

# Early Tatting Instructions

Cary Karp

## Introduction

The first tatting instructions in the English language that have thus far come to light were published in 1842, twenty-three years after the first narrative reference to tatting. Earlier printed instructions appeared in Dutch in 1823 and the practice of tatting in England is attested at that time. Relevant intervening material was published in French. The first dated iconographic evidence of tatting is a portrait from 1790 and there is a dated tatting shuttle from 1773.

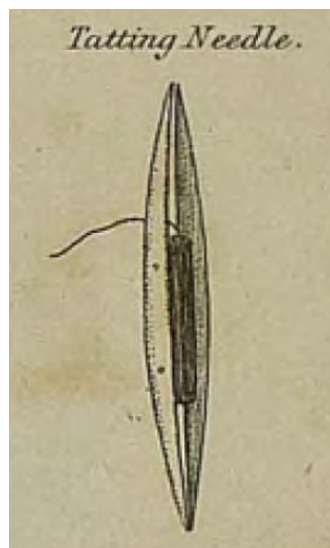
This material will be examined here, together with additional European sources from the 18th- through the early-20th centuries.<sup>1</sup> Focus will be placed on the shuttle and other tools used for tatting. Since a shuttle was also used for the earlier craft of knotting, the relationship between the two will be discussed.

Translations are given for all non-English material together with online coordinates for digitized copies of the original documents.

## English sources

The floodgates for the publication of English language tutorial material on *fancywork* were opened by Jane Gaugain in 1840 with *The lady's assistant for executing useful and fancy designs in knitting, netting, and crochet work*.<sup>2</sup> This was an immediate success and an expanded edition was produced in rapid order. There was no mention of tatting in the first edition but the second of the three volumes in the 1842 edition contains illustrated instructions for it.<sup>3</sup>

These illustrations include a tatting shuttle both by itself and in working position. Gaugain calls it a “tatting needle” and the term appears elsewhere without illustration. (This has caused significant confusion about the chronology of needle tatting in more recent texts.) Different types of needles in the more common sense of the term are also used for tatting, and reference is now regularly made to shuttle tatting and needle tatting as separate techniques. This will be examined more fully below. To seed the discussion, here is the 1842 illustration:



---

1 No attempt was made to identify potentially relevant material of non-European origin.

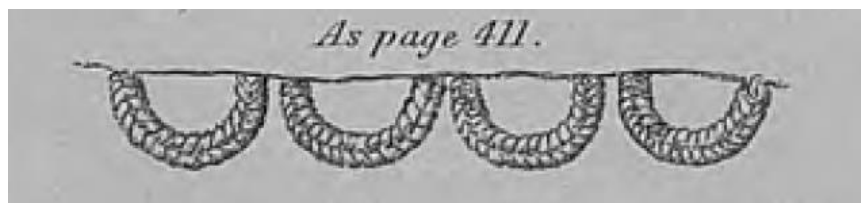
2 Jane Gaugain, *The lady's assistant for executing useful and fancy designs in knitting, netting, and crochet work*, London, 1840. <https://archive.org/details/kr100394037>.

3 Ibid, 1842. The illustrations appear on unnumbered plates at the beginning of that volume. [http://pdf.library.soton.ac.uk/WSA\\_open\\_access/00376346.pdf](http://pdf.library.soton.ac.uk/WSA_open_access/00376346.pdf).

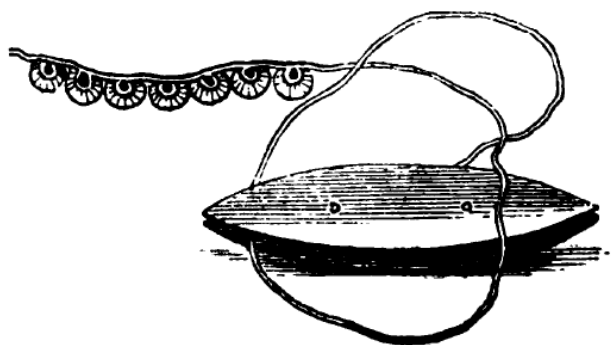
with the same implement in working position:



Gaugain then provides instructions for three patterns of increasing complexity. The first of these is a row of scallops:



This device was emblematic—if not exhaustively descriptive—of tatting in the instructions that predated hers and remained the first form to be illustrated in subsequent texts. Gaugain’s descriptions and illustrations were co-opted into derivative works that appeared starting in 1843. The next original text about tatting located during this study was published by Frances Lambert in 1846, in the fifth edition of *The Hand-Book of Needlework* (embedded in the chapter on netting). This image from it is of “a Tatting Shuttle with a small piece of tatting”:<sup>4</sup>



The instructions accompanying it are brief and do not describe any form other than the one in the illustration, which will serve as a linchpin throughout the remaining discussion.

Cornelia Mee, who began publishing on fancywork in 1842, released a booklet titled *Tatting, or Frivolité* together with her sister Mary Austin in 1862.<sup>5</sup> Mee prefaces this with the following remarks:

I never remember learning the work, or when I did not know how to do it. I believe it was taught me by my grandmother, who, if she had been living, would have been in her hundredth year. I

<sup>4</sup> Frances Lambert, *The Handbook of Needlework, decorative and ornamental, including crochet, knitting and netting*, 5th ed., London, 1846. p. 452. It is possible that this material first appeared in the 4th ed. but no copy of it was located during the preparation of the present text. <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433006773919>.

<sup>5</sup> Cornelia Mee & Mary Austin, *Tatting, or Frivolité*, London, 1862. <http://www.antiquepatternlibrary.org/pub/PDF/MeeTatting.pdf>.

mention this, as I have heard that a claim has been made by some one lately, to have invented the work, which certainly has been known as Knotting or Tatting for more than a century.

Mee was born in 1815 and appears to regard tatting as something she learned as a child (although her 1862 text introduces a new technique). Given the other references to tatting in the 1820s, there is no need for a precise estimate of when her grandmother taught it to her. It would, however, be interesting to know when the elder of them—who would have been born in 1762—acquired that skill. Here the remark about the craft also being known at that time becomes particularly relevant, as is the synonymous relationship between tatting and knotting.

In the introduction to the chapter on tatting in her 1886 *Encyclopedia of Needlework*,<sup>6</sup> Thérèse de Dillmont wrote:

In the eighteenth century, when tatting was in great vogue, much larger shuttles than our present ones were used, because of the voluminous materials they had to carry, silk cord being one.

This statement is consistent with the numerous 18th-century portraits of women engaged in knotting (which Mee and de Dillmont were not alone in referring to as tatting). A shuttle was used to tie knots at regular intervals along a thread that was subsequently couched onto a fabric ground in potentially elaborate patterns, or used for making fringes and tassels in other decorative contexts. This detail from a British portrait painted in 1786 illustrates the preparation of such thread:<sup>7</sup>



In much of the portraiture depicting this action the shuttle is, indeed, larger than those commonly used for tatting in and since de Dillmont's time. However, a range of sizes is seen, varying in both length and width, with the knotting shuttle in the 1786 portrait being somewhere in the middle.

---

<sup>6</sup> Thérèse de Dillmont, *Encyclopedia of Needlework*, 1st English edition, 1886, p. 325.

<https://archive.org/details/encyclopediaofne00dill>. The French edition is at <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb303431012>. It is interesting to note that the French discussion of the translation of *frivolité* into other languages ignores English.

<sup>7</sup> Frances Alleyne, portrait of Margot Wheatley, 1786. <http://collections.britishart.yale.edu/vufind/Record/1669531>.

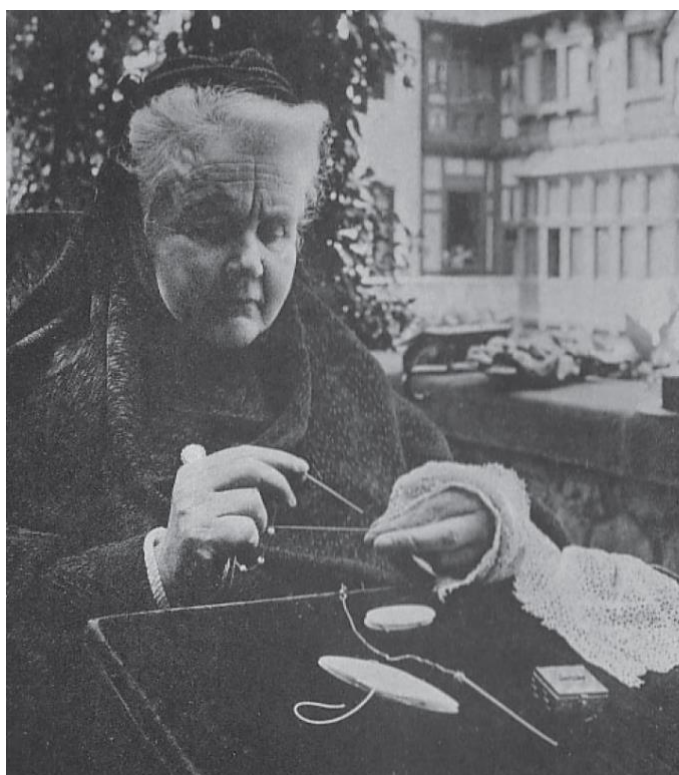
Several other differentiating criteria are usually recognized. One is whether the tips of the shuttle are open, as seen with this knotting shuttle, or closed, as with Gaugain's tating shuttle. One problem here is that older tating shuttles with open tips are not uncommon, the assumption being that they gradually separated through age and use. There are, however, printed tating instructions that illustrate shuttles with open tips.<sup>8</sup>

Rounded tips are normally associated with knotting shuttles, and pointed tips with tating shuttles. However, the article on knotting shuttles in a volume of Zedler's *Universal Lexikon*, published in 1742 states:<sup>9</sup>

... the best proportion of this instrument is, when it is not too wide, and both ends come to a fine point.

It is fairly safe nonetheless to use size and tip configuration for categorizing a shuttle taken in isolation. For the reasons given in the quoted passage from de Dillmont, a knoter could be expected to prefer the largest shuttle found comfortable to hold and use. Conversely, a smaller shuttle is more amenable to the intricate structures and finer thread of tatted lace.

The value of this approach—particularly for distinguishing between knotting and tating as crafts—is offset by the documented use of knotting shuttles for tating. An important text from the early 20th century, *The Art of Tating*, by Katharin Hoare,<sup>10</sup> also subsumes knotting under tating and regards the shuttles for both as tating shuttles. It includes a photograph of a noteworthy early-20th century tatter, Carmen Sylva (the Queen of Romania), working with large shuttles that would otherwise be regarded as specific to knotting:



---

8 The functional difference is that closed tips permit the shuttle to hang freely at the end of the thread without unwinding. This is useful when tating with two shuttles or when letting the shuttle spin freely in the air to eliminate excess twist in the shuttle thread. These factors were apparently not an overriding concern for knotting, nor invariably so for tating.

9 Bibliographic details will be provided below, in a more extensive discussion of early-18th century German encyclopedic sources.

10 Katharin L. Hoare, *The Art of Tating*, London, 1910.  
<http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/book/lookupid?key=olbp33199>.

The question, “Is this a knotting shuttle or a tatting shuttle?”, at least when confronted with a shuttle of a size that could be used for either, appears to be answerable with certainty only in terms of what it was used to produce.

The English term *tatting* first appears in the early 19th century. A letter written on April 3rd, 1819 by Joanna Baillie (1762–1851, a Scottish playwright) states:<sup>11</sup>

... Mrs Siddon[s] ... has invited me very kindly to see her which I have done, and I am this very day employed in sewing some tatting (do you know what tatting is?) upon a handkerchief which she made me a present of very lately, the work of her own Queenly fingers, and it is the most beautiful tatting I ever saw.

This tells us that tatting was a form of embellishment of pre-existing fabric, but sewing could mean either attachment or embroidery. It is unlikely that it was an inclusion and other sources are more specific about tatting being a scalloped edging.

### Dutch and French sources

The first known instructions for tatted edging were written by Anna Barbera van Meerten-Schilperoort and appeared in the 1823 volume of her Dutch monthly, *Penélopé* (better known as the source of the first published instructions for *crochet* to explicitly name that craft):<sup>12</sup>

This simple, yet not inelegant ornament, which is often included in large festoons, can be made in two ways: separately in the hand by the use of a bobbin or shuttle, after which it is sewn onto the fabric; or directly on the fabric itself. This time we will only describe the latter manner, which seems the best to me, and also the quickest and will provide information about the other afterwards. One takes the edge of the festoon that one wants to transform with tatting, in front of oneself, and starts working from the right- to the left side. One attaches a skein of fine sewing cotton, threads a long thin linen darning needle with a thicker thread and stitches it likewise at the beginning. Now you hold the needle with its point upward between the thumb and index finger of the left hand, and wrap 14 loops of the fine cotton around it; as if casting on knitwear for a child; or as is taught for Swiss tricot, Vol. II No. 1. These loops are firmly held by the left hand, so that they form an arc. This arc is secured with a loop, which one also makes. Now you hold the needle back upright, and start again from the beginning. This creates the work illustrated in Fig. A.



A few details in this description may be unexpected. First, it is for needle tatting, which is generally believed to have developed later in the century (albeit in a form more closely resembling shuttle tatting). Second, it employs a separate core thread, also commonly taken to be a later development. Finally, the

11 Judith Bailey Slagle, ed., *The Collected Letters of Joanna Baillie*, Vol. 2. Madison NJ, 1999, ISBN 0-8386-3816-3, p. 821. <https://books.google.com/books?id=pBANrDk26HcC>.

12 Anna Barbera van Meerten-Schilperoort, *Penélopé, of, Maandwerk aan het vrouwelijk geslacht toegewijd*, Amsterdam, vol. 2, 1823, pp. 104–107. <https://books.google.com/books?id=PtFeAAAAcAAJ>.

instructions are indexed under the heading *Whitework Embroidery* in the cumulative index for the first four volumes of *Penélopé*.<sup>13</sup>

The reason for that categorization is apparent from the description of tatting by Élisabeth-Félicie Bayle-Mouillard in the chapter on embroidery in her, *Manuel des demoiselles*.<sup>14</sup> The first edition of this was published in 1826 and states:

A few years ago, one made a kind of scallop embroidery called *frivolité*. Having completed the first festoon, one started another, matching its convex shape to the concave shape of the preceding one, and vice versa: a new row was made in the same order, producing a kind of mesh, made very long, and pretty only when the scallops were small: I mention this because the caprice of fashion may lead to its return some day.

One terms a full festoon, a festoon with a primary scallop that is subdivided into scallops with stitches that vary (Fig. 38) in width.



This describes tatting as an outmoded embroidered festoon edging, with no suggestion of the term being used in any other sense.<sup>15</sup> The text and illustration are repeated in subsequent editions of the *Manuel* but the fourth edition from 1830 added a second tutorial section on tatting, under the heading of netting:<sup>16</sup>

This type of ornament, which is both festoon embroidery and netting, seems to me should be included here. To make it, a sort of large ivory shuttle is required, the round part of which is wrapped with cotton, which unwinds off it into the broader part. When enough cotton has been unwound, the end is taken between the left index finger and thumb; at the same time, we grasp the shuttle in the right hand. The other fingers of the left hand are spread apart, the cotton is wrapped around them, and the tool is passed under the thread, in the manner of making a festoon stitch. One holds this stitch tightly, but not so as to hinder the cotton on the shuttle from unwinding freely. The number of stitches needed for the width of what we are tatting is determined in advance. These stitches are made on the thread stretched on the left hand: that is the track. The thread held in the shuttle, and therefore in the right hand, is tightened at each stitch, the number of which determines the production of a larger or smaller scallop, but resembling a scallop in a festoon of openwork and cutwork. This goes much faster than needle tatting.

This adds shuttle tatting to the other techniques used to make scalloped edging. Given that the embroidered form was conventional needlework, the mention of needle tatting here surely refers to that and not to needle tatting as described in *Penélopé*.

---

13 Ibid, vol. 4, 1826, p. 126.

14 Élisabeth-Félicie Bayle-Mouillard (writing as Élisabeth Celnart), *Manuel des demoiselles*, Paris, 1826, p. 54. <https://books.google.com/books?id=FNU-AAAAcAAJ>.

15 The festoon stitch is commonly regarded as a form of blanket- or buttonhole stitch and discussed as such in present-day texts on embroidery. The term *frivolité* was deliberately left untranslated in the preceding description as it is not clear that *tatting* was synonymous with it in every sense.

16 Bayle-Mouillard, op. cit., 4th ed., 1830, p. 190. There is little question about the French index heading, *Ouvrages en filet*, meaning netting and not lace, which is separately indexed and described under *L'art de faire la dentelle*. <https://books.google.com/books?id=pqnVctvBDNwC>.

A. B. van Meerten-Schilperoort published detailed instructions for shuttle tatting in an article in an *Encyclopedia of Womanly Activity* from 1835.<sup>17</sup> This is a translation of a German work but the translator's preface says that she replaced some of the instructions "with ones that are more appropriate to our local domestic practice."<sup>18</sup> It is not clear if those for shuttle tatting were among them. Credit for the description of shuttle tatting belongs to Amalia Salden, nonetheless, even if her direct statement of it remains to be located. However, since van Meerten-Schilperoort provided the initial description of needle tatting, the way she words the translation is of interest in its own right:

This work, just as the previously described ones, is placed on collars, bands and handkerchiefs, and is made on a shuttle, in this manner:

One takes the bobbin or shuttle, which is wrapped with yarn, grasps the end of the thread between the thumb and index finger of the left hand, turns the thread around the four fingers that must be somewhat outspread, holds the thread together with its end, takes the shuttle, and inserts it from behind between the two middle fingers, and draws the shuttle over the thread with which one is working, pulls it taut, then gradually relaxes the fingers, taking care that the festoon stitch doesn't twist backwards. When the first festoon stitch is completed, one holds onto it instead of the two ends, and goes on in the same way. After 12 or 14 such stitches, one pulls the thread on which one is working, until its length is what the work requires, and in this way the completed stitches form a festooned scallop. One works continuously in this manner.

The terms *bobbin or shuttle* are alternate designations for a single implement rather than two different ones.<sup>19</sup> It is, however, not clear if reference is to a post shuttle (the form that appears in the illustrations, above) or a flat shuttle. It should therefore be noted that an article on *Different Ways to Make Fringes* in the 1824 volume of *Penélopé*, includes an illustration of a small weaver's bobbin (a designation used to distinguish a flat bobbin from a round one) of a basic type that often appears in the modern tatter's toolbox:<sup>20</sup>



The accompanying instructions are for knotting and will be discussed below in the section on *18th Century Descriptions of Knotting*.

---

17 Anna Barbera van Meerten-Schilperoort, *Encyclopédie of Handboek van vrouwelijke bedrijven en raadgever in alle vacken van den vrouwelijken werkring*, Amsterdam, 1835, p. 125.

<https://books.google.com/books?id=JhVcAAAACAAJ>.

18 Ibid, pp. XI–XII. The translator's preface is dated 1834. It is preceded by a translation of the German author's preface, who was Amalia Salden. The original work could not be located during the preparation of the present article.

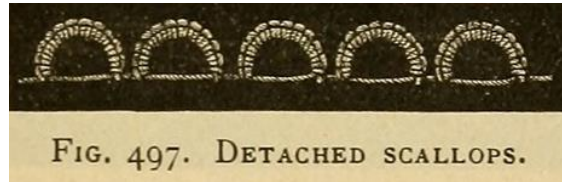
19 This is clear from the way van Meerten-Schilperoort otherwise indicates parallel terminologies. In this instance, the Dutch *spoeltje* is the native term for the French *navette*, noting that the two English terms used in the translation here are not as fully synonymous.

20 van Meerten-Schilperoort, *Penélopé*, op. cit., vol. 3, 1824, p. 149.

<https://books.google.com/books?id=U9FeAAAACAAJ>. A similar shuttle also appears in *Lady Hoare's Book* (as her text is also known): Hoare, op. cit., Plate XLIV.

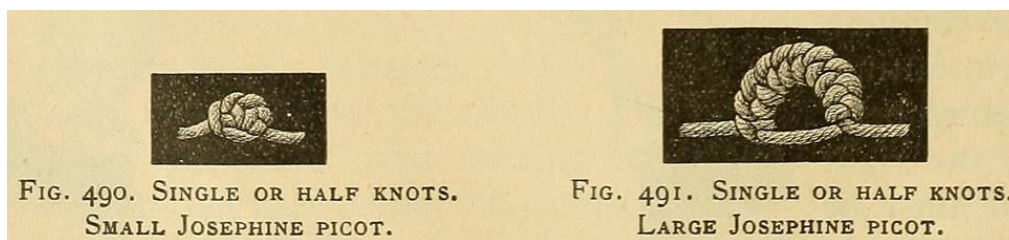
## Tatting and knotting

The scallop has already been seen in several sources, to which de Dillmont's *Encyclopedia* will now be added. Her first example of tatting;



appears with adjacent illustrations of two additional forms with the text:

The Josephine picot or purl, as it is also called in tatting, consists of a series of single or half knots formed of the first knot only. These picots may be made of 4 or 5 knots, as in Fig. 490, or of 10 or 12 knots, as in Fig. 491.



The larger of these differs from the detached scallop through its use of a single, rather than a double knot. That is also the form described and illustrated by van Meerten, Gaugain, and Lambert, to which fig. 491 is essentially identical. The difference is that de Dillmont would have regarded the earlier single knot as a second, rather than a first knot. (The significance of fig. 490 will be discussed further on, with more detail about the difference between the two forms of single knot.)

If a row of scallops is indicative of tatting as a distinct craft, the following detail of a portrait from 1790 provides evidence of it in the late 18th century;<sup>21</sup>



21 Jacob Feitama, portrait of Elisabeth de Haan, 1790. <https://www.mauritshuis.nl/en/explore/the-collection/artworks/portrait-of-jacob-feitama-17261797-and-his-wife-elisabeth-de-haan-17351800-827/>.



and in still closer detail:



Further evidence of 18th-century tating is provided by the date on a shuttle in the collections of the Nordic Museum, in Stockholm:<sup>22</sup>



Although no association between this type of shuttle and rigid-heddle band weaving appears in any Swedish description of that craft (which remains in present-day practice), it may be worth noting that such use is reported by Sophia Caulfield and Blanche Seward in an article on “Swedish Work” in their *Dictionary of Needlework* from 1882:<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> <http://digitaltmuseum.se/011023828870>. The initials CAD are those of its owner, Chatarina Andersdotter (d. 1812).

<sup>23</sup> Sophia Frances Anne Caulfeild & Blanche C. Seward, *The Dictionary of Needlework*, London, 1882, p. 466. <https://archive.org/stream/dictionaryofneed00caul>.

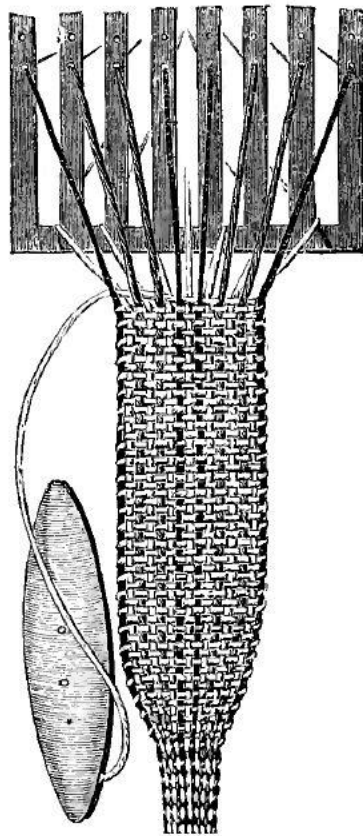


FIG. 746. SWEDISH WORK.

Upon a very thin Shuttle wind the warp thread, which make either of black silk or of a deep blue, or of any colour according to fancy.

Regardless of how the Swedish evidence is taken, the 1790 portrait illustrates a point of contiguity between tating and knotting. Its date may also be significant, as there do not seem to be any subsequent portraits in the “Woman Knotting” genre. The portrait from 1786 closely precedes it and a second one from the same year contains the following detail:<sup>24</sup>



<sup>24</sup> Francis Wheatley, portrait of Mrs. Pearce, 1786.

[http://www.wolverhamptonart.org.uk/collections/getrecord/WAGMU\\_OP759](http://www.wolverhamptonart.org.uk/collections/getrecord/WAGMU_OP759).

This includes two pertinent features. The one is the *knotting bag*, a common motif that when seen together with a shuttle is taken as a certain indicator of knotting. However, the thread often disappears into the bag without any knots being visible, presenting more than a slight impediment to the analysis of what was being produced.

The second interesting detail in this portrait is that it shows the hands in working position, which is far less common than might be assumed. This is also illustrated in a detail of a portrait from 1760:<sup>25</sup>



It is not possible to tell from the hand position alone whether the depicted activity is knotting or tatting. If the shuttle is passed directly through the loop before the loop is closed, it will form an overhand knot; the central element of knotting. If the shuttle thread is first wrapped around the loop thread (as in the second illustration taken from Gaugain) it will form a single knot—a definitive characteristic of shuttle tatting as described by van Meerten-Schiperoort, Gaugain, and Lambert. There is no other difference between the processes, themselves.<sup>26</sup>

A single tatting knot placed around the loop thread will simply untie when the loop is closed. If two single knots are placed around the loop thread, the loop will close to an overhand knot. Beyond that, additional single stitches produce finished knots of increasing complexity, as illustrated by de Dillmont's figs. 490 and 491. If a string of fig. 490 knots had been depicted in a portrait of someone otherwise taken to be engaged in knotting, it is unlikely that it would be flagged as unusual. If made with three single knots, instead of the prescribed four, it might well pass as knotting on physical examination. If made with two

---

25 Joshua Reynolds, portrait of the Countess of Albemarle, 1786.

<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/sir-joshua-reynolds-anne-2nd-countess-of-albemarle>.

26 This might appear to be an oversimplification, if not outright misleading, given that the definitive attribute of present-day tatting is a double knot consisting of one first- and one second stitch. At the outset, however, the single knot was all that was used. It had the form described by van Meerten-Schilperoort, Gaugain, and Lambert, and is seen in Gaugain's illustration of tatting hands. It was also used exclusively for all of their scallops. Gaugain went on to describe a double knot using the single knot as a *first stitch* (subsequently also termed an *English stitch*) plus an additional single knot of the reverse form, termed the *second stitch* (or later, a *French stitch*). This sequence was inverted into the modern order sometime after the middle of the 19th century. In the current descriptive terminology, the initial form is a Reverse Order Double Stitch (RODS) and a ring of single stitches is still referred to as a Josephine knot. The reader who feels this to be confusing may find something exonerating in Gaugain's conclusion: "I do not think any person who has not seen Tatting done can accomplish it by any description."

single knots, there would be no way to distinguish between the resulting overhand knot and one produced directly by a single pass of the shuttle.

Since the double knot is definitive of tating (even if requiring it to include one first- and one second stitch), it appears justified to suggest that the basic shuttle technique of tating mirrored the shuttle technique of knotting. With the latter, more complexity is added by juxtaposing two or more overhand knots, looping the thread around the hand once for each. With tating, additional complexity is added before the loop is closed, by the number of single knots placed on it. Such loops can, in turn, be combined into intricate stand-alone patterns, providing the point of departure, first for the production of scalloped edging, and then for the development of tatted lace. Knotting, on the other hand, remained a preparatory phase for the embellishment of a separately produced piece of fabric.

Returning to the 1760 and 1790 portraits, the further detail needed to identify the crafts they depict is provided by the thread in the first of them continuing into a rolled ball, which is another prime indicator of knotting and also seen in the 1786 portrait at the outset of this article (which additionally clearly shows knots). The 1790 portrait similarly either depicts a length of tating, or our notions of what knotting entailed require substantial revision.

If we posit that there was a knotted equivalent to tatted scalloping, and that the two were visually confusable in as detailed a painting as the one from 1790, this would indicate that the two genres overlapped not just in process, but also in product. Either way, there is a clear suggestion that placing both on a single continuum, as done by Hoare, de Dillmont, Mee, et. al., was a reasonable way to classify them and not—as so much subsequent commentary charges—a gross failure to recognize them as separate crafts.

### **18th-century descriptions of knotting**

Literary references to knotting abound in the 18th century in both prosaic and poetic contexts. However, the production of instruction manuals for home craft had not yet begun. Corresponding descriptive, if not tutorial, information was normally conveyed in encyclopedic presentations of various arts, crafts, and trades.

The largest encyclopedia of its day was the *Universal Lexicon*, published by Johann Heinrich Zedler in 64 volumes between 1732 and 1750. The volume from 1737 includes an article on knotting:<sup>27</sup>

Knotting: is a common art for women, from long doubled thread using a shuttle made for the purpose, one knot is hung and tied close to another. This is then used to make fringes or tassels on window curtains and other things.

This text appeared verbatim two years later in the *Woman's Lexicon*, by Gottfried Siegmund Corvinus,<sup>28</sup> which also includes articles on fringes and tassels, naming some of those other things as being “sewn onto the ends of scarves” and “looped onto fans.” Zedler then co-opted that fringe article back into the 1745 volume of his own lexicon, adding further decorative applications including:

“... clothing, especially for bordering vests and coats...”

Corvinus also has an article on shuttles:

Shuttles for knotting: are two small plates made from clean and smooth wood or ivory cut wide along their length, pointed above and below, and joined together, around which a woman winds the thread she uses for knotting and with which, instead of a knitting needle, she makes the knots.

---

27 Johann Heinrich Zedler, *Universal-Lexicon*, Halle, 1737, p. 569. <http://www.zedler-lexikon.de/>.

28 Gottfried Siegmund Corvinus, *Frauenzimmer-Lexicon*, Frankfurt, 1739. <https://books.google.com/books?id=-AxCAAAAcAAJ>.

It is not clear how a knitting needle was used for knotting (although the parallel between this and the use of a darning needle as an alternative to a shuttle in the earliest tating instructions may be of more than passing interest, as would the possibility of it referring to a precursor of the craft using a hooked knitting needle that would ultimately become Tunisian crochet.) Zedler continued the plagiaristic leap-frogging between the two lexicons by lifting the shuttle article into his 1742 volume, again adding useful information to it:

Shuttle: is a small instrument consisting of two clean, smooth, wood or ivory plates, cut wide along their length and tapered both above and below, affixed to a small post on the inside in the middle, around which a woman winds the thread for knotting, in order to tie a knot and place the one after the other evenly spaced, often stacking them in triple on top of each other. The best proportion of this instrument is, when it is not too wide, and both ends come to a fine point.

Nothing is said about knotting as a preparatory stage to couched embroidery. However, the use of a shuttle for the preparation of knotted fringes and tassels continued into the 19th century. The article in the 1824 volume of *Penélopé*, from which the above image of a weaver's bobbin was taken includes illustrations of such work. The one of a fringe on the left combines knotting with netting and may help to explain the characterizations of tating as netting noted above:



The instructions for it are:

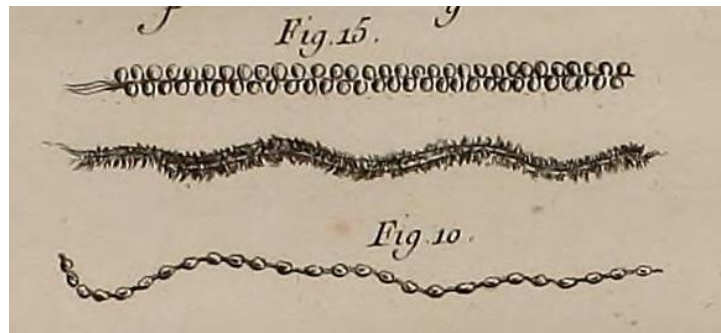
One winds knitting cotton, as is used for moderately fine stockings, on a weaver's shuttle; makes a string from the same cotton, 12 threads thick, and ties the thread from the shuttle around the middle of it; thereafter one ties three consecutive knots of the same around the string with a distance of one half Dutch inch between each; then cuts right through the middle of the string; thereby creating small tassels, which are firmly attached to the main thread, and are separated a bit with the finger or a needle. This long thread is now worked as shown in fig. 3, with a one two or three stitches high, quadruple row of knots; or when made of silk floss, in a bullion. This is also serviceable as an instruction for a tassel.

A specimen tassel is then illustrated on the right. The device at its top is a turned wooden button, prepared precisely as is also described in Zedler's article on tassels.

It is not clear when couched embroidery was added to the applications of knotting. Regardless, in 1770, Charles du Saint-Aubin published *L'Art du Brodeur*,<sup>29</sup> which illustrates three different knotted strings:

---

29 Charles Germain de Saint-Aubin, *L'art du brodeur*, Paris, 1770. <https://archive.org/details/lartdubrodeur00sain>.



He includes couched embroidery among their uses, alongside bordering. The key to fig. 10 says that it illustrates, “Knots made by Ladies as a pastime,” more fully describing it elsewhere as:

... knots of thread or silk, which Ladies make as a pastime with a shuttle. These knots, are positioned very closely to one another, making a pleasant type of string that one sews onto the surface of a fabric with silk thread.

The fig. 15 key says that it shows, “Knots in two forms made with a shuttle,” with additional commentary stating them to be:

... of different sizes and most suitable as borders for large pieces.

Given that this describes knotting in its fully mature state, it is significant both that the simplest of all possible forms is the first one illustrated and that the most intricate of the three is still relatively non-complex. If this characterization is rejected and it is argued that fig. 15 illustrates the form shown in the 1790 portrait, yet again, that would mean that there is no absolute distinction between knotted bordering and tatted bordering.

### Tatting with other implements

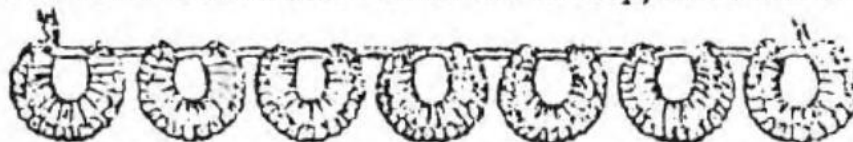
Three additional techniques for producing tatting are described in mid-19th-century sources. One of them is a transient curiosity but the other two have been widely recognized. All are included here for the sake of comprehensiveness.

Eléanor Riego de la Branchardiere produced a number of books on tatting and is a portal figure in its development. Her first work on the subject, *Tatting*, appeared in 1850.<sup>30</sup> In the preface she explains why she felt the “old system” of tatting to be too difficult and time consuming and therefore:

... substituted a “Netting Needle,” for the “Shuttle” which has enabled me to *attach* and *shape* the patterns while working; and where the loops are too small to admit of the netting needle passing through, I have given directions for using a sewing needle instead.

Mlle. Riego (as she is most often referred to) then illustrates the use of the netting needle for producing a *single stitch* (of the initial type described in Note 24, above), followed by the first of several examples of its use:

**EXAMPLE.—EDGING : First Oval—Commence a loop, and work 20 single stitches as**



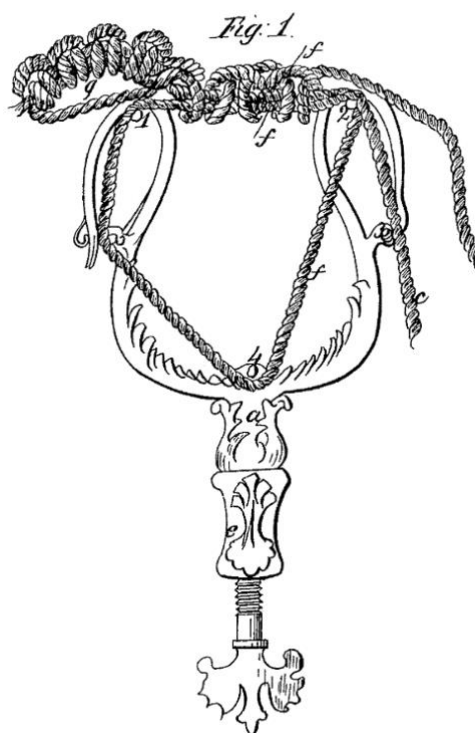
<sup>30</sup> Eléanor Riego de la Branchardiere, *Tatting*, London, 1850.

<http://www.antiquepatternlibrary.org/pub/PDF/RiegoTat.pdf>.

She did not revisit this technique in any of her subsequent publications but others make later reference to it, for example, Matilda Pullan in 1858:<sup>31</sup>

I may observe, that a netting needle is sometimes used as a substitute for a shuttle. It is very pleasant to work with, but not suitable for carrying in the pocket; and as the convenience of being able so to carry it about is one of the chief recommendations of this sort of work, an ivory shuttle ought always to be possessed, although a netting-needle, also, may sometimes be employed.

An application for a United States patent for the “Manufacture of Tatting and Device Therefor” was filed by David F. Randall in October 1860 and granted in March of the following year.<sup>32</sup> He defines tatting as a scalloped edging or trimming and describes a “frame” intended to speed its production:



Finally, the 1869 volume of *Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine* includes instructions for tatting using a crochet hook.<sup>33</sup> These start, as by now might be expected:

### CROCHET TATTING.

**TAT** over the crochet hook, instead of over the thread with a shuttle. For the scallops represented in Fig. 1, work 12 double knots,

Fig. 1.



31 Matilda M. Pullan, *The lady's manual of fancy work*, New York, 1858, p. 122.

<https://archive.org/details/ladysmanualoffan1858pull>.

32 David F. Randall, *Manufacture of Tatting and Device Therefor*, United States Patent 31624, 1861,

<http://pdfpiw.uspto.gov/.piw?PageNum=0&docid=00031624>.

33 Sarah J. Hale and Louis A. Godey, eds., *Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine*, Philadelphia, 1869, p. 271.

<http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015027389355;view=1up;seq=253>.

## Conclusions

The term *tatting* was initially used to designate a form of bordering that was either directly embroidered onto the edge of a piece of fabric or prepared separately and then sewn onto it. At some point during the late 18th century, shuttles were taken into use for making the separate borders as strings of tatted scallops. Both that process and its product were referred to as tatting.

The basic tool and technique of the earlier practice of knotting—a shuttle worked through a loop of thread wrapped around the hand to produce a row of more or less complex knots—provided impetus for this development. At its outset, both knotting and tatting were regarded as forms of whitework embroidery. Tatting rapidly developed into its own form of lace making, while knotting remained a preparatory step for couched embroidery and other decorative uses.

Tools other than a shuttle have been (and still are) used for tatting, including several kinds of needles, and crochet hooks. Considered as having originated in embroidery it is reasonable to see the use of needles early in the development of knot-based tatting.

This text is copyrighted by the author: © Cary Karp, 2019



It is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License found at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Author's address: Cary Karp <cary.karp@gmail.com>

This is version 1.5.3, released on 20 May 2019, replacing all previous versions. It is subject to further revision and the most recent version will be found under the heading **Research Reports** at <https://loopholes.blog/>.