

Conflict textiles included in the new gallery 'Collecting the Troubles and beyond' at the Ulster Museum

By Dr Karen Nickell

The original Troubles Gallery at the Ulster Museum was a text and image based exhibition - a 'news' style approach to the conflict that was as boring as it was inoffensive. However, over the last few years there has been an increasing willingness within society to examine the troubles from multiple perspectives and an exhibition 'Art of the Troubles' at the Ulster Museum in 2014 was a significant cultural opportunity to encourage open public discussion about the past and differing memories. I noticed that while the symbolism of cloth was highly evident in a lot of the work none of the artworks were textiles so as part of the lecture programme accompanying the Art of the Troubles I gave a public lecture on 'Troubles Textiles'. These textile responses to the Troubles were predominantly made by women and therefore added another voice to the history of a period that has been largely dominated by men. Many of the textile artefacts I studied were part of the Conflict Textile collection, curated by Roberta Bacic, and we both felt it was important that a few representative pieces should be included in the mainstream narrative and archived in museum collections. Roberta Bacic has worked tirelessly over many years to bring these textiles to the attention of the public, academics and institutions and in the last few years has collaborated with Karen Logan, curator of the new gallery 'Collecting the Troubles and Beyond' resulting in the inclusion of several conflict textiles in the new exhibition. There are many other community-made banners and quilts such as those made by 'Women Together' and it is my hope that some of these will also be archived in permanent public collections and preserved for the future – they are visual artefacts laden with stories and seldom heard voices.

'Collecting the Troubles and Beyond' is a permanent exhibition exploring Northern Ireland's history throughout the period of the 'Troubles' and in the 20 years since the Good Friday Agreement, contextualised by what was happening in society and the wider world. The new gallery offers a diverse, inclusive, thought provoking collection of artefacts and memories that is of interest to both locals and visitors. It is a living collection and community involvement is welcomed so the exhibition will evolve as people contribute their own personal objects, photographs and stories. As an on-going exhibition the collection contains material reflecting the concerns of the present day such as flag protests, the campaign for equal marriage and Brexit.

The way the Troubles are set in context of what was happening in society and the wider world is effective. I have visited the exhibition on several occasions and each time have struck up conversations with fellow visitors; the way the exhibition is arranged, with the juxtaposition of key events and the ordinary life portrayed in many of the photographs, encourages the recollection and sharing of memories which adds another layer to the narrative.

The objects on display are diverse, from Dame Mary Peter's Olympic gold medal and a Spitting Image puppet to a pipe bomb and a bomb disposal robot. The textiles selected for inclusion are Irene MacWilliam's four panel 'Peace Quilt (Common Loss)' made of 3,161 scraps of red fabric, each one representing a person killed during the Troubles between 1969 and 1994 and Sonja Copeland's panel 'No going back' made in 2009 when a number of killings threatened peace - it depicts a cross-community protest against violence at Belfast City Hall. Looking below the surface of these textiles reveals another narrative. MacWilliam's was made in 1994, when there was a cease-fire (though it later broke down) and Copeland's was made in 2009 (eleven years after the Good Friday Agreement). So while history may record the 'Troubles' as the period 1968-1998, we in Northern Ireland know that it is an altogether more complex history – the Troubles and Beyond Gallery successfully embraces this complexity, the need to understand it in context and the richness of multiple voices.



A special opening event was held on Tuesday 22nd May for all those who have been involved with Conflict Textiles collection. Karen Logan gave a guided tour of the new gallery. From left Valerie Wilson, Karen Nickell, Roberta Bacic, Sonja Copeland, Irene MacWilliam.

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