

Traditional Crafts in Northern Ireland

Linda Ballard



Bob Johnston, basket maker at Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, describes his work as "a pursuit of perfection."
Photo by Nancy Groce, Smithsonian Institution

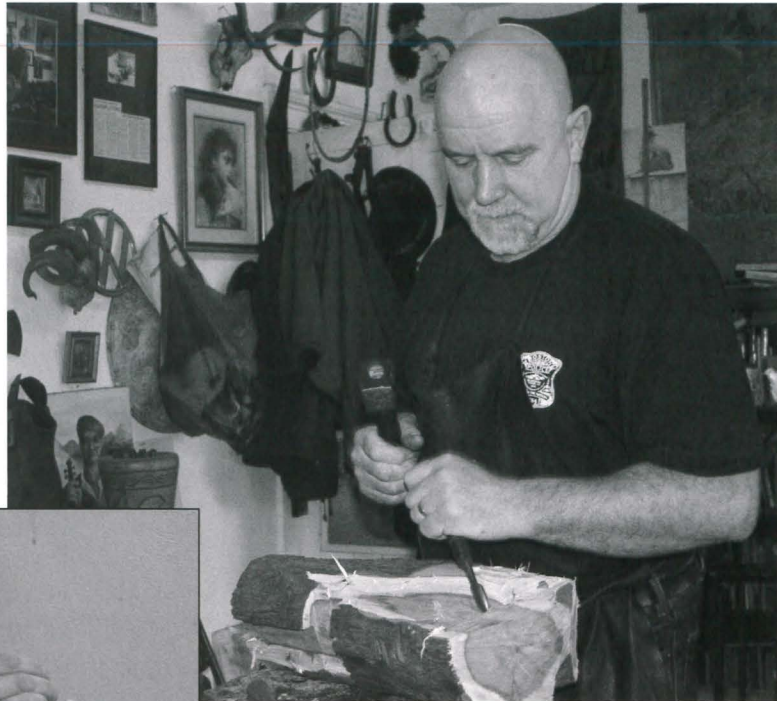
The crafts of Northern Ireland are historically related to those of the British Isles, especially western Scotland, and Europe's Atlantic coast as far north as Norway. Irish boatbuilding, basket making, and metalwork skills can be traced back at least 4,000 years.

Crafts have always related directly to everyday life, and in the past, were intimately connected to survival. In the pre-industrial age, many people were dependent on the skills available in their communities. Some crafts, such as sewing or basic woodworking, were known and practiced at every level of society to provide clothing and domestic necessities. Other crafts were more specialized, and people relied on the local smith, stonemason, cooper, or basket maker to meet those needs.

One characteristic craft, fine Ulster linen, arose in the eighteenth century, and large quantities were exported to the United States. In the beginning, linen production required a complex network of people to transform the flax plant into a commodity suited for the international marketplace. In the 1820s, Jacquard technology was adapted to the linen loom, and beauti-

ful damask patterns became more common. Later still, powered looms were introduced and linen played a major role in the growth of Belfast as an industrialized port city. By the late twentieth century, linen production had sharply declined. Today, some firms are still in operation, including Thomas Fergusons Irish Linen of Banbridge, County Down, which continues to weave high-quality, double-damask linen.

Linen production on a large scale encouraged skills, such as hand embroidery and drawn-thread work. Women fitted these arts into their daily routines to earn often-vital family income. Fabric to be decorated by home workers was brought from the factory to a central point, often a shop in a provincial town, and craftswomen sometimes walked miles to deliver their completed work for payment. Lace making was also organized along semi-commercial lines, although women with enough leisure time also produced lace and embroidery for use in their own homes. Some lace styles, such as Clones, Limerick, and Carrickmacross, took their names from locations in Ireland.



(Above) Eamon Maguire, *bodhran* maker and bog oak carver at work in his Ogham Gallery on Belfast's Antrim Road. Photo by Nancy Groce, Smithsonian Institution

(Left) Belleek Pottery workers handcraft intricate woven clay baskets. Photo courtesy Belleek Pottery

Today, computerized sewing machines have greatly simplified the production of colorful Celtic embroidery for Irish dance dresses. Many of the patterns now considered “traditional” were originally drawn in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century to reflect contemporary fashion. Some embroiderers continue to work by hand, adapting ideas from old sources to produce new designs.

Although textile arts are particularly strong, numerous other crafts and art industries flourish in Northern Ireland. Fine porcelain from the town of Belleek in County Fermanagh was first made in 1857 and quickly gained an international reputation. Producing traditional and contemporary designs, Belleek now employs 600 people who craft, paint, and finish by hand delicate, highly prized china.

Today, specialized crafts continue to be practiced in ateliers and workshops throughout Northern Ireland, where many artisans produce work such as jewelry, ceramics, glass, and clothing on a commercial or semi-commercial basis. Some craftspeople specialize in making

musical instruments, including uniquely Irish *bodhrans*, Lambeg drums, and *uilleann* bagpipes. Organizations, such as the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Invest Northern Ireland, Craft Northern Ireland, and District Councils, provide support to artisans.

Some ancient, traditional skills, such as basketry and blacksmithing, which are seldom practiced today in homes and communities, are fostered at two of Northern Ireland's National Museums—the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum (just outside Belfast) and the Ulster American Folk Park (near Omagh in County Tyrone). Northern Ireland continues to place high value on traditional craft skills and respects the creative link between past and present generations.

Linda Ballard is Curator of Folklife Initiatives at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. She has spent many years working on all aspects of folklore, folklife, and culture in Northern Ireland, including documenting and recording regional traditions. She lives on the coast in Bangor, County Down.