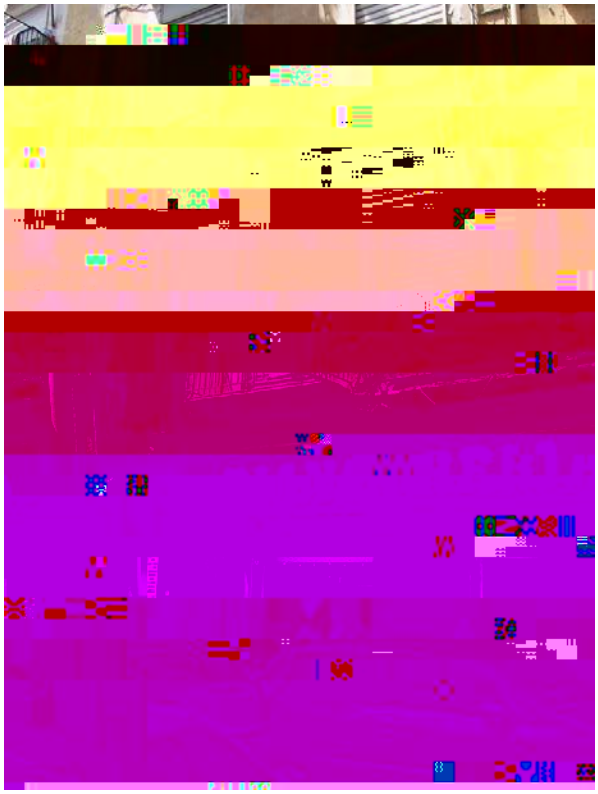
WANDA BALZANO

Biancheria in the Shadow of Vesuvius

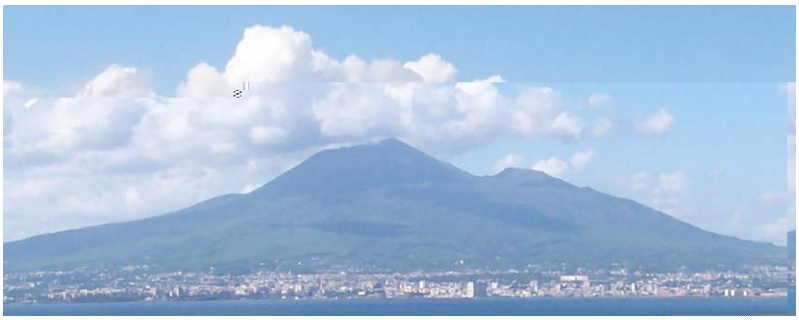
Dedicated to Rosa Frigenti, Maria Frigenti, Anne Holdridge, Penny Tallarini

***Biancheria*: (Italian) Linen or cotton goods; Laundry; Table linen; Bed linen; Underclothes; Trousseau.**



Home

I am going home—or at least what home was for me in the past, and so will always be—and the first familiar sight welcoming me from the plane is the elongated blue shadow of Vesuvius, majestic, apparently impassive, but so inherently alive with danger and fertility. On the carousel we all wait for our luggage to come, patiently or impatiently; some laugh with the pleasure of homecoming, while some others—the tourists—with the promise of a new scene to own, and to remember. I can read it in the corners of their mouths. A few members of a group shout in excitement when they see their suitcases slide in their direction. I watch those bags so impossibly stuffed that a coloured piece of clothing is visible in between the two ziplets. "Italians," I think. Then, on the back of my mind, suddenly a picture of Vesuvius forms again. So naked, so forthright and clean, so true. I think of it as a body that does not need to be covered. No hats, no ties, no sheets to sleep in, no clothes. Bare and absolute. It sleeps standing, like a horse.



As soon as I leave the airport, and take the train that goes around our blue volcano, the *Circumvesuviana*, my eyes revel

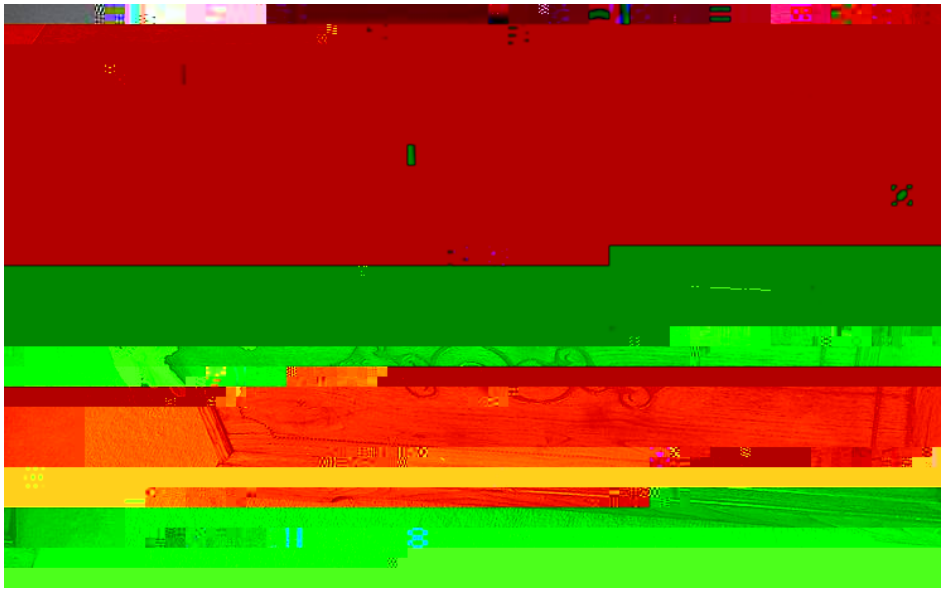
in another familiar sight: hundreds of balconies with thousands of clothes-lines. Sheets, towels, tablecloths, aprons, clothes for men, for women, for babies, for sportspeople, for businesspeople, school uniforms, hospital uniforms, restaurant uniforms, fabrics of all colours like multi-coloured flags swinging in the light breeze and drying in the sun. A familiar sight. In the States, in the apartment block where I live, I am the only one who still dries the laundry in the sun. It reminds me of home, of the wind that blows through the linen, the natural rhythm of the seasons, and of the past. As a child growing up I remember playing hide-and-seek in between the sheets, or playing ghosts emerging from

> black pin will do for them. If they forget to wear it, they will be easily forgiven. Does this note remind us of the law of the Mediterranean?—and the veiling of women, implicitly or explicitly, is a practice, whether we acknowledge it or not.

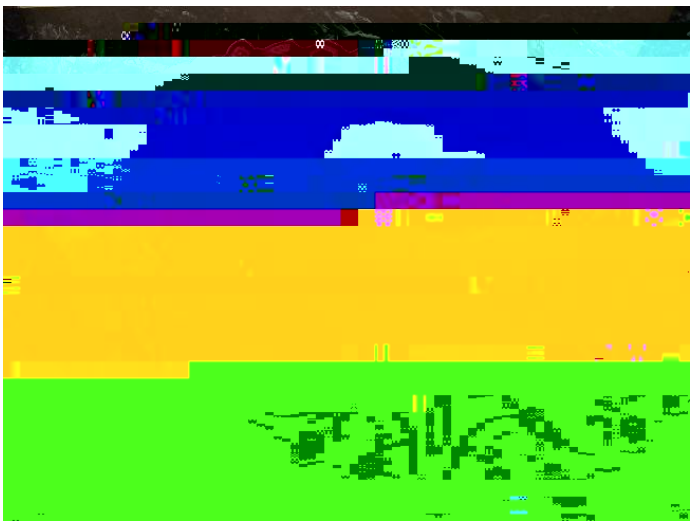
Black laundry, in my mind, is associated with a man only when he is a Catholic priest. In such a case, the black gown is taken to be more a mark of privilege than repression. Walter Benjamin recounts that when he was in Naples he heard people vehemently screaming and squabbling. A priest in a black gown was just about to be beaten because of his alleged misbehaviour. At that moment a holy procession went by and the sacred icon of the Virgin was followed by a group of devoted parishioners. As soon as the misbehaved priest stood up to bless the icon everyone knelt and the squabble came to a halt. Such is the power of the black gown in this 0 Td [(m)a4(g)6 tt7 Tf-4(w)1(be)4(ha)4(ve).W50 Tc 0 4 -0.004 T Td

silhouette of Vesuvius in the background. I am playing volleyball with my brother and sister over the clothesline, free from the laundry, and my aunts are talking to the neighbours with their baskets full of dry clothes. Literally, news travelled along the clotheslines. Ironically, in the pre-ipod, pre-email world, the sense of community was more intensely and tightly woven than in the contemporary globalized era, and the intermittent shadow of clotheslines concealed and at the same time revealed the complex social scene of a predominantly female universe.

***Il corredo,* or Trousseau**



If I hope that in the remotest villages of Southern Italy some barbarous customs are no longer practised—n(c)4(l)-2(ot)1TJf3Tc 0.154 b04 Tw 5.6iP <</MCID :/m</M0 Tc 0.1 Tw 110(e)

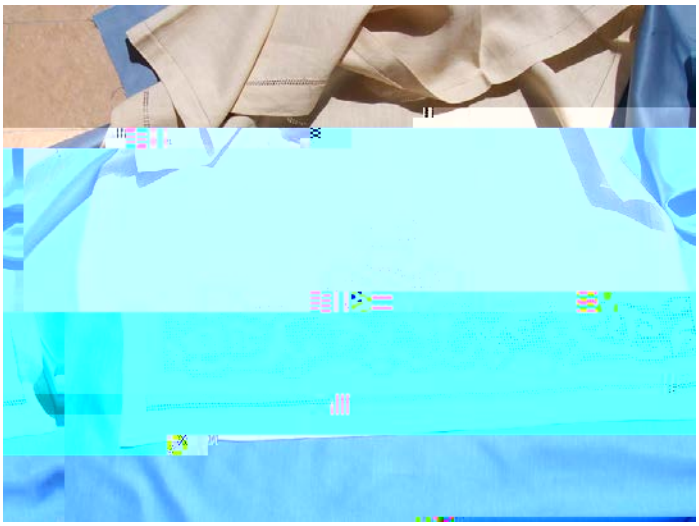


Among such things there used to be

only white before the wars. The Americans, after World War II, were generally praised for having brought colour to the biancheria.

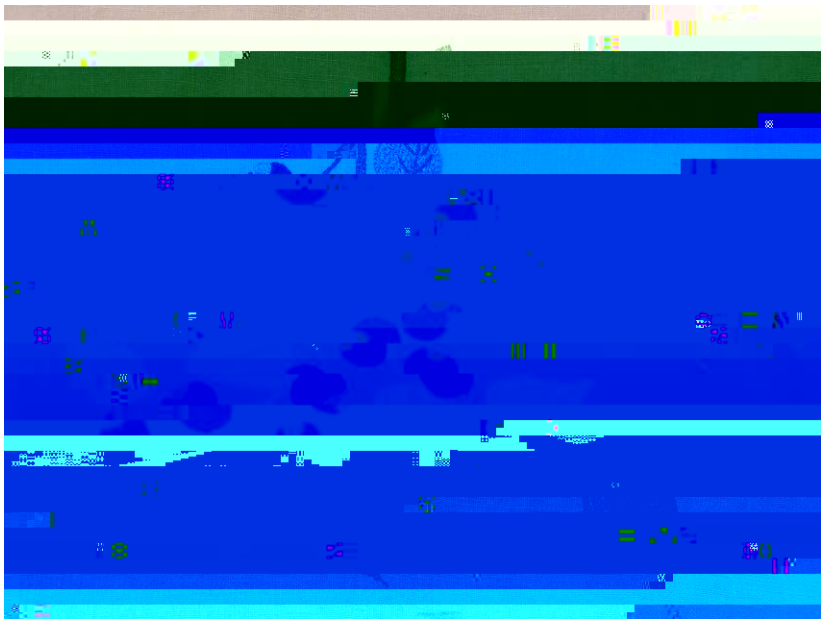
How the War Changed the ways of *Biancheria*

Particularly after 1945, there existed a very thriving market based on the American military supplies. My uncle, who was nineteen at the time, had his first coat made, and my aunt, who was fifteen, had her first frock. Both of these were made out of blankets. American blankets. Naples was so poor that American supplies were being pilfered when not [AmriWoj [([A)2(84(Tc 0.004h1c]TJ -)4(t)p)5 9.96 0w -25TJ -34 02d1l(b)-J 25.3 r A Tc (en)Tae

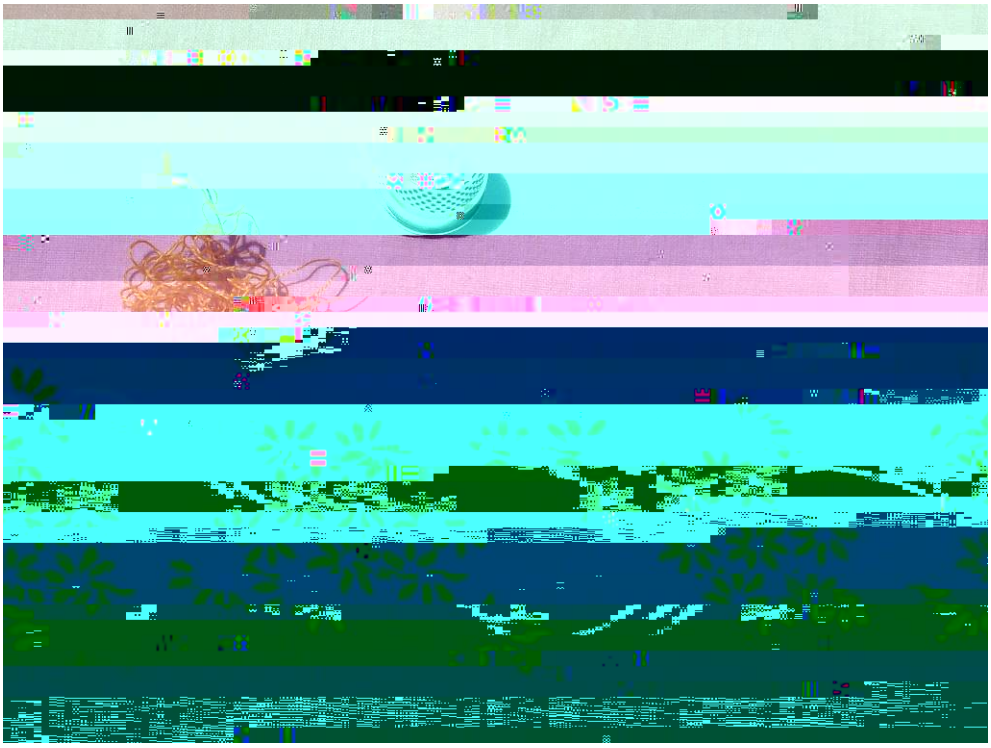


Sometimes a few girls got together and went to the most able one of them in order to have a piece of advice, or to copy a trendy pattern. Together, these women exchanged their knowledge of patterns and ideas.

Often the trousseau was a combination of old and new designs, a combination, that is, of designs that were traditionally used within the family (handed down from mother to

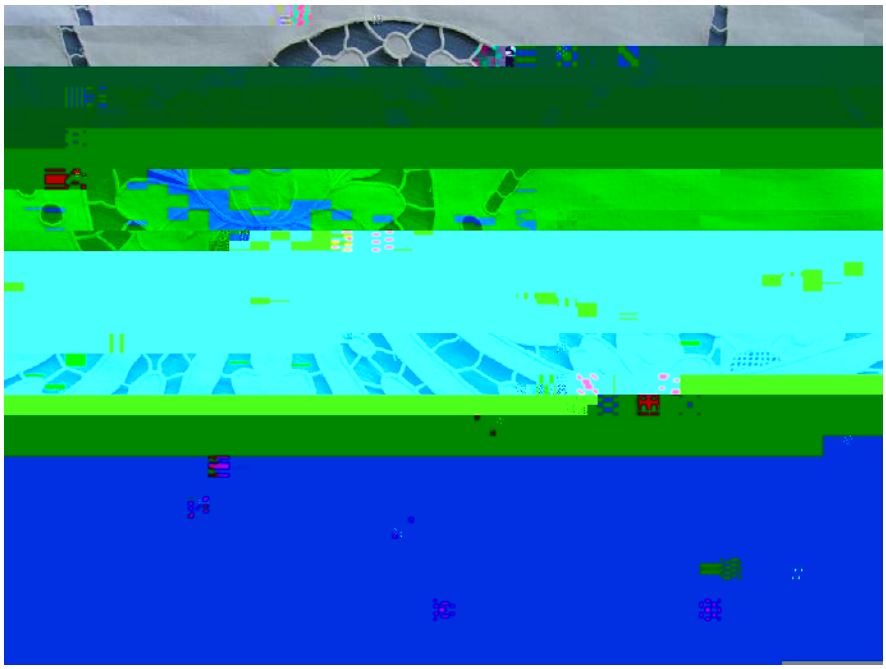


daughter) and more modern designs that particularly appealed to the young.



Patterns were floral, geometric,

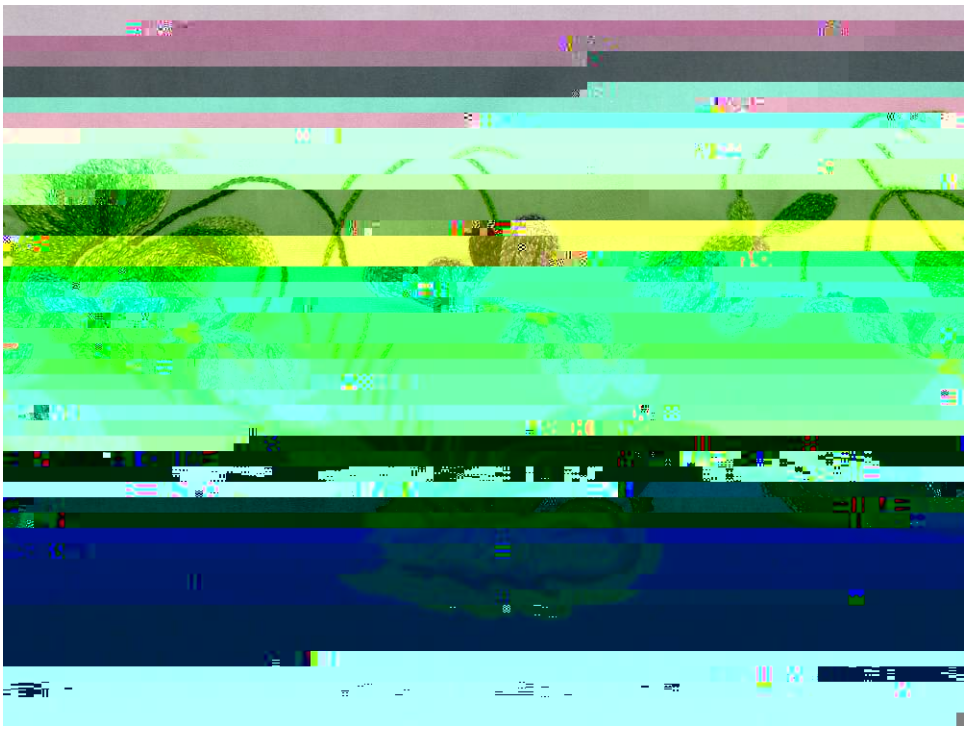
Almost in every case, the initials were those of a woman before marriage, as often there was no way to know the name of the future husband so much in advance, when the *corredo* was being embroidered.



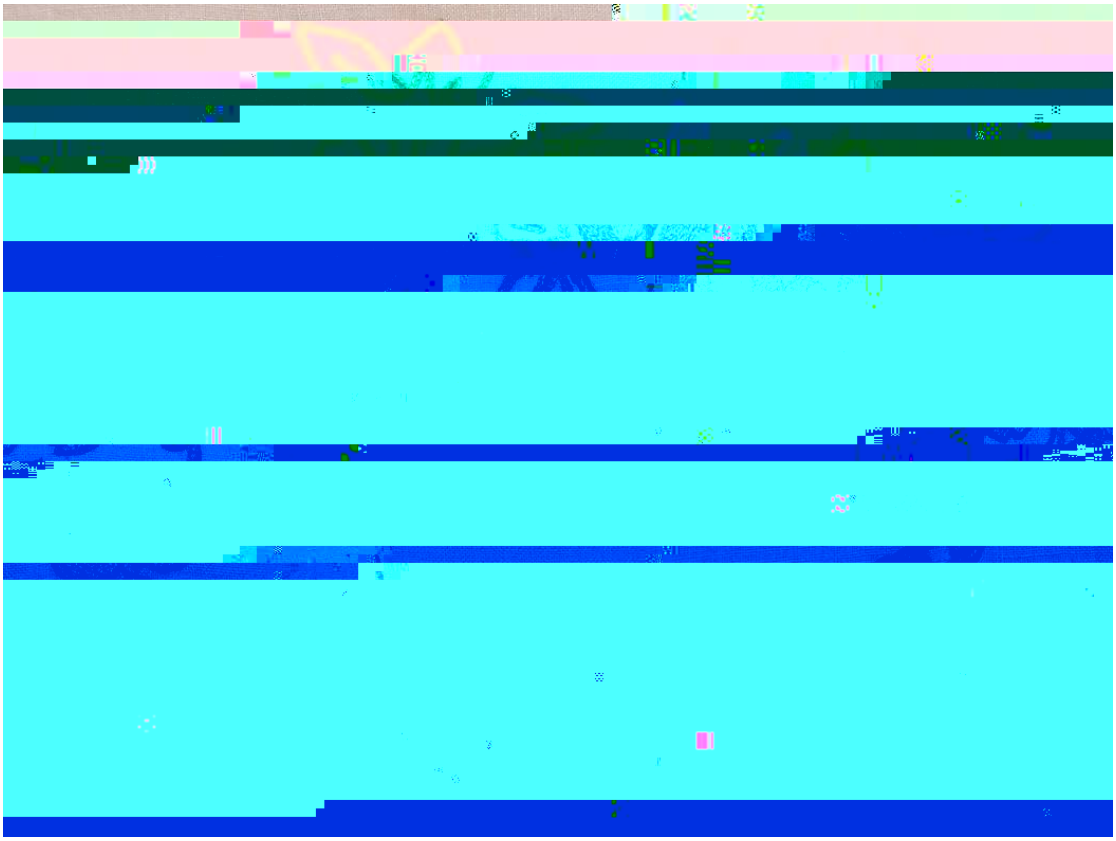
Therefore, women gave up their names on paper, but—indelibly—imprinted their own on fabrics.

There were many women who showed great artistry

at free hand-drawing.



Nuns were generally very well trained in the arts and crafts, and it was good practice among fairly wealthy families to send young women to the nuns in order for them to be trained in the art of embroidery, but also in painting and music.



In many cases young women were encouraged by the nuns to paint a variety of sacred icons or country scenes or flowers on cushions, table spreads, or on canvases that were framed and hung.

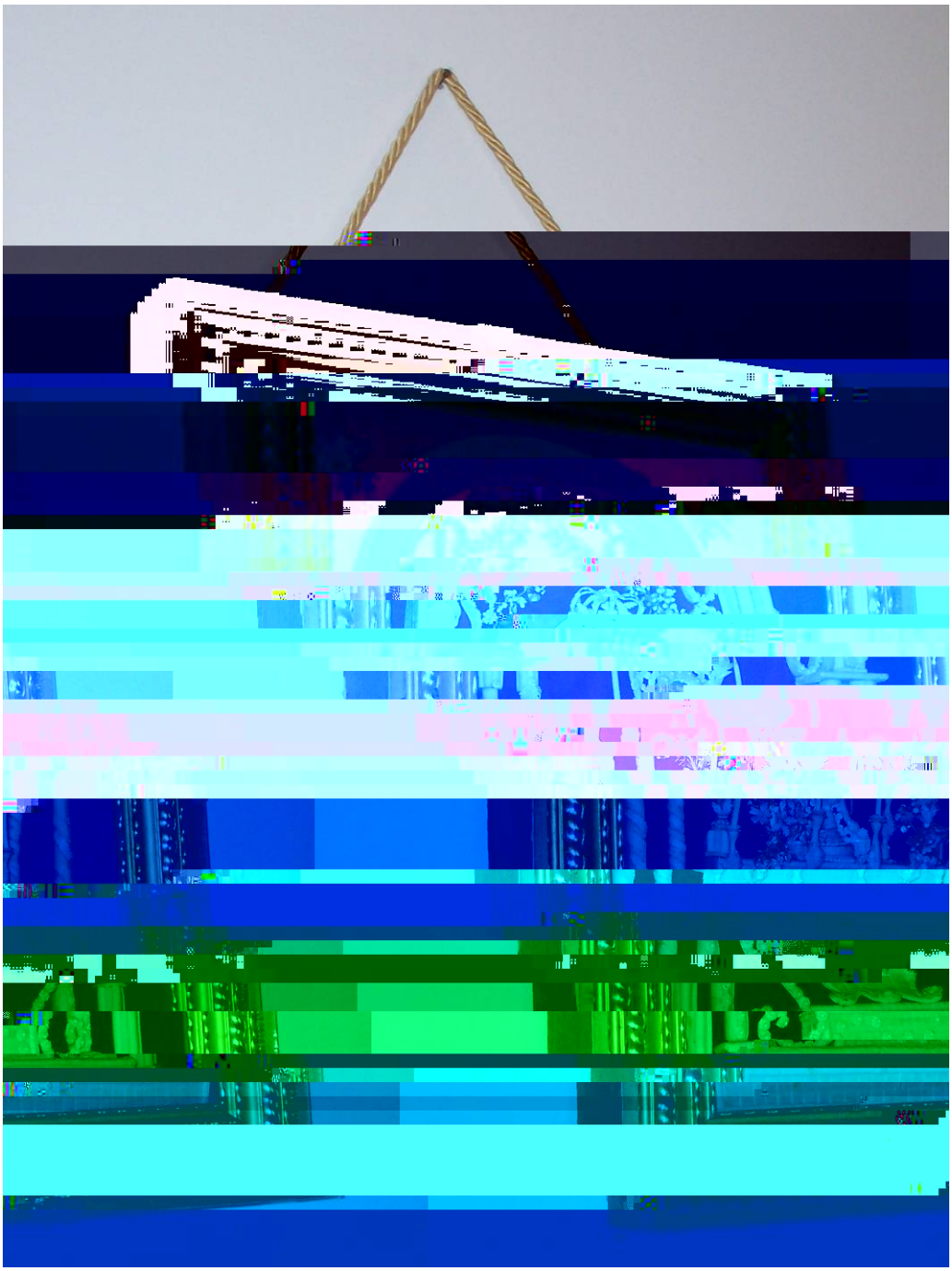
So, in honor of the saint patron of the town, when the sacred icon was brought out in procession, the best and most beautifully embroidered or crocheted bedspreads were

hanging down over the balcony. This tradition is still alive today. Often people do not use such bedspreads daily, but perhaps on three occasions: one being the day to honour and mark the passage of the saint, the second, the day when they gave birth, and the third, the day when they die. In all three occasions the bedspread functions as a social marker for the tightly knit community that is an eyewitness to the riches of one's family and household. To mark a household where there has recently been a birth in the family

people hang small cushions with big ribbons—pink for a baby girl and blue for a baby boy—so that everyone knows the good news.

The priest also needed a *corredo*, and his mother was the one who made it for him. In the

church, however, it was the whole community of believers, nuns, married and unmarried women, who contributed to the embellishment of altars and the church in general.



The Visible and the Invisible

If the word *biancheria* appeared for the first time in France at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the use of intimate pieces of clothing and tablecloths and bedspreads is, of course, very old. Each piece of *biancheria* has an unusual and complex history,

with different usages in different locations. For instance, in Venice and in Genoa the prostitutes were compelled to wear big underwear, as a mark of their profession. During the French Revolution women wore a tight shirt under a flimsy dress. Later on, the bourgeoisie became obsessed with covering, wrapping, burying all nudity; but the stronger the fear of the naked body the richer, the bigger and more