

Preserving Irish Culture Through Art

by Catherine Crowe

C'est la découverte de son héritage irlandais et son engagement dans la communauté irlandaise de Toronto, comme chanteuse et ensuite comme artiste, que l'auteure nous rapporte ici.

As Irish-Canadians we have a double responsibility: to maintain the integrity of our ancestor's culture, and to make that culture meaningful in this country.

In spite of being born to an Irish parent, it was not until my teens that I went to my first really Irish party. Everyone from the oldest to the youngest at this party had something to contribute: a poem, a recitation, a song, a tune, even a joke. I was overwhelmed. The feeling in everything that I heard that night utterly captivated me. I had a sense that these people knew who they were, and where they came from. They had a sense not only of themselves, but of themselves as part of a larger picture, something larger than "family" and older than "community," something full of meaning. I had never before felt this lack in my own life, but now I yearned for that feeling of belonging.

I became involved in the Irish community, volunteering at the Irish Centre, and working with the Toronto Irish Players. I started singing professionally with Toronto's community of traditional Irish musicians. Later, I spent two months in Ireland where I took singing workshops and visited museums and libraries. Here I made the painful discovery that in spite of my intense love for the culture, Ireland was not my home. I had dreamed of going back to Ireland for so many years, and yet when I got there, I experienced a sense of isolation, of being cut off in a very real way from the living experience of my culture. I still struggle with this dilemma.

Going back to the home country did give me enormous inspiration, however, and new directions. For the first time, I heard *sean nos* singing. *Sean nos* simply means "old style," but it refers to an unaccompanied, very highly ornamented style of singing. *Sean nos* songs are part of the oral tradition and have been passed down from generation to generation. While they are relatively unknown in popular culture, they more truly reflect old Irish tradition than songs such as "Danny Boy" or "The Black Velvet Band." Unfortunately I had to learn these songs through field recordings and books, rather than from individuals

in the traditional way. I decided I wanted to seek out the hidden gems of the past that were in danger of being lost.

O, and if you told me, I would believe you,
that no grass could appear through softest clay,
That the moon would bleed in the sky each evening,
And the stars would clearly shine by day.
Until the sun in the sky has frozen, and the fish do fly
over Sligo Bay,
Till the hills so high into stones are broken,
My own true love I will not betray.

O I served my time as a college student,
And was in the high-school for five long years.
The clergy wanted me wise and prudent
But when they advised me I closed my ears.
And when I go before God the father, my heart will
harbour a hundred fears
For my sins reach halfway up Croagh Patrick
Since I sold my soul for a maiden's tears.

It is very difficult to collect these *sean nos* songs while in Canada, but the search is very rewarding.

Going back to Ireland also gave me new inspiration as a visual artist. I spent many hours in archeological museums making sketches of early Irish artifacts. Since coming back to Canada, I have read countless books on early Irish history, archaeology, mythology, and folklore and use these sources to inform my work.

A good deal of my jewellery is based on very early Celtic designs. Their early designs are almost all abstract, consisting largely of geometric shapes. The main representational types are animals, which remain remarkably consistent from 1000 BC right up to the medieval period: ducks, swans, rabbits, horses, bulls, deer, and the ubiquitous boars.

The Celts were probably Europe's first abstract artists. They had a treaty with Alexander the Great's father, Philip II of Macedonia, from whom they learned coin-making. The Celts began coin-making in approximately 300 BC with close imitations of Macedonian prototypes. These were Greek influenced and very representational (Allen). Then, slowly, over the next 100 years they developed a style which art historians call "disintegration." This means that they broke down the realistic image into abstract parts. It used to be thought that this was a reflection of the Celt's lack of skill, but we now understand that abstraction was a sophisticated and individual way of seeing things (Allen).

From 300 BC to 300 AD the Celts of Ireland produced some of the most unique art. At this time the continental

Celts were feeling the pressure of other civilizations: Etruscan, Roman, and Greek and this was reflected in their designs. Irish Celts were isolated by the sea from these influences. It was during this period that the Irish developed their unique enamelling style called *champleve* which is derived from the French "raised" (*leve*) and "field" (*champ*) as the design is created with a raised field of metal. This technique is different from the more well-known *cloisonné*, which is derived from the French "cell" (*cloison*) as the design is created with cells of wire. *Champleve* is the technique that I use for all of my work. The early Celts gouged out the metal with engraving tools. They then

melted the glass (enamel) in clay crucibles and poured it into the depressions.

I paint the cut copper with an etch-resist, and etch out the depressions. My glass is ground up to the consistency of salt or sugar, and inlaid with a small spoon before several firings at very high temperatures (1500°F). The designs created by the Celts using this technique are again, simple and abstract, probably incorporating basic elemental symbols such as sun, moon, earth, air, fire, and water signs.

During the later part of this period (100 AD) Irish artists also developed a style called by archaeologists "spiral-trumpet." It was enduring and lasted well into the eighth century AD (Megaw).

This style follows in the tradition of early Celtic art in that it is fluid, and evokes elemental images. A typical "spiral-trumpet" piece from 400 AD was found at a hill fort in Northern Ireland called Emain Macha, named after the goddess Macha (Ross).

In addition to historical and archaeological sources, I found much inspiration in English translations of medieval manuscripts that are thought to reflect an older tradition. I looked to these to give me more information about the old goddesses and gods of pagan Ireland, such as Macha.

Macha was said to have entered the household of a wealthy widower named Crunnchu, wordlessly taking the place of his wife who had died. Because she was beautiful and useful, Crunnchu accepted her and she became pregnant. When Crunnchu asked if he could attend an assembly of the men of Ulster, Macha agreed, stipulating only that he should not mention her. At the assembly, no one could talk of anything but the swiftness of the King's horses, so that Crunnchu could not help boasting "My wife is swifter." Instantly he was arrested by the King and told to produce his wife and prove his statement. When Macha arrived at the race, nine months pregnant, she

asked leave to wait until after her delivery, but was told that her husband would be killed if she did not run. She raced and won, giving birth to twins as she crossed the finish line in front of the king's chariot. She then cursed the men of Ulster unto the ninth generation, and this was her curse: that all who had heard her cries, would themselves suffer the pains of labour whenever they were in most need of strength. That place was ever after called Emain Macha (that is: the twins "emain" of Macha)

The story of Macha is from a body of work known as the "*Dindsenchas*," or the "mythological geography" of Ireland. While the stories contained in this work are taken from medieval manuscripts, it is thought that they were copied from much earlier works, which in turn represented an even earlier oral tradition.

In art, as well as in music, my goal is to rescue that which is in danger of being lost and preserve as much of the old Irish tradition as possible. In this way, we will be able to pass a richer heritage to the next generation.

As Irish-Canadians we have a double responsibility: to maintain the integrity of our ancestor's culture, and to make that culture meaningful in this country. I work very hard at research to make up for my lack of experience of Ireland herself, but I believe that I am part of a living experience of Irish culture here in Canada. Everyone, no matter where one lives, craves meaning in their lives. It is the function of culture to provide this meaning. What I endeavour to communicate with my work, whether visual or musical, is respect for the past, and a recognition that we are products of our past. These historical, mythological, and poetic stories give a context to the universal human experience and bring significance to our every day, present-day lives.

A life-long interest in art eventually brought Catherine Crowe to experiment with enamels. She was drawn to the vivid colours and timeless nature of the medium. Her true inspiration came, however, when she travelled to Ireland, her father's native land, to study traditional music in 1984. It was then that she discovered that the Celts were Europe's first enamellists. Already steeped in the music and literature of these ancient peoples, it was a natural step to incorporate early Celtic designs into her artwork. Each piece has its own story, informed by research in early history, archaeology, and folklore.

References

- Allen, Derreck. *An Introduction to Celtic Coins*. London: British Museum Publications, 1978.
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- Ross, Anne. *Pagan Celtic Britain Studies in Iconography and Tradition*. London: Routledge, 1967.

