

Early Efforts

To 1800

FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS, the only means of stitching two pieces of fabric together had been with a common needle and a length of thread. The thread might be of silk, flax, wool, sinew, or other fibrous material. The needle, whether of bone, silver, bronze, steel, or some other metal, was always the same in design—a thin shaft with a point at one end and a hole or eye for receiving the thread at the other end. Simple as it was, the common needle (fig. 2) with its thread-carrying eye had been an ingenious improvement over the sharp bone, stick, or other object used to pierce a hole through which a lacing then had to be passed.¹ In addition to utilitarian stitching for such things as the making of garments and household furnishings, the needle was also used for decorative stitching, commonly called embroidery. And it was for this purpose that the needle, the seemingly perfect tool that defied improvement, was first altered for ease of stitching and to increase production.

One of the forms that the needle took in the process of adaptation was that of the fine steel hook. Called an *aguja* in Spain, the hook was used in making a type of lace known as *punto de aguja*. During the 17th century after the introduction of chainstitch embroideries from India, this hook was used to produce

chainstitch designs on a net ground.² The stitch and the fine hook to make it were especially adaptable to this work. By the 18th century the hook had been reduced to needle size and inserted into a handle, and was used to chainstitch-embroider woven fabrics.³ In France the hook was called a *crochet* and was sharpened to a point for easy entry into the fabric (fig. 3). For stitching, the fabric was held taut on a drum-shaped frame. The hooked needle pierced the fabric, caught the thread from below the surface and pulled a loop to the top. The needle reentered the fabric a stitch-length from the first entry and caught the thread again, pulling a second loop through the first to which it became enchained. This method of embroidery permitted for the first time the use of a continuous length of thread. At this time the chainstitch was used exclusively for decorative embroidery, and from the French name for drum—the shape of the frame that held the fabric—the worked fabric came to be called tambour embroidery. The *crochet*⁴

² FLORENCE LEWIS MAY, *Hispanic Lace and Lace Making* (New York, 1939), pp. 267-271.

³ Diderot's *L'Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers . . .*, vol. II (1763), Plates Brodeur, plate II.

⁴ The term "crochet," as used today, became the modern counterpart of the Spanish *punto de aguja* about the second quarter of the 19th century.

¹ CHARLES M. KARCH, *Needles: Historical and Descriptive* (12 Census U.S., vol. X, 1902), pp. 429-432.