

Rosa Elena Egipciano

National Heritage Fellow, 2003 Master Lacemaker



“For me mundillo (lacemaking) is an art because, like the painter who has in his imagination what he wants to create on the canvas, so it is for us: we create, invent, and design what we want to make in lace.”

–Rose Elena Egipciano

Rosa Elena Egipciano is a Puerto Rican lacemaker, or *tejedora*, [pronounced tay-ha-dora] who lives in New York City. A perfectionist, she is a demanding yet generous teacher. Her passion for preserving the very old tradition of lacemaking known as *mundillo* [pronounced mun-di-yo] reminds us how important it is to be cultural stewards, to pass along skills as well as stories that are important to us and our families.

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Meet the Artist Rosa Elena Egipciano



Rosa Elena Egipciano is from the town of Moca, Puerto Rico, famous for *mundillo*, a form of intricate bobbin lacemaking. Her father, Nieves, owned a *cafetín*, a small grocery store, and her mother, Doña Salud, owned a *fonda*, a restaurant, and made *mundillo*.

The youngest of five, Rosa Elena began learning *mundillo* at the age of four from her mother. She wanted to learn because she loved the sound of the bobbins clicking against one another as her mother worked on her *mundillo* loom. Ever since, *mundillo* has been part of her life.

Rosa Elena tells a story of how lacemaking started in her hometown. “My grandmother told me that her mother told her that two *españolas* (women from Spain) came to live in Moca. They lived in a house in front of the plaza, across from the Catholic Church. When they started teaching girls to make lace they were paid 25 cents for a class. Back then if a person was able to pay a quarter they were considered well-to-do. Girls taught other girls and it spread.”

When she was a little girl, Rosa Elena and her friends would “play house” on her patio and she would imagine making lace. “I walked to the lemon tree and I took the leaves and the thorns and started making patterns on the leaves using the thorns.” She looked for patterns everywhere. She remembers while sitting in church during Mass, “I would look at the designs on the floor of the church and think of them as patterns. I saw squares and I was making mental holes and *margaritas* [a daisy pattern] just in my mind, making designs.”

Where do you
see patterns or
designs in your
home?
Draw one.

Doña Salud liked to make lace by the yard to use as trim on her daughter's dresses. She didn't like to make set pieces like *zapatitos* (baby booties) but loved to create yard upon yard of lace. Rosa Elena learned this from her, but she also learned from friends to make other pieces.

During summers as she grew older, Rosa Elena would gather with friends on the balcony of one of their homes to talk, watch the boys pass by, and make *mundillo*. She never remembers working on *mundillo* alone, it was always a group activity.

How do you
and your friends
spend time
together?

The creativity in lacemaking is very important to Rosa Elena. She makes her own patterns instead of using pattern books. She also invents new stitches. Geometry and artistic sensitivity are needed to create a balanced and beautiful pattern. Rosa Elena says, "For me *mundillo* is an art, because, like the painter who has in his imagination what he wants to create on the canvas, so it is for us: we create, invent, and design what we want to make in lace." Like her mother before her, Rosa Elena does not sell her work. For her it is a work of art without a price tag, so she makes pieces for family and friends on special occasions.

In 1986, Rosa Elena moved to New York City. Her children were attending college, and she wanted to be closer to them. "I love New York. I always came in the summer to see museums; bringing my children here to meet people and expand their knowledge. Before I came I thought to myself, maybe I should go to a warmer place, but I love New York."

In New York City, *mundillo* is hard to find because there are so few lacemakers. There are many more in Puerto Rico. Of the handful in New York City, Rosa Elena stands out for the quality of her work and her tireless work upholding the tradition. She regularly demonstrates at festivals and exhibits. Her efforts to promote *mundillo* as a Puerto Rican folk art are important for Nuyoricans (Puerto Ricans from New York).

Rosa Elena has a long history of teaching *mundillo*. In Puerto Rico she taught and also organized the Festival de *Mundillo* to celebrate Moca's distinctive legacy. She also teaches lacemaking many places in New York, for example New York University and El Museo del Barrio. She likes to see her students appreciate how a pattern emerges from a little thread and a piece of wood.





Teaching has always been important to Rosa Elena. She remembers, “I’ve loved teaching since I’ve been in the first grade. What we learned in the morning I would teach to my classmates in the next class in the afternoon.” As an adult Rosa Elena became an English as a Second Language and Spanish teacher for high school and college courses. She also has a long history of teaching *mundillo*.

Rosa Elena feels it is essential to preserve and present her culture. She wants her students to take pride in what they do and strive to become not just a lacemaker, but a lacemaker who always tries their best to make work with beauty and love.

Regional Background



Moca, Puerto Rico

The beginning of Rosa Elena’s lacemaking lies in her hometown of Moca, in the northwest of the island of Puerto Rico. Founded in 1772 by the Spanish, it is surrounded by fertile plains. At one time the economy relied on sugar cane. Today it centers on manufacturing and electronics factories.

Moca is a Taino word for a tree in the region. Tainos were the indigenous inhabitants of Puerto Rico and other islands of the Caribbean before the arrival of Europeans. The moca tree has clusters of rose and purple flowers resembling sweetpeas.

Around 30,000 people live in about a dozen barrios (neighborhoods). The town is nicknamed La Capital de *Mundillo*. Since 1980, a *mundillo* festival that Rosa Elena helped to establish celebrates the town’s legacy each December and a statue in the plaza, *La tejedora de mundillo* honors the art and its artists year-round.



Puerto Rican Migration to New York City

Rosa Elena migrated to New York City in 1986 and is part of the largest community of Puerto Ricans on the U.S. mainland. Puerto Rico is the fourth largest Caribbean island. Four centuries of Spanish colonial rule made Puerto Rico a Spanish-speaking country that shares many cultural aspects with other Latin American and Caribbean nations, yet it remains separated from most of Latin America by a century of U.S. presence. In 1898, after the Spanish American War, Puerto Rico became a U.S. commonwealth, or territory.

Congress passed the Jones Act of 1917 to confer American citizenship on Puerto Ricans. This changed Puerto Rican's status from immigrant to migrant, making it easier to move to the mainland during hard economic times. The U.S. has not annexed Puerto Rico into the Union, so it remains a possession, or commonwealth. The U.S. has not annexed Puerto Rico into the Union, so it remains a possession, or commonwealth, and the issues of statehood are often debated.

Like other ethnic and immigrant groups before them, Puerto Ricans often took low-paying jobs that had helped previous immigrants move up the economic ladder. In New York City, the hotel and restaurant industries and especially the garment industry have depended on the large presence of Puerto Ricans. During World War I and in the 1920s, Puerto Ricans replaced the positions formerly occupied by European immigrants. Although there were Puerto Rican settlements throughout the city, East Harlem became the largest and is known as *El Barrio* (The Neighborhood).

While she had established her skill and devotion to *mundillo* in Puerto Rico, moving to New York made Rosa Elena recognize and strengthen her personal and cultural ties to *mundillo* and the *thetjedora* legacy. She introduced new people to the art and continues to build a tradition of *mundillo*. She lives in an apartment filled with mementos of Puerto Rico. Her loom is always

out, ready to be worked on, and her walls, shelves, and closets are filled with *mundillo* pieces.

Nuyoricans

A common term for Puerto Ricans who were born or grew up in New York City is Nuyorican. The word is a combination of the words New Yorker and Puerto Rican. Originally it was a disparaging term used by those from the island to describe a generation of migrants who dressed differently, acted differently, and spoke differently (Nuyoricans either spoke "Spanglish," a combination of Spanish and English that many Spanish-speaking Puerto Ricans felt was a corrupted form, or no Spanish at all).



Founder of the Nuyorican Poets Café, Miguel Algarin (center), at the Café.

Photo by Martha Cooper/City Lore

Nuyorican is now a term embraced by second- and third-generation Puerto Ricans in New York to describe their dual culture that straddles island and urban life, U.S. and Puerto Rican values. The ideas of biculturalism and discrimination were major concerns for the Nuyorican literary movement that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s with a center New York's Lower East Side. These poets and writers expressed themselves in English and Spanish and in rhymes and rhythms that blended Latino and African American sensibilities. In the early 1970s, a group of poets opened the Nuyorican Poets Café, which remains a vital cultural center.

Rosa Elena's Studio



The *mundillo* loom.
Photo: Elena Martínez



Lace makers from Almagro in the province of Castilla, Spain. In the background, placed on chair, are additional lace pillows.

Photo: Courtesy of The Hispanic Society of America-NY, with thanks to Dr. Mitchell Codding and Constanancio del Alamo.

Rosa Elena is a master lacemaker. In addition to being part of the long lacemaking tradition of her hometown of Moca, Puerto Rico, she claims a place in a much larger, very old tradition of Spanish and European lacemaking. The word “lace” comes from the Latin word, *laqueus*, meaning “noose.” There are two types of lace: point, which is made using a needle, and bobbin (pillow) lace, which is what Rose Elena makes.

The origins of bobbin lace in Europe go back to the Middle Ages in Flanders (the northern region of Belgium) where it is known as *kant* (border or edge), since lace began as a way to secure the edges of fine material from fraying, as well as giving it a decorative border.

Bobbin lace appears in many 16th century Dutch and Flemish portraits. The wide collars and cuffs ruffled in lace were the epitome of sophistication and wealth. Spain controlled Belgium in the 16th century, so the art probably traveled to Galicia, Spain, in that period, and later from Spain to Puerto Rico.

Although lace was an upper-class luxury, it was generally made by the lower classes. By the mid-16th century lacemaking had spread throughout Europe and the British Isles. Since it was made by hand and was very time consuming, lace was very expensive and regarded as a luxury item.

Bobbin lace came to Puerto Rico from Spain, where it had thrived in major commercial markets as well as a cottage industry. In Spain, lace is called *encaje*, because it is worked on separately and then joined to material (the Spanish word for “join” is *encajar*).

In bobbin lacemaking, a pillow called a loom holds the pattern and bobbins, forming a workplace for the *tejedora* (lacemaker). The bobbins, pieces of wood about the size of a pencil, are wound with cotton thread. By twisting and crossing the threads, stitches form a pattern. Each stitch is made with at least two pairs of bobbins (four threads) and held in place by pins.



The pattern is stenciled on graph paper and often made by the *tejedora* herself. Depending on the pattern, two dozen bobbins or hundreds of bobbins may be used. In addition to its use as edges and borders of and handkerchiefs, at one time *mundillo* also decorated items for special occasions such as wedding dresses, baptismal gowns, and the cloths used to adorn religious icons.

We still associate lace with rituals such as a christening or a bris, *quinceañeras*, and weddings. Linens trimmed with lace, such as tablecloths or pillowcases, often mean there is a special occasion or honored guest. Lacemakers play a very important role in the creation of meaning during rites of passage. Yet today handmade lace is rare, and machine-made lace is more common.

Rosa Elena teaches her students through a three-part process. First they learn the basic stitches. Intermediate students move on to more complicated stitches that require four pairs of bobbins instead of two. Advanced students start using stitches in patterns to make handkerchiefs, collars, and baby booties.

Mundillo Song

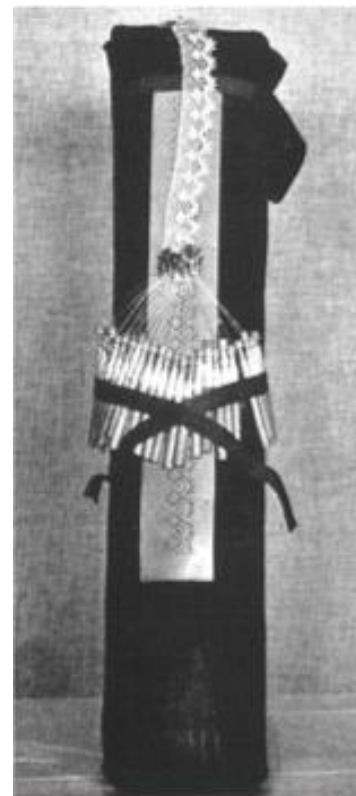
Rosa Elena teaches this song to new students so they can remember how to do the edges of a lace piece. It is part of a much larger tradition of spinning and weaving songs, which are a type of work song.

Una canción para los nuevos estudiantes

*El piquito de adentro se hace con el enganchado
Coje el que es, no el que me da la gana.*

A Song for New Students


The inside tip is made with the outside hanging pair
Take the correct one, not the one that you would prefer.



Lace pillow from Barcelona in the province of Cataluña. Approximately 27 inches in length, 20th century.

Photo: The Hispanic Society of America, with thanks to Dr. Mitchell Coddling and Constancio del Alamo.

Stitches

Cucubán	The wood of the cucubán bush is used to make the bolillos (bobbins). Cucubán wood is also used to make the loom.
Palillos	Literally “little pieces of wood”; palillos is another name for bolillos (bobbins)
Hilo (Thread)	Rosa Elena uses 100% cotton thread to create her mundillo. She prefers to work in lighter colors, which are easier to see.
Afiler (Straight Pin)	Straight pins are essential to mundillo because they hold the pattern on the loom. The pins are also used to hold stitches after they are made. Tejadora’s use steel pins size 21 (20-24)
Pen or Marker	A back ball point pen is used to create or copy a pattern.
Graph Paper	<p>Graph paper is essential to the creation of a mundillo pattern. Rosa Elena’s students use 5-squares-to-the-inch graph paper for most patterns.</p> <p>Once the pattern has been designed on graph paper, it is cut to a preferred size and placed on top of a manila file folder which has also been cut to the same size.</p> <p>The pattern is then glued on the file folder (which provides stiff, yet flexible backing) and covered in clear contact paper so it’s protected and durable while being used on the loom.</p>
Cartón or picado (stenciled pattern)	
Mundillo (Loom)	<p>The loom is called telares en forma de almohadillas a lace pillow. Mundillo is the Puerto Rican Spanish word for the artform and the loom. Loom, in Spanish is also known as a telar (loom).</p> <p>Rosa Elena has each of her students’ looms handmade in Puerto Rico. Looms vary in size and number of bobbins used. Beginning students work with about 55 bobbins, which cost about \$5 a dozen.</p>

Classroom Connections

Language Arts

Symbolism, Imagery

The mythological connections between weaving, language, and creation are evoked in creation stories around the world and in classical mythology, in which the weaver—or the spinner as spider—has a role in creating and maintaining the world. Create a symbol that weaves together things that are important to you. **Write a poem using visual images to describe your symbol.**



Rosa Elena shows Rockland County, NY festival goers the techniques of mundillo.
Photographer: Elena Martínez

Folklore, Critical Thinking, and Writing

Rosa Elena never made lace alone as a girl because it was always a group activity. What activities are more fun for you to do as a group? **List and compare and contrast activities you do in groups and alone.**

Explore Rosa Elena's decision not to sell her lace. **What is something so valuable to you that it has no price?** Brainstorm ideas and use one as inspiration for a poem or song lyrics.

Visual Art

Symbols and Portraits

Because painters include cultural and personal symbols in their portraits, they can be read for cultural information. Look closely at the symbols and colors included and omitted in Rembrandt's painting, *Young Woman with a Fan*. What cultural statements can you infer the photo? What do you see? **Create a self portrait through collage, painting or drawing.** Include symbols that show the viewer your values and perspective on life.

Young Woman with a Fan was originally paired with another painting, *Man Rising from a Chair*. These belong to two different museums today, but most likely they hung together in the home of this lively couple and the portraits may have been made when they were married. **Create a second portrait of someone or something that is important to you to accompany your self-portrait.** Include symbols that show the viewer something about your subject.

Mathematics

Patterns

- Patterns that *tejadores* like Rosa Elena use and patterns that exist in nature are all studied by mathematicians. Consider a slice of fruit, a fern frond, or a braided hair style. **Cut open three kinds of fruit and sketch the patterns you see in each cross-section.** What's different? What's the same?

- Lacemaking patterns relate to geometry, which deals with the measurements, properties, and relationships of points, lines, angles, surfaces, and solids. **Look for patterns in your everyday life.** Think about the weave of clothing or baskets, athletic shoe soles, Choose pattern one to sketch or bring the object to school to compare with classmates' findings. Examine and describe the relationship between the angles and repetitions. Discuss the social functions of the objects.

Vocabulary

barrio
 bobbin
 festival
 Flanders
 handmade indigenous
 lace
 lacemaking
 loom
 Middle Ages
 migration
 Moca
mundillo
 Nuyoricans
 pattern
 Puerto Rico
 Taino
tejadore

Resources

Publications

Levey, Santana. *Lace: A History*. Costume and Fashion Press. 2001.

[Martinez, Elena. "The Queen of Mundillo: Rosa Elena Egipciaco." *Voices, The Journal of New York Folklore*. Vol. 29, Fall-Winter 2003.](#)

Waggenheim, Kal and Olga Jimenez de Wagenheim, eds. *The Puerto Ricans: A Documentary History*. Markus Weiner Publishers, 2002.

Web Sites

[Lacemakers Cottage](#)

Museo del Barrio

[National Endowment for the Arts Heritage Fellows Biography and Interview](#)

Nuyoricana Poet's Cafe

Puerto Rican Tourism Board

[Traditional Art](#)

[Moca](#)