

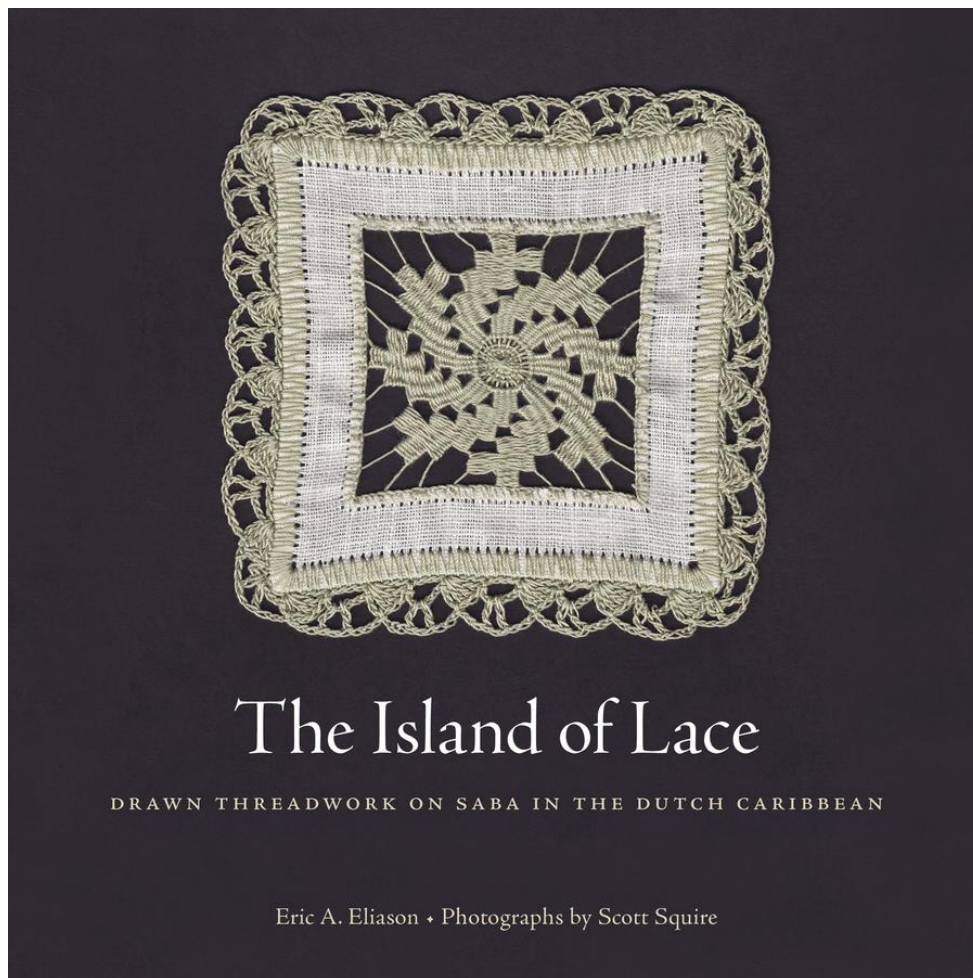
**Review**

**Eric A. Eliason:**

***The island of lace: Drawn threadwork on Saba  
in the Dutch Caribbean***

Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2019. 196 p.  
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*Reviewed by Ryan Espersen*



Deftly combining the anthropology of Saba lace with the meticulous care of an art historian, *The island of lace: Drawn threadwork on Saba in the Dutch Caribbean* fills a critical gap in Saba's cultural history that has never been the subject of a thorough study. Saba, a small, steep volcanic island of just 13 square kilometres, was settled by the Dutch in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century but never developed into a plantation economy or a trade centre like its neighbouring islands. Rather, most residents, along with enslaved Africans, subsisted through agriculture and fishing. While originally conceived as a follow-up to the author's first work, *The fruit of her hands: Saba lace history and patterns*, the book combines thorough research of the origins, economic development, and cultural relevance of Saba lace through time, together with an exhaustive index of new and surviving patterns. Nearly three hundred figures are included, with notable emphasis on Saba lace practitioners both past and present. Eliason's work is divided into three sections.

The first, and most novel, discusses the origins of Saba lace, and the local economic conditions of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that incentivized Saba women to profit from lace production as Saba became known as the island of women from the number of men working abroad. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Saba women exported lace to their own zealously guarded clients in the U.S.A. to account for thirty to forty percent of Saba's annual GDP. Literate women found great leverage in this enterprise, allowing them to find new American clients while keeping their addresses a closely guarded secret. Those that were illiterate, consequently, found themselves working for literate client-address holders to create a new working class on Saba exclusive to women. The 1930s saw attrition of their American client base from the Depression and following further disruption to global trade during World War II, Saba lace production was no longer a viable industry on the island. Lace production gradually shifted to a hobby, and its practice declined steadily until a small revival by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century with the rise of the tourism industry. Saba lace is now publicly promoted by a small cadre of women on the island known as the *lace ladies*.

The second section is a thorough photographic database of known Saba lace patterns organized by corners, borders, pattern stitches, fillet work, and some miscellany. All patterns are described according to their common name, and in many cases, their evolution is traced according to individual practitioners through time.

The third section discusses the cultural continuity of Saba lace, and profiles present-day Saba lace practitioners, including oral histories of their families and their identity relative to the craft. This work is an important contribution towards preserving and promoting Saba's intangible cultural heritage (ICH), as well as the extent of unique ICH practices across the Caribbean Netherlands. *The island of lace* is particularly timely as Saba lace was recently selected as one of the island's

three elements submitted for inscription into the Dutch National UNESCO ICH register. For a second printing, a list of figures is desirable, along with a revision of the bibliography as some references are incorrect. This book will be of great interest to Caribbean art historians, anthropologists, and tourists to Saba alike.

### **About the reviewer**

Ryan Espersen's work has focused on the historical and pre-Columbian archaeology of the Dutch Caribbean and the northeastern Caribbean over the past fifteen years. His research focuses particularly upon power structures, ideology, powered landscapes, and how these relate to the material record. He received his PhD from Leiden University (Netherlands) in 2017, lived on the island of Saba in the Dutch Caribbean from 2011 to 2018, and founded the Saba Archaeological Center (known as SABARC) in 2012 as a youth-centered NGO to help Sabans participate in the discovery of their own history through archaeology. Over the years as Saba's resident archaeologist, he grew SABARC into a museum with a fully furnished archaeology lab and artifact storage facility. He led surveys and excavations on over fifty terrestrial and maritime archaeological sites between Saba and St. Eustatius, and along with the Saba Conservation Foundation and the Island Government of Saba, led the establishment of the Saba Heritage Trail and the Saba National Park, both of which were opened by the Dutch Royal family. He also served as Saba's representative to the Dutch Caribbean UNESCO working group, is a member of the Dutch Caribbean maritime heritage working group with the Dutch Ministry of Culture, and the French Caribbean maritime history working group with the Université des Antilles in Martinique. Since February 2022 he is a Marie Curie fellow with the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research at the University of Cambridge, and lead researcher for the multidisciplinary project "No dollar too dark: Piracy, privateering, and illegal slave trading in the northeast Caribbean, early 19th century." His research has been published in *Antiquity*, *Historical Archaeology*, the *Journal of Archaeological Science*, and the *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*.

