

Conference Review: The Amazing Lace Symposium 2025

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To cite this article:

Morris, Samantha (2026). Conference Report: The Amazing Lace Symposium 2025, *Irish Journal of Arts Management & Cultural Policy*, 12(1), 41 – 45.

Published online:

January 2026

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Abstract

The Amazing Lace Symposium 2025, held in Limerick, Ireland, examined lacemaking as a cultural practice that bridges historical traditions and contemporary innovation. The event, themed “Connections”, brought together artists, lacemakers, and academics to examine how lacemaking links traditions, communities, and practices, connecting practitioners across the island of Ireland and fostering global relationships among lacemakers worldwide. The event was supported by Limerick City and County Council through the Festivals and Events Scheme, the Design and Crafts Council of Ireland through the Network Support Scheme, and Creative Ireland through the Creative Communities on a Shared Island programme. The symposium comprised two parts: a morning session featuring talks and presentations, followed by afternoon workshops and small-group discussions (this review focuses on the morning session). This review article argues that lacemaking intertwines tradition with personal and communal meaning, demonstrating that lacemaking is not static but rather a dynamic practice that is continuously being reinterpreted by makers.

Keywords: lacemaking; living heritage; embodied knowledge; cultural connections.

Conference Report: The Amazing Lace Symposium 2025

Introduction: Crafting living heritage

Organised by ‘Friends of Lace Limerick’ and held at The Absolute Hotel, the *Amazing Lace Symposium 2025* brought together national and international contributors to explore the historical and contemporary significance of lace and lacemaking. Anchored by the theme of ‘Connections’, the symposium highlighted how lacemaking serves as a thread linking people, communities, and traditions across time. Lacemaking is recognised as intangible cultural heritage, encompassing knowledge, skills, and meanings passed through generations (Smith, 2004). As living heritage, lacemaking represents cultural practices actively sustained, adapted, and reinterpreted by communities in the present (UNESCO, 2003).

In reflecting on the symposium, this review adopts a living heritage framework as a meaningful lens to explore/investigate lace as a dynamic cultural practice. This approach foregrounds the adaptability, social embeddedness, and ongoing relevance of lacemaking today (Akagawa, 2015; Harrison, 2013), inviting deeper appreciation of its cultural significance within both historical and contemporary contexts.

Recovering Histories: Limerick Lace

The symposium opened with two presentations focused on the history of Limerick Lace. Matthew Potter's *Florence Vere O'Brien and Her Era* examined Vere O'Brien's pivotal role in reviving the Limerick Lace industry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Drawing on extensive research (Potter, 2014), Potter demonstrated how lace functioned not only as a decorative craft but also as a socially embedded practice shaped by gendered labour, philanthropy, and entrepreneurial ambition (Adamson, 2004, Parker, 2010). In contrast, Sharon Slater's *The Women Who Wore Limerick Lace* drew on images from *The Gentlewoman* magazine (1890 - 1927) to explore lace as a material object through which social identities and cultural values were articulated. These photographs offer valuable insights into how lace was worn and perceived, revealing its role in shaping gendered and classed identities (Breward, 2003; McNeil and Karaminas, 2009). Together, these papers illustrated how historical research not only reconstructs past practices but also enriches our understanding of lacemaking as a form of living heritage (Smith, 2006). These histories are not fixed or rigid; rather, they actively inform and shape contemporary cultural identities and practices.

Lacemaking as an embodied practice

A central theme of the symposium was 'embodied knowledge', and this was seen in Jack Ó Meara's paper *Threading the Needle* (Ingold, 2000). Ó Meara recounted his journey of learning traditional Irish lace, beginning with the challenges of learning this specialised craft during his final year at the National College of Art and Design. His ongoing apprenticeship with lacemaker Fiona Harrington, as part of the Homo Faber Fellowship, foregrounded the combination of technical precision and emotional labour required to master the craft (Adamson, 2007; Parker, 2010). Ó Meara's paper demonstrated that lacemaking is acquired not through abstract instruction but via tacit, embodied knowledge, learned by repetition, observation, and sensory engagement (Dormer, 1997; Ingold, 2013). This perspective positions the lacemaker as both a skilled practitioner and as a custodian of heritage, sustaining craft knowledge through lived experience and shared making (Ingold, 2000; Taylor, 2003).

Memory, belonging, and place

Lace emerged repeatedly throughout the symposium as a medium through which memory and belonging are expressed and negotiated. This was strongly illustrated by Fiona O'Neill's *Threads of Belonging* project, which explores lacemaking as a transformative practice for connection and empowerment among women seeking asylum in Ireland. Reflecting on her experience teaching Irish crochet lace to female asylum seekers in Dublin, O'Neill framed lace as both a metaphorical and literal border, symbolising resilience, displacement, and the crossing of boundaries. Often dismissed as decorative edging, lace in this instance became a powerful metaphor for the precariousness and strength of lives lived at the margins. Through the act of weaving threads into intricate patterns, participants not only created objects of beauty but also reclaimed agency and fostered solidarity. O'Neill positions lace at the intersection of art, activism, and belonging, illustrating how living heritage practices can transcend borders and cultivate inclusion.

This thematic continuity was echoed in my own contribution, *Borris Lace: Stories Behind the Craft*, which presented ongoing PhD research conducted with the Borris Lacemakers in County Carlow. My work seeks to uncover the entangled memories, traditions, values, and aspirations embedded in the practice of Borris Lace. Drawing on theories of place as socially constructed and meaning-laden (Cresswell, 2004, Lippard, 1997), my paper positioned lacemaking as a way of knowing and making place, and showed how lace continues as a living heritage through community engagement. Together, these presentations affirmed that lace functions not merely as textile, but as a tactile archive of memory, a living heritage and storytelling medium that forges close connections between people and place.

Reinterpretation and sustainability: the contemporary turn

The symposium further explored lacemaking's contemporary relevance, particularly through artistic reinterpretation and environmental sustainability. Theresa Kelly's presentation, *Threads of Tradition: Early Carrickmacross Lace in Contemporary Practice*, demonstrated how early Carrickmacross techniques such as netting and appliqué inform her modern practice, blending tradition with contemporary design aesthetics (Adamson, 2021). Saidhbhín Gibson's presentation introduced her video piece *Perpetual Glow*, offering insights into the making and integration of needlepoint lace within her visual art practice. The lace embodies central themes in her work, especially the interconnectedness of humans with the more-than-human world, expressed through detailed, haptic processes. Gibson's intricate lacemaking transcends craft to become a form of storytelling that bridges human experience and environmental relationships, aiding our understanding of place and environment (Bender, 2001). Together, these contemporary explorations illustrate that living heritage is a dynamic process. Lace is not a static preservation but a critical practice that questions, adapts, and reinvents tradition (Adamson, 2018).

Transnational Threads: Lace Beyond Borders

Keynote speaker Paola Matteucci's presentation *Ars Panicalensis – Italian Embroidery on Net* offered an in-depth exploration of the rich Italian lace tradition rooted in Panicale, Umbria. She shared her personal journey learning this intricate art, exploring both historical legacy and unique characteristics of Italian embroidery on net. Matteucci highlighted her research into ancient stitches and their reinterpretation within contemporary design, demonstrating how traditional techniques continue to live and evolve through creative practice. Her presentation underscored lace's transnational nature, shaped by centuries of migration, cultural exchange, and adaptation. This illustrates how, through contact with other places, textile heritage resists static national boundaries, thriving instead through continual renewal. This global perspective echoes Brusius and Singh's (2018) call for heritage frameworks that foreground movement, circulation, and entanglement as central to understanding cultural practices. Craft knowledge, inherently mobile, travels through trade routes, colonial histories, and diasporic networks, accumulating new meanings and sustaining relevance across contexts.

Finally, Ann Keller's *Four Seasons of Lace Bookmarks* project further illustrates this vitality. Through collaboration with Slovenian lacemaker Simona Krajsek, Keller reflected on how engaging with lacemaking traditions abroad enriched her practice and personal growth. This intercultural exchange fostered mutual learning and extended Irish lace traditions beyond local settings, culminating in a publication celebrating lace as a living tradition, continuously adapted, shared, and revitalised.

Conclusion

Contributors to The Amazing Lace Symposium 2025 emphasized lacemaking as a skilled and evolving craft that connects historical techniques with contemporary practice. The event revealed lacemaking as a living heritage sustained through embodied knowledge, technical expertise, community engagement and creative innovation. As a craft, lacemaking intertwines tradition with personal and communal meaning demonstrating that lacemaking is not static, but a dynamic practice that is continuously being reinterpreted by makers.

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