

Luminous Lace, January 27, 2017–July 30, 2017

The desire to decorate clothing with reflective fibers and embellishment is a longstanding Western fashion tradition. Gold, silver, and other plated and alloy metal threads were employed for trimmings and textile decoration even before lace was first produced. Metallic bobbin lace, in which small spools of metal-wrapped thread are knotted together, was developed in the late 16th century as a couched edging on cutwork, a precursor of lace. Because of its high gold and silver content, metallic lace was sold by weight. It was worn in such quantities in England and France that sumptuary (regulatory) laws were put in place to restrict its importation, creation, and use.

In most instances, metal fibers are used for evening attire—to brighten the night. Fittingly, this exhibition is on view during the darkest period of the year, from the winter solstice (December 21) until the return of the sun with the summer solstice (June 21). These fashions and accessories, ranging from the 16th to the 21st centuries, collectively attest to an impulse to create a luminous glow, capturing the fire of the sun and bringing that spotlight, prestige, or implied spiritual power to the wearer.

The History and Components of Metallic Lacemaking

Given the immense cost of metallic fibers, their use before the 1500s was limited to the visible surfaces of textiles. By the second half of that century, expanding trade and developments in technology had led to an increase in the availability of gold, silver, and silk. Metal strips and wires of different thicknesses, widths, and shapes were used to create a broad range of rich and changeable tonal effects. Wearing a metallic lace was a sign of extreme wealth, as the metal was considered “real” currency.

By the 1700s, numerous metallic-thread types were incorporated into textile designs. The color and twist of the silk core, the size of the strip, and the angle and direction in which the metal strip was applied determined the appearance of the thread. In general, yellow silk was used with gold, and white silk was paired with silver to emphasize the color of the metal. The color of the core was sometimes reversed to create a contrast, or more than one color was used, resulting in complex tonal effects.

“The Lace-Man employs, besides the Craft above mentioned in the Metal Way, the Spangle, Bugle, and Button Ring Maker. The Spangles and Plate Figures in Embroidery are made of Gold or Silver Wire, first twined round a Stick of the Bigness they want the Spangles, to be made of; then they are cut off in Rings and flatted upon an Anvil, with a Punch and the Stroke of a heavy Hammer. The Anvil is made of Iron, fixed in a large Block of Wood bound round with Iron Hoops; the Face of it is of case-hardened Steel, nicely polished and perfectly flat, the Punch is nine Inches long, and about an Inch over in the Face, which is likewise of casehardened Steel, flat and curiously polished, a Frame of Iron.”

—R. Campbell, *The London Tradesman* (1747)

RISD MUSEUM

Lacemaking is one of the most time-consuming embellishment enterprises, and when paired with expensive precious metals, the work compounds in value. The haberdashery trade employed a multitude of specialized artisans to support the taste for metallic lace. Craftsmen known as wire

drawers produced the thin metal coverings or flat metallic strips that were spun round fine threads of fabric. Thread twisters then wound the metal around silk, linen, or wool threads that were worked by hand into bobbin or needle lace. This sumptuous edging trimmed skirts, gloves, and jackets. On view here are examples of metallic lace trim from the 16th to the 19th centuries, complementing the painting *Portrait of a Young Girl* (ca. 1660).

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

French

Point d' Espagne, 1600s

Wrapped and crimped metallic yarn, flat metal tape
metallic yarn, flat metal tape

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 11.097



French; Italian

Metallic Bobbin-Lace Trim, 1600s

Silk-wrapped and metallic-wrapped yarn

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 11.103



French

Point d' Espagne, 1600s

Metallic-wrapped yarn, flat metallic thread

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 11.105X



Italian; Genoan

Metallic Bobbin-Lace Trim, 1600s

Metallic-wrapped yarn, flat metal tape

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 11.108



RISD MUSEUM

French

Metallic Bobbin-Lace Trim, 1774-1792

Metallic-wrapped yarn

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 11.110



French

Metallic Lace Trim, 1840

Metallic-wrapped yarn, looped metallic-wrapped cord

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 11.117



Italian

Metallic Lace Trim, 1600s

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 11.121



Genoan; Italian

Metallic Bobbin-Lace Trim, 1600s

Metallic-wrapped yarn, flat metal tape

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 11.129



French

Metallic Bobbin-Lace Trim, 1700s

Metallic-wrapped yarn, metallic-wrapped cord

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 11.135



French

Metallic Passementerie, 1700s

Metallic-wrapped yarn, flat metal tape

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 11.139



RISD MUSEUM

French

Metallic Bobbin-Lace Trim, Mid 1700s

Metallic-wrapped yarn, flat metal tape

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 11.140



French

Metallic Passementerie, 1700s

Plain-weave metallic-wrapped yarn, metallic-wrapped cord, flat metal tape

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 11.176



Italian

Metallic Bobbin-Lace Trim, 1600s

Metallic-wrapped yarn, flat metal tape

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 11.180



Jessie Franklin Turner, designer

American, 1881-1956

Ensemble (Dress and Coat), 1930s

Coat: silk velvet, metallic bobbin-lace trim, metallic silk-brocade piping

Dress: silk satin

Gift of Mrs. Helen Danforth; Transferred from the Costume Research Collection 1986.036

This luxurious ensemble was made for entertaining at home. The satin bias-cut dress skimmed the figure, while the velvet robe enveloped it. The intricate construction of the robe—with multiple pattern pieces at the waist seam, mitered pieces at derrière, and engineered cuffs—is a signature of the designer Jessie Franklin Turner.

The cuffs, dripping with re-embroidered silver lace, must have appealed in particular to Helen Danforth, an avid collector of lace who donated many examples to the RISD Museum's collections. Most of the small lace samples on view here were donated by Danforth's aunt, Eliza Greene Metcalf Radeke.



RISD MUSEUM

Yves Saint Laurent, designer

French, 1936–2008

Yves Saint Laurent Rive Gauche, design label

French, 1966

Suit, ca. 1980

Satin weave with guipure (machine-made metallic lace trim) and metal piping

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Miles Fiterman 1988.025.3

This pantsuit features real metal piping and golden guipure—or embroidered lace—trim. The highwaisted trousers and strong shoulders suggest the “power suit” silhouette of the 1980s, but the ensemble’s inspiration comes from the traditional costume of the bullfighter, the *traje de luces* (“suit of lights”). Just as the bullfighter in his golden costume seeks to attract the bull, a woman wearing this striking pantsuit would similarly draw all eyes to her. In both instances, gold imbues the wearer with a sense of power.



Junya Watanabe, designer

Japanese, b. 1961

Woman's Jacket, 2008

Liberty of London–style machine-printed cotton; machine-made synthetic metallic lace, grosgrain ribbon

Museum Purchase 2009.62.1

If you compare the 18th-century casaquin to this draped and ruched jacket, you will find numerous parallels, including the peplum shaping, the lively floral fabric, and, most importantly, the metallic lace trim. The lace trim on the 18th-century work is entirely handmade, whereas the 21st-century work includes machine-made trim composed of synthetic fibers. By leaving the printed selvage (or edge) of the textile visible, the designer of the latter work invites the viewer to consider the place of the machine in its craftsmanship, questioning what defines luxury in the 21st century.



RISD MUSEUM

Arnold Scaasi, designer

American, b. 1931

Dress, 1980s

Synthetic fiber, rhinestones, chemical lace; appliqué, embellishment

Gift of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, made possible by Jean S. and Frederic A. Sharf 2011.83.3

By the 1980s, designers had many options for using gold-colored fibers in their designs. This dress's base fabric was machine-embroidered, creating what looks much like highly dimensional handmade needle lace. The lace was further embellished with rhinestones, stressing the dress's Renaissance aesthetic. The fitted bodice with low, open neckline and the off-shoulder sleeves extending over the wrist of the wearer evoke styles from the late 16th or early 17th centuries.

Modern designers often erroneously interpret this historic garment as bare and open, neglecting to see that women added sheer linen chemises for modesty. This 16th-century example is on view in Intermission in the Chace Galleries.

Dutch; Flemish

Portrait of a Young Girl, ca. 1660

Oil on canvas

Gift of James Warren Lane in memory of Mrs. Eva Metcalf Bliss Lane 24.443



Attributed to Domenico Brusasorci

Italian, ca. 1515-1567

Portrait of a Woman, ca. 1550-1559

Oil on canvas

Museum Appropriation Fund 30.057



RISD MUSEUM

Italian

Metallic Bobbin Lace Trim, 1700s

Metallic wrapped yarn, flat metal tape

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 46.258.2



Italian

Metallic Lace Trim, 1700s

Metallic-wrapped yarn

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 46.265.2



Italian

Metallic Lace Trim, 1750-1780

Metallic-wrapped yarn

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 46.266.2



French

Metallic Lace Trim, ca. 1790

Metallic-wrapped yarn

Museum Works of Art Fund 47.191.2



Therese Blanchet, design label

Paris, active 1920s

Chemise, 1923

Lamé, gold-wrapped silk metallic lace, sequin trim

Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Edith Stuyvesant Vanderbilt Gerry 59.031.8

This lamé and lace chemise is by the French design label Therese Blanchet. Sumptuous materials compose this abbreviated garment, including two weights of metallic thread used in the lace, golden sequins, and the lamé ground fabric. A heavier metallic thread (composed of a yellow silk thread encapsulated within a sheet of metal) highlights discrete areas of the lace border.

This undergarment would have been worn for modesty under a transparent beaded and embellished shift, such as the green and gold dress on this platform.



RISD MUSEUM

Spanish

Suit of Lights Jacket (Traje de luces), ca. 1936

Silk satin embellished with gold-wrapped thread, passementerie, pailletes, stones

Gift of Mr. William Link 59.101.1A



American

Cape, ca. 1895

Fulled wool with cutwork, metallic-wrapped couched embroidery and silk braid, glass beads, faux jet gems

Gift of Miss Eleanor Fayerweather 59.104.9



House of Worth, design house

French, 1858-1952

Dress, ca. 1913

Silk taffeta with supplementary metallic weft decoration and metallic lace trim, beads, velvet floral decoration

Gift of Mrs. C. Oliver Iselin 61.012.2

Because this dress—commissioned by Providence resident Mrs. Oliver Iselin (born Edith Hope Goddard)—was never worn, its striking orange taffeta with silver brocade is beautifully preserved. The flounces of silver lace net are further accented with silver and crystal glass bead tassels on each sleeve, and the bodice is completed with a large velvet orchid at the right front.



Many American clients traveled to Paris to purchase their wardrobes at the House of Worth, known for its innovative use of sumptuous materials. Reputedly quite fashionable, Mrs. Iselin was also an avid sportswoman, holding the honor of being the first female to sail as an America's Cup crew member.

RISD MUSEUM

Dress, ca. 1949

Silk with lace embroidered with metallic-wrapped yarn, sequins, metal beads, glass beads, metallic-wrapped-yarn applique
Gift of Mrs. Leon A. Mnuchin 61.103.2

This understated ballgown is perhaps misleading in terms of the careful craft and immense time that were required to create it. The cream fabric is a deftly woven slub silk with a repeating floral motif composed in couched gold thread; each flower is completed with three hammered sequins and a glass bead. Lace finishes the bodice and ends in a deep flounce at the hem. The lace was not created using a traditional bobbin or needle technique, but the outline of the motif was painstakingly embroidered using couched metallic-wrapped yarn.

The gown's donor, Harriet Gervitz-Mnuchin, was frequently dressed by designer Hattie Carnegie. This example is unlabeled, but it was made either in the Carnegie workshop or by a similarly skilled dressmaker.



French

Casaquin, mid 1700s

Silk brocade with discontinuous supplementary silk-floss-wrapped and metallic-wrapped yarns, metallic-wrapped yarn and flat-metal tape bobbin-lace trim
Gift of Mrs. Kenneth Shaw Safe 63.010.1

This meandering silk floral textile is enlivened with metallic yarns in the ground fabric and a metallic bobbin-lace trim at the center front closure and hem. Fabric ruffles edge all the openings of the garment, and the silver bobbin lace, which is now darkened with tarnish, would have glimmered brightly when first manufactured.

A casaquin is a short jacket that falls to about mid-hip, and has a flared skirt and pleats at the back. Given its small scale, this example was likely a costume for a religious sculpture.



European; Probably; English

Metallic Bobbin-Lace Trim, 1700s

Metallic-wrapped silk, metallic-wrapped cord, crimped metal tape, spangles

Gift of the Estate of Helen Crocker Russell 67.143.16



RISD MUSEUM

European

Metallic Bobbin-Lace Trim, 1700s

Silver-wrapped yarn, gold-wrapped yarn

Gift of the Estate of Helen Crocker Russell 67.143.17



French

Dress, ca. 1927

Raschel knit lace with metallic yarn, faceted-glass bugle beads, glass gems

Gift of Miss Helen Tuttle in memory of Mrs. Edwina B. Stillman

69.003

This silver and beige lace chemise is embellished overall with brilliant emerald-colored glass beads and gems. When worn, the panels would have floated away from the body at the hip, resolving in a layered hemline that, with the glass embellishments, would have added dynamic visual energy. The geometric design of the lace ground was created utilizing raschel knit lace, an economical machine-made alternative to handmade lace. The styling—particularly the lamé central band and the hip girdle embellished with palm motifs—recalls the Egyptian revival in 1920s design. According to the donors, this dress was worn by German opera singer Frieda Hempel (1885–1955).



Albanian

Jacket, 1800s

Fulled wool with cutwork, metallic-wrapped couched embroidery and silk braid

Gift of Philip Adams 73.086.4



Possibly; French

Cap, altered in the 1920s from 17th-century materials

Silk and linen, metallic bobbin lace, spangles, metal foil decoration, sequins, pleated-silk trim

Museum Collection INV2003.428

This curious cap was found in RISD Museum storage during a 2003 inventory. When initially catalogued, it was assumed the cap was a cloche, the close-fitting hat worn by 1920s flappers. However, recent examination identified it as an informal 17th-century cap known as a coif. Coifs were commonly worn by European women until the end of the 1600s, and middle-class and wealthy women wore heavily embellished versions like this one, adorned with metal spangles, foil flowers, purl decoration, and three types of metallic bobbin lace. A



RISD MUSEUM

woman in the 1920s may have been drawn to this glittering cap,
repurposing the older garment for her wardrobe.