



This first article in a series of two on the History of Crochet was originally published in the September 1997 issue of the **Chain Link** newsletter. Ruthie Marks is a member of the Crochet Guild of America.

History of Crochet by Ruthie Marks

You and I call it crochet, as do the French, Belgians, Italians and Spanish-speaking people. It is known as haken in Holland, haekling in Denmark, hekling in Norway, virkning in Sweden.

Other forms of handwork knitting, embroidery and weaving can be dated far back in time, thanks to archeological finds, written sources and pictorial representations of various kinds. But no one is quite sure when and where crochet got its start. The word comes from *croc*, or *croche*, the Middle French word for hook, and the Old Norse word for hook is *krokr*.

According to American crochet expert and world traveler Annie Potter, "The modern art of true crochet as we know it today was developed during the 16th century. It became known as 'crochet lace' in France and 'chain lace' in England." And, she tells us, in 1916 Walter Edmund Roth visited descendants of the Guiana Indians and found examples of true crochet.

Another writer/researcher, Lis Paludan of Denmark, who limited her search for the origins of crochet to Europe, puts forth three interesting theories. One: Crochet originated in Arabia, spread eastward to Tibet and westward to Spain, from where it followed the Arab trade routes to other Mediterranean countries. Two: Earliest evidence of crochet came from South America, where a primitive tribe was said to have used crochet adornments in rites of puberty. Three: In China, early examples were known of three-dimensional dolls worked in crochet.

But, says Paludan, the bottom line is that there is "no convincing evidence as to how old the art of crochet might be or where it came from. It was impossible to find evidence of crochet in Europe before 1800. A great many sources state that crochet has been known as far back as the 1500s in Italy under the name of 'nun's work' or 'nun's lace,' where it was worked by nuns for church textiles," she says. Her research turned up examples of lace-making and a kind of lace tape, many of which have been preserved, but "all indications are that crochet was not known in Italy as far back as the 16th century" under any name.

Tambour gives birth to crochet

Research suggests that crochet probably developed most directly from Chinese needlework, a very ancient form of embroidery known in Turkey, India, Persia and North Africa, which reached Europe in the 1700s and was referred to as "tambouring," from the French "tambour" or drum.

In this technique, a background fabric is stretched taut on a frame. The working thread is held underneath the fabric. A needle with a hook is inserted downward and a loop of the working thread drawn up through the fabric. With the loop still on the hook, the hook

is then inserted a little farther along and another loop of the working thread is drawn up and worked through the first loop to form a chain stitch. The tambour hooks were as thin as sewing needles, so the work must have been accomplished with very fine thread. At the end of the 18th century, tambour evolved into what the French called "crochet in the air," when the background fabric was discarded and the stitch worked on its own. Crochet began turning up in Europe in the early 1800s and was given a tremendous boost by Mlle. Riego de la Branchardiere, who was best known for her ability to take old-style needle and bobbin lace designs and turn them into crochet patterns that could easily be duplicated. She published many pattern books so that millions of women could begin to copy her designs. Mlle. Riego also claimed to have invented "lace-like" crochet, today called Irish crochet.

Want to know more?

Much of the material for this article came from two excellent sources: "A Living Mystery, the International Art & History of Crochet," Annie Louise Potter, A.J. Publishing International, 1990; and "Crochet History & Technique," Lis Paludan, Interweave Press, 1995.