

# A lifelong pursuit of



Ruth Payne Hellmann's incredible collection, now in CSU's care, spans centuries and continents and took almost 80 years to assemble



Sherri Barber/The Coloradoan

**HISTORICAL COLLECTION:** Linda Carlson, curator of historical collections in the Department of Design and Merchandising at Colorado State University, describes parts of the needle lace she is holding. The lace is a part the late Ruth Payne Hellmann's collection which was donated to CSU.

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There wasn't a lot of money in lace. Regardless, the late Ruth Payne Hellmann still managed to glean from it a wealth of rare knowledge in a personal passion that spanned nearly 80 years of her life.

"She, herself, was a volunteer in textiles at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York," said her daughter Margaret Hellmann, a graduate of Colorado State University with a Ph.D. in environmental health who now lives in Denver. "The Met sent her unofficially to other countries, and they would tell her, 'We hear there's an important

## Interested?

The Ruth Payne Hellmann lace collection is kept at CSU and is available to students at any time and to interested members of the public and researchers by appointment: 491-1983.

piece of lace. We want you to go find out if it's real or machine made.' She was sort of undercover. "Her real joy was in making lace. She would take designs — she especially liked Celtic designs — and she would translate stuff like that into lace. I think she really probably took lace to a new di-

mension because she was always trying new ways of how to transcribe the art that she saw into the lace that she would do."

It's a lifelong collection the late Hellmann, who died in 1999 at the age of 87, has passed on to CSU by willing to the department of design and merchandising her collection of more than 3,000 lace samples valued at \$141,000. The collection spans four centuries of lace. Two hundred books about lace, many of them rare, were also part of the gift.

CSU officials said the donation will benefit

# Lace

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many other departments of their teachings — history and foreign languages, for instance.

Friday, a selected portion of the lace collection was unveiled at an open house.

"It's really kind of this rich layering of history we're going to be able to study," said Linda Carlson, curator of historic collections at CSU. "You're learning about how people looked at lace. The initial thinking about lace is that it was a luxury fabric to start with. It defined for them what was beautiful, what was luxury. At the same time, the makers of lace were traditionally the working poor women. We learn something about luxury and, at the opposite end of that, what it was like to be the working poor. It helps us learn what people treasured. It helps us see how creative they were because they are all so different."

The collection comes from several countries in Europe to which Hellmann traveled, including the lace birthplaces of Belgium and Italy and the prominent lace countries of France and Germany.

The late Hellmann was a chemist and science librarian and lived most of her life in Westbury, N.Y. She was a reviewer for Encyclopedia Britannica on the subject of lace. In 1950, she won an award for a piece of lace she designed. She was allowed to see the most sacred collections of lace, one of which was kept at a cathedral in Aachen, Germany, where the outfits of the Madonna and child statues, regarded by German royalty as good luck, were kept. In the 1960s, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City granted her a letter of introduction to a place that kept the secret of one of the rarest forms of lace.

It's a favorite story about her visit to an abbey in Alansaw,



Sherri Barber/The Coloradan

**LOTS OF LACE:** Linda Carlson, curator of historical collections in the Department of Design and Merchandising at Colorado State University, sorts and stores lace from the Ruth Payne Hellmann collection that was donated to CSU. The collection consists of more than 3,000 pieces of lace and more than 200 tools and 200 books.

France.

"The Alansaw lace is one of the most delicate and valuable places of lace-making, with either 11 or 12 stitches," Hellmann said. "You have to use really, really fine thread. It is so fine, you

can't copy them because you can't see them. She was sent there to an abbey that still made that lace.

"When they got there, she showed her letter of introduction to the mother superior. She

said, 'I will take you to see this book written in Latin.' Each page had how to do each one of the important stitches. The mother superior took her down to the spooky old cloister with a candle. She took this old book, and by candlelight started to show Mom the pages.

"She was trying to memorize the pages, but she only showed her 10 of the pages. And she closed the book. My mother said, 'Well, my understanding is there are 11 stitches.' The mother superior said that the last stitch dies with the convent and went around to the other side to put the book back and whisked my mother back upstairs. And that stitch probably did die with the convent."

Hellmann said retired CSU employee Mildred Weidemann was the link to getting the collection to CSU, after having met Hellmann's daughter, while she was studying at CSU in the mid-1980s.

"We've been working on this donation over 10 years," said Carlson. "We were very lucky she had it all boxed in archival boxes and categorized. We've got about 400 years represented in the lace collection, but of course the bulk of it is going to be more contemporary. She was an avid collector until the very end."

The late Hellmann started her love of lace at the age of 11 or 12, her daughter guessed.

Lace originated in Europe in the 16th Century, said Carlson. Its earliest origin traces to the Flanders (now Belgium) and Italy.

Hellmann's collection also includes books and craft samples with relation to lace.

"She collected books on snowflakes because they look like lace," Carlson said. "It's more than just lace. It includes embroidery and other sorts of lace type of applications. This was a passion that was really very broad in scope."