Clothing Cultures
Volume 11 Number 2
 https://doi.org/10.1386/cc_00090_1
Received 26 August 2024; Accepted 7 October 2024; Published Online October 2025

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In search of Irish crochet lace: An object-based inquiry

ABSTRACT

This article explores the prevalence of Irish crochet lace in American fashion of the early twentieth century (c.1900–26). An extant object in a university collection of historic dress sparked interest, leading to this research, an attempt to understand what Irish crochet lace is and its use in American fashion. Print media of the time extensively reported the widespread appeal and sale of Irish crochet lace in America. By the 1920s, businesses capitalized on its growing popularity and presented imitation machine-made lace as authentic Irish crochet to deceive consumers and capitalize upon the appeal of the craft. In particular, Bardwil Bros. faced an extensive legal battle due to disingenuous business and marketing practices. A unique component of this inquiry was an analysis of three extant Irish crochet lace fashions held by the Louisiana State University (LSU) Textile & Costume Museum, further enriching this research.

KEYWORDS

fashion
material culture
fashion collections
Ireland
women's labour
American fashion

INTRODUCTION

Tucked away in the LSU Textile & Costume Museum (LSUTCM) storage is a lace jacket that inspired curiosity (see Figure 1). The artefact was made of lace, and an accession record identified the type as Irish crochet from the 1900s. This research began in search of an answer to the question of what Irish crochet

lace is, to examine its distinguishing characteristics, and to understand how or why these garments survived in a museum collection. According to curator Ann Smart Martin, material culture can be vital to investigating consumerism, revealing 'notions of taste, style […] and the emotional pleasures of acquiring material objects' (1993: 142).

Our research revealed that Irish crochet lace was a popular component of American women's fashion in the early twentieth century, appealing to many consumers so much so that, while it was traditionally made by hand, it was machine-made by some American firms, notably Bardwil Bros., who labelled the lace as authentic. This work emerged from analysing primary source materials, including newspapers and magazines of the period, coupled with

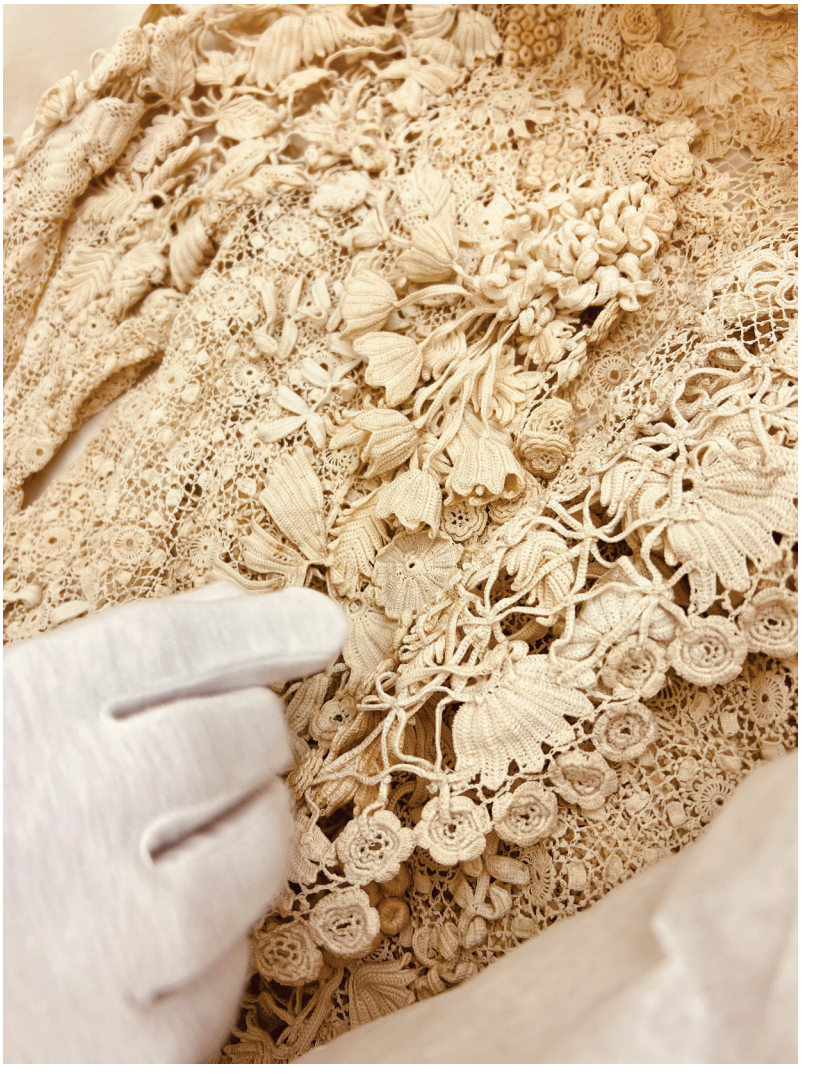

Figure 1: Detail of Irish crochet lace jacket, c.*1906, 1990.007.001, Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Textile & Costume Museum. Photograph by and courtesy of Morrie Breyer.*

photographic evidence of extant fashion items from museum collections. Also, an analysis of extant artefacts held by LSUTCM allowed for a deeper understanding of the materiality of Irish crochet lace used in early twentieth-century American fashion. While there are several different types of Irish lace, crochet experienced widespread appeal in American women's fashion in the first decades of the twentieth century. In April 1910, Valencia Lace & Embroidery Co. advertised a 'Real Hand Made Irish Crochet Dutch Collar' for six dollars, a sum of close to $200 in today's currency and further described it as 'exquisitely worked in fine Irish Crochet. Every stitch and every thread of this neck piece is made by an expert lace maker […] every woman who knows *real lace* values will appreciate what a bargain this is' (Anon. 1910: 105, original emphasis).

LACE IN CONTEXT: WOMEN'S LABOUR

Women made the craft of handmade Irish crochet lace possible (Freedgood 2003: 628). Irish crochet lacemaking developed in Ireland in response to nationwide poverty during the Irish Potato Famine of 1845–52 (Dye and Leader 2021: 68). The craft originated in the Ursuline Convent of Black Rock, County Cork, around 1845 and, in just a few years, was taught to women in convents throughout the country as part of famine relief efforts. This crocheted variety of lace mimicked Venetian point, a bobbin lace, which was laborious. Irish crochet was an alternative that could be made quicker and yet still appeal to lace connoisseurs. This crochet variety of lacemaking was unique to Ireland. According to lace historian Barbara Ballantyne, '[l]acemaking was the salvation of many Irish families in the mid-nineteenth century when a new disease killed the potatoes on which most of the Irish depended' (2007: 11). Nuns taught girls how to make lace to earn income in Ireland (Cooper 2020: 304–27). Clergymen's wives also started stand-alone crochet schools, separate from convents, during the famine (Ballantyne 2007: 13). During this period, lacemaking in Ireland was a cottage industry where many women also made lace at home out of convenience and necessity (Hertz 2013: 4; Coleman 1896: 591; Burke 2019: 32). Women, some named and some unknown, organized workshops and schools to train makers and provide better living or working conditions (O'Sullivan 1991: 106). Irish crochet lace initially copied Venetian point bobbin lace, but makers soon developed unique three-dimensional details that set the lace apart.

Most Irish lacemakers realized their craft mainly using needle stitches, decorative stitches to mesh or net and crochet (see Figure 2). Needle laces are formed with meticulous precision and skill. Two types of Irish needle laces are Youghal and Kenmare. Perhaps the finer of the two is Youghal, referred to by some as 'the queen of Irish lace', with its floral motifs outlined with a twisted buttonhole stitch (Helland 2018: 102). Kenmare needle lace is attributed to Mother O'Hagan, the abbess of a convent in Kenmare, Ireland, who taught women how to make it (O'Sullivan 1991: 106). Like Youghal, Kenmare lace is stitched together; however, it begins with couching a string of thread along the outline of a pattern on cloth. The pattern is then filled in with stitches, and when finished, the couching stitches are released to detach the completed lace from the substrate. Many items, such as collars, cuffs, veils and household textiles, were made from Kenmare lace, running the gamut from practical everyday items to luxury fashion products (O'Sullivan 1991: 107).

Carrickmacross and Limerick are Irish lace made with decorative embroidery stitches applied to mesh or net. Carrickmacross uses three layers of

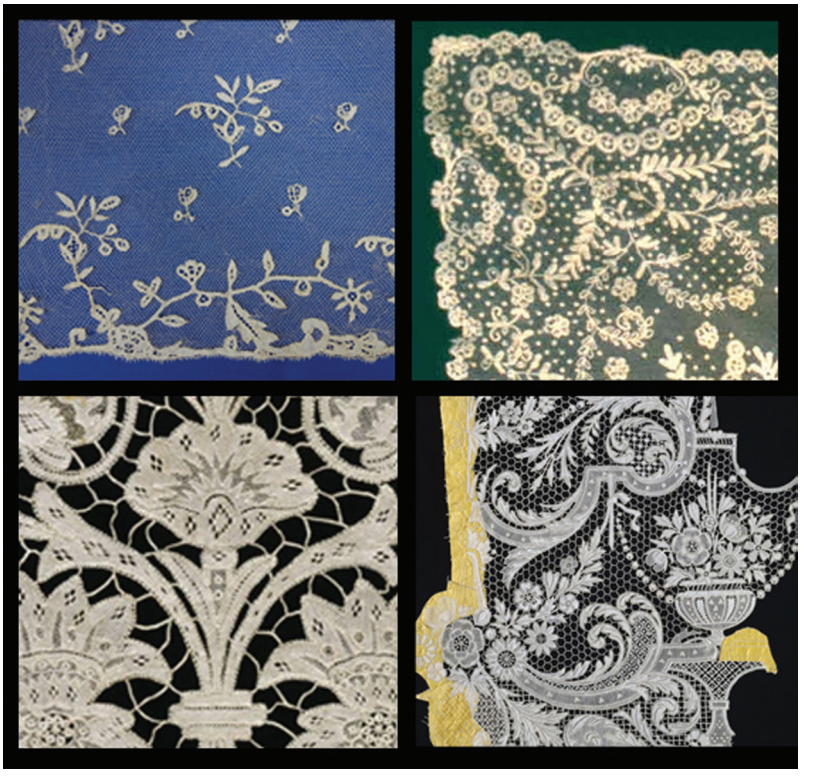

Figure 2: Examples of Irish lace (clockwise from top left): shawl, muslin Carrickmacross, mid-nineteenth century, 2008.0453, courtesy of the Textile Research Centre, Leiden; Limerick lace, c.1880, 1986.0162, courtesy of Dr Matthew Potter, curator, Limerick Museum; T.18-1913, and Flounce, Kenmare needle lace, c.1886, both London: courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum.

the pattern on paper, a layer of mesh or net, and a fine muslin; after much stitchwork, the paper and muslin are cut away, revealing a surface pattern on the mesh (Earnshaw 1994: 122). Limerick is an early example of partially mechanized lace production comprising embroidery on a machine-made net, producing a gossamer texture.

Irish crochet lace uses a single continuous thread looped with a 'fine crochet hook' (Powys 1953: 30). Interconnected loops, often called stitches, include the basic chain stitch, double crochet or a taller stitch known as the treble (Dye and Leader 2021: 94). Shamrocks, vines, roses and other botanical motifs are used in Irish crochet lace. The process begins with individual motifs, which are then crocheted together. In the ground of the composition, 'fine loops [are] ornamented with small projections' (Ballantyne 2007: 9), called picots (see Figure 3).

One distinctive type of Irish crochet lace, known as the Clones Knot, is

> worked over a length of chain by alternately picking up the thread at the front of the chain, then the back and repeating this many times before

> drawing the loop on the hook through all the loops over the chain and finishing with a double crochet [stitch].
>
> (Ballantyne 2007: 9)

This resulted in a dimensional circle shape often used in the ground or along the edge of a piece. The technique developed initially in Clones, a town in Monaghan County, Ireland (Potter and Hayes 2014: 135).

In 1859, Cassandra Hand opened a lacemaking school in Clones, at the height of the Irish Potato Famine (McPhelim 2019). Hand, determined to help women provide for themselves and their families, knew lace was desirable in high fashion. Although she was married to the local reverend, she had English aristocratic ties and made the necessary arrangements to sell lace made by women in her school. At its peak, over 1500 women, girls and disabled men attended Hand's school, where they learnt to make Irish crochet (Clones Knot) lace. Hand facilitated the sale of large quantities of lace made in Clones and invested any surplus profits back into the community.[1] This was a significant sociocultural shift in the rural agricultural community of Clones, Ireland. Irish crochet lace was the crafted commodity by which women moved from being supported into roles as earners, saving themselves and their families from starvation.

In the mid-to-late nineteenth century, the arts and crafts movement gained traction in Ireland, prompting a focus on the exquisite craftsmanship of handmade objects. As such, lace became a valuable export used in various products, from domestic textiles to fashion. In the late 1880s,

1. For an overview of the history of Cassandra Hand and the development of Irish crochet lace in Clones, Ireland including images of extant lace and women carrying on the tradition of lacemaking, see St Patrick's Festival (2021).

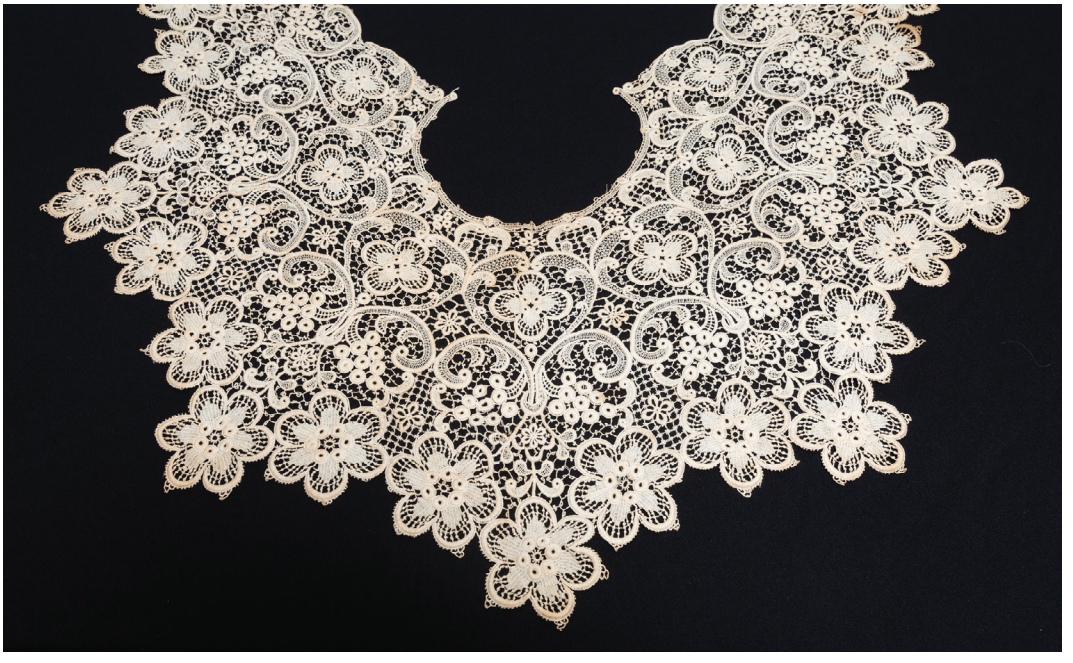

Figure 3: Irish crochet lace collar with botanical elements, including vines and grapes, hundreds of tiny projections called picots ornament the bars of the groundwork, c.*1905, Irish crochet lace, cotton/linen,* 1990.008.003, *Baton Rouge, LA. Photograph by Kevin Duffy. Courtesy of LSU Textile and Costume Museum.*

an English entrepreneur and aristocrat, Alan Cole, recognized the value of Irish lace and centralized production with skilled labour in facilities he owned and operated (Bowe 1990/1991: 175). By the early twentieth century, lace crafted in Ireland was an enduring symbol of national pride and heritage, synonymous with Irish culture. Makers of Irish crochet lace were adept at mimicking bobbin lace styles, such as Venetian point, but also were able 'to produce some original, extraordinary and very complicated shapes' (Ballantyne 2007: 13), including the three-dimensional qualities of Irish crochet lace. Ultimately, Irish crochet lace found its way to America as an export product used in variable applications and at vastly different price points.

IRISH CROCHET LACE IN AMERICAN FASHION

By the late nineteenth century, exhibitions of Irish lace used in fashion, such as at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, bolstered American consumer interest (Mackay 1893: 31). The three-dimensional quality of Irish crochet lace made it distinctive from other forms of lace, which were generally two-dimensional. This textural component of Irish crochet was attuned to the feminine decorative qualities of Edwardian-era fashion. Also, the American fashion press reported on the sartorial choices of English society, including their use of Irish crochet lace (Anon. 1893: 5). In 1900, Arnold, Constable & Co., a New York-based retailer, advertised 'rich laces' (Anon. 1900: viii) from Ireland, offering many different types, including Irish crochet. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Irish crochet lace was used in American fashion for women in many capacities, such as summer dresses, accessories and undergarments (Anon. 1911a: 52, 1907a: 800). This included various fashions such as Gibson girl shirtwaist collars, women's and girls' dresses, millinery, cuffs and accessories (Anon. 1908c: 404, 1908a: 188B, 1908b: 829, 1908d: 232). As reported in *Vogue*, '[n]o lace can vie with Irish crochet for the handsomest creations of the season' (Anon. 1905: 639), when describing the three-dimensional characteristics of Irish crochet, which perfectly adorned the sinuous silhouette of Edwardian fashion.

Jackets of Irish crochet lace were popular with consumers. An extant example is a *c.*1910 jacket from the Philadelphia Museum of Art (see Figure 4). The padded rings or circular shapes visible in the groundwork resulted from crocheting around a cord in a circle. The lace used for this piece incorporated raised details and dangling tassels at the centre-front closure. When applied to fashion, the dimensional qualities of Irish crochet lace personified whimsy, nostalgia and femininity, all prevalent themes of Edwardian-era fashion. According to Douglas Russell, fashion for women of the Edwardian period 'with the help of layers or accents of lace, came to have a frothy […] look' (1983: 389).

The epitome of this is evident in a *c.*1904 bodice that is part of an afternoon or walking ensemble also held at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (see Figure 5). Visible in this design are the floral motifs used in Irish crochet fashioned in the Edwardian-era pouter-pigeon silhouette, with graceful points extending over the tops of the hands. *Vogue* reported on Irish crochet lace used as part of walking ensembles: 'Lace coats of Irish crochet in three-quarter length and semi-fitting are seen with plaited [*sic*] linen skirts in walking length' (Anon. 1907c: 765). The *New York Times* elaborated on the combination of Irish crochet lace with pleated skirts of

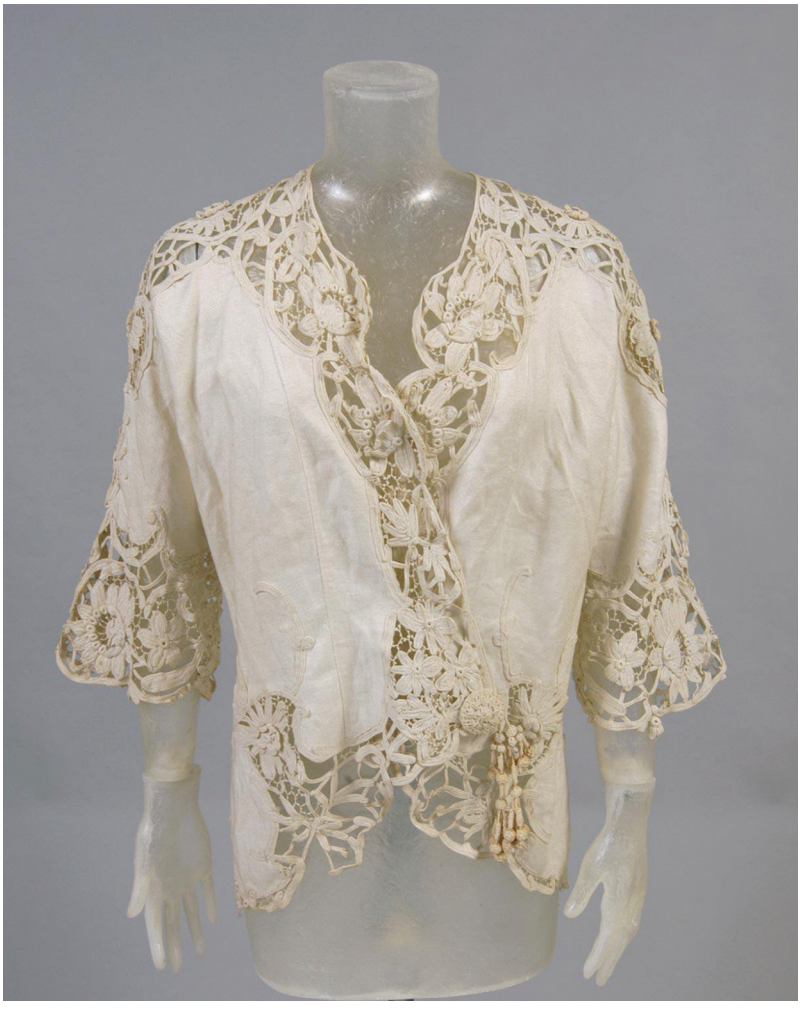

Figure 4: A women's soft dressing jacket trimmed with Irish crochet lace. Woman's jacket, c.*1910, linen, Irish crochet lace, 1970-94-21, Philadelphia. Courtesy of Philadelphia Museum of Art.*

neutral-coloured fabrications when describing a coat and skirt worn to a society wedding of 1907.

> A smart coat and skirt worn at the Gray-Fish wedding, the last of the fashionable nuptials in town for the season, showed the long-time but satisfactory combination of Irish crochet lace and linen […]. The coat extended below the waist line [*sic*], and at the sides just cleared the widest part of the hips, being slightly fitted […] but was loose and straight in the front. The back was semi-fitted, curving gracefully in to [*sic*] the figure. The coat was […] entirely of Irish crochet […]. The centre [*sic*] fronts of the coat, entirely of lace, were shaped to fit around the neck, leaving a little V in the centre [*sic*]. The hem at the bottom

rounded up one side of the coat, tapering as it ran to the bust line, where the lace sides met, a large lace chrysanthemum being placed at each side of the meeting points. From each of these flowers drooped […] more flowers placed back to back as pendants […] the lowest came to the bottom of the coat.

(Anon. 1907d: x5)

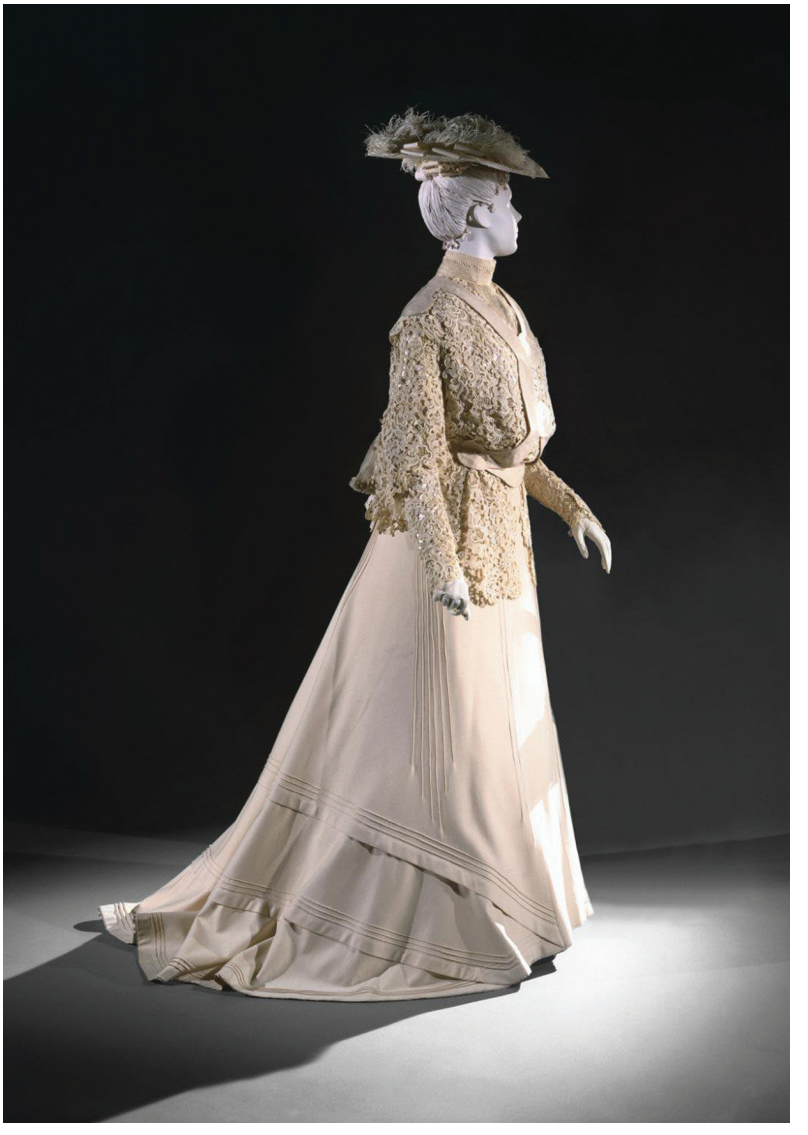

Figure 5: Early twentieth-century ensemble with an Irish crochet lace bodice. Woman's dress: bodice and skirt, cream-coloured Irish lace, wool flannel and silk chiffon, c.*1904, 1964-123-14a, b, Philadelphia. Courtesy of Philadelphia Museum of Art.*

This is a small portion of an extensive five-paragraph description. The Irish crochet jacket described in the *New York Times* was paired with a linen skirt, while the Philadelphia Museum of Art ensemble has a wool flannel skirt.

Examples of Irish crochet lace used in American fashion from the early 1900s through the 1920s are in other museum collections at leading institutions such as the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, The Museum at FIT and an elegant *c.*1900–09 afternoon dress, lined in gauzy chiffon, at the Texas Fashion Collection (see Figure 6). While this garment is primarily made of Irish crochet lace with an underlayer of silk, dresses from the first decade of the twentieth century used Irish crochet lace to varying degrees in their design and across broad categories, including bridal, morning, afternoon, walking and dinner or evening.

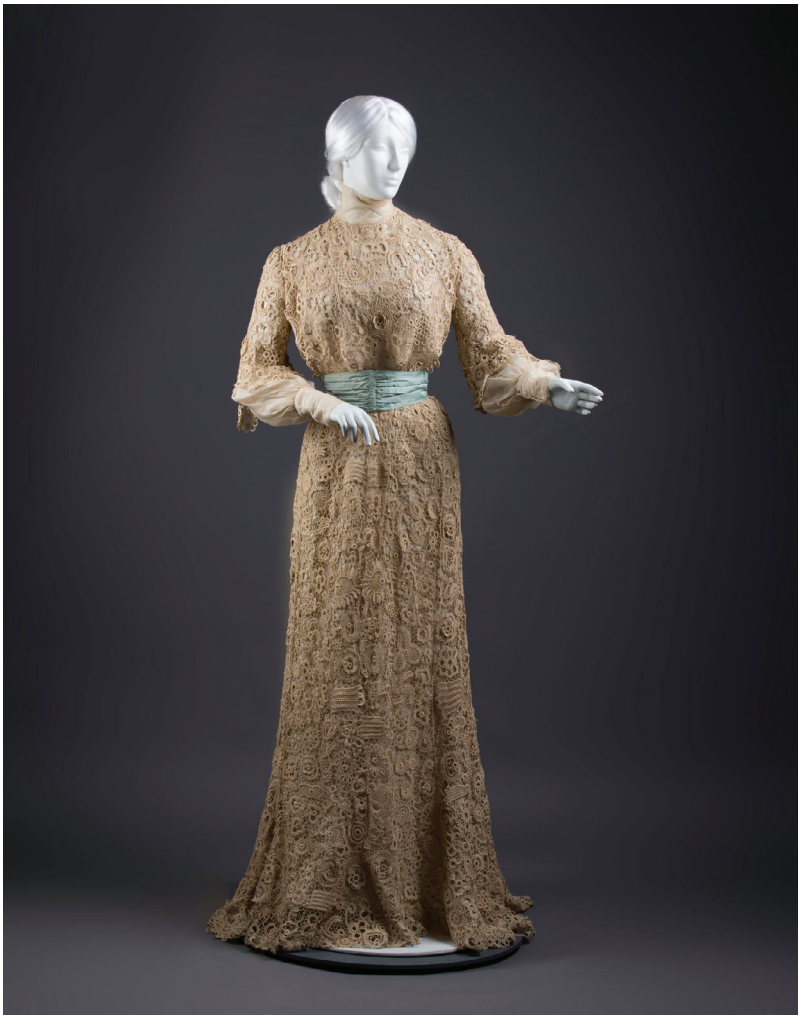

Figure 6: An afternoon dress (bodice and skirt) of Irish crochet lace. Designer unknown, afternoon dress of Irish crochet lace, c.*1900–09, 1962.001.181, gift of Mrs William Herman. Courtesy of Texas Fashion Collection, University of North Texas College of Visual Arts and Design.*

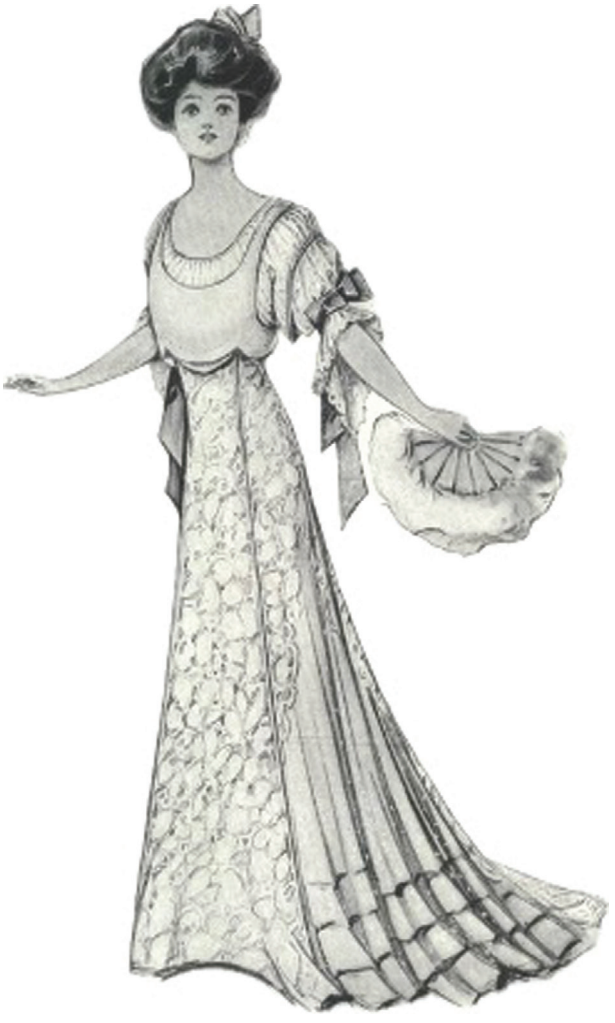

Figure 7: Dinner gown of Irish crochet lace and white net (Anon. 1907b: 84).

Irish crochet lace was used as a central component of the garment, such as with the example from the Texas Fashion Collection or layered and mixed with other fabrications to complete the look. For example, a dinner gown of Irish crochet lace combined with a white net in the quintessential Edwardian silhouette (see Figure 7) (Anon. 1907b: 84).

FROM AUTHENTIC TO IMITATION

Increasing demand for Irish crochet lace in America, especially among the growing middle classes, prompted mechanized production. American firms such as Valencia Lace & Embroidery Co. and Integrity Garment Manufacturing Co. produced machine-made *imitation* Irish crochet lace (Anon. 1909: C3, 1911b: 4). That which was reportedly made by hand was more expensive. Some manufacturers deceived the public by presenting lace as authentic Irish

crochet when, in fact, it was machine-made and imported from countries such as Austria, Germany and Syria (Anon. 1912a: 15). Design piracy, counterfeit products and general consumer fraud were rampant in America in the first half of the twentieth century (Marcketti and Parsons 2016: 36).

Bardwil Bros., a New York-based firm, imported a wide selection of textile products. In 1912, they were accused of undervaluing imported laces to reduce import tax (Anon. 1912b: 2). Later, in 1925, as demand for Irish crochet lace persisted with consumers, the company came under the scrutiny of the Federal Trade Commission for importing machine-made lace from China that was advertised as Irish crochet at prices that undercut their competition (Anon. 1925a: 2). Bardwil Bros. asserted there was no claim of authenticity with the advertisement of the lace. Legal complaints were filed to address the threat that manufactured Irish crochet lace might have on the handmade lace industry of Ireland.

A trial ensued to determine whether Bardwil Bros. should be prohibited from distributing Irish crochet lace without identifying it as imitation or machine-made. Witnesses were asked to define Irish crochet lace. Nine testified that Irish crochet lace must be made in Ireland to be regarded as authentic; however, at least two others believed that if the textile was constructed with handmade crochet and raised motifs, the product could be considered Irish no matter its country of origin. The prosecution called witnesses in a multistate trial from Boston, Massachusetts and Providence, Rhode Island, including customers who purchased Irish crochet lace (Anon. 1925c: 41, 1925d: 38).

In August 1925, Mr Bardwil admitted that Irish as an adjective to describe lace added value to his product, as it capitalized upon the public's desire for laces from Ireland, but also asserted that real Irish crochet lace was easily discerned from the Chinese imports because the former was heavily starched, and the textile from China was not (Anon. 1925b: 7). However, the Federal Trade Commission argued it must be from Ireland to be Irish (Anon. 1926: 62). In the end, a cease-and-desist order was issued against Bardwil Bros. for enacting unfair methods of competition related to Irish crochet lace (Federal Trade Commission 1926: 16). Controversy about what was authentic Irish crochet lace was not limited to Bardwil Bros. Trials against other businesses, such as Shanghai Lace Corporation, A. D. Sutton & Sons and Alfred Kohlberg, all resulted in judgements ordering them to stop advertising lace as Irish without noting it was machine-made (Federal Trade Commission 1926: 259–63).

From the civil war to the first decade of the twentieth century, the United States steadily shifted from an agrarian society to one shaped by capitalism. According to William Leach, 'American capitalism […] produce[d] a distinct culture […] with the exchange and circulation of money and goods at the foundation […] the cardinal features of this culture were acquisition and consumption as the means of achieving happiness; the cult of the new' (1993: 3). Newness in fashion fuelled consumer desire, and a combination of manufacturers, retailers and mail-order catalogues scrambled to quench the thirst for newness, flooding the marketplace with countless options at variable prices and quality and from the handmade to the mass-produced or knocked-off. For the first time, fashion was a great democratizer, available in many forms for people of vastly different socio-economic statuses (Buckley and Clark 2017). In this landscape of burgeoning American fashion consumerism, the desire for Irish crochet lace took hold. Additionally, Irish crochet lace incorporated elements of art nouveau and the arts and crafts movement, which had an immense influence on the fashion of the time. Key elements included curving lines, stylized natural forms and a 'constant sense of movement' (Tortora and Marcketti 2021: 289).

A CLOSER LOOK: EXTANT FASHIONS OF IRISH CROCHET LACE

The artefact that sparked curiosity and two other examples held by LSUTCM presented a unique opportunity to analyse Irish crochet lace. Material culture is an excellent primary source for fashion historians that enriches our understanding of the past. According to Jules Prown, artefacts enable us to 'engage […]

Figure 8: Irish crochet lace jacket, soft dressing jacket of Irish crochet lace, c.1906, 1990.007.001, Baton Rouge, LA. Photograph by Kevin Duffy. Courtesy of LSU Textile & Costume Museum.

not with our minds, the seat of cultural biases, but with our senses' (1982: 5). Prown argued the value of material culture as a primary source and proposed a theoretical consideration of extant artefacts using an approach of 'description, deduction, speculation' (1982: 7). Object-based research opens the door to a rich understanding of the materiality and construction of historical fashion. The material culture of Irish crochet's past is further evidence of its prevalence in the early twentieth century, as these garments were cherished, passed down and ultimately given to a museum.

The first artefact is the *c.*1906 jacket, where this inquiry began (see Figure 8). The garment's centre front falls gracefully open, with no closures to fasten it shut. This exquisite study in scale and proportion easily ebbs and flows from large to small – dense to singular – with motifs such as vines, grapes and flowers. The base structure of the bodice and sleeves is finely crafted crochet lace with circular patterns connected to more extensive networks of crocheted and cotton corded motifs at the centre-front opening and shoulders. The garment has no seams; it was crocheted together by hand. The length is three-quarters, extending 26 inches from the shoulder past the mid-hip line.

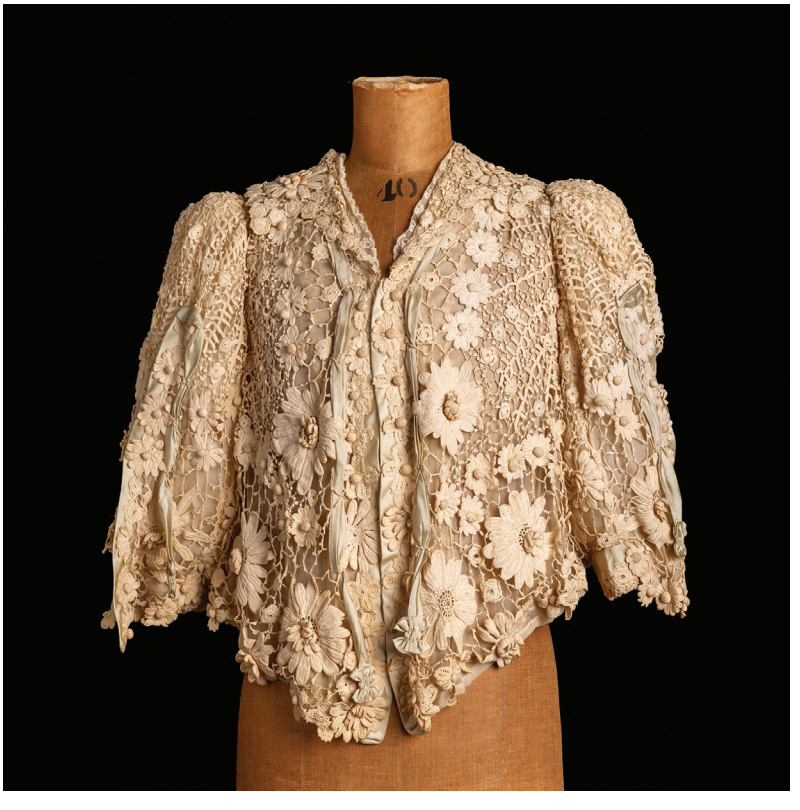

Figure 9: Jacket of Irish crochet lace and silk chiffon with 3-D floral elements and a spiderweb lace construction. Maurice Mayer, Irish Crochet Lace Jacket, c.*1905, V.37.36.13, Baton Rouge, LA. Photograph by Kevin Duffy. Courtesy of LSU Textile & Costume Museum.*

LSUTCM also holds a second jacket of Irish crochet lace (*c.*1905) (see Figure 9). The garment includes a fold-over collar that ends in a V-neck fastened with a single hook-and-eye at the centre front. A ribbon of delicate blue silk satin adorns both sides of the garment's centre front, ending at the jacket's hemline. The hemline is especially interesting; at the centre-front opening, both sides meet at a point, extending five inches past the centre-back hemline; one can deduce this is likely to accommodate or emphasize the fuller bustlines of the Edwardian era. The same blue silk found along the front of the jacket is incorporated into its three-quarter-length sleeves, which measure sixteen inches in length. The jacket's exterior is composed of intricate Irish crochet lace adorned with floral elements of various sizes. A spiderweb-like pattern emanates from the armscyes and cascades across the front of the bodice and down the sleeves. Insects were also a key component of art nouveau designs (Balchin and Barrow 2008: 11). As such, their presence within Irish crochet lace demonstrates that lacemakers were aware of contemporary fashion trends.

The interior of the garment is constructed with exceptional attention to detail. Delicate silk chiffon lines the entire jacket, and it is ruched in areas for extra stability and textural interest. Some interior seams are trimmed in dainty lace ribbon. Despite the garment's age, the fragile silk chiffon lining is in good condition. Located inside the garment is a label attributing the garment to Maurice Mayer, a Parisian fashion designer of the early twentieth century. Mayer's atelier and showroom were at 8 Rue St Augustin in Paris. He offered many women's fashion items, including dresses, coats, suits and furs (Anon. 1916: 2). It seems that goods by the French designer were either imported and sold at the American department store of Franklin, Simon and Co., in New York City or licensed to be made. The jacket has visible seams compared to the first example, including sleeves set in the armscyes. The understructure was cut from silk chiffon and lace sections were tacked to the pattern pieces before being assembled. A small strip of bobbin lace is used at the neck opening as a finishing element. This versatile jacket or over-blouse would have paired well with an underdress or a shirtwaist and skirt combination.

The final example of Irish crochet lace analysed for this research is an evening bodice and skirt combination (*c.*1905) (see Figure 10). Like many women's fashionable garments from the Edwardian period, this bodice and skirt emphasize the S-curve silhouette, which pushed the bosom forward in a pouter-pigeon style and moved the hips back. This distinctive shape resulted from rigorous corsetry emphasizing an exaggerated bosom and tiny waist (Cole and Deihl 2015: 85). The skirt is swathed in Irish crochet lace atop an underlayer of lustrous cream silk satin. Aside from the satin lining, the skirt is entirely composed of Irish crochet lace. At the knee, the lace is draped at the sides and centre, flowing towards an elegant, rounded-edged train.

The bodice of this ensemble is constructed of delicate pink silk satin, further trimmed with silk chiffon along the neckline's interior. The square-neck bodice was fit to the body to create the desired Edwardian silhouette with ten boned pattern pieces seamed together. The seam allowances are hand-tacked open and finished by hand-turning the edges and whipstitching them with minuscule stitches. It closes at the centre back with nine hooks and eyes. The interior grosgrain ribbon waistband of the bodice that closes with two hooks and eyes is printed with the name of the designer, Madame Guyonnet Genève, a Swiss dressmaker. Whether this was purchased abroad

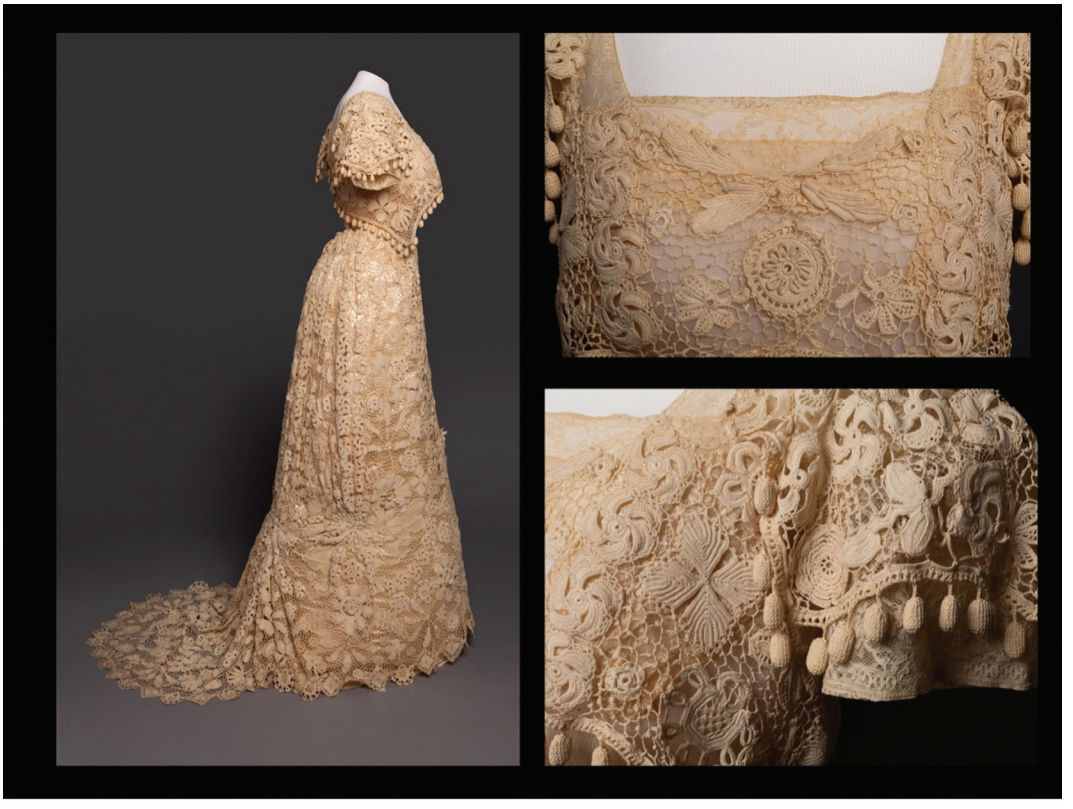

Figure 10: (Left) afternoon dress (bodice and skirt) of satin in skirt and chiffon in bodice covered in Irish crochet lace; (top right) dragonfly motif on the bodice; (bottom right) sleeve flounce with tassels and floral elements. Madame Guyonnet, Irish crochet lace afternoon dress, silk, lace, c.1906, V.55.195.05a-c, Baton Rouge, LA. Photograph by Kevin Duffy. Courtesy of LSU Textile & Costume Museum.

or in an American department store is uncertain; however, the latter seems probable. Regardless, the use of Irish crochet lace in Switzerland demonstrates the widespread popularity of the material. Three pieces of handmade Irish crochet lace comprise the bodice. A larger piece covers the bodice and is hand-tacked in place to the silk understructure along the neckline, at the sides, and the centre-back closure. Two other pieces are tacked to the bodice and draped over the arms extending seven and one-half inches in length from the shoulder and ending in points. The bodice has set-in sleeves of chiffon and bobbin lace over which the Irish crochet was draped. The Irish crochet lace elements are all in excellent condition. In addition to the floral aspects of Irish crochet lace, crochet balls trim the edges of the bodice. The careful craftsmanship lends an air of luxury to the garment and is further solidified by the complexity and skill that the lacework required.

The lace used for this look has many striking elements, such as the large dragonfly on the bodice's centre front and the twin floral motifs supporting the luxurious train, which extends approximately fifteen inches. The skirt understructure is made of cream lustrous silk satin, with pleated panels of horsehair crin added at the back to create slight fullness before the skirt cascades into

the train. The entire outside of the skirt is a singular piece of handmade Irish crochet lace tacked by hand at the waist and seamed by hand along the centre back. The skirt is trussed up in the back, creating cascades of Irish crochet lace before extending into the train. From the centre-back waist to the end of the train is 42 and one-half inches, and the waist circumference is 25 inches. The underskirt closes at the centre back with ten hooks and eyes, and the outer skirt of Irish crochet lace closes with five hooks and eyes. The ensemble follows an S-curve silhouette, which was the favoured silhouette during the Edwardian period and is characterized by a full, pouched bust and a rounded hipline that typically flared out to a trumpet shape at the bottom (Tortora and Marcketti 2021: 327). Fashion at this time was rapidly changing, and this silhouette reigned for less than a decade before giving way.

Following Prown's material culture framework of description–deduction–speculation, a close look and description of these garments allow one to deduce that they were all handmade and done so by skilled craftspeople and dressmakers. Quality materials and professional labour contributed to these objects' survival. One can speculate that these garments were prized possessions within their owner's wardrobes (all American women), saved, cherished and passed down to other family members. This process of preserving supports the notion that Irish crochet lace for American women of the early twentieth century was perhaps not just fashionable but a component of persisting style.

CONCLUSION

The collection and preservation of Irish crochet lace fashions in several museums and reporting from the media of the period affirm that Irish crochet lace was a popular component of early twentieth-century American fashion. Mass production also imitated the lace, resulting in legal proceedings regarding authenticity. What was once produced by skilled makers, who crafted their pride and struggle into 'every stitch and every thread' (Anon. 1910: 105), was imitated by industry.

Inquiry beginning with a singular object led to an understanding of Irish crochet lace as a craft, cultural symbol and commodity in American fashion, a testament to the power of object-based research in writing fashion history. Moreover, it demonstrates how the commodification of Irish crochet lace resulted in a loss of authenticity. Eventually, this resulted in a decreased demand for the product. According to fashion historian Lou Taylor, once collected, 'clothes […] take on quite different semiotic characteristics […] [as] displaced objects' (2002: 18). Such was the case with the Irish crochet lace jacket when this research began – the artefact was well-preserved yet detached from how it functioned or what it symbolized within its time.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

This article was researched and written to the standards of Intellect's Ethical Guidelines: https://www.intellectbooks.com/ethical-guidelines. No approvals or subject consent were required.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

FUNDING

The Friends of the LSU Textile & Costume Museum funded photography for this research.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Strzynski, Morgan R. and Mamp, Michael E. (2024), 'In search of Irish crochet lace: An object-based inquiry', *Clothing Cultures*, 11:2, pp. 183–201, https://doi.org/10.1386/cc_00090_1

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