

The Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) is one of the few institutions in the world to have sustainable development included as one of the core principles within its statute. Written into the Government of Wales Act 1998 is a duty to promote sustainable development in the exercise of all the Government's functions. WAG aims to "promote development that meets the needs of the present . . . without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own social, economic, environmental and cultural needs."

Stories of individuals and groups illustrate the continuum of sustainability in Wales. While doing research for the *Wales Smithsonian Cymru* program, fieldworkers sought four types of sustainability relating to traditional culture in Wales: 1] keeping the best of traditional practices; 2] recycling in the broadest sense; 3] thinking globally, acting locally; and 4] planning for a sustainable future. They documented music and dance; storytelling; occupational skills such as farming and mining; the building arts; industrial heritage; outdoor pursuits; maritime arts; textile, ceramics, and wood crafts; and cooking, gardening, and traditional medicine. The four core sustainability concepts helped the fieldworkers make connections between genres, regions, and the skills and talents of potential participants, informing the program throughout its development.

1 | Keeping the Best of Traditional Practices

Traditional practices in Wales, as elsewhere, continue over generations into the modern world because they fulfill a personal or community need. For instance, the Welsh dresser, as described by Moira Vincentelli (right), still serves as a marker of identity as well as a functional display and storage space in many homes. Whether through the legacies of language, occupational skills, or stories, people in Wales find ways to keep the best of old customs while updating them to fit new uses and meet new challenges.

This Welsh dresser displays a well-organized collection of colorful china, drawing upon older traditions of home decoration.

Photo by Moira Vincentelli



THE WELSH DRESSER

Moira Vincentelli

"The other dresser was a wedding present to my mother and father. I have not changed anything on it and it is still in the way my mother had it. It's easy to do because she had a list of all the wedding presents. . . . I always think of that as my mum and dad's dresser but this is my dresser. . . . This one is for me."—E.

In an interview in the early 1990s, E. contrasted her living-room dresser, preserved almost as a family shrine, with the one in the parlor that was her dresser. This latter piece was a hybrid of recently constructed shelves atop an older sideboard, but the furniture's quality was of no particular importance; it was the display that counted. Although created quite recently, E.'s display drew on older traditions with blue-and-white china and luster jugs. It also incorporated arrangements of natural objects and decorations made from wood, cones, and moss.

By age sixty-five, E. had spent much of her life looking after other people. Her father, who had always lived with her, had recently died and her children had grown up. She felt very strongly that the parlor was her domain and thus lavished her decorative and creative skills and attention on it. Sitting in this room, she reminisced about her life, her great-grandmother, and the dresser just a few feet away.

An icon of Welsh identity, the dresser gained its symbolic status in the late nineteenth century along with Welsh hats and spinning wheels. Combining storage and display, the dresser became a repository for distinctive arrays of colorful, mass-produced pottery.

During the twentieth century, as mass-produced furniture became available and fitted kitchens more fashionable, the dresser was sometimes consigned to the outhouse and the barn. However, interest revived after the 1960s, a period that also saw an improved fortune for the Welsh language. The Welsh people were again valuing dressers, both sentimentally and financially. By the early 1990s, women were using dressers to express their relationship with Wales and to adapt the decorative display to their own creative ends. The dresser is thus a dynamic piece of house decoration, both a touchstone for family memories and a vehicle for creative expression.

Moira Vincentelli is senior lecturer in art history and curator of the Ceramic Collection at Aberystwyth University. She has published widely in the field of gender and ceramics and has made a particular study of women's collecting and Welsh dresser display.