



# ***KNITWEAR IN IRELAND:***

*Economic, Social and Cultural Aspects*

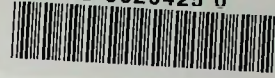
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*Economic, Social and Cultural Aspects*

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- To my mother who introduced me to knitting and nurtured my interest in it as a child.

## INTRODUCTION

As a fashion student my main area of interest and specialisation is knitwear. I have decided therefore to investigate knitting in Ireland concentrating on the subject from economic, social and cultural perspectives. In doing so, this has allowed me to explore the skill of knitting from a wide view point.

While in the process of researching this thesis I have had opportunity to speak with several people whose interests in knitting vary from using it as a medium to create Art forms (Lily Van Oost - Artist - Chapter 2), to working as an agent responsible for the collection of hand-knit Aran's for a large knitwear company (Mrs. Kingston - Agent - Chapter 3) and to working specifically in the designer end of the knitwear market (Deirdre Fitzgerald - Knitwear Designer - Chapter 4). The insight I have gained through this work into the various aspects of knitting have been beneficial, as my hope, when I graduate from college, is to work in the Irish Knitwear Industry.

Ireland, as a traditionally craft-orientated society, has a rich history in hand-knitting. Traditionally in society the boundaries and purposes of knit have been clearly defined. Knitting has been largely performed in the domestic environment and engaged in almost exclusively by women. Its functional purpose has been to clothe and keep the body warm.

The qualities inherent in wool fibres (i.e. waterproofing, insulation and elasticity) when worked to a certain formula it was found could be maximised and retained in the finished garment. The intricacies of Aran stitches were the result.

While still primarily being viewed as a functional craft, knitting in the 20th Century has left its original boundaries and also developed into an aesthetic form of expression in the field of 'Art' and 'Design.' Whereas originally the emphasis in knitting was on the function of the article, now to a large extent the decorative elements are given priority.

This is probably due to the fact that the hand-knitting industry (although still prevalent in Ireland) has largely been replaced by 20th Century industrialisation where new technology and equipment have allowed high-volume production in knitwear.

Hand-knitting is now largely pursued as a leisure activity and the media through women's magazines constantly high-light the craft as such.

The strong association between knitting, women and the home place has reflected the low status society places both on the skill as an Art/Craft form and the person engaged in the activity. Knitting has been but another tool in reinforcing the common ideology relating to women and their role in society.

One would be grossly mistaken for thinking that issues related to knitting commence when one picks up a pair of needles and casts on the first row of stitches, and draw to a close when the garment, whatever it may be, is pieced together and sewn up.

The knitting activity highlights social, economic and cultural aspects in our society.



## 1- KNITWEAR IN AN IRISH CULTURAL CONTEXT

In this chapter I would like to discuss the craft of knitting in the context of a particular environment, namely Irish society. The role knitwear plays in an Irish cultural context will be discussed from an historical point of view, where as later on in this essay the emphasis of discussion will be based on the knitwear industry as seen in the Ireland of the 1990s.

When one thinks of traditional Irish knitwear the image of the Aran sweater is most probably what 'tourist attraction' and seems to portray those qualities of essential timelessness and Irishness.

(fig 1.1)

Perhaps Aran knitting is justified in claiming its ancient Irish roots, whereby, through this textile medium, the stitches used are thought to illustrate symbolic meanings found in the Celtic culture of the past. Or maybe these claims are merely the devices of clever entrepreneurs and business people who have capitalised on the notions that such connections exist, and in successfully doing so have created a multi-million pound industry which has spread its wings across the globe.

Whether or not Aran knitting has its true origins in an ancient Celtic culture or in recently constructed mythologies, it does not take away from the fact that these 'bainin' sweaters with their combinations of intricate stitches





GAELTARRA

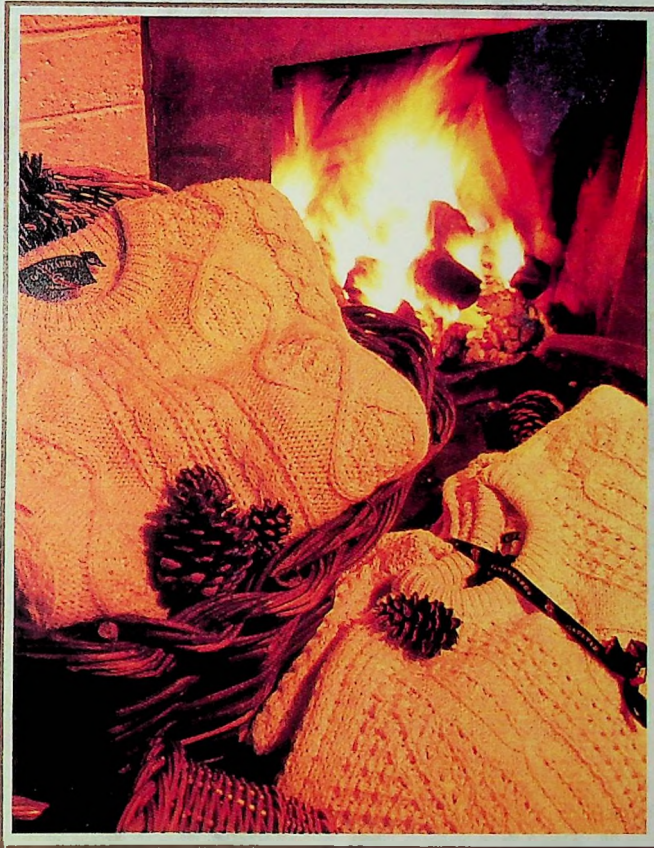
GAELTARRA

GAELTARRA



GAELTARRA

Tá Cnlotail Árannach ar cheann de  
mhór cheirdeanna dúchasacha an  
Domhain. Ceird bheo bhríomhar  
Oile ain Árann ar chósta Thiar na  
hÉireann. Gineadh Tionscal Cnlotála



A426 SH01

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Ghaeltarra, nua-aimsireach is atá sé  
inniu, as dúchas ársa Iarthar Éireann.  
Tá forbairt shaiseanna déanta againn ar  
ár láimhcheirdeanna traidisiúnta, agus  
tá ár raonta ar díol anois ins na siopaí  
is iomráití ins na cúig Críocha.

GAELTARRA



GAELTARRA



GAELTARRA



GAELTARRA

(fig 1.1) - Page from the 'Gaeltarra Autumn-Winter 1991  
Catalogue'.

Aran knitwear is described as 'the centuries-old  
craft of a tiny island community living on the  
Rocky Aran Islands off the West coast of Ireland'  
in this publicity campaign.

of cables, diamonds, blackberries etc., are credible and admirable pieces of work, worthy of recognition. The craft does not lack authenticity simply because it has a shorter history than distinctive Irish Art such as the 'Book of Kells' or the carvings from the Neolithic tombs of Newgrange.

The very fact that this style of sweater bears the name of those three rocky islands off the west coast of Ireland - the Aran Islands - shows that the skill of Aran knitting in its form as we recognise it today is supposedly strongly linked to these Islands.

In looking at Irish cultural history it is necessary to examine those influences which had the greatest effect on Irish society in changing and shaping it into the one we recognise today, and how <sup>the</sup> craft of knitting fits into such a society. What were the forces which altered Ireland from the land of ancient Celts into the urban-industrial capitalist society as we know it today?

Without doubt the biggest single factor which brought about this change was the British invasion or colonisation of the country, which led to the suppression of Irish culture and way of life.

How were these two countries (i.e. Ireland and England) which were relatively near in geographical terms, so different culturally?

Erich Fromm in his book 'To Have Or To Be' divides civilisations into two different modes, namely 'Having Societies' and 'Being Societies'. Having societies, he suggests are those which channel their energies into 'the acquisition of material goods, money and power'.



(Collins, 1990, p.22) In essence they are materialistic societies 'which have reached their extreme form of development in urban-industrial capitalist society' (Collins, 1990 , p.22). It would appear that societies such as Ireland correspond to what Fromm would term the 'Being' mode, giving priority to non-material goals or spiritual values. These societies bear the trait that once an individual's basic existential needs (i.e. food, water, shelter, clothing, tools of various kinds and human companionship) are satisfied, life does not become obsessed with the acquisition of more of the same or with transmutations of the same, but with 'spiritual experience and enrichment' (Collins, 1990, p.23)

Indeed many of Ireland's greatest poets and writers have often alluded to this point. W.B. Yeats in the early days of his career stated that Ireland's 'socio-political inferiority to the English was compensated for by its "poetic...idyllic and fanciful" life of the spirit!' (Kearney, 1985, p.8). Frank O'Connor said of the Irish people that they chose the imagination over the intellect.

Luke Gibbons however is of the opinion that Ireland's colonial history and its position on the Celtic periphery of Europe allowed it to be misrepresented by the myth and Romanticism often associated with the Irish culture. In his essay on 'Romanticism, Realism and Irish Cinema' he talks about the means through which this popular imagery spread by way of the Victorian periodical and the mass circulation press and more particularly in modern times with the advent of film and television which led to the tradition of caricature and stage Irishry reaching wider

audiences than ever before. (ref. Gibbons, 1987, p. 194)

In reaction to this he says it is not surprising that cultural apologists in Ireland should have sought 'an alternative body of imagery which addressed itself to the realities of Irish life, free from the straitjacket of stereotypes and misrepresentation'. (Gibbons, 1987, p. 195) The film director Robert Flaherty was one man who succeeded in doing this through 'Man of Aran' (1934). Gibbons describes the film as 'an evocative portrayal of the harsh realities of life on the west coast of Ireland'. (Gibbons, 1987, p. 195) The film is discussed again in Chapter 3.

While it is impossible now to examine in depth and trace the origins of these various characteristics in Irish society, we can appreciate the complete contrast in Irish culture and society in comparison with their conquerors the English. The English Prime Minister, Disraeli said of the Irish in 1836 that they were a people which 'hate our order our civilisation, our enterprising industry, our pure religion'. This wild, reckless, indolent, uncertain and superstitious race have no sympathy with the English character'. (Collins, 1990, p. 9).

When we consider however the next few points, this last statement seems to do gross injustice to the Irish people.

Indeed as Richard Kearney points out in 'The Irish Mind' the art and culture of Ireland's past dating back to 3000 B.C. or so is epitomised in the Neolithic tomb at Newgrange, illustrating the highly complex ideologies of life and death articulated in its symbolic systems, which definitely 'do not bespeak primitivistic unrule'. (Kearney, 1985, p. 9)

Kevin Collins in his book 'The Cultural Conquest of Ireland' makes another point for arguing that Ireland was not a primitive and uncivilised society. When turning to the matter of literacy he reminds us that the Irish language is 'the oldest written vernacular in Europe (apart from Greek and Latin) and its literature was already a thousand years old when the Elizabethan armies began to role'. (Collins, 1990, p.23)

The colonial conquest of Ireland was an external force which strongly influenced Irish culture. Another external force which left a deep impression on Irish civilisation was the acceptance and absorption of the Christian ideals and beliefs into society. Between the sixth and twelfth centuries this new, Christianised Gaelic civilisation made tremendous contributions to the common pool of European culture (Collins, 1990,p.17) through its missionary movements to the continent. This ability which the Irish nation had to absorb new ideas and to direct energies into fresh overseas endeavours was indicative of great vitality and something, it would seem, which a so called primitive society would not be capable of having.

Now we must ask ourselves where and how the craft of knitting fits into such a society. There are two popular opinions, as already stated, about the origins of Aran knitting. In the more romantic notion the famous knitting historian Heinz Edgar Kiewe suggests that it was no coincidence when the stitches of Aran work began to appear on the white knitted stockings of Austria and Switzerland in places where the Irish Celts had founded monasteries by 500 A.D. Thus the missionary movement perhaps aided the transportation of fragments of Irish culture to the continent.

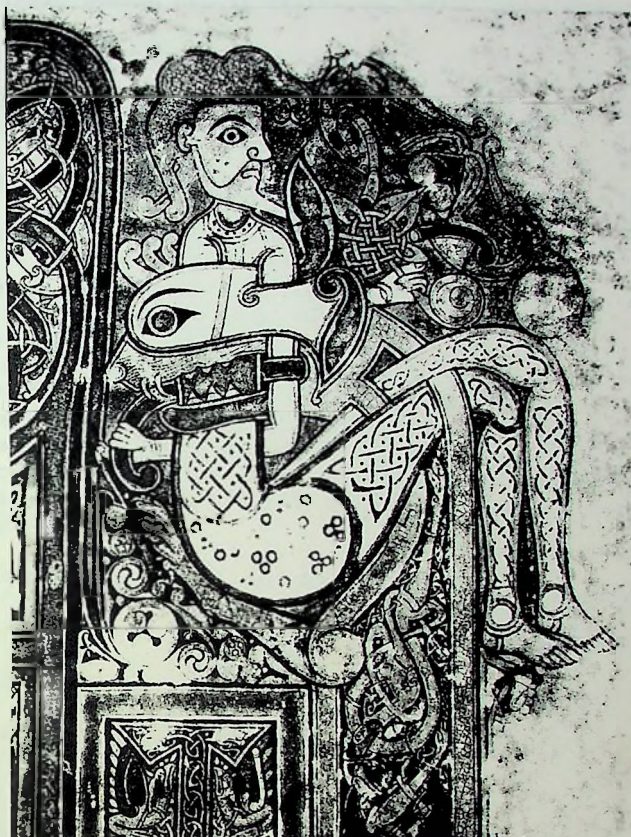


Kiewe goes so far as to suggest that the figure of Daniel in the 'Book of Kells' is clothed in Aran patterned knitting stockings, breeches and sweater. If this is true then the craft would indeed appear to be over 1000 years old as the 'Book of Kells' dates from the earlier ninth century A.D.

In contrast to this opinion however Richard Rutt, the Bishop of Leicester in his book 'A History of Hand Knitting' says in relation to this claim, that similarities between the decorations in the 'Book of Kells' and those of Aran knitwear are superficial. Firstly, he states knitting is not a craft which is thousands of years old. The figures Kiewe refers to in the 'Book of Kells', while wearing something which resembles a knitted cat suit, are accompanied by animals dressed likewise (Rutt, 1987, p.196).

These illustrations I would imagine were most likely exercises in elaborate decoration, and the notion of depicting reality in its true form was hardly deemed important by the fine craftsmen of this manuscript when one looks at the rest of its ornamental pages with panels of fantastic intertwined beasts such as serpents and greyhounds and intertwined ribbons and spirals.

Richard Rutt believes that such designs as these found on other ancient Irish art such as the tomb decorations of Newgrange and the similarities drawn between them and Aran design are merely the fundamental similarities of all simple geometric designs.



(fig. 2) - Detail of Man and animal's head,  
top of In initial, the Book of Kells,  
illustrating similitudes in ancient Celtic  
design and Aran stitchwork.



Because of these strong visual similarities which exist between Aran design and Ancient Irish Art it is easy to see how one might be tempted to connect the two to a common denominator as Kiewe has done.

Sean O Riada in his series of broadcasts on RTE entitled 'Our Musical Heritage' made this statement in relation to Irish creativity:

'The simplest picture of traditional Irish art is the ancient symbol of the serpent with its tail in its mouth: "in my end is my beginning". It is essentially a cyclic form... This is the idea that has lain at the root of all Irish traditional art since pre-Christian times. It is represented in the carved stones of Newgrange, in the curvilinear designs of the 'Book of Kells', in the old mythological stories, episodic and cyclic in form, in all Gaelic poetry even in James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*: and in the Sean-Nos singing which still survives as an art form today.' (Collins, 1990, p.9)

In contrast to this 'cyclic form' of expression O Riada placed the 'linear form' which he described as being characteristic of general European art, its origins lying in the Graeco-Latin antiquity which had been absorbed into modern western society through the intermediary of the Italian Renaissance.

The woollen Aran sweater aside from its aesthetic appeal was also a very functional piece of design and its original use as a fisherman's garment was most appropriate. One of wool's properties is that it has the ability to absorb moisture which in its turn gives out heat. This property when worked in a closely knitted texture helps to keep the garment virtually waterproof. In her book 'The Complete Book of Traditional Aran Knitting' Shelagh Hollingworth says -

'It is probably from this necessity that the beginnings of the fancy patterns were made. It will be obvious that the tighter one knits that basic of all patterns, stocking stitch, the finer will become any space between the stitches but, at the same time, in practise, this will produce a fabric as hard and as uncomfortable as a board. However, when one takes the weaving process of knitting a stage further and crosses the stitches this doubly enhances the scaled surfaces. It lessens the chance of inflow of moisture and with the weave entraps the air in the same way as the basic fibre, adding to the insulating properties. By cabling and twisting the stitches we not only eliminate the need for a board-like garment but we finish with a wearable sweater with all the characteristics of the wool itself- waterproofing, insulation and elasticity. We have created a functional piece of knitting and that alone is worth doing but more happily we have also created a thing of beauty.' (Hollingworth, 1982, p.14)

Whether one chooses to believe Kiewe's theory which relates the stitches in Aran knitting to symbolic meanings taken from the lives of these people, there is a more accepted theory that each family wore sweaters of distinctive patterns peculiar only to them. This in a way acted as a family's arms or shield and as a means of identifying the family from which a fisherman came - often in unfortunate circumstances such as identifying the corpses of those drowned at sea.

These patterns were preserved originally simply by being passed down in families from mother to daughter who recorded them mentally, which in itself was a daunting task illustrating the skill and resourcefulness of these islanders. Memory was much relied upon in the creative side of their lifestyles as was shown also in the storytelling of the 'Seanachai', those storytellers who served as entertainers in the simplistic lifestyles of these people.

The first recorded 'Aran' jumper was illustrated in 'Mary Thomas' Book of knitting Patterns' in 1943 and was originally bought by Heinz Edgar

Kiewe in the summer of 1936, in a shop in Stephen's Green in Dublin called





(fig. 1.3)



'Countryworkers Ltd'. (fig 1.3) The shop was part of a co-operative movement established to preserve Irish country crafts which among other things included basket-making. The movement also contributed to developing the folklore collection in the National Museum. Kiewe described his find as 'a peculiar whiskey-chunk of a sweater in "biblical white" '. (Rutt, 1987, p.197) It was from this date onwards that 'Aran' sweaters became popular. Richard Rutt tells us that

the original one bought in Dublin was lost. New patterns were created, all with high-relief cabling and honeycombing. Vogue knitting published an Aran pattern in 1956. By 1957 they were being worn in America. The fashion has wavered, but never yet disappeared. In the 1980s 'Aran' sweaters have maintained their popularity, not least because knitters enjoy creating the bold sculptured effects of the patterns. (Rutt, 1987, p.194)

Much has been written about life on the Aran Islands in the last two centuries. In these records knitting is sometimes mentioned but not in great detail. Paul O'Sullivan in his book 'A World of Stone' (1977) gives a very detailed account of life on the Islands with reference also to the clothing of these people. He states that 'the knitting of the "Aran" sweater with its intricate patterns of stitching was introduced to the Islands only after the famine, as a means of creating cash employment' (Rutt, 1987, p.197)

As a craft it had been encouraged for this very reason by the Congested Districts Board, an organisation set up in 1891 by the government to assist those districts where each family had insufficient land to maintain a minimum standard of living. Major Robert Rutledge-Fair, reporting on the Aran Islands, 31st, March 1893 noticed the increased activities in weaving and knitting.



(fig 1.4) 'The Man from Aranmore' by Jack B. Yeats, 1905.

- 'Jack Yeats painted this watercolour after he had visited the Irish speaking districts of South Galway with Synge in the summer of 1905' (Taken from 'Jack B. Yeats in The National Gallery of Ireland; Hilary Pyle; Cahill Printers Ltd., 1986)



At this time Ireland had experienced a severe famine in the 1840s and also another potato crop failure in 1889. Such catastrophies inhibited Ireland's development of her country and its people, robbing it of much of its population through emigration, that process which became the dominant social pattern which continued to drain the country of its lifeblood. And to the Irish people exile from the land was in a sense seen as death also.

It is within this framework of emigration that Richard Rutt tells us the truth about how the origins of Aran knitting on the Islands occurred. He tells that in 1984 the knitwear designer Rohana Darlington visited the Islands and found herself in the home of Mary Dirrane on Inishmore. Mary was reputed by the islanders as knowing more about knitting than anyone else. She told Rohana how her mother Margaret with her friend Maggie O'Toole, had gone to Boston, Massachusetts in 1906 with the intention of emigrating, and stayed on, 'some islands off Boston'. (Rutt, 1987, p.198). It was here these two women learned to do cable, moss stitch, and trellis or lattice patterns from some foreign immigrant woman. Mary and Margaret returned to their homes on the Aran Islands in 1908 and there they blended their new knitting skills with the ganseys they saw sailors from overseas wearing who often passed by their shores.

J.M. Synge the renowned Irish playwright writing between 1898 and 1907 documented the place and its people in a book which he simply called 'The Aran Islands'. He notes the growing popularity of the fisherman's gansey among young island men on Aranmor. (Fig 1.4) Other women on the islands then began to learn the craft of gansey-knitting as their product became saleable and provided, as already said, a very welcome means of earning extra cash.

And so it was from the society which bore the scars of famine and emigration that such fine knitwear sprang forth. In Rutt's words 'Aran' knitting 'belongs historically to the harsh world of famine and emigration, and to the hard life of the rocky islands' (Rutt, 1987, p.199)

Another thought I think worth noting, is that because of their (i.e. the Aran Islands) geographical separation from the mainland, these Islands would have been less accessible, thus making them all the more insular from the attacks colonialism brought on Irish people and its culture. Even today it is in such places where one can find the purest old Irish still spoken and the remnants of a culture where may still be seen

the old fishing curraghs, canvas successors of the frail prehistoric skin-covered craft; still the rough cowhide pampooties - hand made leather, sandal-type shoes that have to be dampened occasionally to keep them supple - the brightly coloured crios - a long hand woven belt worn round the waist by the men - and, of course the Aran knitting" (Hollingworth, 1982, p.3)

It was such communities like those on the Aran Islands that Kevin Collins must have been alluding to when he wrote - 'It is these peasant communities which were the true creators, transmitters and inheritors of the Gaelic civilisation'. (Collins, 1990, p.113)

In concluding this chapter I would like to explain the relationship I perceive between the 'Aran Islands' and the 'Aran Sweater'. My opinion is some - what similar to the connection Richard Rutt has identified between the two. The romanticism created around the 'Aran'. with its stitches supposedly symboling ideals and beliefs held by the 'Aran Islanders' is hard to accept when one considers that these stitches were in fact





(fig 1.5) Line drawings depicting life on the Aran Islands by Jack B. Yeats. The drawings are illustrated in J.H. Synge's 'The Aran Islands'.



introduced to the islands by two emigrant women returning from America. It seems definite that the practise of the skill is a recent one (commencing within the last 100 years). Therefore it is not as Aran Manufacturing Companies like to portray a 'centuries-old craft' (fig 1.1) with its origins and symbolism in stitches created in an ancient Celtic culture. This image undoubtedly sells more sweaters, but like many 20th century marketing campaigns its tracks lie covered in a system that exalts money and power at the cost of true values and integrity.

## 2- WOMEN AS KNITTERS AND THEIR ROLE IN THE WIDER CIRCLE OF THE ARTS/CRAFTS FRAMEWORK

From looking at knitwear in the context of Irish culture, I would now like to take a look at the gender to which we most often attribute the skill of knitting and at the role these persons play in the crafts. I am of course referring to women and their relation to knitting and also their role in the wider circle of the Arts/Crafts world of which knitting is a constituent.

Firstly, one question I would like to address is, is knitting perceived as an Art or Craft? In Richard Rutt's opinion

"Knitting is best called a craft. It serves life and is relatively ephemeral. It gets worn and wears out (hence museum collections are sparse). It can be expensive, but it is almost never precious. Its structure is more limiting than the structures of tapestry and embroidery. Therefore knitting is widely practised by non-professionals and tends to be a people's craft." (Rutt, 1987, p. 25).

Richard Rutt's perception of knitting in this statement is fairly accurate in terms of how most people would view the skill. Indeed, it is widely practised by non-professionals and is one of the most popular home crafts.

The mass media have programmed the general public to rely upon and to operate within the framework of their particular product, i.e. the specialist craft magazine. All you need to know about a certain craft, be it knitting, embroidery, carpentry or painting, is simply laid out in colourful weekly/monthly editions, and of course to entice you even further there is a free ring binder with part 1. (fig 2.1)

There are two main factors in my opinion which have greatly influenced the relationship between women and craft culture in society today. These two forces are firstly, the feminist movement, which has led to the re-evaluation of womens work in the home among other things, and secondly the connection identified between craft and a particular type of lifestyle whereby the craft lifestyle is viewed as an alternative mode of living in opposition to the dominant values of 20th century capitalism.

Expanding on the latter statement Gillian Elinor in her article for Circa 'Feminism and Craftwork' believes craft and its relation to lifestyle stems from the alternative modes and practices first experienced in the late 1960s and early 70s where the drop-out living pattern or 'hippy' era as it was seen, allowed the production of much craftwork. This mode of alternative living has carried through to present-day times. Gillian Elinor states that with the creation of a widespread 'craft sensibility' as she calls it, the craft lifestyle with its fashionable alternative appeal has been placed in opposition to twentieth century capitalist values with the association of old-fashioned virtues and the 'close to nature way of life'. With this craft lifestyle a demand within the market place has arisen for the crafted object.



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(fig 2.1) - An Example of a specialist Knitting Magazine by 'Rowan Yarns Ltd.'

Places such as 'craft fairs', rural craft centres, markets and shops have all emerged to cater for this demand in craft consumption. (Elinor, 1989, p. 29)

As craftwork has moved into the spheres of economically-viable and profit-making businesses, and taken a leap from the back shelves of society into a frontal window position due to successful marketing images placed in glossy magazines etc., so too has the focus on the individual craftworker sharpened. The work of women in the craft areas has undoubtedly been looked at in closer detail. Again Gillian Elinor has something to say about this when she talks about historic craftwork finding its way into art galleries in the form of exhibitions supporting a contention that, 'Women's craft is actually an art-form, with identifiable traditions and with individual innovation and expression'. (Elinor, 1989, p.29)

Women's craft has moved into the once almost exclusively reserved places of a male-dominated art world and in doing so has high lighted the belief of some that art is 'in some way intrinsically higher, greater, or better than craft'. (Rutt, 1987, p.28)

Craft is almost seen as an inferior skill less worthy of acknowledgement and approval when placed next to its high-ranking relation in society - ART.



## PATRICIA HURL (WAAG)

Recently, I met to meet Patricia Hurl, a prominent member of WAAG (Women's Artist Action Group). Her enthusiasm and commitment towards women and craftwork left a deep impression on me as the words she spoke came from her heart, and her own personal experiences struck a cord at the very core of issues relating to women in this area.

Patricia is now an artist and Fine Art tutor at the College of Marketing and Design, Dublin. She started her career when she entered college as a mother and housewife to study Fine Art Painting. The joy she discovered through the work she produced there was something Patricia had never experienced in any creative work she had produced previously in her home environment.

At home Patricia's time was largely occupied by activities such as knitting and sewing which she did for both her family and friends. It was a means of saving and earning extra cash, yes it was creative to a certain extent, but the practical reasons for engaging in these activities over-ruled her sense of creativity. She feels that at home she was being creative for the wrong reasons. It was not an avenue through which she could express her ideas and feelings as the college situation allowed, boosting her creative confidence. After all, society and the media attach a higher status to the work produced in art institutions than the work produced in home environments. Creativity in college was a liberating exercise for Patricia, whereas sewing and knitting as a housewife she found to be a repressive one.



The image of Mother knitting by the fireside while Father reads the newspaper is one which, Pen Dalton says in 'Women and Craft' is reinforced by the mass media time and time again where there is an implicit assumption that leisure crafts are practised by housewives. She goes so far as to correctly say,

'Even when women have shown amazing skill, creativity and artistry in knitting or sewing, it has been difficult for them to evaluate their own work as "skill" or "art". So long have textile crafts been women's work that they have been regarded as an extension of femininity itself or, at best, a different kind of housework'. (Dalton, 1987, p. 33)

The mass media have nurtured the idea of crafts being the activities of housewives and have successfully regenerated a growing interest in leisure activities such as crafts within the home environment.

This success in creating and stimulating an interest in craft skills has led to a demand for textiles, patterns, books, kits, materials and equipment. Resulting from the media's widespread publicity of such craft skills a broader base of people have come into contact with these skills through their easy accessibility in the form of specialist magazines found on sale in most newsagents and book shops. So, on a positive note, the media have aided a greater awareness of craft skills and techniques in society. However, taking a more negative view-point, Pen Dalton expresses the idea that

'Women look to magazines, books and kits for ideas and aesthetic stimulus. The notion that crafts could represent their own ideas, values and experiences and fantasies has no place in leisure craft ideologies '. (Dalton, 1987, P. 32).

It was repressive in the sense that repetitive work (such as knitting) Patricia feels is often linked by society to menial and unskilled work. Disadvantaged minorities such as prisoners and disabled people are given this work to execute in society. There is no status attached to it or the hands behind the operation. Frequently in her opinion the crafts most widely practised in the home by women tend to be viewed in the same light as the above.

Her concern with the plight of women living in these environments has led her to attempt to share the joy and confidence she found through the work she produced in college with women who work in the home environment and whose creative expression is confined within their home boundaries as hers once was.

I attended a meeting with Patricia in the Tallaght I.D.A. Enterprise Centre where, gathered around a table women from various community workshops in Tallaght discussed the details of proposed plans to hold a series of exhibitions composed of womens Craft/Art work as part of a special event in the 'Dublin European City Of Culture' programme.

(This event is being organised by 7 women of whom Patricia is one, who are members of the Association of Artists in Ireland).

The project entitled 'A Womans' Place' will involve working with women's groups in communities of Dublin's inner city and satellite towns, encouraging them to express themselves through various media (painting, knitting, sewing, sculpture, woodwork). In this way the women will create an environment which will be exhibited at the end of the project, in June 1991.

This will take the form of an installation in libraries, shop-fronts, community centres or churches in the locality. During the month of June Dublin will host an International Women's Artists Symposium and it is expected that this series of exhibitions will hold a lot of interest to its participants.

This event will give all women who wish to participate an opportunity to be creative in their work under the guidance of professional artists and designers who will co-ordinate the various workshops to be set up.

Hopefully this project will highlight the often-denied recognition and praise women working in the home deserve, and prove to be an exciting and refreshing event drawing on the hidden wealth of experiences and feelings each participant has as her source of inspiration.

#### LILY VAN OOST - ARTIST

Lily Van Oost is a Belgian born artist living in Killarney, Co. Kerry.

In a letter expressed some of her feelings about working as a visual artist through the medium of knit (she also works in other mediums but knitting is her most renowned form of expression)

In the art world she feels she is sometimes badly rewarded and in some quarters is refuted as a knitter, the connotations of which she strongly rejects. This attitude again illustrates the low status society attaches to knitting. As a sculpting media knit is a less conventional material in comparison to the more traditional mediums used such as wood, clay and stone. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why it is taken less seriously as an art form.



This reason, combined with the fact that it has long been practised as a craft activity and by women, explains the negative attitude Lily Van Oost has sometimes experienced.

In response to being labelled a 'knitter' Lily replies

'Yes I knit, weave once every three years, cook every three days, wash my clothes every week, garden, walk. This does not make me a knitter, weaver, chef-cook, laundretteer, gardener, sports woman etc., I am an ARTIST a VISUAL ARTIST.'

For Lily the technique of knitting is just one of the means to achieving the realisation of ideas and inspiration into sculpted art forms. As an artist one of her duties is to visually translate to people what is happening in society and also what may happen. One of the attractions she finds in sculpting with fibres is their pliable qualities which make them very adaptable to various shapes. In her work she covers bodies (life bodies) with her marks to show icony, cruelty stupidity and tenderness. (fig 2.2)

One of the points that Lily stresses about art work is that the artist should never take into consideration the sale-ability of the work s/he produces. For her bread and butter she sells pullovers but says,

'I simply prefer to eat mouldy bread while knitting, crocheting, weaving, knitting, glueing, pressing the fibres I choose to torture to the end of realising my work.'

There is a parallel line of thought here with the sentiments Patricia Hurl expressed in relation to how she viewed her own creativity in the home (i.e. knitting and sewing) and the creative work she produced in college.



(fig 2.2) - Lily Van Oost's  
Body Coverings in  
Knit and Crochet  
at present on tour  
with the 'Visa Versa'  
Exhibition.





The views suggested by both Patricia and Lily indicate that in order for creativity to flourish it must be spontaneous and all hindrances such as whether the piece of work is going to be saleable need to be removed before hand. It is this total unhindered creativity allows the deepest form of expression.

I would like to close this chapter with some illustrations which portray the wonderful qualities knit has as a sculpting material and the enthusiasm and creative passion of a woman artist - LILY VAN DOOST .



'R.H.K.' Arcade - Lily Van Oost

A Wall hanging in Knit/crochet  
presented by the artist to the Royal  
Hospital Kilmainham in June '90.

'The work depicts part of the R.H.K.  
Courtyard, complete with clock tower  
and sundial and incorporates  
references to R.H.K. activities such  
as music and art' (from the Press  
Release.)







### 3- KNITTING IN THE ECONOMIC CONTEXT

In the previous two chapters, evidence has shown that knitting has long been an activity associated with and practised by women working in the domestic environment. In these circumstances it has been performed as a leisure activity and handicraft and also as a wage earner in the outwork system providing an extra source of increasing a families income.

Aran knitting as an outwork activity in Ireland first became popular when market demand for the product increased. There are two contributing factors which I feel caused the popularisation of the Aran sweater. In 1934 the Irish pioneer and documentary film-maker, Robert Flaherty released his film 'Man Of Aran'. The film in Richard Rutts words was: 'A celluloid poem of hard life and high seas in his ancestral islands'. As part of a vigorous publicity campaign Flaherty brought Aran Islanders to London and dressed cinema attendants in seamen's jerseys.

Tam-O'Shanter's known as 'Man-of Aran berets' for a brief time following the release of the film had a vogue among the fashionable.

The Aran sweater as we know it today did not resemble the seamen's jerseys as worn in the film or by the cinema ushers. It was not until two years later in 1936 (as already discussed in Chapter 1.) that Kiewe discovered the first creamy white 'Aran' jumper in a shop called 'Country Workers' in Dublin. A year after making this discovery Kiewe saw Flaherty's 'Man of Aran'. The stark beauty of the film moved Kiewe to revive a 'biblical



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(fig 3.2) Still from the 'Man of Aran' (1934).



white' fisherman's sweater even though none of this description had been seen in the film.

In a sense Kiewe placed the creamy white Aran sweater he had discovered in Dublin the summer previously into what he saw as an appropriate setting, the Aran Islands. He also perceived a connection between Aran-knitted designs and ancient Irish art. As Aran knitwear was provided with its own mythology, demands for the product increased dramatically. The garment makers and wool spinners were not heard objecting. Knitwear of this kind became a tourist sales item as it still is today in Ireland, supported by a large system of outworkers.

I would now like to take a look at the structure of this system concentrating on Aran hand-knitting as an outwork activity. The Blarney Woollen Mills Company in Blarney, Co. Cork are one of the largest producers in Ireland of traditional hand-knit Aran sweaters and cardigans. I recently visited a woman living in my home locality of Bandon, Co. Cork who works as an agent handling the hand-knit products that they produce.

As an agent Mrs. Kingston's work involves distributing yarns (100% wool) and patterns to knitters through her home. When a knitter has completed a garment she returns it to Mrs. Kingston whereupon it is checked and weighed. The labour costs are then paid accordingly to the knitter. Mrs. Kingston then sews in the 'Blarney Woollen Mills' label and attaches the knitter's name to the garment. When she has collected in the region of 40-50 garments she contacts her employers who then collect them from her and supply her with more wool, and so the cycle continues in this 'primitive capitalist' structure.



Mrs. Kingston handles in the region of 45 knitters, all of whom live within a 20 mile radius of her home. In the West Cork area alone Blarney have agents operating as she does in the areas of Clonakilty, Bantry, Skibbereen, Kinsale and Cork City (the latter having 2/3 agents). Each agent handles at least 40-50 knitters, all of whom are women and mostly housewives and mothers.

The women that Mrs. Kingston deals with are mainly in the 40-50 age group. According to her there are very few women under this age bracket who engage in this type of work. She attributes this to the fact that women under 40 belong to a generation which did not place emphasis on home crafts such as knitting in their school training as had been done prior to this, especially in rural areas where very few married women moved outside the home environment to work. Activities such as knitting therefore, provided a way of obtaining extra income (however meagre the sum) and could be incorporated into their daily lives as home makers. There has been an agent operating in the Bandon area for Blarney for the last 40 years, Mrs. Kingston having held this position for the past 18 years.

Men's, women's and children's sweaters and cardigans are knit in Aran styles. It is the individual knitters choice of whether she wishes to follow a given pattern or work to her own. Sometimes however Blarney will specify a particular quantity of a certain style that they want. As already mentioned a knitter is paid by the weight of the garment she produces. The going rate of pay is as follows:

Garment knitted to a jacket pattern style - 62p per ounce.

Garment knitted to a sweater pattern style - 57p per ounce.

(Knitters are expected to sew up their finished garments at no extra cost)

I would now like to take these figures and use them in a example to determine whether or not women are being paid a fair price for their work in this area or being exploited for their skills.

To knit an average man's Aran sweater in size 40 it usually takes 48 ozs of wool, 48 multiplied by 57p equals a total sum of #27.36. According to Mrs. Kingston most of her knitters are capable of producing a finished garment within two or three weeks. The amount of time involved in knitting this garment would obviously vary from woman to woman. To roughly estimate the rate of pay per hour, having watched my own mother doing Aran knitting, I would say a garment could take 60 hours to knit and sew up, allowing three hours sewing up time, 60 hours divided into the total sum received i.e. #27.36 averages at 46p per hour.

It is interesting to note that the basic weekly wage a woman employed as a machinist in an industrial environment receives (as quoted by S.I.P.T.U. - Federated Workers Union of Ireland) is #115.99. Added to this basic wage she would usually receive an extra #35-#40 bonus totalling her average gross weekly wage at #150. A married womans' take home pay would then end up at around #120.00. Dividing this total into the 39 hour week she works we can see that her average hourly take home pay is #3.00. This comparison seems to highlight even further the exploitation of women's work carried out in the domestic environment by the capitalist system.

It is the same system which exploits her work in this context by successfully marketing the good (i.e. the Aran sweater) as a quality craft product.

Attached to all its Aran knits 'Blarney Woollen Mills' has a tag which reads as follows:

'This garment has been hand-knit by (name of knitter) in my own home with care and attention to detail to last you a lifetime.'

This message reinforces the point that the sweater is a personalised piece of work allowing the customer to identify with its place of origin and creator.

The fact that it is hand-knit by someone in their own home is capitalised upon to sell the product as a craft item. It illustrates as mentioned in the previous chapter the connection identified between craft and a particular type of lifestyle. The quality craft item, in this case the Aran sweater, portrays an alternative mode of living (i.e., the craft lifestyle) which is seen in opposition to the dominant values of 20th century capitalism. The fact is however that the roots of this craft practice for commercial sale lie in a particularly exploitative form of the 20th century capitalist system.

Heidi Hartmann states in her essay, 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards A More Progressive Union,' 'that profits derive from the capitalists' ability to exploit labour power, to pay labourers less than the value of what they produce.' (Hartman, 1981, p.10) In the case of Aran knitters in this particular outwork system I think this statement is ~~very~~ true.

Why then do women subject themselves to this form of labour exploitation?

Maybe one of the reasons is that women as mothers and housewives working in the domestic environment are economically dependant on their husband's income.

Outwork knitting is a means of earning extra cash (however meagre the amount) where she would otherwise have none. It is a job suited to the domestic



environment in that it can be done at a woman's own pace and whenever the opportunity arises. The work itself is not belittling or unjust, it is the poor returns which a woman receives for this work which give cause for discontent.

I would like to turn now to broader issues concerning women's work in the home and the use of knitwear by an artist commenting on this.

One of the reasons I feel knitting is held in such low esteem is because of the strong connection perceived between it and woman's work or housework. This point was illustrated in chapter two by Pen Dalton when she stated that 'so long have textile crafts been women's work that they have been regarded as an extension of femininity itself or at best a different kind of housework'. (Dalton, 1987, p.33) In society it is the men who have occupied the positions with status and power attached to them, dominating the social and political spheres while women have been placed in subordinate positions. The sexual inequality between men and women, and male dominance over women has been the main concern of the feminist movement.

Mariarosa Dalla Costa is a marxist feminist whose political position, that women should demand wages from the state for housework, has vastly increased consciousness among those in the women's movement concerning the importance of housework. Dalla Costa suggests that if women were to receive wages for housework it would allow them:

'to organise their housework collectively, providing community child care, meal preparation, and the like. Demanding wages and having wages would raise their consciousness of the importance of their work; they would see its social significance, as well as its private necessity, a necessary first step toward more comprehensive social change'. (Hartmann, 1981, p.8)

Eli Zaretsky's socialist analysis of the place of women in the capitalist system voices the opinion that because of the distinction and separation made between wage work and home work, sexism has become more virulent. He acknowledges the crucial positioning housework has in relation to the production of capital. It requires women to work in the home in order to reproduce wage workers for the system. According to Zaretsky, women in reproducing the labour force also provide a capsule of intimacy amidst the external alienating society. In the system, he believes women are labouring for capital and not for men. The privatisation of housework resulting from the separation of the home and work place brought about under the capitalist system, he believes, has created the illusion that women are working for men privately in the home.

Heidi Hartmann however would argue that housework performed by women for the family really is for men (though it clearly reproduces capitalism as well. The feminist belief is that:

'the problem in the family, the labour market, economy and society is not simply a division of labour between men and women, but a division that places men in a superior, and women in a subordinate position'. (Hartmann, 1981, p.7)

In order to explain this it is necessary to determine the constitution of gender types from biological and social aspects. In her essay 'Speaking of Gender ... Expressionism, Feminism and Sexuality' (A New Tradition, Irish Art of the Eighties), Joan Fowler voices several questions. She asks:

'Are we biologically defined as either man or woman or is the split between the sexes socially constructed, in the interests of men? What is it to be a 'woman', and what is (are) our image(s) of ourselves, what image(s) have been constructed of us, and what does

this tell us about the constitution of gender? And how do race and class affect relationships between men and women, and women with other women? The questions are in a sense as important as the answers because they enable a questioning of all social practises and institutions. They lead to the radical conclusion that nothing in our social relations is gender free, or beyond issues of gender discrimination. Moreover, the principle of achieving equal status to men in social order, and if the social order is permeated by the domination of men over women, and that, in turn, is based - as psychoanalytic theory informs us - on psychic associations, fears and taboos concerning sexuality which are reproduced forwards and backwards, through the social order, then concepts of 'equality' also carry the prejudice of existing social relations'. (Fowler, 1990, p.57)

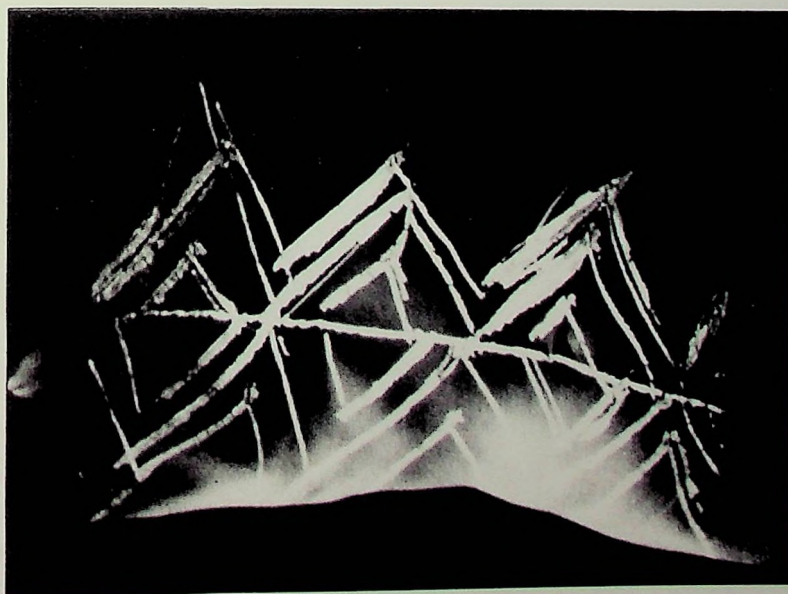
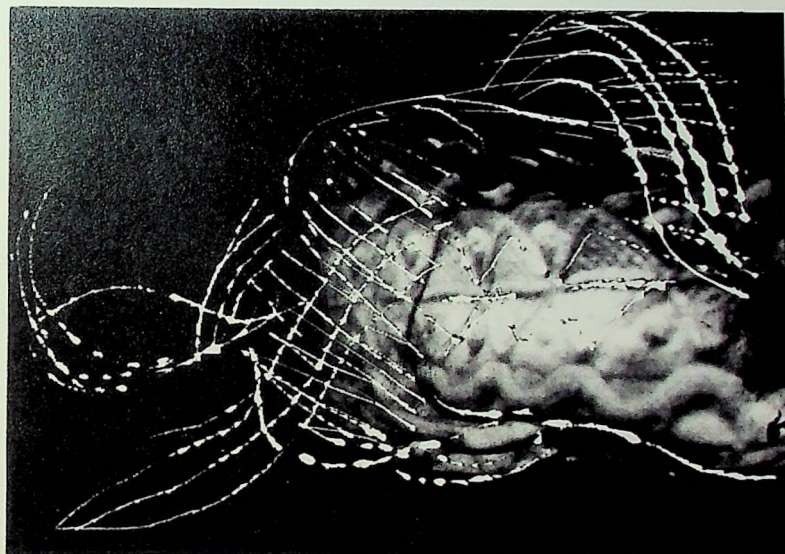
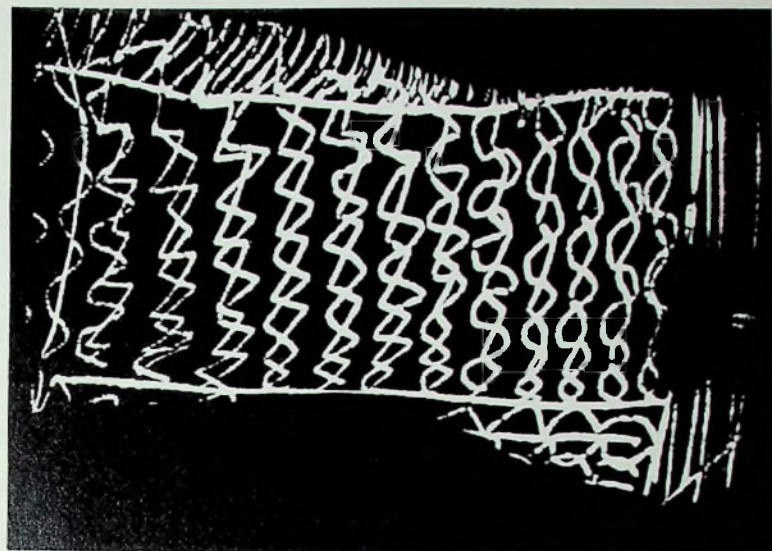
In the context of the Irish situation the 1970s saw the Women's Movement exerting a good deal of energy in seeking equal opportunity in the workplace, and in seeking rights to enable them to make choices in their careers, in areas relating to contraception and maternity leave. In the 1980s the home environment was given more attention as an important issue in the construction and reproduction of gender roles.

During this decade (1980s) many artists created work addressing issues such as gender, analysing male/female power relations and exploring their own sexual identities. I would now like to draw attention to the work of Irish Artist Pauline Cummins who makes the body more public in work that celebrates women and sexuality and makes positive representations of women.

In the 1984 Irish Exhibition of Living Art she created a mural entitled, 'Celebration,' in the National Maternity Hospital which was intended to welcome, in a general way, the event of motherhood. She also celebrates male sexuality in her slide/tape piece entitled 'Aran Dance,' (1985) which was shown in the 'Sexuality and Gender' exhibition (one of a series of six exhibitions from the 'Irish Art of the Eighties Collection') in



(fig 3.3) - Stills from Pauline Cummins video/tape piece 'Akan Dance'  
as seen in the 'Sexuality and Gender' Exhibition



the Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin. The subject is a personal view of the visual 'tactile pleasures of a man's body'. Her interest in the piece (which is very appropriate in the context of this essay) was aroused by an old Aran sweater she saw on a tailor's dummy. The way this sweater clung so tightly to the stand was like none she had seen before. 'It was sensuous and strong. It was voluptuous and warm, gentle and soft. It was very male. It was made by a woman, for a man - it was sexual'. (From introductory page on the wall of the gallery) In describing this slide/tape piece Pauline says:

'The first part of the tape is like an outer layer, a description of knitting, a suggestion of the fantasy imposed on the man by the woman.

The second part is a love-song - the enjoyment of the male body, by the female. A renaming - an inquiry into what is opposite - and how one creates the "other"'. (From introductory page on the wall of the gallery) (fig 3.3)

In Joan Fowler's words 'Aran Dance' 'uses the fact that women's sexual responses are rarely portrayed from the point of view of women as the spectators of the male body'. (Fowler, 1990, p.62)



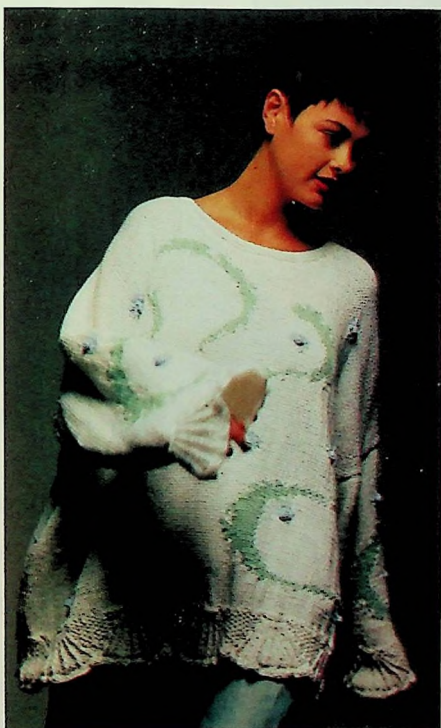
*A Look  
at Irish Knit.*



*- Lyn Marr - Sept '90 - 'U'.*



*- Lainey Keogh - March '91 - 'U'.*



*- Glynis Robins - March '91 - 'U'.*



#### 4- THE KNITWEAR INDUSTRY ITSELF

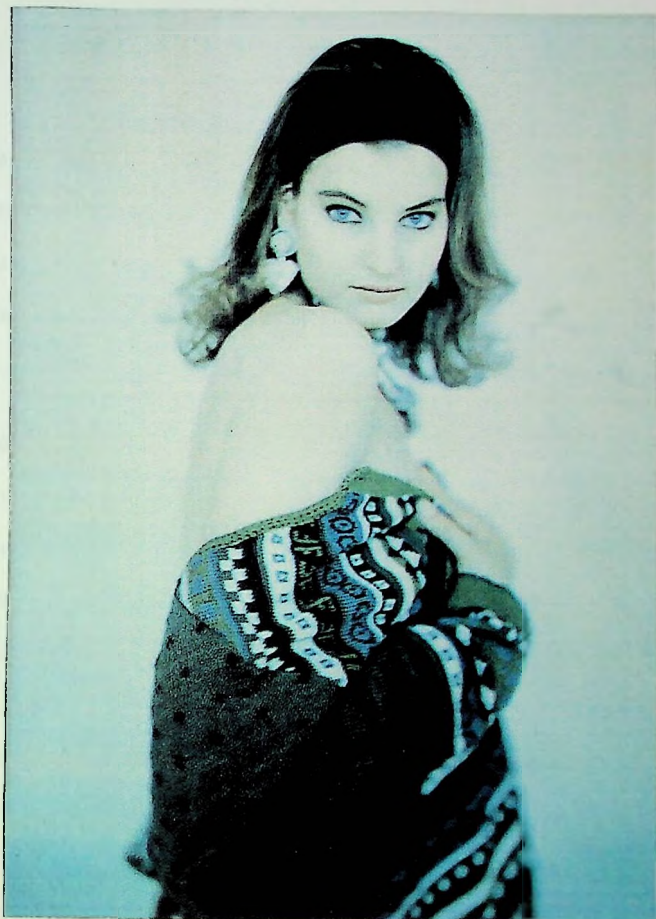
Having discussed knitting in an economic context in the previous chapter, I would now like to discuss some aspects of the Irish knitwear industry itself. This chapter gives an account of a small company in the industry whose knitwear is aimed at the exclusive, designer end of the market ('Francobolli'). The industrial high-volume production area is also looked at with an example of one such company operating in Ireland ('Tyna International'). Mr. Oskar Haug, owner of a relatively small mass-producing company 'Irlanda', discusses the changes needed in the industry to bring it to a higher level of efficiency. Finally, the government aided body the Crafts Council of Ireland (allied to Kilkenny Design ) is mentioned with particular attention given to its proposal to meet the specific technical needs of individuals entering this industry.

##### 'Francobolli'

Deirdre Fitzgerald and Lorna Ross are ~~the names of~~ two prominent young Irish designers who specialise in knitwear. They both studied at the National College of Art and Design, Dublin and graduated from its fashion course with first class honours in June 1989.

Within a few months of leaving college the two young designers joined forces and formed their own limited company and thus the 'Francobolli' label was born.

I recently met Deirdre to discuss with her, her experience to date as a young designer working in the Irish fashion industry.



(fig 4.2) - 'Francobolli' knitwear as seen in 'U' Magazine, sept '90.

Upon leaving college Deirdre decided that Ireland was where she wanted to work. Despite the popular trend for fashion graduates to automatically travel abroad to the international fashion capitals such as New York, Paris, Milan and London in search of work, Deirdre felt there was room for young designers to branch out and make a living in the industry here at home, and that is exactly what she did.

The forming of 'Francobolli' came about when Deirdre and Lorna were both approached individually by the 'Irish Design Centre', Dublin and asked to open their own units in the shop, having already sold parts of their



degree collections in the centre. The unfavourable initial costs and responsibilities involved in setting up on their own led them to enter the venture together as a team and slowly but steadily the business which started out in Deirdre's parents' living room was built up. Within a year and a half their sales had reached over #40,000 per year.

The initial step from the college situation into the world of business and running a company was an eye-opener for Deirdre who says she knew very little about the basics of running a business when she came out of college. It is an area she feels which was very much neglected in her college education and something which students really should get a grip on before opting to go it alone. Deirdre's father who is an accountant was an essential asset to the company in its early stages, offering them much advice and assistance in areas such as administration, accounts, obtaining overdraft facilities and understanding the daily costs and overheads involved in running a business.

Without a doubt the economic climate in the 'Rag Trade' is somewhat depressed at the moment with statistics showing that 45% of British manufacturing companies are expected to go into liquidation over the next two years. Irish companies have felt the repercussions of the English situation and within the last six months an Irish dyeing and also fabric manufacturing company which 'Francobolli' used to do business with have gone into liquidation.

'Francobolli' entered the market place with their product at the more exclusive, designer end. The average retail price of one of their sweaters is #180.00. According to Deirdre they couldn't have entered the market at any other price point because of the high production costs

involved at their scale. The mark-up price on everything they sell is 120%. The retail outlet receives 100% of the cost price and the remaining 20% is the V.A.T. charge put on all goods.

Good quality is a must for customers who buy within this price range, Deirdre says. The yarns most frequently used in 'Francobolli' knits are cottons, alpakas and wools, most of which are imported from Britain and Germany as these European yarn suppliers offer wider colour choices and finer quality yarns more suitable to 'Francobolli' knits than most yarns produced by Irish spinners.

When I asked Deirdre whether her work had been influenced by 'Green' issues, she replied yes, to the extent that she only ever uses natural yarns and fibres, finding them much more pleasant to work with in comparison to the synthetic varieties available. From the point of view of marketing, she has found that it is best not to use various combinations of yarns together in a garment as the appeal of 100% wool for example is a major plus when selling a garment.

The 'Francobolli' look is worn mainly by young fashion-conscious people seeking an individual image. The core group of their customers are in the 18 - late 20s age bracket. However they do also get a cross-over of younger and older women wearing their clothes. The ability to be flexible in this area is very important Deirdre says, especially in a small consumer market such as Ireland where there is only a small percentage of the population prepared to spend in the region of #180.00 on a sweater.

The 'Irish Design Centre' has been 'Francobolli's' main outlet of sale. They have also retailed in the 'Margaret Joyce' knitwear shops in Galway,





(fig 4.3) - 'Francobolli' knit from the Wareroke Collection for Brown Thomas — pictured in 'U' — Jan '91.

Clifden, and Dingle. Prior to Christmas 1990, they were commissioned by Brown Thomas' 'Wareroke' department to produce a range of winter specials. The collection occupied one of the front window display areas for three weeks during the busy season.

The ongoing 'Look To Our Own' campaign organised by the Irish Goods Council to promote Irish fashion to the Irish people is one which Deirdre wholeheartedly supports. The Irish Goods Council is the state agency responsible for the promotion of Irish products in the Irish market. It

also provides a range of marketing support services to the Irish clothing sector. She believes that the campaign has helped to encourage Irish fashion and promoted the idea that it has an equal standing in the market with our other European counterparts in Italy, France and England. The campaign is not about generating a specific 'Irish Look' but rather the promotion of design and quality in Irish clothing. (See fig 4.4-'Francobolli' knitwear used in the 'Look To Our Own' advertising campaign)

Similarly, the 'Doolin Crafts Centre' in County Clare has approached Deirdre to start stocking her knitwear in their shop this coming summer. In her dealings with them she has found that they are very much along the same vein of thought as the Irish Goods Councils' Campaign 'Look To Own Own' in that they wish to encourage Irish design without expecting it to fit into the moulds of the frequently portrayed traditional images. 'Francobolli' knitwear has fused designer appeal with an essence of Irishness by combining traditional Aran stitches in fine-quality yarns such as alpaka. The use of such yarns has dissociated them from the traditional 'Irish Look' composed from the more coarse, rugged and tweedy yarns.

The 'Francobolli' label will soon cease to exist as Deirdre and Lorna have both decided to split the partnership and work separately in their own individual careers. Deirdre feels this will allow her to become more specific about her own intentions and how she sees her career progressing in the industry. 'Francobolli' allowed the two young designers to gain valuable work experience and knowledge in how a company is run, and established for them a good base within the industry which they can now





Part of life's rich pattern.

Knitwear from Irish Designers and Fashion Houses. Reflecting the pattern of our lives. With looks as diverse as the Irish countryside.

The warm, simple statement of pure new wool. Wool-rich blends and cotton mixes with a flair for the witty detail – the sure touch that sparkles with personality. Irish Fashion Houses and Irish designers bring us knitwear that's as personal as our lives – a part of the pattern that makes us what we are.

So next time you're looking for labels, look to our own.

Look to our own.

build on.

Deirdres' future plans include obtaining her own premises and within the next year she would like to see her work being directed towards the export as well as the home market.

In concluding this section, it is evident I think, that the success of 'Francobolli' illustrates the economic opportunities available for small enterprises aiming at the top end of the market. Also, forms of small enterprises such as the one mentioned, I find more excepcable than large-scale operations (as discussed in Chapter 3) which exploit out-workers.

(1994) - I have been modelling Deirdre's 'Francobolli' as a business - selling 10 small cakes with love heart centres and chocolate flower petals.  
This garment will be shown in the April Edition of 'W' under Deirdre's own individual label - 'Deirdre's Francobolli'.





(fig 4.5) - Eileen Shells modelling Deirdre Fitzgerald's own knitwear - swing chenille dress with lace knit insets and crocheted flower details.

This garment will be shown in the April Edition of 'A' under Deirdre's own individual label - 'Deirdre Fitzgerald.'

## 'Futura Trade Fair'

Every year one of the major events in the calendar of Irish fashion firms is the 'Futura Trade Fair.' This year the exhibition occupied the RDS Simmonscourt Pavilion, Dublin, from the 3-5 March, celebrating its 21st year in existence. It is estimated that the fair attracted more than 4,000 Irish and overseas buyers and trade from the event in terms of written orders and follow-up business is expected to reach in the region of 6 million pounds in revenue for the Irish fashion firms which took part.

I went to 'Futura' with a special interest in viewing the Irish knitwear content. I spoke to Mr. Robert Hunt, Managing Director and owner of 'Tyna International Ltd.', Ireland's largest-producing knitwear company, and also Mr. Oskar Haug, a native of Germany who runs his own knitwear company in Cahirciveen, County Kerry. Both exhibitors were part of the 'Irish Fashion World' section which was co-ordinated by the Irish Goods Council.

## 'Irlanda' - Mr. Oskar Haug

The 'Futura' fair has given Oskar Haug's company (like all the other exhibitors) trade exposure and an opportunity to find new customers.

Trained as an industrial knitwear technician, Mr. Haug has been working in the industry for the last 15 years, 10 of which he has spent in Ireland where he now runs his own company producing women's knitwear under the 'Irlanda' label. Mr. Haug has a broad knowledge and experience of the knitwear industry having worked all over Europe in Germany, France, Belgium, Switzerland and England before settling in Ireland. In





(fig 4.6) - 'Orlanda' Women's Knitwear from the Autumn/Winter 1990 collection.

specialise in knitwear, a post-graduate course in business studies (due to commence in Sept. 1991) making available to them relevant industrial production equipment (discussed later on the chapter).

Mr. Haug believes that the ability to be creative in the industry is of the utmost importance. However it is not the only ingredient necessary for commercial success. It must, he emphasises, be coupled with commercial knowledge. The knitwear industry needs to be approached, he says, as it has been in Germany, with modern management procedures aiming to lift its low-status image as a textile industry with high labour intensive production and low financial returns, into an industry where productive efficiency and high quality can result in rewarding financial returns, as in the case of the computer industry.

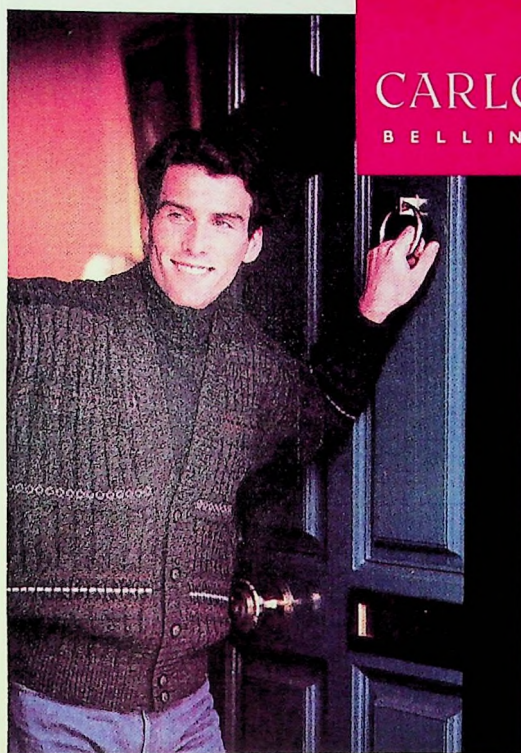
our discussion, the topics which dominated were commercial survival in the industry and the things Mr. Haug felt the Irish knitwear business could learn from the German one.

'Irlanda' employs between 15-18 people. Mr. Haug maintains that one of the reasons why his company has not decided to expand is because of the severe shortage in Ireland of technically-trained people in the area of knitwear production. In his opinion this shortage is the main factor preventing Irish knitwear companies from making a bigger impact on the international market. In maintaining a relatively small-scale business Mr. Haug is able to assist in and oversee all areas of the company.

In Germany before entering a technical college it is necessary to have worked in the particular industry one's course of study in being directed towards, for four years. All German companies depending on their size are obliged by law to employ a certain number of trainees who receive a basic working knowledge of the industry, as they are given an opportunity to assist in and observe its various departments. In his own training, Mr. Haug worked through all the departments of the company he was placed in, going from design to production areas before entering a technical college, where he studied for a further two years.

No course equivalent to the one Mr. Haug pursued exists here in the Republic of Ireland. Lack of funding in equipping fashion courses with appropriate modern technology has meant that many graduates are entering the industry more-or-less illiterate in industrial production processes. It is encouraging to note, however, that the Crafts Council of Ireland under the Crescent Workshops structure, situated in Kilkenny, has proposed plans to offer fashion and textiles graduates who wish to





The Carlo Bellini Autumn–Winter Collection features three distinctive design themes — 'Pre-Raphaelites', 'Northern Territories' and 'Marble & Shadowplay', resulting in an imaginative choice that balances fashion with commercial appeal.

See The Carlo Bellini Collection for Autumn–Winter 1990/91

at IMBEX (London) and FUTURA FAIR (Dublin).

*(fig 4.7) - 'Carlo Bellini' Mens' Casual Knitwear.*

'Irlanda' knitwear is sold in 150 retail outlets in Ireland (retails between #80 - #170) which accounts for 40% of its turnover. The remaining 60% is exported to the U.S.A., Canada, Germany and Belgium.

### 'Tyna International' -- Mr. Robert Hunt

Mr. Robert Hunt is Managing Director and owner of 'Tyna International', which is situated in Monasterevin, County Kildare, employing a workforce of 127. As the largest producing knitwear company, 'Tyna' is involved in high volume production. Its main customers are the 'Littlewoods' and 'B.H.S.' chainstores in the U.K. 70% of their turnover is for the European export market; the remaining 30% is consumed in the home market. The company produces under the 'Tyna' and 'Carlo Bellini' labels, but is also involved in contract work producing knitwear for other companies with their own labels. One such example in Ireland is 'Saint Lazare.'

According to Mr. Hunt the 'Tyna' and 'Carlo Bellini' labels appear in over 100 retail outlets in Ireland. When considering the contract work 'Tyna' is involved in this would bring the number of outlets their knitwear is sold in to over 1000.

'Tyna' employs two full time designers, both of whom are graduates of the Limerick College of Art and Design. Mr. Hunt, like Oskar Haug stresses the importance of designers knowing the capabilities of the machines they are designing for. Both 'Irlanda' and 'Tyna International' have CMS Stoll (German model) knitting machines operating on their plants. This model is presently the top of the range in industrial knitwear equipment.

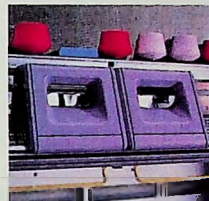


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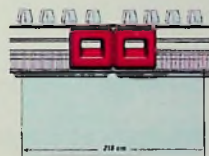
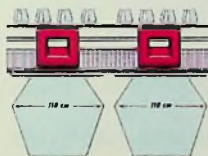


The CMS 402 in its tandem layout (2 x 2system).



The CMS 402 in its 4system layout, with the carriages coupled together.

When operating as a 2 x 2system machine, the carriage stroke still adjusts itself automatically to the width of the piece being produced, or to that of the motif within it. This gives greatly increased productivity on shaped panels,

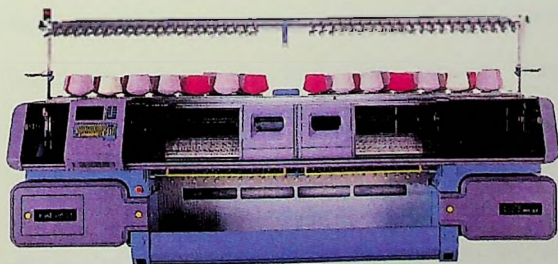


On 4system knitting, panels are produced at maximum rate at a working width of up to 215 cm. If the operating width is reduced, the carriage still only has to traverse over that part of the needle bed that is actually producing

intarsia and a host of special effects that can be incorporated within the knitting process. Even high-value yarns can be knitted double-system at the production rate of a 4system machine.

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(fig 4.8) - The top of the model range in Industrial Knitting machines from Stoll, Germany.

## Kilkenny Design

In 1981 the magazine of the British Design Council held the Kilkenny Design Workshops up as a praiseworthy 'model of state intervention in design'. (Kelly, 1989, p.40)

I would like now to examine the main aims and objectives of this government aided body and take a look at some of its achievements to date in relation to Irish Knitwear.

The Kilkenny Design Workshops were set up by the government in 1962 in response to the findings of a report based on the state of design in Ireland, issued by a Scandinavian Design Group who visited the country to undertake this endeavour in 1961 on the requests of C.T.T. (Coras Trachtala - Irish Export Board).

In the report many criticisms were made concerning design awareness and education in Ireland. It stressed the need for a radical change in design education as taught in the country's design institutions. The National College of Art, it was noted, while having adequate facilities and space was found to be using methods of education which were completely out of date.

Although the government did not take action on many of the educational recommendations found in the report, moves were made to improve the quality of Irish Design by the setting up of the Kilkenny Design Workshops (KDW).

Anne Kelly discusses the formation of Kilkenny Design in her book 'Cultural Policy in Ireland'. She states that:



'Their main purpose was to be the advancement of good design in industry and among consumers; good design was now recognised by the state as an essential element of economic development, and Kilkenny Design was to make an important contribution to visual awareness in Ireland. (Kelly, 1989, p.40)

Further to this in 1971 public policy in the arts was extended to cover the craft areas with the establishment of the Crafts Council of Ireland which is state-aided through the I.D.A. (Industrial Development Authority) with an input by the Royal Dublin Society also.

The functions of Kilkenny Design include those of adviser to the Minister for Industry and Commerce in matters relating to design, as well as conveying the design needs of industry to the relevant educational authorities. It also provides designer training in conjunction with the E.S.F. (European Social Fund) and makes Designer Development awards which enable Irish designers to benefit from training abroad.

The Craft's Council since 1981 has run a post-graduate training scheme for young crafts persons and designers. The course was originally started in Kilworth, County Cork as a joint venture with ANCO. From 1989 the post-graduate training scheme has been based in new premises in Kilkenny called the Crescent Workshops. They are large and well-equipped, offering all the facilities needed for professional production.

Although essentially a business training course, the course directors feel it is important to emphasize that it is allied to the production of the workshops. In their application form for this course they state:

'That this production should be both creative in concept and technique is essential for a successful move to a professional workshop, but the need to market your work is obviously just as essential to this success. It is the combination of these skills that the Crescent Workshop aims to encourage.'

The course caters for people training in a broad spectrum of craft and design areas having facilities for craft, textiles, pottery, jewellery and graphics students, whose intentions may vary from seeking to produce for galleries or for commission, to those who are considering batch and volume production.

The autumn of 1991 will it is hoped will see the introduction of a knitwear course to the workshops, offering 15 places to students wishing to pursue a career in this industry. The course hopes to make available to its participants adequate training facilities with modern technological and computer systems, equipping designers with the necessary knowledge to carve out successful careers in the industry.

The foregoing accounts illustrate the problems and possibilities facing the knitwear industry in Ireland. On a small scale it seems possible that the market place is capable of supporting individuals who are engaged in fairly simple production practises ('Francobolli'). On a larger scale however Irish industry is being hindered somewhat by the problems outlined by Oskar Haug. In order to reach it's full potential these fundamental problems, such as lack of technically trained people in knitwear production to operate and utilise machines to a high efficiency, must be addressed and subsequent training provided.

As it is an industry with a low status perhaps profit-sharing schemes could be introduced to companies to encourage more people to enter and train towards an area of specialisation in the industry.



## CONCLUSION

As knitting has been viewed and discussed from economic, social and cultural aspects it has been evident that it has many different functions and is viewed from as many different angles by those who engage in it.

Knitting as a widely practised conventional home-hobbie reflects the environment it is produced in. It gives us an insight into the hands that created it. Patricia Hurl has referred to a woman's knitting as her 'worry beads'. Behind a garment she says, there are often many trials and tribulations stemming from events in the particular person's life which may be causing her to knit at that given time. It was seen that Patricia found knitting in this context, a repressive action. In contrast to this, one is reminded of the way in which Artist, Lily Van Dost uses the medium. For her it is an expressive form of creativity. It is clearly evident that knitting can take either one of these patterns depending on the attitude ad the environment in which it is approached.

As a domestic female orientated activity its practise has identified certain opinions that society at large holds in regard to the value or status women are often rewarded. It is held in low esteem and has low financial returns for those engaged in the activity as a means to earning a supplemntary wage in the outwork system, as was seen in chapter three.

This type of thinking has I Think, carried through to the industrial situation where as of yet the knitwear industry has yet to take on the characteristics of serious minded companies with high profiles in *society*.

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