

NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN  
DEPARTMENT OF FASHION & TEXTILES

LINEN: THE ARISTOCRAT OF TEXTILES

BY

EIMEAR MCAVOY

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART & DESIGN  
& COMPLEMENTARY STUDIES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
BDES IN FASHION.

1992







ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

To Paul Costello with whom I had the privilege to work during the summer of '91.

To Moygashal Linen Mills who showed me the different stages in producing the finished cloth.

To John England Textiles who provided me with various linen samples.

To the Irish Linen Guild whose literature I found most helpful in tracing the story of linen.

To Barry Cowan for giving of his time to dicusses the B.B.C production of 'Flax With Flair', televised on 1st March, 1987.







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## INTRODUCTION

'All year the flax-dam festered in the heart  
Of the townlands; green and heavy headed.  
Flax had rotten there, weighed down by huge sods.  
Daily it sweltered in the punishing sun'  
(Seamus Heaney, Death Of A Naturalist)

Who could imagine that from such inauspicious  
beginnings this 'Aristocrat of Textiles' - linen could  
evolve?.

The stinking flax dam in Seamus Heaney's native Bellaghy is  
a far cry from the opulent catwalks of Milan or Paris!.  
(plate 1).

Living in close proximity to Moygashel, the base of the  
famous ambassador of Irish linen, Paul Costello, I have long  
been fascinated by the fabric which has ensured that  
Ireland's name remains in the forefront of international  
haute couture. My 1991 work experience in Moygashel  
heightened my appreciation of and interest in the history of  
this upmarket fabric, hence my choice of thesis.

In this age of flux, where each new season brings  
with it innovations and experimentations, it is edifying to  
note that linen, despite fluctuations in its popularity, has  
survived the test of time and is sure proof of John Keats'  
famous lines :









plate 1







'A thing of beauty is a joy forever:  
Its loveliness increases; it will never  
Pass into nothingness '

My study of the history of the Irish linen industry has proved to me that this 'thing of beauty' has not faded into oblivion but rather has, espically in the past two decades, 'increased in loveliness'

This thesis will trace the history of linen from its earliest origins to the present day. It will attempt to show how thanks to innovative Italian fashion designers and sophisticated Italian consumers, who both viewed the characteristic creasing of linen as proof of the genuine article, it is now enjoying a renaissance in the world of fashion.







CHAPTER 1

LINEN : A COTTAGE INDUSTRY.







Linen is the aristocrat of textiles, strong as steel, delicate as silk with an appearance as varied and attractive as an Irish landscape. It is not surprising that it has been preferred by people of good taste for well over 4000 years. (6,p.5)

Wallace Clarke's glowing eulogy on the merits of linen refer to both the popularity and the antiquity of this particular fabric. This is scarcely surprising considering the ready availability of the raw materials: ie, the flax plant which has flourished in the damp Irish soil. The art of weaving and finishing linen has been an age old tradition for the Irish people. However, although traces referring to the linen trade can be found as early as the 13th century, it wasn't until some 300 years later that the linen trade was transformed into a major industry, being used constantly as an apparel fabric.

In the 16th century the people of Ireland seemed to have possessed a superabundance of linen, of which they made extravagant use. At that period, it was fashionable to wear chemises each of which contained 13 or 14 yards of linen...(33,p.6)

These chemises were, needless to say, unlike that of today. They had a novel design in that they were pleated and draped like a skirt.(Plate 2)<sup>2</sup> Moreover for Irish women of those days the fashionable linen article was a 'leine'<sup>1</sup> which was a turban like headdress which would contain as much as 6 yards of linen.









plate 2







The common use of such vast quantities of material in chemises and "leine" thus ensured the success of the linen trade which continued to flourish in the ensuing centuries.

During the 18th century at a time when several Irish trades were undoubtedly ravished by English colonial policy the linen trade was made exempt and even encouraged by the British government. They inaugurated a policy of 'discouraging the manufacture of wool in Ireland and encouraging the manufacture of linen.' (13,p.5) This enabled the Earl of Strafford, appointed by Charles I, to build the trade into a major industry. Strafford imported Dutch equipment, had weaving looms built, improved quality flax plants which he sold at cost price to the farmers and altogether vastly improved the quality of Irish flax. He promptly sent to France and the Netherlands for skilled textile workers, as Irish linen manufacturers had previously done. The cultivation of flax was energetically promoted for several years. However, as in every era, such innovations met with resistance, possibly the result of suspicion of change. The people he tried to help refused to co-operate and to adopt new ways and techniques. Strafford retaliated by punishing with fines or imprisonment anyone who continued to work the flax in the traditional fashion and by confiscating all the flax, yarn and cloth involved. The end result was mass misery.



Families were dispossessed and more than 1000 people died. (33, pp.10-11) Undeterred by such set-backs, Parliament continued its promotions of flax cultivation and linen manufacture in Ireland; the most significant law probably being the prohibition of the importing of French linen into England. This ensured the success of Irish linen and earned King Charles I the tribute of being 'kind to the Irish linen trade.' (13, p.5)

Probably the greatest impetus which led to linen becoming an important industry was the arrival of Huguenot refugees who settled in Northern Ireland. Some of them came slightly before 1700 (13,p.16) others during the next 10 or 20 years. Their presence must have given strength to the industry at a critical time when all important overseas trade was just beginning to develop. They brought with them both personal and material wealth. They knew the best methods of flax culture and could teach fine spinning. They had the most efficient looms adapted to the weaving of cambric, damask and the finest broad cloths. They had experience of bleaching, partly gained at Haarlem. They were acquainted with the methods of trade in highly organized markets and the kinds of cloth most in demand in other countries. Not only did they bring with them this vast range of expertise, but they were also 'men of substance'<sup>3</sup> who were able to invest capital,







and thus to supply to some extent the greatest of all needs to any industry : money. (13,pp.16-17)

Their leader, Louis Crommelin, belonged to a family which had been connected with the linen trade for several generations, and had prospered in it. He toured the Irish countryside teaching the farmers more economical methods of cultivating flax and advising them on how to increase their flax yield by devising methods of improving the seeds from which the flax was grown. He introduced water power and even brought in a reel that would measure yarn fairly at the market. He was an influential figure in government circles. As part of the bargain between the English and Irish governments in 1698 for the discouragement of woollen manufacture and the promotion of the the linen industry in Ireland, Crommelin was invited to form a society, or royal corporation carrying on the linen trade.

The corporation consisted of a number of partners who undertook to bring machinery to Ireland, practice manufacture themselves and teach the process to others. The Huguenots were free to make whatever profit they could by their own trading but they were expected to contribute time to technical instruction as well.(13, pp.20-21)

As overseer of the royal linen manufacture Crommelin appears to have done his work well, as he modernised the Irish linen industry in every stage of processing.







He wrote a small book,<sup>4</sup> giving clear and concise points, and with the help of good illustrations gave particulars of all the processes from flax growing to bleaching. The Irish were particularly amazed at the 'Saxony' flax spinning wheel which brought wondrous speed' and the Dutch looms which produced a quality of linen fabric 'far superior to the earlier narrow cloth...' (32, p.29) The Linen Board were more than pleased with Crommelin's performance and made this statement:

They said Crommelin and colony have been very serviceable and greatly instrumental in the improving and propagating the flaxen manufacture in the north part of the kingdom and the perfection to which the same brought in that part of the country is very much owing to the skill and industry of the said Crommelin.  
(13, p.19)

Despite the undoubted benefits of his innovations, his influence was not wholly good. He passed regulations to prevent Irishmen from setting up as independent craftsmen until they had served an apprenticeship to Huguenot employers. However, there is no question that the general quality of linen manufacture improved as its volume increased. We may take as evidence the statement made in 1737, by Huey, a London merchant, who is quoted as saying 'that Irish linen was at that time much better in quality than it had been when he began 25 years before.' (13, p. 20)







However, not all the praise should go to Crommelin and the Huguenots, whose invaluable contributions and services are indisputable. A deserving tribute is likewise due to the 'Linen and Hempen Manufacturers of Ireland' which was formed in 1711 to encourage and extend the linen trade and which remained in existence until 1828. (32,p.13)

The Industrial Revolution which in the 18th century swept over England, had little or no impact on the Irish linen trade for several years; this was because the wholesale switch to power was retarded by the comparatively cheap labour available in Ireland. 'In 1811 linen yarn could be hand spun and sold in Ireland much cheaper than the same article manufactured by machinery in England'. (32,p.14)

Even when the factory system of organisation for weaving took place in Ireland in the second half of the 18th century, domestic weaving persisted on a large scale. In the 19th century, power driven machinery made its debut in Irish linen manufacture and gained a foothold that was rapidly to develop the whole trade. Industrialisation had taken over what for centuries had been a cottage industry. The use of steam power had long been delayed, but when the fashion had once been set it spread rapidly, because there was an urgent need for increased production.<sup>5</sup> New techniques began to pave the way for the design of new machines,







whose performance continually sought improvements to match breakthroughs brought about by continued research. By 1869 several thousand powerlooms had been set up in Ireland. The development of the power driven mechanical equipment slowly converted the age old cottage spinning and weaving production of Irish linen into a factory industry of standardized patterns after a picturesque history of nearly 1000 years. (13, pp. 320-334).

Demand for apparel linen came about early in the 18th century, although court dress at this time was distinguished more by the quality and expense of the fabric rather than the cut or style.

Mary Delaney,<sup>6</sup> a renowned figure both in the social and the fashion world became active in encouraging the promotion of Irish fabrics. She persuaded ladies who attended receptions at Dublin Castle to have their dresses made of Irish cloth.

Mary Delaney noted with pleasure 'that the ball was prodigiously crowded and all the ladies dressed in Irish stuff and never looked finer or more gentle; except five or six who wore silk and they were not distinguished to their honour.'

Mrs Delaney was just the person to set this example as the Dublin ladies, knowing she had attended the grandest court functions in England, were content to trust her good taste.







As early as the 1770s linen of different weights was used by ladies for such outer garments as neckerchiefs, tippets, simple ruff and ruffles, caps and handkerchiefs. The Irish linen manufacturers were ambitious to have more of the fashion custom, and were encouraged in this by the trustees of the Linen Board, the Irish Parliament and the Dublin Society. The industry also benefited from the increasing interest in personal hygiene because it created a demand for extra underwear. Linen was also increasingly being used in men's shirts, so much so that by the end of the 19th century there were many establishments making shirts to measure. (32,p.27) (plate 3 & 4).

This service allowed the customer to have a choice of linens for body, front and cuffs while permitting the more thrifty to use calico in the body rather than linen.

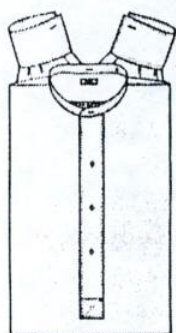
For a Viceregal Garden party in May 1886, it was recommended that only Irish fabrics should be worn. A booklet was published with suggestions; illustrations included that of a "light brown tussore linen and Irish cream surat. The linen bodice of tiny pleats had a plastron of cream surat loosely caught with daffodil lacings. The linen skirt was made in full box pleats trimmed with silk..."(10,pp.158-159) (plates 5 & 6).





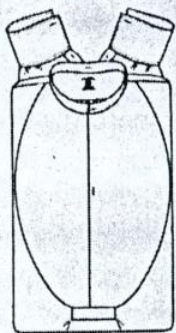


GENTLEMEN'S SHIRTS.



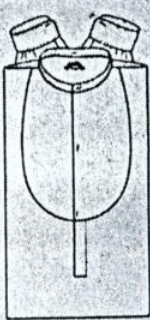
OFFICERS' SHIRT.

Cuffs, 4-fold Linen.  
Price 26/- per half-dozen.  
Made specially, 2/- per  
half-dozen extra.



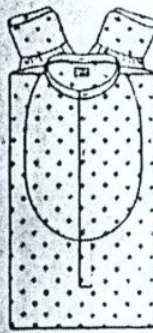
"IMPERIAL" DRESS SHIRT.

The finest Shirt made.  
Price 47/6 per half-dozen.  
Made specially, 2/- per  
half-dozen extra.



"CHAMPION"  
BUSINESS SHIRT.

Price 23/6 per half-dozen.  
Made specially, 3/6 per  
half-dozen extra.  
Boys' Shirts, 15/9 to 23/9  
per half-dozen.



"CARNLEA" SHIRT.

French Print,  
Price 27/- per half-dozen.  
Made to pattern, 4/11 ca.  
Write for Samples.

DIRECTIONS FOR SELF-MEASUREMENT.—Round chest at armpits, from centre of back to shoulder ;  
from shoulder to end of sleeve, including cuff ; size of collar worn.

N.B.—Collars and Cuffs are measured from centre to centre of buttonhole, and NOT from end to end.

FANCY FRENCH CAMBRIC, WOVEN OXFORD, AND ZEPHYR SHIRTS, in all the NEWEST AND BEST COLOURS.  
SHIRTS MADE TO ORDER in shortest time. Smartly cut ; good fit. WRITE FOR PATTERNS, POST FREE.

ROBINSON & CLEAVER, Ltd., Shirt, Collar and Cuff Manufacturers, BELFAST.









plate 4









plate 5









plate 6







However, the steady growth in the linen industry suffered a set back in the early part of the 20th century; for some years the trade did not realise that this trend was permanent and continued to hope for a return to the pre-war boom. The manufacture of linen was becoming more expensive in competition with other fabrics, notably cotton. Linen's reputation for distinction and durability met little response in a post war world that wanted mass production of cheap fashions. The trade had to admit that 'linen manufacture differs from other industries in that it does not lend itself to the bulk manufacture of standard articles from uniform raw materials' and tried to live with the consequences. (32,p.37)

Between the wars, particularly after 1945, artificial fibres like rayon, nylon, terylene and polypropylene arrived to capture huge chunks of the market. This had disastrous repercussions on the Irish linen industry. Of the 250 linen houses that had been trading in 1920, scarcely 20 are in business today. Happily, some of the oldest have survived: Clarkes of Upperlands<sup>7</sup>, bleaching since 1736, and Andrews of Comber, spinning for over 200 years. Each of them has been in the hands of one family throughout. (22,pp.15-16)







Notwithstanding the competition from other fabrics in which Europe dominates the world, demand for apparell linen<sup>8</sup> has climbed by 10% every year for the last decade and there is no sign of it diminishing (21,pp.91-93). The industry has the linen loving Italians to thank for this unexpected kiss of life. The Italians use linen in their most consummate creations and have established a vogue taken up by to designers the world over. Although the oldest textile fabric in the world, it is still able to adapt to today's fast moving scene where it is highly popular with designers, manufacturers and customers alike.

The plush catwalks of Milan, Paris and New York may be a far cry from the humble Irish cottage industry in which this fabric has its origins, but its continuing popularity in the ever changing world of fashion has ensured the survival of this "Aristocrat of Textiles."







CHAPTER 2

LINEN : ON THE CATWALK.







It is not simply design, style and shape that are subject to the whims of the fashion society. Fabrics also fall in and out of favour with the passing of each season.

In the past, "flavour of the month" fabrics have ranged from cheesecloth to crimplene. Skins such as leathers and suede have vastly increased in popularity, moving from classy to common place. Silks have become more accessible and less exotic; and of course, the influence of Levi Strauss and the use of denim cannot be under estimated. However some fabrics are less enduring than others and one cloth that has been unusually subject to the ups and downs in the fashion industry is the natural fabric of linen.

Over the years linen as a fashion fabric has enjoyed a mixed fortune, largely due to ambivalent attitudes to its appearance. On the one hand, linen is synonymous with crisp classic styles which discreetly exude an air of affluence. On the other hand, its high crumple factor ensures that only those who can effortlessly remain impeccable can wear the fabric with ease and confidence. That linen is now enjoying a prestigious niche in the world of haute couture is due in no small measure to the influence of Sybil Connolly, who is attributed with putting Ireland and, in particular, Irish linen on the map of 20th century fashion. (19, p. 41.)







The famous portrait of Jackie Kennedy clad in one of Connolly's famous pleated linen garments gave her the publicity and prestige of which every designer dreams. However, in the 1950's, before her endorsement by the American First Lady, Sybil Connolly was recognised as a designer of worth. Her use of linens and tweeds gave her clothes the stamp of individuality in the post-war years. Her pleated skirts, painstakingly done by hand, were her hallmark. She popularised linen as a chic fabric and responded to the new demand from the continentals for cool fabrics by making a half to three quarters of her collection in Irish linen. Her designs of the 50's were comprised of the most traditional Irish fabrics: red flannel, linen and wool. They were used together to create her 'washer woman' designs, that of a long evening skirt (quilted flannel) beautifully cut and flaring, worn with a white vee-neck blouse in fine linen with accordion pleated sleeves and a traditional black stole. Sybil continued to use white linen in her most popular and successful gown of the season. This dress, 'First Love' was of gossamer fine linen, sheer chiffon and hand pleated with over 5000 tiny pleats. They were held in place with delicate bands of plaited satin ribbon. These pleated linen creations were so uncontrollable; each panel was hand stitched to a corresponding section of lining with a series of tiny running stitches - an operation that must have taken hours.







Examples of her work can be seen in plates 7-10. They were extremely popular, particularly with the Irish Americans and the European press and public.<sup>9</sup>

She was recognised in many circles as a designer of considerable worth. Sybil Connolly took fabrics that were in danger of becoming extinct and by using them in a new high fashion application ensured their survival. Connolly is eloquent in her descriptions of the search for inspiration in remote Ireland, about her respect for the craft and the dignity of the weavers. (26,p.B3) She supervised the production of local fabrics and introduced pale blues and pinks into a repertoire once dominated by traditional rustic hues. Sybil Connolly's basic shapes, detailing and overall design concept rarely, if ever, differed from that of her contemporaries. She was not particularly original or innovative - many of the ideas featured in her collections may have been found in other European designers' ensembles a few seasons previously. The use of traditional Irish fabrics may seem a cliché to us forty years later ; however, one must remember that no one previous to Sybil Connolly had given Irish linen the recognition it deserved.

It is important to recall the freshness with which the 'washer woman' designs were executed and received in the '50s.









plate 7









plate 8







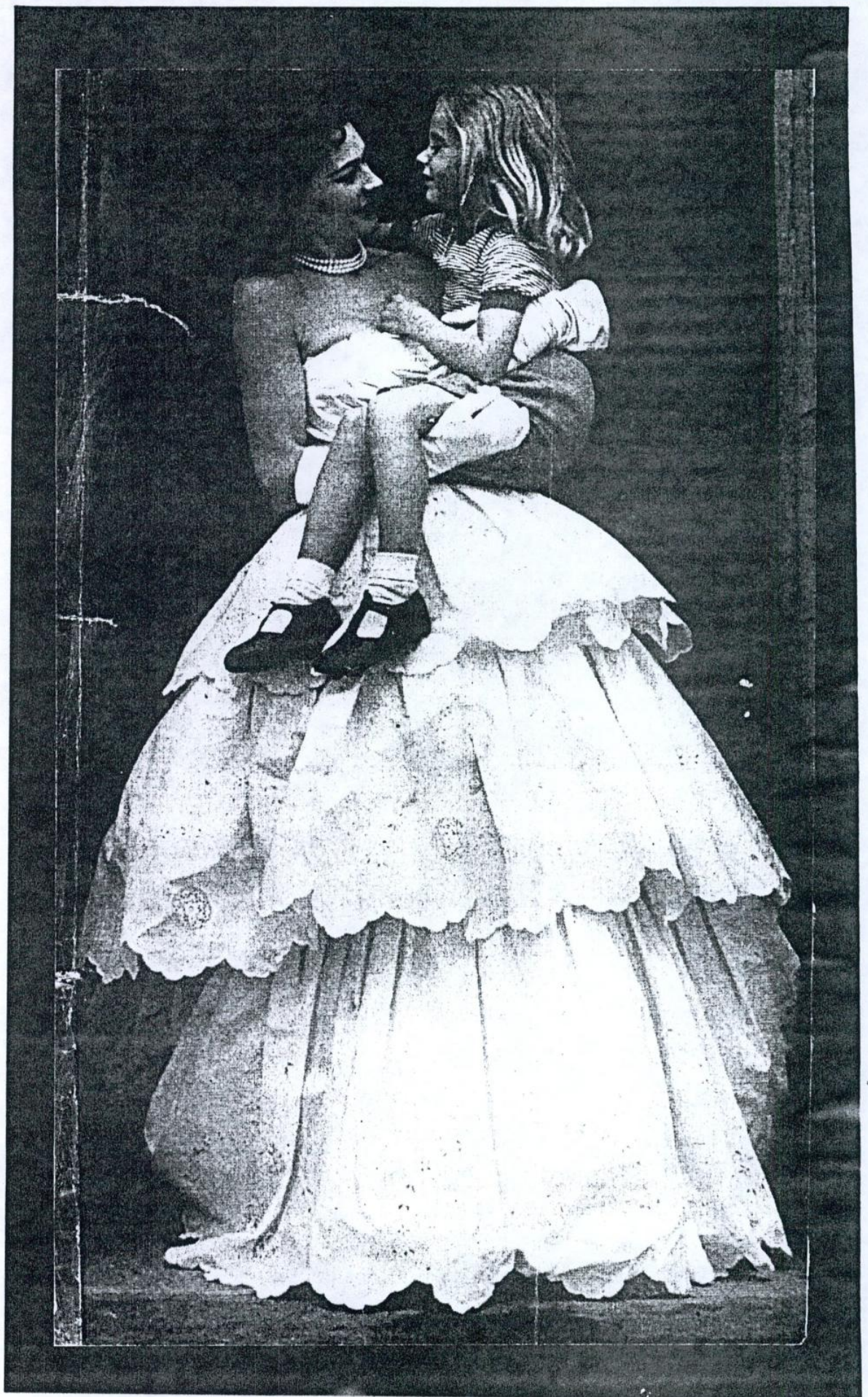


plate 9









plate 10







Her real legacy today is not so much her fashion styling as her ability to work convincingly with Irish fabrics and complicated pleating techniques. It was the use of such fabrics that once prompted Sinead de Valera to say "Well, I always thought God was the only Creator!" (26,p.B3).

While Sybil Connolly may not be totally responsible for the resurgence of interest in the Irish fabric industry, she surely has been of great importance as a publicity agent. So much so, that the Linen Board Of Ireland in the 50's and 60's christened her ' The Ambassadors of Irish Linen' - a title she justly deserved.

Irish fashion designers have been making a significant impact on the international market through their skilful use of home made linens and tweeds. Although Paul Costello, Ib Jorgenson and other top designers have been outstanding ambassadors for the Irish fashion industry, they have not yet managed to repeat her success at this level. American fashion expert, Eleanor Lambert,<sup>10</sup> in the latter part of the 1980's in an interview with Trevor Danker asserted that ' the only outstanding Irish designer now is Sybil Connolly, who, in my opinion, is far ahead of the others. But for the others, I cannot see anyone in Ireland at the moment who is anywhere near world class. Some Irish designers are producing terrible clothes.....' (23,p.34).



This outspoken comment provoked, not surprisingly, an avalanche of protest, not least from designers like Pat Crawley who considered themselves to be labelled as those producing 'terrible clothes'. I feel that Lambert, like so many other Americans, was unduly influenced by her fondness for 'typically Irish' designs and fails to give credit to the excellent work being done by Louise Kennedy, Paul Costello and other young designers. I would hate to think that such a derogatory comment was a true reflection of the Irish fashion scene.

Sybil Connolly's most important source of inspiration and raw materials is still very much Ireland. She is still 'in love' with Donegal tweeds and Irish linen, as illustrated in the following excerpt from her speech to the weavers of Donegal.

Irish linen, tweeds and lace are today's fabrics which are accepted everywhere as part of international fashion. The age-old craft of hand-weaving and hand crocheting handed down to you from your parents and from their parents before them have come into their own as far as fashion is concerned. I am very proud that the fabrics that I am identified with have such a proud tradition behind them and such a reputation of quality and beauty.  
(46,p.1)

Now, because of her influence, many internationally recognised designers are using linen as a suitable raw material for their collections.



Sybil's success inspired a wide new generation of young designers ;she not only boosted an ailing craft industry but put Ireland firmly on the map of haute couture.

Traditional Irish fabrics still have a very great appeal in America, Britain and indeed Europe. In fact, they have become an even more sought after commodity by the truly international designers such as Issey Miyake, Giorgio Armani and Penny Ellis, to name but a few.

Irish designers have always loved using homemade tweeds and linens, but in recent years, Paul Costello has been the most outstanding ambassador abroad for his use of native fabrics.(plates 11 & 12) Linen has always featured strongly in his collections and right next door to his design studios in Dungannon, is Moygashel Mills, which manufactures and develops most of his linen and linen - mix fabrics. He works closely with Irish weavers and has developed in Ireland new polished and washed finishes for linen, which will be used in his collections for this coming summer. His pioneering and skilful use of linen has set him alongside some of the world leaders of the fashion industry, an achievement recognised by the International Linen Federation who have awarded him the Fil D'or (Golden Thread) on several occasions.









plate 11









plate 12







The International Linen Festival in Monto Carlo is a unique celebration of the world's oldest fabric," bringing together everyone in the industry including the flax growers of Belgium, to the weavers of Northern Ireland and Italy, and the top international names in fashion.

Paul Costello has been known for an innovative and sometimes cheeky approach to fabrics. He was to take household linen teacloths, complete with stripes down the side, and common Irish handkerchief material, turning them both into alluring skirts and dresses that women across the world from America to Japan wanted to buy. This innovation was to be widely copied.

There was a huge jump in linen consumption at this time; (between 1976 and 1981 it rose by over 400% in Europe alone). (13,p.13) Costello was instrumental in developing subtle new patterns and textures as linen was woven like tweed in a variety of weights and colourations. Sources of supply were Connemara Fabrics, McNutts of Donegal, Emblem of Wexford and Spence Bryson of Belfast, all of whom sold abroad. He uses suitings, shirtings and dress weights and became known for his tailored jackets, delicate dresses and beautifully cut blouses, a very sophisticated home spun look. 'It takes experience to know its limitations,' he once said. 'Linen is a very subtle fabric...







I have a close affinity to it and the people who work with it; it's at my roots' This affinity for and expertise in linen, explains why it is his biggest selling fabric and why he remains loyal to it, despite the swings of fashion. roots' This affinity for and expertise in linen, explains why it is his biggest selling fabric and why he remains loyal to it, despite the swings of fashion.

Costello's beautifully flattering clothes reflect his romantic idealistic views of women. The type of woman he designs for is not a fashion victim but rather a woman who wants quality in both fabric and style. He is meticulous about cut, though it is not one of his own skills. The cut is always important, especially in a jacket where it accentuates the quality of the garment. (See plates 13, 14 & 15)

This is something he learned while working in Milan for La Rinascente, a large department store where the fashion giant Armani also trained.

Costello still obviously keeps a very close eye on international markets and developments as indeed every designer does as a matter of course. His period in Milan proved very influential to him and now it is in Italy that Costello's linens are particularly popular. The fabric is perfect for warm climates;









plate 13









plate 14









plate 15







It is cool and comfortable and although it does crease the Italians have the art of wearing it with confidence.

'They dress it down and it looks great with a tan,' says Costello. (plates 16 & 17)

However, it is not just the chic Italians who are impressed by Costello's design skills. Just as Sybil Connolly's designs attracted the attention of the American First Lady, so Costello's designs have found favour in Buckingham Palace. Costello's creations may be found in Princess Diana's wardrobe of clothes for her recent Royal tour of the Middle East. How better to dress Princess Diana, than in Pure Irish Linen!. Ever since she first chose a suit from his collections six years ago, she has remained a faithful customer, buying steadily twice a year. 'She goes for colour, long jackets, things that would be noticed, rather than understated clothes. I contact her lady in waiting directly when the clothes are ready and she tries them on herself. Shes brilliant, no problem at all' comments Costello, with unconcealed pride. (47)

In his Dressage Spring/Summer collection of 1989, one can see clearly how he has taken the very best of natural materials and how he treats them in a traditional way to produce classic looks. Dressage consists of what Paul calls 'ozone friendly' linens and Aran sweaters, a home spun look with which he has been associated for so long.









plate 16









plate 17







The flexibility of simple unstructured shapes for effortless dressing; the ease and texture of natural fabrics in the purest colour palette, spiced marls and earthy prints; easy blazers, classic pants and long pleated skirts, teamed with crisp shirts and chunky cotton knits'. This is how he describes his own collections. As a developer he is not totally original. He has developed a very 'traditional' approach to dressing, at worst cliched and conventional but at best inspired with a truly international flavour.

Linen is now firmly established in the Spring/Summer collections of all leading designers either as pure linen or in mixtures. But some people will never get over the hurdle of its creased look while others appreciate the natural feel and the badge of designer clothes. Costello's collections include brilliant linens and silks, innovative tweeds and understated natural coloured clothes, reflecting both the style and flair of Italy and the romance and softness of his native country.

Costello produces four collections a year, a main collection for both winter and summer and two Dressage collections which consist of less classical and more exciting clothes at expensive but not outrageous prices, aimed at a slightly younger market. It is in his Dressage collections that his use of linen excels.







These clothes are easy, long lasting both physically and stylistically and unfussily flattering. Costello likes the traditional detailing which comes chiefly from the countryman's classic wardrobe. He does not handle frills or bows well. They seem to embarrass him.

Simplicity of line is always a prime concern when using linen. Costello prefers to leave the fabric to make its own statement; indeed his use of quality fabrics is perhaps the most important element in his collections and he does not feel obliged to detract from it with complicated cuts and construction. However, his work consisted of such a simple cut in the late 80s that his designs, in my opinion, had almost become boring, even though his shapes and use of fabric remained impeccable.

During my recent interview with Paul Costello at his base in Moygashel he alluded to his period of apprenticeship in Milan where he worked for La Rinascente, the same outlet in which Armani also trained. His admiration for this Italian giant of the fashion world was obvious, not only in his unstinted praise for Armani, but in the striking similarity in some of their designs.







Costello claimed that Armani knew how to make up linen, by choosing simple lines, clever cut and stylish colours, but above all, Costello admired his purist form. If 'Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery' then Costello's admiration knows no bounds!

I believe that a close scrutiny of some of the Irish designer's work reveals an uncanny similarity with Armani's designs. The photographs in plates 18-21 support my contention that he uses the Italian's designs as a starting point, eliminating or adding details where necessary. The similarity in shape, line and fabrics in these garments is quite phenomenal.

I believe that it is not too fanciful to describe Costello as an 'Italophile.' His enthusiasm is reflected in the following comment; 'I personally like very subtle tones, a sophisticated look. This is where Italy has been such a great influence on me. From Florence to Milan, Italy is an inspiration representing the standard of what I want to achieve. In Italy I became really enthusiastic.' (47)

However, I believe that this obvious relish for Italian fashion has had an adverse effect on Costello's creativity. As yet he has not pioneered a particular design concept; he has never set a trend in shape but seems to be content to follow in the footsteps of those whom he genuinely admires.









plate 18









plate 19









plate 20







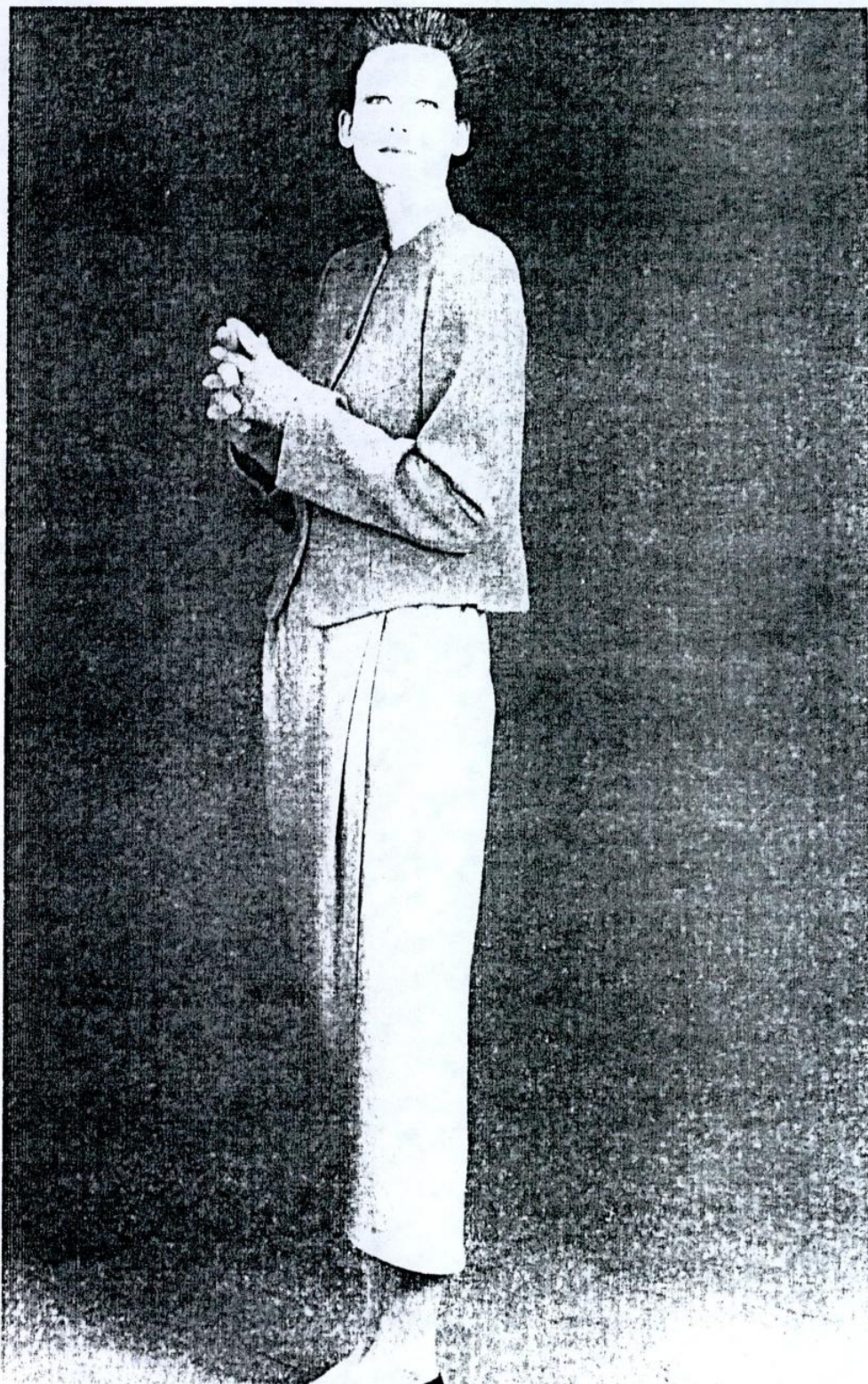


plate 21







I look forward to his undoubted talent breaking free from the fetters of the European influence, and breaking new ground in the fashion scene. Costello's love of linen is obvious, even in the briefest of interviews. He believes that many people fail to understand its qualities, and waxes eloquent on its coolness, wearability and especially the fact that it is a natural fibre which allows the body to breathe.

'The more you wear it the better it looks,' was his summing up of the merits of this fabric. Possibly because of this high esteem Costello is reluctant to mix linen with any artificial yarns, believing that such mixtures detract from the quality of the fabric. Therefore, unlike many continental designers,<sup>12</sup> he only uses other natural fabrics such as silk, wool and cotton when mixing with linen.

This will undoubtedly find favour in today's environment where we are being challenged to be ecologically conscious. To quote Costello once again, 'I think I'm lucky since I've specialised in natural fibres so anything I work with is ecologically friendly, and linen is one of the purest fibres. It's also a European fibre so I think the future looks quite healthy for me'.







I concluded my interview by asking Costello if he attributed his position as Ireland's most successful designer to his use of linen. In his answer he acknowledged that working with Irish Linen, 'the best in the world,' was certainly a plus, but felt that his success stemmed from a number of ingredients, especially design, fit, production, quality and public relations.

His popularity in Italy is an obvious source of satisfaction to Costello; the fact that Luigi distributes both his and Armani's designs, he regards as a successful infiltration of his rival's own country. Costello, sound business man that he is, recognises and appreciates the value of the continentals' endorsement of his fashion, but is equally aware that the U.K. and the Irish market account for 80% of his trade. (44,p.3)

Any consideration of Paul Costello's work leads inevitably to the acclaimed Italian designer Giorgio Armani, whose influence the Irishman readily acknowledges. A British newspaper aptly summed up Armani's pivotal position in the world of haute couture by proclaiming that he represented 'for fashion what Picasso represented for painting'. He emancipated and revolutionised fashion; his mid 1970's innovation of the unstructured jacket with no lining and 'unpressed appearance' met with phenomenal



success, a success that he still enjoys, as evidenced in his being awarded the "Neiman Maryous", the Oscar of the fashion world. He is especially admired by influential fashion journalists as the following paeon of praise by A. Mulassana illustrates;<sup>14</sup> "Super revolutionary in his concept of the female silhouette, making a clean sweep of layers, sags and creases to uncover a bold contemporary outline drawn by the magic flair of clean elegance".

Like his Irish counterpart, Armani's love of linen spans a long period: this is his fourteenth successive year to have used this fabric in his Spring/Summer collection. 'If Armani had a model it is that elegance need not involve dressing up'. (27, pp. 10-14) He invented the power suit for women, eliminated the details, removed the structure took out the stiffening and made the first crumpled linen blazer. Armani seems to have taken for granted that working women need a parallel to men's suits, a dignified and readily accepted way to dress. However, Armani's use of linen is not confined to ladies fashion. A recent issue of the Italian mens' fashion bible 'L 'Homo' ran a major feature on linen, thus ensuring its promotion in the lucrative male fashion scene' because where Milan leads' others are sure to follow. (plates 22-30 illustrate mens linen apparel)









plate 22









plate 23









plate 24









plate 25







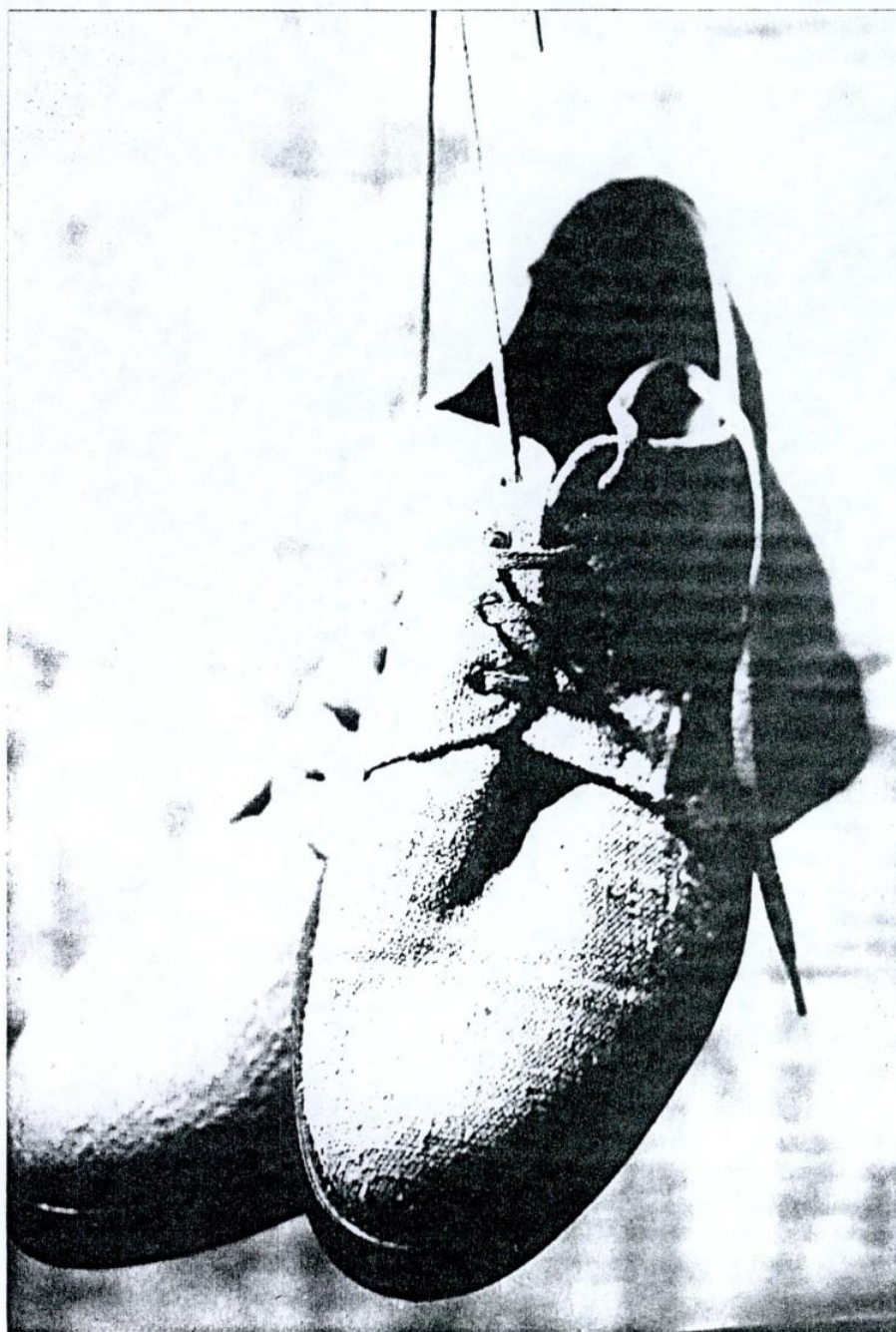


plate 26







YF&amp;TGU



1. The first step is to identify the problem. This involves understanding the symptoms and the context in which they are occurring.



DE-48907 Vehicle Vehicle and engine







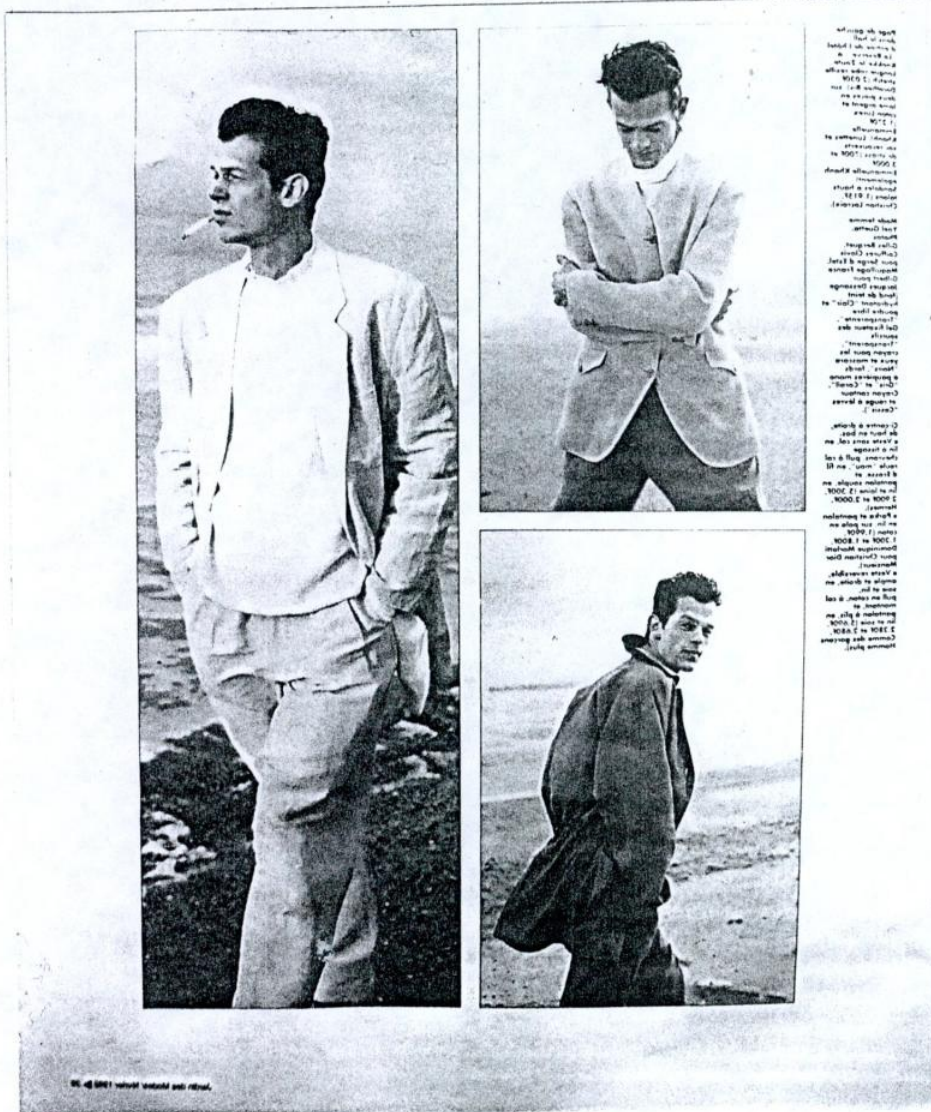


plate 28









plate 29









plate 30







While Armani is the undoubted leader of the Italian linen scene, Laura Biagiatti's contribution is also significant. She uses mainly white linen, flowing and made precious by hemstitching, trimmings, embroidery and close small pleats. (4, pp. 86-88) Her colours and materials matched according to graduations and never contrast. The quality of fabrics from linen, to cashmere is fundamental to Biagiatti's non-fashion fashion, which is based on comfort and the belief that everyone who wears her clothes has a right to them. They are fresh, dry and light in summer; warm and cosy in winter. All her designs are comfortable, wrapping and flowing and never impose constraints on the body. (plate 31).

While Paul Costello may be reluctant to mix linen with synthetics, fashion designers such as Dolce and Gabbana have no such reservations.

Their pin striped stretch linen jacket and trousers must surely be the answer to those like myself who have not the Italians' confidence or poise to be convinced that creased is chic! (plate 32)

Romeo Gigli's metallic linen trousers (plate 33) are, probably one of the best examples of how an innovative designer can take a traditional fabric and adapt it to meet the demands of today's fashion trends.









NYL KIRK

SERVIZIO PUBBLICITARIO

L A U R A  
B I A G I O T T I  
CANOTTIERA E PAN-  
TALONI DI LINO CON  
PROFILO AJOURÉ.

plate 31









**Dolce &  
Gabbana**

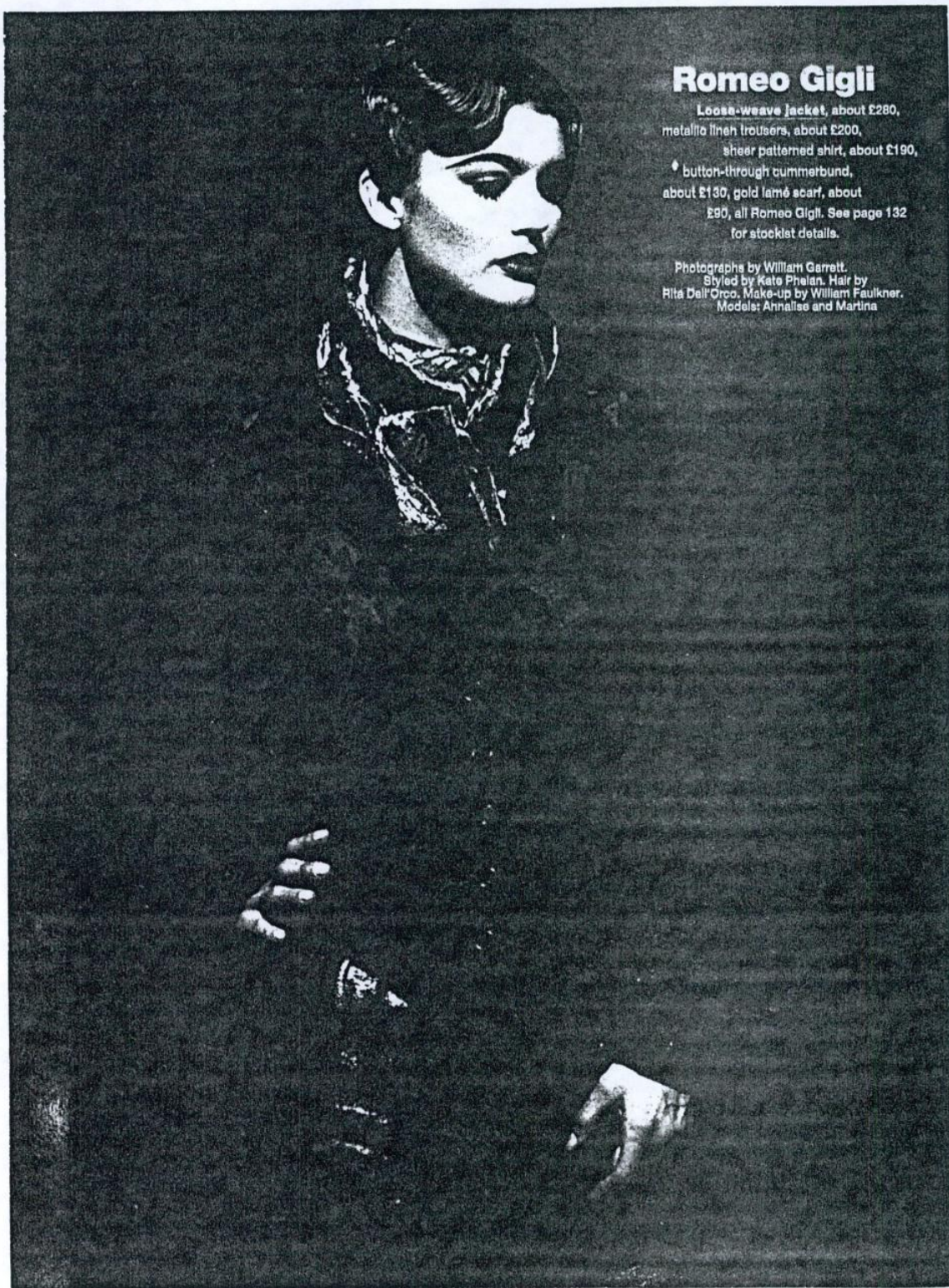
• Pinstriped stretch linen jacket,  
£450, pinstriped stretch linen trousers,  
and matching waistcoat, £420 (as a  
suit), long fringed scarf, from a selection,  
all Dolce & Gabbana

plate 32









## Romeo Gigli

Loose-weave jacket, about £280,  
metallic lined trousers, about £200,  
sheer patterned shirt, about £190,  
button-through cummerbund,  
about £130, gold lamé scarf, about  
£90, all Romeo Gigli. See page 132  
for stockist details.

Photographs by William Garrett.  
Styled by Kate Phelan. Hair by  
Rita Dell'Orco. Make-up by William Faulkner.  
Models: Annalise and Martina







They are certainly in stark contrast to Sybil Connolly's ensemble made famous by America's First Lady, Jackie Kennedy. Perhaps both these examples (32 & 33) demonstrate how versatile linen can be and how it can be adapted to suit both the personality of the wearer and the current fashion trends.

However, it would be erroneous to give the impression that only Italian designers make use of linen. Ronald Shamask, now based in New York designed what is certainly one of my favourite creations that has stood the test of time, the 'Cello Jacket' of beige linen (plate 34 ) I particularly like his approach to the use of linen as a fabric which he uses to create a sculptural form (28).

Issey Miyake's designs must not be overlooked when discussing designers use of this fabric. His clothes reflect the creative excitement of modern Japan. He takes his inspiration from Japanese traditions and modifies them into fluid sculpted forms; he as a designer is very concerned with freedom of movement and self expression; people say that his clothes don't date. 'Idealism, buoyancy, challenge it didn't seem possible, but I was sure that I saw them all suggested in his designs, his fabrics, his freedom of forms', is how Joy Cooks describes his work (17,p.49)









plate 34







Miyake has taken historic Japanese shapes and combined with his innovative use of linen has produced designs which seem ancient, contemporary and futuristic all at once. Illustrations of his work can be found in plates 35 - 40.

Such trends augur well for the linen industry in Ireland. Spurred by the success of the Italian linen weavers, the Ulster weavers began promoting and developing their strength in apparel fabrics.

Several firms have developed a reputation for high design content by enlisting freelance designers. Among them is Spence Bryson with whom the freelance designer Beryl Gibson has developed a range of fashion fabrics. Italian competition exposed the need for Irish Mills to concentrate on products that the market was demanding, while still maintaining their traditional values and individual identities. They are adapting reasonably well to the changing demands in the fashion sector and are becoming flexible enough to respond to the demand for linen blended with other fabrics either synthetic or natural. The readiness to cater for current fashion trends coupled with the boom in linen fashion suggests a bright future for the industry in Ireland.









plate 35









plate 36









plate 37









plate 38







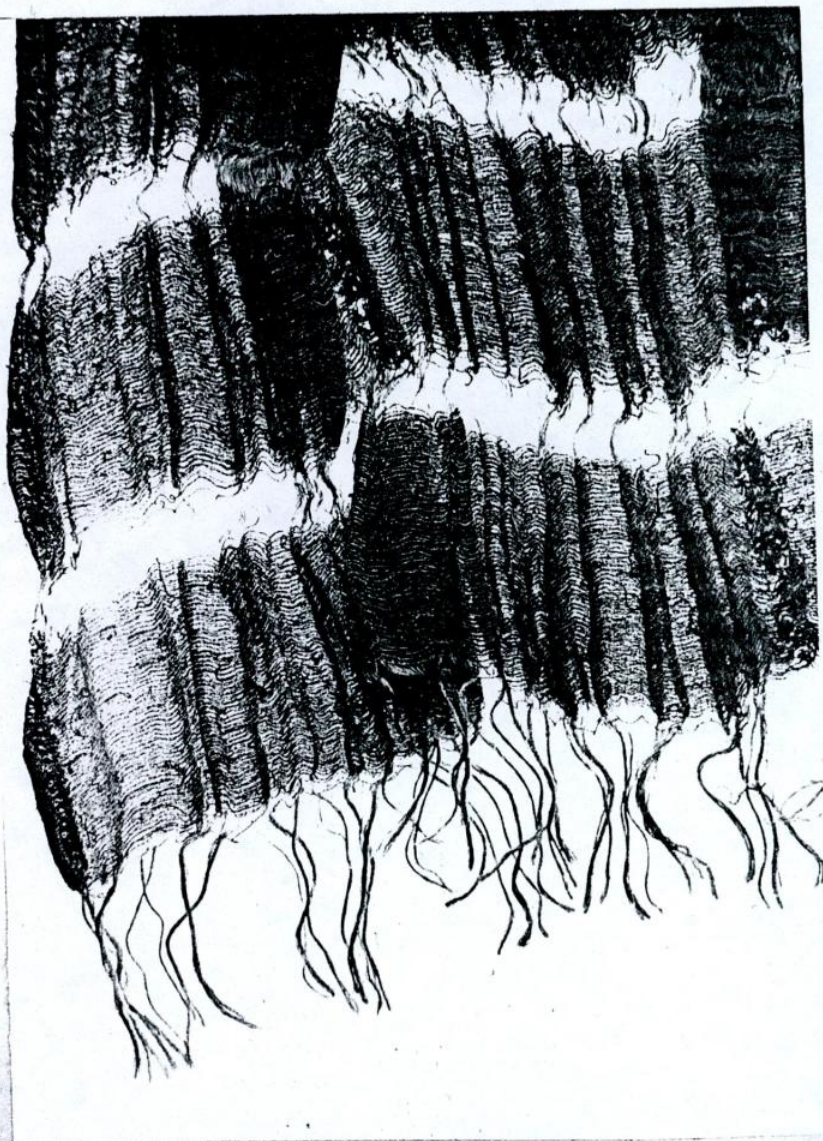


plate 39









plate 40







CHAPTER 3

LINEN : LOOKING TO THE FUTURE.







The Ulster linen industry is currently enjoying a renaissance- a welcome reversal to its declining fortunes in preceding decades .In the seventies the industry had all but died ; plants which were household names in the post-war period had nearly all disappeared. (35, PP13,14) The Industrial Development board, aware of the seriousness of the problems facing the industry, created a working party whose remit was the identification of the problems facing the manufacture of linen and recommendations for their solution. Their report recognises that the future successful developments of the industry lies in the hands of the individual companies and depends on the initiative which they are prepared to show in implementing the strategies recommended. (40, P.7)

The new linen industry not only takes account of what the markets want, it also designs opportunities which can generate the use of more linen in the premium priced sector of the fashion industry. A move towards a higher quality product taking advantage of the traditional skills of the Ulster work force has resulted in major gains in the market place and a rise in employment. The scale of operations is admittedly lower than in 1959, where there were 45,000 workers at 44 mills scattered all over N Ireland.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, the tide has been turning and I believe that we should have some optimism about the future.





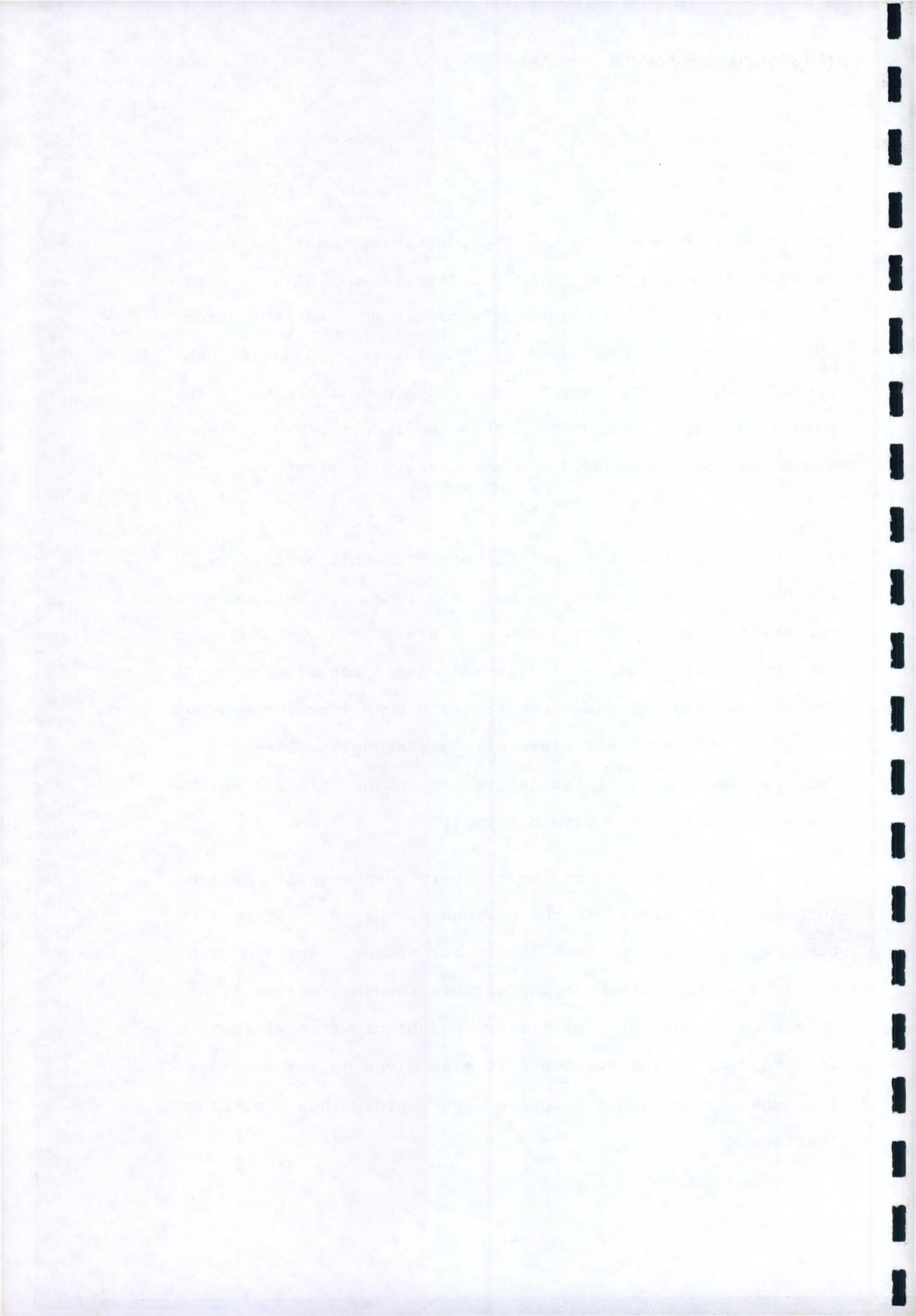


The industry's readiness to experiment with other fabrics is to be commended; recent technical developments have enabled it to be married with silks and wools as well as synthetics such as viscose and even lycra. The latter combination has produced unusual stretchy fabrics which have appealed to the more experimental designers. Thus the industry has widened its scope and encompassed a wider market. Illustrations of such may be found on plate 41.

A further reason for the upturn in this product is its adaptibility to both the male and female market. Crease resistant linen and cotton mixtures are used increasingly in the men's suiting market, while delicately embroidered linen jackets and high waisted trousers with metallised, tweedy or patterned decorations feature strongly among the latest fashions for women. Linen lingere is another product which looks set to become a growth market.

The industry is exploring every avenue in its desire to promote its appeal to the designers. Hitherto it has been regarded as the ideal fabric for summer wear. In warm or humid weather linen is comfortable to wear because it can absorb up to one fifth of its dry weight of water without feeling damp on the surface. It also gives up its moisture into the surrounding atmosphere more rapidly than most other textiles.







John  
ngland  
Irish linen

JE 727

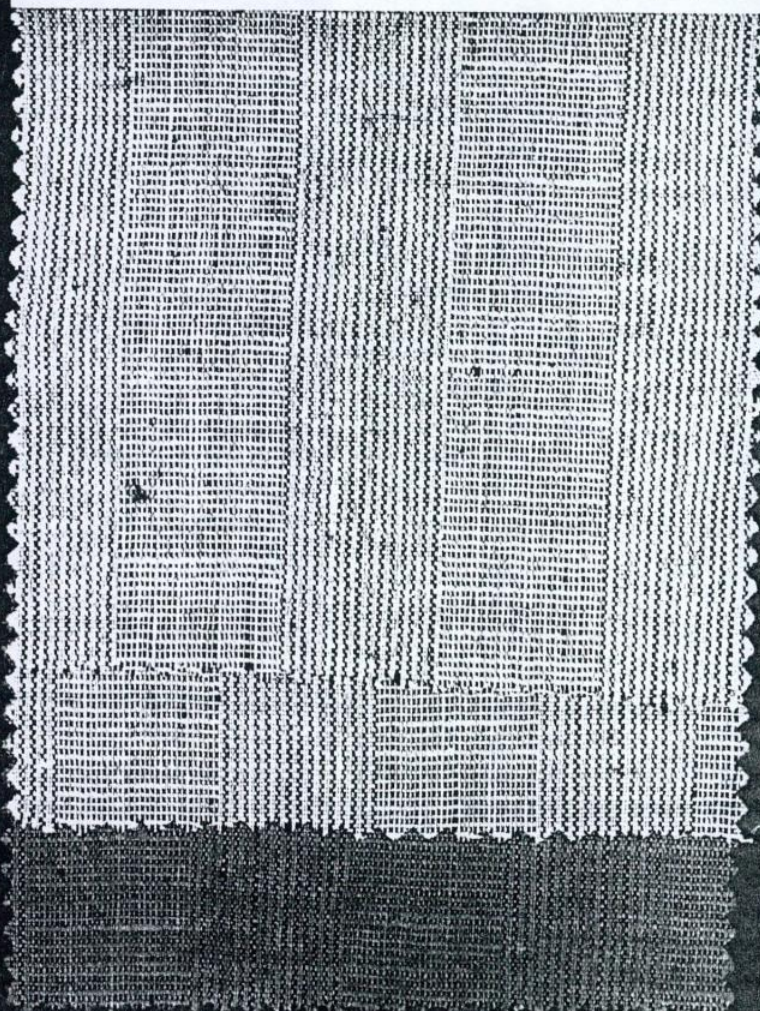


plate 41







It is these qualities of coolness and ability to absorb perspiration quickly that have led to linen being used mainly for summer clothing. (31, pp. 10-14)

Efforts to promote linen for winter use have in the past proved unsuccessful. Recently, however, more emphasis has been given to develop thicker and heavier dry spun yarns. This has encouraged Europe's Flax Spinners Association to launch a project called 'Winter Linen.' Shown for the first time last year at Pitti Immagine Filoti in Florence, the project aims to encourage the use of linen fabric in the cooler months.

Although winter linen has attracted a lot of interest within the textile industry, reservations have been expressed about whether the extra weight of linen required for winter clothing would make the end product unrealistically expensive. There is also the question of how effectively linen could compete against fibres such as wool and mohair which have traditionally dominated the higher end of the market for winter apparel.

Linen does not depend solely on the haute couture market for its consumption; it occupies an important niche in the soft furnishings market and has a number of uses including curtains, sheets, upholstery and wall coverings.







Demand for this sector is being boosted by the provision of a wider variety of design and a promotion campaign aimed at the contract as well as the residential markets. (plate 42 illustrates the different weights and varieties of linen available from the weavers of Ireland.)

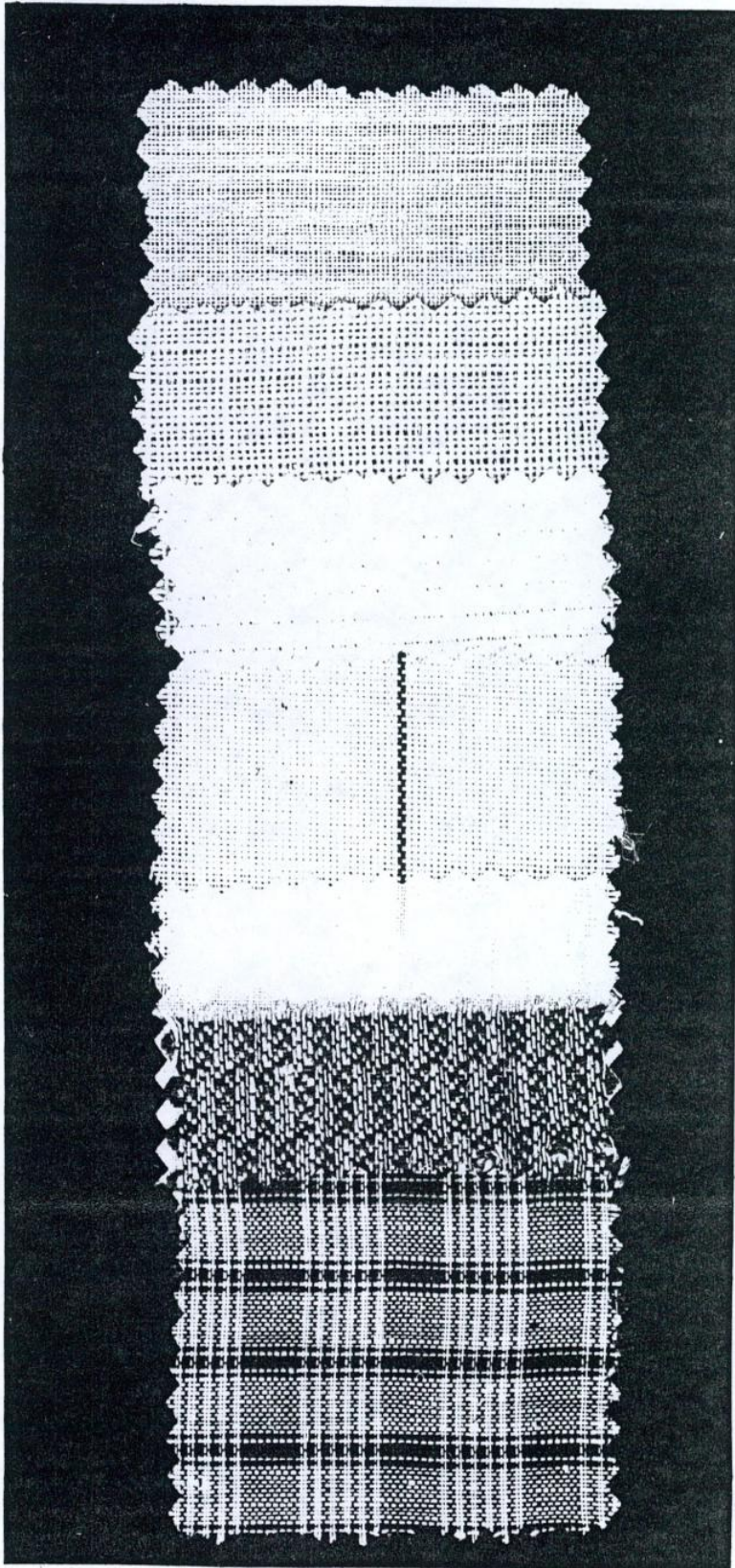
Colour fastness and dimensional stability are inherent qualities of linen which make it highly suitable as a material for furnishing and household textiles. The fabric dyes well, reacts favourably to washing and dry cleaning, and does not 'lint' when used as a drying-up cloth. (30, pp.3-9)

Growing concern about the environment is another factor which has stimulated the resurgence in demand for linen. The flax plant from which linen is derived is one of the most ecologically sound agricultural products. No part of the plant is wasted; the fibres are used for textiles; the shives are used for making chipboard or as fuel in scutching mills; the seeds are used to make linseed oil and the residue, after pressing, is used for cattle cake and other animal feeds. Even the dust is used in organic fertilisers. Such an ecologically satisfactory plant must surely be an asset in our 'green society.'<sup>16</sup>









UNBLEACHED LINEN

UPOLESTERY FABRIC

HUCK TOWELLING

LINEN FOR TEA  
TOWELS

EMBROIDERY LINEN

SUITING

DRESS FABRIC

PLATE 42







The preference for natural fabrics - a reaction against the boom in synthetics - goes some way to account for a trend that, I feel, will continue hand in hand with ecology consciousness. (42, pp.57-68)

What particularly impresses me about this industry is its ability to transform a disadvantage into an advantage. In the early post-war years, it was considered unsuitable for even the higher levels of the mass market, because it crumpled so easily. But today, that very quality is proof that it is a natural fibre and its return to popularity has been hastened by the many period and empire movies of the early 80's because it was associated with the Retro chic. (20, p.224)

Linen's tendency to crease - due to the inherent rigidity of the fabric - has been the subject of technical research. A small firm in Northern Ireland has developed a system combining a resin treatment, with carefully controlled weaving to enhance the cloth's ability to recover its shape. However as the market has become more familiar with linen, consumers have become less preoccupied with creasing. The vogue for 'crumpled fabrics' in the early 80's may have helped to remove the stigma attached to the unironed look, which had long been associated with poverty.







Italian fashion designers have shown the way by using clever garment construction, half-lined for example, to minimise creasing and by selecting patterned and textured surfaces to minimise the visual impact of these crease lines. I must admit, however, that I have never managed to convince myself that my linen suit, after a day's wear is as chic and elegant as was Julia Davis's in the film version of E M Forster's 'A Passage to India!'. (plate 43)

I have already referred to linen's ecological merits; a further advantage relevant to this is that it does not have to be finished with a moth proofing agent. By contrast, wool textiles have to be moth proofed and the effluence from this process currently gives rise to environmental problems .

The biodegradable quality of linen has recently prompted an investigation into the possible uses of the fabric in the expanding geotextile market. Jute clothing is already being used as an alternative to synthetics to stabilise earth banks. The advantage of jute is that it rots away after a few years, allowing vegetation cover to become established and eventually take over the establishing function. (21, pp.91-110)

Linen may prove to be even more effective than jute in this role, as it tends to be stronger and more durable, while still being biodegradable.









plate 43







However, jute is relatively cheap, an important consideration where large quantities of fabric are required for landfill sites which can cover several hectares.

To sum up, despite the diversification, the main focus of the linen industry will always be haute couture. It is a relatively expensive fabric to produce but like silk and speciality animal fibres, such as cashmere and mohair, it will continue to be appreciated for its finer qualities of elegance and soft texture. Its smart, attractive appearance and pleasant feel resulting from the natural lustre and smooth surface of the fibres are valuable attributes in any article of clothing, especially for white shirts, collars, dresses and the like.







### CONCLUSION

One of the main challenges for the linen industry in the 1990's will be to promote greater awareness of the practical value of the fabric as well as further investigating its capacity to be used in a wide range of new products such as winter clothing and industrial textiles. The industry also needs to develop the ability to comply consistently with international standards of clothing fabrics. Of the future of the fabric one can only surmise.

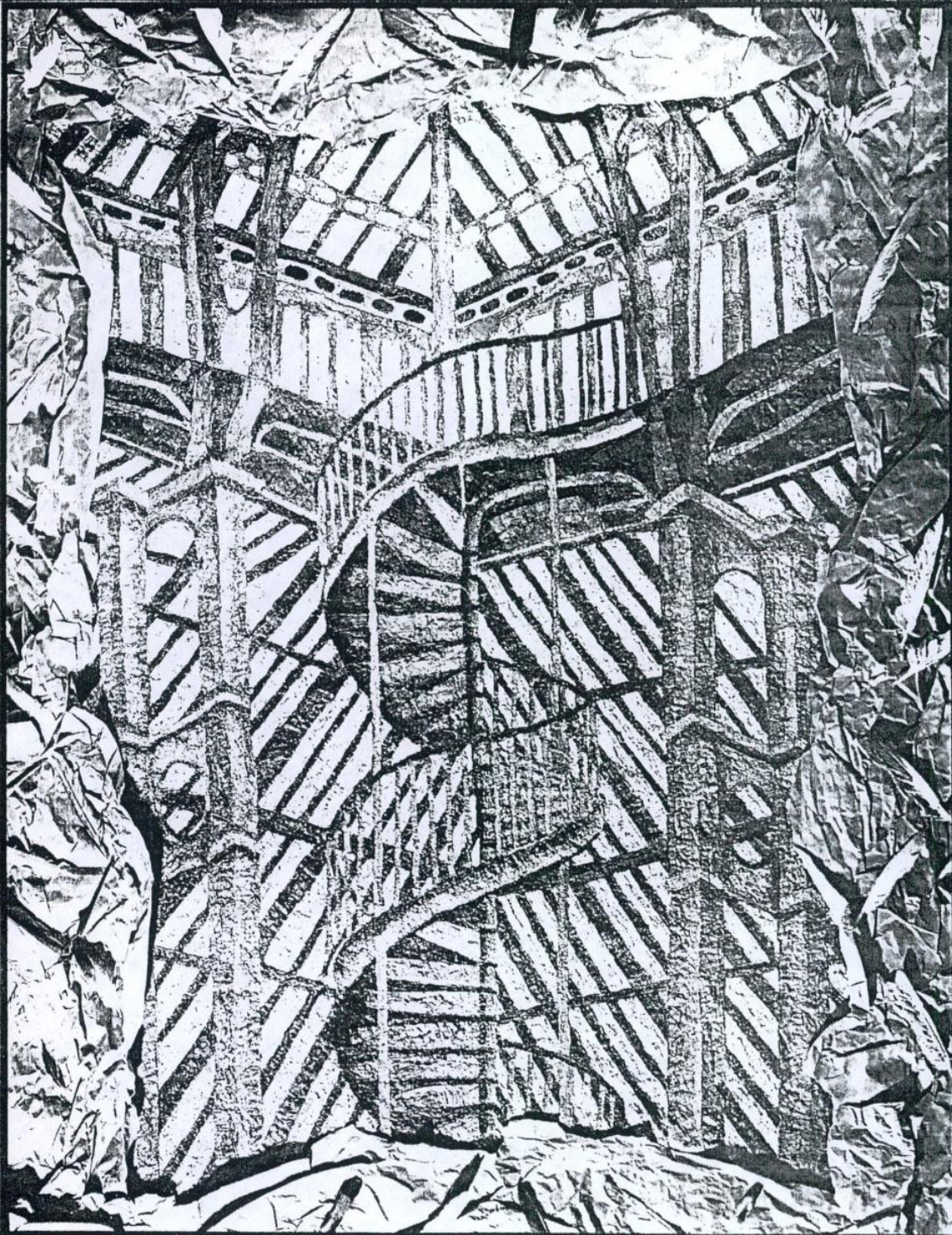
'I am quietly confident that Irish linen still has quite a good future,' says Peter Larmour of Ulster Weavers. 'We have become bigger and bigger rather than smaller and smaller and those who are left have certainly learned the art of survival'. (43, p.16)

I share Peter Larmour's guarded optimism and would, in fact, be even more sanguine about its future. There is ample evidence that linen's versatility is being utilised. In 1991 the prestigious Contemporary Textile Gallery hosted the first ever exhibition in which various young innovative designers illustrated just how diverse are the uses to which it can be put (plate 44-45).









# LINEN

## AT THE CONTEMPORARY TEXTILE GALLERY

plate 44



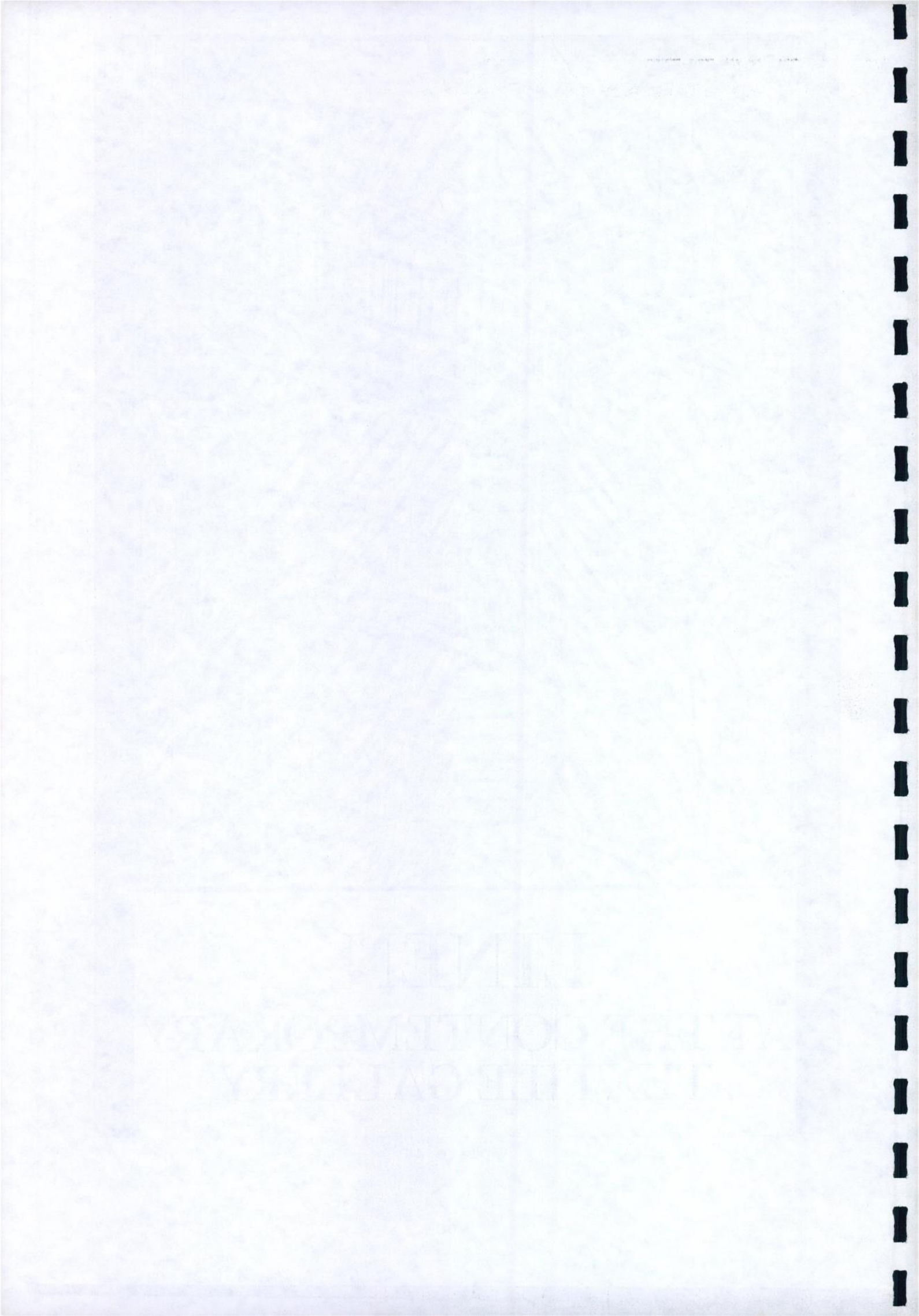






plate 45





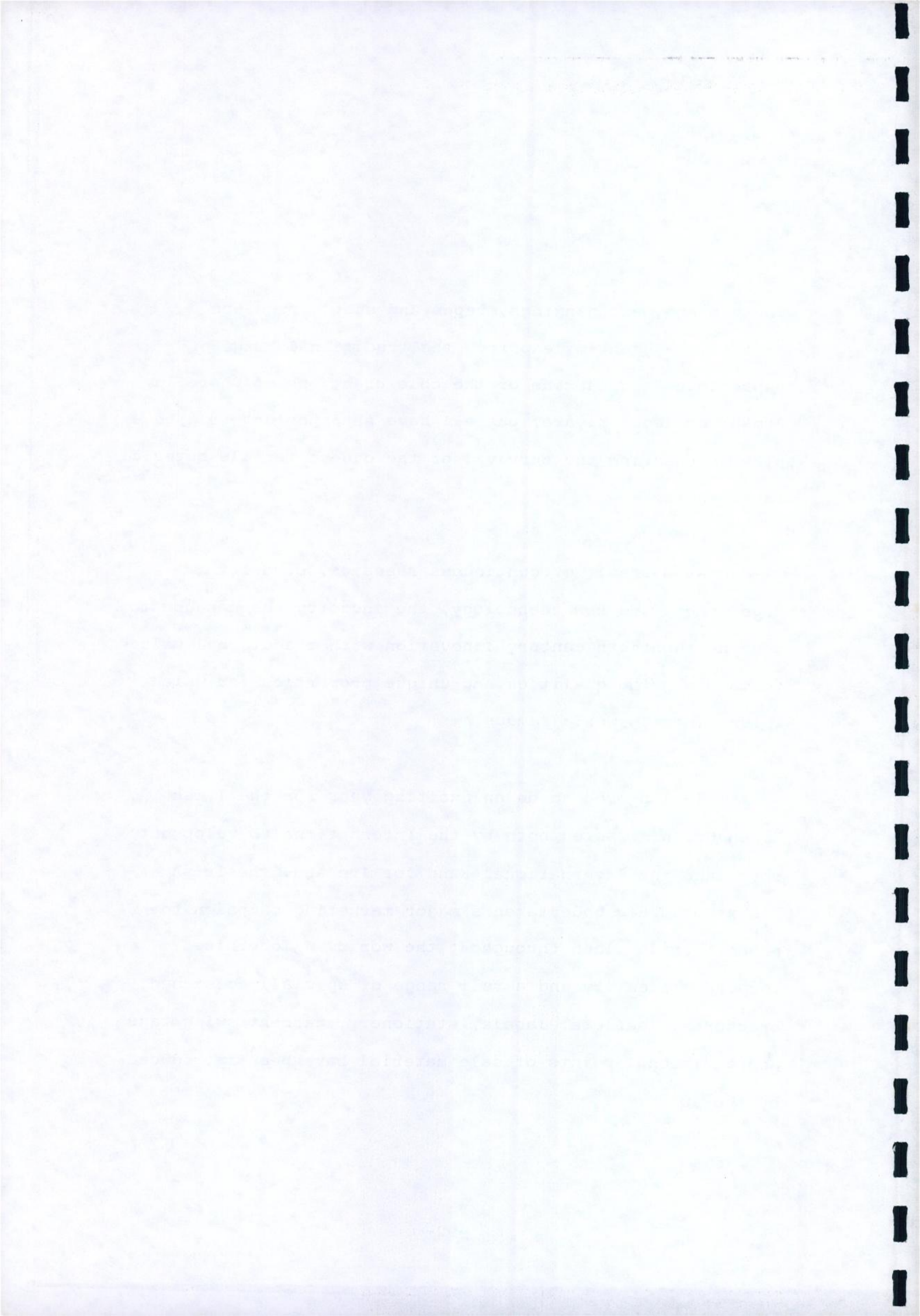


The vibrant wall hangings, drapes and subtle rugs are certainly a quantam leap from the traditional image of tablecloths and napkins or the chic creations of Costello, Armani or Issey Miyake, but all have an important role to play in ensuring the survival of the oldest textile material in the world.

As a result of continuous research, product development and new technology, the industry has managed to combine twentieth century innovation with traditional values to maintain the qualities and unique properties for which Irish linen is world famous.

1991 proved to be an exciting year for the Irish Linen Guild. Backed both by the International Development Board and the International Fund for Ireland, the Irish Linen Guild has undertaken a major marketing campaign to promote Irish linen throughout the world. A modernised corporate identity and a full range of specially designed brochures, leaflets, labels, stationery, garment swing tags and additional points of sale material have been introduced by the Guild.







This marketing campaign has undoubtedly been boosted by the election of the first female president of the Irish Republic - Mary Robinson. Her fondness for Irish linen and in particular the creations of Paul Costello and Louise Kennedy were, I feel, the main factors leading to her being named as one of Europe's best dressed ladies. This accolade coming at a time when the linen industry is riding on the crest of a wave, augurs well for the future.

1992 will be a challenging phase for the Guild as it continues to promote Irish Linen actively in the national and international markets and ensures that Irish linen attains the premiere ranking with major European manufacturers.

Once again, all the evidence suggests that their promotional campaign is highly successful as top designers throughout Europe included a variety of linen creations in their most recent collections, while Next, catering as it does for a much wider market, also features a range of linen garments for both men and women in their Spring/Summer '92 catalogue. Illustrations of such garments may be found on plates 46 & 47.







**pure irish** *linen*

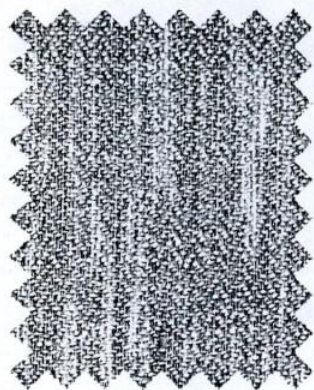


plate 46







Casual  
linen  
jacket

A

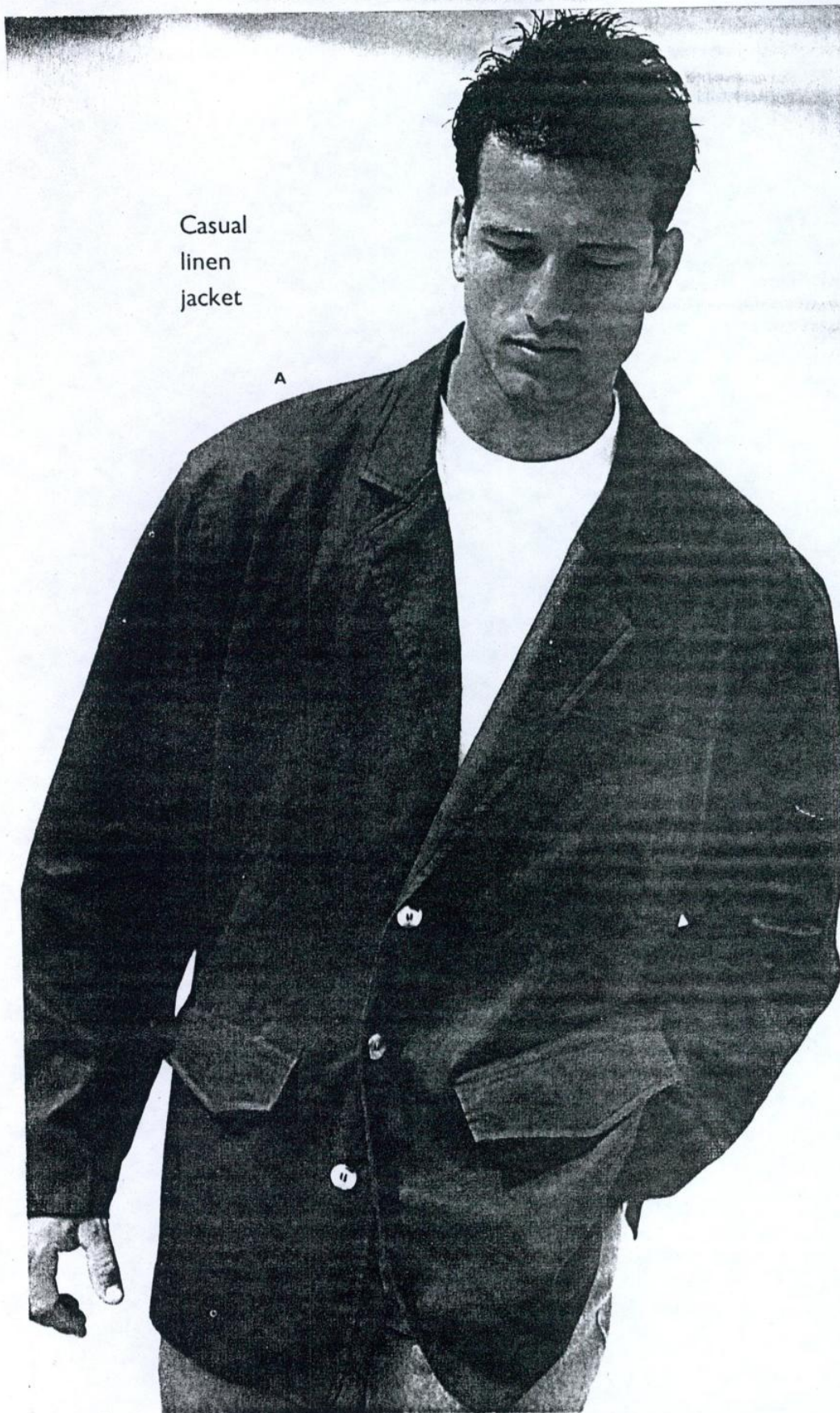


plate 47







The Italians, Belgians and now even the Chinese may be producing more cloth than we do. However, the Irish linen trade, like Ireland itself, remains first in quality, if not in size.







ADDITIONAL PLATES







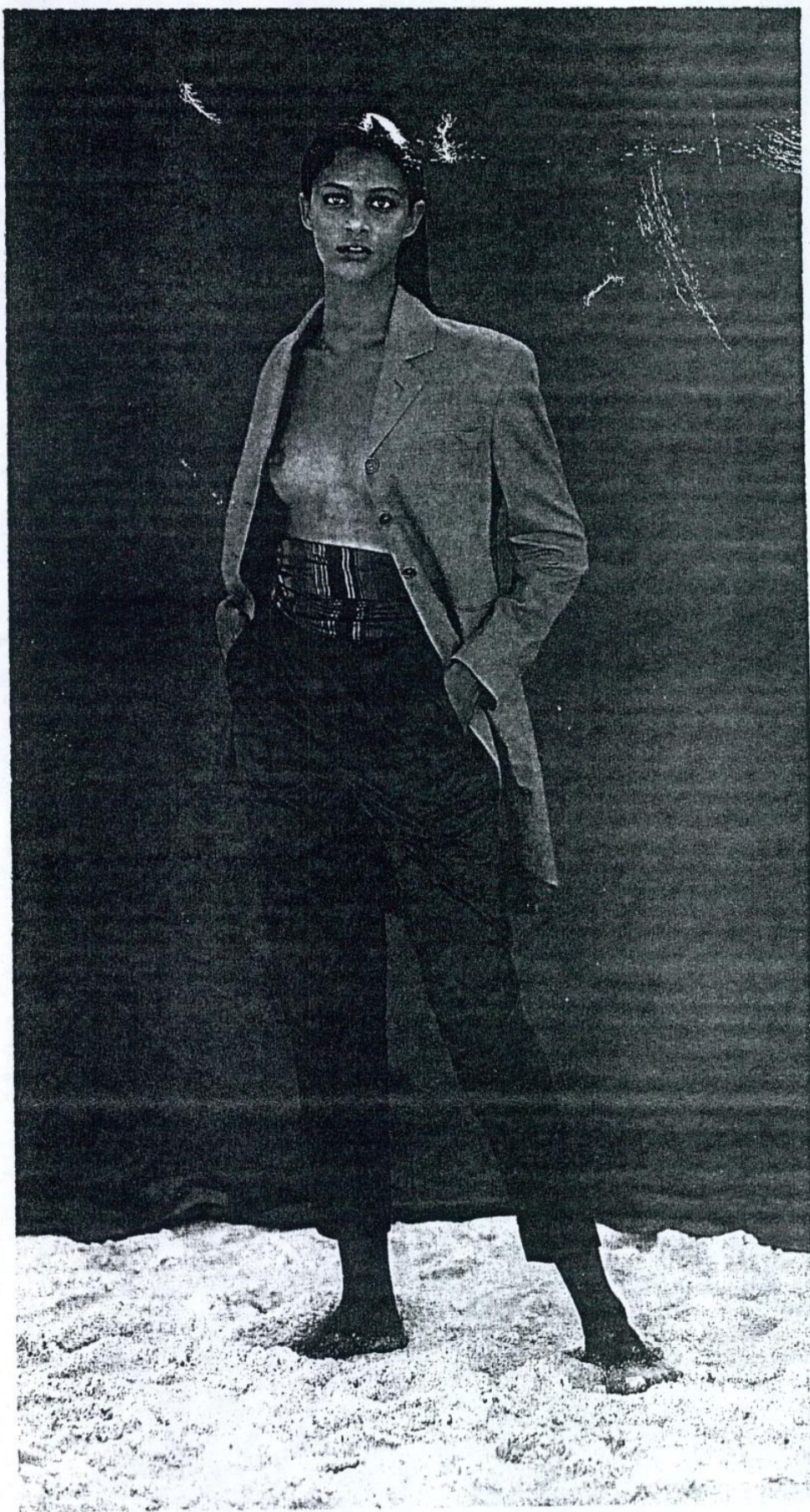


plate 48







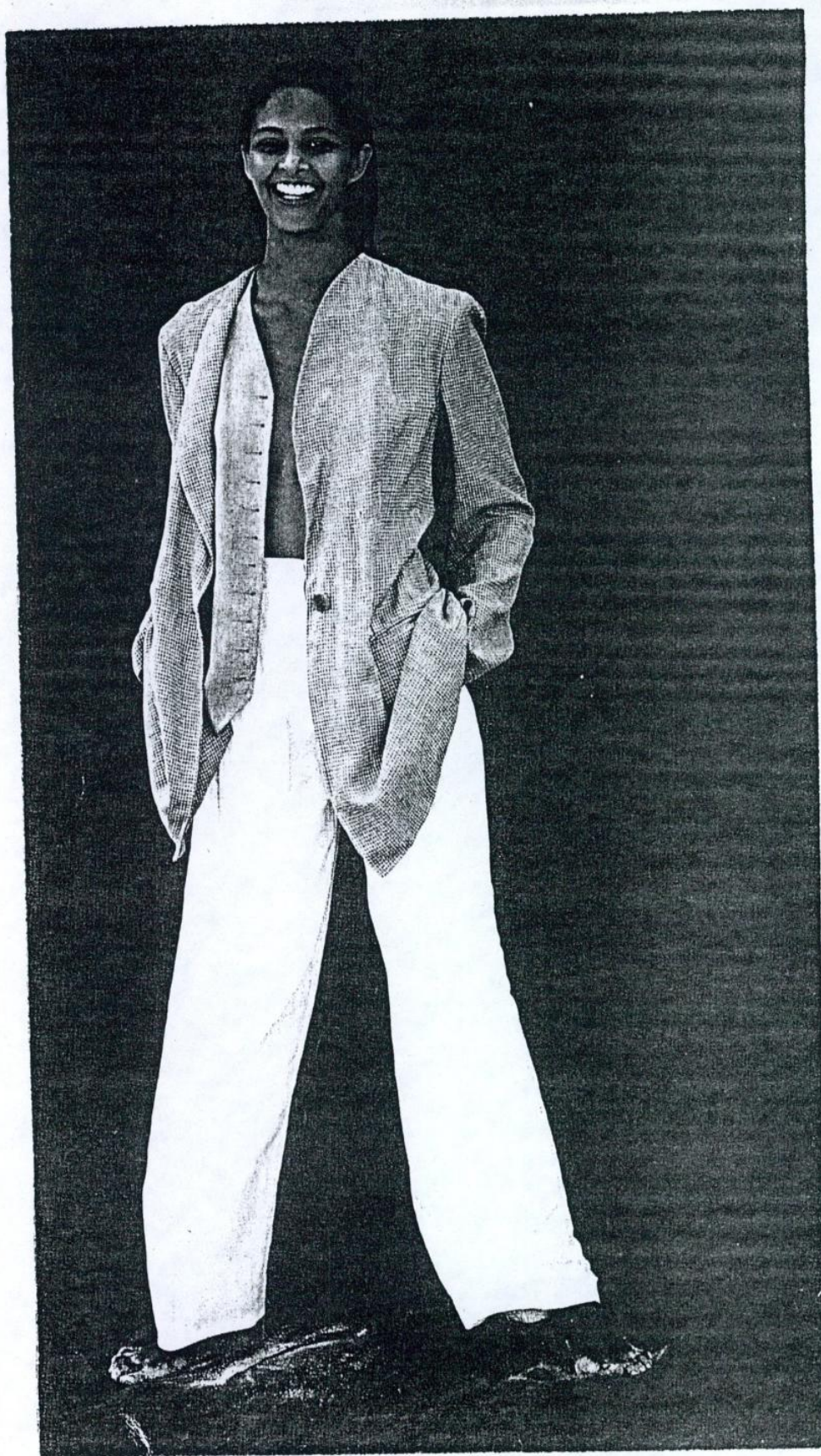


plate 49









plate 50







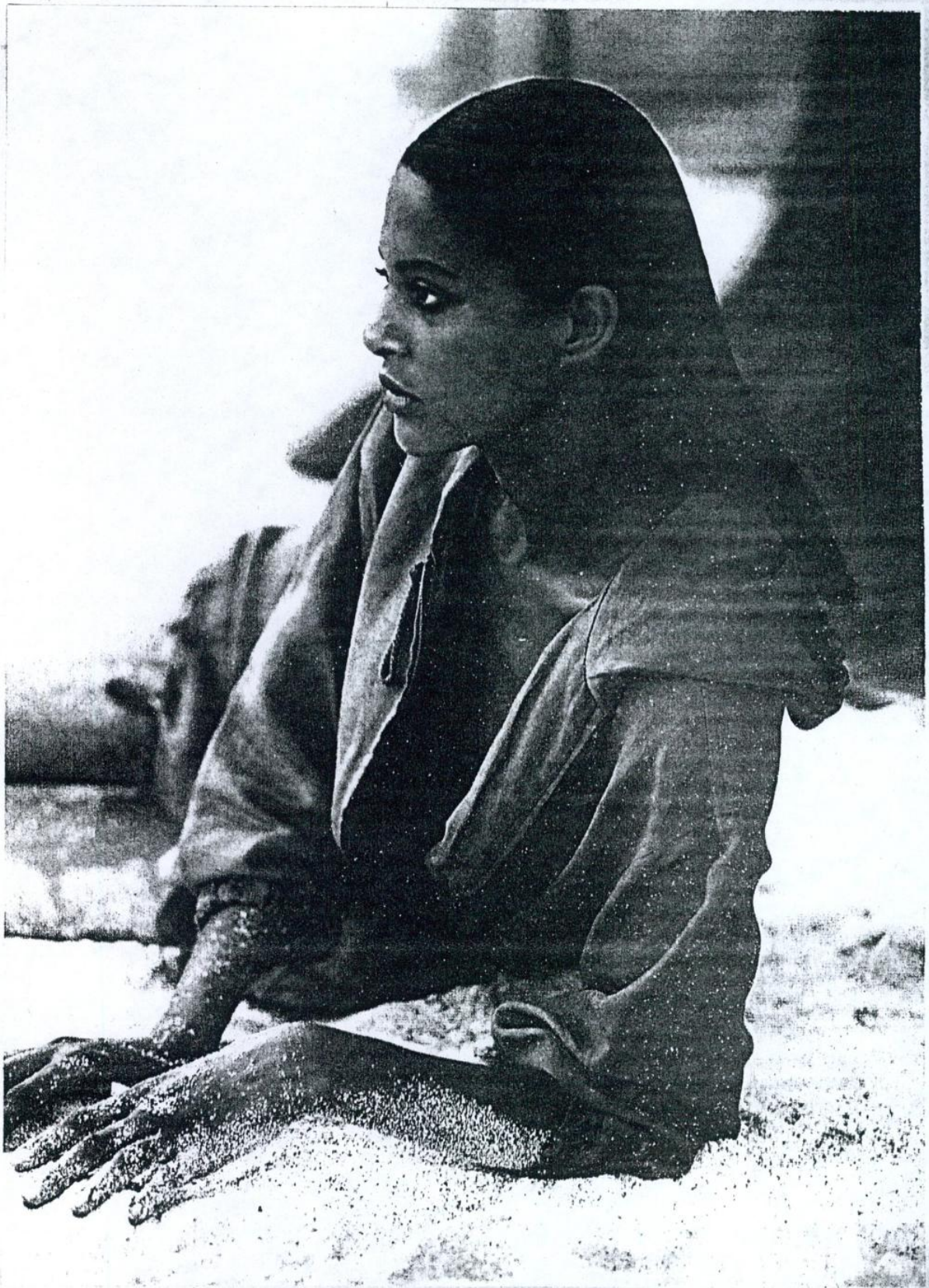


plate 51







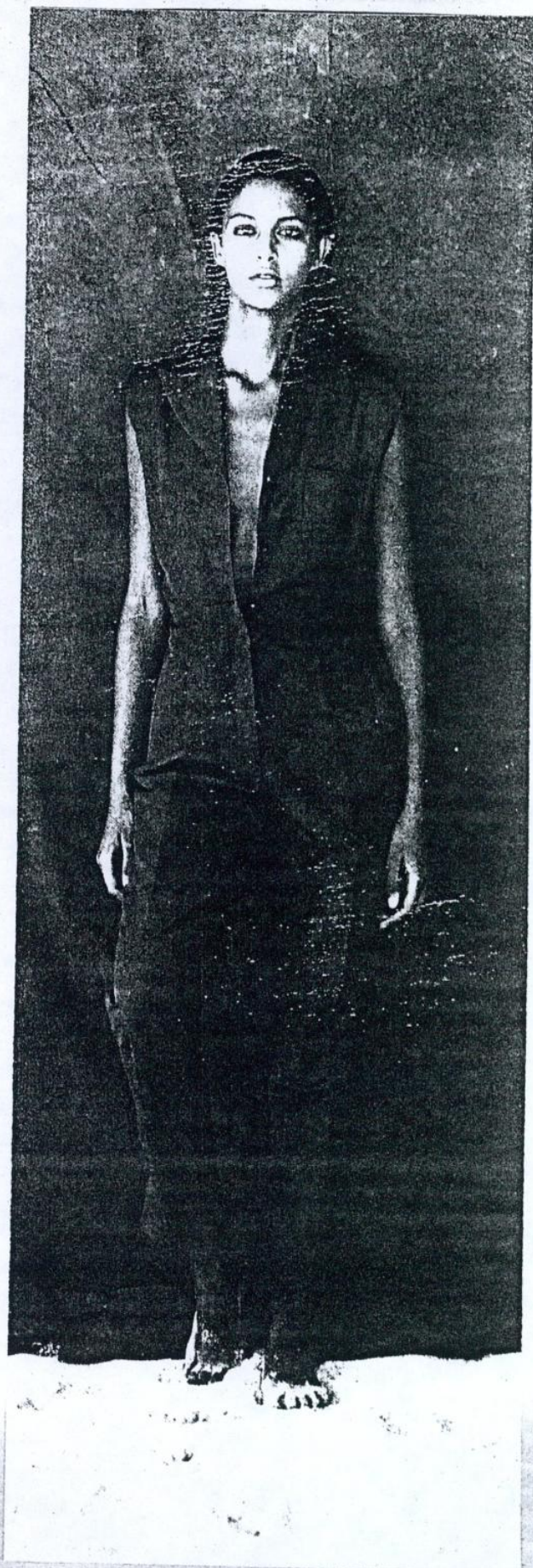


plate 52







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### Interviews

47) Various interviews taken with Paul Costello, during the period June-September 1991, at his design studios in Moygesal, Dungannon.







#### FOOTNOTES

- 1) Daniel F. Mc. Crea's interpretation of the word 'Leine'
- 2) This shirt is a modified version of the chemises worn in the 18th Century.
- 3) According to the Royal Commissioner at this time .
- 4) Economic History of Ireland pp. 92-98.
- 5) Rise of the linen trade : Conrad Gill
- 6) Spend a considerable time painting.
- 7) Regarded as the oldest in Europe.
- 8) Statistics supplied by Textile Outlook International.
- 9) She, as yet, is the only Irish designer to feature on the front page of Time magazine.
- 10) Also a client of Sybil Connolly.
- 11) Held in Monte Carlo every two years.
- 12) Issey Miyake ; Perry Ellis for example.
- 13) Statistics provided by Marketing Staff at Paul Costello International.
- 14) Fashion journalist - Sunday Telegraph.
- 15) Statistics provided by Lambeg Research Institute.
- 16) Data provided by International Linen Federation.



