

Uncommon Thread: Isernia's Craft of Bobbin Lacemaking

In the heart of Isernia, a once-endangered artisanal technique is enjoying a major revival — thanks to an emphasis on both community and craft.

**STYLE & DESIGN / Words by Gia Marie Amella
Photos by Beppe Mangione / Modio Media**

In a tucked-away corner of Isernia's historic center, I hear a soft clattering. Following the sound into a narrow street, I spot a group of people seated before oblong objects — pillows, it turns out — cradled in folding stools. Their hands move steadily back and forth, twisting and knotting lengths of thread held in place by dozens of sewing pins. Bobbins — cylindrical wooden spools — fan out across the pillows with a rhythmic click-clack every few seconds. The workers' concentration is scissor-sharp; they scarcely notice the arrival of newcomers.

"Pull, then make a knot," one woman instructs her neighbor, leaning over to inspect her progress.

"She's my teacher," the pupil explains, suddenly aware of my presence. "I'm learning the technique, but you need a lot of practice."

THE ART'S ALL IN THE HANDS

Each July, this street transforms into a scene from another time. Here in the open air, lacemakers of all ages practice the tradition of bobbin lacemaking, *merletto a tombolo di Isernia*, elevated to a high art by an Aragonese queen in the early 16th century.

The pillows the group is using as work surfaces are typically filled with hay. (*Tombolo* is the word for both the pillow

and the technique.) Thread is wound onto the desired number of bobbins based on the design's complexity and width. This number could be "[anywhere] from four to 100," says pattern-maker Gerardo Abbatiello.

Once the selected pattern is pinned to the cushion, the lacemaker inserts pins along its contours, always working from the reverse side as she weaves. Bobbins are worked in pairs and the lace is created by crossing and twisting the bobbin couplets, creating a sequence of interweaving knots. The mark of a "true lacemaker," Abbatiello explains, is tying the lace with a pin, not a crochet hook.

Though lacemaking has long been part of Isernia's social and economic fabric, the "Borgo del Merletto" square, as this open-air school is now known, is a recent invention. It's an initiative of Il Merletto di Isernia — l'Arte nelle Mani, an association founded in 2021 that now has 300 members, from absolute beginners to generational lacemakers who mesmerize as they expertly maneuver dozens of bobbins at a time.

In the middle of the square, Carmela lavarone, the association's founder and president, bends over her design, a large-petalled flower with the letter "D" at its center. After launching an initiative that successfully united isolated lacemakers during the pandemic, lavarone saw a larger opportunity to reinvigorate this endangered tradition. Her idea? Repopulate the old city's streets with



lacemakers “to give Isernia an opportunity to earn revenue from a form of tourism that had never been considered before: lace-related tourism,” says spokesperson Anna Luisa D’Aiola.

This push for revival has attracted people from across generational and even gender divides. In one corner of the “Borgo,” a woman gently guides her young granddaughter through a few simple steps. In another, newbie lacemaker Libero tells me he makes the 40-minute drive from Campobasso to absorb the know-how of Isernia’s veterans. “This is the homeland of bobbin lace,” he says matter-of-factly.

A 500-YEAR-OLD TRADITION

Town records show that Isernia’s lacemaking tradition first took root in the early 16th century at Santa Maria delle Monache, a former Benedictine convent huddled at the lower end of the old city. Here, as early as 1503, the cloistered nuns were already known for their finesse at lace crafting, which provided income for them to carry out their good works. But it was a pivotal visit to the convent by Queen Giovanna II d’Aragona, consort to King Fernando of Naples, that would cement lacemaking as part of the local fabric.

The queen had a hobby of Spanish lacemaking, which she practiced during her visit. “The nuns learned this technique and took it up themselves,”

D’Aiola explains. “At the end of the queen’s stay, she urged the nuns to preserve what they’d learned and to share it with local girls to make trousseaus for noblewomen.”

And so it happened that young girls would come to the convent for lacemaking training. In time, they brought their skills to the outside world, teaching the techniques to others and to earn income. Isernia’s economy at the time was largely tied to farming and agriculture, and between working in the fields and minding the children, women’s free time was scarce and always put to good use. Angela Buccigrossi, whose maternal family dealt in the lace trade for six generations, explains, “These women, when they had some spare time, would sit by the pillow and do *la cucchiarella*” — the term for the technique in Isernian dialect.

The Buccigrossi family has a lacemaking collection displayed in Isernia’s civic museum, which Angela and her sister Paola lead me through. The items, which date from the 19th century, are exquisite: table linen embellished with flowers, a curtain with delicately scalloped borders, and — one especially prized piece — a bed set with medallion insets recalling 18th-century oval portraits, their mother’s design. Angela points out a bamboo stick on the wall, used to measure lace; Paola highlights a miniature lace-trimmed canopy used to protect a Eucharist tabernacle.





Lacemakers did piecemeal work for merchants like the Buccigrossi sisters' grandmother, a trailblazer who traveled to clients' homes around Italy with her suitcase of lace samples. Brokers financially benefitted more than the creators, but the latter's handiwork attracted the attention of other income sources. Angela describes a typical scene: "Foreigners would pass by [as the women worked in the square] and the women would ask, 'Do you want this? I'll sell it to you.'" Those from elsewhere, Angela explains, were always more likely to make a purchase — and not due to any trickery on the artisans' part. "*Nemo propheta in patria*," she recites in Latin. No one's a prophet in their own country.

THE LONG-TERM VIEW

Angela's declaration begs the question: What's the cost of lacemaking in today's market?

I get a good sense of it at the Isernia Cathedral, where a gold-embroidered mantle adorns a striking Madonna Addolorata statue. It's the handiwork of 52 lacemakers, including seven young trainees who made the trim for the 10-foot-long cloak. The pattern-maker Abbatiello, who also runs a small museum linked to the Il Merletto di Isernia — l'Arte nelle Mani association, estimates materials and labor costs at between \$47,000 and \$58,000. And with Isernia's lacemaking traditions inching closer to

full UNESCO recognition, tools of the trade are gaining in sentimental value, too.

Fortunately, today's creators are aware of all this. Unlike lacemakers of yesteryear who were often underpaid, today many know the value of their work and can price it accordingly. Association spokeswoman D'Aiola tells me this is a deeply held conviction and a major source of pride for members of the association.

There are additional reasons to be optimistic about the future. In 2022, Borgo del Merletto recorded 25,000 visitors, and that number has steadily increased each year since. And in 2025, Abbatiello accompanied lacemakers to Expo Osaka, one of Japan's largest gatherings. Meeting in person and transmitting the techniques to an international public is a chance to bridge cultural divides. "Everyone's free to sit down at one of the pillows provided and try out the basic stitches," says D'Aiola.

Back at the Borgo del Merletto after a stroll through Isernia's lacy legacy, I spot Carmela Iavarone, who's working the bobbins as purposefully as she was this morning. She tells me her wish is to pass down her passion for *tombolo* to her grandchildren.

"This is an art," she says, bobbins clacking away. "We must protect it."