



Galle Lace Drama

By Juliet Coombe

The Galle region in the south of Sri Lanka has been a lace-making epicentre ever since the Portuguese invaders introduced the skill to local fisherwomen six centuries ago. It was an era when royalty and the aristocracy sported lacy attire as symbols of their high status in society.

Andrea Galer, a UK film and television costume designer with some 30 years' experience, is the brains behind the Power of Hands Galle Lace Project, which works in conjunction with Shoba Display Gallery in Galle Fort to renew interest in Galle lace.

As an organisation, the Galle lace ladies have already produced two thousand yards of lace for costumes used for the BBC's lavish production of *Jane Eyre*, in ITV's *Persuasion*, and currently *Miss Austen Regrets*, which will be screened this Easter in the UK. Their lace was also used for Cate Blanchett's sumptuous outfits in *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*, which received Oscar and BAFTA nominations for Best Costume Design, won a Satellite Award (voted for by the world's press) for the same category, and was also nominated by the Costume Designer's Guild for Period costumes.



"*Shoba* means 'nature, love and peace,'" explains Anusha Liyanage, chief craft-maker and representative of Power of Hands (POH) in Sri Lanka. Anusha says: "Andrea's main aim with the project is to encourage and help traditional lace-makers to not only get back into business after they lost everything in the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, but also create new marketable outlets for their work." She continues, "Each piece is an incredible labour of love; for example, one collar was so elaborate it took three months and two weeks to make by Kusumathi, our 62-year-old third-generation lace-maker." In addition to film and TV work Shoba have had orders from the Royal Opera House and National Theatre UK costumes departments.

In addition to the period dramas, Andrea has also worked hard to create a new fashion demand for lace in London, with the likes of actress Christina Cole modelling a sexy Galle lace bracelet, which can be seen on the Power of Hands website. Andrea also uses lace in her current bridal collection, and series of Limited Signature Editions. The use of Galle Lace has been further publicised when it appeared in several UK exhibitions, such as Fenton House 'Costumes from *Jane Eyre*' and The Jane Austen Centre 'Costumes from *Persuasion*'. The costumes from *Jane Eyre* have also gone farther afield, exhibiting in The Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising in California.

These exhibitions demonstrate the three different styles of hand-made lace, which are: using a traditional pillow with pins and wooden bobbins; by machine bobbins,

called tacking lace; and a crochet style of lace-making. Andrea is thrilled with what has been achieved to date and says "that the Galle lace project now has a base where seven women who have craft skills are provided with full-time work, and from this base the outworkers are given piecework and their skills and needs are assessed, currently dealing with around 100 outworkers." The youngest woman in the team is 23, with the oldest a sprightly 87.

Since the tsunami, the number of lace-makers has dropped from 500 to less than 300 skilled women. Anusha personally feels that the most perfect lace is made by Weligama people. She says, "There is one very old lady, Galapathi, who makes beautiful antique lace. To create such perfect pieces it is important to have immense patience, a bit like meditating; a lace-maker sits in the same position for days and months on end."

Andrea has also made a documentary telling the lace-makers' story, which covers the history of *Beerulu Mostara* lace-making (*Beerulu* is Sinhalese for lace bone, and *Mostara* is the Portuguese expression for 'design'). The story starts in the 5th century when, taking advantage of cheap local raw materials, the Portuguese traders taught the local ladies how to spin threads of wool, linen, flax, and cotton, and make textiles and embroideries, which in turn they traded from Asia to Africa. Examples of period trims used in making long colonial gloves, frilly parasol decorations, and evening gown trims can be seen in Galle Fort's National Museum, by the Amangalla Hotel on Church Street.



The elders in the fort say that during colonial rule no upper-crust Fort colonial home was complete without a fine lace tablecloth on which to serve afternoon tea, while floral door curtains could be found in the finest homes. Unlike other tourist souvenir items made in Sri Lanka, lace is still surprisingly good value, ranging from a (US) dollar for a doyley mat to US\$20 depending on the intricacy of the design and size of the pieces being purchased. In contrast, original historical pieces from the Portuguese and Dutch periods sell at auction houses around the world for thousands of dollars.

However, for reasonably priced good-quality replica antique-style pieces, head to Galle Fort's Historical Mansions on Leyn Baan Street.

Here you can watch traditional lace-making demonstrations in the courtyard of the Historical Mansions museum by a local lace lady, held daily except on Poya full moon days. Each intricate design she produces looks like a computer programme set in dots using colourful pins stuck into a paper pattern rolled round an original 18th century pin cushion. Each throw of the 30 or so wooden bobbins, which would have originally been made in bone, is mesmerising to watch.

Another legendary Fort lace lady, Mrs Mariya Saliheen, can also be found daily beside Flag Rock market with bags full of lacy objects for sale. She shelters from the tropical sun beneath the shade of a large kottamba tree in the very place that silk and gem merchants would have first stepped ashore onto the island of Serendib.

Many of the women involved in this cottage industry, either as sellers or makers, are 5th- or 6th-generation lace-makers. There is no doubt that some of these families may well have been responsible for the product used in yesteryear's lavish period dramas in London's theatres and, in particular, Shakespeare productions, which were famous for their yards of sumptuous over-the-top embroidered lace costumes.

Anusha believes that anyone who has seen Galle lace will be inspired, as it makes even the dullest outfit look fancy and brings light into the darkest of rooms. Both she and Andrea Galer are united in developing a global market for Galle lace and welcome all suggestions and financial support that might just see this unique industry well into the next century. ✨

Further information
www.powerofhandsfoundation.co.uk

Shoba Display Gallery
Open Monday to Friday
9am to 5pm;
67A Pedlar St, Galle Fort.

'Sipnara' Handicraft Centre
Part of the National Handicrafts Council, stocking the very popular dresses adorned with butterflies and leafy trim.

Thilini Lace
Multi-award-winning lace-maker M B Priyani, situated at 203/1, Matara Road, Magalle, Galle.



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