

NOTTINGHAM LACE: textile heritage and authentic voices

Facilitators

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Abstract

The workshop will discuss intangible heritage within the context of Nottingham lace recognising the symbiosis between the worker and the machine which has been noted since its invention in the early 19th century. The machines require a highly skilled operator, usually having trained for several years, and many of the processes both pre and post the lace manufacturing stage (such as bobbin winding or mending) still need to be carried out by hand, again, by skilled workers. This symbiosis between twisthand/craftsman and machine as well as multiple processes and people demonstrates the distribution skills and the harmony with which this team are required to operate to manufacture lace. In addition Fisher and Botticello(2018) highlight, that Leavers lace machines were all hand built, meaning that no two machines were the same. In interviews and oral histories that we have gathered twisthands all give testimony to the idiosyncrasies of individual machines. ‘They was hand made, you couldn’t take a cam off one and put it on another. Everything was individually made’ (Joe 6th September 2019 interview). The skill required here in understanding each machine’s differences and devising methods to accommodate them is more ‘akin’ to the craftsman Fisher and Botticello (2018) describe: ‘what appears to be simply ‘factory work’ but is in many ways more akin to contemporary craft production’

Introduction

This workshop will offer an opportunity to discuss issues of intangible textile heritage from different perspectives and practices within a global context. We note the definitions surrounding intangible heritage as defined by UNESCO (<https://ich.unesco.org/en/traditional-craftsmanship-00057>) and the associated craft ‘safeguarding’ list which includes several textile traditions related to weaving, embroidery and lace making from Bangladesh to Indonesia. However, in this context we are interested to explore and discuss intangible heritage from the perspective of post-industrial textile heritage, where skills and knowledge are not necessarily bound by cultural traditions, nor do they necessarily reside in individual artisans. In this context they form part of manufacturing systems initiated, in many cases, in the 19th century, and of which Fisher and Botticello (2018) assert that skills and knowledge ‘are not bound within an individual but are distributed among social actors, material objects and locales’. Therefore, while the context may differ, the focus on skills and knowledge run parallel to the crafts maker and we acknowledge Ingold’s (2018) perspective that ‘Skills are about going along with things - about responding to things and being responded to’ and Sennet (2008:9) who argues that craft explores the ‘dimensions of skill, commitment and judgement in a particular way. It focuses on the intimate connection between hand and head’.

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Nottingham Lace Heritage

Lace making as a machine manufacturing process has been significant to Nottingham since the mid 18th century, having developed from a 16th century invention, the stocking frame,

invented by William Lee in Nottinghamshire in 1589. The stocking frame, a knitting machine, was adapted and enhanced and eventually in 1760 was able to create a net fabric. This ‘point net’ was then hand embellished by circa 75,000 hand embroiderers from across the region,

known as ‘runners’ (Mason, 2013 p.14). However, innovations of this continued to explore methods for recreating the twisting of thread to replicate the processes involved in hand made lace, eventually this was successful and ‘Nottingham Lace’, as it became known, was born. Nottingham lace was in reality made across the region of the East Midlands in the UK but was so called to identify its unique qualities as a manufacturing process based on the twisting of thread, as opposed to the knitted variation which interloops threads (or in warp knitting uses the loop and the warp (knit and weave) together or indeed the embroidered variation on a net base or cut away from a backing cloth. The key developments in defining a specific fabric called Nottingham Lace were John Heathcoat’s work in Loughborough, Leicestershire in 1808 whereby a net was created by twisting threads, followed by John

Leaver’s developments in 1813 in Nottingham with what was known as the Leavers Lace machine. These technological innovations meant that for around a century and a half Nottingham became the global centre of the machine-made lace industry.

Production of lace was expanding rapidly in the region, so much so that in the mid 19th century ‘hundreds of mechanics’ were attracted into the Nottingham area to work (Mason, 2010) and at its height, in the early 20th century, the industry employed around 60,000 people (Mason, 2013) and was selling approximately £5 million of lace (equating to £600 million today (Bank of England, 2020)) (Mason, 2014). This focus on innovation in technology does not appear to have been matched by its approach to design and Nottingham was initially dependent on imported fabrics from France which they adapted and modified. Roles for designers began to appear slowly, and in 1828 there were eight listed in Nottingham (Jones, 1993).

A Governmental Select Committee was established in the mid 1830s to address the concern over the loss of overseas markets despite the technical excellence of British products and concluded that investment in British design education was required to enable British products to prosper at home and abroad. Therefore during the rapid expansion of this industry, the simultaneous emergence of design education in the city also grew and in 1843 the Government School of Design in Nottingham was formed, followed by a purpose-built art school in 1865. The relationship between the school and the lace industry at this time is evident through the donations, support and its governance, the first President was Richard Birkin, prominent manufacturer in the city (Jones, 1993).

Despite the rapid growth of the machine-made lace industry during the 19th century to its height around 1907 with 60,000 workers, it began to suffer from a lack of interest from consumers. The changing role of women from the period of the 1st world war had impacted upon dress styles, and democratisation through machine-made lace had made a once exclusive luxury commodity affordable, but ultimately created market saturation and therefore affected desire. By 1924 the workforce had reduced to 17,000 (Mason, 2010).

However, cultural and political changes also affected the hand made lace industry and the Manchester Guardian reported in 1925 the closure of a Court lace makers, reporting that it was ‘destroyed by the fall of thrones, the changes of fashion, the distribution of wealth, new industrial conditions and the compulsory education system’ (Guardian Archive, 2020). From this point onwards the lace industry went into steady, but permanent decline. Now, in 2020, we

find that there is only one business left in England, based in the East Midlands, manufacturing Nottingham Lace and employing a small team of highly skilled and knowledgeable people (Briggs-Goode and Donovan, 2017).

It is in this context of the shift between global leader in lace manufacturing, through decline and eventual collapse in the late 20th Century and the tensions this brings that we are interested in exploring more widely. This collapse left communities not only bereft of their livelihood but also their identities as industrial citizens within a cohesive society. From prior and ongoing work with Nottingham lace communities the team established that an overriding theme is one of feeling that aside from a few examples of “ambient heritage” (Samuels 1994) evidence of this manufacturing within the city has all but disappeared. Alice Mah (2012) explains that the redundant workers of formerly successful industries are often thought of as ‘losers’ or the ‘waste’ products of the capitalist driven ‘creative destruction’ processes from which urban regeneration emerges. The research team looked to the concepts of ‘Intangible’ and ‘unauthorised heritage’. Developed by leading heritage scholar

Professor Laura Jane Smith these concepts challenge the primacy of ‘authorised’ heritage and explain that the privileging of monuments, buildings and artefacts deemed worthy of preservation and edification prioritised narratives of power, thus denying other, non- sanctioned narratives (Smith, 2006). Smith argues that since those without power or privilege tend to leave few, if any ‘valuable’ material artefacts, their narratives are considered to lack significant meaning so are therefore dismissed, overlooked and unacknowledged. She argues for the recognition of non- material heritage, that is, ‘unauthorised’ and ‘intangible’ heritage to be recognised as equal in value to that of the ‘authorised’ and ‘tangible’.

Nichola Burton will present findings from her current PhD research project: Women and Lace: Social Change and Lace Design Education in Post-war Nottingham. Burton has embarked upon using an oral history methodology for interviewing workers from the lace industry in the post war period. The focus is upon the educational strategies which were initiated to produce designers for the industry and has illicited some fascinating testimony.

Tonya Outtram who has recently begun a PhD but prior to this was a Research Fellow on Textile Tales a Heritage Lottery Funded project (www.textiletales.co.uk). The aim of Textile Tales was to ensure that while we recognise that the East Midlands, UK was instrumental in beginning of the textile industry through the invention of cotton spinning and the mills of the Derwent Valley, little is known or has been collated about the decline of the textile industry in the East Midlands in the 1980s onwards. Therefore, the project sought to capture the stories of people who worked in the industry during this period, shining a light on their experience and preserving them through recordings of their oral testimony of their lived experiences.

This workshop will utilise the heritage of the Nottingham lace industry as a case study to initiate dialogue about other manufactured textile products in other regions across the globe. Leading to discussion about how IFFTI could, through its members, develop dialogue about textile heritage and how research and practice in higher education can support awareness and provide examples to ensure that craft practices are valued, maintained and are used for future.

The workshop will include:

A presentation on the history of Nottingham lace 5-10 minutes Amanda Briggs-Goode Objects will be shown from the archive 10 minutes Gail Baxter

A presentation from Doctoral candidate Nichola Burton 15 minutes A presentation from Doctoral candidate Tonya Outtram 15 minutes Discussion for 40 minutes will address:

- Establish participants interest in intangible heritage
- Explore examples from of traditional crafts or other post-industrial contexts
- What research projects are IFFTI members are aware of?
- What archives and collections do IFFTI members hold?
- Could there be collaborations to explore these ideas through research, practice or a network or special interest group via IFFTI?

At the end of the workshop there will be opportunities for small groups to visit the archive

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Oral history interviews with Joe for the Textile Tales project recorded 2019

Data Availability Statement

All recordings from the Textile Tales Project are available for public access at the East Midlands Oral History Archive, based at University of Leicester.

Some clips from these are also available to listen to on the project website: www.textiletales.co.uk