

## History of Crochet by Ruthie Marks

You and I call it *crochet*, and so do the French, Belgians, Italians and Spanish-speaking people. The skill is known as *haken* in Holland, *haekling* in Denmark, *hekling* in Norway and *virkning* in Sweden.

Other forms of handwork – knitting, embroidery and weaving – can be dated far back in time, thanks to archeological finds, written sources and pictorial representations of various kinds. But no one is quite sure when and where crochet got its start. The word comes from *croc*, or *croche*, the Middle French word for hook, and the Old Norse word for hook is *krokr*.

According to American crochet expert and world traveler Annie Potter, “The modern art of true crochet as we know it today was developed during the 16th century. It became known as ‘crochet lace’ in France and ‘chain lace’ in England.” And, she tells us, in 1916 Walter Edmund Roth visited descendants of the Guiana Indians and found examples of true crochet.

Another writer/researcher, Lis Paludan of Denmark, who limited her search for the origins of crochet to Europe, puts forth three interesting theories. One: Crochet originated in Arabia, spread eastward to Tibet and westward to Spain, from where it followed the Arab trade routes to other Mediterranean countries. Two: Earliest evidence of crochet came from South America, where a primitive tribe was said to have used crochet adornments in rites of puberty. Three: In China, early examples were known of three-dimensional dolls worked in crochet.

But, says Paludan, the bottom line is that there is “no convincing evidence as to how old the art of crochet might be or where it came from. It was impossible to find evidence of crochet in Europe before 1800. A great many sources state that crochet has been known as far back as the 1500s in Italy under the name of ‘nun’s work’ or ‘nun’s lace,’ where it was worked by nuns for church textiles,” she says. Her research turned up examples of lace-making and a kind of lace tape, many of which have been preserved, but “all indications are that crochet was not known in Italy as far back as the 16th century” – under any name.

### **Tambour gives birth to crochet**

Research suggests that crochet probably developed most directly from Chinese needlework, a very ancient form of embroidery known in Turkey, India, Persia and North Africa, which reached Europe in the 1700s and was referred to as “tambouring,” from the French “tambour” or drum. In this technique, a background fabric is stretched taut on a frame. The working thread is held underneath the fabric. A needle with a hook is inserted downward and a loop of the working thread drawn up through the fabric. With the loop still on the hook, the hook is then inserted a little farther

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*Ruthie Marks lives in California and began to crochet 8 years ago. She drives old-timers crazy with her left-handedness.*

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along and another loop of the working thread is drawn up and worked through the first loop to form a chain stitch. The tambour hooks were as thin as sewing needles, so the work must have been accomplished with very fine thread.

At the end of the 18th century, tambour evolved into what the French called “crochet in the air,” when the background fabric was discarded and the stitch worked on its own.

Crochet began turning up in Europe in the early 1800s and was given a tremendous boost by Mlle. Riego de la Branchardiere, who was best known for her ability to take old-style needle and bobbin lace designs and turn them into crochet patterns that could easily be duplicated. She published many pattern books so that millions of women could begin to copy her designs. Mlle. Riego also claimed to have invented “lace-like” crochet,” today called Irish crochet.

### **Irish famine spawns Irish crochet**

Irish crochet was a virtual lifesaver for the people of Ireland. It pulled them out of their potato famine, which lasted from 1845 to 1850 and threw them into abject poverty.

During these times, living and working conditions for the Irish were harsh. They crocheted between farm chores and outdoors to take advantage of sunlight. After dark, they moved indoors to work by the light of a candle, a slow-burning peat fire or an oil lamp.

A place to keep their crochetwork presented a problem, for many were living in squalor. If they had no other spot it went under the bed where it inevitably became dirty. Fortunately, the crocheted piece could be washed and its original luster completely recaptured. Ironically, buyers abroad were unaware that their delicate collars and cuffs were made in primitive dwellings under poverty-stricken conditions.

Irish workers – men as well as women and children – were organized into crochet cooperatives. Schools were formed to teach the skill and teachers were trained and sent all over Ireland, where the workers were soon creating new patterns of their own. And, although more than a million died in less than 10 years, the Irish people survived the famine. Families relied on their earnings from crochet, which gave them the chance to save up enough to emigrate and start a new life abroad, taking their crochet skills with them.

Potter tells us that the Irish immigrated to America – two million between 1845 and 1859, four million by 1900. American women, busy with their spinning, weaving, knitting and quilting, could not help but be influenced to include in their handwork the crochet skills of their new neighbors.

## Tools – the hooks, the materials

Techniques for working with a needle – knitting, netting, weaving, twisting, braiding, knotting – have been called by many names throughout history. They include needle-coiling, knotless netting, cross-knit looping, looped needle-netting, vatsom, coptic knitting, naalebinding, Tunisian crochet, tambour, needle lace, lace making, tatting, macrame, sprang and shepherd's knitting.

Throughout the ages, a variety of materials have been used: hair, grasses, reeds, animal fur and sinew, hemp, flax, wool, gold and silver and copper strands, silk, white cotton thread, wool yarns (soft zephyr yarn, lustre yarn, double cable yarn, carpet yarn), cotton yarn (anchor and estramadura), silk thread (cordonnet and floss), linen thread, hemp thread, mohair, chenille, novelty mixtures, metal thread and string.

Today we have at our disposal an enormously wide selection of cotton, wool, silk and synthetic yarns. We can also crochet with such unusual materials as copper wire, strips of plastic, sisal, jute, scraps of fabric, unspun wool and even dog hair.

And how about the crochet tool? Today we walk into a yarn shop or Walmart and purchase aluminum, plastic or steel hooks available in more than 25 sizes. In earlier times, however, they used whatever they could get their hands on – fingers first, then hooks made of metal, wood, fishbone, animal bone, horn, old spoons, teeth from discarded combs, brass, mother-of-pearl, morse (walrus tusk), tortoiseshell, ivory, copper, steel, vulcanite, ebonite, silver and agate.

In Ireland at the time of the great famine (1845 to 1850), what at least one person used to produce fine Irish crochet was a needle or a stiff wire, inserted into a cork or piece of wood or tree bark, with the end filed down and bent into a little hook.

### What kinds of things were made?

In early centuries, man – and it was the job of the men – created his handwork for practical purposes. Hunters and fishermen created knotted strands of woven fibers, cords or strips of cloth to trap animals and snare fish or birds. Other uses included knotted game bags, fishing nets and open-worked cooking utensils.

Handwork was expanded to include personal decoration for special occasions such as religious rites, celebrations, marriages or funerals. One might see ceremonial costumes with crochet-like ornamentation and decorative trimmings for arms, ankles and wrists.

In 16th century Europe, royalty and the wealthy lavished themselves in lace – trimmings, gowns, jackets, headpieces – and the poor folk could only dream of wearing such things. So, it is surmised, crochet was developed as the poor people's imitation of the rich man's lace.

Moving forward to Victorian times, crochet patterns became available for flowerpot holders, bird cage covers, baskets for visiting cards, lamp mats and shades, wastepaper baskets, tablecloths, antimacassars (or “antis,” covers to protect chairbacks from the hair oil worn by the men in the mid-1800s), tobacco pouches, purses, men’s caps and waistcoats, even a rug with footwarmers to be placed under the card table for card players.

From 1900 to 1930 women were also busy crocheting afghans, slumber rugs, traveling rugs, chaise lounge rugs, sleigh rugs, car rugs, cushions, coffee- and teapot cozies and hot-water bottle covers. It was during this time that potholders made their first appearance and became a staple of the crocheter’s repertoire.

Now, of course, anything goes. In the 1960s and 1970s crochet took off as a freeform means of expression that can be seen today in three-dimensional sculptures, articles of clothing, or rugs and tapestries that depict abstract and realistic designs and scenes.

### **Techniques yesterday and today**

It is interesting to compare crochet methods of the past with those we use today. In the period 1824 to 1833, for instance, it is documented in the Dutch magazine, *Penelope*, that both the yarn and hook were to be held in the right hand and the yarn passed over the hook from the right forefinger. In crochet books from the 1840s, the hook is held in the right hand and the yarn in the left, as right-handers do today.

In a German publication dated 1847, it stated that one should always “keep the same tension, either crochet loosely or crochet tightly, otherwise an attractively even texture will not be achieved. Moreover, if not working in the round, you have to break off your yarn at the end of each row, since this gives a finer finish to the crocheted article.” Today’s patterns, thank goodness, usually instruct us to work both the right and wrong sides of the fabric we are creating. This change came about at the turn of the 20th century.

Researcher Lis Paludan speculates that the admonition to keep the same tension “seems to suggest that crochet hooks were of the same thickness and that the crocheter was expected to work in the correct tension according to the pattern.”

Old pattern instructions, dating about the mid-1800s, indicated that the hook was to be inserted into the back half of the stitch only, using a single crochet stitch unless otherwise instructed. Jenny Lambert, a European, wrote in 1847 that inserting the single crochet into the back half of the stitch was useful for making table runners and such, but inserting the hook through both loops could be used “to crochet soles for shoes and other articles which have to be thicker than average, but the technique is not suitable for patterns.” Today, of course, unless told to do otherwise, we automatically go through both loops.

## Patterns and books

Before patterns were written down, one simply copied someone else's work. Samples were made and sewn onto pages and bound like scrapbooks, sewn onto large pieces of fabric or kept loose in a bag or box. In her travels, author Annie Potter found some of these scrapbooks – dating from the late 1800s – still in use by nuns in Spain.

Another way to collect stitch samples was to crochet different stitches together in long, narrow bands – some made by adults, some begun in school and added on to over the years. (Later on in Europe, from 1916 to about 1926, readers could buy small pattern samples along with their yarn.)

The earliest crochet patterns known to date were printed in 1824. The earliest patterns were for purses of gold and silver silk thread in colorwork crochet.

Crochet books were found in many countries, often translated from one language into another. The most notable expert on crochet was Mlle. Riego de la Branchardiere, who published more than a hundred books, many about crochet.

The crochet books from the mid 1800s were small, only about 4 inches by 6 inches, but included woodcut illustrations. These small treasures, Paludan tells us, contained patterns for white lace-like collars, cuffs, lace, insertions and caps for women and children, along with patterns for purses and men's slippers and caps. Materials recommended for white crochet (insertions, edgings, mats, trimming for underwear) were cotton thread, spool yarn (Scottish thread on spools), linen or hemp thread. For colorwork, silk, wool and chenille yarns, as well as gold and silver threads, were suggested.

Those early patterns, which often were not accurate, would drive modern crocheters crazy. An eight-pointed star, for example, might turn out to possess only six points. The reader was expected, it turns out, to read the pattern but to use the illustration as the more accurate guide.

### Want to know more?

Much of the material for this article came from two excellent sources: "A Living Mystery, the International Art & History of Crochet," Annie Louise Potter, A.J. Publishing International, 1990; and "Crochet History & Technique," Lis Paludan, Interweave Press, 1995.