



North Portugese lace square carried by brides as they entered the parish church

Messages expressed in words or other symbols, intended to coax or persuade, to promote or crystallise a desired emotion in 'the other person,' or which betoken hopes, state objectives, and also aid the solidification of one's own pledge, are to be found scratched, carved, painted, written, and even knitted or embroidered, on a host of different love gifts. Generally, the emotion contained in the message is love; but from time to time despair occurs or love sours to hate.

Such messages were not conveyed by word of mouth, either because the person concerned did not know the loved one well enough, or because he or she was too constrained in everyday life and thus, when under the pressure of powerful emotion, became inarticulate. This aspect of the love token reflects the very limited social intercourse between girls and young men, which, not everywhere, but in most parts of Europe, continued down to modern times. Often, of course, the message love token was employed to emphasise strength of feeling, which being more substantial than the fleeting, spoken word suggests that the emotion is not merely ephemeral but will endure.

The message love gift, above all, was swept away by the revolution in social manners. Valentines, those anonymous and clandestine declarations, are the only ones left with us today. But they are too well known to warrant more than passing mention. It's noticeable that all attempts to trace the Valentine's history slip back into a quagmire of conjecture. For example, the popular idea that a solid connection exists between the

giving of Valentines and the saint whose feast is celebrated on 14th February is misplaced. All that is fairly certain is that Valentines originated in France and reached England via Scotland.

Let us pass immediately to the lesser-known posy ring, examples of which date, in England, from the fourteenth century. Posy is a contraction of poesy, strictly speaking a 'line or verse of poetry inscribed on a knife or within a ring.' I quote a few posies taken from the hoops of sixteenth-century rings; all seem a little rueful: 'I have don if you yeeld not soone' ... 'Faint heart delayed too long' ... 'Yours at midnight take this hand' ... 'I am thy lot refues me not' ...

These posies evoke unrequited love. But, 'the shoe maketh me woo' is open to speculation. What exactly, does it mean? In the folklore of all ages, the shoe stood for the essence of womanhood, because it receives and contains. Moreover, the shoe embodied the idea of fitting. Since that which fits brings good luck – comfort! – the shoe may be said to be propitious in conjuring the right partner.

Seventeenth and eighteenth century survivals are more cheerful. Engraved on gold rings, at the Victoria and Albert Museum, you may find: 'Love and live happily' ... 'You have me hart' ... 'United hearts death only parts' and 'this spark will grow.' There is also a bronze ring with that universal plea, 'Love me,' a mute cry mostly in the imperative, but with faint interrogative overtones. Such legends foreshadow the sentimental inscriptions recurring throughout the Victorian period, on that rich class of love tokens, lace bobbins.

Records indicate that the Chinese evolved the first simple but complete mode of communicating ideas by means florigraphic signs. Subsequently every civilisation, it seems, has devised its own plant language. It will be recalled that in Europe the following figurative meanings at one time obtained: ivy – because it clings for support – representing love and fidelity; rose and myrtle – love; poppy – sleep and oblivion; rosemary-remembrance; lily of the valley – return of happiness; violet – constancy; aloe – bitterness. As noted above, the pansy, in Portugal, stands for perfect love.

England is home of what might be claimed as the most astonishing of all message-bearers. These are the mid-Victorian lace bobbins, notably from the pillow lace districts of Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire and Northants. Their multifarious tersely phrased communications, which, not infrequently, are piquantly humorous, and sometimes boldly down to earth, offer a fruitful field of entertainment or study. These bobbins, either of wood or bone, were weighted with decorative bunches of beads called spangles (jingles in America) attached by brass wires. Inscribed survivals – there are a prodigious number still around – are of two types: the straight and the scrambled. The former bears its legend along the length of the shaft; the latter carries



Top left: entwined double and single Scottish love brooches



Top right: Dutch clog from Marken Holland
Left: battoir à linge (washerwoman's beetle) for flattening and rolling out sheets



a 'scrambled' message. At first sight nothing except spiralled lines containing coloured dots is visible. But by rotating such a bobbin anti-clockwise and reading upwards from the bottom, the dots are seen as parts of capital letters, and a message is gradually spelled out.

Frequently, turners journeyed from village to village with a dog cart, dotting messages to order with a small drill. The height of the craze fell between 1860 and 1880, at the same time as a boom in Valentines, when such bobbins could be bought from a penny to fivepence. The dots were in alternate colours, and the colouring varied from county to county, as did the particulars of technique.

Skill

A wide range of love gifts, besides conveying sentiment and being practical objects of use, are intimately connected with courting display. These are mainly highly-ornamented household utensils intended for future wives and the sometimes lavishly embroidered garments to be worn (generally) by the bridegroom on the wedding day. In this light such love gifts were made and presented to demonstrate manual dexterity and indirectly to prove domestic capability. Concerning the large number of surviving examples of such love gifts an interesting question immediately arises: how many were the actual work of the donor?

I think it may be assumed that those given by girls were nearly always made by themselves. Of such love gifts presented by men – for the most part carved wooden articles those actually made by the suitor or the betrothed young man seem to be inextricably mingled with those acquired from a more skilled neighbour or perhaps bought at the local market or annual fair.

Consider, for instance, the *battoir à linge* (washerwoman's beetle), used for pounding dirty linen when the laundry was done on the banks of a stream. The examples illustrated clearly show the difference between professional and amateur skill. Both have the form of an early French tennis-bat. The emblems (apart from the inscriptions) of foliage symbolic of growth – are typical of love gifts. Another *battoir*, possibly made by a hand long habituated to carving stall-ends, rood

screens and such like, portrays sophisticated trees, birds, and a heart. Too good for use, it was most likely kept permanently in a place of honour. Obviously the former would have been made by the donor, but the latter, unless the giver happened to be a carver by profession, was certainly acquired by way of trade or the barter of services. These *battoirs* were to be found in all those parts of France where women preferred not to use their hands for beating washing.

The greatest feats of sheer virtuosity are to be found among a limited number of Welsh love spoons, but for aesthetic qualities we must turn to the mangleboards, notably of Norway. These elongated rectangles of heavy wood, used with an accompanying roller around which damp or dry linen had been firmly wound, are forerunners of mangles and other 'ironing' implements. They seem to have made an initial appearance in the laundering-conscious Netherlands. The earliest dated example, 1566, is now in the Open Air Museum at Arnhem.

From Holland, mangleboards spread to many parts of Europe, especially into Germany and Scandinavia. Dutch examples, most frequently of oak, have a characteristic 'top' decoration – a set of three to six rosettes, reminiscent of butter pats. The upper surface of many N.W. European mangleboards are covered with elaborately chip-carved rosettes and geometrical patterns, related to Spanish design and introduced no doubt from the south during the Hapsburg period.

Knobs and handles (in Iceland, hand 'tunnels') were introduced as aids to readier grasping or handling, at uncertain dates; but these are rare in Holland itself. A plain looped handle, later decorated with mermaids, caryatids or even angels, was finally supplanted in the north by a hump-necked stallion. This horse-motif, in mythology representing good fortune and fertility, suggests, quite apart from all other evidence, that mangleboards were a traditional love gift.

The earliest horse-shaped handles appeared in the mid-seventeenth century. I illustrate one, dated 1760, which is now in the Norskfolkemuseum at Bygøy. It will be noted that the date and initials, filling in what had been a blank panel, are exceptionally crude compared