

## More than `just a little hobby': Women and textile art in Ireland

By: Nancy J. Nelson, Karen L. LaBat, and Gloria M. Williams

Nelson, Nancy, LaBat, Karen, & Williams, Gloria. (2005). More than just a 'little hobby': Women and textile art in Ireland. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 28(4), 328-342.

Made available courtesy of Elsevier:

[http://www.elsevier.com/wps/find/journaldescription.cws\\_home/361/description](http://www.elsevier.com/wps/find/journaldescription.cws_home/361/description)

**\*\*\*Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document**

### **Abstract:**

In this article, interviews with 25 contemporary Irish women textile artists form the basis of an exploration of women's experiences with creative expression. An interpretive framework that highlights key socio-cultural and gender issues is used to critically examine the experiences of these 25 artists and situate their lives and work at the center of expression in the textile medium in Ireland today. Their experiences with making textile art, as well as sharing it, are explored, as are the challenges they face in dealing with a public largely unaware of the social and economic value of the textile medium. As the interpretation illustrates, these women artists find themselves taking on the role of educators in order to build visibility for their work, and ultimately, what they hope will be support for and acceptance of their particular brand of creative expression.

### **Article:**

Ireland has a rich history of textile crafts, a history that is directly linked to the hands of women. Lace-making, knitting, and crochet, as well as the production of fabrics such as tweeds and linen, are several types of textile products that are commonly associated with Ireland's textile heritage. These products were often created by women, whether working in factories or at home (Cullen, 1991; Jones, 1978, 1981; Kelly, 1987; Luddy, 1995; Shaw-Smith, 1994; Wilson, 1991). Today, this link between women and textiles continues, in that creative expression in the textile medium is a practice done predominantly by women. One of the primary differences, however, is that many women do so with a view to exhibiting their work in art galleries instead of putting them to use within the home. This essay highlights the lives and work of 25 such women in Ireland and explores their experiences as textile artists today.

As this article will illustrate, the women of the study have faced sturdy resistance to the idea of textiles as art, and that they as artists occupy a marginalized position within the paradigm of contemporary art. Analyses of the marginalization of women's expression often focus on its link to the history of women's work with textiles; a history that is currently undervalued in Ireland as elsewhere (Ballard, 1993; Ni Chuilleanain, 1985). Yet there is little research that has been done which critiques cultural perceptions of textile art in Ireland from the perspective of the women who create it and therefore experience the challenges that go along with working in this medium on a daily basis. Within the interpretation presented here, we will rely on the experiences of the artists themselves to highlight and discuss the issues that they face in their lives and work, including their views on the interrelationships between gender, textiles, and cultural value that serve to shape and define interpretations of textile art—and those who make it—in Ireland today.

## *Background*

Twenty-five women artists living in the Republic of Ireland were asked to submit work for inclusion in an exhibition of contemporary Irish textile art, titled *Contemporary Irish Textile Art: The Women of Annaghmakerrig*, held in the United States at the University of Minnesota's Goldstein Museum of Design. All 25 women were part of a larger group of women who attended textile art retreats held at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre for the Arts at Annaghmakerrig in County Monaghan, Ireland. Upon completion of the retreats the women agreed to be interviewed and to discuss their experiences as textile artists. Interviews lasted 2 to 3 h. In these interviews, each artist was asked to provide information about her family, employment background, education, and exhibition history. She was then asked to describe how and when she began to use textiles as an artistic medium. Each artist also provided in-depth information about her creative process, that is, the steps through which she goes from conception to completion in her creative work. Other interview topics included her experiences with mounting exhibitions of textile art in Ireland, responses to these exhibits, and experiences with selling her work.

Several issues surfaced repeatedly during the interviews with the artists, including: the creative process and its location within the home; perceptions surrounding the textile medium in Ireland and its link to the position of women as textile artists in Ireland; a comparison of such perceptions to those throughout Western Europe and the United States; the attitudes about creative expression in textiles on the part of the general art establishment; and strategies used to alter attitudes toward the textile medium and toward textile art within Ireland. The interpretation presented here seeks to illuminate how these issues enter into the artists' own experiences with and work in textiles.

The participants' life situations vary, as do their backgrounds. Their ages range from 42 to 69. All were living in Ireland at the time of the research. Fifteen are from in and around the Dublin area. Of the remaining, an equal number are from other cities in the west and south, including Galway and Cork. All of the women are married and 23 have children. Occupations include accountant, full-time artist, and full-time homemaker. Five of the twenty-five earn a living through sales of their textile art. One artist had her own textile crafts show on Irish television at the time of this research. Three have university degrees in various subjects from geology to education. Two of the twenty-five have formal art training. Eighteen teach about textile art in some form or another, ranging from night classes at adult vocational training centers to weekend design workshops.

Techniques used by the participants range from dyeing and painting fabric to manipulating the surface of the fabric with embroidery, wire, and glass. The type of work each artist does sets her apart from the others, ranging from traditional types of quilting to working with glass and beads to create three-dimensional, sculptural pieces. All of the participants make their work to be viewed in a gallery setting. Two concentrate on wearable art designs. Most use contemporary fabric art techniques, including hand and machine embroidery and applique'. Almost all dye their own fabrics and all are inclined to experiment with the myriad of creative options provided by the textile medium. Content of each woman's work ranges from the exterior landscape to the interior, whether representative of a particular experience, feeling, or a rendering of her life in textiles. Inspiration is drawn from culture in its various forms, as well as ancient imagery and the

Irish countryside. According to Robinson (1995), women artists throughout Northern Ireland and the Republic often seek to represent and interpret the experiences of a culture that, for generations, has been divided along lines of religion and by alliances between groups and nations. Artists working in textiles believe they are no exception, including several of the women in this study, who have dealt with a variety of socio-political events in Northern Ireland within their textile art. Several of them also exhibit their work regularly in the bi-yearly "Hands Across the Border" traveling exhibition, an opportunity developed for artists in both countries to share ideas and modes of expression across the national divide.

Each artist cites the textile medium as the starting point for creative expression, and particularly because of its inherent tactile qualities. The use of textiles is a crucial factor operating to shape their mode of expression, insofar as their experiences with expression strongly relate to the visual and tactile qualities of the textile medium. One of the artists, Monica Tierney, puts it this way: "I find the fabric moves me ... I like the fabric, the touch of [it] a lot" (MT).<sup>1</sup> Ann Fleton is inspired by the color of the cloth: "Very often I'll find a piece of fabric and for a while I'll keep it and take it out and see what I can do" (AF). Grania McElligott uses the cloth to nurture her ideas throughout the process, and says, "I am constantly designing as I go along... I prefer to let them grow naturally" (GM). All of the artists find that their response to textiles is what provides the impetus to create, and most of them find that the process of manipulating the fabric is in itself the focus of interpretation.

The women of this study all learned to sew as young girls, a skill taught both at home and in school. Formal higher education programs that promote the use of textiles as a medium of creative expression are hard to come by in Ireland today. Existing opportunities for learning beyond secondary schools are therefore primarily grass-roots in origin, such as workshops and adult education programs. According to the artists in this study, the organization that has been most critical to fostering women's interest in using textiles for creative expression is the Irish Patchwork Society (IPS).<sup>2</sup> All of the participants in this study are long-time members, and several of them are founding members. Established in 1981, the IPS led to a cohesive group of individuals working in diverse aspects of textile art, including both contemporary and traditional modes of textile expression. At its inception, the IPS was located only in Dublin, but committee members were comprised of representatives from other areas of the country. Presently there are several local branches of the IPS that organize local exhibitions. Each branch has its own regional committee, overseen at the national level by the executive committee. Most of the local groups meet once a month, and there is one national meeting a year, which usually takes place during the fall.

The mission of the IPS is to sponsor workshops and organize a bi-yearly exhibition of work by its members. Membership in the IPS averages about 400, and is comprised mainly of women, although there have been one or two men who have joined over the years. Members work in a variety of techniques, including quilting, piece-work, embroidery, and applique', and are of varying levels of expertise and experience. However, because the IPS does not differentiate between techniques and modes of textile use, the open-ended nature of the membership has lent itself to the on-going diversity that, according to a number of artists in this study, has become the primary characteristic of contemporary Irish textile art. It has also led to an increased interest in

learning how to work in the medium, and in turn, a higher standard of work. According to Ruth McDonnell, this has had a positive impact on both textile art and its makers:

RM: It's improving all the time... I think more people are getting into it. I think the standard is improving...people are actually quite passionate about it—which is great. And they're convinced about it, what it's worth and what it means to them.

This article presents the narratives of the selected 25 women as the focal point for understanding what it is like to work in the textile medium creatively within Ireland today. The following interpretation presents the issues that reoccur among and across the narratives under the headings of (a) Making Textile Art, (b) Sharing Textile Art, and (c) Educating for Change. Within each of these topical areas, several themes are discussed in order to link the women's narratives together and to present their experiences in a manner that sheds light on as well as furthers the dialogue about gender, medium, and creative expression in Ireland.

### *Making textile art*

There are several themes that surfaced in talking with the artists about what it means to work in the textile medium and their experiences with the making of textile art. Each artist had her own story to tell in terms of coming to work in the medium, many cited either learning textile techniques from female family members or through exposure to textile art groups as important to their decision to work in textiles. All of the artists speak of their use of textiles as a necessary creative outlet, and as their narratives illustrate, the impact of textiles in the creative process—from inspiration to finished piece. Talking through the creative process often led to discussion of the need to merge their work with the responsibilities of family; a consideration that is often at the forefront of their daily experiences as textile artists.

### *Learning the medium*

Many of the artists were profoundly influenced by an introduction to textile forms early in childhood. For example, Anne Higgins Killeen remembers being drawn to textiles from an early age, and then learning to sew in school:

AHK: I started working with fabrics when I was a child. I took an interest with fabrics when I was very young, because I used to like to trace out the designs of fabrics... so, without knowing it, I think I became interested in textiles because I loved the feel of them and I loved the textures and I just loved handling them...Then, when I was about seven or eight, I started knitting, and when I was ten I started crochet and my mother taught me Irish crochet at about that time...So I then went on to [secondary] school, where plain sewing was taught.

Likewise, Grania McElligott grew up around textiles. Her grandmother operated a lacemaking business in Limerick, and when she retired and came to live with Grania's parents she taught Grania the art of lacemaking. Grania showed a talent and interest in lacemaking as well as in knitting and making doll clothes at an early age. By the age of 12, she was making most, if not all, of her own clothes. By the time she was in her late teens she was into more complex kinds of sewing, such as tailoring and making wedding dresses. She recalls being inspired by the sewing and knitting goods available in Ireland at that time:

GM: ...I've always had this relationship with the sewing needle and with the stitchery in a wide variety of ways... And I've always loved...yarn. I used to admire all the wonderful—particularly Irish—wools and yarns, we had wonderful spinners and weavers here in the country, throughout my teenage years.

Ann Fleeton began sewing as a teenager and continued to make her own clothes throughout her college career. She recalls being around other women who knew how to sew, including family members and friends:

AF: I used to make clothes at school and in college, partly because...it was, economically practical to do that, and I always liked messing around with patterns...my mother used to knit a bit. And she used to dressmake functional things. And my grandmother used to do some embroidery but fairly conventional embroidery. And I had a friend or two, when we were in college and we used to make things you know, and discuss how to do it.

After she was married, Ann made clothes for her children as well as things for the home. Her family then moved to Limerick, where she began teaching at a primary school. She taught for 2 years until the family moved back to Dublin, at which point she stopped teaching and began looking for something else to do. Someone in her family suggested she look into quiltmaking, so she made a quilt and found that she enjoyed the process. Shortly after making the quilt, Ann heard about the newly formed Irish Patchwork Society and began attending meetings and learning techniques. Since then she has been actively involved with the organization and has continued to express herself in the textile medium.

Monica Tierney's first experience with textile art came about in the mid-1980s, when she was asked by a friend to attend a meeting of the Irish Patchwork Society. She recalls being excited by what she saw and heard there.

MT: ...when I went there and I heard Alison Erridge, ah, she was the chairperson at the time, I found her really stimulating... And I was really turned on by what I saw, you know, there, side shows and stalls, and the lecture itself. So I decided to join.

Monica brought along one of her paintings, "African Violets" to the meeting and told everyone there that she wanted to learn how to translate this painting into a fabric piece. Through her local group, Monica learned the techniques involved in applique' and embroidery, which she still uses to make textile pieces today.

### *The creative process*

After an initial exposure to textiles, the artists often found that their ideas were best expressed through this particular medium. For instance, Ann Fleeton often gets an idea for a piece based on fabrics and the inspiration they provide for her. In particular, she believes that knowing how to dye her own fabrics has given her both the freedom and flexibility that is necessary in order to use color as the main point of departure in her work. She primarily uses silks and linens, fibers that respond to the dyeing process well, making for colors that are clear and pure, while still retaining the subtle textures of the fabric surface.

Grania, on the other hand, often finds inspiration in visiting other countries, but she also does so in order to teach others to be aware of what makes their culture unique and to try and foster this uniqueness within their textile art. She has developed several lectures that she gives at association meetings and shows that do just this, including "Stoneworks," which describes how she uses Irish culture as inspiration for her art as a means of encouraging this on a broader scale.

GM: ... I feel very strongly that people should use their own heritage and their own culture in the work that they do. Now, obviously you can't impose that on people, but you can try and encourage it.

Bernadette Falvey's textile work encompasses both types of inspiration and content. Bernadette takes diverse points of departure to arrive at each final piece, and this comes through when viewing the work she has done over the years, particularly in terms of color palette, technique, and subject matter.

For example, "Before Kells" is based on a Celtic horse brass, and was included in the Women of Annaghmakerrig exhibit. In contrast, "Golden Sunset," is a landscape based on Galway Bay, which was chosen at the Great British Championship in England for exhibition at the 1999 European Quilt Championships in The Netherlands. Because she sees textiles as having expressive qualities, she often finds most of her inspiration by looking at or working with the actual fabrics. But she also finds inspiration in her own culture, having completed a course on art and archaeology at University College, Galway. Regardless of the content of a given piece, Bernadette views the creative process as one which leads to something more, and therefore feels that it is most important that she constantly challenge herself and her abilities within each piece. This philosophy is reiterated in the "personal ambition statement" found on her current curriculum vita, which reads: "Constant exploration of all types of fabric art and achieving the highest art form in patchwork."

For Jennifer Kingston, a successful end result is the most important part of the creative process. She admits that this is mainly because she makes her living by her art, but that she nevertheless finds the personal satisfaction that comes with completing a successful piece to be the most enjoyable aspect of making textile art. She says

JK: I just enjoy it when it comes off, you know? When something actually works. It just gives me a kick...When it works as a picture. When you hang it on the wall, and it pleases you, as a decorative piece. That gives me great enjoyment... And then, the jam goes on the butter when somebody buys it. You know, when somebody likes it well enough to put their hand in their pocket and buy it. That's the ultimate accolade, and that gives me a great kick.

### *Merging work and family*

Many of the textile artists in this study told us that creative expression was something that had to be squeezed into small bits of free time they found in between the demands of their daily lives. For this reason, textiles became the medium of choice, in that they were already sewing in order to make clothes for their children, and it was something that could be done within the home. In fact many of the women eventually set up a separate space or room within their homes as "studios" where they could spend their precious free time working on their pieces. Some have even built studio spaces in the backyard. Removed from the actual home, such spaces are seen as sanctuaries to retreat to in order to better focus on creative work.

Grania's experience is an example of how important a separate workspace is to the development of one's creative ability. She lives in a large home that once housed stables, which she renovated into a studio big enough to accommodate her own textile art as well as workshops. Grania attributes much of what she has accomplished in textiles to having this separate space in which to work, making it easier to bring in teachers and to facilitate groups of interested people, as well as providing a space in which to spread out.

GM: If I wasn't living somewhere that gave me the space that I have here, my life could quite easily gone...totally different. But to have actually been able to have the space here and come and work in an area where probably unlike most people I don't have to clear up after me and tidy things away. Which I know is the way a lot of people work, under probably quite difficult conditions... I know I'm spoilt in having what I have here. But I think that this has played a major role...in allowing me to develop, you know, in the way that I do.

Several of the artists who were in their late 50s and 60s at the time of the interviews mentioned that they were obligated to give up paid employment outside of the home upon marriage, citing the marriage laws at the time which prevented them from working, as well as social pressure put on them to focus their full attention on meeting the obligations of the household (Curtin, Jackson, & O'Connor, 1987; O'Dowd & Wichert, 1993). Although their children are now grown, as Grania points out, the emotional needs of the family continue to be an important consideration,

GM: ... I keep having to remind myself, every now and then, that I'm not just a mother but that I'm a wife, and I'm a daughter, and I'm a sister and you know, all of these things. Every now and then the family ties sort of take over, and, you just have to drop everything, and you know, go look after whatever the crisis is.

Monica echoes Grania's point of view but approaches the topic from the standpoint of a critique of gendered social expectations. As Monica points out, the responsibility of raising a family and running the household is in itself a full-time job and can interfere with the creative process even when one's workspace is located in the home. This responsibility therefore often has implications for the amount of effort an artist can put into creative expression.

MT: I think...women have done better, say, in the last 20–30 years, but, a woman artist will say to you, 'I still have to make the beds, I still have to get the breakfast and the evening meal' and a man doesn't have to do that. He'll have some kind of woman that will do that for him. And it is conservation of energy, if nothing else...They have more time to work on their art ... and, the women have to bring up the children as well, if you're married. And, it's like any field, that you go into, medicine, anything, bringing up your family is an intrusion, if you like to call it that.

The artists find that working at home can be a mixed blessing. Because one's studio is part of the home it is conducive to a woman's work within the home, but because the work is done in the home it is perceived as simply "women's work." This makes for a challenge when the pieces are taken out of the home and shared with the viewing public. As Jennifer explains, there is perhaps an automatic association made between textiles and a "woman's hobby" as related to the limited socio-economic opportunities Irish women had until only recently.

JK: ... any art or craft to do with textiles has now become synonymous with women. Because it was the only outlet for women, in the home. And because, particularly in this country, women were so pinned down to being in the home, it was the obvious outlet.

### *Sharing textile art*

Irish women have typically been expected to eschew work outside of the home, and thus have often faced relegation to marginalized socio-economic positions as a group (Barry, 1988; Clancy, Drudy, Lynch, & O'Dowd, 1995; Clear, 1993; Mahon, 1995; Robinson, 1992; Smyth, 1985). The same can be said for this group of women. Essential to their growth as artists, each of the women of this study had to begin looking outside of the home in order to show her work to the public at large. Once they began to put their work on exhibit, they were exposed to the response

and critique of a much larger circle of viewers. As the artists point out, this forced them to become much more introspective about who they are and what they do. In dealing with the public's perception of their work, critical questions surfaced for many of the artists. What was important to them about what they do? What exactly do they call themselves and their work? For the 25 women in this study, such questions are at the center of what it is like to share their textile art with others in Ireland today.

### *Identity issues*

From the artist's narratives, it is clear that working in the textile medium is popularly understood today as a "hobby" as opposed to those more "serious" modes of creative expression, such as painting or sculpture. As Rita Scannell puts it, "art in Ireland is still painting on canvas" (RS). The root of this perception is two-fold. First, there is an automatic connection between textiles and craft as "women's work" (Aptheker, 1989). For many, upon viewing work in the textile medium, descriptors such as "decoration," "frill," and even "drudgery" come to mind. Sewing, necessary to the creation of textile art, is seen as a hobby or as a strictly domestic pursuit and is often associated with functional quilting. Very few men in Ireland do piecework, and Siobhan Dillon sees this as having more to do with the sewing necessitated by the textile medium than with the fabrics themselves. She says

SD: I think that probably one of the reasons that many men don't become involved in the textile end of it, is really because it's not so much the fabric end of it, but it's actually the stitching end, which, here would be looked upon as being a female task as such and almost sort of strictly relegated to the female ... And I think it's probably because, on their part, of a fear of ridicule, which I think is probably what they get ... And I think it's more the attitude ...which would prevent many men working in this field...that stitching is a woman's job, chore, hobby, whatever, but rarely taken as seriously as many of us would like it to be taken.

Second, women's creative expression has historically been relegated to that of utility rather than high art (Lippard, 1995). The idea that textiles are supposed to be put to work instead of preserved has made it difficult for people to associate art made of fabric with gallery-caliber creative expression.

To broaden the potential for increased interest in textile art, the IPS began to provide workshops in textiles, as well as exhibition opportunities on a national scale. This coming together led to a cohesive identity out of which exhibitions could be developed. From these exhibitions came opportunities for public recognition of the contemporary uses of the textile medium. However, this identity is paradoxical, based on the intermediary position of textile art in relation to western conceptions of craft and fine art. That is, the artists soon realized how their work was intimately connected to both such traditions while also being quite distinctly different from them. Although the artists themselves sought to avoid hard and fast labels of art vs. craft, the diversity of labels they rely on to describe their work may indicate a conscious awareness of using the textile medium to draw upon both art and craft. For instance, Monica, Grania, and Bernadette liken their use of textiles to painting or drawing with fabric, and both Jennifer and Monica literally paint the surfaces of the textiles. In contrast, Ann Fleeton, calling her work "quilts," uses color and texture to determine shape, and much like is done in quilting, integrates these shapes to create the overall design of the piece. She is aware of how quilt—like her work is; yet at the same time, like the others, she relies on a combination of traditional quilting techniques with dye and paint to manipulate color and surface texture.

There were indeed a myriad of labels that the artists used to describe themselves during the interviews, possibly reflecting how very diverse the use of the textile medium is among these 25 women. However, this diversity of labels can lead to confusion for the general public, who are largely unfamiliar with the use of the medium as art. As Grania explains, using the title or occupation "textile artist" is often at the root of such confusion:

GM: ...in this country if you talk to any or many of the rest of us, we have severe difficulties with describing ourselves...if you say that you make patchwork, you know, people automatically still associate patchwork with these crazy women who sit and cut up fabric just to stitch it back together again...up until recent years, if you tried to use the word 'artist' you know, people sort of laughed at you, because artists are only people who create art, and art comes inside a frame, and inside glass, and anything else is not categorized in the same way. ...but it's very difficult to ...actually say, you know, when people ask you 'What are you?'...and a lot of people would not have used the word 'textile artist' either. Because first and foremost as well, when you say that to somebody nowadays—here—they would say well 'What exactly does that mean?' so you're almost back to square one again when you said 'Patchwork' and then they think of little squares. So if you say 'Textile Artist' they don't understand because they don't really have enough comprehension about what exactly textile art encompasses. And it's a very wide sort of field as well. And so people say, 'Do you paint or print fabrics?' or, you know, that would be the automatic association.. ..It is very difficult to try and explain to people what it is you do.

Even though the differences between what the artists call themselves and their work often leads to confusion as to what exactly textile art is or what the term "textile artist" means, the artists point out that this should not keep any one individual from putting their work "out there" if only for the pleasure that comes from sharing something that one enjoys doing. Ann Fleeton believes that textile artists should put their work forward as art forms, and feels that they need not be wary of what others will think as long as the work is of the highest quality. As she explains

AF: ... quiltmakers shouldn't be afraid of calling their work art forms, it's just this tunnel vision of art being in a frame, and being of a very closed circuit and not being kept in certain galleries. There's a big world out there, they shouldn't be ashamed of what they do. ...I think they should be positive, not feeling negative. I mean, once you start being negative, saying, 'Well our stuff will never be shown there,' we have to go out and make it shown. But, I think we have to be much more selective about expecting people to show our work....You know, I think we shouldn't be ashamed of what we do.

### *Exhibiting textiles: opportunities*

For textile artists working in Ireland, there are several options for exhibitions, including the yearly craft competition of the Royal Dublin Society. The IPS puts on the bi-yearly National Exhibition that travels all over the country. There is also the bi-yearly exhibition of Hands Across the Border. European quilt shows, as well as the American Quilting Association annual Quilt Festival in Houston, Texas are also popular outlets. When the artists were asked to describe where textile art is typically shown, they all replied similarly, but cited a wide range of sizes and strata of galleries. Over the years, the typical space for a National Exhibition of the IPS, which generally can include anywhere from 40 to 60 pieces, is a public hall or business, such as the Bank of Ireland in Dublin. However, Grania points out that it has also been exhibited in the more established fine art galleries, such as the prestigious Gallagher Gallery attached to the Royal Hibernian Academy:

GM: The ... RHA, the Gallagher Gallery...just off Stephen's Green in Dublin is another excellent venue, and the Patchwork Society has had a number of exhibitions in there as well, which I think have been very successful and that would be looked upon as one of the main art galleries in the country here also.

Patricia Clyne-Kelly suggests some of the galleries operating in the Temple Bar area of Dublin are the most ideal spaces, because as she describes, most are large enough for textiles and are in an excellent location:

PCK: ...the location is city-center based, it's got passing traffic, which I think is terribly important. It's also because, certainly during the summer months, and in fact now the season has extended much longer, you'd have a lot of tourists up and down there...

The artists all admit that textiles are best exhibited in large spaces, primarily because textiles are larger in scale than some other kinds of art. Although such spaces as public meeting halls may be ideal for showing textiles, they are not generally widely respected art spaces, and thus successful attempts at widespread recognition of textile art are rather difficult to achieve. As Rosemary MacCarthy-Morrogh explains, "...in general, you know, they [the IPS] would look for maybe larger spaces, and the larger spaces come as halls [which] certainly would be second-rated to art galleries" (RMM). Bernadette argues that regardless of the lack of prestige attributed to larger-size halls and public space, this is the kind of space in which textiles are best displayed. She states:

BF: ...what we need in Galway is an exhibition hall...we don't have the exhibition space....we can show in shopping centers... but I mean...things must be shown in a light environment.. ..To hang fabric art and quilts and things, you need a very big, well- lighted gallery.

Most of the artists point out that that the type of space influences the extent to which pieces will be sold within an exhibition, and selling work is often an important measure of success for a textile artist. For example, the exhibition held at the University of Minnesota went on to travel to Dublin and two venues in England, as part of the yearly Knitting and Stitching Show. Although this led to a higher degree of visibility for the work than if it had not traveled, the audience attending the Knitting and Stitching Show was not particularly interested in purchasing textile art. Instead, viewers were primarily there to attend the workshops and visit venter booths for the latest in materials and equipment. According to the artists, this kind of space and audience is fairly typical of textile art exhibitions, because the craft circuit, through such meetings as the Knitting and Stitching Show, generally creates the most opportunity for textile art exhibitions. Additionally, because textile art exhibitions often take place in craft-circuit venues the artists point out that the majority of people attending exhibitions of textile art are other textile artists. As Monica explains

MT: ...you would see a higher proportion of women ... like our Annaghmakerrig one, that came from America, was exhibited in the RDS, and at the Knitting and Stitching [show], and ...it was all women at that, really. You might say it was nearly all women. It was a female outing.

Although it can be said that any public display of textile art helps to further establish it within the public purview, the downside of this is that the type of audience drawn to the majority of textile art exhibitions are textile art makers rather than buyers.

### *Exhibiting textiles: challenges*

Even though the IPS does a bi-yearly exhibition, most artists do not find this to be enough opportunity to exhibit their work. According to Bernadette, however, there are plenty of opportunities to exhibit work if one is interested in shipping it abroad.

BF: [the] opportunities are becoming more frequent now, and it's completely up to yourself if you want to do this. I mean, there are now exhibitions in all countries in Europe, nearly every country in Europe and even abroad in America and other places, and it's up to you to find out about these, and if you want to enter, well, you can enter.

Although there has been some cross-cultural recognition of Irish textile art, which has been an ongoing source of encouragement for many, the artists find that it is still necessary to prove themselves worthy of respect within their own society and culture. For Grania, this is a common challenge faced by textile artists in Ireland.

GM: A lot of it has to do with working in this country here, because as far as I'm concerned there isn't a proper appreciation of textiles and nor will there be within my lifetime or those of us who are trying very hard, and there are many of us who are trying very hard, to promote textile art as an acceptable medium...

Oddly enough, textile art exhibitions brought into Ireland from other countries are much more popular than those of Irish textile artists. As Anne Jeffares points out, "Patchwork is seen as Irish women's work exhibited as a group of Irish women...Textile exhibitions coming from abroad, places like the US and Scandinavia, are appreciated more—they get better gallery space because they are foreign" (AJ). This sentiment was echoed by several other women, further illustrating the marginalization that they feel as artists within their own culture.

The problems encountered by the artists in this study may also stem from the fact that textile art is done predominantly by women. Though there have been one or two male members of the IPS, Grania points out that one rarely sees a textile art piece made by a man in Ireland today unless it is classified as "mixed media" (GM). The difference between the use of textiles as part of mixed media and the use of textiles alone is gender-related, and as Ann Fleeton suggests, it is an issue that has real implications for where the work will be displayed:

AF: If you mixed fabric with painted work and made a collage out of it, people will see it as mixed media, and that can go into an art gallery. But if you make something that's just textiles you won't be accepted in an art gallery.

The difficulty with promoting textile art lies in altering the perception held by the general viewing public and the gallery culture that textile art is the product of, as Kerry Pocock puts it, "just a bunch of women sewing" (KP). Much like the hierarchy among art forms, galleries have their own kind of stratification. With a few exceptions, the situation in Ireland is such that the better the gallery, the less likely it is to exhibit textile art. Exhibitions of textile art are not overtly "banned" from well-known galleries, but the acceptance of a textile art exhibition often depends on the mission of a particular gallery space. As Grania states:

GM: Many of the well-established and the I suppose 'better' galleries, for want of a better word, in Dublin city would still resist taking textiles in, because in some ways they're still regarded as ...second class art.

Although there are roughly 30 selling galleries in Dublin City alone, many of them are too expensive for an organization like the IPS to rent. Hence, locating exhibition space for the National Exhibition is always difficult, in that, according to the artists it is impossible to plan the

exhibition far enough in advance to reserve space. This difficulty, coupled with the fact that the exhibitors have to add the cost of a gallery commission on the price of their work, results in feelings of frustration and exasperation on the part of the exhibition organizers. As Bernadette, who lives in Galway, points out,

BF: It's not that we have the galleries and they won't show them. We do have, Kenny's Art Gallery and they have shown textiles, but then they are the main gallery and they're always booked up with different things... our problem in Dublin too is the cost. There's exhibition spaces, but they're too costly. They're very expensive to get ... It's not so much that they won't take our stuff, but, that it's so expensive to get it, and we're only a voluntary organization.

Educating gallery owners and the buying public at large that textile art is a good investment is yet another challenge discussed by the artists. To avoid this problem, some of them put their pieces behind glass. As Jennifer has found, "The wall hangings aren't great sellers. So put them in a frame and they sell better..." (JK). Fiona O'Farrell suggests the root of the perception lies in the notion of investment, in that, "People are afraid to buy textile art because they think it will get dirty, it hasn't got glass on it, and [they're] a bit worried about investing money into it" (FO). Monica, who works as both a textile artist and painter, can charge more for her oil paintings than her textile pieces, even though she spends two to three times longer working on a textile piece. Some artists avoid the issue altogether by looking outside of Ireland for success in exhibiting and selling their work. Anne Jeffares posits, "In Ireland galleries are afraid of textiles, they reckon that one textile exhibition every year is all they can handle [and so] serious [textile artists] keep one or two things to exhibit here and most everything else they send abroad" (AJ). As a consequence, most textile artists, including those in this study, find it difficult to make a living by sales of their art alone.

### *Educating for change*

Each of the artist's narratives involve at least some discussion of the idea that exposing the viewing public to the textile medium is critical in order for it to become taken more seriously as a potential art form. The artists were also quick to point out that just because they consider what they do to be art does not mean that the viewing public, gallery owners, or even potential buyers will too. Improvements in the quality and sophistication of technique over the past 25 years have created more opportunities for the women to better establish themselves and their collective work within the world of textiles, as all of the artists have exhibited in textile art shows in at least one other European country, if not several. What the women find more important, however, is the need to increase the visibility of their medium within their home country. Strategies consciously used by these women point to the crucial role of exhibitions for education, linking exposure of the public to the medium of textiles with the economic value of the finished product.

### *Increasing exposure*

Because of the relatively small population within Ireland, and the even smaller number of people who are textile artists, each of the artists in this study recognizes the need to look outside of Ireland for ideas and encouragement. One artist, Allie Kay, invites teachers to Ireland from abroad in order to broaden the scope of textile artists working in Ireland. In addition, meeting other textile artists from diverse cultures and learning that textile art is more highly regarded in other countries has had a positive impact on how Irish textile artists regard their own work. As Bernadette points out,

BF: ...when you meet other quilters, especially Americans, you don't become shy about your work, you're able to say, 'Yes, I did that' and you know, before that you'd be hiding it behind your back. I think we were like that in Ireland, we weren't up front, but things have changed and now we want to share everything as well [with] everybody.

Within Ireland, however, the artists point out that it is more difficult to achieve the level of exposure necessary to increasing awareness of work in the medium. As former Public Relations Officer for the Irish Patchwork Society, in Monica's experience exhibitions of textile art are not as well attended in Ireland as they might be if the public was made more aware of them. In the following passage, she points out how this was the case when she was in charge of PR for the IPS' National Exhibition in 1999:

MT: The viewing public would be comparatively low ... Not that many people go to see the exhibitions. Quite honestly, not that many people. We had people the second week, but the first week, we didn't. And, you know, not that many people went. Huge lot of promotion, trying to get them in the papers, and you know you find that the papers aren't really interested in us.

The artists are acutely aware of how factors such as promotion and attendance have implications for the value placed on textiles. To deal with this challenge, several of the artists in this study, including Monica, have formed a group for the express purpose of mounting traveling exhibits of textile art. Called "Fibres 2000", the group has exhibited widely within Ireland, England, and was included in the 2000 and 2001 American Quilt Association exhibit that traveled throughout the United States.

Relying on the medium of textiles as the uniting force that joins several working artists together has been an effective means of increasing exposure for many of the artist's work. A similar type of solidarity through-medium can be seen through the artists' experiences as members of the IPS. The activities sponsored by the IPS helped encourage members to develop an identity as textile artists, and to explain to themselves and to others what they do in the textile medium. On a personal level, membership in the IPS influenced each artist's approach to expression, in that being part of a larger group both validated her identity as a textile artist, and allowed her to share her work with others. As Jennifer states, joining the organization had a notable impact on her creative process:

JK: ... I've never really gone forward in the process through reading, I think [it's] through talking to other people who are in the same thing. You swap ideas in textiles. All my processes were got through talking to people and going to workshops, and that sort of thing.

As Jennifer points out, this kind of experience contributes to the definition of one's own identity as a textile artist, but it also contributes to the conceptualization of how textile art is defined by its creators, a definition that can then be shared with the viewing public.

### *Social and economic value*

The perception that textiles are not a long-term investment has subsequently resulted in the perception that they are not worth preserving for the long-term. Grania further clarifies this by describing a situation that she encountered with respect to a piece called "Tesselations" that was made by her quilting group. "Tesselations" was based on the tile designs found within the town

hall of the seat of a particular county council. The piece was exhibited in the county's public library. The council was interested in having a look at the piece with a view to purchasing it because of its relevance to the history of the locality and the building itself. However, she recalls the disappointing turn of events as follows:

GM: ...we had put a price on it of two thousand pounds, which I think was not an exorbitant figure, I know that they've paid anything up to four and five thousand pounds for paintings. We put a price of two thousand pounds on it, there was a huge volume of work involved in it, it's all entirely hand-quilted by a group of six or eight of us, which took months, and months, and months of hard work....It's not that they didn't have the funding for it, it was that a choice was made and I imagine the choice was made, possibly on account of the size of the piece, and they decided maybe it wouldn't be transportable, it would be possibly too fragile, or maybe they'd just rather invest their money in 'art' art... NN: What about the fact that its content was historically relevant? GM: Now, this would be probably one of the few historically important textile pieces within this county, and that was the attitude...it is almost a part of their headquarters, the town hall tiles, the town hall itself rather, which is where I took the design from the ceramic tiles there, you know, part of their premises. So, where do you go from there? That to me then is such a just a gross lack of support.

In addition to private buyers, the artists in this study would like to see more investment made in textiles by public institutions and corporate bodies, insofar as it would promote the value of the medium on a broad scale. As Alison Erridge points out

AE: ... I would like to see an awful lot more of it hanging in public places. I would like to see a lot more of it purchased, by corporate bodies, by corporations. I would like to see an awful lot more support for textile artists within the country, from whatever source it comes from. Particularly within public buildings. I mean, there may be a fair amount of it within private homes, but that's not necessarily viewed by a vast majority of the public. I would certainly like to see it available... far more publicly.

The artists in this study are very conscious of the implications of their actions for altering perceptions held by the viewing public. Indeed, beyond just selling the work, the potential to effect positive change through creative expression is an important reason to exhibit work, at least according to Grania, who states:

GM ...the schools bring their pupils...to have a look at these exhibitions and sometimes I'd make arrangements with them for a class to come up and we'd sit around and talk...about the various quilts and what the quilts meant to them and what they like about them... But equally it is trying to educate the public in general here as to what could be done...educating people's palette...showing them alternatives to the art that they are climatized to.

Exhibitions play a crucial role in conferring value on objects of and as art, in that there is a reflexive relationship between objects in certain kinds of space and the meaning attached to them (Ardener, 1993; Attfield, 2000). That is, objects rely on the space they are placed within for their meaning, and conversely, the meaning associated with the space is in part attributed to the objects. Likewise, because rituals also serve to define objects (Ardener, 1993), an event like a gallery opening for a textile art exhibition can help redefine expectations of art within society, in that an opening announces to the public that the space contains certain objects to be looked at. A gallery opening also suggests that these objects are to be valued as art, as oftentimes openings indicate the potential for investment through the purchase of art objects. The artists in this study hope that by increasing the public's familiarity with the medium they will ultimately be able to work toward increasing its value in the minds of viewers as well as potential buyers.

### *Discussion and conclusions*

For the artists in this study it is difficult to separate the medium from the finished piece. Their personal narratives each highlight a history of creative expression through fabric and stitching, as well as finding inspiration in putting the two together. The creative process, however, is not always easy for these 25 women, who, as mothers, wives, and sisters, experience the creative process as part of daily life, instead of being removed from it. As the narratives illustrate, working within the home requires the integration of expression with expectations that come along with being an Irish woman of their generation. Yet these artists have clearly come into their own through the medium and particularly through sharing their work with others within textile circles as well as without. Exhibiting work has forced the women to open themselves up to the outside, and in turn, to find their footing as artists.

In *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture*, Wolff likens the feminist critique of the exclusion of women from the history of knowledge production to the exclusion of women from "cultural production," in that education in art schools, participation in academies, exhibiting in galleries, and critical examinations of work have occurred far more often for male artists than females (Wolff, 1990, p. 73). Sociologist Dorothy Smith further substantiates this idea, writing that in art and in poetry the artist begins with the problem of having learned her craft in an alienated mode and must discover methods of working that allow her to begin from herself distinctly as a woman, or perhaps even more simply, to begin from herself who is a woman (Smith, 1990, p. 59).

For the textile artist in particular, this alienated mode is more deeply rooted. As the interpretation presented here illustrates, when the women of this study began to seek opportunities for exhibiting and selling work they also began to confront public perceptions of the value of the textile medium. They began to experience the extent to which women's actions and materials in regards to creative expression had not been accepted within the discourse of actuality, and that this was particularly the case for them given their chosen medium. As Smith (1987) points out, created out of the fabric of family, friendship, and use, the quilt

[W]as not a piece of art, therefore to be seen in isolation from its history and the social relations of its making. It was not made to be set in the high walls of a gallery or museum. It was always a moment in the moving skein of family and tradition, raising suspicion against time and its powers of separation (1987, p. 23).

This ongoing perception has implications for the textile artist's experience, in that she continuously faces conflicting interpretations of the value of her work—her own versus that of society.

The popular mode of interpretation used to define textile art forms points to the way that the dominant discourse of art traditionally confers value on objects as art. Criteria such as selling and exhibiting are used as means to evaluate the textile medium against the normative definition of art in western societies. Scholars have argued that, when viewed in relation to the general understanding of what is acceptable as art, it is possible that textiles as a medium both challenge and reinforce this understanding, resulting in the notion that textiles are a "critical" artistic medium (Barnett, 1995; Jefferies, 1995; Maharaj, 1991). Consequently, textile art is somewhat ambiguous, allowing it the freedom to work in-between the lines established between art and craft, and thus to operate as a critical art form.

Associations between women, textiles, and social value arise out of the androcentric notion that women's experiences in general, and modes of expression in particular, are of less value than those of men (Deepwell, 1995; Robinson, 1995). But by repeatedly situating textiles as art objects, the artists in this study consciously seek to effect change through their art by reinforcing the notion that artistic worth can and should apply to a multiplicity of forms. Each artist expressed the opinion that by continued exhibition, education, and exposure, the eventual acceptance of this new understanding is a real possibility. Many of the artists discussed the widespread changes that have occurred in the art world during their lifetimes, particularly with respect to what makes for acceptable art media. Moreover, many have witnessed changes in gender expectations, whether within society in general or within the art establishment in particular. Textile art exhibitions have led to increased opportunities to learn new techniques and ways to work with the textile medium through workshops and conferences. This has resulted in an increased flexibility on the part of the artist to work both with and against tradition via the textile medium. Therefore, like the medium she works in, the textile artist is herself in a potentially critical position.

Working together over the past 20 years, these 25 Irish women textile artists have begun the process whereby social perceptions as to the value of the textile medium can be changed. The artists' narratives not only point to the profound importance that forming a group had on their use of the medium, but also on a myriad of results stemming from their participation as group members. Factors important to their narratives reflect the challenges and successes they have had over the years, and the accomplishments they have made in the face of perceptions of textiles as "women's work," or as Rita Scannell puts it: "the little hobby that the wife has" (RS).

In challenging tradition, the artists in this study work to educate the public about textiles as a viable medium, and in turn, emphasize the cultural significance and value of Irish women's creative expression in general. Although there is still much intellectual and pragmatic work needed to fully understand the gendered relations of power that categorize and define the textile medium in Irish society today, listening to these 25 women talk about their expression provides a perspective based on lived experience, a perspective that highlights the implications of such definitions for their experiences. Ultimately, this article illustrates how critical creative expression in textiles is to the daily lives of these 25 women. Indeed, what is perhaps most compelling about their experiences is the level of devotion they show for their chosen medium of expression. As Bernadette explains, "It's more than a hobby, it's something that I don't think I could live without." (BF). This devotion, coupled with the desire to share their work with others, illustrates the extent to which these 25 women are actively seeking to light the spark of change in their culture's collective way of seeing textiles, envisioning a time when artistic expression in the textile medium will be understood as far more than just a hobby.

### *Artists*

Brady, Mary

Clyne-Kelly, Patricia Costelloe, Eileen Dillon, Siobhan

Duggan, Catherine Erridge, Allison Falvey, Bernadette Fleeton, Ann

Glynn, Bryde

Jeffares, Anne

Kay, Allie  
Killeen, Ann Higgins Kingston, Jennifer  
MacCarthy-Morrogh, Rosemary  
McDonnell, Mary McDonnell, Ruth McElligott, Grania Montague, Evelyn O'Brien, Loretta  
O'Farrell, Fiona Pocock, Kerry  
Scannell, Rita  
Sherrard, Catherine Tierney, Monica Whelan, Kitty

### *Endnotes*

1. Reference to each of the artists is indicated by the initials of her first and last name. 'NN' refers to the interviewer. The artists have agreed to the use of their real names in the publishing of this manuscript.
2. Along with the IPS there are other organizations involved in the development of contemporary textile art in Ireland. The Crafts Council of Ireland, a government sponsored organization, oversees the development of Irish crafts on a national scale and supports craft workshops and exhibitions, including those of textile art. The Irish Countrywoman's Association offers short courses in a variety of textile crafts, including patchwork. The City and Guilds provides training and certification in a particular craft, such as embroidery or patchwork. The program is typically 3 years long, and works to establish and maintain a high standard of craftwork on a broad scale.

### *References*

Aptheker, Bettina (1989). *Tapestries of life: Women's work, women's consciousness, and the meaning of daily experience*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.

Ardener, Shirley (1993). *Women and space: Ground rules and social maps*. Oxford: Berg.

Attfield, Judy (2000). *Wild things: The material culture of everyday life*. Oxford: Berg.

Ballard, Linda (1993). *Applied art? Tradition and creativity in Irish needleskills (summary)*. In Nicola Gordon Bowe (Ed.), *Art and the national dream: The search for vernacular expression in turn-of-the-century design* (pp. 203–204). Dublin, Ireland: Colour Books.

Barnett, Pennina (1995). *Afterthoughts on curating 'The Subversive Stitch.'* In Katy Deepwell (Ed.), *New feminist art criticism: Critical strategies* (pp. 76–86). Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Barry, Ursula (1988). *Women in Ireland*. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 11, 317–322.

Clancy, Patrick, Drudy, Sheelagh, Lynch, Kathleen, & O'Dowd, Liam (Eds.). (1995). *Irish society: Sociological perspectives*.

Dublin, Ireland: Institute of Public Administration.

Clear, Caitriona (1993). *'The women cannot be blamed': The Commission of Vocational Organization, feminism, and 'homemakers' in independent Ireland in the 1930s and 40s*. In Mary

O'Dowd, & Sabine Wichert (Eds.), *Chattel, servant or citizen: Women's status in church, state, and society* (pp. 179–186).

Belfast, Northern Ireland: The Institute of Irish Studies, The Queen's University of Belfast.

Cullen, Mary (1991). Women's history in Ireland. In Karen Offen, Ruth Roach Pierson, & Jane Rendall (Eds.), *Writing women's history: International perspectives* (pp. 429–442). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Curtin, Chris, Jackson, Patricia, & O'Connor, Barbara (Eds.). (1987). *Gender in Irish society*. Galway, Ireland: Galway University Press.

Deepwell, Katy (Ed.). (1995). *New feminist art criticism: Critical strategies*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Jefferies, Janis (1995). Text and textiles: Weaving across the borderlines. In Katy Deepwell (Ed.), *New feminist art criticism: Critical strategies* (pp. 164–173). Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Jones, Laura (1978). Patchwork bedcovers. *Ulster Folk Life Journal*, 24, 31–47.

Jones, Laura (1981). *Irish bedcovers*. Exhibition catalog. Cultra: Ulster Folk and Transport Museum.

Kelly, Nora (1987). Women knitters castoff. In Chris Curtin, Patricia Jackson, & Barbara O'Connor (Eds.), *Gender in Irish society* (pp. 169–183). Galway, Ireland: Galway University Press.

Lippard, Lucy (1995). *The pink glass swan: Selected feminist essays on art*. New York: The New Press.

Luddy, Maria (1995). *Women in Ireland, 1800–1918: A documentary history*. Cork, Ireland: Cork University Press.

Maharaj, Sarat (1991). Arachne's genre: Towards inter-cultural studies in textiles. *Journal of Design History*, 4, 75–96.

Mahon, Evelyn (1995). From democracy to femocracy: The women's movement in the Republic of Ireland. In Patrick Clancy, Sheelagh Drudy, Kathleen Lynch, & Liam O'Dowd (Eds.), *Irish society: Sociological perspectives* (pp. 529–562).

Dublin, Ireland: Institute of Public Administration. Ni Chuilleanain, Eilean (Ed.). (1985). *Irish women, image and achievement: Women in Irish culture from earliest times*. Dublin, Ireland: Arlen House.

O'Dowd, Mary, & Wichert, Sabine (Eds.). (1993). *Chattel, servant or citizen: Women's status in church, state, and society*. Belfast: The Institute of Irish Studies, The Queen's University of Belfast.

Robinson, Hilary (1995). Irish/woman/artwork: Selective readings. *Feminist Review*, 50, 89–110.

Robinson, Kathleen (1992). Women's contribution to the visual arts. *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 81, 49–56.

Shaw-Smith, David (1994). *Ireland's traditional crafts*. London: Thames and Hudson.

Smith, Dorothy E. (1987). *The everyday world as problematic: A feminist sociology*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Smith, Dorothy E. (1990). *The conceptual practices of power: A feminist sociology of knowledge*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Smyth, Ailbhe (1985). Women and power in Ireland: Problems, progress, practice. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 8, 255–262.

Wilson, Valerie (1991). Quiltmaking in Counties Antrim and Down: Some preliminary findings from the Ulster quilt survey. *Ulster Folk Life Journal*, 36, 142–175.

Wolff, Janet (1990). *Feminine sentences: Essays on women and culture*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.