

Beginning Bobbin Lace

By Tim & Debbie Coyle

Brief History

It's difficult to tell the early history of most fiber arts, as the fabrics are lost through reuse of the materials or deterioration. Bobbin lace is documented as far back as the 15th century in Italy. The technique spread quickly and widely after that. By the end of the 16th century Spain was producing colored silk laces as well as gold and silver laces. The Scandinavian counties and Germany were also very influential in furthering bobbin lace.

Although lace is often thought of as adorning ecclesiastical fabrics and the garments of the wealthy and titled, peasants were numbered among the people making and wearing bobbin lace. In Eastern Europe they were responsible for keeping the technique alive, their laces were sophisticated and developed into very personal designs.

Materials

Pillow

The pillow is the working platform for your lace. Pillows come in many shapes and sizes, and are made of many different materials, from straw or fabric scraps contained in a fabric covering, to different types of foam covered in fabric.

What they all have in common is a firm but yielding texture that allows pins to go in easily and stay in place without wobbling.

This kit contains a close cell foam block that works well to keep the pins in position. Rather than covering the foam with fabric, we have covered the top with the pricking pattern and instructions.

You might want to buy some cotton quilting fabric, cut it to size, and pin it on to cover all sides of the foam. You might also want to cut a piece of foam core or poster board to size and attach that to the bottom of the foam if you're using it on your lap rather than on a flat surface.

Working Pins

As you work the pattern, small headed pins provide the points on which you anchor the stitches. These pins keep the threads in place until you've done enough work that the threads are stabilized in place.

The pins are pulled as you work further down in the pattern and then reused in the next portion of the pattern.

This kit uses size 17 pins often called "silk" or "dressmaker" pins.

Divider Pins

Corsage pins or other big head pins are useful for:

- Pinning a cover cloth on your pillow to keep dust and dirt off of your lace and working surface
- Keeping currently un-worked bobbins out of the way of your work. Pin each un-worked section to the side.
- Keeping your place in the pattern when you stop work for any length of time. Separate out the next sets of bobbins that you will be working with, to remind you where you are in the pattern.

Bobbins

There are many styles and shapes of bobbins available and collecting decorative bobbins is a popular hobby among bobbin lacers -- you've been warned! But the decorative bobbins are not always the most useful for working lace. Be sure to pick bobbins you will be able to work with easily.

This kit includes squared off bobbins to make it easier to keep your bobbins from rolling out of position.

Thread

Historically bobbin lace has been done with gold, silver, linen, silk, or cotton threads. Each type of thread has its advantages and disadvantages. Linen thread provides a stiffer lace without having to starch it after each washing. Silk thread makes lace that keeps its shape but also flows into lovely pleats. Cotton produces a limper lace that would benefit from starching, but is easy to find and affordable. Wires, manmade fibers, and metallic threads are all usable as well.

When looking at thread sizes, it's important to know that the larger the size number, the thinner the thread. Size 5 crochet cotton is thicker than size 10. Depending on the use for your lace, you may want to use size 10 crochet cotton, but traditionally thinner threads are used for bobbin lace. The thicker the thread, the larger the lace and its patterning will be, you might find that with thicker lace you need to enlarge the pattern to allow the pins to be farther apart.

For this kit we used size 20 Lizbeth brand or size 20 Aunt Lydia's cotton thread.

Pricking

This is the pattern that you follow to make the lace. It indicates where pins are to be placed and any unusual thread movement. Always keep an original copy of the pricking for future use. Photo copy it on to stiff paper or cover stock that will contrast with the color of your thread. Pin the copy onto your pillow's working space.

The lines on the pricking are guides and do not indicate exactly where the thread will lay.

Pricking Instructions

These are the directions that explain how to work the pricking or pattern. It lists what stitches you use for each bobbin pair and any unusual thread movements.

Bobbin Keepers (Crocheted strip)

Provides a place to secure the bobbins when the lace is not being worked,

Getting Ready To Work

Basic Pillow Prep

Bobbin lace pillows can be round, square, or rectangular. They can be flat, somewhat domed in the center, or the workspace can be a round roller set in the center of the pillow. Each has its advantages. Round and small square pillows are more easily portable and use less space. While the large square and rectangular pillows provide more workspace for large projects. The roller pillow is especially useful for making long lengths of lace. The dome shape pillow makes the bobbins less likely to roll out of position as gravity helps hold them down.

Padding can be used but most foam pads are soft enough not to need padding. If padding is necessary add 1 to 2 layers of felt under the pillow cover.

The cover should be a non-slippery cotton fabric. Broadcloth or quilting cotton works well. It should be of a solid color that contrasts well with the color of thread you will be using.

Winding the Bobbins

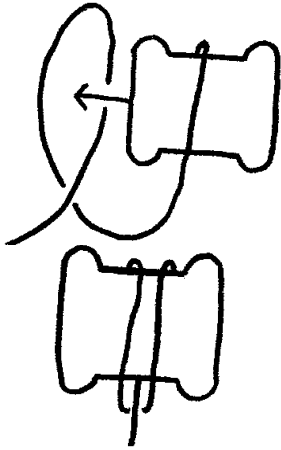
Tie the thread to the bobbin with a slip knot.

If winding by hand the best method is to roll the bobbin along the thread. If you can afford it a bobbin winder makes things easier. Or if the bobbins will fit in, an electric drill works wonders!

Wind all your bobbins in the same direction so that they all turn the same way when lengthening the threads.

Tying Off the Bobbins

Tie off the bobbin with a half hitch. This keeps the thread from unwinding while you work and makes it easier to lengthen the thread as needed. Sometimes an extra twist is needed to help keep it from unwinding.



- Hold the bobbin with the thread coming down in front of the bobbin (like a waterfall)
- Fold the thread into a loop, with the bobbin end of the thread in the back of the loop
- Put the loop over the left side of the bobbin, the front of the loop behind the bobbin
- When done correctly, the thread will hang down from between a loop of thread
- Tighten the half hitch by rotating the bobbin away from the loop you've created. This pulls the thread toward the loop and tightens the loop around the working end of the thread.

Starting the Work

- A good working position is the same position that you use for typing -- pillow top at elbow height when sitting up straight. Too high or too low will cause problems for your neck, back, shoulders, and/or wrists.
- **Wash Your Hands** Dirt and hand oil can, over time, cause yellowish discoloration of your work. Your pillow can pick up some of this dirt and transfer this to the lace.

Bobbin Pairs

Bobbins are usually used in pairs. In this kit the bobbins were strung together with 1 thread for 2 bobbins, they have a loop tied in the middle to hang from pins at the top of the work area.

You can also create a pair by measuring a separate thread for each bobbin, wind each thread on a bobbin, and tie pairs together by tying a knot about an inch down from the loose ends of thread.

To avoid tangling, tie the pairs together just before you hang them.

Later you'll create your pairs by threading one thread on 2 bobbins and hanging the midpoint of the thread on the starting pin. This makes for a smooth start of your lace, but it is not easy to keep everything balanced. Practice!

Hanging Pairs

Most prickings have a "Set Up List" or "Hanging List". This list will indicate the number of bobbin pairs needed along with the **starting position** of each pair.

Place a pin in each of the pricking's starting positions. The number next to the starting position indicates how many pairs of bobbins to hang on that pin. On the pricking for this kit, you'll see the left starting pin has 2 bobbins hung off of it, and the other 5 have one.

As a beginner it will probably be easier to pin through the knot but you should learn to work with the pairs hung on the pin. As you hang each pair it might be easier for the beginning bobbin lace maker to separate each pair with a divider pin.

When you have hung all your pairs lengthen or shorten each thread so that the bobbins all hang at the same level.

The pricking will also indicate which pair of bobbins is the **starting pair**. This will be the first pair you work with as you follow the pricking instructions.

Open vs Closed

Bobbin pairs can be hung either Open or Closed position.

- **Open position** is when a pair of threads start out hanging straight down from their starting pin.
- **Closed position** is when a pair of threads starts out crossed or twisted under the starting pin.

Many if not most lace patterns start with the pairs in the open position, as is this pattern.

The pricking instructions will indicate if some or all of the pairs should start in the closed position, it will also indicate if the closed pairs should use the Cross or Twist Stitch.

As you start each project be sure to check whether the pairs should be open or closed. The lace will unravel if you start it in the wrong position.

Pins (Small head pins)

Place pins at a slight angle from the body of your work. This keeps them out of your way and keeps the lace from riding up the pins. Too much of an inward angle will cause your work to warp as the threads have a tendency to ride up the pins.

Push the pins in about ½ way as you place them.

Always place the pin in the pinhole on the pricking, not where it looks like the threads should be pinned. Remember that later moves will help define the pattern. It may take a while before the lace looks “right”.

Bobbins

There are also many methods for moving the bobbins as you work -- Some people pick up each pair and move them methodically, some toss the bobbins from hand to hand as they work. Some people straighten and tighten their work after each stitch, and some do it at the end of each sequence. ... Each person comes up with the method that works best for them.

Just make sure the threads move smoothly from one pin to the next, without any excess thread making a bump in the pattern.

Basic Stitches

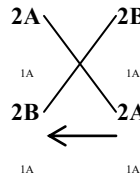
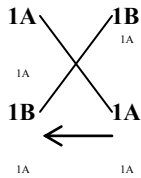
All bobbin lace stitches are a combination of the **Twist Stitch** and **Cross Stitch**. These stitches are always executed with two pairs of bobbins – each is called a “bobbin pair”.

T -- Twist Stitch

- Twists always **go left**.
- Twists always **work within a bobbin pair**.
- Move the right bobbin of each pair over the left bobbin.

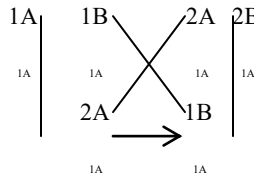
AT THE SAME TIME:

- With the **left hand**
 - **move bobbin 1B over bobbin 1A**
- **That is:** using the left side pair of bobbins
 - Move the right bobbin over the left bobbin
- With the **right hand**
 - **move bobbin 2B over bobbin 2A**
- **That is:** using the right side pair of bobbins
 - Move the right bobbin over the left bobbin



C -- Cross Stitch

- Crosses always **go right**.
- Crosses always **work between two pairs of bobbins** and so join those pairs.
- Move the **left center bobbin** of the two pairs **over the right center bobbin**.
 - **Ignore** the outside bobbins (**1A and 2B**) of both bobbin pairs
 - With your right hand
 - **Move 2A over 1B**



Combination Stitches

Bobbin lace patterns will sometimes call for a combination stitch, these are just a shorthand method of calling for you to execute two or more Cross and/or Twist Stitches in a particular pattern.

HT -- Half Throw / Half Stitch / Net Stitch

Twist
Cross

With the current 2 bobbin pairs, execute a Twist Stitch, and then a Cross Stitch

WT -- Whole Throw / Whole Stitch (2 Half Stitches)

Twist
Cross
Twist
Cross

With the current 2 bobbin pairs, execute a Twist Stitch, and then a Cross Stitch, then another Twist Stitch, followed by another Cross Stitch.

CS -- Cloth Stitch / Linen Stitch

Cross
Twist
Cross

With the current 2 bobbin pairs, execute a Cross Stitch, then a Twist Stitch, followed by another Cross Stitch.

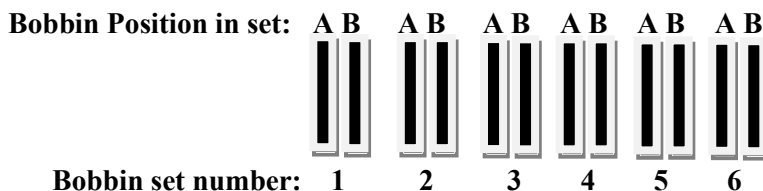
Reading a Pattern

The pricking instructions list which type of stitch is worked on which bobbin pairs for each sequence.

- Bobbins are ALWAYS referred to in sets of 2 bobbins
- A **Bobbin pair** refer to **2 sets of 2 bobbins** ... equaling 4 bobbins in a bobbin pair
- A bobbin pair is two sets of bobbins sitting side by side as in the illustrations for the Cross and Twist stitch.

The bobbins are always counted from the left side of your pillow

- The left set of 2 bobbins is #1
- The set of 2 to their right is #2, etc.
- As your work progresses the bobbins will change places on the pillow, BUT they are still counted from the left side as #1, #2, etc.



Pattern instructions

The following instruction tells you to make **Cloth stitches** across 6 bobbin pairs: CS 1-2, 2-3, 3-4, 4-5, 5-6

The only stitch listed is the Cloth stitch, so we'll be executing that stitch on each bobbin pair listed

- Use the **1st and 2nd sets of bobbins** for your first bobbin pair (1-2)
 - Using those 4 bobbins, **do a Cloth Stitch**
 - Which is a Cross stitch, a Twist stitch, then another Cross stitch
- Then use the bobbins that are now in the **2nd and 3rd positions** as your next bobbin pair (2-3)
 - Do another **Cloth stitch**
- Repeat for the bobbins in the **3rd and 4th positions (3-4)**
- Then the bobbins in the **4th and 5th positions (4-5)**
- Finally the bobbins in the **5th and 6th positions (5-6)**

This one's a bit more complex: WT 1-2, T 2, CS 2-3, 3-4, 4-5, WT 5-6

This lists more than one stitch, so each stitch is followed by the bobbin set(s) or pair(s) to be used for that stitch

- Use the bobbins in the **1st and 2nd positions (WT 1-2,)**
 - Do a **Whole Throw**
 - Which is a Twist, then a Cross, then another Twist, and another Cross
- Then use the bobbins in the **2nd position (T 2,)**
 - Do a **Twist stitch** (move the right thread over the left thread using ONLY that set of 2 bobbins)
- Now will do 3 sets of the **Cloth Stitch (CS 2-3, 3-4, 4-5,)**
 - Use the bobbins in the **2nd and 3rd positions**
 - Then use bobbins in the **3rd and 4th positions**
 - Then use the bobbins in the **4th and 5th positions**
- Then finish up with a **Whole Throw (WT 5-6)**
 - Using the bobbins in the **5th and 6th positions**

Adjust your stitches after each stitch sequence (line of instructions) so they are tight and well formed.

Adding Extra Twists

Sometimes it is necessary to add extra twists to your threads, such as when a pair is unused for several sequences in the pattern or along the outer edge of a “tape lace”. The extra twist(s) are used instead of having the threads floating separately down the side of the lace; they give a neater appearance, add extra stability. Usually 2 twists are enough but use more if it seems desirable.

Lengthening the Threads

As you work the bobbins will hang higher on the pillow, when they get too high, lengthen all the threads to bring them down to the starting position. Lengthen the thread by twisting the bobbin toward the loop in your half hitch, and then twist it back toward the loop to tighten it when you’ve lengthened it enough.

You may notice that some bobbin’s threads will be used more quickly than others, lengthen those threads as needed to keep them at a useful level with the other bobbins.

Removing the Pins

After you get 2 to 3 inches along the lace pattern you can begin to pull pins from the start of the lace and reusing them for new pin points. Always leave the most current 2 to 3 inches of the lace pinned at all time.

If you are working on a large project leave enough pins in to support your project, especially where you may have to join portions.

Cover Cloth

Keep your pillow covered when not in use.

While working a large piece of lace cover the portion not currently being worked. This helps keep pillow and lace clean and keeps it from being disturbed when not in use.

If you take your pillow to a demo, consider covering part or all of your work with Saran Wrap to allow people to see your work without touching it.

Finishing the Work

Tying Off the Lace

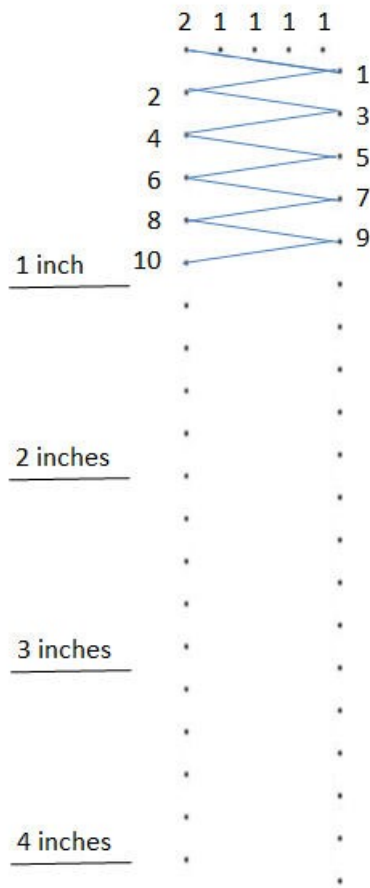
Many braid patterns end with stitches that “tie off” the pattern and prevent it from unraveling after the pins are pulled out.

If your pattern doesn’t – Tie each bobbin pair in a square knot under its final pin.

The snipped off ends of the project can be hidden by weaving them into the lace or can be used to provide a decorative element. (I.e. left long and braided, twisted, etc.).

How you finish off your ends will depend on how you plan to use the piece. Remember to leave extra thread at the start of your piece if you want decorative fringe on BOTH ends of the lace.

Pricking Instructions: Sampler



Sample 1: Cloth Stitch (CS)

CS 1-2, 2-3, 3-4, 4-5, 5-6

Place a pin in **hole #1** between pairs 5 & 6

CS 6-5, 5-4, 4-3, 3-2, 2-1

Place a pin in **hole #2** between pairs 2 & 1

Continue above sequence to **hole #3** and **hole #4** etc. until you have 1 inch

Sample 2: Whole Throw (WT)

WT 1-2, 2-3, 3-4, 4-5, 5-6

Place a pin in next hole between pairs 5 & 6

WT 6-5, 5-4, 4-3, 3-2, 2-1

Place a pin in next hole between pairs 2 & 1

Continue above sequence until you have 1 inch

Sample 3: Half Throw (HT)

HT 1-2, 2-3, 3-4, 4-5, 5-6

Place a pin in next hole between pairs 5 & 6.

HT 6-5, 5-4, 4-3, 3-2, 2-1

Place a pin in next hole between pairs 2 & 1

Continue above sequence until you have 1 inch

Be aware that since only one thread goes across it will look like you are doing it incorrectly.

Sample 4: Combined Stitches

This combines the Whole Stitch and the Cloth Stitch.

WT 1-2, T 2, CS 2-3, 3-4, 4-5, WT 5-6.

Place a pin in next hole between pairs 5 & 6.

WT 6-5, T 5, CS 5-4, 4-3, 3-2, WT 2-1.

Place a pin in next hole between pairs 2 & 1

Continue above sequence until you have 1 inch.

Stitches

C = Cross Stitch

CS = Cloth Stitch

HT = Half Throw Stitch

T = Twist Stitch

WT = Whole Throw Stitch