is generally thought to have occurred in Italy. Someone sitting knotting one day decided to join her knots into a ring instead of making a string of them and thus tatting was born. Meanwhile in England, in the court of William and Mary, knotting was in full swing. Queen Mary was herself an ardent knoter and took it everywhere with her. Indeed, there was even a poem written about her by Sir Charles Sedley in which he compares her to the former Catholic queens who were always *'...telling beads, But here's a Queen now, thanks to God, Who, when she rides in coach abroad Is always knotting threads.'*

Being a favourite pastime of the ladies at Court, naturally the shuttles were very elaborate and expensive, being made as much to be seen as to be used. Knotting shuttles were much larger than the present tatting shuttles, being between 13cm and 15cm long and 2.5cm and 5cm wide, with the blades open at the end so that quite thick threads might be wound on. Some very precious threads were used for knotting including gold thread. Ivory and tortoiseshell decorated and inlaid with gold and silver and mother-of-pearl were popular for shuttles, which were often given as gifts. In 1745, the Infanta Maria Theresa was given five caskets of enamelled gold each containing a gold shuttle as a wedding present. Madame de Pompadour also had elaborate gold shuttles, each decorated with jewels.

The French knotting shuttles were even larger than the English ones, and again, the ladies at Court used their shuttles almost as a fashion accessory. In fashionable society a lady never sat empty-handed and idle. She used either her fan or her knotting shuttle to show off her hands and to make her look composed and graceful as well as industrious. Shuttles were carried in little knotting bags which were also richly adorned and bejewelled and these little bags were taken everywhere from society parties to the theatre. A fashionable lady would not be seen without one. Indeed, many ladies had their portrait painted complete with knotting bag and shuttle.

As mentioned previously, tatting, as such, is thought to have originated in Italy in the sixteenth century. It was probably made by nuns, as many forms of lace and needlework owe their existence to convents. The early forms of tatting were quite different from today. There were no chains and the work consisted of only rings which were made in rows or groups using only a single shuttle and then tied or sewn together afterwards. Sometimes the rings were made with a needle instead of a shuttle. During the early eighteenth century tatting was gradually taking over from knotting in England, although the word tatting did not actually appear in print until 1843. It is thought that early examples of tatting were still referred to as knotting.

A Mrs Mary Delaney in 1750 made a pair of chair covers having a border of oak leaves in white linen which were outlined in knotted threads, some of which are tatted rather than knotted. Later, in 1781, Parson Woodforde mentions buying a pair of small ivory shuttles for his niece for one shilling. It is presumed that these shuttles were for tatting since knotting tat shuttles were of a much larger size. At the start of the nineteenth century tatting was a popular English occupation and in 1843 the Ladies Handbook of Millinery, Dressmaking and Tatting was published. This was to be the start of many books on the subject. Up to this time tatting patterns were passed down from tatter to tatter by word of mouth or simply copying other pieces of work. Shortly after this, in 1850, the woman regarded as the 'mother' of modern tatting appeared on the scene. She was Mademoiselle Eleonore Riego de la Branchardiere, a half-Irish, half-French woman who had a 'fancy warehouse' in London and supplied lace-making and embroidery materials. Between 1850 and 1868 Mlle Riego (as she liked to be known) published eleven little pattern books showing mainly borders and insertions in tatting. Mlle Riego used picots to join the rings together but she used a needle to do it at first and not a shuttle, as it wasn't until 1851 that an unknown writer published instructions on how to join with a shuttle and so improved the method of tatting.

Mlle Riego also developed the use of a central ring with picots as the central motif and many old patterns use this as the basis of their design. If you are lucky enough to have any old piece of tatting (really old!) you will notice that it consists of 'wheels' that is, a central small ring with about twelve picots, then a second row of small rings joined to these picots and an outer row of rings joined to the second row by a single thread. These wheels are then joined together side by side to go round a doily or whatever, or are joined together round a central 'wheel' to form a complete tatted doily.

The name doily, by the way, comes from a Mr D'Oyley who kept a small shop in The Strand in London in the eighteenth century, selling cloth and small pieces of material which were fringed or decorated and used to put under finger bowls and the like to stop them marking tables. Because chains were not invented until 1864 Mlle Riego used to crochet over the single threads left between rings to make a firmer lace. At about the same time that Mlle Riego was enlightening the English ladies, a Mrs Pullan published a book in America with a section on tatting. This was in 1853 and in 1857 the same lady had an edging featured in a popular ladies magazine of the day. An attempt was made in 1847 to introduce tatting as a cottage industry in Ireland at a place called Ardee, but it was not very successful. Irish tatting, while usually worked in very fine thread, did not show a great deal of originality in design, being made up mostly of repeated motifs worked into collars and cuffs. Mrs Beeton (of cooking fame) also wrote a Book of Needlework in 1870 and this included a section on tatting.

Probably the main authority on tatting after Mlle Riego was Mlle Therese de Dillmont, a French woman who wrote what is considered by many to be the needlework bible - her Encyclopedia of Needlework published in 1886 and still available and selling well today. In the chapter on tatting Mlle de Dillmont covers many types of edgings and braids as well as projects such as bedspreads combining tatting and crochet. She also describes how to use two shuttles and the use of two colours in the threads. Mlle de Dillmont is credited with inventing the Josephine knot, which we will discuss later.

Back in England ten years later a schoolteacher, Mrs Louisa Walker, wrote a little book called Varied Occupations in String Work which consisted of fairly simple exercises for young children to make by knotting string in macrame-style patterns. However, in one section she deals with single and double tatted bars which are worked with one string upon a foundation string. Naturally, the knot is worked by hand and not with a shuttle. Mrs Walker also explains how to make loop fringes (picots) and single and double loop rosettes (rings). One very interesting exercise is joining the double looped fringes (which are very similar to Riego's Pearl Tatting) together by interlocking the loops in much the same way that hairpin crochet strips are joined together .

The next major advance in tatting was in 1910 when Lady Katherine Hoare wrote The Art Of Tatting and used her own work and that of Queen Marie of Romania as examples. Queen Marie made many creative articles, often for the church, using gold threads and jewels worked into the pieces. Lady Hoare popularised the use of the chain and wrote: 'with two shuttles and an imaginative brain there is no end to the designs that may be invented'

Tatting was reasonably popular during the 1920s and 1930s but then it went into a decline. In America it has remained fairly common all along, with many magazines and various thread companies printing patterns quite often. One of the leading American designers is Myrtle Hamilton who turns out an amazing number of designs of all kinds on a regular basis. In Australia, during the 1930s and 1940s tatting enjoyed quite a revival, with many original Australian patterns available to keen tatters. One of the leading designers was Norma Benporath who for many years kept everyone's shuttle busy with her lovely patterns in Australian Home Beautiful. The most amazing thing about Miss Benporath's prolific output was that

every article used in the illustrations to her patterns was made by Norma herself and the embroidery was done by her mother. The old Australian Woman's Mirror often featured very attractive little patterns by Rachel Abraham during the 1940s. In my search for information on old patterns I have several times come across pages torn from these magazines and carefully saved in scrapbooks of patterns. Some could hardly be read, they are so worn and fragile, but all were eagerly shown to me as treasures (which they are), usually by older ladies who now, sadly, no longer tat.

After the war interest in tatting waned, as with many crafts. During the 1960s and 1970s the most notable books on tatting were the rather basic but easy-to-follow book by Bessie Attenborough which reprinted many of the J. & P. Coats designs (from their various pattern books), three books by Elgiva Nicholls which treat tatting in a very contemporary, free-style manner totally unlike any of the traditional methods seen previously, and another similar book by an American writer Rhoda Auld, which, while having some very modern ideas about tatting, also gives a good history of the art plus many illustrations. The other book worth reading is by Irene Waller, again with many illustrations describing the various forms tatting can take.

With the trend towards being 'crafty' these days, tatting is one of the 'new' old crafts being rediscovered, and with this book I hope that many younger people will realise that tatting does not just have to be doilies and hankies - there is a whole world of imagination waiting to be explored.