

# Needlework Tours

BY ELIZABETH BOZIEVICH

A great way to explore the world

Need a vacation? Perhaps you are dreaming about a trip somewhere exotic, somewhere with history or a tour that focuses on a topic you love? Why not explore the world on a needlework tour that ensures you will travel with a small group of like-minded people? I have had the great fortune to have explored a few amazing places such as China, the United Kingdom and Ireland. I met some wonderful new friends along the way, who share my love for needlework.

## INTENSE LEARNING EXPERIENCES

I recently returned from a fascinating tour of Ireland given by Victoria C. Frank, Inc. Victoria leads several tours each year, and although they are all based on the study of textiles, they are not all needlepoint tours. If you travel to Belgium with her, the focus will be on tapestries and lace, whereas a tour of Paris will focus on costume embellishment. Her goal, as with most textile tours, is to offer intimate groups of 13 or fewer an opportunity to explore the needlework traditions of international cultures. The tour I went on focused on Irish linen and lace. I have been working on my judging certification and therefore found the study of lace work appealing.

As with all tours by Victoria, art historians or experts in the field of study

always accompany her and her clients. On the Irish Linen and Lace tour we had the good fortune to be accompanied by Kathleen C. Wilson, author of *Irish People, Irish Linen*. Kathleen's book is the story of the Irish men and women who made fine Irish linen and lace a global product and an international brand. It was great having her along because as we drove through the countryside in our luxury motor coach, she would point out sites of interest or give us an introduction to what we would be seeing once we arrived at our destination.



Kenmare lace

We met with other lace experts, including the textile curator of the Irish Decorative Arts Museum, Alex Ward, Carrickmacross lace expert Theresa Kelly, and Kenmare lace expert Nora Finnegan. Victoria arranged viewings of several private lace collections, and both Theresa and Nora gave workshops on their unique lace styles.

The modern Irish lace and linen industry can be traced back over 400 years and has traveled far and wide to other countries as the Irish people left Ireland to make new homes and lives for themselves during the country's more trying times. When the Irish people migrated throughout the world, they took with them their spinning, weaving and lace-making skills. Making their way to new lands by sea, they were stranded on ships for months at a time. A ball of cotton thread and a tiny crochet hook or tatting shuttle helped to occupy their time and keep them sane. For those who stayed in Ireland, lacemaking became their salvation during the famines. A woman could save her family from starvation by selling



damask loom at Ferguson's Irish Linen mill

batik dying  
near Dali, China



above: student  
of embroidery,  
Dali, China

embroidery  
from a 1600s  
British  
petticoat



The Rock of  
Cashel,  
Tipperary,  
Ireland



detail from an alter cloth at Durham  
Cathedral, Durham, England



Carrickmascross lace

her lacework to earn money. In the 1800s a good lacemaker could earn more than a laborer.

### HOW THE LACE TRADE STARTED IN IRELAND

Although lacemaking existed in Ireland in the 18th century, it was not done for commercial trade. In 1861 in the town of Kenmare, several nuns were charged with setting up a school to teach the local women the art of lacemaking. A few years earlier the town had been ravaged by famine and disease, and the people were fighting to recover from these misfortunes. A school was temporarily set up in a building that had once been used as a brewery to teach the women a skill that they could use to earn enough money to feed their families. The nuns and the school moved to their permanent location in May 1862. The first class had 80 pupils but quickly grew to 385 in this new location. In the late 1860s needlepoint lace was introduced to the school. A Presentation sister in nearby Youghal bought a piece of Point de Milan lace. She carefully unraveled the lace to learn how to make what is now called Kenmare needlepoint lace.

During the Victorian era lace became very popular when Queen Victoria's love for it was expressed by the large amounts of it that she wore. The nuns began to teach the women to make fine crochet lace, and as the women were able to produce saleable quantities, markets had to be found. Displays of the lace were set up in a hotel lobby on a coach route near Kenmare. Tourists traveling this route who were interested in the lace would be directed to the school, where they could purchase the fine lace. Other outlets were found in England and elsewhere to

sell the lace. The crochet work was so fine that buyers often confused it with needlepoint lace. In Paris they referred to this fine crochet lace as Petit Point D'Irlandaise, which literally means little Irish needlepoint.

### SEE IT BEFORE IT IS GONE

Today the culture of linen and lace-making that sustained the Irish people for generations is gone. In Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland the last traces of the industry disappeared less than 10 years ago.

Where once flax was grown you will now find fields planted with rapeseed for canola oil. Many of the weaving mills are no longer running as the consumer's demand for wrinkle-free fabrics has replaced the need for fine linens that require care. What little remains of the linen and lace industry supplies predominantly the tourist industry. Tourists, handcrafters, a few fashion designers and fiber artists are what keep many of the world's textiles alive or at least well documented.



a small sampling of a private lace collection

Similarly, during my tours of China I was saddened to hear that many of the embroidery techniques the country is famous for are no longer being taught as the youth are more interested in factory-made clothing to be worn to their jobs in the city. I am thankful that I was able to travel to see the few remaining parts of China and Ireland where fine needlework is still made and is available to study. Occasionally I will recognize a piece of Miao embroidery or Irish lace used on a costume in a movie or television show, and I'm thrilled that I know a little bit of its history.

### OTHER TYPES OF TOURS

Many tours focus on reproducing ancient embroideries that were found on clothing, linens and other household and personal items. But not all tours limit their agenda to the history of textiles. There are many companies that organize needlework tours and cruises where stitching modern designs in beautiful settings is the focus of the trip. For example, Jeremy Hamilton and I are leading our first needlepoint tour of London in May. The goal of the tour is to see the sights that the area is famous for, all while working on needlepoint postcards or mementos of what we see. As we travel to several sites in and around London, we will be offering workshops with local needlepoint designers and teachers.

Most specialty tours include meals. There may be a lunch or two or a dinner where you will be on your own, but for the most part meals are included. Tour leaders usually factor in the tips and include them in the price of the tour. This makes it much easier when traveling to a country where the tipping scale is quite different. Americans are generally known as big tippers even in the United Kingdom.

Would you like to bring a spouse along? Often spouses are welcome. You will find that there may be a reduced price if they do not intend to participate in workshops, as with our upcoming tour.

If you are Internet savvy, with a click of your mouse you can find companies that can take you anywhere in the world with specialists in needlework and other handcrafts. Wherever you desire to go, whatever your needlework or textile design of choice, you're likely to find a tour that will delight you. 