Lacis

Have you ever heard this (or said it):

> *"Lacemaking? No way! You have to buy a bunch of equipment, learn a thousand stitches, and it takes a month of eyestrain to produce just an inch of lace!"*

How about this?

> *"Handmade lace isn't worth it; it tears up too easily, and it can't be washed."*

Or the Kiss of Death:

> *"Lace isn't appropriate to my time period."*

Nonsense!

What would you say if I told you that, for less than $20, and a weekend's work, even a child can produce lace that is attractive and versatile, can survive repeated trips through the washing machine, and is appropriate for at least late 12th century through end of Period? Lacis is that lace.
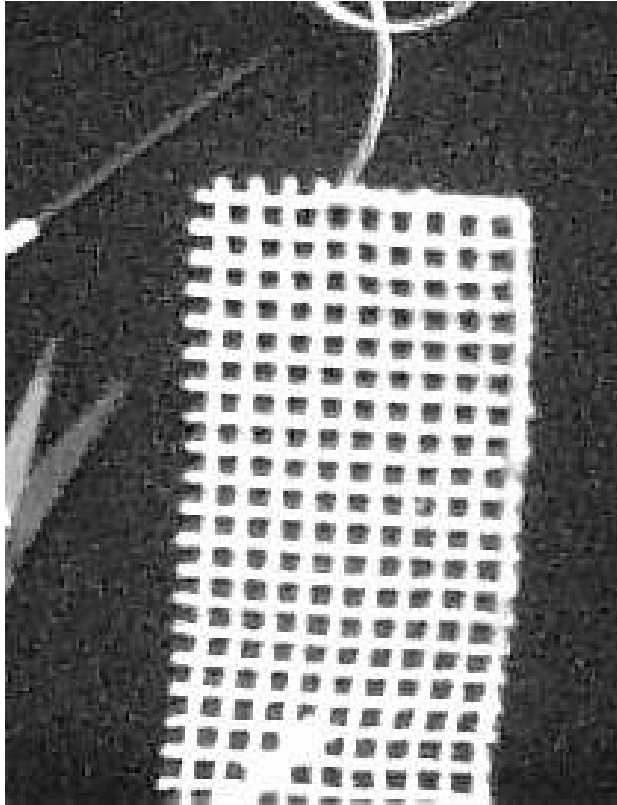
Lacis (also known as darned netting, filet lace, mezzo mandolino, and Filet Italien) is one of the oldest known lacemaking techniques. Examples of the netting itself – which even the most hardened Viking would recognize as simple fishnet -- has been found in ancient Egyptian tombs. Fine netting, delicately darned, have been found in sites dating back to the earliest days of the 14th century. It is mentioned specifically in the *Ancrin Riwle* (a novice nun's 'handbook,' c. 1301), wherein the novice is admonished not to spend all her time netting, but to turn her hand to charitable works.
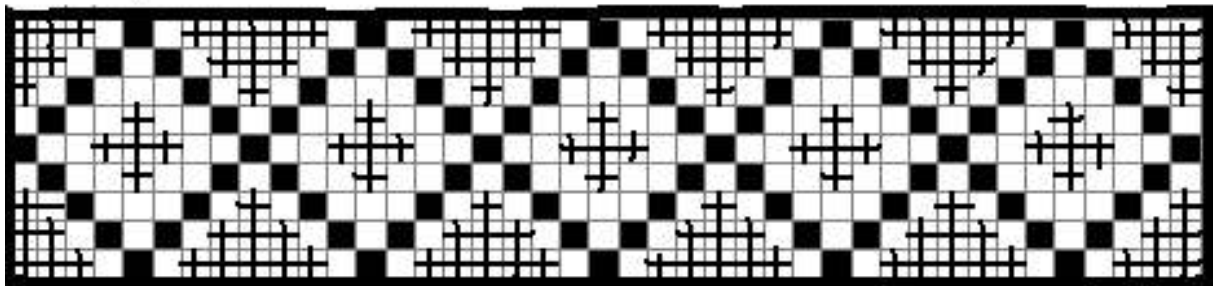
Figure 1 pattern for bookmark

Lacis is simply a net, such as fishnet, that has patterns darned into it. It comes in two basic categories, which categorize the kind of net used. Mondano is classic fishnet, a knotted netting where a shuttle and mesh gauge is used to make link loops together to form the net. Buratto, or woven netting, is more familiar to modern needleworkers; it is a net that is formed by weaving. Needlepoint canvas and latch-hook rug canvas are both examples of buratto.
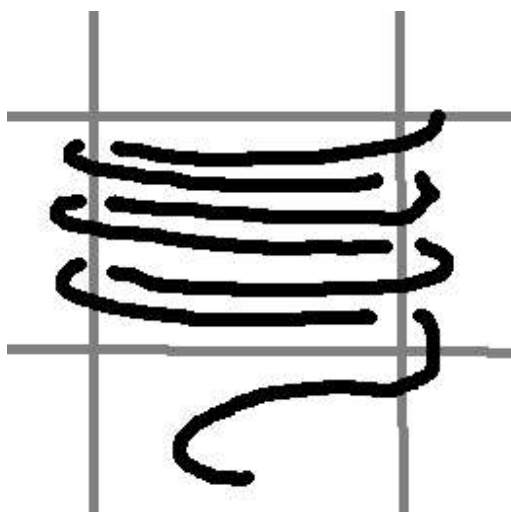
Both buratto and mondano were used in period, and both have their advantages and disadvantages. Mondano tends to be more stable, and looks and feels lighter; but it's a slow,
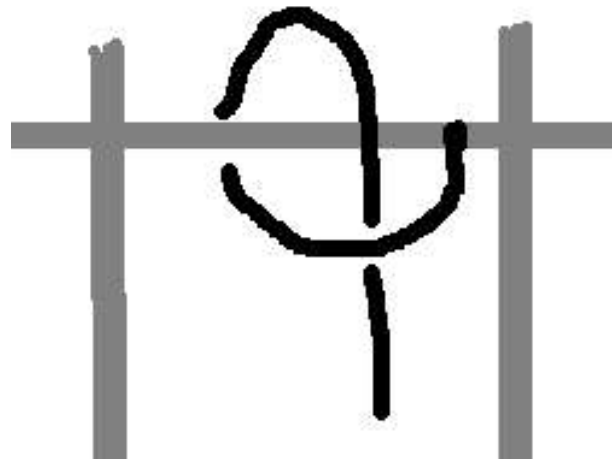
Figure 3 finished edge. Note that the tails of the cut burrato have been cut away

Figure 2 Buttonhole stitch

painstaking process to make it; it also has to be stretched in a frame in order to darn it. Buratto is easier to obtain in large quantities(either weaving it or buying it), but it is not as light looking as mondano; it also tends to fray where it's cut.

The most common uses for lacis in period were snoods. These varied from plain, unadorned net, to fabulously decorated creations, darned with gold thread and beads. Other uses for lacis were to decorate altar linens, table linens, some articles of clothing, and furniture.

For this project, a sampler bookmark, I recommend a good, five- or six-meshes-to-the-inch buratto, which can be gotten at www.lacis.com or other online suppliers. It is generally prestarched, so there is no need to stretch the net in a frame to darn it. At Lacis.com, it can be purchased for about $14 for a sixty-inch wide piece. Yes, that's kind of pricy, but it's deceptive. You're using such small amounts that the one piece of buratto can last six months or more. If that's still a little too steep, then needlepoint canvas (NOT the plastic canvas) will make a suitable substitute.

You're also going to need some #20 or #30 crochet or tatting thread; that can be had at Walmart or craft store for less than two dollars. You'll also need scissors, and a large-eyed needle, like an embroidery or crewel needle.

For this project, cut a strip of buratto that's 9 meshes wide, and 41 meshes long; that will end up being about 1.5 inches wide, and about five inches long (a little larger for the 5-mesh than for the 6-mesh). This is going to be the body of our bookmark.

Thread your needle with a good length of thread.

Figure 4 Darning Stitch

Tie the trailing end of your thread tightly – a firm square knot will do – to the edge of your buratto. Make buttonhole stitches around the outer thread of the buratto. (Figure one is a simple diagram of the buttonhole stitch, if you're not familiar with it). Take special care to make your stitches very tight at each crossing of the buratto threads. This helps prevent raveling of the outer edges of your work.

Go all the way around the bookmark. When you run out of thread, take a couple tight stitches, and cut away the remaining thread; leave a tail a couple inches long dangling. Tie on the new thread, just as before, catching the dangling tail in the knot. Now, continue the buttonhole stitch, covering the dangling tail of your previous thread, so that it is hidden. After about ten stitches, cut off the remainder of that tail; this makes your thread change almost invisible.

As you go, you may want to trim the rough edges of the buratto; or you can wait until your have completed finishing the edge.
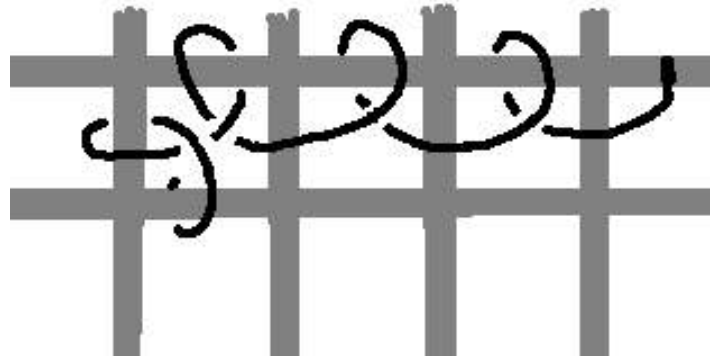
When you have completely
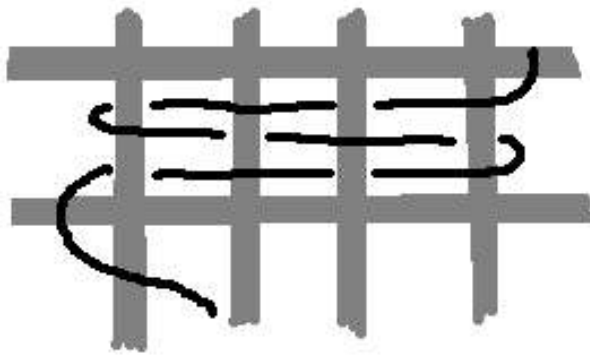
Figure 5 Darning stitch carried across a number of meshes, illustrating the basketweave nature of the stitch
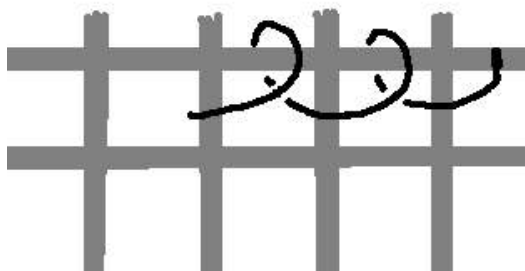
Figure 7 Interlock stitch, step one

bound the edge, you are ready to being darning the pattern.

Figure 6 Interlock stitch, step Two

Below you will see a pattern, that can be done with about five hours work. In period, simple geometrics or stylized florals were very common themes for most decorative needlework. I have tried to capture that with this simple pattern.
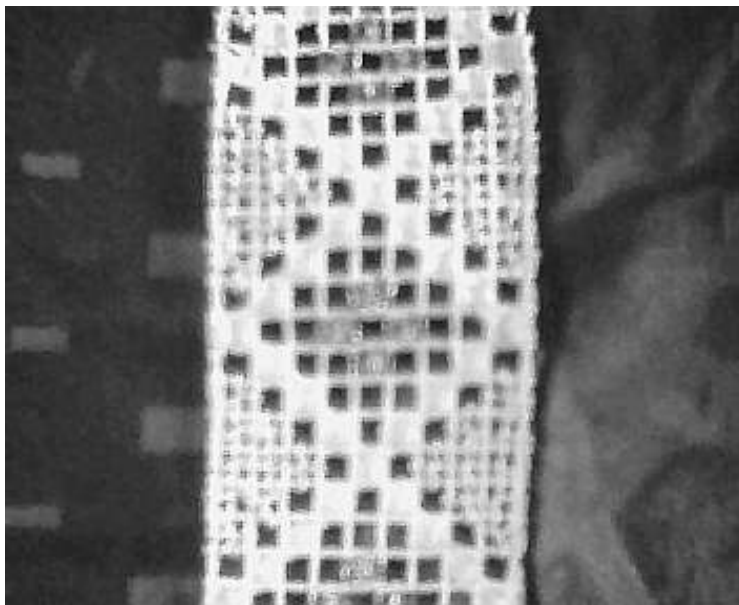
As complicated as it seems to be, there are only two stitches involved in making this pattern, both of which you probably have already used in other kinds of needlework. The first, illustrated in Figure 4, is a Darning Stitch. It is the simplest stitch, being simply an over-under basketweave. Carry the thread under the left hand buratto thread, then back and over the right. Next over the left, and over the right. Just like weaving a basket.

If you're doing longer stretches, it simply carries on with the original basketweave over-under, going over and under alternately until you reach the end of the row you want to cover (see
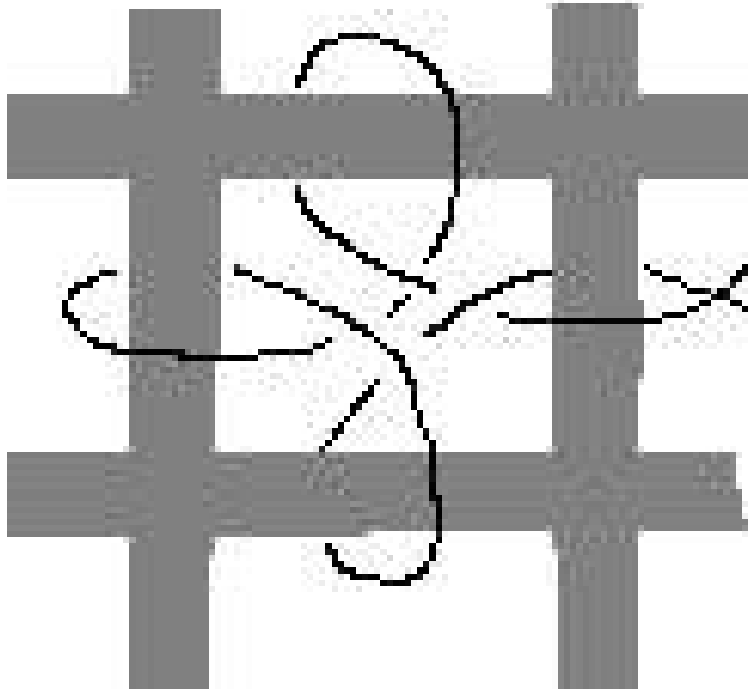
Figure 8 Interlock stitch, Step Three

Figure 9 Finished product; note the gold threads in the center motif.

Figure 5)

This stitch can be used to fill the diamond section of the pattern, illustrated by solid black squares.
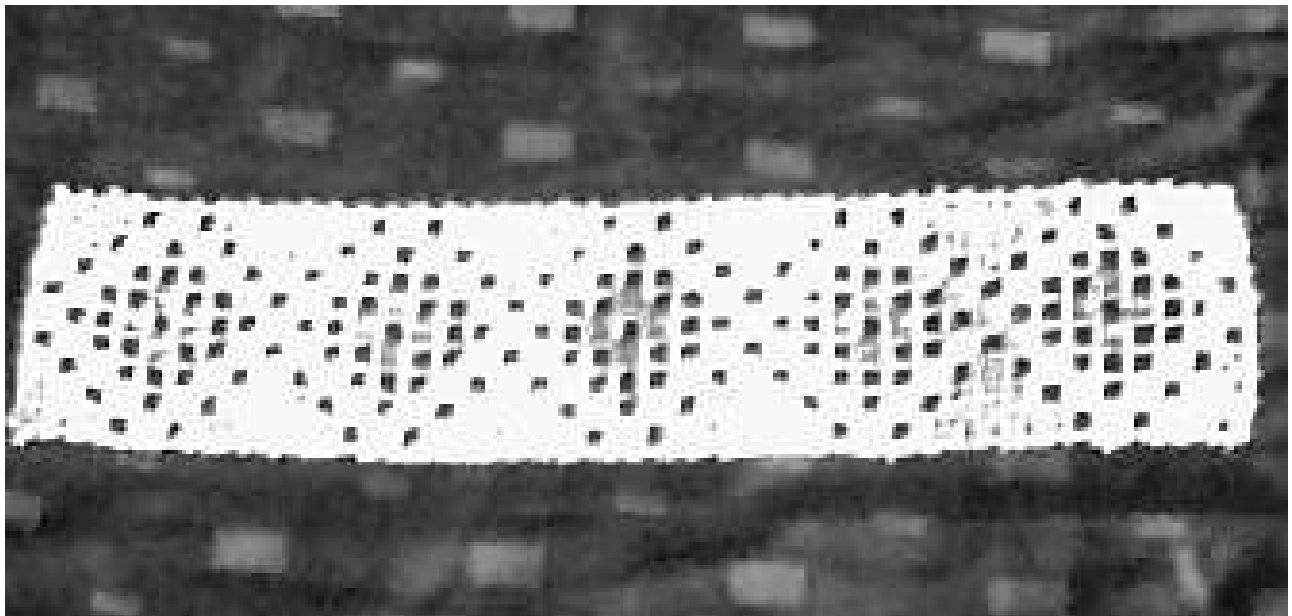
The other stitch used is called the Interlock stitch. It sounds and looks complicated, but it is actually very simple: it is a stretched out buttonhole stitch, that turns back on itself at the end of each row. Anchor the thread on the side of a mesh that is to be filled with interlock stitch. Then, carry the thread up to the first cross thread, as in figure 7. Carry the thread to the next square, and across, until you have entered a loose buttonhole-stitch-type loop in each square. Then, you carry another loose buttonhole stitch to the lefthand upright of the mesh, as in Figure 8.

Finally, you begin to work back toward where you started, again, doing a loose buttonhole stitch in the bottom of the mesh. But, where it crosses into the next square, you pass behind the mesh thread, looping with the first threads as in Figure 9. Continue like that until you have gotten back to where you started. If you've done it correctly, then it will look like a little star or flower is centered, more or less, in each affected mesh.

These two stitches will allow you to complete the bookmark pattern. As both of these stitches were done in period, dating back as far as the 1300's, you can safely adapt them to any number of patterns you may care to devise yourself. The finished product should look something like the one in figure 10; as you can see, I used gold thread for the center motifs.

For more information about lacis, I recommend The DMC Encyclopedia of Needlework (which includes a lot more stitches, and much out of period information). For websites that describe how to make your own netting, try http://www.knotsindeed.freeservers.com/index.html. For pattern ideas, try

http://www.pbm.com/~lindahl/vinciolo/ which is a scanning of Vinciolo's Singulairs et Nouveaux Portraicts, a period lace pattern book that includes a number of lacis patterns.

Figure 10 Finished bookmark