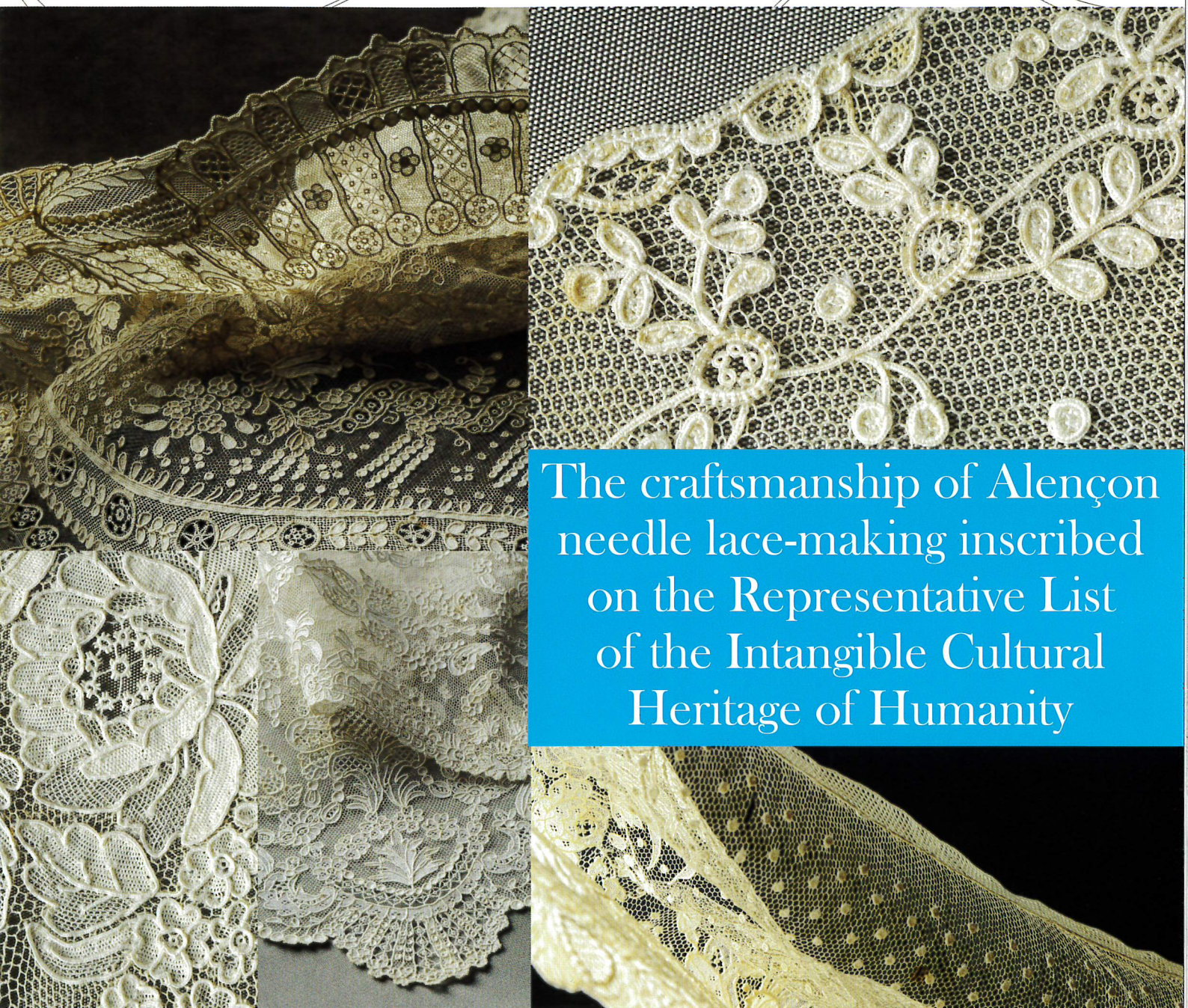


# Lace of Alençon

# Thread of excellence

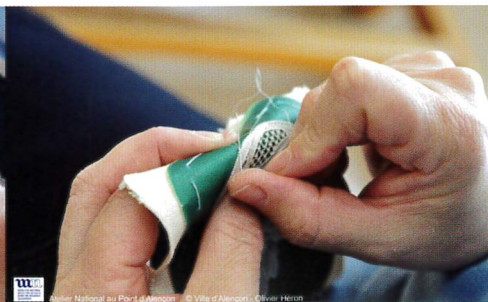
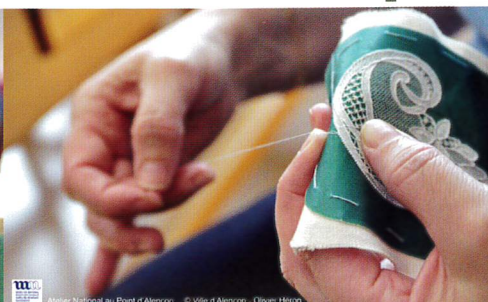


The craftsmanship of Alençon  
needle lace-making inscribed  
on the Representative List  
of the Intangible Cultural  
Heritage of Humanity





# Alençon lace in three points



## Its history.

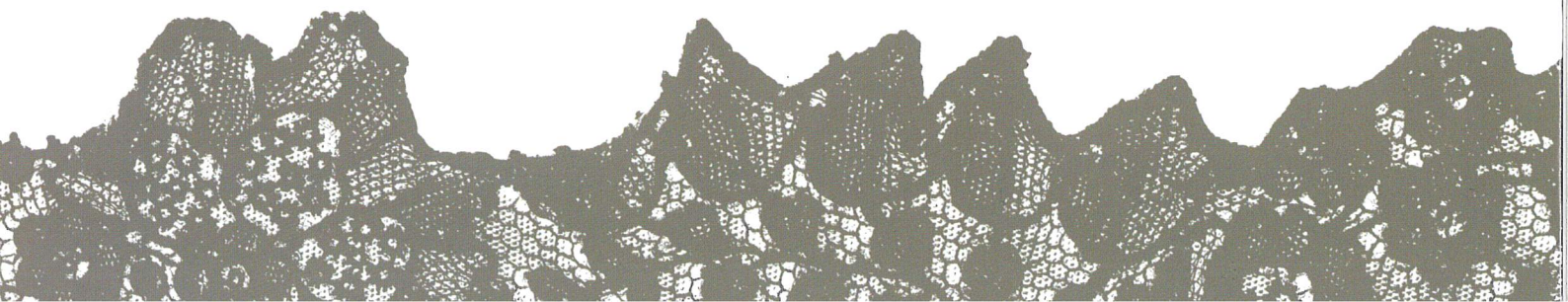
Needlework made its appearance in the Alençon region from the XVI<sup>th</sup> century. In 1665, the establishment of the Manufactures Royales de Dentelle (Royal Manufacturers of Lace) promoted the development of this activity, which supported thousands of lace workers in the Alençon area. Very early on, Alençon lace moved towards prestige, made principally for the European royal courts. Its finesse and sophistication allowed it to obtain excellence in the royal courts in the second half of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century. Its success then declined because of changes in fashion and the emergence of machine-made lace.

## Its uniqueness.

There are two types of handmade lace: lace bobbin and needle lace. Lace bobbin is developed mainly in Europe and notably in France (Auvergne, Normandy, Lorraine etc). Needle lace is much rarer. Alençon lace appeared as the quintessence of this technique. Made with a needle and a single thread of linen (today with Egyptian cotton), it is made up by sewing together almost invisible, very small pieces. Its complexity means that it has never been possible to transfer production to lace bobbin or machine.

## Its execution.

The production of Alençon lace is carried out in 10 stages. Up until the XX<sup>th</sup> century, lace makers only knew a few stage of work, conforming to the work methods established by Marthe La Perrière (1605 - 1677). Today, each of the lace makers has mastered all there is to know. Alençon lace is defined by the length of time it takes for its exceptional execution: 1 cm<sup>2</sup> of lace takes, on average, seven hours of work.







Atelier National au Point d'Alençon © Ville d'Alençon - Olivier Héron

## The National Workshop between tradition and modernity

Now there are seven. Seven lace makers who are the only ones in the world to possess the production techniques of Alençon lace. These nimble fingered women perpetuate this unique knowledge at the heart of the Atelier Conservatoire National du Point d'Alençon. Created in 1976 by the State, the organisation is associated with the Administration Générale du Mobilier National et des Manufactures. *"Our mission is to save, conserve and to pass on the unique knowledge of needle lace",*

explains Brigitte Lefebvre, manager of the workshop. *"Between seven and ten years are needed in order to fully master Alençon lace. Learning is based exclusively on oral and practical teaching because the production process is extremely complex."*

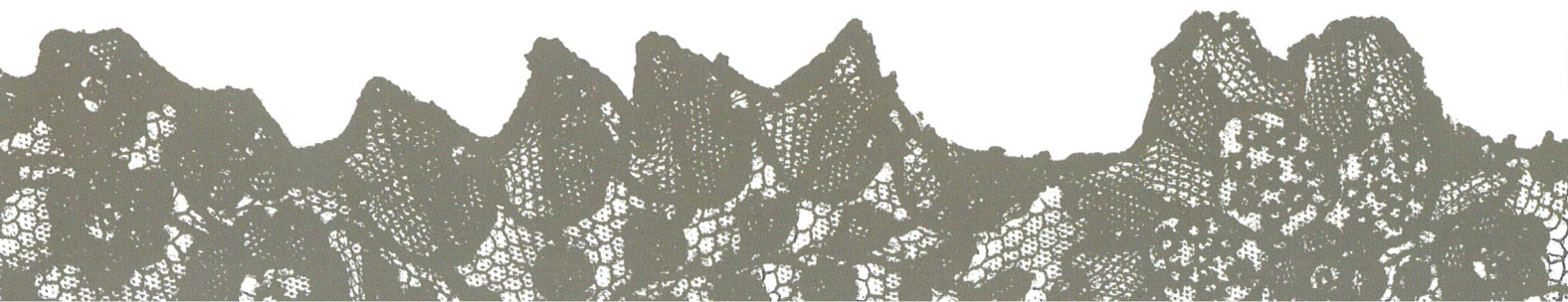
Nestled in the Cour Carrée de la Dentelle, the Atelier National works to a very precisely timed day. Each morning, the lace makers teach their expertise to the apprentices (two pupils joined the organisation last October, one of which is the first boy).

They reproduce pieces of work from the inventory in order to safeguard the age-old knowledge. The afternoon is devoted to the production of artistic textile pieces. *"We take our expertise in order to work towards modernity by transposing our own techniques to contemporary works"* underlines Brigitte Lefebvre. *"This impetus given by the Mobilier National allows us to renew an exceptional tradition and to open Alençon lace to contemporary creation."*

### ... ADDITIONAL INFORMATION .....

#### From the School of Lace Makers to the National Workshop

The Atelier Conservatoire National du Point d'Alençon has taken over the school of lace makers, founded in 1902 by the Chamber of Commerce, to safeguard the lace industry of Alençon. Run by the Providence nuns from 1931, the school was managed by charities from 1965 up until its closure in 1976. Initially set up on rue Saint-Blaise, it moved to rue du Pont-Neuf in 1938. In 1987, the Atelier National left rue du Pont-Neuf in order to set up near the museum.







# Lace Treasures at the Museum

## A unique collection

The biggest needle lace collection in the world is in the Musée des Beaux-arts et de la Dentelle d'Alençon! Actually the administration department «lace» numbers 1 200 examples, whose technique originates in the XIV Century, and has continued to flourish until the present day. Amongst them, 220 pieces or samples are Alençon lace. Alençon lace therefore constitutes a little more than 15% of the museum's collection. The 1000 other pieces are essentially French bobbin lace or needle lace. The collections also bring together some French and European machine-made lace.

## Exceptional Pieces

Lace first made its appearance in the museum in 1889 thanks to the generosity of Mme Gerasime Despierres. This donation, which brings together 27 samples of Alençon lace, constitutes the first public lace collection in France. Since then, the collection has not stopped growing. The museum's acquisitions are essentially directed towards prestigious pieces of needle lace: Point de Venise, Point de France, Point d'Argentan and of course Point d'Alençon. Amongst the exceptional pieces are the remarkably named "Volant aux grenades", made from Point d'Argentan (between 1745 and 1753), an exceptional collection of bas d'aube from the end of the 17th century until present day, a

book of design techniques with Point d'Alençon and Point d'Argentan models and a beautiful Point d'Alençon fan (from 1890).

## Twenty exhibitions

The first exhibition devoted to lace was shown in 1949. You have to wait until a later date, actually until the 80's for it to return to an eminent on stage position. Since then, twenty exhibitions have been organised for the general public. The Musée des Beaux-arts et de la Dentelle has now started a digitisation inventory approach to its collection. This work of protection and conservation will, without doubt, provide the opportunity to take pride in new lace treasures.

## .. PRATICAL INFO .....

**Musée des Beaux-arts et de la Dentelle**  
**Cour Carrée de la Dentelle**  
**61000 Alençon**  
**Tél : 02 33 32 40 07**

**Opening hours:**  
**Tuesday – Sunday: 10.00 – 12.00 & 14.00 – 18.00**  
**Open on monday in july and august**

**Museum prices:**  
**Standard price: 4 €**  
**Discounted price: 3 €**  
**Free for under 26s**  
**Free entry on the first Sunday of the month**

