



MARY ELIZA FITCH, THE 4' 11" DYNAMO (1861 – 1942)

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Mary Eliza Morris Fitch is one of a group of designers that came to prominence around 1915, when interest in needle craft, which had been rapidly building over the previous four years, suddenly exploded. Her series of crochet and tatting books offered in the popular Woolworth catalog established her as one of the dominant names in design for this time period.

She was born in 1861 in Boston, Massachusetts, to a socially prominent family whose roots in the colonies went as far back as 1650. She was the fifth child of nine, and the only daughter. Most of her brothers died in childhood, but it seems likely they were all raised on stories of their most famous ancestor, Charles Morris, Sr., who in 1749 had been appointed by Lord Cornwallis himself to be the first Surveyor General of the new British Province of Nova Scotia. He surveyed and mapped the new territory for the British crown, and drafted the plans for towns and cities in this Province for the settlers brought in by Cornwallis. The title of Surveyor General was held by four generations of the Morris family, a matter of family pride, establishing them as one of the more prominent and important families of Nova Scotia.

Mary's great-great-grandfather was commissioned a privateer in 1799 to combat the

French who had seized 316 American merchant ships in one year. Her grandfather, Captain Jonathan Breed Mason, was a merchant ship captain as well at the young age of 20, out of Marblehead, Massachusetts, where Mary's family spent their summers away from Boston. His ship, the *Hawk*, was seized by the French during the War of 1812. We know that this story resonated with Mary, because in later life she wrote a letter to a lawyer in Boston, engaging him in an attempt to claim an insurance settlement for the cargo lost in the seizure. She was ultimately unsuccessful in this, as all records had been lost of any prior claims during the Great Fire of Boston in 1872.

Mary's father was a brush manufacturer whose business burned to the ground in that same fire of 1872. Only eleven years old at the time, this devastating loss was an early lesson in overcoming adversity.

Her parents lived to see her married at the age of 20 to a Canadian, Edwin Oberlin Fitch, of Wolfville, Nova Scotia, whose family also had deep



roots spanning a century and a half in this Canadian province. Mary bore three sons, the first in 1882 and twins in 1884. They lost one of the twins at the age of ten to diphtheria.

Mary must have been searching for something more

to fill her time after her sons were grown. She had always been artistic, doing oil and china painting, and of course, embroidering and crocheting her own designs to add beauty to her home.



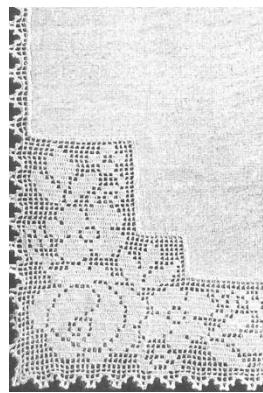
Her professional career as a designer began at age 50 with the modest success of selling



crochet designs appearing in *The Modern Priscilla* until Mary's design work met with major success in the publication of her first book of filet crochet in 1914.

It isn't known whether she approached the F.W. Woolworth Company or they approached her, but the team-up was wildly successful. The Woolworth mail-order catalog ended up in almost every household, rich or poor. Mary's first book was so popular, that the next two books of filet crochet were rushed to publication, and books Two through Five all came out in rapid succession in 1915 – a prodigious

To the left is a close-up of a double-rose corner for a table runner she designed and crocheted for her own home. Below is the single-rose design that ultimately ended up in the first Radcliffe book.

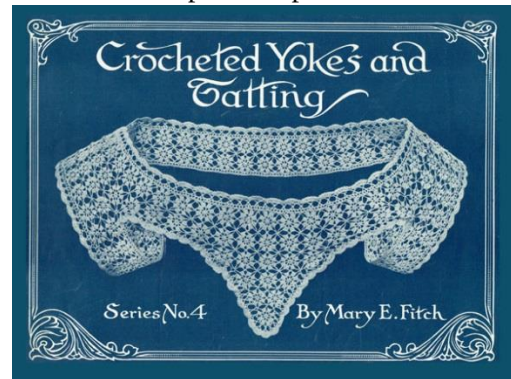


a Netted Doily pattern to the popular women's magazine *The Modern Priscilla*, who ran it in the February issue in 1911. This was followed by a scattering of



display of creativity and focused work. They all had multiple printings.

She introduced tatting in Book Four in the form of yokes, collars, edgings, and two doilies. She paired embroidery with much of the tatting, something she had also done with some of the crochet work up to that point.



We know from ads placed in the books that some of her embroidery patterns in the form of

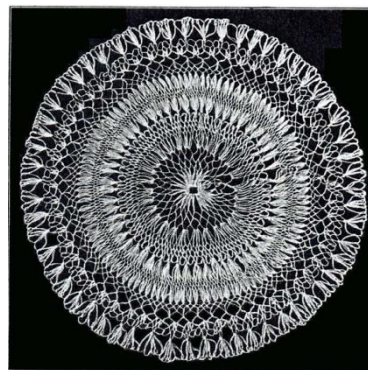
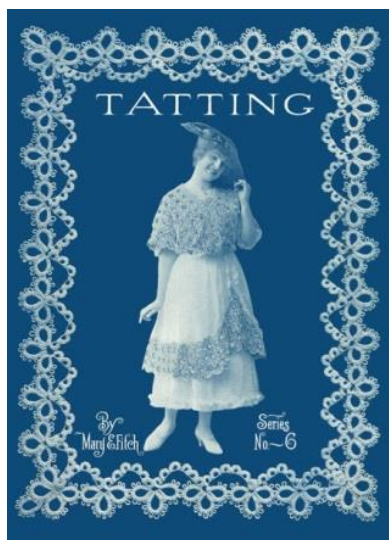


FIG. 2. NETTED DOILY. By Mary Fitch

cross-stitch were being offered at the same time as the crochet and tatting books, but we have not yet recovered any existing copy of these collections.

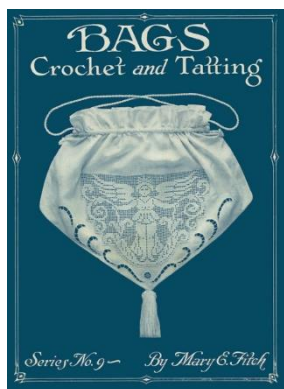
Book Six was the first book exclusively of tatting, establishing her firmly

as a triple threat on the market for needlework designs in crochet, embroidery and tatting. Her first tatting design offerings in Book Four were very traditional and often simple fare, made more sophisticated by their pairing with her embroidery – ground she was more comfortable with at the time.



cover is shown the antique method of only partially closing a row of rings in order to make an attractive scallop.

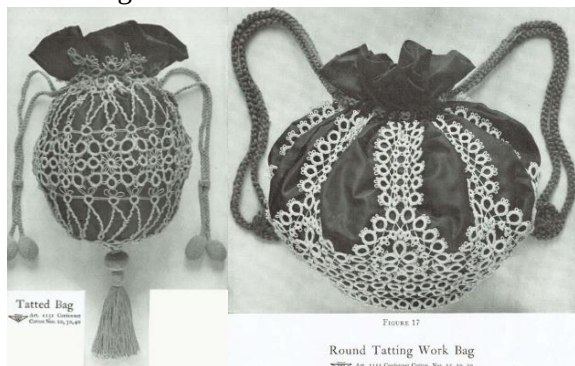
Book Eight has only one tatted collar and two yokes – the rest are lovely examples of filet crochet. All three tatting patterns eschew bare thread for the more favored rings and chains, and gain in sophistication of design.



Book Nine is a lovely collection of bags in both



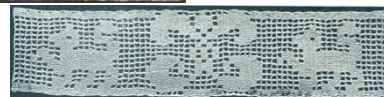
and tatting.



In Book Six, with the inclusion of roll tatting, beading, and a sparing use of chains, she explores new elements incorporated into her still mostly simple designs. She favored bare thread in most of her early tatting designs. On the

Books Ten to Thirteen alternate between filet and a mix of crochet and tatting – five books in all published in 1917. There were Sixteen books overall in the Woolworth series, published over the short span of only five years.

Mary liked the figures in her filet crochet to be moving as illustrated by her hopping bunny...



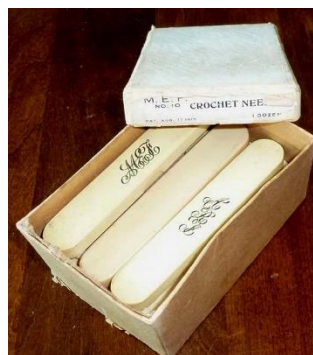
and prancing cat.

Even the sofa pillow below has her ocean liner under way and the lighthouse flashing its warning to passing ships.



This filet crochet sofa pillow is a design out of Book Five of her Woolworth series – more evidence that sea travel was a dream of hers.

At the height of her popularity, Mary had sets of crochet hooks in monogrammed cases, and thread sold in her name.

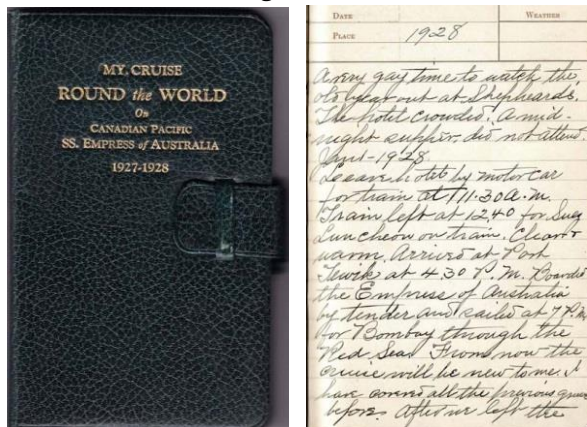


After her husband of 36 years passed away in 1919, Mary ended her

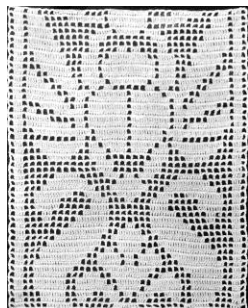
publishing career abruptly. Instead, she travelled, taking three trips around the world without escort or chaperone, and spending several years living in Paris. While living in Paris, Mary learned how to do beautiful French-style raised hand embroidery and white-on-white monogram letters. But this was

the only call back to her previous career during this time period.

She spent the money from her book sales extravagantly, having her own state room and private dining table aboard the recently commissioned ocean liner, *SS Empress of Australia*. It was a stormy passage across the Atlantic, "Sunday, Dec. 12th... Seas were so rough that at dinner, dishes were thrown from the tables, tables were overturned, and many passengers thrown to the floor, some being made unconscious..."



Mary journeyed in style in a sedan chair carried by four men to view the Great Wall of China, and by camel in Egypt to see the Pyramids and the Sphinx. In Cairo, she spent time at the museum to enjoy the display of treasures from King Tut's tomb, discovered only five years before.



This filet crochet scarab was from her first Woolworth book, so we know that being able to visit Egypt was likely a highlight of her travels.

She saw the sites in Madeira and Portugal, wrote about riding in rickshaws in Shanghai and Japan, then stayed briefly in Honolulu before returning to port in San Francisco in late March of 1928.

She returned to her home in Brookline, Massachusetts, where she remained peacefully for twelve years before going to live with her daughter-in-law in Asheville, North Carolina. Mary passed away two years later in 1942 at the age of 81. She was buried in Marblehead, Massachusetts.

PDFs of her books and *Modern Priscilla* articles can be found at: www.archive.org, www.antiquepatternlibrary.org and www.SomethingUndertheBed.com. Good reproductions can be purchased from Iva Rose Vintage Reproductions: www.ivarose.com

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F.W. WOOLWORTH CO.

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- Series No. 11: *Gifts Crochet & Tatting* (1917; ??pp)
- Series No. 12: *Filet Crochet with Instructions* (1917; 22pp)
- Includes some tatting patterns...
- Series No. 13: *Crocheted & Tatted Yokes & Neckwear* (1918; 23pp)
- Series No. 14: *Embroidered Patch-work Applique* (1918; 15pp)
- Series No. 15: *Latest Yokes, Collars & Cuff Sets in Filet Crochet and Tatting* (1919; 21pp)
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My Cruise Around the World on Canadian Pacific SS Empress of Australia 1927-1928 (her travel diary for her 3rd trip)