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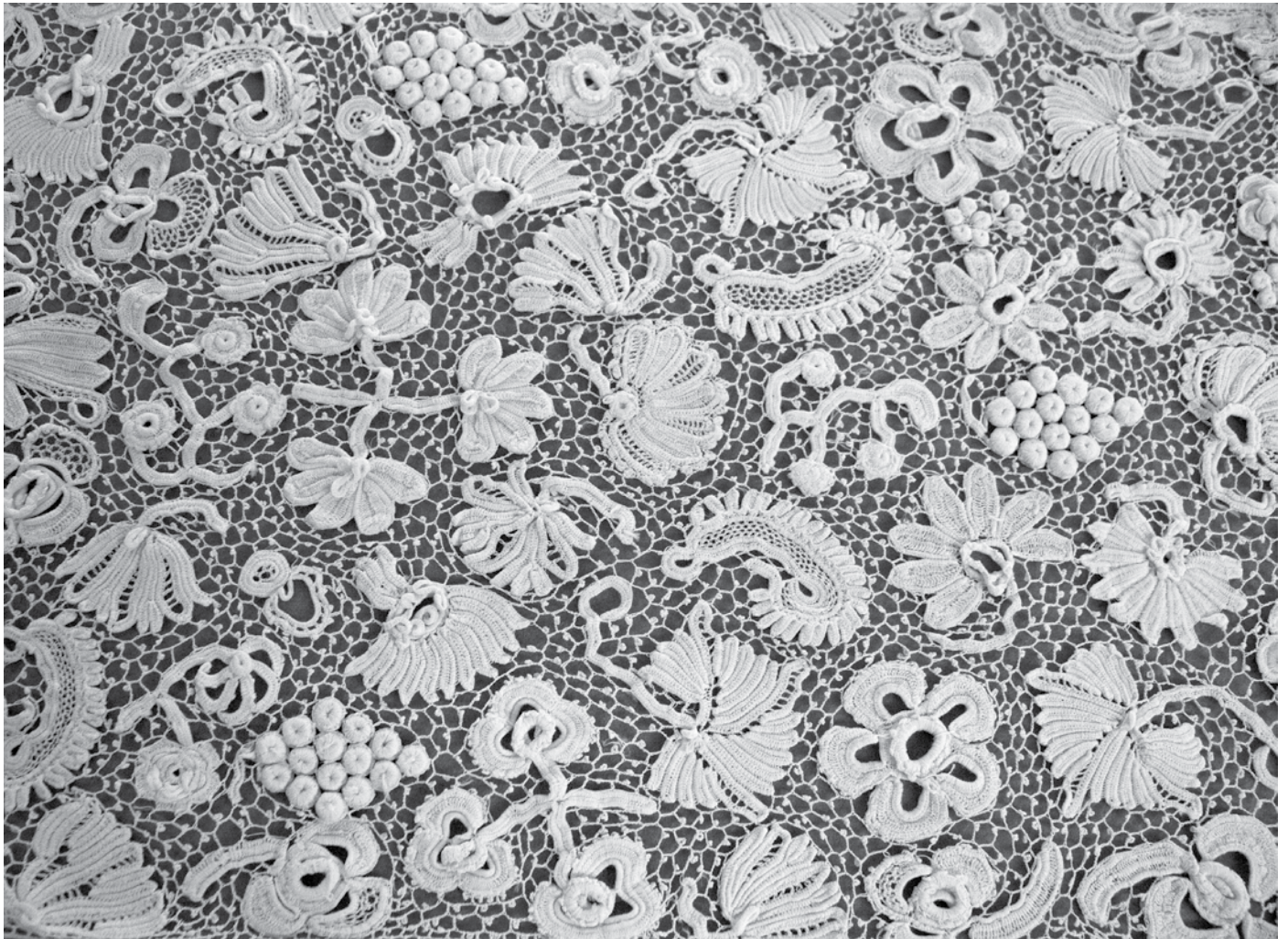
Reimagining Irish Lace in Western New York

BY CARRIE HERTZ

In 2011, I began research that would culminate in “(Re-)Making Irish Lace,” an exhibition that ran at the Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University (CAM) from July 15–December 2, 2012. The mandate of CAM’s Folk Arts Program is to document and interpret the cultural lives of Western

New Yorkers, but like anywhere in the world, the region is marked by global interconnectivity with ongoing histories of migration, tourism, and social networks supported by technology. A diasporic Irish identity, for example, matters to a good number of people in the area. “(Re-)Making

Irish Lace” attempted to understand how a particular art form has been interpreted by different groups of people, locally and abroad, for nearly 200 years, comparing past and recent practice. Fundamentally, I wanted to see how the unfurling story of Irish lace is playing out in the daily lives of



Yardage of Irish Crochet, 1890–1910. From the collection of Molly Carroll. Courtesy of Molly Carroll.

Buffalonians. What does this tell us about contemporary efforts to preserve and revive traditions that developed under circumstances that no longer exist? And, as these art forms move out from their geographical and temporal origins, who determines the direction of their development? This essay offers two case studies of current practitioners living in Western New York, with the hope of shedding light on the negotiation of meaning and aesthetics as it relates to Ireland's recent efforts to promote its lacemaking traditions around the world. First, let me briefly sketch the historical context that informs current activities.

Handmade Lacemaking in Ireland

Handmade Irish lace was always a global product, sold first to wealthy aristocrats throughout Europe, and then, increasingly, marketed worldwide as a token of Ireland. The country's lacemaking industry was a latecomer to the international marketplace, arising in the 19th century 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. Many of the characteristic Irish laces began as conscious imitations of popular Continental styles, but these adaptations were quickly transformed by local circumstances.

Regional styles emerged and matured; they were named for their main centers of production. Some of the new motifs that gained prevalence were the conventional symbols of Ireland like the rose of Sharon and the shamrock. As samples were sent to industrial exhibitions, like the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago, Irish laces began receiving international recognition, both positive and negative.

Though some styles achieved periods of widespread acclaim, winning first prizes and even enjoying the patronage of monarchs and popes, most were largely undervalued and criticized for lacking refinement. Common stylistic features often diverged from the preferences of affluent buyers who tended to favor delicate scale and perfect symmetry. The famed lace industries in France and Belgium relied on ateliers and design studios to produce stylish patterns that suited discerning, high fashion tastes. In contrast, most Irish lace production, directed more by philanthropic necessity than business acumen, had neither such clear artistic direction nor hierarchical structures of management. In some places, decisions regarding design were left to the discretion of makers who pleased themselves.

Irish Crochet and Youghal, arguably two of the more distinctive Irish styles, received some of the harshest reviews from critics. In 1897, textile expert and Englishman Alan S. Cole, after touring lacemaking centers, complained that 'the trade leaves the invention of ornamental forms for crochet work practically to the workers themselves, who have no training in drawing and consequently cannot produce properly designed patterns' (quoted in Ballard 1992, 45). He, like many Victorians, preferred lace "composed of simple geometric forms repeated in an ordered manner" (Cole 1888). Many examples of the Irish styles, in contrast, look spontaneously arranged with dense, busy flourishes.

There were others like Cole who hoped to improve the widespread commercial appeal of Irish lace by encouraging makers to conform to international market demand. Philanthropists and entrepreneurs compiled "study collections" of the finest laces from around the world. They held design competitions with cash prizes and offered scholarships to promising workers, so they could attend prestigious art schools in Ireland and England. Most Irish lacemakers had not been trained in drawing. Some convents provided classes in art, but nuns were hardly well versed in the world of fashion (Ó Cléirigh and Rowe 1995, 17–31).

Attempts at "improvement" seem to have had mixed results. When award-winning designs were circulated to manufacturing centers without being adopted, Cole decried that 'innovations are regarded with timidity' by Irish lacemakers (quoted in Ballard 1992, 50). It is more likely that women, working closely together within small or rural communities, inspired each other. Probably some workers cared little beyond getting paid. We cannot assume that their goals were always aligned with the interests of critics, socialites, businessmen, and buyers. Evidence, like Cole's account, indicates that individual women invented or modified some conventional motifs themselves, based on their own preferences and improvisations. Looking again at examples of Youghal and Irish Crochet from this period, we see pieces of lace crowded with demonstrations of virtuosic needle skills and whimsical shapes. Youghal, for example, has been described as "exuberant chaos," "idiosyncratic," and as a "perplexing perversity" (Kurella 1991, 4). Why would poor workers take the extra time, only to make their products less desirable for sale? The frequency of "over-decorated" Irish laces instead suggests that makers shared a different aesthetic—one that valued imaginative and complicated stitchwork over careful, reserved compositions. As many were not engaged in typical factory-style production with explicit directives, perhaps boredom was staved off by creativity. As curator Linda Ballard points out, in the absence of better information, we cannot know how much creative control individual makers had over the outcome of their work, though it likely varied greatly (1992, 53).

The handmade lace industry across Europe collapsed after the 1920s, unable to survive slackening demand and the competition of improved mechanical production methods. Irish styles of lace, however, did not disappear. Antique laces continue to circulate today, given new lives by restorers, dealers, and collecting institutions. This material legacy fuels interest in both the past and future of Irish lacemaking. Over the last few decades, the Irish government,



Molly Carroll, 2012. Photo by Carrie Hertz.

with the help of the European Union, has opened numerous lace museums and centers throughout the country. Organizations like the Guild of Irish Lacemakers, the Irish Countrywoman's Association, the Royal Dublin Society, and the Education and Training Boards provide a network of support for enthusiasts and practitioners. New generations of devoted lacemakers have reverse engineered once lost styles, like Youghal, or revived others that had been limping along, like Limerick. Lace has again become an important part of Ireland's tourist industry, now as a conscious heritage project. With this upsurge in interest, a growing number of women are devising successful careers as international instructors and experts, publishing and traveling around the world to provide hands-on training, workshops, seminars, and lectures

to groups of eager hobbyists. Rather than exporting lace products, entrepreneurs in Ireland are exporting techniques.

As I began looking into the origins of Irish lace, I was disappointed by the paucity of scholarship available about the early lacemakers. Despite the best efforts of dedicated and compassionate historians (Nellie O'Cléirigh, for one), history has privileged the voices of the philanthropists, entrepreneurs, and art critics who were involved in the Irish lacemaking industry to various degrees. We can only guess, for example, what individual lacemakers thought about the many attempts to "improve" designs. Most of these lacemakers remain anonymous to us, but the work they left behind gives us clues.

While we can no longer ask the early lacemakers about their agency or standards

of beauty, we *can* record the subjective experiences of people living today who are re-imagining Irish lace in a new place and a new era. In Buffalo, Molly Carroll collects, restores, and sells antique lace with the hope of keeping it relevant. Her beautiful collection provided most of the historical examples for the exhibition and a glimpse into the impact of contemporary connoisseurship. Mother and daughter, Mary Lou and Joan Sulecki, are present-day lacemakers who, having studied in Ireland, adapt Irish styles to their lives in Western New York.

Molly Carroll

The first time I met Molly Carroll, she welcomed me into her home in Amherst, New York. I was escorted to the "inner sanctum," as Molly's husband Chuck refers to the bright sitting room where she restores



fragile pieces of historical lace. On a table, she had fanned out an ivory spray of textiles for me to inspect. Molly is a lace dealer, but even more importantly, she is a lover of beautiful dress. It was this first love that led her to lace; she began collecting it because she wanted to wear it.

Molly received her first piece of lace—a giant collar of Irish Crochet—in her late 20s as a gift from her mother-in-law. “I thought it was the most beautiful thing,” she recalled. “And this is kind of a vain statement, but people were *at* me. And I’ve always been kind of costume-y, into music and all that.” Molly describes her style of dress as “very romantic, very feminine.” The “New Romantic” fashion scene, popularized and softened by Princess Diana during the 1980s, easily captures her preferences. Like many Americans, she sees a connection between her tastes in clothing styles and types of music. Classically trained in violin, Molly grew up in a family of musicians. She reasons, “We know beauty through music. We know about ornament through music. That’s my whole background, but it gave me the eyes to see real beauty. It’s very tied to music. And remember that music is the last calling for real dress. Part of that love of costume comes out of formal music events that I’ve been so fortunate in my life to attend, namely the opera. People [in the audience] wear the most incredible things. Sometimes men show up in capes.”

With this penchant for sartorial drama, Molly relished the showiness of her new Irish Crochet, a style of lace that reminded her of carved ivory. It sparked a lifelong passion.

Becoming a collector

Historically, handmade lace was created for a variety of domestic purposes, but the finest materials and the highest quality craftsmanship were reserved for items of dress and adornment. Molly began collecting lace to expand her personal wardrobe. “I’ve had to learn to restrain myself,” she admits, “because I had this notion of myself ornamented, *with* ornament. And I did it up pretty well for a lot of years. And there’s a

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

strange invitation to buy something if you *think* you can sell it. And then that got a hold of me and I kept on buying.” Collecting and selling presented an easy excuse for Molly to surround herself with beautiful things. It also offered her conventional tools for defining herself as an individual and as a woman. She explains, “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.”

Today, Molly rarely buys anything for herself. Age has tempered her fashion courage, and she prefers to dress more simply. Her collecting, though much reduced, continues. While it started as a means to adorn herself, collecting led to something greater: entry into a new social world.

The world of lace

When I asked Molly what has kept her collecting all these years, she named interesting people she has met from all over the world. She listed lectures she has attended that were given by famed authors, historians, couturiers, and lacemakers. She pointed to all the places she has visited—some lifelong dream trips, like to Ireland and France, and others more surprising. “These lace conventions,” she explained, “have taken me to San Antonio, Tulsa, to LA, to Puerto Rico, to Montreal. Places I really would not have gone to. I’ve been to Tulsa twice! And wherever I go, there are the field trips to local museums, the experience with local food. Puerto Rico was unbelievable. We danced! It’s been very exciting.” Because of her interest in lace, deep friendships have been forged, and unanticipated adventures enjoyed. Collecting has opened the door to something glamorous—international travel and camaraderie—but more importantly, to something intellectual.

Molly told me that she regrets having never pursued higher education, but she is right when she says, “I’m basically a curator, but without the PhD and without the job.” Though she lacks credentials or institutional

backing, Molly has dedicated herself to study. In the past three years, she has been taking courses in French in order to speak more freely with her fellow enthusiasts. France currently serves as a central hub for the contemporary, international world of lace. The most prominent organization, OIIFA (*L’Organisation Internationale de la Dentelle au Fuseau et à l’Aiguille*, or in English, The International Bobbin and Needle Lace Organization) was founded in that country during the early 1980s.

Molly attends OIIFA’s biennial congresses when she can—like the one held in Caen in 2012—where she sells lace. “It’s very costly,” she confesses. “Just to fly there is a big deal. I was kind of pleased [during my last trip] because just selling enough almost paid for the ticket. But I would rather be with people who are serious, knowledgeable.” Molly is a saleswoman who never makes a profit. Making money has never been her goal. From the beginning, collecting and selling have put her where she always wanted to be: in the company of learned people—scholars, connoisseurs, and artists. “I’ve only been a small player,” she admits, “but at my level, I’ve been intense about it.”

Collecting Irish lace

Collectors contribute to the preservation of important objects. In the process, they help construct which parts of material culture *should* be saved for the future. An individual collector’s most valuable skill is the ability to see what others ignore. Molly has spent the past three decades collecting and studying all sorts of lace, but the most important to her have been handmade Irish styles. Looking back, she says, “I’m extremely proud of this Irish lace, because nobody else was paying attention, and I was. That’s worth something, isn’t it? Everybody looked down her nose at the Irish lace. They wanted the Continental, the *great* laces.”

The stylistic elements deemed most valuable in a piece of handmade lace have varied very little over hundreds of years. When Molly purchases things for sale, she looks for these hallmarks, because they are what buyers want. The lace must be skill-

fully made, recognized in part by tight, even stitches. She will also inspect the scale of composition. The threads should be fine and delicate; the motifs should be small. The details of the design should “seem to be working together as opposed to just thrown in there.” So what happens to those laces, like some Irish styles, that defy universal standards? As we have seen, enough Irish lacemakers during the 19th century were clearly evaluating their work using a different set of criteria. Should we not judge, to some extent, through the eyes of the makers? Molly believes so. In Irish lace, she sees what she considers characteristic Irish pluck. The Irish people endure because of hard work and stubbornness. As 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 very 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 lacemakers. They came to this country. And so then when I saw the product of so many Irish women, especially in the west [of Ireland, where her ancestors had lived], 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.” If the women in her family had not immigrated, Molly believes they, too, may have become anonymous lacemakers. Instead they were fortunate to become educated women—school teachers, as well as accomplished musicians.

Molly is full of the same pluck that she ascribes to Irish culture. Collecting Irish lace, for Molly, has a touch of feminist zeal behind it. “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.” 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 women’s endeavors. Molly believes that Irish lace is more than art; it is an enduring record of the accomplishments of disenfranchised women who have otherwise been lost to history.

The art of restoration

Molly not only collects old pieces of lace, saving them “from the rag bin,” but 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 dust and dirt. 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 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 Ian, 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 repairs by hand the pieces that have been improperly washed or otherwise ravaged by time. Although she does not consider herself a needle worker, she knows the basic stitches needed to join together tears and to anchor broken or brittle threads. A vital step is finding the proper thread, one that matches the original in material, color, and thickness. Molly buys most of her materials from specialized vendors at lace conventions. The finest spools of cotton come from Belgium or France, but extraordinary silks have started appearing from Thailand.

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. Many early lacemakers, in fact, had only brief careers, cut short by blindness. 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 lacemaker’s undertaking.

At a crossroads

Molly recently turned 71 years old. She has been seriously collecting, restoring, and selling lace for more than 30 years. Much has changed, and she realizes she must change, too. Antique lace is harder to find at affordable prices, and the marketplace has started moving to the Internet. “My strength,” she explains, “has been finding beautiful things. I would say those things are not available. The competition, I guess, is so great. At Sturbridge [Massachusetts for the 2012 Antique Textile and Vintage Fashion Show in May], I heard by way of the grapevine all these different people were stopping [their businesses].”

Because travel is becoming more difficult at her age, Molly has considered embracing a whole new set of skills in order to create her own web-based business. This new model, however, would mean a departure from what she most loves—the travel, the adventure, and the continually renewed fellowship with fashionable, like-minded people. I asked Molly if she felt like she was at a crossroads. Through lace she has been able to foster a sense of identity and community. Was she ready to retire? After some thought, she answered, “When I was there [at Sturbridge], walking around, seeing the people—the man who sold textiles from the Himalayas, a person from [the Czech Republic] selling homespun linens, the woman from Pennsylvania who had the

historic flax—the spell is cast. A spell comes over me. So yeah, I’m at a crossroads.”

Joan and Mary Lou Sulecki: Lacemakers and Teachers

Art forms—their production, dissemination, and valuation—are continually reassessed in the face of changing technologies. Machines ended widespread handcraft, and the Internet is altering the circulation of objects and knowledge. We can see some of these effects in the experiences of individual makers. In Buffalo, New York, 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 history and development of Irish lace, or any lace for that matter, is incidental to their practice. “We know there’s a social history attached to it,” Joan admits. “We often talk about the social history—that it was essentially sweatshop labor for hundreds of years, that it was not well paid, *men* would design and provide the materials, and women would do the work. Yes, it’s interesting. In our group [of lacemakers], we have one person who’s very much the historian. Like Molly, she collects and identifies. Super detailed. It’s always fascinating to hear what this person has learned, but we hear it, and then we go back to making it.” Joan and Mary Lou understand lace through their hands, through action. Consequently, their view of Irish lace is neither emotional nor romanticized. It does not connect them to ancestors or ethnic identity, but it does bring them creative satisfaction.

Like Molly, Joan and Mary Lou also consider themselves collectors, not of historical objects, but rather of traditional skills. They are ever eager to learn a new style of lacemaking. Joan describes herself as a “generalist.” She and her mother, nevertheless, have developed preferences. Joan actually prefers bobbin laces with their pretty paraphernalia. In contrast, Mary Lou, who knows a large repertoire of bobbin, needle, and tape laces,

likes Carrickmacross and Limerick best. These styles are her favorites to make, in part, because they are also her favorites to look at. The joy of making is both tactile and visual, as you watch something beautiful take shape in your own hands.

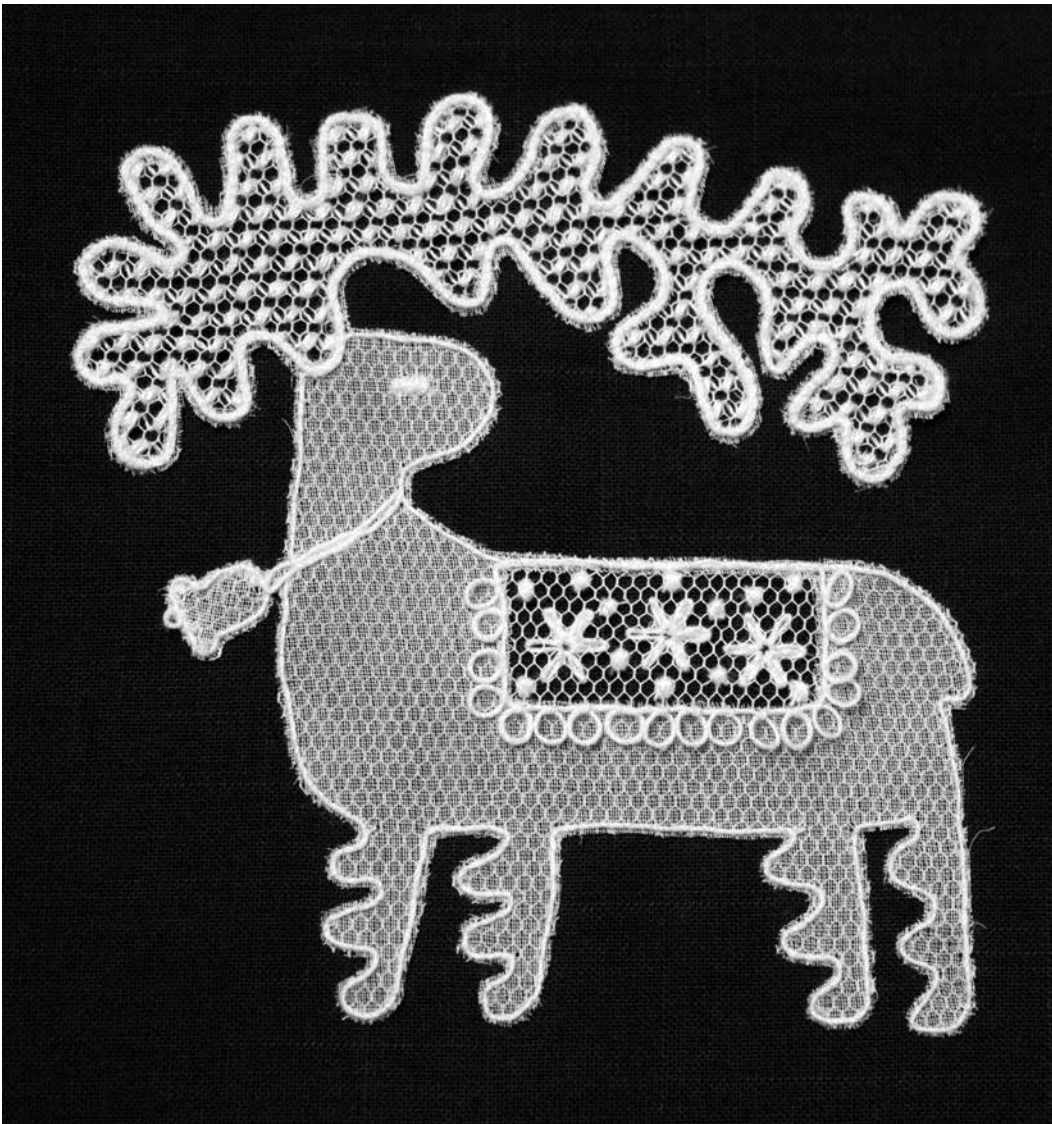
Learning to make lace and the importance of modern guilds

Even though Joan did not “learn at her mother’s knee,” a passion for lacemaking is something she and Mary Lou share. Joan was the first to try lacemaking. Soon after graduating college, Mary Lou surprised Joan with a bobbin-lace pillow. “She had been talking about wanting to do it,” Mary Lou explains. So when a friend said she was getting rid of her pillow because she “absolutely detested it,” Mary Lou bought it for Joan. Luckily, unlike Mary Lou’s friend, Joan was quickly hooked.

Joan remembers that in the 1980s, lacemaking was pretty rare in Western New York. “It was *just* growing [in the United States],” she recalls. “Someone’s husband would transfer to England. They’d see bobbin lace there. Learn. Get transferred back to the US and start teaching in a little pocket in some town. And then they’d get transferred again and move. So there’d be these little lace guilds, these little pockets of ladies around, learning from people who often learned abroad.”

When Joan first got her pillow, there were not many local opportunities for learning. Like many who want to embrace dwindling traditional arts, she turned to published manuals. But learning from books is difficult. Diagrams and explanations never fully capture what can be conveyed by an expert sitting next to you, nor can they substitute for the face-to-face intimacy that animates shared practice.

By the 1990s, local lacemaking received a major boon. The Buffalo Niagara Heritage Village (formerly known as the Amherst Museum) began hosting a lace guild. Like craft guilds all over the country, the Heritage Village Lace Guild was established to bring like-minded people together to learn from each other. With this new resource,



Christmas ornament (original design in the style of Carrickmacross Lace) by Mary Lou Sulecki. Photo by Carrie Hertz.

Mary Lou was persuaded to give lace a try. “I had been an embroiderer up until that time,” she told me. “I belonged to the Buffalo Chapter of the Embroiderers’ Guild of America. Suddenly this lace guild turned up, and Joan was an original member of it. I didn’t join until a year later. When Nellie O’Cléirigh was here from Ireland to teach Carrickmacross Lace for the [annual] seminar, Joan said, ‘you really should come and take this class. It’s *embroidered* lace, and you’d love it. It’s your kind of thing.’ And I took the class, and I’ve been making it ever since. So that’s how it all started.”

Lace guilds provide special access to formal instruction. They host, for example, distant and prestigious teachers who give

presentations or lead hands-on workshops. More importantly, lace guilds create communities and networks of makers. “It’s nice to belong to a guild,” Mary Lou explains, “because it’s fun to [make lace] with people. See what they do and let them see what you’re doing. I think without that, you wouldn’t do as much.”

Guilds help spur activity because they serve the social functions necessary to support vibrant art forms. They provide motivation by supplying occasions, as well as an audience. Regional, national, and international guilds typically hold annual conferences where works can be submitted to themed competitions. Through her memberships, Mary Lou has won a number

of awards for her lace. In both official and unofficial competition within guilds, the criteria for judging excellence are hashed out by members.

Though guilds host a variety of workshops and classes led by guest instructors, much of the teaching that goes on within guilds is informal. Once a month, members of the Heritage Village Lace Guild gather for what they call “any lace,” a time to come together and work on their respective projects in a social setting. “It’s a *great* thing if you’re stuck,” Joan declares. “We’re very good at teaching each other.” For nearly two decades, “any lace” nights were held in Joan’s living room, but Joan’s career as an engineer has become more demanding. Now, the guild members rotate hosting duties.

The Heritage Village Lace Guild claims around 30 members. Joan joined when she was in her 20s, but young members are rare now. After a 30-year period of growth, she believes local lacemaking must be declining in popularity. “Things have their cycles,” she reasons. “Someone rediscovers it, and it has a little burst of activity. There’s always something old to be rediscovered. And that’s a good thing. 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.” This has certainly been the story of handmade lace. As Joan summarizes, “With 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.”

A pilgrimage to Ireland

Mary Lou and Joan have had the opportunity to study with some of the world’s leading experts in Irish lace, including 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. Since the 1950s, the college has welcomed visitors to stay in

the manor house on its property and take courses of their choosing in traditional arts, crafts, and cooking. During their stay, Mary Lou attended hands-on classes in making Carrickmacross and Limerick lace, while Joan learned Youghal from Veronica Stuart. “I took the Youghal class from the person who actually re-invigorated Youghal,” Joan exclaims. “She went to the convent and went in their attics and started to pick [the lace] apart and figure out how they had done it.” Veronica Stuart literally pulled an otherwise forgotten style of lace out of Ireland’s attic and reintroduced it to the world.

Traveling to Ireland was a sort of pilgrimage for Joan and Mary Lou who, like most people, continue to associate these styles with their Irish origins. I understand their trip as a sign that Ireland is still considered the creative epicenter, thoroughly invested in claiming the “Irish-ness” of its characteristic laces. Americans like the Suleckis wish to honor the historical roots of the tradition, even as they feel free to adopt and adapt it. In modern times, instruction in Irish lace has become a successful tourist attraction. Even as they traveled to Ireland, at An Grianán, Joan and Mary Lou were surrounded by other Americans, also hoping to learn something “authentically” Irish.

An evolving tradition

Traditional Irish styles of lace have certainly changed with time. The techniques for making them have remained largely the same. Contemporary patterns, however, reflect handmade lace’s new purpose. Historically, handmade lace was principally a lavish embellishment. Made to edge skirt flounces, collars, and sleeves, or fashioned into shawls, handkerchiefs, veils, or table runners, the most common designs were linear and repetitive. Few makers today create lace for garments. Even couturiers leave such time-consuming work primarily to machines. According to Mary Lou, hobbyists working in their spare time, like she and Joan, prefer to concentrate on small, accomplishable creations they can frame or easily display as handmade art. Consequently, designs are more often composed around

a central image with older motifs relegated to border decoration. Colorful threads and nontraditional motifs may be incorporated. Personal innovation is highly prized. In a culture of mass-produced conveniences, contemporary makers like to show off their originality and hard won hand labor. Unlike the poor Irish women toiling at the turn of the 20th century, today’s lacemakers expect recognition for their individual achievements.

Perhaps because new designs look so very different, contemporary teachers invested in preservation may insist that certain technical elements *must* be present. So while some generic features have been unleashed from conventional standards, others have calcified. 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 on the use of specific stitches, namely those 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, but this ornament was “just a fun piece,” freeing her to re-interpret convention. Rather than adding the traditional twirling edge, she references loops with a tiny row along the border of the reindeer’s saddle. The piece won first prize in a lace contest held in Paducah, Kentucky, suggesting flexibility within American guilds. Mary Lou, however, has encountered competing interpretations of what counts as “real” Carrickmacross or Limerick lace.

Mary Lou became especially conscious of genre distinctions when she studied in Ireland. “I had never done Limerick *officially* before,” she concluded after her trip. “I had tried it on my own, but I really didn’t know all the details of it. And in Limerick lace,

there's two stitches that either both of them or one of them *has* to be in it in order to be *real* Limerick lace. I think that most people here [in the United States] don't know that; I hadn't heard it before I went [to Ireland]. And I think a lot of people make what they *think* is Limerick lace, but it doesn't have that stitch, so *officially*, according to the teacher I had, she said it was necessary. But I'm sure you could find it without that. Though I *do* try to incorporate at least one of them always." For Mary Lou, the authority to determine authenticity rests in the hands of Irish-born practitioners, especially those who taught her face-to-face.

After the invention of lacemaking machines, an international debate arose around the very definition of lace. What makes something "real" lace? Carrickmacross and Limerick, both made by embroidering machine-made net, were initially dismissed as lesser fakes. Similar debates continue today, especially in relation to revivals of traditional styles as they gain popularity around the world. Now people ask, what makes something *real* Carrickmacross, Limerick, or Youghal?

Joan argues that we should embrace the diversity of approaches to perpetuation. "Some people want to really replicate the traditional and never vary," she 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, printed sources also have 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 lacemakers 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 300 years. Sixteenth-century Flanders did not look like 19th-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 the individuals who attempt to take responsibility for them. If its history is any indication, Irish lace will be transformed by diverse hands for years to come. ▼

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