

ORIGINS OF ARAN KNITTING



Rohana in her studio working on a painting for her website

When I applied for a Churchill Travelling Fellowship in 1983, I was a lecturer in art and knitwear design at the then Manchester Polytechnic. In those days, there were no inspiring textbooks on hand-knitting as it was considered boring and old-fashioned and the obscure origins of this craft were so shrouded in mystery I felt unable to give my students the information they needed. It was therefore really thrilling to be awarded my Fellowship and to have the opportunity to travel to investigate these matters for myself. After travelling to Norway to explore Scandinavian folk art and textiles

which featured some similarities to the structure of traditional Aran knitting I journeyed to Ireland. Here I visited the sites of prehistoric stone carvings, museums containing exquisite artefacts and textiles and convents displaying intricate lacework before my travels culminated in my exploration of the Aran Isles.

Here I met Mary Dirrane, an Irish lady from Inishmore who told me how in 1906 her mother Mairead had travelled to Boston, USA with her friend Maggie O'Toole, where she learned new hand-knitting skills from European immigrants. In 1908 she decided to return to Inishmore, where she showed the new patterns to her neighbours and so helped to develop the simple knitting designs of traditional fishermen's jerseys, gloves and socks made from the local undyed 'bainin' homespun wool. From these early experiments the Irish Aran knitting industry evolved and I made sure this information was safely recorded in the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin.



A bike leaning against a wall in Inishmore I photographed on my travels

On my return I wrote and illustrated my book IRISH KNITTING which contains 24 original garment designs inspired by my journeys. These were influenced by the amazingly beautiful art work I saw on my travels and not least by the stunning Irish landscape. Published by A & C Black in 1991 this created a great deal of interest in the media and I was interviewed by Irish RT radio and invited to appear on the TV programme This Morning to discuss my Fellowship's discoveries. Later I gave numerous talks and demonstrations to a variety of community groups around the UK publicising the work of the Churchill Trust. And I was able to share my experiences with design students at the college as the book became a standard text book in universities internationally. I also expanded my own freelance work for national magazines and design companies and I'm sure my Fellowship contributed to my own artistic development.

Later I trained in medicine, using my art and craft skills to help patients in Macclesfield Hospital in Cheshire. Here I worked for over 20 years as a member of a rehabilitation team working with the occupational therapists in the Psychiatric Units, the Orthopaedic and Stroke Wards and with long stay patients. Even terminally ill and suicidal patients told me how much they valued the arts and crafts sessions we offered them. I also worked for a variety of community groups for the charity Age UK where the creative activity sessions in East Cheshire that I organised were much appreciated.

I've now retired from the hospital and Age UK and am currently developing my own website where my best work can be seen, and exhibiting in international on-line art shows. My Fellowship has helped to foster a life-long love of craftwork, art and design and I've attempted to share this with others.



Rohana wearing the cover design from her book IRISH KNITTING

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