

Linen from County Derry goes far afield

“Knowing the Hands that touched it”

“Is Irish Linen making a comeback? Will flax fields in bloom be seen all over again?”

Questions like these are being asked more often these days – by visitors from abroad and by local people.

“
Deborah Toner is one of the best crafters I have met in my life as a weaver. Her product is of superb quality, she is flexible and very hard working.
-Marion Baur”

While the former “heart – lands” of Ireland’s most known and most liked product, Belfast and the Counties Armagh and Down are still far too quiet, the industry diminished, the North – West is experiencing an up-turn, not big yet but noticeable.

The weavers at Derrylane Flax Mill are playing a role in this development as are the finishers at Ireland’s oldest linen mill in Upperlands and a growing number of textile – crafters, tailors, dressmakers and upholsterers who use the fabric. They are fully in trend, many top fashion designers the world over have incorporated linen back into their creations.

On these shores one of the most profiled young makers who was show - cased for Northern Ireland last year, is Belfast based Deborah Toner. She uses her architectural skills in tandem with her unique embroidery. From her workshop in East Belfast, she spoke exclusively to the County Derry Post.

Q. Linen woven and finished in County Derry is making more and more of an impact in the world of textile- design and -making, both here and further afield. Maria Cardenas (Colombia/Co. Down), Chris Tyndal (Belfast), Fiona Smyth



– Mc Andrew (Limerick), Lynn Hulse (London), Ina O’Lohan (Dublin), Sinead Black (Hollywood) – the list of top makers/designers who are using linen from the Roe – Valley is growing. You are certainly one of the most profiled and – by your work – unique ones amongst them. Why linen and why linen made at the Flax Mill?

A. My interest came about in a strange way. When studying to be an architect I became fascinated with what we call “City Housing Patterns”. The mill housing areas attracted me particularly – large housing areas around large – scale – work and as a result large communities with the place of production in the heart.

Through research on these I

learned about the essence: Belfast, my city of birth, turned into the huge industrial hub because of linen manufacturing, this influenced the whole country, the complete product from flax to the finished product was made here. I learned about linen through my education as an architect, grew to love the fabric: It’s durable, strong and versatile, has many uses including building products.

Bruce Clark introduced me to Marion Baur. I immediately felt her passion for keeping alive the very essence this country has been built on, I understood her journey, I share her commitment and I love the superb quality of her product. She takes you with her, goes into every detail, you know the hands that touched the

linen you use – nothing else would do for my work now.

Q. How does a qualified architect end up as one of the country’s best-known embroiderers? Is there a connection between the two professions?

A. A good question – I qualified in the middle of the recession and there simply were no jobs for architects. During my final thesis one of the tasks was to make 6 machine-embroidered maps which were to show the change of Belfast.

During my graduation – celebration, somebody from the Ulster Museum approached me and wanted to buy the maps. This fostered the idea that there is more to changing draw-

ings into embroidered pieces.

You may say that was the birth of my picture-embroidery or architectural embroidery.

Textiles had been a great hobby of mine, now the hobby has turned into the career and I can merge my two professions.

Q. Last year you were chosen to show – case Northern Ireland at the huge “Show Case Ireland” trade show in Dublin’s RDS. How did that feel, how did you get chosen and most importantly: Did it have an influence on your business?

A. It felt nerve-racking to be honest with you. It’s hard to go and put your business on show in any case – never mind at such a huge scale.

I had applied to “Craft NI” and was selected to go together with a small group of other crafters.

The effect on my business was huge; customers at the event come from literally all over the world. I got lots of work from them, still do now. You need a very good product at large – scale events like this but it’s very rewarding to have your stuff going all over the world.

Q. The owner of your cloth – supplying mill, Marion Baur, has been in the fore-front of people who are trying to bring the “from flax to linen cycle” back here on a larger scale. Do you see that as “wishful thinking” or do you think the blue ocean of flax – fields in bloom will be seen again by many in the near future? What is the future for linen and products made from it?

A. I don’t think this is wishful thinking at all!

Marion’s work is as incredible as is her fore-sight and commitment. The “small army” supporting her is growing, (I’m one of them, no doubt). We are talking to people, educating them. Bringing a broken cycle like this back isn’t easy, needs many people supporting it and needs politicians who lend support of course. We have to embrace the development carefully – then the flax-fields and with them many more sustainable jobs will be dominant again.

Besides using linen from the Roe Valley only, I want to tell you about a little personal contribution for next year, I haven’t talked about in public - I have a large garden at the back of my building – it will turn into a small flax field in the coming spring!

Questions by Hermann Glaser – Baur

