



Common Threads

An Exhibition of Fabric Crafts at the National Museum of Ireland – Country Life
A National Museum of Ireland exhibition in conjunction with the Mayo
Inter-cultural Action group

February – March 2009

Catalogue compiled by Deirdre Power, Education & Outreach Officer

Acknowledgements

Many people contributed to the success of this project. The National Museum of Ireland would like to thank the following:-
The women who participated in the project and the resulting exhibition:-

Favour Ezenna	from Nigeria
Olanike Ogundare	from Nigeria
Faoziya Yussuf	from Nigeria
Phaw Shee Hta	from Burma
Natalia Pestova	from Russia
Hsar Bway Say	from Burma
Mi Nyel Win	from Burma
Joanna Kuruc	from Poland

Artist Carmel Balfe for coordinating the project.

Thérèse Ruane, Bridget Breen and Ailish Irvine of the Mayo Intercultural Action group (MIA).

Micheal McLoughlin & Tom Meskell for the photographs in this publication.

Kiltimagh Community Development Project (CDP).

National Museum of Ireland – Country Life:

Tom Doyle and Deirdre Power, Education & Outreach Department; Albert Siggins, Folklife Division; Karena Morton, Conservator and other staff in the Museum who contributed to the exhibition.

This project was funded by the National Museum of Ireland with support from the Mayo Intercultural Action group.

Common Threads

The fabric craft in this exhibition was made by eight women of different nationalities now living in Mayo, in response to the museum exhibitions and their own experiences.

The work is a result of a joint project undertaken by the National Museum of Ireland – Country Life and Mayo Intercultural Action group (MIA) and facilitated by community artist Carmel Balfe. MIA is a Non-Government Organisation (NGO) dedicated to issues of immigration and integration in county Mayo.

Background to the Exhibition

The project was prompted by a desire to continue and deepen museum engagement with new communities living in Ireland, and to explore the relevance of the museum and its collections to these communities.

After an initial familiarisation visit and guided tour of the exhibitions, participants undertook weekly visits to the Museum in October and November 2008. Each week, the women worked with their own individual techniques using tools and materials specific to their craft. Each participant has brought a flavour of her own culture to fruition through her individual work.

The sharing of craft skills and ideas amongst the group and with museum staff was - an important element of the project. The sharing of personal stories that emerged through the medium of craft was also important and an interview with each participant was recorded during the project.

The Exhibition

The quality of the craft skills and the resonances with the museum exhibitions led to a proposal to exhibit the finished work. The finished work is displayed alongside the permanent exhibits of the Museum that portray aspects of life in rural Ireland between 1850 and 1950.

The location of each item is indicated at the end of this catalogue. Information from the oral interviews forms the basis for the catalogue entries on each participant and craft piece.

The exhibition will run until early March 2009.

Artist's Statement

As a textile artist, using fabric of all weights, widths and textures has been an essential part of my work. Sourcing the fabric and the techniques used to manipulate it has led me to research the practices of craftspeople across the globe. One of my greatest interests in this research has been the enlightenment that can be gained from experiencing new cultures. When at all possible I try to work with craftspeople from other cultures, an experience which I find always informs my work.

In July 2008 arising out of conversations with Deirdre Power - Education and Outreach Officer with the National Museum of Ireland – Country Life around the museum's desire to build on previous work with new communities in Ireland, the idea for a community art project emerged. The Mayo Intercultural Action group (MIA), headed by Thérèse Ruane, also agreed to come on board in both an advisory and administrative capacity.

The project involved identifying women from different nationalities who are currently living in Mayo. Each participant would be a craftsperson skilled in the area of fabric crafts and would produce a piece within and informed by the environs of the Museum.

The idea was informed by three things.

1. My background as a textile artist and my desire to explore other cultures through my work.
2. My experience of living in New York through September 11th and how valuable I found the experience of looking at artworks created by other cultures, particularly middle eastern, in allowing me to have a more holistic and balanced view of the event.
3. The fact that I was aware of the wealth of fabric craft skills that have come with the people from different nationalities now living in Ireland.



During the course of the project each participant shared not only their practical skills but also an insight into the value of crafts within their culture. For some it was the value of personal fulfilment, the opportunity to honour their culture by representing a traditional piece and for others it was the ability to create poetry through their work.

As the weeks went by, the staff of the museum became more involved in the work by joining the group and learning about what was being produced. This exchange I believe allowed a new clarity to all involved as to the wealth of Irish fabric crafts by being juxtaposed with the crafts of another culture.

Having had such valuable exposure to and exploration of new possibilities in working with fabric I feel this project will be of great benefit to my work in the future. I would like to thank the participants for their time and generosity of spirit. I would also like to thank everybody at the Museum and MIA for their expertise and support.

Carmel Balfe

1. African Dress for an Adult Woman

Favour Ezenna

Favour comes from Edo Stat West in Nigeria. She has been living in Kiltimagh for three years.

Favour's outfit took twelve hours to make. It is composed of a top, skirt and hair tie. The skirt is flared and is fitted and lined from waist to hip. This outfit, trimmed with a cotton bias, is made for a special occasion. The hair tie is a very important element of the outfit. Hair ties are worn on special occasions and are intended to accentuate the design and features of the outfit.

There are a lot of fashion schools in Nigeria where clothes are produced for fashion outlets. Once qualified, a person is titled a sewing mistress or master. Favour formally studied dressmaking at a fashion home in Edo Stat and is a qualified sewing mistress.

Favour mentioned that she valued the opportunity to learn more about Irish culture.



2. African Dress for a Teenager

Olanike Ogundare

Olanike comes from the city of Lagos in Nigeria. She has been living in Ballyhaunis for almost four years.

Olanike created an outfit for a teenage girl that took twelve hours to make. The design of the skirt is called a six piece. It is fitted from the waist to the hips and flairs out from the hip down. Olanike created the piece without the use of a paper pattern. The cut is designed to compliment the printed pattern on the cloth. This cloth was printed in South Africa. The outfit is finished with an organza trim.

Fashion design is a very important part of Nigerian culture with fashions constantly being updated. Olanike studied tailoring with an international fashion designer in Nigeria and has a diploma in fashion design/ dressmaking.

The Hearth & Home exhibit reminded Olanike of Nigeria where the system of cooking with a pot over on an open wood fire is still in use in places.



3. African Dress for a Teenager

Faoziya Yussuf

Faoziya comes from Lagos in Nigeria. She has been living in Ballyhaunis for two years.

This outfit for a teenage girl took twelve hours to make. The skirt is lined and flared from the waist down and trimmed with organza. It can be worn for everyday use or for special occasions.

Clothes are predominantly made of cotton in Nigerian dressmaking. Batik is traditional in Nigeria and imported cotton is often printed there. Women's clothes are often trimmed with different fabrics including lace, organza and satin.

Faoziya developed an interest in dressmaking and in her spare time she learned to sew and cut fabric from a dressmaker in Nigeria.

Faoziya was most drawn to the School exhibit, depicting a teacher and classroom, because she places a high value on education.



4. Crochet Pillow Case

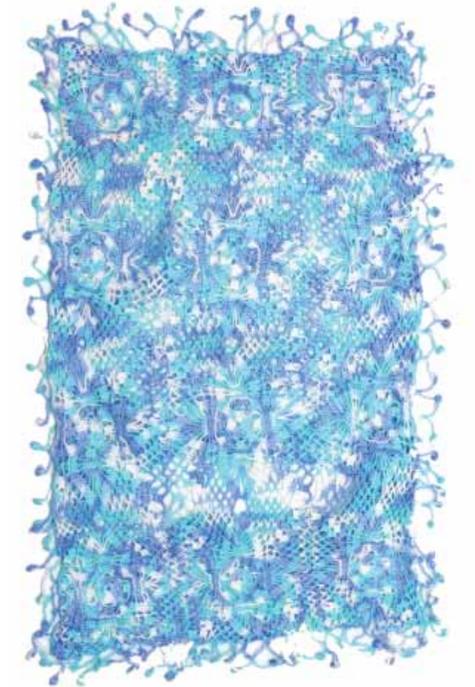
Paw Shee Taw

Paw Shee Taw comes from Tee Ta Baw village in Burma and is one of the Karen people. She spent ten years in Ban Don Yang refugee camp in Thailand before coming to Ireland. She has been living in Castlebar for just over one year.

This crochet pillow cover took thirty hours to make. The pillow cover was made with a tiny crochet hook and could almost be compared to lace making in its intricacy. Crochet is a technique widely used by the Karen who value craftspeople highly.

Paw Shee Taw became interested in crochet when she was living in Thailand. She had seen the work of other women within the camp and learned to crochet from a friend whose work she admired.

Paw Shee Taw said basket weaving in the Trades exhibit reminded her of Burma.



5. Russian Embroidery

Natalia Pestova

Natalia comes from Kirov city in Central Russia. She has been in Ireland for six years and lives in Castlebar.

This embroidery, using the Vladimir stitch, took sixty hours to make. Vladimir is one of the fifty regions in Russia and is near Kirov. The design is based on traditional motifs of Russian country life. It includes a Russian log cabin, trees and a woman feeding birds.

In Russia, embroidery was traditionally done by women. Often a girl getting married would hand-embroider items to bring with her to her new home. Though needlework is still taught in school, the art of embroidery has become a hobby rather than an integral part of the current lifestyle. The linen and threads used for embroidery are still produced in Russia.

Natalia was taught embroidery by her mother and has made this piece in her memory.

The household items of fabric and basketry in the Hearth and Home exhibit reminded Natalia of Russia.



6. Woven Scarf for a Girl

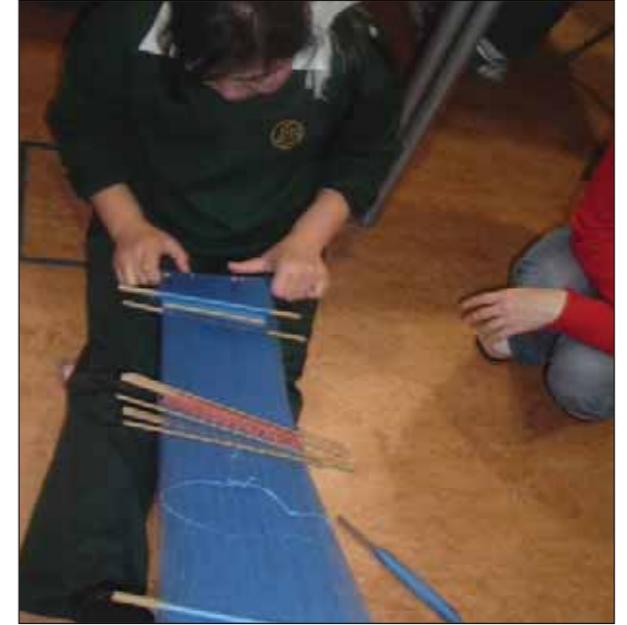
Hsar Bway Say

Hsar Bway Say comes from Tee Ta Baw village in Burma and is one of the Karen people. She spent ten years in Ban Don Yang refugee camp in Thailand before coming to Ireland. She has been living in Castlebar for just over one year.

This scarf, woven on a backstrap loom traditional to Burma, took seven hours to weave. Though the mechanism for the loom is quite simple it requires a lot of skill to operate. Each item of clothing woven by the Karen has its own cultural significance, the colour and design denoting a person's status within the society. The scarf in the exhibition is made for an unmarried girl.

Hsar Bway Say learned to weave out of necessity in the refugee camp in Thailand. People in the camp cannot afford to buy clothes so they weave their own sometimes with cotton that they have grown and dyed themselves. The scarf is just one example of the wide variety of clothing that she learned to weave.

The Weaving and Fishing exhibits as well as the general lifestyle depicted in the Museum reminded Hsar Bway Say of Burma.



7. Silk Skirt

Mi Nyel Win.

Mi Nyel Win comes from Lan Than village in Burma and is one of the Karen people. Previous to coming to Ireland she lived in the Ban Don Yang refugee camp in Thailand. She has been living in Castlebar for just over one year.

This silk skirt took five hours to make. The pattern is both elegant and sophisticated but astonishing in its simplicity. It is composed of two pieces, the waistband and the skirt. The skirt is made from a wide circle folded at the front to fit the size of the wearer. The fold has the benefit of both looking stylish because it looks like a slit in the skirt while also practically providing the wearer with room to move about.

Mi Nyel Win is mostly self-taught having had a small amount of training in stitching and clothes making.

She said she appreciated the opportunity to experience and work with another culture at the National Museum.



8. Hand-woven Tapestry

Joanna Kuruc

Joanna comes from Zakopane in South Poland. She has been living in Castlebar for two years.

Joanna's tapestry took fifty hours to make. The tapestry is hand woven with wool on a simple wooden frame to her own design. The image depicts leaves on the ground floor of a forest and the glint of water shining through them.

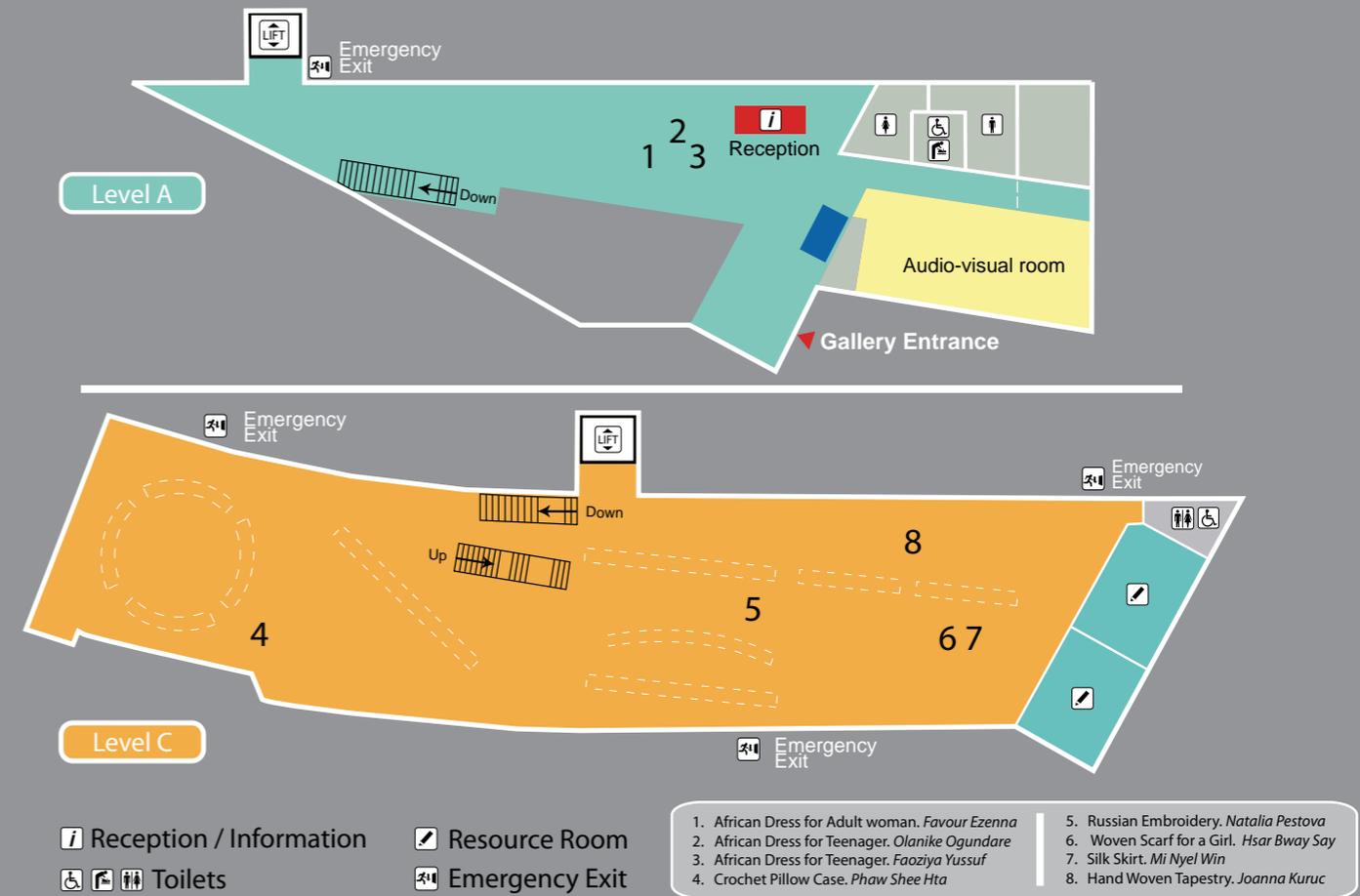
The tradition of hand-crafts was an important part of lifestyle in Poland in the last century but most items are now shop bought. Some of the older generation still practice traditional fabric crafts in Poland where wool is in good supply as sheep rearing is still a common farming practice.

Joanna learned to weave in school as part of her primary education.

She singled out the technique of waterproofing woollen clothing in the Clothing Exhibit as similar to Poland because of the climate. According to Joanna the folklife museum in Zakopane has very similar exhibits.



'Common Threads' - Location of Exhibits:



Level A

Level C

- | | |
|-------------------------|----------------|
| Reception / Information | Resource Room |
| Toilets | Emergency Exit |
- 1. African Dress for Adult woman. *Favour Ezenna*
 - 2. African Dress for Teenager. *Olanike Ogundare*
 - 3. African Dress for Teenager. *Faoziya Yussuf*
 - 4. Crochet Pillow Case. *Phaw Shee Hta*
 - 5. Russian Embroidery. *Natalia Pestova*
 - 6. Woven Scarf for a Girl. *Hsar Bway Say*
 - 7. Silk Skirt. *Mi Nyel Win*
 - 8. Hand Woven Tapestry. *Joanna Kuruc*



National Museum of Ireland -
Decorative Arts & History
Collins Barracks
Dublin 7



National Museum of Ireland -
Archaeology
Kildare Street
Dublin 2



National Museum of Ireland -
Natural History
Merrion Street
Dublin 2



National Museum of Ireland -
Country Life
Turlough Park
Castlebar, Co. Mayo

Opening Hours
Tuesday - Saturday 10am - 5pm
Sunday 2pm - 5pm
Closed Monday (including bank
holidays)

For further information on this
exhibition please contact:

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museum

National Museum of Ireland
Ard-Mhúsaem na hÉireann

Country Life

MIA