Sri Lankan Lace: Cotton Filigree Made by Nimble Fingers

Posted on

Maureen Seneviratna



Lace the delicate, flimsy, gossamer dream of those who design bridal trousseaus. The lining and edging on furnishings of class. The mark of a fine mantilla over the head and shoulders of a Spanish girl, and still the stuff of the orthodox church veil worn by Roman Catholic woman. Browse around in a handicraft shop in Colombo, Negombo, Bentota, or Galle and you will most likely discover some examples of Sri Lankan handmade lace, which is second to none anywhere-not even to the lace from Brussels.

Sri Lankan lace is still made as it was done in the early days, when the Portuguese introduced the craft and the Dutch expanded its commercial manufacture. Each piece of lace is a little work of art created with cotton thread, bobbins, weights, spindles and the nimble fingers of women, to whom the patterns of lace are almost part of inherited memory. In Sri Lanka lace-making as a cottage craft, the famous “beeralu” of the Galle district, and the use of this handmade lace for all manner of garments, was started by the Portuguese.The very word “beeralu” is a derivation or a shortened form of the word “beeralureinda” which according to experts has itself been taken from the Portuguese “bilru”, though it seems to some it has Dutch undertones as well. Portuguese women of the well-to-do classes – and among these were the wives of soldiers and merchants-wore jackets made of handmade lace and elaborate lace sleeves with their colourful skirts, a fashion that lasted among some women in Sri Lanka right down to the middle of this century.

The fisherwomen of the west and south coast hamlets also wore a jacket which seems to have originated with the fashions introduced by Portugal in the 16th century. Known as the “kabakurutuwe”, it was made of this fine “beeralu” insertions and edging with long, narrowly-cuffed sleeves and a wide, lace-edged neckline. It became high fashion in the past decade or two among the elite in Colombo who wore it in doth-and-jacket ensembles or over the Burmese-style “lungi”-cloth or skirt. By the time the Portuguese arrived in Sri Lanka in the early 1500s AD., handmade lace had reached a fashion peak in Europe. It was used in great gossamer lengths to make gowns and dresses for queens and princesses and members of the aristocracy, as well as a trimming to “border” caps, bonnets, shawls, ruffs and kerchiefs. Men wore it elegantly as cravats: “a bunch of lace at his chin”, was the distinguishing mark of a gentleman and the lace was usually the fine, handmade lace of Valenciennes in Belgium, far famed for its purity of design, its texture and its quality. Even today we speak of Brussels lace with veneration: a family that possesses a bridal veil of this delicate, handmade or bobbin lace as well as pillow lace had by then reached the very zenith of perfection in its manufacture.

By the time the Dutch came to Sri Lanka, thousands of men and women were working on the small looms. Indeed, that most commercial-minded people extended the occupation to thousands more and even exported exclusive lengths of bobbin lace to Europe and their other domains.

According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Lacemaking was introduced to India by missionaries. The inter-relation between Europe and the Far East during the Middle Ages and in the 15th century between Italy and the Levant also spread techniques and patterns … The ‘Sol’ (Sun) pattern, the double eagle, diverse leaf and branch forms and stylistic birds were all worked in lace by Dutch bobbin lacemakers… a famous Dutch pattern was the pair of ‘confronted’ birds.”

Here is something vastly interesting about the evolution of the Sri Lankan designs in this art. In true ingenious ‘native’ fashion of making everything they received ‘anew,’ the local lace-makers retained the original design concepts replacing their “subjects” with the flowers, birds, beasts, heraldic figures of their own knowledge, folklore, tradition and imagination. Over the centuries the subjects of the designs have al o taken distinctive Sinhalese names. The motifs include: liawelle (straight or curved vines), miwade (honeycomb), awane (fan), pitcha-mal (jasmine), nelum mal (lotus), pol-atte (coconut leaf) and many entrancing others including stylised forms of interwoven Sinhala letters in imitation of the monogrammed laces of the Western looms. When we consider that the Dutch were in occupation of Galle for decades before they had taken the rest of the maritime provinces from their rivals, the Portuguese, it is not surprising that the art of “pillow lace” is pre-eminent among the women of Galle to this day. Indeed, lace was once made in this manner in all the west and south coast villages.

Today apart from Galle, especially Dutch Fort, and in a few other villages along the south coast in Moratuwa and Dehiwela Mount Lavinia, all suburbs of Greater Colombo and their hinterland, this lace locally knov.11 also as ‘·Galle lace” is no longer manufactured. A5 a cottage industry it is a time-consuming art, especially the weaving of the intricate patterns which are the most in demand.

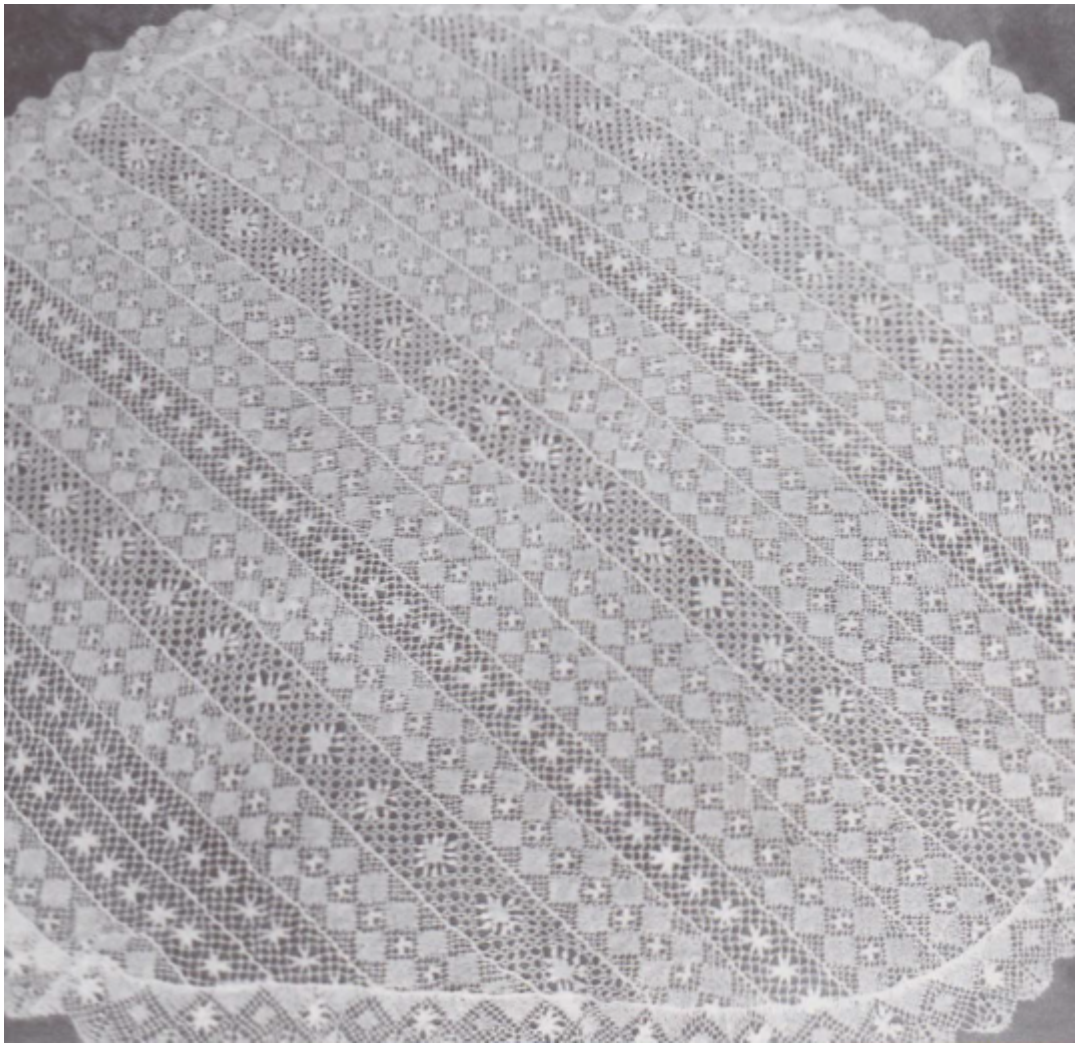
Curiously, it is the older women now who weave “beeralu” and if you enter the small houses on the sea front in Galle you can see many a middle-aged woman and older grandmothers busy at the little loom, so closely resembling the pillow it is named after-the cushion itself fixed on to a wooden box-like contraption. You can see them expertly scramble and unwind myriad bobbins almost at one and the same time, plotting in pins a design, perhaps of a “string of flies” (the delicate

‘messa’ design) or creating a lace table-mat highlighted all over with the interlocking loops (putu-isse). There goes on the eternal pinning and unpinning, the knotting and twisting, the looping and grouping of pins and bobbins threaded with the fine or thick (according to the design and the type of lace being made) white cotton over the “pillow” fixed firmly in place. It might take weeks to make one single curve of lace.

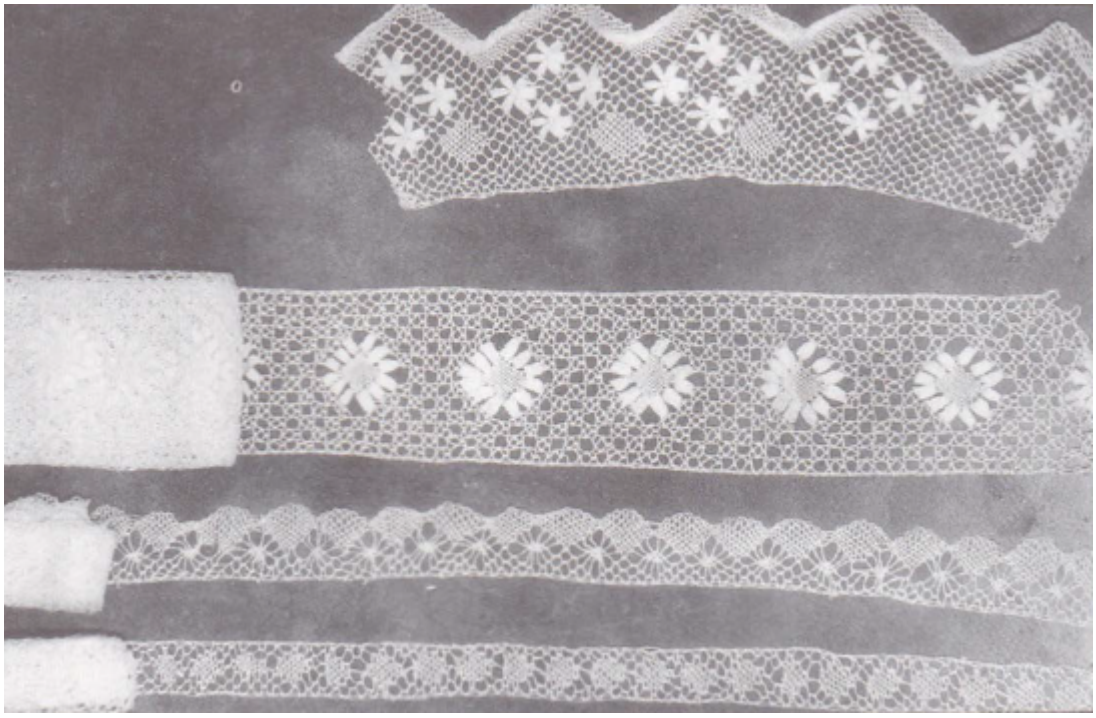
With the coming of the big power looms, handmade lace is a rarity anywhere in the world. But a few Sri l.ankan women continue to produce it and tourists, among others, flock to buy the exquisite borders, edgings, trimmings, table-cloths, doilies, napkins, etc, made of this bobbin lace we call “beeralu.” Indeed, in 1925 samples of “beeralu” from Galle won the Gold Medal at the World Handicraft Exhibition in Wembley, London.

That lace is yet a favourite for real elegance is undoubted and a fabric very much in vogue for brides and their maids. However, “beeralu” never really went “out”: about two decades ago it came back in a big way with long lengths of it used in fashion garments and to trim house linen. Organisations like the Lanka Mahila Samiti and diverse women’s cooperatives have done a great deal to rescue and revive the art and buy their produces from the lace-makers direct. Shops like I.aksala and the Small Industries Corporations and Emporiums also make regular purchases. A fashion that can be revived with profit are the “beeralu fans” worked in gold and silver thread. There are design now being created for bags and for evening wear oversewn with “beeralu” work in synthetic threads. Recently also those interested in reviewing the art have delved into old libraries and musty bookshelves and come up with ancient pattern books, but as the lace-makers of Galle proudly claim. they do not need these books, “because the patterns are in our heads and hands”!

Beeralu is a legacy well worth preserving and an accessory deserving of more than a second look by Sri Lanka’s modern designer/couturiers, who seek to take the fashion scene by storm.



A beautiful woven table covering of pillow lace.



Edgings and trimmings of lace in different motifs.



Nimble fingers at the Beeralu pillow, weaving the thread into myriad designs.