

Crafting a national identity: the Dun Emer Guild, 1902–1908

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The home arts and industries associations of late nineteenth-century Ireland sought to bring together the exhibition and sale of beautiful objects with improved living and working conditions for Irish peasants and rural labourers. Directed by educated middle-class women, these ventures successfully intertwined art, entrepreneurial activity, and philanthropy, with an unusual brand of nationalism.

One such venture was the Dun Emer Guild established at Dundrum, Co. Dublin, in 1902 by three middle-class Irish women, Evelyn Gleeson (1855–1944) and the Yeats sisters, Lily (1866–1949) and Elizabeth (1868–1940), and developed into a thriving industry by 1908. The objectives of the Guild were to provide work for Irish women crafting art objects using exclusively Irish materials and to educate working women 'in the hope that they might eventually become teachers to others' so that similar industries could develop throughout Ireland.¹ The Guild specialized in weaving, embroidery and printing on a hand press.

The objectives of the Dun Emer Guild were in line with those of the larger home arts movement, which included: making beautiful objects available to the mass of the people, and not just the few; making the home the centre of interest and attraction; reducing the exodus of workers from country to town; reviving local village industries; and holding classes where voluntary teachers would give instruction in arts and handicrafts, both design and execution, to artisans and labourers. In the 1885 *Magazine of Art*, the movement's founder, Eglantyne Jebb, wrote that home arts and industries associations should help workers lead happier lives and have 'lighter hearts, tidier children, cleaner cottages, and a better moral tone all round'.² Thus the unofficial goal of most home arts industries was social reform through education, as much as art production. At Dun Emer, another specifically nationalist objective was to offer work to young women in a 'poor district' where, without such employment, these young women 'habitually emigrated'.³

1 Dun Emer Guild prospectus (1903), Evelyn Gleeson Papers (EGP), Trinity College, Dublin.
2 E.L. Jebb, 'The Home Arts and Industries Association', *Magazine of Art* (1885), pp 294–8. See also *The Amateurs' Art Designer* (later *Home Art Work*), 1884–1891; and Alfred Harris, 'Home Arts and Industries', in *Transactions of the National Association for the Advancement of Art and its Application to Industry: Edinburgh Meeting, 1889* (London: 1890), pp 421–33. 3 Draft of Guild

In an essay intended for the Irish Literary Society, Evelyn Gleeson proposed ‘to those who are Gaelic Leaguers’ the possibility of nationalizing others ‘through the eyes as well as through the ears’. Referring to the success of art industries like Dun Emer, she explained that ‘the people themselves must be interested in the work, enthusiastic if possible, otherwise the scheme is a failure, not merely financially but educationally. This enthusiasm is aroused by appealing to local patriotism.’⁴ According to social anthropologist Ernest Gellner, part of the discourse generated in the formation of modern nations is the discovery of ‘folk roots’. This emergent nationalism is also based on the assumption that the ‘folk’ has a residual presence in existing rural communities.⁵ Although the Dun Emer Guild can be viewed as a revival of traditional Irish ‘folk arts’, it is important to identify the ways in which the founders of this industry appealed to ‘local patriotism’ in order to negotiate and originate, rather than merely preserve, an Irish cultural identity.

This biographical sketch of an art industry must examine the social networks of these three women since, as sociologist Liz Stanley points out, lives make more sense when located through participation in a range of overlapping social groups. Stanley claims ‘ideas’ are the products of socially shared understandings reworked in different ways within particular cultural settings.⁶ The complex intersection of the home arts movement and the Irish Revival produced the specific cultural setting of Dun Emer. Gleeson and the Yeats sisters were personally and professionally involved in these groups and creatively combined the social, political and artistic understandings of both in their Guild.

Evelyn Gleeson met Lily and Elizabeth Yeats through her involvement with the Irish Literary Society of London founded by their brother, the poet WB Yeats, in the 1890s. All three women shared an interest in craftwork and a need to contribute in some practical way to the Irish Revival – a movement concerned, in part, with culturally validating a separate Irish identity.⁷ Both Lily and Elizabeth Yeats were trained at the Metropolitan School of Art (Dublin), and Evelyn Gleeson had studied design at the South Kensington Museum (London). Gleeson’s focus had been on hand-woven carpets and several of her designs were sold commercially. Elizabeth Yeats had taught and lectured on art professionally in London, while Lily Yeats had been an assistant to May Morris in the embroidery department of Morris & Co. at Kelmscott House. To prepare for her work on a hand press at Dun

prospectus intended for potential shareholders, EGP, Trinity College, Dublin. ⁴ Fragment of draft essay by Evelyn Gleeson intended for the Irish Literary Society (c.1907), EGP, Trinity College, Dublin. ⁵ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and nationalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p. 57. ⁶ Liz Stanley, ‘On auto/biography in sociology’, *Sociology*, 27:1 (Feb. 1993), pp 41–52. ⁷ Eugene O’Brien explains that ‘Irish Revival’ is often used as an umbrella term to include the Gaelic revival, the Celtic revival, and the Literary revival. (“‘What ish my Nation?’: towards a negative definition of identity”, *Minerva*, 2 (Nov. 1998), p. 3 (journal online); available from <http://www.ul.ie/~philos>.

Emer, Elizabeth Yeats had also taken a hand-printing course at the Women's Printing Society in London.⁸ All this artistic training led the three women to the idea of developing an Irish art industry, but the passion for it was Evelyn Gleeson's.

Evelyn Gleeson's nationalist sympathies, intertwined with her feminist beliefs as a suffragist, fed her desire to found an establishment in Ireland for the artistic training and employment of young women. In her correspondence with several newspapers, her developing interest in the movement for the emancipation of women is clear. To the editor of the *Weekly Sun* she writes: 'It has been my fortune to meet most of the leading women among the "shrieking sisterhood" and also to have spent many years among the "womanly" women who believe in the perfect rounding of the "sphere" and the divine right of man to keep his foot on their necks.'⁹ Her wish to contribute in a useful way to the Irish nationalist cause is also evident in her letter to the *Irish Independent*. She writes: 'Whether women will ever obtain the franchise or not is a moot point, a great many of us think that it is, like home rule, merely a question of time. "National Politics" may not be the "métier" of Irish women, but they love their country very dearly and they claim the right with or without your correspondent's permission, to labour in its cause, as heartily ... as their brothers.'¹⁰ Historian Anne McClintock has argued that women are typically constructed as the symbol of the nation, but are denied any direct relation to national agency.¹¹ I suggest, however, that the women of Dun Emer did participate in nationalist discourse through a process of visual political argument, carefully developed within the boundaries of acceptable women's work. National participation was inextricably linked to, and limited by, the gendered social roles prescribed to these middle-class women.

Cultural representations do not simply 'reflect' experience or embellish it with aesthetic form, but significantly alter and shape the ways people make sense of their lives. To engage in cultural activity in circumstances where a culture is being effaced, or even to assert the existence of a civilization prior to conquest, is to make a political statement.¹² This transformative power of culture, so effectively harnessed by the Irish Revival, is evident in the Dun Emer Guild. A particular Irish cultural identity was cultivated at the Guild, through the works produced and in the organizational structure of the industry – one in which it was possible for Irish people of different traditions to feel themselves at home. Set within the Revival, the Guild was nevertheless an attempt to move away from

8 EGP, Trinity College, Dublin. 9 *Weekly Sun*, Newspaper clipping book, EGP, Trinity College, Dublin. 10 *Irish Independent*, Newspaper clipping book, EGP, Trinity College, Dublin. 11 Anne McClintock, *Imperial leather: Race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995). 12 Luke Gibbons, 'Race against time: racial discourse and Irish history', in Robert Young (ed.), 'Neocolonialisms', *Oxford Literary Review*, 13 (1991); and *Transformations in Irish culture* (Cork UP, 1996), p. 8. Gibbons claims that race entered Irish nationalist rhetoric by 'defining an untouched, pure Celtic past – before the colonizing English polluted it – and forming the base on which the distinctive culture of Ireland' was supposedly founded.

the 'fixed centrality of the Irishness of the Revival,' where different qualities became commodities that were associated with Irishness, to the exclusion of all others.¹³ The inclusiveness sought by Gleeson and the Yeats sisters was meant to broaden the scope of 'Irish identity' and appeal to a group other than their own, as middle-class Irish women.

With Gleeson as the driving force, the Yeats sisters readily agreed to bring their special skills to her project. Her plan for the industry already worked out, Evelyn Gleeson went to Dublin in 1902 to take a house and commence work.¹⁴ The Dun Emer venture was funded largely by Evelyn Gleeson's inheritance, and the Yeats sisters were salaried assistants. Although the sisters were unable to contribute money to the enterprise, they were well-connected and offered considerable experience and expertise in their crafts.¹⁵ Gleeson undertook substantial responsibility for financing the Guild by paying the rent for the first two years and guaranteeing the Yeats sisters salaries of £125 each per annum. Additional support for the industry came in the form of a £500 loan from Evelyn Gleeson's close friend, Dr Augustine Henry, as well as several grants over the course of the venture from the Irish government's Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction.¹⁶ As well as the sale of articles made by the members of the Guild, other income was expected from the sale of vegetables, fruits and flowers from its garden, and from art lessons given by its members.

With this financial plan in place and using the medieval workshop model favoured by the Arts and Crafts Movement, the Dun Emer Guild was installed in a large home in the Dublin suburb of Dundrum.¹⁷ The embroidery, tapestry and weaving workrooms were on the upper floor of the house in a large room, while the printing press was set up in a separate room. The Yeats sisters lived with their father some twenty minutes away, but Evelyn Gleeson lived at Dun Emer. Every Thursday, the workrooms were opened to the public for viewing, along with a display room exhibiting finished works. At Dun Emer, public and private spaces were conflated as industry and the buying public converged inside one woman's home.

Within this unusual space, each woman was in charge of a particular craft and given complete independence in her own department: Evelyn Gleeson in

13 Eugene O'Brien, 'Towards a Negative Definition of Identity', pp 4–11. **14** Liam Miller, *The Dun Emer Press, later the Cuala Press* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1973). See also Paul Larmour, *The arts and crafts movement in Ireland* (Belfast: Friar's Bush, 1992) and 'The Dun Emer Guild', *Irish Arts Review*, 1:4 (Winter 1984), pp 24–8. **15** Lily and Elizabeth Yeats were familiar with many key figures of the Irish Revival (for instance, J.M. Synge and Augusta Lady Gregory) through family connections. Both of their brothers, Jack B. Yeats (1871–1957) the painter and William B. Yeats (1865–1939) the poet, made significant contributions to the Revival. **16** Dun Emer Guild Articles of Association, EGP, Trinity College, Dublin; and Henry-Gleeson Letters, 1879–1930, National Library of Ireland. **17** For more on the workshop as an organizational model, see Elizabeth Cumming and Wendy Kaplan, *The arts and crafts movement* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991).

tapestry and carpets; Lily Yeats in embroidery on Irish linen; Elizabeth Yeats in printing on a hand press. The Guild's Articles of Association indicate that these three crafts were chosen on the grounds that they were 'little known and afforded scope for artistic powers'.¹⁸ Art production was therefore an important aspect of this endeavour from the very beginning.

The artistic and social ideals of the three founders are defined in the Guild's 1903 prospectus:

The idea is to make beautiful things; this, of course, means materials honest and true and the application to them of deftness of hand, brightness of colour, and cleverness of design.

Everything as far as possible, is Irish: the paper of the books, the linen of the embroidery and the wool of the tapestry and carpets. The designs are also of the spirit and tradition of the country.

The education of the work-girls is also part of the idea, they are taught to paint and their brains and fingers are made more active and understanding.¹⁹

The Guild was successful in educating and sending out teachers. The records show that women came in for a few months of training and then departed to teach the craft they had learned, the most successful of these being May Kerley, who left the Dun Emer Guild to become the teacher and manager of the Glenbeigh Industry in Co. Kerry.²⁰ Also, by choosing to use exclusively Irish materials, the Guild supported other local industries.

The organization and output of this home art industry interlaced feminist and nationalist politics in concrete ways. Through their participation in the home arts movement, Gleeson and the Yeats sisters were able to present their political ideals. Involvement in this movement provided them with personal as well as group authority. Set against an industrial profile (low wages, sweated work at home for pennies), this artistic revival of Irish industries redefined women's crafts as art and provided the women working in them with an alternative to these harsh conditions.²¹ A critique of art and labour under industrial capitalism was implied in the Guild's prospectus, which also conveyed a patriotic message to its patrons:

¹⁸ Dun Emer Guild Articles of Association, EGP, Trinity College, Dublin. ¹⁹ Dun Emer Guild prospectus (1903), EGP, Trinity College, Dublin. ²⁰ EGP, Trinity College, Dublin. See also Gifford Lewis, *The Yeats sisters and the Cuala* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1994). In 1905, other women training at the Guild included Dora Griffiths from Kilkenny who took a 6-week weaving course; Delia Larkin from Beaufort, Co. Kerry who trained for 2 months; and Miss Brodigan who studied tapestry and weaving (Dun Emer Journal 1903-1905, Cuala Press Archive, Early Printed Books, Trinity College, Dublin). ²¹ For more on this see Maria Luddy, *Women and philanthropy in nineteenth-century Ireland* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1995); Eileen Boris, *Art and labor: Ruskin, Morris, and the craftsman ideal in America* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1986).

Things made of pure materials, worked by these Irish girls must be *more lasting and more valuable* than machine-made goods which only serve a temporary purpose. All the things made at Dun Emer are beautiful and *have cost thought and care*.

There is no limit to the number and kind of things that could be well made in Ireland if designers and workers could *depend upon a certain market*. It is indisputable that the talent for artistic hand-work is widely spread amidst the Irish people.²² [Emphasis added]

By praising the ability of Irish craftworkers and advocating support for local industries, the Guild linked craft revival with the economic self-sufficiency and collective self-consciousness promoted by Irish Revivalists as a necessity for Ireland to become competitive in world markets.

The Dun Emer women put these ideals to practical use not only in the organization, design and craftwork of their industry, but in their everyday lives – supporting other home industries by purchasing items made in Ireland under the auspices of the home arts movement. For instance, Lily Yeats owned a dress and veil made of Limerick lace produced at Florence Vere O'Brien's Limerick school.²³ The adopted daughter of the Irish chief secretary (W.E. Forster), O'Brien successfully revived the craft of handmade lace and exhibited her industry's products at most of the major arts and crafts and art industry exhibitions in Ireland from 1890 to 1920.²⁴ Fashion historian Elizabeth Wilson claims that dress links the biological body to the social being, and private to public. Fashion can serve as a means of expressing individual identity while also securing social solidarity and imposing group norms, while deviations in dress are usually experienced as shocking and disturbing.²⁵ The personal act of dressing in Irish handmade lace reflected a particular tactic of consumption, one that lent a political dimension to an everyday practice.

In her writings on Irish dress, Evelyn Gleeson mused, 'how interesting and full of colour our streets could become if our people had a national dress and wore it proudly'.²⁶ Celtic dress was also praised by the weekly Gaelic League newspaper. In an illustrated article entitled 'A Costume for Irish Ladies' the journalist explained the many useful ways the outfits might be worn, while concluding that 'the most conscientious Irish Irelander may now be blissfully happy' wearing such an outfit.²⁷ Indeed, Celtic costume was an established way for the

²² Dun Emer Guild prospectus (1903), EGP, Trinity College, Dublin. ²³ Last Will and Testament of Susan Mary (Lily) Yeats of Churchtown, Dundrum, Co. Dublin, 5 Jan. 1949. Lily bequeathed the Limerick lace dress and veil to her niece, Anne Butler Yeats. ²⁴ *The Amateurs' Art Designer* (Sept. 1889). ²⁵ Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in dreams: fashion and modernity* (University of California Press, 1987). ²⁶ Draft letter to the editor of *Evening Herald*, EGP, Trinity College, Dublin. ²⁷ 'A costume for Irish ladies', *Sinn Féin*, 5 Mar. 1910, quoted in Elizabeth Cumming and Nicola Gordon Bowe, *The arts and crafts movements in Dublin and*

upper classes in Ireland to show an acceptance of Irish patriotism. Lady Aberdeen famously dressed her children in Celtic attire and insisted that guests at several of her garden parties wear only Irish-made clothing.²⁸ Mary Colum's recounting of her own experience wearing Celtic costume provides an interesting contrast to this: '[It] was all right for the Abbey Theatre or Gaelic League dances, but once when myself and a friend ... walked together down a street where the fisherwomen were selling their fish, we were openly derided.'²⁹ By clothing herself in Limerick lace, a handmade Irish material available in limited quantities, Lily Yeats clearly marked herself as a middle-class Irish woman, home arts supporter, and Irish Revivalist. Though still a display of class difference and privilege, this particular outfit deviated from the norm of Victorian fashion in that it produced a different set of references and meaning, ones grounded in the cultural nationalism of the Revival, as well as the social activism and aesthetic sensibilities of the home arts movement.

Many nineteenth-century social reformers were committed to the idea that rich and poor share a common culture and heritage that were physically realized in art objects. This shared culture was meant to help transcend class divisions and to foster a unified nation.³⁰ At Dun Emer, a sense of pride in Irish culture was evident in the design and material of every object. This sentiment was also conveyed to the local women workers through Irish language, music, dance, acting, painting, and drawing classes provided by the Guild. By encouraging local women to develop their cultural knowledge, Gleeson and the Yeats sisters performed a kind of educative nationalism. Yet, as educators, they laid claim to this culture and controlled how it was presented to the pupils. Representations of the middle-class background of the teachers and the working-class status of the students were harnessed together in a collaborative experiment. Students at Dun Emer won prizes in various competitions (language, music, dancing, drawing). For example, Rosie Gallagher of the Dun Emer Guild won the senior language contest at a Gaelic League competition held on the Dun Emer grounds. These women also helped produce the handmade journal of the Guild, by contributing poetry, short stories, drawings, and designs. Every woman working at the Guild was named at the beginning of each journal and news of the Guild was reported enthusiastically at the end of it, listing prizes won by particular women

Edinburgh, 1885-1925 (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998), p. 122. ²⁸ Evelyn Gleeson knew Lady Aberdeen socially and was invited to at least one of her garden parties. She was also aware of Lady Aberdeen's ability to draw attention to an industry. This is evident in a letter from Augustine Henry where he advises Gleeson to 'get Lady Aberdeen out' to Dun Emer for it 'increases profits' (Henry-Gleeson Letters, 1879-1930, National Library of Ireland; and EGP, Trinity College, Dublin). ²⁹ Mary Colum, wife of the poet Padraic Colum, as quoted in Cumming and Bowe, *The arts and crafts movements*, p. 122. ³⁰ Seth Koven, 'The Whitechapel picture exhibitions and the politics of seeing', in Daniel Sherman and Irit Rogoff (eds), *Museum culture: histories, discourses, spectacles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp 22-48.

at specific exhibitions.³¹ While the women workers certainly took pride in their learning and accomplishments, they also seem caught between a desire to share in the culture and ideology presented to them in these classes and the economic reality of their lives which materially excluded them from it. The products of the Guild were beyond the means of most of the working-class women who produced them.

The popularity of the Irish Revival meant this concern for Irish culture traversed all aspects of the arts in Ireland. One important institution of the Revival, the Gaelic League, was described as ‘an organisation composed of all classes of Irishmen, without distinction of religious or political belief, aiming at development of the distinctive culture of Ireland and the betterment socially and industrially of the Irish people’.³² Though carefully avoiding religious and class distinctions, the League nevertheless fostered a particular ideology based in these very differences. As Timothy Foley and Sean Ryder explain in *Ideology and Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (1998), unresolved contests between Gaelic and English cultural values, between peasantry and gentry, between Protestant and Catholic were such highly visible conflicts in late nineteenth-century Ireland that ideology found itself continually in a state of exposure and confrontation, unable to ‘naturalize’ itself and achieve hegemonic invisibility.³³ Homi Bhabha claims that an important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of ‘fixity’ in the ideological construction of otherness, in this case Irishness, with the stereotype as its major discursive strategy.³⁴ The spontaneous and visible recognition characteristic of the stereotype allows both colonizer and colonized to create a fixed reality where the other is entirely knowable. Yet in this ‘metropolitan colony’, whose subject population was both ‘native’ and ‘white’ at the same time, visual recognition had to take on new forms as physical difference was not sufficient to legitimate difference and power.³⁵ Given this, it is not surprising that the need for some kind of undeniably Irish character in art and design, as proposed by the Irish Revival, was a common theme at the turn of the century and was repeatedly praised by critics and commentators.

Celtic ornamentalism, found in ancient manuscripts such as the Book of Kells, was viewed as the ultimate expression of an Irish national art. In its 1903

31 Cuala Press Archive, Early Printed Books, Trinity College, Dublin. **32** Newspaper clipping book, EGP, Trinity College, Dublin. The Gaelic League was founded in 1893. Its object was the encouragement of the Irish language and of Irish culture. The League spread throughout the country, recruiting Irish teachers and holding competitions in Irish speaking, music and dancing. See Jeanne Sheehy, *The rediscovery of Ireland's past: the Celtic Revival, 1830–1930* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), p. 98. **33** Timothy P. Foley and Sean Ryder (eds), *Ideology and Ireland in the nineteenth century* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998). **34** Homi Bhabha, ‘The other question’, *Screen*, 24:6 (1983), pp 18–36. **35** Catherine Hall (ed.), *Cultures of empire: colonisers in Britain and the empire in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (New York: Routledge, 2000). I believe Hall’s use of the term ‘metropolitan colony’ best describes Ireland’s location within the British empire.

prospectus, the Dun Emer Guild's designs were described as in keeping with the tradition of Celtic ornament while still being new and innovative. These designs were a rethinking of tradition, as it manifested itself in a country with a fractured, colonial past.³⁶ The reworking of traditional elements in these designs was the visual key to an earlier historical moment imagined to be noble, distinguished and artistically sophisticated. The newspapers commended this 'manifestation of the Celtic spirit as [one that] makes for peace, for practical effort, [and] for progress in the arts. [The] spirits of poetry, patriotism and true craft have joined hands at Dun Emer.'³⁷ This unproblematic continuity with tradition, which the press mistakenly assigned to the products of the Guild, papered over a disruptive history as well as current tensions. As early as 1903, the *Irish Homestead* wrote: 'Miss Gleeson and her colleagues deserve well of the Irish public, not only for what they have done, but for that sentiment of allying industry to art, and both to patriotism, which runs as a triple coloured thread ... through all their labours.'³⁸ Reclaiming Irishness and 'proving' Irish authenticities were common themes of late nineteenth-century Irish cultural nationalism. By this time, the role of authenticity had shifted from that of signifier of Irish cultural 'incapacities', to that of marketable sign of value.³⁹ The aura of intangible value that the press associated with the production of newly revived 'traditional' Irish craftwork demonstrates how authenticity was a profoundly political pretext for evaluation. The newspapers presented the products of the Guild as a form of consumable Irishness with its accompanying illusion of a uniform national identity.

The women of Dun Emer, on the other hand, sought to develop a new national art by originating works that combined the use of traditional craft skills and design motifs, to signal a pride in Ireland's past, with a more subtle, innovative artistic style that expressed hope for the present and future of the country. While references to a 'traditional' Irish past conferred a level of 'authenticity' upon the Guild's products, innovative and original designs and technical skills offered the craftworkers an opportunity to express their own creativity and draw upon current theories of art as well as nationalism. In a letter of 1904, Evelyn Gleeson writes, 'as the work at Dun Emer is all original, our methods are also those we have evolved from our own experience and they are in accordance with the best modern theories'.⁴⁰ At Dun Emer, authentic Ireland was made modern and new.

The best-known products of the Dun Emer embroidery department were twenty-four banners made for St Brendan's cathedral in Loughrea, Co. Galway.

36 Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish culture*, p. 5. 37 'An Artistic Industry', c. 1903, Newspaper clipping book, EGP, Trinity College, Dublin. 38 *Irish Homestead*, 9 May 1903, p. 392. 39 Colin Graham, "... maybe that's just Blarney": Irish culture and the persistence of authenticity', in Colin Graham and Richard Kirkland (eds), *Ireland and cultural theory: the mechanics of authenticity* (New York: St Martin's, 1999), pp 7-16. 40 Letter from Evelyn Gleeson, 9 Nov. 1904, EGP, Trinity College, Dublin.

The cathedral was a showpiece of Irish Revival arts and crafts and involved many craftspeople, including glassworkers Sarah Purser and A.E. Child.⁴¹ The Loughrea banners were made of silk and wool embroidered on linen. Lily Yeats worked the main figures and most of the designs were by her brother, Jack Yeats, and his wife, Mary Cottenham Yeats, who designed the female saints depicted on the banners. The simplified design, rich colouring, and bold outlines of the figures, incorporated as a design feature, created a new approach to Irish applied art.

In addition to this major commission, the Guild exhibited works at the 1904 World's Fair in St Louis, Missouri. Triumphs of planning and coordination, the world fairs were occasions for agenda setting and identity formation. Fair villages, like the one exhibiting Dun Emer works, successfully merchandized Irish products and demonstrated the central role of craft revivals in awakening nationalist energies.⁴² Dun Emer prominently displayed *The Orchard* and *The Meadow*, two needlework pictures executed by Lily Yeats, at the Irish pavilion of the St Louis World's Fair. Both pieces were presented as 'landscape embroideries' using silk threads embroidered on linen. Similar works were exhibited by the Guild with the Arts and Crafts Society of Ireland. With a distinctive embroidery technique that used unusually long stitches, the 'Irish' colouring of greens and purples of the local landscape, and innovative designs, these works helped originate the style of the Irish Revival.

When these works were first exhibited in 1904, the Anglo-Irish hold on the land in Ireland had been decisively and legislatively loosened.⁴³ The separation of the landed class from the traditional source of its authority is significant when looking at representations of the Irish landscape as imagined by middle-class Irish Protestant women. According to art historian Tricia Cusack, national imaginings of the land in Ireland generated two kinds of representations of the 'rural idyll': one based on the English ideal of estate and village, the other on an uncultivated wildness that was meant to signify non-anglicized Gaelic Ireland.⁴⁴ The Dun Emer landscape embroideries do not fit easily into either representational category. Rather, they perform a kind of balancing act between the two rural idylls. In *The Meadow* (1904) the viewer must look through the untamed wildflowers climbing up and across the foreground in order to see the trees of the

⁴¹ Purser was a stained glass worker and portrait painter most noted for establishing An Túr Gloine (Tower of Glass) stained glass workshop in Dublin. Child was a stained glass worker originally with Christopher Whall in England and then Purser's studio in Ireland. (See Cumming and Bowe, *The arts and crafts movements*.) ⁴² Neil Harris, 'Selling national culture: Ireland at the World's Columbian Exposition', in T.J. Edelstein (ed.), *Imagining an Irish past: the Celtic Revival, 1840–1940* (Chicago: David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, 1992), pp 82–105. ⁴³ A generation of land war and land legislation (in particular the Wyndham Act of 1903) brought about the break-up of the large estates and the creation of a multiplicity of small, independent farms (F.S.L. Lyons, *Culture and anarchy in Ireland, 1890–1939* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), p. 71). ⁴⁴ Tricia Cusack, 'Migrant travellers and touristic idylls: The paintings of Jack B. Yeats and post-colonial identities', *Art History*, 21:2 (June 1998), p. 203.

background. The large expanse in the middle ground is specifically identified as a meadow and contrasted to the cultivated fields in the distance. The focus of this image, visually and in the title, is the uncultivated land of the meadow.⁴⁵ In *A Garden* (c.1905), an often-reproduced design for needlework pictures, this contrast is made by the title rather than in the picture itself.⁴⁶ This garden is reminiscent of Irish gardener William Robinson's 'wild gardening' style where native plants (foxglove, daisies, tulips, marigolds) were incorporated as though growing wild to signal national pride.⁴⁷ Set in the context of the land legislation and the break-up of the large, mainly Anglo-Irish estates in Ireland, these pictures can be read as a search for a sense of place, a fundamental part of territorial identity, by the middle-class Irish Protestant women who designed them. In these examples, the nationalism implied in the 'wildness' of the Irish landscape is 'tamed' by references to the ordered, settled and cultivated structure of the English-style 'rural idyll'.

This shifting and ambivalent representation of cultural identity characterizes the Guild as a whole. In the handmade journal produced by the Guild during its first three years, an ad reads: 'Decorate your home with Dun Emer tufted rugs, embroidered portières and sofa backs, put Dun Emer tapestries on your walls and Dun Emer books in your bookcases. This is the duty of an Irish woman.'⁴⁸ While the Dun Emer Guild was committed to a public role for art in the negotiation of Irish identity, the fact that not all Irish women could afford to decorate their homes with Dun Emer products appears to be overlooked. Irish identity, as it applied to the women involved in the Guild, was mediated by the class positions and experiences of both the founders and the workers. Though not part of the landlord class in Ireland, Gleeson and the Yeats sisters were part of an educated bourgeoisie while most of their workers were rural working-class women.⁴⁹ Still, the Dun Emer Guild can be read as a site of cross-

⁴⁵ In another version of this design, the cultivated fields have been removed altogether, strengthening the emphasis on the meadow itself. ⁴⁶ The first mention I have found of this design is in the handmade Dun Emer journal where it is listed as one of three embroidered panels sent to Liberty & Company on 3 July 1905 (the other two were *The Meadow* and *The Orchard*). (Cuala Press Archive, Early Printed Books, Trinity College, Dublin). ⁴⁷ Born in Co. Down in 1838, William Robinson delivered one of the most pernicious attacks on the Victorian manner of gardening in his book *The wild garden* (1870), launching a campaign to reinstate indigenous shrubs, bulbs and perennials. He encouraged gardeners to study the wild flowers of meadows and follow nature's lead when creating a garden. (Wendy Hitchmough, *Arts and crafts gardens* (London: Pavilion, 1997), pp 54–69. ⁴⁸ Dun Emer Journal, 1903–1905, Cuala Press Archive, Early Printed Books, Trinity College, Dublin. ⁴⁹ Not all of the women working at Dun Emer were from working-class families, some even came from well-known artistic families: Beatrice Cassidy, the daughter of an official at Dundrum Asylum, came to work at the Press on 23 Feb. 1903. Her sister Frances was later employed in the embroidery section of the industry. Eileen Colum, sister of the poet Padraic Colum also joined the press. (Cuala Press Archive, Early Printed Books, Trinity College, Dublin).

class cultural exchange, where meaning and purpose were constantly shifting as workers were given more authority in the design and production of the works, paid higher wages according to merit, and became involved in the daily operation of the industry.

Ultimately, the Dun Emer Guild's involvement in the Irish Revival can be viewed as more closely linked with the progress of the arts than with political upheaval. The Guild promised economic revival through craft production and advertised the survival of artistic skills and common ideals to demonstrate its support for Revivalist politics. This home art industry sought to culturally validate the ambitions of the Irish Revival by appealing to 'local patriotism' rather than resorting to political radicalism. As one newspaper suggested in 1908: '[Evelyn Gleeson] is a good Home Ruler, but pending the attainment of her country's legislative independence, she wants to keep as many of the young people in their own country as she can, by giving them remunerative employment.'⁵⁰ This for Gleeson was her life's work, her cause. Clearly, she and the Yeats sisters preferred to assist in the economic and political growth of Ireland in a practical and tangible way. A marked concern for the living and working conditions of the local women and a desire to instil pride in a national heritage are evident in this Irish art industry. Drawing on the social ideals proposed by the home arts movement, Gleeson and the Yeats sisters sought to produce and market beautiful objects, while creating a viable industry that would supply employment and training to Irish women.

Although they attempted to foster a communal culture and heritage among all the women at Dun Emer, the relationships between Evelyn Gleeson, Lily Yeats, Elizabeth Yeats and their craftworkers were inevitably negotiated along class lines. The economic disparity between the three women and their workers was also occasionally political. In a letter to an American papermaker, Elizabeth Yeats writes that two of her printing assistants were arrested because the women 'belonged to Cumann na mBan – the woman's Republican Society – we are finished the book in spite of this upset'.⁵¹ In running this art industry, the three middle-class women gained a greater understanding of the economic, social and political realities of the local women. It was this knowledge that drove them to politicize their philanthropic concerns and strive to improve the situation of these women.

Nationalist and feminist ideals were woven together in the Dun Emer Guild. The unmistakably Irish character of the Guild's work locates it within the Irish Revival, while awards won by exhibiting this work meant greater financial independence and professional exposure for the women involved. Challenging restrictive social codes, the Guild positioned these women within the public realm of industry and paid work.⁵²

⁵⁰ Newspaper clipping book, EGP, Trinity College, Dublin. ⁵¹ As quoted in Miller, *The Dun Emer Press*, p. 83. ⁵² The Guild exhibited at the 1904 Home Arts and Industries

The significance of the Dun Emer Guild's artistic contribution to the Irish Revival situates this industry within a historical moment marked by complex and changing power relations. At a time when key conflicts, negotiations and resolutions occurred along and between class and gender lines, these three entrepreneurial women remained dedicated to the education, artistic training, remunerative employment, and professional development of rural Irish women. This commitment highlights the extent to which Evelyn Gleeson, Lily Yeats and Elizabeth Yeats broadened their political horizons and impact through social activism and the belief that art is an instrument of social change rather than its result.

Exhibition at the Albert Hall in London, where Dun Emer embroidery won five stars, two of which were gold. One award from the Art Industries Exhibition of the Royal Dublin Society was worth £2. By 1905, the Guild was supplying embroidered panels to the London Arts & Crafts dealer, Liberty & Co, two of which also won awards at the Dublin Horse Show that year. At this same show, the tapestry, weaving and rugs exhibited by Dun Emer 'had the prizes' (Cuala Press Archive, Early Printed Books, Trinity College, Dublin; and the Dublin Horse Show, Special Issue of the *Irish Homestead*, 5 June 1905).