(RE-)MAKING IRISH LACE

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Displaying Irish styles of lace—old and new, historical and reimagined—this exhibition celebrates the ingenuity and handwork of women in Ireland and Western New York.

The 19th-century lacemaking industry in Ireland arose as a commercial response to poverty and famine. Numerous convents, philanthropic societies, and wealthy patrons promoted widespread instruction in lacemaking, hoping to create a means for poor women to earn income. Conversely, shrewd entrepreneurs saw an opportunity for exploiting low-wage, skilled labor. Given the variety of motivations driving it, the organization of lace production ranged from cooperative workrooms run by nuns to factory "schools" demanding indentured servitude.

Over time, distinctive regional styles of lace developed across Ireland and began receiving international recognition, both positive and negative, as they were sent to industrial exhibitions like the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago. Although some styles, like Limerick and Irish Crochet, achieved periods of wide popularity, Irish lace was largely undervalued in its day, criticized as well-executed, but lacking in fine taste—that is, the tastes of Continental upper classes.

(Re-)Making Irish Lace explores the hidden labor of an elite textile, demonstrating the artistic achievements of average women, many desperately poor, who harnessed their hands and their imaginations to support themselves and their families. Showing fine historical examples of the most common Irish styles from the collection of Buffalonian Molly Carroll, this exhibition pairs them with the work of contemporary women living in Western New York who, through their own creativity, re-imagine Irish lace for a new time and place.

STYLES OF IRISH LACE

Irish laces range from the bold, fanciful varieties of Irish Crochet and Youghal (pronounced YAWL), to the delicate creations of Limerick and Carrickmacross. Far from being comprehensive, this exhibition presents a sampling of some of the most characteristic and enduring styles of lace developed during Ireland's brief period of handmade, commercial production.

Irish forms of lace were latecomers, invented only in the final waning years of an international, handmade lace industry. Commercial lace production in Ireland began in the 1820s, first as a minor cottage industry in the town of Carrickmacross, and like handmade manufacture across Europe, fizzled out following WWI. Major shifts in fashion and technology made handmade lace an untenable business venture.

Many of the characteristic Irish laces began as conscious re-inventions of much older European forms, but these adaptations were quickly transformed by local circumstances and tastes. Many of the motifs that gained prevalence were the symbols of Ireland like the rose of Sharon and the shamrock. The seed of invention was planted by philanthropists, religious orders, and entrepreneurs hoping to relieve poverty or to turn a profit. The flowering of Irish lace, however, can be attributed to the innovations of skilled women who crafted distinctive stylistic elements. The resulting varieties, each associated with the location where they originated, reflect an Irish history of beauty flourishing even in the face of hardship.

Cover image: Detail of Irish Crochet, 1900-1910, from the collection of Molly Carroll.

IRISH CROCHET

Sisters of the Ursuline Order of Cork adapted popular European laces—namely, Venetian and Flemish needlepoints—to develop the style that would become known as Irish Crochet. In 1845, the nuns opened the first “Crochet Centre” at the convent where they taught local women.

Irish Crochet is made with a very fine crochet hook. Cotton thread is worked over a cord foundation. Bulkier than laces made with needles or bobbins, Irish Crochet is also more sculptural, renowned for its fanciful, three-dimensional quality. Though sometimes denigrated as merely a “craft lace,” Irish Crochet enjoyed jolts of international popularity in the 1850s and again at the turn of the 20th century. Sturdier than some other laces—and much faster to make—Irish Crochet was ideal for fashioning all-over lace garments.

Finished pieces were often the product of multiple makers. Women made motifs separately, drawing upon traditional patterns, or also commonly, inventing their own. These would then be gathered and arranged, sometimes on patterns, before being connected by “fillings,” the decorative chains and bars between motifs. The resulting textile clearly represented a creative collaboration, balancing shared tradition and personal innovation.

YOUGHAL

Youghal lace has been treasured, then and now, for its abundance of delicate details. Known as a “flat point” needlelace, this style lacks the raised relief of Irish Crochet. Youghal, however, is equally showy in results, being constructed from tiny, labor intensive stitches. The incredibly nimble-fingered women who made this lace demonstrated an impressive repertoire of fancy fillings.

Much like Irish Crochet, Youghal was a style developed by nuns to provide work for impoverished families during the famine starting in 1845. Mother Mary Ann Smith of the Presentation Convent in the town of Youghal studied old pieces of Italian and French needle laces in their holdings for inspiration. The style that emerged spread to other locations along the southern coast, like Kenmare, Killarney, and New Ross.

CARRICKMACROSS

Near the town of Carrickmacross in Co. Monaghan, philanthropists saw an opportunity to provide meaningful work to poor women. A rector’s wife, Mrs. Grey Porter, is usually credited with being the first to foster a local cottage industry in the 1820s by teaching classes using designs she had adapted from Italian examples. By the 1840s, Carrickmacross lace had taken on a distinctive style with more than a dozen industrial schools to teach it. Carrickmacross lacemaking was preserved by the sisters of the Convent of St. Louis who continued teaching it long after the collapse of a strong commercial industry.

Esteemed for its delicacy, Carrickmacross lace is far more fragile than Irish Crochet or Youghal. This style is made by applying motifs of woven cloth—usually a very fine cambric or organdy—onto a machine net. Additional ornamentation is added by elaborately embroidering the net ground or removing areas of net to create open spaces.

LIMERICK

Like Carrickmacross, Limerick lace is a machine net with hand embroidered designs, but without the addition of an appliqued fabric. Limerick was highly valued for its flexible and diaphanous texture.

Unlike the other styles of Irish lace displayed in this exhibit, Limerick was not initiated to combat poverty, but rather to exploit it. In 1828 Englishman Charles Walker, attracted by a cheap labor force in Ireland, opened a lacemaking factory at Mount Kennet in Limerick. Although Limerick lace production began as a purely commercial project, it was later revived and sustained through philanthropic efforts. Convents again became important centers, such as the Good Shepherd Convent in Limerick, the Convent of Mercy in Kinsale, the Benada Abbey in Sligo, and the Presentation Convent in Cahirciveen.

IRISH LACE RE-IMAGINED

"With [European] lace, people always presume it's the Victorian lady sitting in her parlor. No, it was 300 years of a cutthroat business. And then once it died out, then it became a leisure activity for genteel ladies." – Lace-maker Joan Sulecki

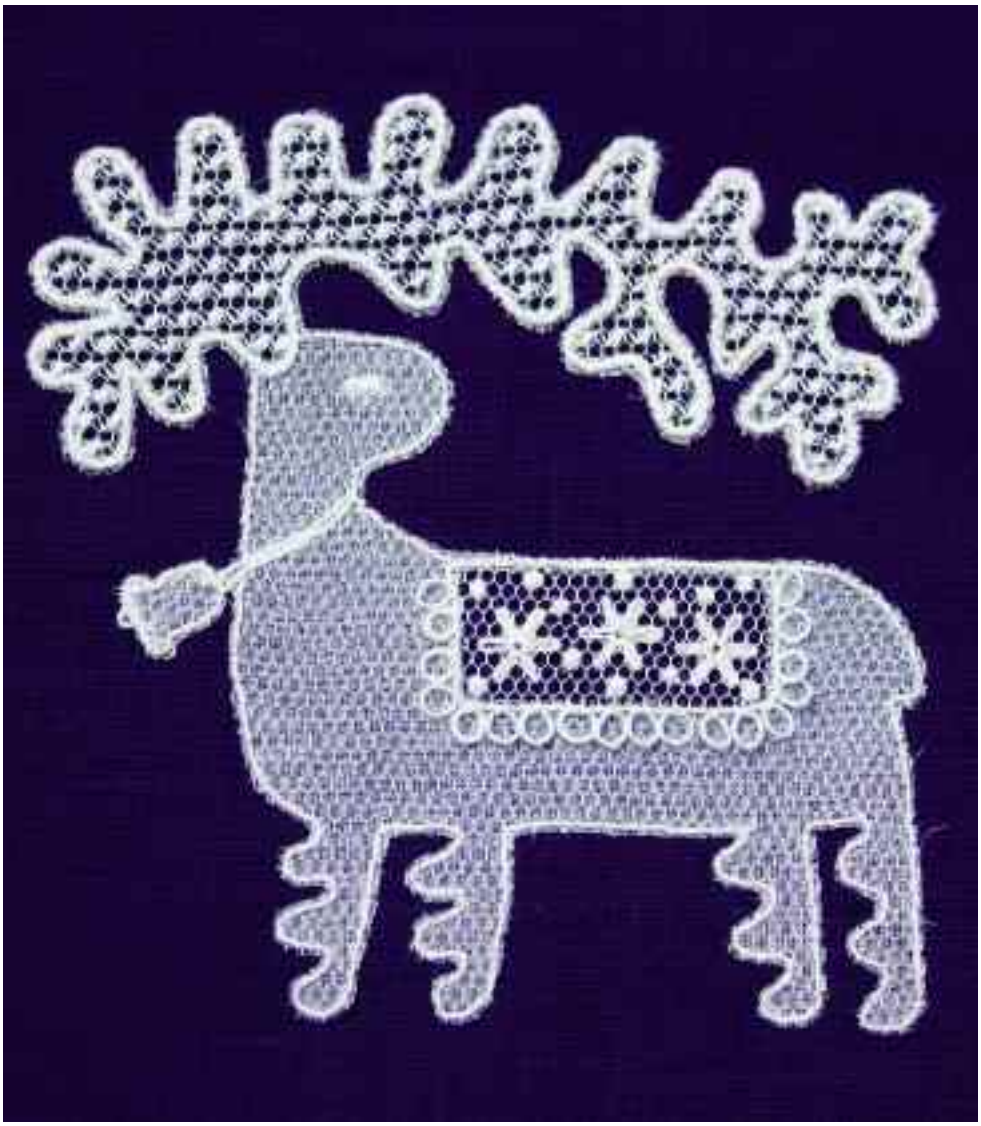
The handmade lace industry collapsed after the 1920s, unable to survive slackening demand and the competition of improved mechanical methods. Irish styles of lace, however, did not disappear. Today, antique laces continue to circulate, given new lives by restorers who clean, repair, and remake them for future owners.

The skills employed to make Irish lace have also been preserved or revived, though the forms have been adapted to contemporary needs and tastes.

In the last few decades, there has been a resurgence of interest in Irish lace. Ireland, with the help of the European Union, has opened numerous lace museums and centers. New generations of devoted lace-makers have reverse engineered lost styles, like Youghal, or revived ones that had been limping along, like Limerick. Lace has become an important part of Ireland's tourist industry.

Though we are unlikely to ever again see a handmade lace industry in Ireland, serious lace-makers continue to devise successful careers as instructors and scholars. Not only do they publish, but they also travel, providing hands-on training, workshops, seminars, and lectures around the world. Their dedication helps feed networks of enthusiastic hobbyists. Interest is further fostered by the large array of regional, national, and international craft guilds and organizations that provide opportunities for instruction and fellowship, as well as spur creativity.

Like most traditional arts, lace experiences periods of decline and resurgence. "Things have their cycles," local lace-maker Joan Sulecki reasons. "Someone rediscovers it and it has a little burst of activity. There's always something old to be rediscovered. It's just an evolution. Things we make now—our businesses—a hundred years from now may become hobbies, too. We just don't know which ones they're going to be."



In many ways, *(Re-)Making Irish Lace* is an attempt to understand how one traditional art form has been interpreted by different groups of people over nearly two hundred years. Such a goal, however, is challenging. As I began the historical research for this exhibition, I was disappointed by the paucity of scholarship available about the early Irish lace-makers. History has instead privileged the voices of the philanthropists, entrepreneurs, and art critics who were involved in the Irish lacemaking industry to various degrees. While we *can* no longer ask the early lace-makers about their interpretations or their standards of beauty, we can seek out the people living today who are re-imagining Irish lace in a new era. In Buffalo, New York, Molly Carroll collects, restores, and sells antique lace with the hope of keeping its history alive. Her beautiful collection of Irish lace forms the bulk of this exhibition. Mother and daughter, Mary Lou and Joan Sulecki, are present-day lace-makers who, having studied in Ireland, adapt Irish styles to their lives in Western New York.

Christmas Ornament (original design in the style of Carrickmacross Lace), Mary Lou Sulecki, 2005. This work won first prize in Christmas ornament contest in Paducah, KY.

MOLLY CARROLL: LACE COLLECTOR, RESTORER, AND SELLER

A collector contributes to the preservation of important objects. Their most valuable skill is the ability to see what others ignore. Buffalonian Molly Carroll has spent the past three decades collecting and studying all sorts of lace. She started, however, with handmade Irish lace. "I'm extremely proud of this [collection of] Irish lace," she explains. "In a time when no one was paying attention to Irish lace, I did. Because I thought, *this* is my heritage."

Irish lace appealed to Molly for a number of reasons—some practical (it was affordable at the time) and some aesthetic (she thought it extremely lovely). But her appreciation went deeper. Molly saw a reflection of her ancestral roots. She says, "In the famine times, I knew that my family came from Ireland [to New York] during those terrible times. They were not lace-makers. They came to this country and were able to own some land. And so then when I saw the product of so many Irish women, especially in the west [of the country, where my family originated], that they were making this lace to keep their families fed, I thought it's contemporary with what was happening in my own family. They had to leave Ireland. Those who stayed had to find other ways to keep alive. So that is a very personal connection."

"COLLECTING IS A VERY SPECIAL BIRD, BECAUSE IT'S VERY TIME CONSUMING, VERY COURAGEOUS OF ME, A LITTLE BIT WACKY, AND ALSO EXPENSIVE. I ALSO LIVED WITH FOUR MEN–MY HUSBAND AND THREE SONS. SO, PART OF ME SAID, YOU KNOW, I HAD TO HAVE THIS KIND OF FEMALE COSTUME THING."

-MOLLY CARROLL

For Molly, collecting Irish lace not only preserves precious objects, but also the historical importance she attaches to them. "People study art," she acknowledges, "but they don't necessarily study *women's* work, because it's considered…trivial! I feel a tremendous kinship with the women who came before us. [Irish lace] represents *hand labor* of the anonymous female, the poor female. They supported themselves." And they did it by making something beautiful. While many of the lace industries across Europe were under the managerial and creative control of men, Irish lace—organized by convents and benevolent socialites—was primarily a women's endeavor. Molly understands that Irish lace is more than art; it is an enduring record of the accomplishments of poor women that would have otherwise been lost to history.

Molly not only collects old pieces of lace, she hopes to bring them back to life for others to use and wear. Most objects that Molly takes into her collection need some work. Pieces of antique lace are often dingy with layers of destructive dirt and dust. Collars, cuffs, and other clothing worn against the skin may be yellowed or discolored from natural oils and perspiration. Washing, however, can destroy most handmade laces by loosening the fibers. The delicate layers pull away from each other or simply rot. Bleaches wreak irreparable damage. Through much study and experimentation, Molly has discovered safe ways to bathe most laces, returning them as close as possible to a "natural cream color." When she described this process to me, she recalled that her daughter-in-law, before she married her son Colin, asked him incredulously: "your mother *cleans* things for a living?" Laughing, she said to me, "doesn't that sound *Irish*? Like the [stereotype of the] Irish washer woman!"

Molly Carroll's grandmother, for whom she was named, was the first generation born in the U.S., near Syracuse. Here, Molly Bresnahan (later Mullen) is shown in 1908 wearing a bolero jacket of Irish lace.

Pieces of lace that have been improperly washed or otherwise ravaged by time, Molly repairs by hand. Molly describes herself as a "fussy" person, and this personality suits a lace restorer. The activity is exacting, requiring close and patient work. If done well, it is also a thankless task, because the results should be invisible. She tells me that repair work might be "calming for about two hours, but no longer." After that, the process becomes too tedious—for the fingers, but especially for the eyes. For this reason, she was never drawn to actual lacemaking which demands far more time with slower results. Being a restorer has only deepened her appreciation of the lace-maker's undertaking.

JOAN AND MARY LOU SULECKI: LACE-MAKERS

Handmade lace is preserved, revived, and re-imagined by individual makers. In Buffalo, New York, the Suleckis have learned many forms of traditional lace, including some Irish. Mary Lou Sulecki makes Carrickmacross and Limerick lace, and her daughter Joan makes Youghal.

Unlike their friend Molly Carroll, Joan and Mary Lou have no ancestral ties to Ireland. They were attracted to Irish lace purely for its beauty. While they appreciate knowing "how it started and why it started," the social history of Irish lace, or any lace for that matter, is a small part of their practice. Joan and Mary Lou understand lace through their hands, through action. Nevertheless, they wish to honor the historical roots of Irish lace-making, even as they feel free to adopt it.

Mary Lou and Joan have had the opportunity to study with some of the world's leading experts in Irish lace, including Nellie Ó Cléirigh, Mary Shields, Sheila Reagan, and Veronica Stuart. In 2004, the Suleckis travelled to Ireland in order to improve their skills at the source. They spent a week taking hands-on classes at An Grianán, a residential adult education college managed by the Irish Countrywomen's Association. In modern times, Ireland is still regarded as the creative epicenter of Irish laces which have become a successful tourist attraction. Even though they traveled to Ireland, at An Grianán, Joan and Mary Lou were surrounded by other Americans also hoping to learn something "authentically" Irish.

While Irish lace-makers continue to revive, preserve, and promote it to the rest of the world, traditional Irish lace has indeed changed with time. The techniques for making traditional styles have remained largely the same. Contemporary patterns, however, have come to reflect lace's new purpose. Traditionally, lace was always used as an embellishment, whether for the human body or for domestic interiors. According to Mary Lou, hobbyists working in their spare time, like she and Joan, prefer to make small things they can frame or easily display as handmade art. Consequently, designs tend to be less linear and repetitive, and instead composed around a central image. Colorful threads and nontraditional motifs may be incorporated. In a culture of mass-produced conveniences, we like to show off our hard-won hand labor. Unlike the poor Irish women toiling at the turn of the 20th century, today's makers expect recognition for their individual work.

Perhaps because new designs look so very different, contemporary teachers may insist that certain technical elements *must* be present. As Mary Lou was showing me a Christmas ornament she had made—a stylized reindeer sporting an impressive rack of antlers—she warned, "There are some people who would say that's not Carrickmacross." The design is indeed nontraditional—one invented by Mary Lou—but what calls the ornament's authenticity into question hinges instead on the use of specific stitches, namely stitches known as "pops" and "loops." Pops are created by outlining a single opening in the tulle with buttonhole stitches. Loops make up the twirled border found on many, but certainly not all, historical examples of Carrickmacross. Wanting to make "authentic" versions of Carrickmacross, Mary Lou usually tries to incorporate these elements. Yet, she also feels free to re-interpret them. Rather than adding the traditional twirling edge, for example, she references loops with a tiny row along the border of the reindeer's saddle. Although Mary Lou has encountered different understandings of what makes Irish laces "authentic," she considers her Irish teachers to be the most important authorities.

After the invention of lace-making machines, a public and international debate arose around the very definition of lace. What makes something *real* lace? Similar debates continue today, especially in relation to revivals of traditional styles. Now people ask, what makes something *real* Carrickmacross, Limerick, or Youghal? Joan argues that we should embrace the diversity of approaches to tradition. "Some people want to really replicate the traditional and never vary," Joan says. "And some people want to take [the traditional] as inspiration and move it forward. And I think both are good. I think it depends on personality. I like extending things." The prevalence of modern publishing is a factor. Even as it has the ability to spread information more widely, it also has a tendency to limit variation by providing a definitive and verifiable version. Joan believes publication can actually stymie the vibrancy of tradition. *Living* traditions, after all, are responsive and adaptable. "Although they're well-researched," she explains, "20th century books can't really capture all the variation in a lace. An introductory book will have to document the typical, and that's all that many of us see. Through time many lace-makers certainly did the typical, but others did it differently, either accidentally or intentionally, probably at the very same time. Lace was made [by hand] for three hundred years. Sixteenth-century Flanders did not look like nineteenth-century Flanders. Innovation is a part of it. And it's the exciting part to a lot of it."

Traditions are shaped and understood through the creative choices of individuals. If its history is any indication, Irish lace will be transformed by diverse hands for years to come.

Goldfinch and Thistles (original design in the style of Limerick Lace), Mary Lou Sulecki, 2004.
This work won the first prize and the popular vote at the 2004 International Old Lacers annual convention.

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