

**A Brief History of the Handkerchief in Europe  
during the Late Middle Ages through the Renaissance**

*by Margaret Roe*

The exact age of the handkerchief is difficult to determine. The earliest written evidence of the handkerchief comes from the Roman poet Catullus in the first century A.D. Most often called a sudarium, from sudor, to sweat, it was used to shield or veil the face and mouth and to wipe off sweat. In the first century B.C., it remained a luxury for the rich, due to the expensive nature of linen, which was then a prized import. By the first century A.D., when linen was more easily and cheaply imported, the middle and lower classes gained access to the handkerchief. By the third century A.D., the name sudarium was being replaced with orarium, from ora, meaning hem; and mappa. The uses were also expanding to include such tasks as cleaning and dressing wounds, and cleaning the fingers during a meal. The Roman Emperor Aurelian gave handkerchiefs to people in the theater to greet high-ranking people, a custom which was quickly adopted. Despite its popularity at the fall of the Roman Empire, as the empire waned, the evidence of the handkerchief did too. The Middle Ages saw little of the handkerchief in either art or literature, until the fourteenth century (Braun-Ronsdorf).

When the handkerchief appears in literature again, it is referred to by many names. In the beginning of the fourteenth century, the French called the handkerchief a pleuvoir, from the word pleur, to rain, tear or cry. By mid-century, it is also called a mouchoir. By the late fourteenth century, the handkerchief is also seen in England and Italy. The English, being supplied of these items directly from France, commonly called it a mokador, mokedore, muckender, or muckiter. In addition, it was called a hand cover and hand coverchief, which during the sixteenth century became handkerchief. Frequently, the handkerchief was also referred to as a napkyn, the words, as well as the uses, being interchangeable. The Italians called the handkerchief sudaroli, from the Roman word; fazzoletti, from faccia meaning face; and paneti (Braun-Ronsdorf). Armed with these words, the handkerchief becomes even more evident.

French literature is the first to mention the handkerchief again. In 1301 and again in 1328, handkerchiefs are seen in two inventories of Margrite de Pieronne. Around the same time, Michelant indicated in his writing about the trades, *Livre de metiers*, that it was among the seamstresses' duties to sew handkerchiefs. The French Queen, Isabeau of Bavaria, in 1386, purchased thirty two ells of toile de Reims, linen cloth from Reims, to be made into eight shirts, eight biggins caps, and the rest into handkerchiefs. In the fifteenth century, the handkerchief began to be decorated. Around 1460, Martial D'Auvergne wrote a collection of stories, in one of which a richly decorated handkerchief is mentioned. The inventories of Charlotte of Savoy, Queen of France, included three handkerchiefs embroidered in silk or gold (Braun-Ronsdorf). From France, the handkerchief moved into England. Near the end of the fourteenth century, one writer mentions clothes given to the king, then Richard II, with which to wipe his nose. In 1403, Joanna of Navarre, Queen of England, received three dozen handkerchiefs. They soon were known by much of the population, but they continued to be supplied predominantly by France (Braun-Ronsdorf).

In Italy, the handkerchief is first seen in the marriage dowry inventories of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. By the fifteenth century, handkerchiefs were often seen in large numbers. Marco Parenta, in 1447, gave his bride Catarina Strozzi thirty handkerchiefs and one embroidered handkerchief. In 1488, the dowry of Elisabetta Gonzaga, soon to be Duchess of Montrefeltre, listed twenty braccia (an Italian unit of measurement, usually about 27 inches) of

cloth of Renso from which to make handkerchiefs, and three braccia to make twelve handkerchiefs for the nose (Braun-Ronsdorf). Further evidence of handkerchiefs, especially richly decorated ones, can be found in numerous paintings and portraits.

The sixteenth century saw an increased use of the handkerchief and with it greater decorations for the handkerchief. Because Italy was the center from which the highest quality embroideries and laces were sought, it also became the center from which the best handkerchiefs were sought. In the sixteenth century Venice needle lace became one of the most popular and sought-after trims, from across the Continent. In addition, embroideries from Lombardy had long been favored as the most fashionable. The Italians imported the finest fabrics from all over the Continent and from the Orient, and exported the most sought-after handkerchiefs in Europe (Braun-Ronsdorf).



*Two Venetian Women, One with an Embroidered Handkerchief*



*Venetian Woman with a Handkerchief with a Narrow Lace and Narrow Embroidery around the Edges*

These highly decorated handkerchiefs adorned the greatest members of Italian society. Caroso mentioned the handkerchief several times in his dance manuals, indicating to his reader that a lady should tuck it into her sleeve while she danced, and suggesting she have a handkerchief or fan to busy her hands when she sat. The popularity of the handkerchief concerned many Italian ladies, as did many fashionable accessories. When Italian noblewomen complained that courtesans were flaunting expensive clothing and accessories which they felt was the sole right of the nobility, which included the handkerchief, many Italian cities, including Florence and Milan, attempted to regulate the availability of these items. Finely decorated handkerchiefs were regulated through price, but the regulations proved difficult to implement, and the courtesans were able to maintain their

extravagance (Braun-Ronsdorf).

Catherine de Medici brought many Italian styles to the French court with her marriage to Henry II in 1533. The handkerchief was already in use in France; Henry II had many handkerchiefs for the specific purpose of cleaning his teeth. Decorated handkerchiefs increased in popularity throughout France after her arrival, and lace edged handkerchiefs began to overtake embroidered ones in popularity. Additionally, perfume soaked handkerchiefs were seen with greater frequency, as she encouraged Italian perfumers to settle in France and patronized the perfume industry greatly. Her son, Henry III, presented numerous scented



*Henry III with a Handkerchief Decorated with Needle Lace*

handkerchiefs to his "mignons" (Braun-Ronsdorf). As the century progressed, handkerchiefs in France became so valuable that they were listed in wills and inventories. Henry IV gave two handkerchiefs, worth 1000 francs and 900 francs, to his mistress Gabrielle d'Estrées in 1594 (Lester). These handkerchiefs were so valuable that he asked for their return upon her death in 1599 (Braun-Ronsdorf).

Throughout the sixteenth century, the Tudor monarchs held great influence over the fashion in England. Henry VIII had a number of handkerchiefs, including a handkerchief of Holland cloth, fringed in Venice gold and red and white silk; others that were trimmed in silver and gold; and several trimmed with Flanders work, a bobbin lace imported specifically from Flanders. Both Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth were presented with handkerchiefs as New Year's presents. Queen Elizabeth's influence on the fashionable accessory was probably the greatest in her family. Like the fashion on the continent, Elizabeth loved scented handkerchiefs, making them very popular in England, and received many as gifts. On the other hand, she

preferred the embroidered handkerchiefs over those decorated with great amounts of needle lace, and embroideries of all kinds, in colored silk, gold, or silver threads were most popular in Elizabethan England. Frequently in England, sweet bags were also made specifically to carry these handkerchiefs in (Braun-Ronsdorf).

The English did not exclude the handkerchief to the wealthy, however. In Shakespeare's tragedy Othello, Desmonda's fate was manipulated by the use of her handkerchief, showing the familiarity of even the commoners with the handkerchief. Several children's books of the time direct their pupils to mind their manners and use their handkerchief. Erasmus wrote "to wipe your nose on your cap or your sleeve is boorish; it might be alright for pastry-cooks to wipe their noses on their arm or their elbow; to blow your nose in your hand and then, as if by chance, wipe it on your clothes, shows not much better manners. But to receive the secretion of your nose in your handkerchief, at the same time turning slightly away from persons of rank, is a highly respectable matter." The poorest people may not have been able to afford a handkerchief, but they were familiar with it.



*Sir William Fitzwilliam with a Handkerchief Tucked in his Sleeve*

A custom began in England, which John Stow wrote about in his *Annals*, where girls gave small handkerchiefs with tassels as a token of their love. These handkerchiefs were often only three or four inches in diameter, and decorated with tassels at the corners, in the French fashion. Salesmen hawked these handkerchiefs in the streets of London (Braun-Ronsdorf). These handkerchiefs cost anywhere from six to sixteen pence, and the girls who bought them would often embroider them with love knots and names (Lester). Men who were given these tokens would wear them on their person, often tucked into their hatband (Braun-Ronsdorf).

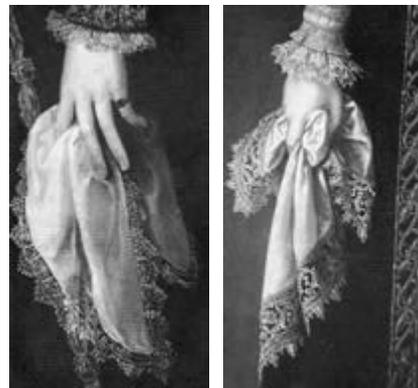


*A German Gentleman with a Tasseled Handkerchief*

Unlike most of the Continent, the Germans were slow to adopt the handkerchief. Michel de Montaigne tells a story of walking into a German church and disturbing the people there because he held a kerchief to his nose, as was the French fashion. By the sixteenth century, Germans had begun to adopt the handkerchief, though they were regarded as decorative and luxurious articles in Germany, and were most often imported. Inventories and wills show that handkerchiefs were used not only by women, but by men as well. A painting by Lucas Cranach the Younger shows just such a gentleman, with a tasseled handkerchief in his hand. The Germans developed a unique custom with the handkerchief, giving them as wedding presents and gifts to guests. Albrecht Durer noted of a visit to a Franciscan monastery in Cologne that one of the monks gave him a handkerchief. Couples exchanged handkerchiefs at their weddings, often spending lavish amounts of money on

them. Dresden attempted to forbid this custom among the lower class as well, but as elsewhere in Europe, this proved difficult to enforce and ultimately failed (Braun-Ronsdorf).

As with many fashions of the sixteenth century, Spain played an important role in developing the style. Numerous Spanish portraits show ladies hold voluminous handkerchiefs, most often trimmed in wide lace. The Spanish handkerchiefs were frequently among the largest used on the Continent. Both of Phillip II's last two queens were painting carrying great handkerchiefs (Braun-Ronsdorf). In addition to the size of handkerchiefs, Spain influenced the scented handkerchiefs. Spain developed a perfume industry that became highly sought-after, largely due to their skill to produce scents that did not easily wear off. These scents were used in numerous items, from leather and gloves to handkerchiefs (Lester).



*Details of Elizabeth of Valois (left) and Anne of Austria (right)*

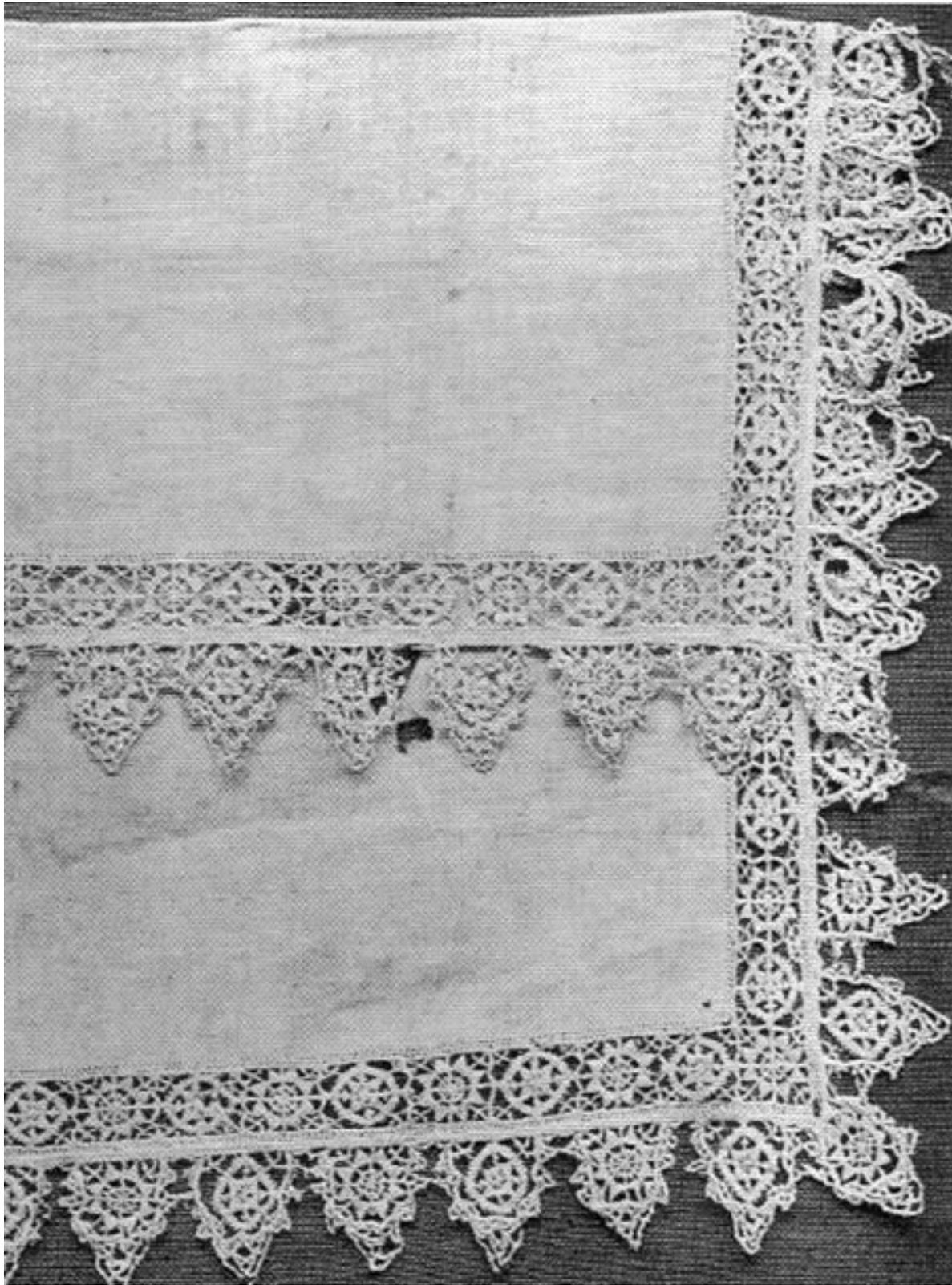
### Materials and Decorations

The inventories of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries include several indications of the materials used to make handkerchiefs. The earliest written evidence was from France in the fourteenth century and names *toile de Reims* and *toile de Hollande*, linen cloth of Rheims and Holland cloth, as the materials purchased for handkerchiefs (Braun-Ronsdorf). Toile was linen cloth of varying sources and qualities (Cotgrave). Holland cloth was a linen cloth of medium quality, used for a variety of clothing items (Malcolm-Davies and Mikhaila). In the sixteenth century, the French preferred silk and linen for handkerchiefs. Italians preferred the finest possible materials, most especially lawn, often with gold threads shot through the fabric. In England, silk and cambric were the fashionable materials (Lester).

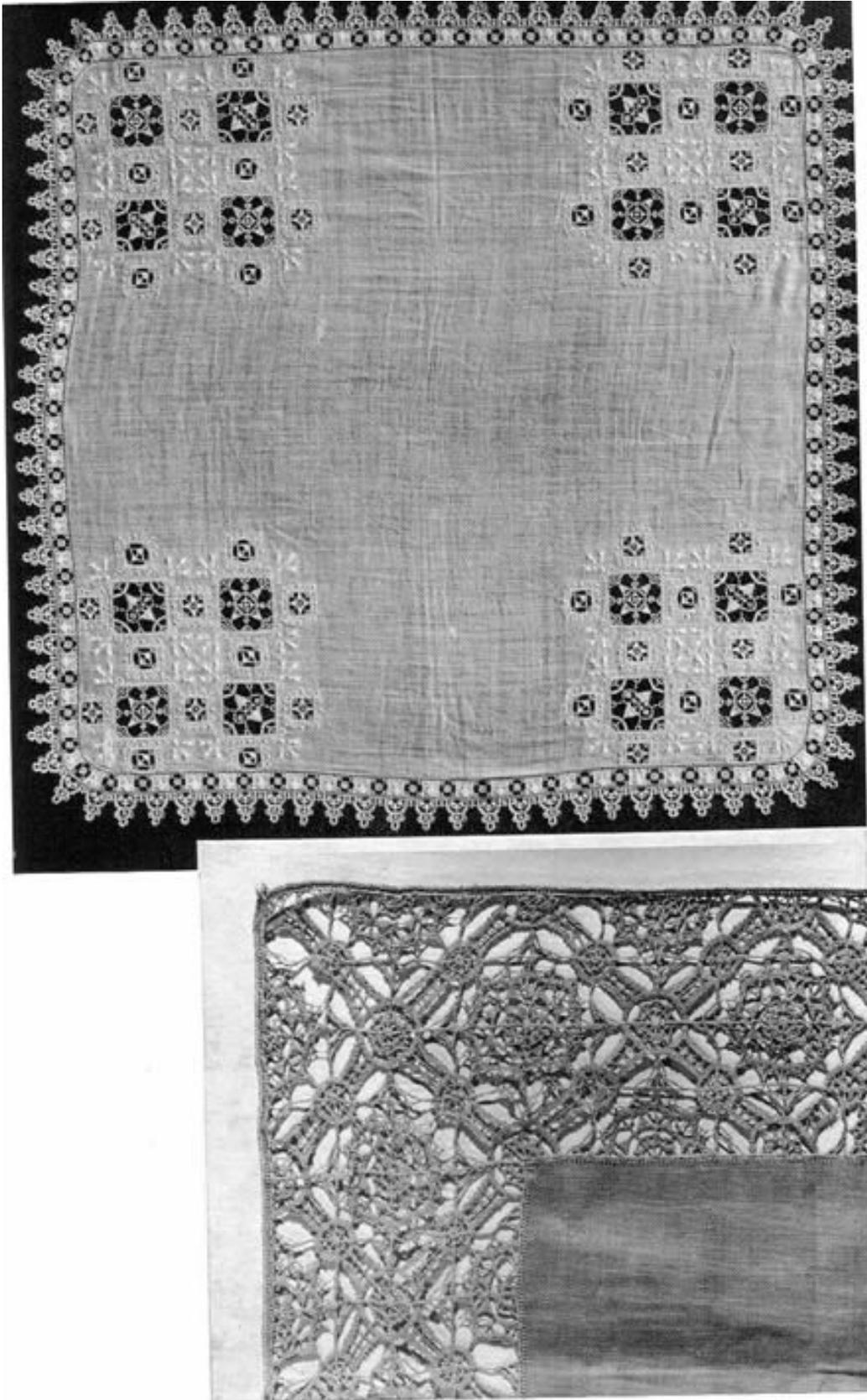
The early handkerchiefs of the Middle Ages were plain squares of cloth, but as they gained more ornamental uses, they also became more decorated. The fifteenth century saw the beginning of decorated handkerchiefs, first seen in French literature. Martial D'Auvergne made the first note of a decorated handkerchief in his collection of stories, around 1460. During the fifteenth century, however, most of the evidence of decorated handkerchiefs came from portraits of the time (Braun-Ronsdorf).

During the sixteenth century, the decoration of handkerchiefs became more pronounced and far more luxurious. Across most of the continent, lace was the preferred decoration on handkerchiefs, needle lace being the most popular and expensive. In France, more simple handkerchiefs often had varying sizes of tassels at the corners, a fashion that the English also picked up. Unlike on the Continent, however, the English, especially during Elizabeth's reign, preferred embroideries of all kinds, in colored silk or gold and silver threads. Similarly, the Germans picked up the preference for embroidery by the end of the century, and began embroidering words and saying onto their handkerchiefs. Also by the end of the century, colored silk handkerchiefs gained popularity throughout the Continent, although it never overtook the preference for the white handkerchief (Braun-Ronsdorf). By the end of the sixteenth century, the handkerchief had become a valuable and popular accessory throughout Europe.

**Extant Handkerchiefs**



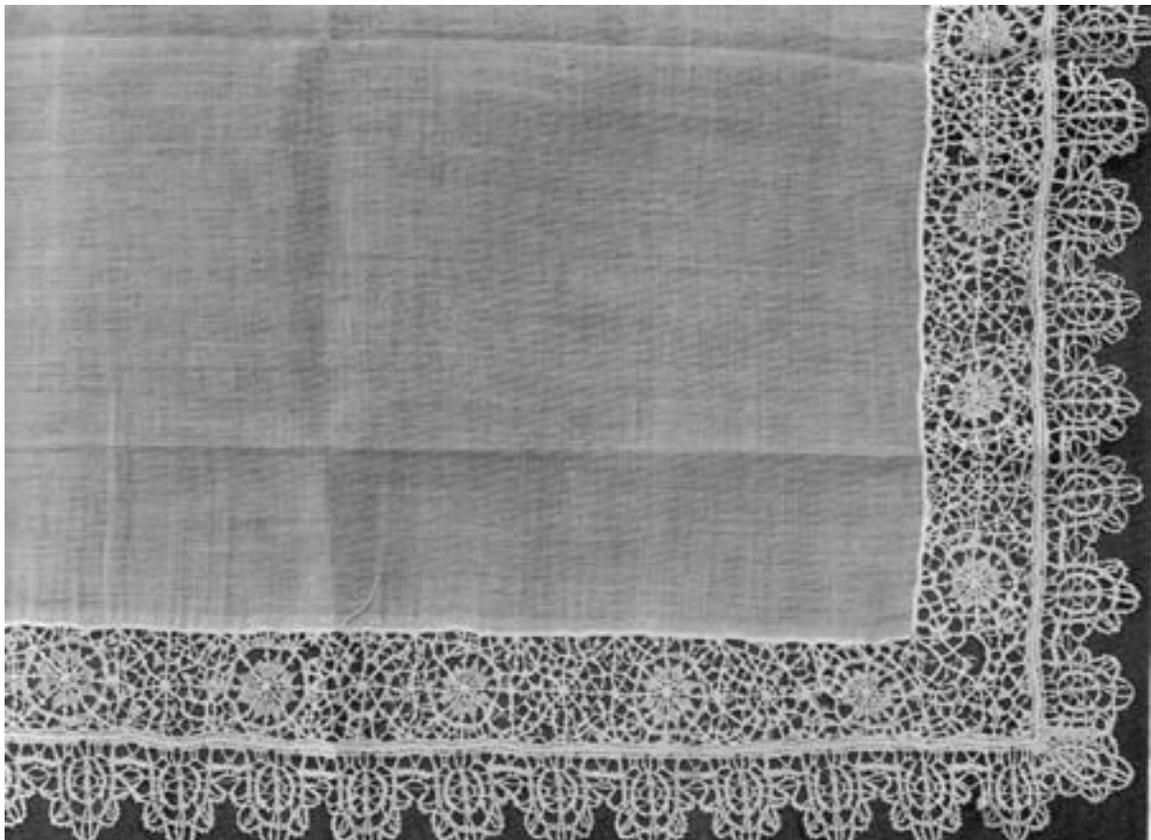
*Italian Handkerchief with Whitework and Needle Lace, Late 16th Century*



*Two Italian Handkerchiefs, 16th - 17th Centuries*



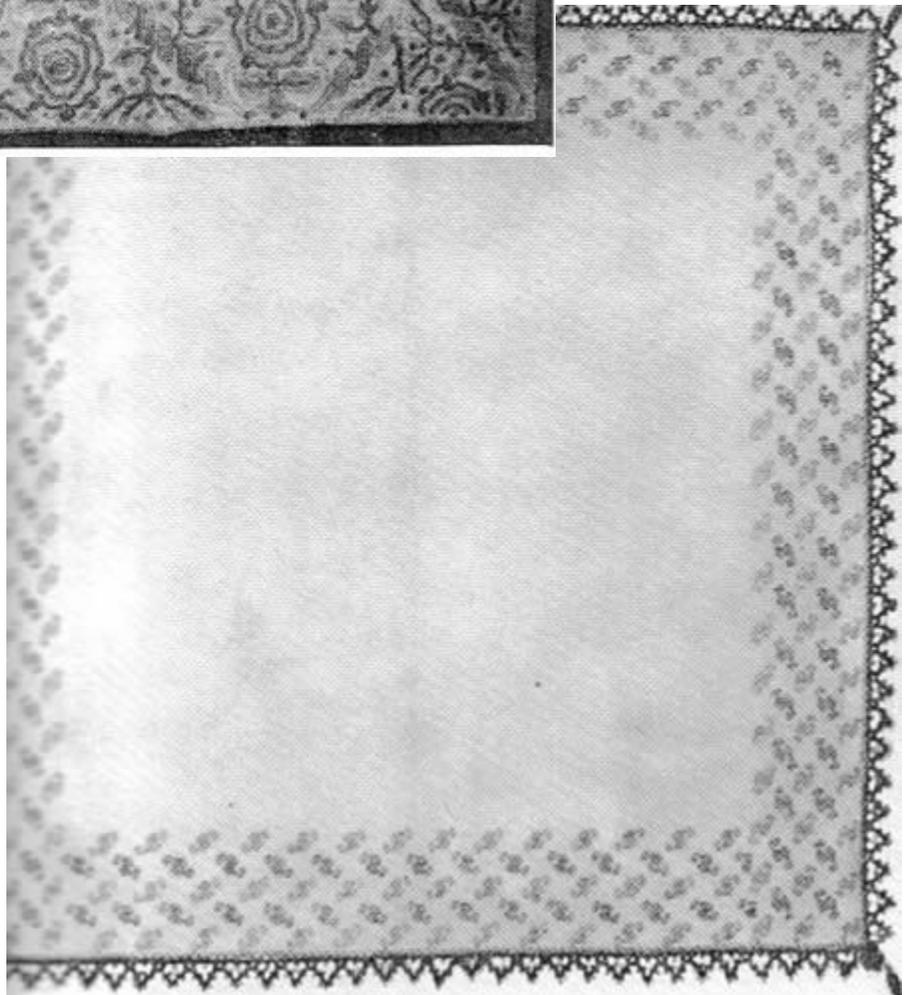
*Handkerchief with Sweet Bag, Late 16th Century (detail below)*

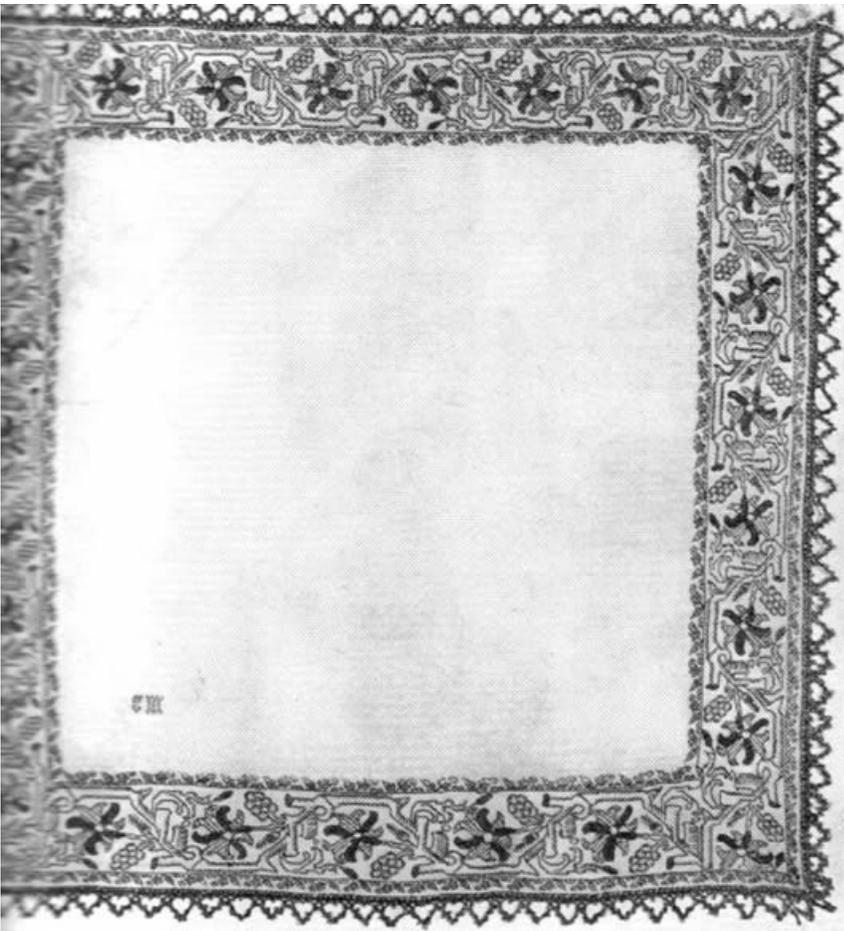




*Handkerchief Belonging to  
Queen Elizabeth I (above)*

*Handkerchief of the  
Elizabethan Period (below)*





*Handkerchief of the Elizabethan Period*

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