

Connecting Threads

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This object has been connecting people both physically and symbolically within Irish heritage and society for decades and in more recent years has expanded globally to enable a variety of other cultures to gain access into Irish tradition. To represent my culture for “Connecting threads” I chose a pair of Irish dancing shoes that relates to both my identity as an individual and my connection to my heritage.

These shoes were handmade in a workshop in County Dublin, Ireland. Their material is one hundred percent calf leather and this is mainly for comfort and to allow the shoe to fit to the specific shape of the dancer’s foot. This hard shoe includes the flattened toe for support and balance when performing toe-stands, a high tech tip at the top which delivers sharp sound when performing a treble, as well as having a reinforced high density heel for terrific sharp sound and durability and this is used for heel clicks. The strap at the top of the shoe is very important to keep ankles in place and provide support for the entire foot. Sound is very important when performing with this shoe to highlight the dancer’s precise rhythm in compliance to the music.

The economic and political conditions of my objects production is equitable, the shoes are handcrafted by a worker earning at the very least minimum wage for a well-established business and therefor are paid sufficiently for their labor. The process of production has not been altered over time which I find notable, however, the price point has increased significantly.

Irish dance originated from the Celts and the Druids who roamed the Island before the onset of outside influence and Christianity. The Celts were a Nomadic tribe of warriors whose appearance in Europe dates back to at least 800BC, and are commonly known for their role during “the iron age”. The Druids were a group of spiritual and religious people who were concerned with the natural world and it’s powers, their beliefs and practices relied on a combination of contact from the spirit world and holistic medicines to treat illness. Both the Druids and the Celts considered trees sacred and

would on several occasions dance in circles around oak trees. Each group had their own unique style of dance but with similar formations. Although this is not familiar to what traditional Irish dance looks like today we still see remnants of these patterns in today's dance from these ancestors. Naturally, the dancing was accompanied by music or singing and usually took place at religious celebrations and special occasions. The Celtic communities began a local celebration called the "feis" which is short for feisanna (meaning festival) and they incorporated art, culture, and music as well as an opportunity for discussing politics, trading, playing sports, and storytelling. Irish dance and culture continued to evolve and in the mid 1700's, Dance Masters began the tradition of traveling from village to village teaching the various dance steps they had created. It is from these teachers that the current day Irish set and ceili dances originated.

Today the feis is only held for dancing accompanied by music and it is very competitive among the different schools. In modern times you represent both yourself and your instructor, every school has their own costume with customized color scheme and Celtic design sewn into it along with a sash in the back with the surname of your instructor. This is specifically for the relevance of the adjudicator. The fabric of the dress is a heavy silk satin material with boning so the structure of the dress is not compromised when dancing. To this day the design still remains Celtic and hopefully will remain like this for years to come.

These shoes have been my family for roughly twenty years and were purchased from a workshop in county Dublin. Although the majority of my ancestors have had Irish dancing shoes, unfortunately, they are not something that can be handed down for somebody to dance in if they are competing professionally. This objects social life continues to expand with this exhibition. Its story began in Ireland and have since crossed a continent and will now be on display for New Yorkers to see. These shoes are symbolic to my family and are pulled out on occasion to remind us of our home away from home. My cousin who was originally from County Clare in Ireland was a great musician here in New York City, on occasion my sister would bring these shoes to

his performances and together they would bring the spirit of the Irish community to the people in New York.

Music plays a large role in Irish dance and some of the main instruments used are the bagpipes, the harp, the bodhran, and the violin. Each instrument has a specific pitch for the type of dance being performed and the story being told through the dancer. Irish dancing has three different rhythm definitions to distinguish the type of dance you do, along with the shoe it will require and on some occasions if you will need a partner. A jig is a tune that has two parts, It has eight bars and the time signature for a jig is 6/8. There are 6 beats to every bar. Jigs are usually done solo, and require rapid footwork and a rigid torso. Reels and hornpipes are subsequently slower, they have two-four bars with dotted rhythms. The reel is one of the first dances taught to students and is danced in soft shoes, there is also the treble reel which is danced in the hard shoe.

The dominant influence of Irish dancing has been globalization and this came about because of our ancestors immigrating to America and integrating their culture on foreign soil. Although they were not welcomed at first, it took them some time to establish and form relationships with the American people and over time they were accepted. A great example of this can be seen in the movie Titanic, it shows the Irish people on board the ship who were peasants and therefore deemed third class passengers. They would have a ceili underdeck when all of the first and second class passengers were dining. As time went by, Irish people decided to incorporate their core values and traditions into their children's lives as they were living away from home, and they began opening Irish dancing schools within their communities. From here, the evolution of Irish dancing began, and the Irish American community embraced and upheld their predecessor's values.

Michael Flatley was an Irish American dancer who created the show Riverdance. He toured the world with Irish dancer Jean Butler and together they made it an enormous success. The world became captivated by the unique style and intense rhythm of Irish dancing along with the music orchestrated by Bill Whelan and Dónal Lunny. With the aid of Riverdance, Irish dancing began modernizing at a rapid pace.

With its worldwide spread came new influences and various dancing schools started to put their own spin on different styles of music to accompany Irish dancing and vice versa. Several interviews have been conducted with dancers from Riverdance to interpret and gain a better understanding of legacy and the commercial aspect of Irish dance with respect to globalization and cultural identity.

“Global Irishness as expressed through dance has the potential to be mobilized for consumer capital through spectacle, sensation and technically brilliant performances for entertainment. It also has the potential to break through the constraints imposed by the commodity culture and to be as genuinely creative, innovative, and exciting as the original performance of Riverdance in 1994.” (O’ Connor, dressing the feispóra)

O’ Connor puts into perspective how Irish dance has pushed boundaries with respect to tradition and postmodernity. Irish dancing saw the greatest influence in the cosmetic and wardrobe department with the onset of wigs, self-tanner, and flashy undergarments.

When I was dancing we did not have flashy dresses, we wore no make-up, our hair fell in a natural curl, and we did not wear colorful undergarments. Today dancers are wearing the opposite of the original attire and their costumes are a lot more colorful, the majority of the dresses still resemble the Celtic designs but now with a modern twist. When the dancers are being evaluated their overall appearance is taken into consideration and although the fashion has evolved, the basic principles of a confident and polished performance still remain intact. The Irish dancing world has advanced with regards to the evolution of style but the one object that has managed to stay entirely the same are the shoes. This indicates their significance and originality in a modern world.

The native people of Ireland like most other countries have experience in invasion and oppression from the early Vikings during the 8th century until 1940 when English rule was lifted. During these time the British imposed conflicting laws on the Irish people in the hope to eradicate Irish culture. Ireland began to reclaim its identity in the twentieth century, and it became clear that dance had been affected by oppression and so a new take on Irish dance emerged which embodied the art of storytelling

allowing the people to attach more meaningful cultural history to their performance. Irish dancing was originally set dancing, and this meant you had one or more partners. These group dances were eliminated due to the influence of the Catholic church as they sought to maintain a limited male-female interaction. The church also decided to minimize solo dancing at the feis, deeming it too competitive, especially among males. To this day Irish dancers dance in a set of three while being judged individually on stage. However, distinctive dances originated from this time period and still remain today, some examples are “The Siege of Ennis” and “The Walls of Limerick”. These dances were deemed more appropriate in the eyes of the church and allowed males and females to dance together with more professionalism.

Irish dancing and culture has become commodified throughout the years and in my opinion globalization has not threatened the culture. Irish people were dictated in their own country for decades and as a result lost a great deal of their identity, specifically their language. Regardless of this they reclaimed their heritage and evolved with modern times to continue innovating their cultural traditions. Through Irish dancing new generations are developing the art and technique of the dance and a global fascination with Ireland and Irish culture has ensued. For years Ireland was seen as a nation of oppressed people and the world only remembered the stereotypical aspects of our history; English rule, and the famine. These obstacles define what we overcame and how we incorporated this pain into the evolution of Irish dance. When the River dance phenomenon illustrated Irish culture, the spirit and pride of the Irish people was seen by a global audience and the perception of our culture was changed forever.

In conclusion, I learned a lot from my research, specifically, from the course material covered and obtained a better understanding regarding clothing and its journey throughout history. I understand the importance of production and consumption and how relevant it is to comprehend the journey of garments not only for yourself but for the individual who manufactured it for you. Through the years, the definition of what it means to be Irish has changed broadly. Tradition versus modernity extends well beyond the original concept of Irish dance, fashion, and music, but despite this influence we

must look to the evolution as an opportunity to bring awareness to the history of Ireland and the origin of the feis.

Works Cited

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YVxJ3iDrdmw&list=RDtua8_bm7Gul&index=5

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ukDht4jRcT0&list=RDtua8_bm7Gul&index=4

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jeQJ25XtM-Y>