

**JANICE N. HARRINGTON**

**Why, Oh Why, the Doily?**

*The lace doily (or antimacassar) was to become as persistent a symbol in [Horace] Pippin's later work as the classical torso in Chirico or the jungle in Rousseau. Whether it represented some unattainable respectability or was seized upon solely for its decorative mosaic, we have no way of knowing: but toward the end of his career its use became pervasive to the point of abstraction.*  
—Selden Rodman, *Horace Pippin: A Negro Painter in America*

*Why, oh why, the doily?*

—Elizabeth Bishop, “Filling Station”

**1**

In a slant of light, a woman crochets a doily,  
working the hook in and out. She wraps  
a thread of cotton floss around  
her index finger, almost  
as if she were writing. The words fall  
from her crochet hook, linked  
into white lace, a white page.

Words tangle in stringy ink,  
almost manic, a speaking in tongues,  
looped, caught, tucked under a stitch  
of breath. Memory rises as if  
it were a doily of lace, beautifully edged,  
holding what once mattered.

**2**

Memory snags on a doily's lace, a ring game of thread—  
*Put your hands on your hips, let your backbone slip.*  
The past wears the body of a girl-child to skip, spin-  
dizzy, fall and leap up again. There is resurrection  
in a jump rope's twirl. The past tosses the unseen  
like a stone, then, scooping it up, claims it, the present  
a pip, a prize for having journeyed. A doily starched,  
shaped into fullness, the hem of a child's skirt as she twirls,  
twirls and falls. Our first sex is with the earth that pulls us  
down, that holds us against its skin as a doily draws the eye.

3

From fiberglass, an artist crochets doilies of resin.  
“Arte Povera,” she says, “chaos theory,  
the Fibonacci sequence, the numbers  $\pi$   
and  $e$ , and Pascal’s triangle.” Fiberglass chains  
and joinings gather light and transform  
into shining, into narratives of mathematical  
precision, from simplicity into hybrid  
space and form, thread and fabric, plane  
and dimension, maker and made.

How measure a doily’s self-similarities?  
Unraveled, a doily is skeins of cotton thread.  
Untwisted, the threads are fiber. Released,  
the fiber drifts over a mill in Carolina or a field  
in Alabama, over a cotton row where a rat snake  
coils under the shade of a cotton plant, unaware  
of a descending blade, how things fall apart.

Another artist links antique doilies, builds  
sculptures, webs, womb rooms, huge cellular  
amoebas of chains (*sc in 2nd ch from hook  
and in each ch across for 34 sc*). Elsewhere  
a poet writes that a single doily is the cell  
of an extraterrestrial organism. Objects drawn  
past its plasma membrane are consumed.  
At night, doilies levitate upward toward  
their host colony, frequently mistaken for mist,  
cloud formations, snow, or vees of geese.  
Doilies have always been amongst us.

4

A man lies on top of a woman.

Which is the doily?

Which is a vase of clear water  
filled with wands of weigela or lemon basil?

Which—the man or the woman—lifts this moment  
above smooth flesh, bare and shining like still water?

5

Doilies are two-dimensional planes until starched  
and shaped or crocheted with wire or words or breath.

Then they are architectural. Doilies are flat  
like stepping stones, like old graves, like the known

universe before longitude. But they can be bowls,  
mesh cages, or equations of hyperbolic geometry,

say Russian kale or a coral reef, say old grief  
or a black woman's hair on a humid day.

6

Consider the doily, a plane, space made lovely,  
space that is and is not, form that is and is not.  
Atop a doily you may place anything of value,  
anything that you want to beguile the eye:  
a porcelain soup tureen from the Azores,  
a lead crystal candy bowl, the photograph  
of a soldier in uniform. Consider the doily,  
how it shows what does and does not belong  
to you, what little you have, as if, surprisingly,  
there is always poverty in such display.

7

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Doi

Patterns, repetitions, skeletons of lace used for display,  
to protect, proclaim, give status, attract the eye, give  
access, to prove, as she said, that *Somebody loves us all*.

Subject headings:

1) lacemaking 2) crochet—history 3) handiwork, women

(see also geometry)

**8**

The doily knows only one word: *Behold!*

**9**

Questions the doily asks:

1.0 *Is space a material thing in which all material things are to be located?*  
—Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*

- 1.1 If doilies are material spaces, should space be understood as form?
  - 1.1.1 If doilies are intersections of form and space, what is the boundary between conceptualized space and the space of the material doily?
  - 1.1.2 If the doily's purpose is display, does an object placed within or atop a doily represent the measure of its display? Do doilies display, at every moment, all objects in any space? We display the doily. Does the doily display us?
  - 1.1.3 If a doily contains an infinite number of spaces, does display alter the perception of space?
- 1.2 Doilies replicate gardens: lilies, roses, palm fronds, carnations, forget-me-nots, daisies, as gardens themselves replicate the wild and fecund. What is consumed in a doily's replicated garden?
  - 1.2.1 If doilies are figurative gardens, are they subversive in the context of the large-scale monocultures of modern agribusiness?

- 1.2.2 As metaphorical garden and embodied paradise in which divinity and sexuality are not separate, do doilies deny same-sex desire? Are they petitions to an absent divinity?
- 1.2.3 As metaphorical gardens, doilies feature flowers, the classic emblems of sexuality. Is the doily a means of seduction?
- 1.3 A doily belonging to Eva Braun is sold at auction. A Negro folk artist paints pictures of his wife's doilies. A black woman passes on a cardboard box, filled with her mother's doilies, to her daughter. Which doily does not represent memory?
- 1.4 Are doilies beautiful because they balance absence with presence?
- 1.4.1 If doilies are hybrids (form and formlessness, repetition and variation), is what composes a doily also hybrid—space, connection, beauty?
- 1.4.2 But if the doily is itself beauty, as well as a marker for beauty, does it compete for the space allocated to women? In making a doily, does a woman replicate *woman, feminine, womb, girl?*

**10**

In *Spring Flowers with Lace Doily, 1944*

Pippin paints gladioli, chrysanthemums,  
roses, and orange poppies over a doily  
as intricate as a spider's web or altar cloth,  
a pictograph across a sandstone cliff.

Wild abundance or what is only lovely?

He argues with himself

about the divine

and the earthly,

about chaos

and order—he can't decide.

He paints a doily, labors to show  
every intersecting thread, each thread  
a path untaken, a path that might have  
made all the difference, each thread  
a journey. He paints the spaces,  
the interruptions of pattern that are also pattern.  
His doilies look like nets, sieves,  
or the aerial cartography of a vast irrigation system,  
labyrinths where there are monsters,  
but also, surely, gods. And so the flowers,  
and so his doilies, and so his petition.

"Questions the Doily Asks," section 9, after Bernard Tschumi, "Questions of Space." *Architecture and Disjunction*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001.