An Undisciplined Activity? Lace Production in Early Modern Venice.

Patricia Allerston (Edinburgh)

The history of work in late medieval and early modern Venice, like that of many other European urban centres, has been traditionally conflated with the history of the city's craft guilds.[1] Comparative studies of early modern work in other parts of early modern Europe indicate that this 'guild-centric' Venetian historiography needs to be questioned.[2] Although recent in-depth studies of the Venetian glass and silk industries indicate that this trend has started to change, the focus has tended to remain on high-profile crafts and formal craft structures.[3] Venetian guilds were numerous - in 1976 the American professor, Richard Rapp, listed 133 'principal guilds' in seventeenth-century Venice - and they had a very long, and reasonably well-documented history.[4] The earliest surviving guild statutes date from the thirteenth century, and the guilds themselves remained in place until their dissolution in the early 1800s, following the fall of the Venetian Republic to the French Revolutionary army several years before[5]. As a rule, historians of Venetian economic life have not traditionally looked beyond these relatively well-documented craft organisations, to incorporate informal work practices.

My initial research on the second-hand trade in early modern Venice necessitated a different approach to that of my principal Ph.D. supervisor, Professor Richard Mackenney, who was a specialist in Venetian guild history.[6] This was because the traders involved in buying and selling second-hand goods were not restricted solely to the guild system. On the one hand, an alternative group of traders, based in the Ghetto, was licensed to practise the trade from the early sixteenth century onwards, alongside the members of an old and very established guild. On the other hand, various types of unlicensed traders engaged in the trade, both licitly and illicitly, such as public auctioneers, dealers in stolen goods, and various sorts of people who exchanged used goods by bartering them or lending money on a pledge. The process of
reconstructing this complicated, elusive structure made it clear quite how important a role informal work practices played in the Venetian second-hand trade as a whole. My research suggested that these practices were not marginal aspects of second-hand trading, but structural elements of the trade. This case study, which was completed a decade ago, is still unusual within the context of Venetian workers' history; further studies are needed to prove that it was not an atypical example. Another means of proving the importance of 'irregular' activity within the Venetian workplace, is to focus on a type of work that produced a quintessentially Venetian product, but was not part of the formal guild-regulated system. That is the rationale behind this paper. Lace production is an interesting example of a Venetian economic activity which developed outside the guild-regulated urban economy. Lace was a characteristic early modern Venetian product. Like glass wares, printed books and high-quality cloth, lace was made by skilled labour from imported raw materials: flax, silk and precious metals. And like these other Venetian products, lace was also exported by merchants, at great profit.

Venetian lace production grew considerably during the sixteenth century, again like the three better-known Venetian wares mentioned. Like glass production, it continued to expand during the seventeenth century. Indeed, the 'heyday' of Venetian lace was the latter half of the seventeenth century, the period in which the Venetian export economy is often seen as being in decline.

Two principal types of lace were made in Venice at this time. Bobbin lace, including precious gold bobbin lace of which very little now remains, was made on a cushion by working together a number of threads wound on separate implements called bobbins. Needle lace, for which Venice became particularly known in the seventeenth century, was made with a needle and thread; in the 1600s, the lace was constructed by means of thousands of tiny stitches built up on top of guiding threads pinned on to a pattern. Looking back from the mid-eighteenth century, a nostalgic Venetian commentator recorded that 'there never was a nation which could dream of taking precedence to Venice in making needlepoint lace appreciated by the likes of emperors and princesses across the mountains'. While this comment needs to be approached with caution, there are a great many documented references to acquisitions of Venetian needlepoint lace by northern European 'emperors and princesses', especially in the seventeenth century. High-profile consumers included many of the crowned heads of Europe of the time, including King-Stadholder William III, and the most powerful monarch in Europe, King Louis XIV. The various attempts made to ban expensive imports of Italian lace in countries such as France and Britain during the latter seventeenth century are an
indication of the extent of such foreign demand.[13] Venetian lace was also one of the expensive and prestigious foreign products emulated by the royal manufactories, which the French minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, established in France in the 1660s.[14]

In spite of its contemporary importance, Venetian lace production has been largely neglected by economic historians. There is no systematic study of the trade, unlike that of glass, printed books and high-quality cloth, although the gendered nature of lace-making has recently provoked interest.[15] In Venice, as elsewhere, lace was made predominantly by women. These women either worked by themselves or in groups scattered throughout the city and its many islands, or they were part of a community formally grouped together in one of the city's many religious institutions.[16] In 1671, the Archbishop of Béziers, who was French ambassador to Venice, reported to Colbert that at that time: 'all the convents of the religious and all the poor families live off this work here'.[17] Venetian lace production therefore not only caused the classic problems caused by dispersed home-working - such as quality control - but it also incorporated additional structural characteristics which did not lend themselves readily to traditional means of craft organisation: the most concentrated pockets of activities occurred in religious institutions which were meant to be gender-specific and completely separate to the world. This unusual structure makes lace-making a difficult economic activity to study and it may be this aspect of the trade, not simply gender bias among economic historians, which has resulted in its neglect.

Aside from some very serious problems posed by sources, one of the biggest difficulties raised by this topic is conceptual - how exactly to categorise lace-making. Madile Gambier, an Italian researcher who wrote a short, well-documented essay on the trade in the early 1980s, described early modern lace-making as 'lavoro nero' ('black work' or work undertaken in the dark (Schwarzarbeit), in other words, illegal work).[18] This description is rather misleading. Lace-making was not an illicit occupation in early modern Venice. Venetian lace-makers, unlike, for example, Jewish tailors or goldsmiths or printers, did not ply their trade in constant fear of being caught and punished for challenging trade monopolies[19] Moreover, the contribution which lace-making made to the Venetian economy - and to Venetian society, in that it provided work for large numbers of poor Venetians - was officially recognised and the trade was positively encouraged in official quarters.[20] A recent commentator represented the trade slightly differently, as an 'exceptional' example of a Venetian economic activity which was carried on entirely outside the guild system.[21] This reflects the
traditional view of Venetian crafts which was mentioned at the start, but is also somewhat misleading. The existence of a group of Jewish second-hand dealers which operated in a completely separate way to the used-goods dealers registered in the Venetian guild disproves this argument, as do other recently highlighted examples of Venetian trades which did not fit the traditional craft-guild mould.[22]

In short, lace-making was neither an activity which occurred illicitly in the 'shadows' or an exceptional example of an urban craft activity which operated outside the guild-regulated economy. How, then, should early modern Venetian lace production be categorised? In the rest of my paper I'd like to explore this question, by discussing Venetian lace production in more detail. We shall see that in spite of its unusual structure and lack of formal trade organisation, lace-making was not an undisciplined activity. Indeed, Venetian lace-makers were subject to a number of different sorts of controls.

**Venetian Lace Production: An undisciplined activity?**

Of the two sorts of production, 'outworking' and institutional lace-making, it is possible to find out most about the latter, although detailed archival evidence of working practices in both areas remains elusive. Lace was made in two different sorts of religious institutions in Venice: nunneries, and the new charitable institutions set up expressly for lay women in the sixteenth century.[23] These new institutions were part of an 'evangelical' movement of religious reform which affected many parts of the Italian peninsula in the mid to late sixteenth century, before the Council of Trent.[24] They were differentiated according to the types of the women they targeted; separate institutions were set up for young attractive female orphans, foundlings, widows, beggars, ex-prostitutes, the incurably sick, and female converts from Islam or Judaism.[25] The stipulations made at Trent added an extra impetus to these institutions, as well as to the Venetian nunneries which were subsequently subjected to a process of strict enclosure.[26]

As with guilds, the religious institutions in which lace was made were organised according to rules, and their members were meant to live by those rules - in this respect it is worth remembering what the term regular actually means. Whereas nunneries varied, according to the social status of the women involved and the religious orders which they followed, the new charitable institutions were mainly aimed at poor, vulnerable women. The rules drawn up for
these religious institutions often refer to the work to be undertaken by their members, since work was an important element of their activity. Work was important to these institutions for two reasons. Firstly, they could not depend solely on charitable donations, but needed to support themselves. In the 1590s, for example, the English traveller Fynes Moryson noted that the Zitelle, the young orphan girls based on the Giudecca island in Venice, lived there 'by the work of their hands'.[27] The second reason why work was important is that it was central to the ethos of these institutions: it was an intrinsic part of the strict notion of charity which they embodied. Pamela Sharpe has recently highlighted that lace-making was perfectly attuned to Puritan ideas about work in seventeenth-century England - raising that hoary old notion of the Protestant work ethic.[28] But ideas about hard work as a suitable form of charity for the poor, were not confession-specific in this period.[29] The statutes of the new Venetian orphans' hospital, the Mendicanti (set up in 1600) state that a large part of the day was to be dedicated to work 'in order to raise the children away from idleness and also to keep them in discipline and fear' ('per allevare li figlioli lontani dall'occhio et anco per custodirli nella disciplina e timore').[30] Lacemaking was a useful occupation for the poor vulnerable women grouped together in such charitable institutions - it kept them busy, it reminded them of their rightful social place, and it also kept them in an ideal religious state: in discipline and fear.

The concept of work as instrumental to redemption is visually represented in an altarpiece painted in the 1590s for the Venetian Church of the Soccorso, one of these new charitable institutions which was founded to reform prostitutes and adulterous women a few years before.[31]

_Benedetto Caliari (Attrib.), L'Istituzione del Soccorso, 1597, Accademia, Venice [Figure 1]._

Painted in the 1590s, probably by Benedetto Caliari the brother of Paolo Veronese, it depicts the prioress of that institution interceding with the Virgin, via Mary Magdalene, on behalf of three penitent prostitutes.[32] On the left of this painting, the reformed inmates of the Soccorso engage in lace-making. Lace was a useful product for such women to make. Not only did the high demand for lace mean that it was a lucrative product for such institutions to produce, but the production of lace was also seen as a 'virtuous' activity for women.

The rule books of these charitable institutions indicate that lace-making was carried out in a systematic fashion. The inmates' day was meant to be rigidly structured, with their time
divided between prayer, work, eating and household chores and only one day out per year.[33] A source from a nunnery says that the nuns were read devotional literature while they worked, and it is likely that similar texts were read aloud in these other places.[34] For example, the charter of the Foundling hospital, the Derelitti, which was rewritten in 1667, stipulates that the orphan girls in its care were meant to work at least six hours a day, more in summer than winter, and to be paid daily, according to the type of lace which they made. Daily work quotas were to be set for the young lace-makers, and their productivity was to be reviewed weekly. The girls were meant to be paid 13 soldi a day in summer for needlepoint lace (11 soldi in winter) and 12 soldi for gold bobbin lace (10 at other times of the year). They were not meant to receive their pay directly: two thirds was supposed to go towards the institution's running costs, and one third towards their individual dowry fund.[35] The orphanage rules explicitly forbid the girls to negotiate prices for their work by themselves. The institution's output was meant to be sold as a whole by its prior or governors, who effectively acted as a cartel.

As with all normative sources, it is hard to know whether these rules were actually carried out. However, an external source shows that religious institutions did sell lace as a single unit. A detailed account book of a successful mercer based in the Merceria survives, dating from 1662. This book, which belonged to a certain Bortolo Cargnoni, records monies owed to 'The House of the Zitelle' for gold lace (130 lire 10 denari).[36] This account book also lists a very large number of individual's names alongside these references to religious institutions, thus revealing the extent to which lace-making was carried on outside the religious institutions. Cargnoni's account book cites the names of these makers and the amounts they were owed for lace-making, but not much else. It is hard to construct a picture of non-institutional lace-making from this information. We are not informed where the women lived or worked, although the odd reference gives us tantalising hints. Fiorina di Giacomo Buranelo, for example, who was owed 30 lire 20 soldi, was probably the wife or daughter of a fisherman from Burano. The list also gives an insight into the women's typical social status, since it includes several widows and orphans, as well as the poor lay religious women called pizzochere. This source therefore supports the Archbishop of Beziers's observation of 1671 (see above), that 'all the poor families' as well as 'all the convents of the religious' lived off this work in Venice.[37] While the entries support the idea that these commercial lace-makers were poor, the citation of individual women's names may be misleading, since lace was often made in groups, supervised by a mistress. An interesting entry in this respect is the one
referring to a certain Madre Suor Crestina Pizzocera, who was owed 169 lire. This substantial sum was more than the amount owed to the House of the Zitelle. It suggests that she was in charge of a large group of tertiaries which acted together like a charitable institution.[38]

The existence of this information within a mercer's account book proves that Venetian lace-makers, both those working publicly in the city and its surrounding islands, and those shut away in religious institutions, were bound up in the city's economic life at its highest level. The mercers - especially those such as Cagnoni who were based in the mercerie - were among the most powerful tradesmen in the city by this time.[39] Given the women's probable economic and social position, this was unlikely to have been an equal relationship, although the existence of institutional cartels is rather interesting. The cost of raw materials, at least in the case of gold bobbin lace, might help to explain the existence of this relationship.[40] Mercers may even have been responsible for developing the production of such lace. In 1632 three Venetian mercers approached the orphans' hospital with a proposition: to start the girls working on bobbin pieces.[41] Powerful mercers were also involved in the management of several of the new charitable institutions, and this involvement may have had commercial as well as religious motivations.[42]

Such merchant mercers were knowledgeable about international demand and international tastes and were not afraid to petition the Venetian government to be allowed to sell forbidden foreign goods.[43] It was probably this knowledge of the international market, as much as their ability to supply raw materials, which explains their close involvement in the lace trade - at least at its highest and most profitable levels. Lace, like most other 'élite' products in this period, was subject to significant changes in taste.[44] Interestingly, a Venetian mercer's shop inventory, of 1671, lists Merli alla Colberta - perhaps the sort of product which the French started to produce in emulation of Venetian lace some 6 years before.[45] Lace-making institutions and groups, would have needed to be kept up-to-date with this changing demand.

Although the Venetian mercers' guild did not claim a monopoly over lace production, it did claim a right to the sale of lace. We have plenty of proof that the mercers were central to the sale of high-quality lace, and they probably also dominated the export market. However, they did not completely control the sale of lace. If we are looking for 'shadowy' aspects of the lace trade, it is in the sale, rather than in the production that we find truly irregular practices. Men, as well as women, sold lace around the city's streets.[46] The mercers' guild complained that
the ability of women from Burano to sell lace in the streets and door-to-door gave them an unfair advantage, as they could get access to nobles' houses, and to nunneries on the days when new nuns took their vows.[47]

Conclusion

The lace trade is an interesting example of an economic activity which doesn't fit the classic 'guild-centric' craft system which has dominated the analysis of Venetian economic life. However, its disparate and unconventional structure does not mean that the trade was irregular and undisciplined. The notion of discipline was in fact central to the raison d'être of the religious institutions in which much of the highest-quality lace was made. Indeed it was a lack of discipline, among the young female inmates of such institutions, which was one of the reasons blamed for the collapse of the lace industry in the eighteenth century.[48] This disparate and unconventional trade managed to meet an international demand for lace which lasted a good 100 years. It seems also to have supplied the expertise to kick-start its main foreign competitor's own industry. In short, the more one investigates Venetian lace production, the less shadowy and irregular it appears to be....


sottoposte alla Giustizia e poi alla Giustizia Vecchia dalle origini al MCCCXXX, 3 vols in 4 parts (Rome, 1896-1914); on the dissolution of the guilds, see Massimo Costantini, L'albero della libertà economica: il processo di scioglimento delle corporazioni veneziane (Venice, 1987).

[6] Published as Tradesmen and Traders, see above note 1.


[15] For a gendered approach, see Satya Datta, Women and Men in Early Modern Venice (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 183-218. A promising early economic study by a French researcher, Anne Kraatz, 'The inventory of a Venetian lace merchant in the year 1671', Bulletin de Liaison du CIETA, 55-6 (1984), pp. 127-33, was followed by a very different type of publication, see ibid., (1989). Recent publications have been dominated by the leading Venetian dress historian, Doretta Davanzo Poli, see ibid. (1998); and ibid., 'Il merletto: un'arte tutta veneziana', in Merletti: Espozone du una selezione di antichi merletti veneziani dalle collezioni IRE (Venice, 2001). A particularly useful historical essay, by Madile Gambier, was published in the exhibition catalogue La scuola dei merletti di Burano (Burano, 1981): 'Testimonianze sulla lavorazione del merletto nella Repubblica di Venezia', pp.21-35. Another interesting recent study, which approaches the subject from an anthropological perspective, is Lidia Sciama, 'Lacemaking in Venetian Culture', in R. Barnes and J. B. Eicher (eds), Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning in Cultural Contexts (Providence/Oxford), 1993, pp. 121-44. For a typical example of a nineteenth-century study of Venetian lace, see G. M. Urbani de Gheltof, Trattato storico tecnico della fabricazione dei merletti veneziani (Venice, 1878).


[20] This is especially obvious in the eighteenth century, when the demand for Venetian lace collapsed and attempts were made to establish new lace-making enterprises, see Gambier (1981), p. 27.


[22] Allerston (1996), pp.119-40 (Jewish second-hand dealers); For workers within the established glass industry who did not belong to the guild system, see Trivellato (2000), pp. 131, 138-9.


[25] For information on each of these institutions, see Bernard Aikema and Dulcia Meijers (eds), Nel regno dei poveri: arte e storia dei grandi ospedali veneziani in età moderna 1474-1797 (Venice, 1989).


[33] See, for example, the extracts of rules for the 'good government' of the girls in the Venetian foundling hospital, which were revised in 1667, published in Arte e musica all'ospedalletto (1978), pp. 141-4. The day out is highlighted by Giuseppe Ellero in idem, p. 14.


[36] Istituzioni di Ricovero e di Educazione (IRE), Ospedale dei Derelitti, Registro di Bilancio del Negozi "alla struzzo d'oro"di Bortolo Cargnoni, in Merceria di San Salvador (1662), Maestranze da
merli d'oro.

[37] For references to the lace-makers of Pellestrina as the main breadwinners in the early seventeenth century, see Davanzo Poli (1998), p.16. A mid-eighteenth century reference relating that the women of Chioggia had, in the past, been 'incessantly' occupied by making white lace of ordinary quality is in Grevembroch, (1981), vol. IV, no. 68.

[38] IRE, Ospedale dei Derelitti, Registro di Bilancio del Negozio "alla struzzo d'oro"di Bortolo Cargnoni, in Merceria di San Salvador (1662), Maestranze da merli d'oro.


[40] Nuns were among the debtors of the mercer Stefano Zarnesi who died in 1609, see Mackenney (1987), p. 108.


[44] For a late-sixteenth-century carnival song which urges by-passers to buy lace collars from a street seller because 'they're of the latest shape/style', see Giovanni Croce, Mascarate piacevoli et ridicolose per il carnevale a otto voci (Venice, 1604 [reprint]), 'Da Buranelle'.


