

Original description of the Story Cloth “Tip O’Neill” provided by Lisa Raye Garlock, February 2023

Title of Textile: Tip O’Neill

Maker: Lisa Raye Garlock

Country of Origin: USA

Year Produced: 2023

Size: 18in (w) x 22in (h) / 45cm x 55cm

Materials: Recycled and/or hand-dyed fabrics and threads (cotton, linen, silk, wool), Irish linen, ties (provided by family), hand printed fabric, felt

Type of Textile: Story cloth

Description

Thomas Phillip “Tip” O’Neill was many things: Irish American, politician, Speaker of the US House of Representatives, coalition builder, father, husband, friend, and advocate for working people. This story cloth reflects aspects of the man that informed his friendship with John Hume and working for peace in Ireland. Tip O’Neill learned from Hume that peace was a complex and long-term process. O’Neill died before seeing the process come to fruition and the changes that shaped the current relationship between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

This textile is one of three, so far, in a Peace Makers series, commissioned through Roberta Bacic with the support of the John Hume and Thomas P. O’Neill Chair in Peace. The artist, Lisa Raye Garlock, was intrigued by the project and subject, taking on the challenge with curiosity and excitement. Many quick internet searches for bits of information turned into deep dives into articles, historical documents and videos relating to Tip O’Neill, the Troubles, and the people working for peace in Ireland. Since O’Neill was best known in the US as a politician and Speaker of the House, as well as someone willing to stand up to President Reagan, it was harder to find specifics about his work for peace.

Lisa’s style of making story cloths entails piecing together different fabrics, creating a varied background. In this cloth, the background pieces represent various aspects of O’Neill’s life and times. The center bottom area, where “all politics is local” represents bricks, building blocks for structures. Tip’s father was a bricklayer, and laid the groundwork for his son’s belief in listening to his neighbors, his constituents, and working for stronger communities and country. His “all politics is local” became ubiquitous, and in the words of writer Charles P. Pierce, “...it has been repeated so often that it ought to be stitched on a sampler and hung on the wall of the common room...”

To the artist, the cloth overall feels very male, and that was intentional. However, the small felted piece near the center represents O’Neill’s wife, Millie. It sounds like she was the anchor

of the family, raising their five children, running the household mostly on her own so that Tip could do his high level political work. It brought to mind the proverb, “Behind every good man is a great woman.” The role of women is usually understated, invisible, unacknowledged and taken for granted. Placing this piece almost in the center is honoring the importance of women and their work. Additionally, the oak leaf above and to the left, is a homage to Deborah Stockdale and her portrait of John Hume. In her piece, it represents Hume’s family and five children. The oak leaves also connect Hume and O’Neill in terms of heritage, family and peace work.

In the top left corner is the silhouette of “Hands Across the Divide” by Maurice Harron (1992) in Derry, N. Ireland. It is sewn onto Irish linen, and in the cloth, represents the peace process, hopes for the future, and the compromising that must happen for people to get along. Below that are pieces of 2 of O’Neill’s ties, courtesy of his son, Tom O’Neill, one of which is specific to an important place in his life—Cape Cod, MA. The gray fabric with rainbow stitching is a shout out to O’Neill’s granddaughters, who continue his legacy of public service.

In the bottom right corner is the outline of four horses. This represents the Four Horsemen, a nickname given to Tip O’Neill, Edward Kennedy, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and Hugh Carey, all of whom stood for a constitutional peace process in Ireland, backing the beliefs of John Hume. Perhaps more importantly, this image represents coalitions, the coming together of people to make change, something that O’Neill worked hard for throughout his career. He was famous for working to make things happen, reaching across the aisle, compromising and standing up for what he believed, even if that made him unpopular.

The portrait of O’Neill is inspired by a photograph by an unknown photographer. To the artist, the photograph captures many layers of Tip O’Neill—gravity, concern, knowledge, curiosity, and compassion—which she wanted to also convey in stitches. The small portrait of O’Neill and Hume to the left is from a photo of them taken together in Ireland. Their age difference is noticeable, yet the enthusiasm, exuberance and determination comes through in the image. The embroidered image represents their friendship and the work they did together.

The “bullets and bombs are not the answer...” quote was found in the online Reagan Library, and is from a short speech supporting the continuation of the peace process by the meeting of the Taoiseach of Ireland and the British Prime Minister in November, 1985. There are three embroidered red lines—two on the gray and black section representing the Troubles and one at the bottom of the piece. These lines represent the blood spilled and lives lost before and during the peace process, important history to acknowledge and remember.

Sources:

Arthur, P. (nd). The conflict: An expert’s view on the crucial elements, drawn from the Frontline/BBC interview for “Behind the Mask.”

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O'Neill, R. (2016). Thomas P. 'Tip' O'Neill, Jr.: The honor of public service. In Peacemaking in the twenty-first century. (Eds: J. Hume, T.G. Fraser, L. Murray). Manchester University Press.

Pierce, C. (2015). Tip O'Neill's idea that all politics is local is how democracy dies.

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