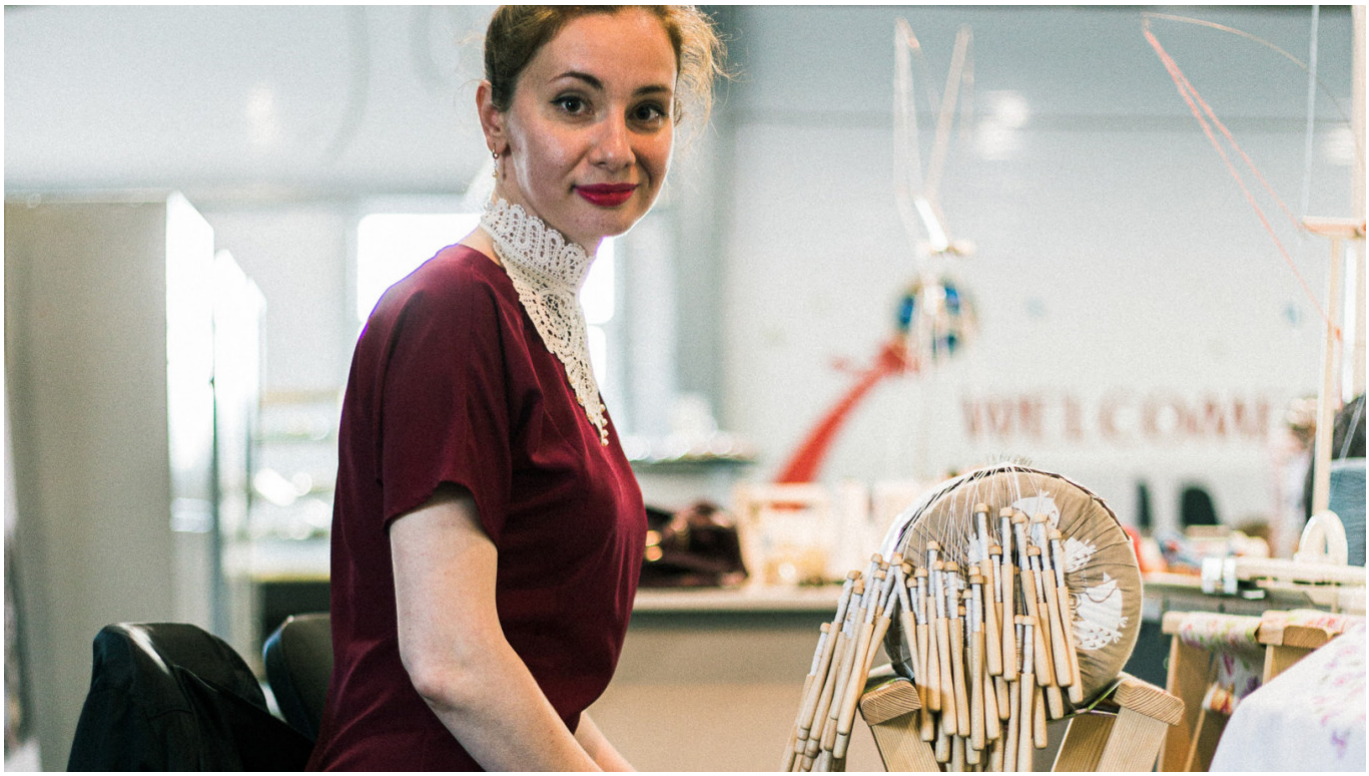
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Off and On the Trans-Siberian: The Lacemaker

This Mesto 47 team talked to a lacemaker in Nizhny Novgorod

By Mesto47/Marina Dmukhovskaya

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Georg Wallner

Anna, 33, calls herself "an extinct dinosaur in a modern society". Indeed, it's almost like she travelled here by time machine. Her job is a well-respected profession in 18th century: lacemaker. She lives with her husband in patriarchy, meaning that she obeys him all the time, thinks that her life mission is to be next to him and asks for permission each time she leaves the house.

I'm from the Nizhegorodskaya region, I work as a lacemaker. I started to sew lace when I was 11 years old. Across from our house was the Center for Children's Crafts and as a child I'd look out the window and watch how the girls were being taught how to do something interesting. At the time, we had no idea what lacemaking with bobbins even was, but my grandmother insisted that I try it out.

It’s impossible not to immediately fall in love with lace. For me it was almost contagious, I fell under its spell. It amazed me with its delicacy and airiness. For an entire century, this rare, interesting craft was one of the most baffling types of needlework. Now when I tat, I don’t even look at my hands. I watch the movement of the threads. Sometimes I’m sewing and then I’m surprised – how was I able to make this?

To actually achieve something with lacemaking, you have to have perseverance, you have to work and work at it. This is what sets lace apart from other types of needlework. With knitting, you can unravel it and knit it again. With lacemaking, the way you made it is the way it will stay. You need to have infinite patience.

In lacemaking, the instrument you use plays a big role. The bobbin is a stick with a notch cut into it for winding the thread. Depending on the technique that the lacemaker uses, there are different shapes of bobbins. The bobbin that I use is our Russian shape, with a bit of an elongated stick with an elegant middle. It doesn’t do anything technically but it’s aesthetically pleasing. Bobbins can be made out of different types of wood, out of any tree that you can imagine. In Russia, the most common kind of lumber comes from Russian birch trees. That’s the cheapest, easiest to find material, but it’s not my favorite.

Each lacemaker chooses her own bobbin based on her personal preferences. The most important thing in choosing a bobbin is the sound it makes while you’re tatting. While we’re sewing, the bobbins hit each other and it turns into a type of rhythmic melody, we like to call it music. In Vologda there’s even an event where they invite an orchestra, the lacemakers are sitting there, and they start sewing and the musicians play alongside the lacemaking sounds.

Historically speaking, families with lacemakers were always prosperous. In pre-revolutionary times, lacemakers earned enough that they could feed a family of eight. In the Nizhegorodska market lace goods would be sold for 6-15 rubles in Tsarist times, depending on how complicated the piece was. For comparison, at the same time a cow cost 2 rubles.

Lacemaking is a valuable art form. Originally, handmade lace was decor for the upper classes of society, tsars and aristocrats. That’s how it was in the past and it’s still like that today. People buy and wear this lace to emphasize their social status. The cost of the lace is determined by how many hours it took to sew it, so for me it’s about 200-300 rubles (3-5 dollars) per hour. It all depends on the technique you’re using and how big the piece you’re tatting is, but it could be on average about 10-15 thousand rubles (160 to 235 dollars). The lace that I’m wearing I made myself, the market price would be 13,000 rubles (205 dollars).

Lacemaking came to Russia from Europe during the time of Peter the Great’s government reforms. The European suit became popular here, and it had a lot of lace trimmings. If you look at an old map of lacemaking from the 18th and 19th centuries, they were making lace in Spain, Italy, France, and the Netherlands. In Russia, there were very few lacemaking areas. There were only 17 regions where people practiced lacemaking as a craft to sell. In the 90s, when things were hard, it almost completely died out.

There are some work-related injuries with lacemaking – joint problems, finger problems, osteochondrosis. You have to take some precautions – don’t tat for more than five hours a day, take a break every 10-15 minutes, just stand up and stretch. Even though I’m young, after sewing lace for ten years I also have some of these problems. Joint problems are scary because

when you have pain in your joints and palms it's hard to sew. If that continues, you have to take a break for a few days. If the pain doesn't go away, you have to go to physiotherapy. Some people even have to stop lacemaking entirely. You also need to have really good eyesight. I had bad eyes, I had minus 6 and minus 8, so I had an operation.

Now lacemaking is on the rise, a lot of young girls are doing it. If you follow fashion trends, you find dresses in girl's closets again today and that's nice. More feminine forms and silhouettes are back, the world got tired of emancipation.

I grew up in a very conservative family, so I'm also more old school, with conservative views. It's not just based on how you're raised, we're carved like this on a genetic level. We have a very strong lineage. There haven't been any divorces, not on my father's side of the family or my mother's. Death was the only thing that separated spouses, so the marital lifespan in our family is about 45-50 years. For me, my grandmother was a powerful role model. My grandfather on my mom's side was an alcoholic, but it never even crossed my grandmother's mind to leave him. She always said, "This is the person that I'm responsible for before God."

I was originally raised with the viewpoint that there should be only one man in your life, and for a long time it was really like that. I had a really sad and unfortunate experience: the person who became my first sex partner wasn't able to carry the burden of this responsibility. It didn't work out ideally, but it was a fairly minimal experience in terms of intimate relationships

His family accepted me, but only as long as we weren't talking about marriage. Once we were drinking tea together and his mom was talking about another girl they knew, a daughter of acquaintances, and judged her by her salary: "Marusia is a good girl. She earns 40,000." (630 dollars a month.) I should have thought about that comment back then.They didn't consider me suitable from a materialistic standpoint. At the time I was a full-time student. We separated under pressure from his mother. Now I think she'd be really surprised to know that I actually earn quite a lot of money.

I met my husband on the Internet. He's older than me by 11 years. When we met (this is what he told me later) he understood that I was the woman for him after just 10 minutes of talking to me. People say that if a guy doesn't marry in his 30s, he won't get married at all. This is actually his first marriage, but he still immediately made it clear that he had serious intentions. Sometimes I ask him, "how are you so amazing and didn't get married until you were 40?" He jokes and says "I was a virgin, I was waiting for you."

At home, it's patriarchy. We are a traditional, conservative family, in which I am subordinate to my husband. That probably sounds harsh, but actually I was raised that way and don't know anything else. I ask him for permission every time that I leave the house. If we go somewhere, we go together. Even coming here [a needlework festival] he only reluctantly let me come, but I said that it was for work, it's necessary. After I explained to him why, then he agreed. When I tell this to people, they say that my husband is a tyrant because he doesn't let me go anywhere.

But actually I'm unbelievably lucky. I'm very happy in my marriage. I always have a strong shoulder at my side. My husband is a very rare type of person, right now men like him don't really exist anymore. He's solid, strong-willed, self-sufficient. We have a strong and

harmonious family, we do everything together. We're one organism, one whole, we make each other complete. In our family life, domestic routine isn't something that wears us down but something that strengthens us. Our life is such that we spend all our time together. My husband is most content when I'm just near him, then he's calm and happy. He tells me, "just sit and sew next to me."

In terms of today's trends we're like dinosaurs dying out. It's pretty rare. The modern family unit looks very different. All the attempts our women have made towards emancipation, focusing on career, it doesn't actually lead to anything good. Women feel flawed, and family life suffers.

In our life together we have never had a conflict. We've never gone to bed angry. My husband has a down-to-earth profession, there's nothing creative about it. He studied to be a psychologist, and now he sells ventilation equipment. My husband values everything that I made for our house – the napkins and the icons that I brought to his home. He won't give them to anyone, even my mother. When my mom comes and asks to take something with her to work to show it to people, he'll loan it to her very reluctantly. Sometimes people come visit us and it turns into a tour. He loves to talk about the things that I've created and show off boxer shorts that I've sewed for him.

I'm an extremely happy wife. For me, my husband is the most important person after my parents. I find the possibility for self-actualization within my family.

I serve him with pleasure. Solid values are the moral backbone of our country and there's no discrimination or inferiority here. What's happening to the institution of family in the West, what's coming closer to us here, that's very foreign to me. It's horrible. My husband and I just watched a fourth movie with propaganda about same sex relationships. We turned on the historical film "The Favorite." I thought it was about the King...it turned out that "the favorite" was a girl...the queen's favorite girl. They showed their intimate life with all of this horrible stuff.

The problem is that in even quite good movies, examples of same sex love, heroes of that movement are shown as positive people, they love and take care of each other. This helps the perversion spread. Of course, it's been around since ancient times, but it's not necessary to popularize that, to show it, and really implant it in society. We Russian people are orthodox people. Our nature is to oppose all of that. Boys should live with girls, men should live with women. It's a certain social order, a lifestyle. God created men as men and women as women so that the human race could continue. Each of us has a specific role in this.

Right now in our family I earn more money, but when we met, my husband made more money. He owns the apartment we live in and has a car. I never used to earn money, I always would give to charity, I was involved in art therapy. My husband directed me on this path, he helped me, taught me how to earn money, curbed some of my altruistic ambitions. At some point he got laid off at work and I started to make money. He's not just sitting around, he's looking for work. He's a very thoughtful and forward-thinking person.

Our family, a family just like in ancient times, is an example of a patriarchal lifestyle. We belong to each other implicitly. Each of us sacrifices something by fulfilling our role in our life together. For example, my husband also sacrifices his freedom, he doesn't spend time with

his friends, or God forbid, with other women. He is with me.

Right now we don't have children. At the moment it's physically not working out. We're trying to do it the natural way. That happens sometimes, that it doesn't work out or it takes a bit longer, but we don't fixate on that.

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