



FOLKLIFE AT HOME

A SMITHSONIAN ACTIVITY GUIDE

STEPS THROUGH TIME

THE EVOLUTION OF WOMEN'S
IRISH DANCE COSTUMES

SMITHSONIAN
CENTER FOR
FOLKLIFE
& CULTURAL
HERITAGE

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A SMITHSONIAN ACTIVITY GUIDE

STEPS THROUGH TIME

THE EVOLUTION OF WOMEN'S IRISH DANCE COSTUMES

This lesson is designed for students in middle school and above.

READ

BEFORE WORKING ON THE ACTIVITY GUIDE,
READ *STEPS THROUGH TIME: THE EVOLUTION
OF WOMEN'S IRISH DANCE COSTUMES*

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WORDS TO KNOW

Ireland: An island sometimes referred to as the Emerald Isle. It is divided into the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Celtic: Relating to the Celts and today, generally referring to the languages and cultures of the Celtic Nations: Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Brittany, Cornwall and the Isle of Man.

Irish Dance: Made up of a group of traditional dances in a variety of forms including solo and group dances performed for competition, recreation, and performance.

Book of Kells: One of Ireland's national treasures. A complex and beautiful illuminated manuscript featuring the four Gospels of the New Testament. It contains old Irish art including Celtic knots. Produced sometime between the eighth and ninth century, it is now housed in Dublin's Trinity College.

High Crosses: Seen throughout Ireland, these heavily carved stone crosses were set in churchyards and at crossroads. Many featured biblical scenes and possibly were used to teach the Gospels.

Celtic Revival: a period in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which featured renewed interest in Celtic culture specifically literature, art, music, and language.

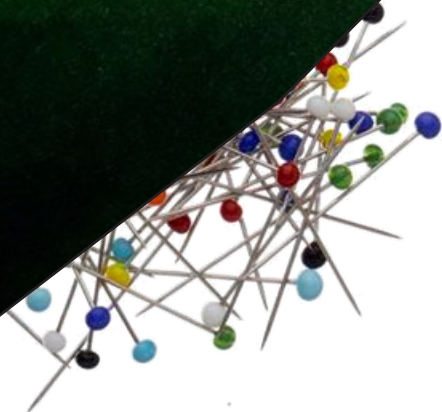
Gaelic League (Conradh na Gaeilge): Founded in 1893, a social and cultural organization promoting Gaeilge, the Irish language.

Feis: An Irish dance competition, meaning "festival" in Gaeilge. Plural form is feiseanna.

An Coimisum le Rinci Gaelacha (CLRG): Founded in 1927, responsible for standardizing Irish dance and helping to preserve its culture.

Family Crest: Sometimes referred to a shield of arms or coat of arms. Crests are used to identify families or individuals. Crests contain symbols, color schemes, and patterns, that hold specific meaning or character traits of one's heritage. They can say a lot about one's ancestry.

A HISTORY OF IRISH DANCING COSTUMES



Dresses designed by Phoenix Dress Designs

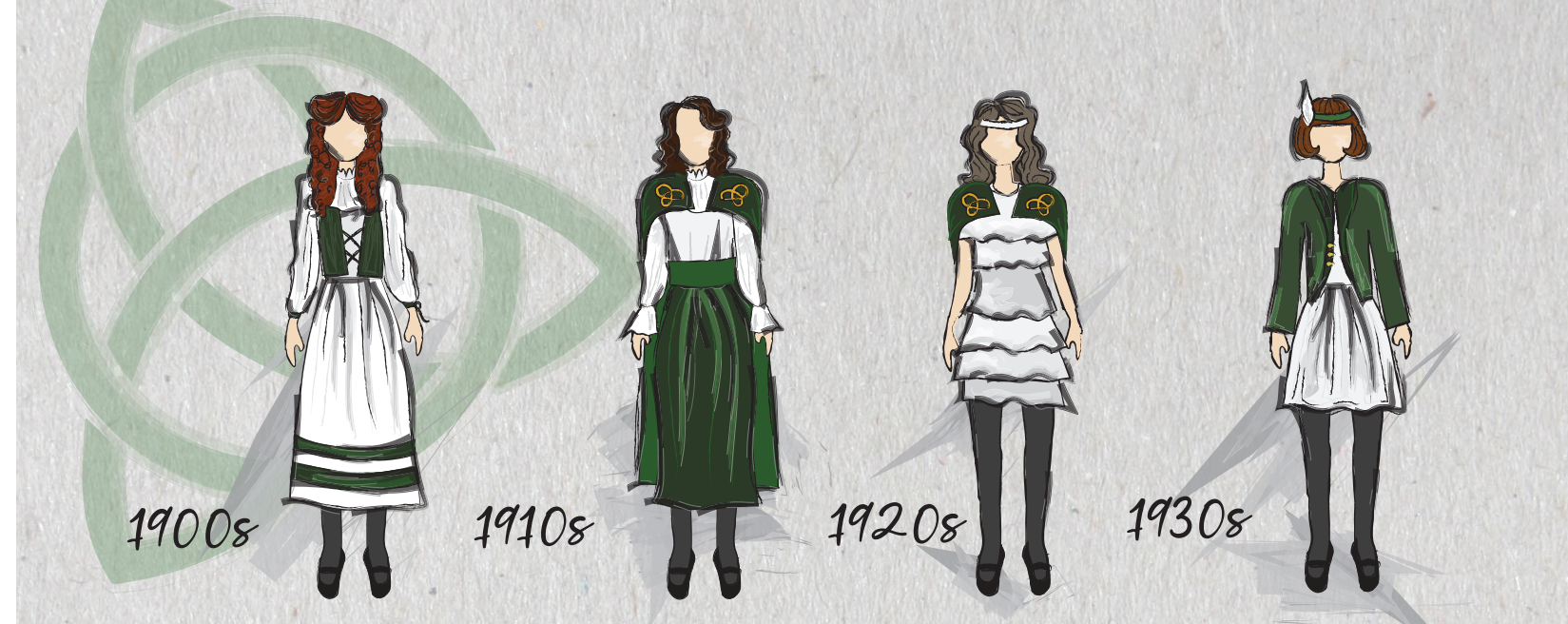


The Celtic Revival was a movement in Ireland during the turn of the twentieth century, a cultural period when the Irish flourished in the arts and developed a new sense of national identity. The Irish wore the Gaelic Revival costume, an outfit promoting their cultural pride and embroidered with Celtic designs. The designs were inspired by the illuminated art in the *Book of Kells* and other artwork made in the British Isles after the Roman occupation. Following the Easter Rising Rebellion of 1916, Ireland moved toward independence from the United Kingdom. The Gaelic Revival costume gained political meaning. From this costume, later stemmed a "New Irish Costume," consisting of a kilt and a military-style coatee with Celtic motifs. Elements of these costumes evolved into Irish dancing costumes.

Prior to the Revival, dancers had worn their "Sunday best" in competition. Some would hand embroider the trim of their



Dancers of Monaghan Men's Irish Dancing and their partners dancing the four-hand reel. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress



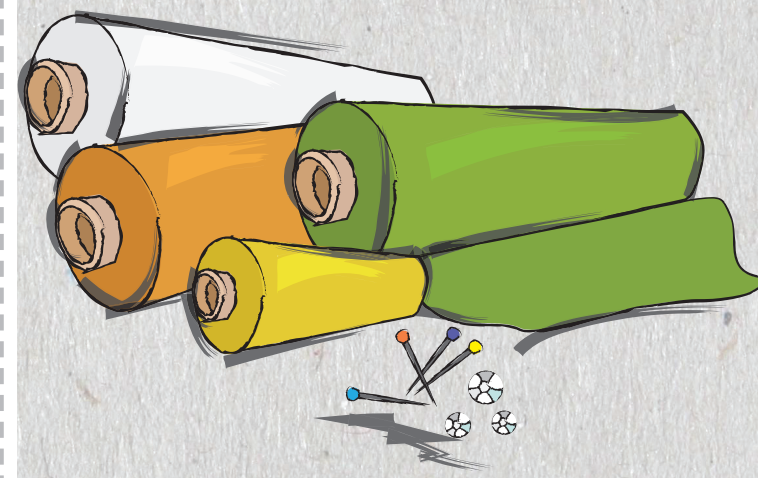
dresses and capes and curl their hair for mass. These traditions are still seen today but have changed form. Now, dresses are appliqued with complex embroidery and crystal embellishment. Capes, known as *brats*, are smaller now and pinned to the back of the dress. Women wear curly wigs instead of doing their own hair. The importance of appearance is very much linked to competition and has increased over time.

In the 1950s, the military edge of the Irish costume began to wear off. Dress designers made the dresses more feminine by introducing crocheted lace. In the 1950s, new machines allowed for more elaborate embroidery, especially on the trim.

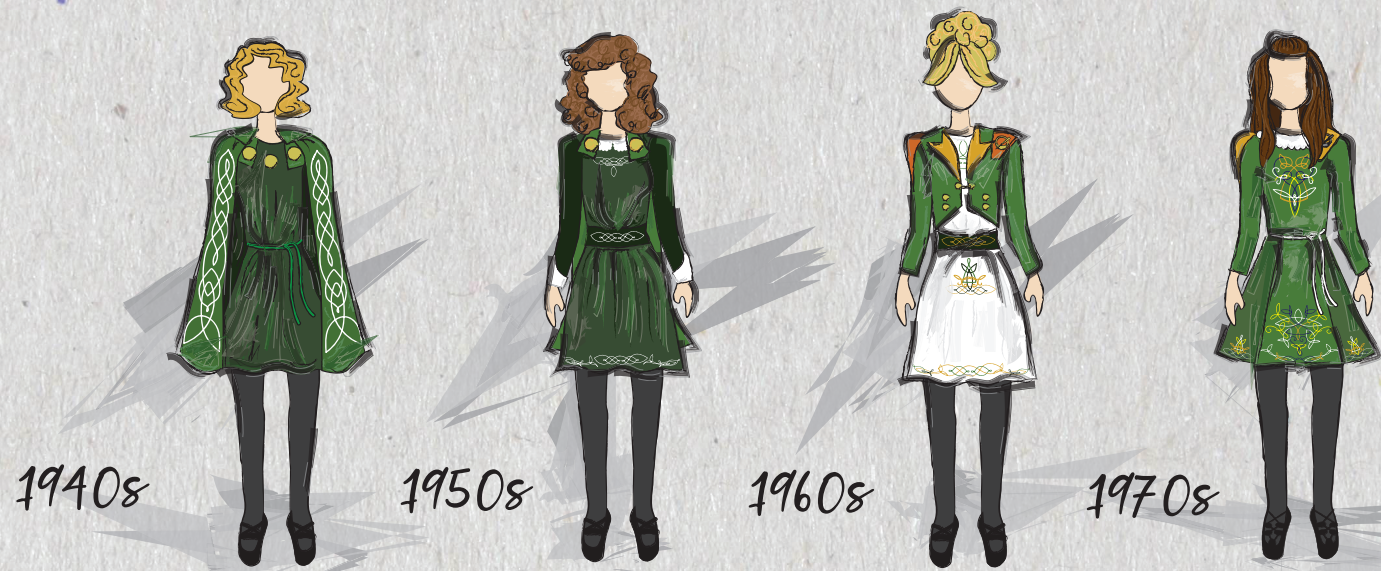
Prior to the 1960s, dancers, would wear a school costume consisting of a unique design specific to the dance school that identified them as a group. Because the 1960s saw an increase in participation and more dancers were competing, there became a greater need to stand out. It was no longer just about the steps. The solo dress was born, tailored to each dancer's individuality. It was believed that judges might purposely refuse to place more than one dancer from the same school on the podium in order to spread the winning around. Dancers learned to disguise themselves in a solo costume, unique to them. This is when Irish dance dressmaking really took off as an industry.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What are some of the symbols you might see on an Irish dance costume?
- How have the dresses changed over time? What are some of the differences and similarities?



Champion dancer Peggy O'Neill in 1940 winning the Scottish championship cup. Photo courtesy of Lauren O'Neill James



1940s

1950s

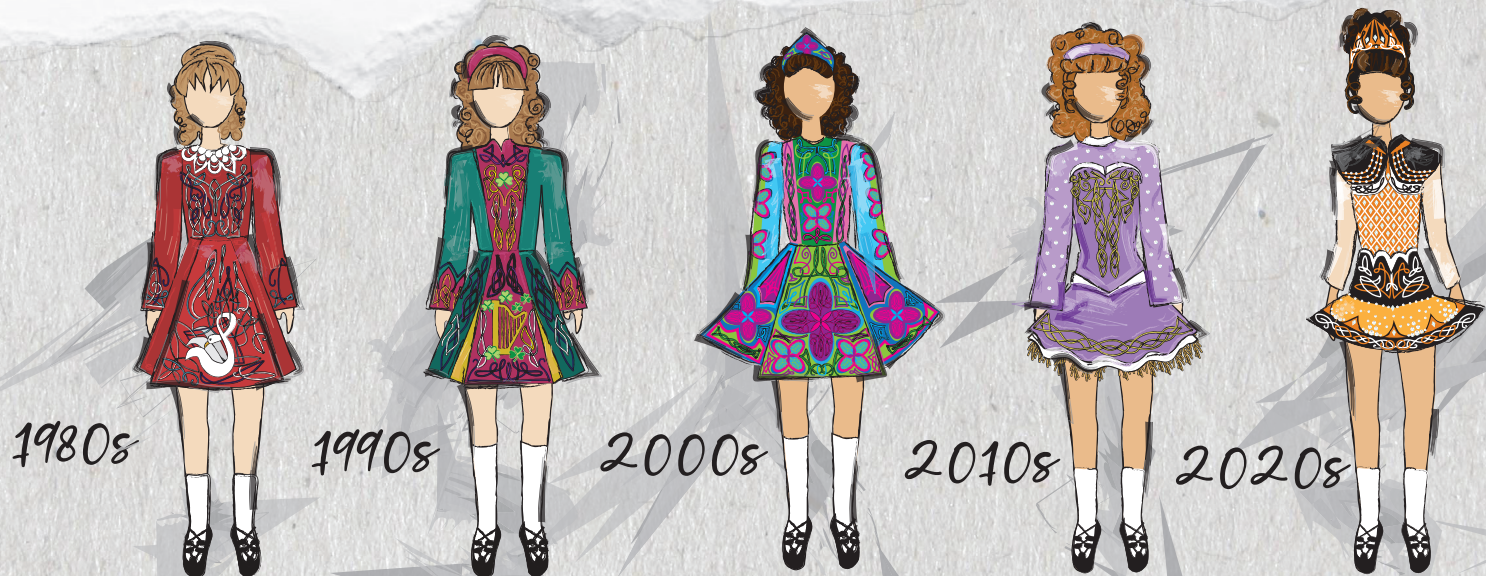
1960s

1970s

In the States, Irish dance boomed in the 1990s, largely due to dancer Michael Flatley and the stage show *Riverdance* which premiered in 1994 at the Eurovision Song Contest. Since then, the show has expanded and is still touring worldwide. *Riverdance* reinvigorated the Irish dance world. The dance was seen as modern, hip, and with this new perspective, came a wave of costume modernization. The Irish dance phenomenon demanded another expansion of the dressmaking and shoemaking industries.

Dress designers were forced to keep up both with demand and the latest trends. New fabrics were introduced in addition to metallics, sequins, and rhinestones. A material culture once based on traditions passed down through generations was transforming into one catering almost completely to the wants of the individual.

Today, advances in technology play a large role in dress designing. Some companies have implemented lighter, stretchier fabrics and employ silkscreened designs instead of heavier embroidery. The technology makes the dresses cheaper; however, some miss the beauty of applique work. As Irish dancing becomes more global, it will be interesting to see where dancers from other cultures take dress design.



1980s

1990s

2000s

2010s

2020s

DRESS TO IMPRESS

DESIGN YOUR OWN IRISH DANCE COSTUME

ACTIVITY

Create your own costume!

Design for a specific era or think about how the dresses might look in the future.



MATERIALS

- Costume template
- Scissors
- Glue
- Fabric, magazine clippings, tissue paper, or other materials
- Crayons, colored pencils, and/or markers



ARTS AND CRAFTS

CREATE A FAMILY CREST

The family crest or coat of arms originated in Europe in the Middle Ages, many scholars say in the 1100s. Originally, they were specific to knights. In battle, this made it easier to see who was whom. Passed down from generation to generation, descendants would sometimes add to the design.

Each crest is specific and unique with its own patterns and colors. Elements of the crest usually contain symbols that represent the family. Animals are common. The lion usually represents courage, and the salmon knowledge, traits that a family could be known for.

Many school dance costumes featured a crest. Although schools would not include their name as it would give away their identity, crests were not as recognizable. After solo costumes were created, many dancers wanted a custom-made costume with their family crest embroidered on it. Some dancers still do this, although it is not as common as it used to be. Some dancers sell their dresses after they have outgrown them, and those with crests do not resell.

ACTIVITY

There are specific components belonging to a crest as described on the next page. Although there are many family crests, not every family will have one. Be creative and make your own. You can research where your family is from or make a design based on what you know about your family. You can draw on the template or use it for reference and make your own.

MATERIALS

- Crest template
- Colored pencils, crayons, or markers

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Where do family crests come from and what importance do they hold?
- What can a crest say about a person's heritage?

The lion is one of the most well known symbols on a coat of arms. Regarded as the noblest of all wild beasts, it represents strength and courage.

Photo courtesy of Phoenix Dress Designs

Williamsburg, Virginia. The capitol of the Virginia colony during the eighteenth century. It features a coat of arms of George I of England above the ballroom wing of the governor's palace,

Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress



A **helm** rests below the crest but above the shield. It reflects the origins of heraldry. A crown could replace or accompany the helmet.

The **crest** is a symbolic object that sits atop of the coat of arms. It is usually an object or animal.

The **mantling** is a piece of cloth that flows out from the helmet or crown.. It was thought that the cloth protected a knight's armor.

A pair of **supporters**, people, or animals stand on either side of the shield and support it. They're typically a local or hereditary figure.

The **shield** is the center of the design

The **motto** is a saying displayed on a ribbon either below or above the rest of the design.



ARTS AND CRAFTS

WEAVE A CELTIC KNOT

The Celts were a collection of peoples from Central Europe who spread their culture and beliefs across Western Europe. Amongst the Celts, druids were high ranking religious, judicial and political leaders. To represent their world and beliefs, the druids created many symbols. In the early days of Christianity in Ireland, monks would use Celtic symbols familiar to Irish "pagans" in their attempts to convert them.

The meanings of these Celtic symbols were never recorded; however, as they have been passed down through time, their meanings have been interpreted. A common theme throughout is represented in threes. Examples include father, son, and holy spirit / earth, sky, and sea / past, present, and future, etc.

Dating back to the early third and fourth century, Celtic motifs such as La Tene spirals can be found carved in stone as found on the Kerbstone at Newgrange and the Turoe Stone in Ireland.

The *Book of Kells*, a ninth century illuminated Gospel book, one of the most beautiful ever created, is decorated with intricate knot work believed derived from Anglo-Saxon animal interlace. Though the Irish popularized knotwork, it appeared in the designs of contemporary cultures such as Byzantine, Islamic, and Coptic. Today, Celtic knotwork, continues as a defining characteristic of Irish-inspired weaving, crotchet, metalwork, jewelry and more.

During the time of the Celtic Revival, activists began working to form an Irish national identity. As part of this identity, they created what is known

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Why were/are Celtic knots so popular?
- Where did they originate from and how were they used in Ireland?
- What was the Celtic Revival and how did it affect Irish dance and material culture?



as the "Celtic Revival Costume." This code of dress was part of a perceived Irish Renaissance and was inspired by centuries old manuscripts such as the Book of Kells. The concept of an Irish costume evolved into Irish dancing costumes. Around the turn of the twentieth century, Ireland declared its independence from England, though the process did not become complete until 1949.

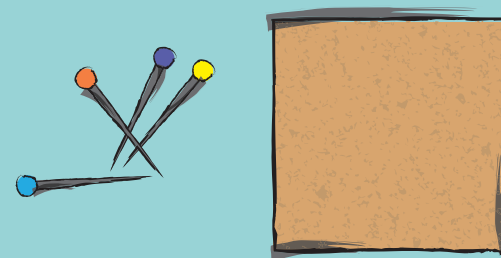
The traditional way of making Irish dancing costumes meant sewing them by hand. Passed down through the generations, women would learn how to sew Celtic designs from their mothers and grandmothers. Some even painted designs on their dresses. Today, Irish dance is big business, largely due to the phenomenon of Riverdance. Celtic motifs remain a significant element to the costume. Although styles and technology have changed, the dresses are still handmade and solo dresses are unique.

MATERIALS

Nylon, rope, or macrame string



Pins and corkboard (optional)



TIP

Use the pins and corkboard to secure your knot while weaving it between loops.

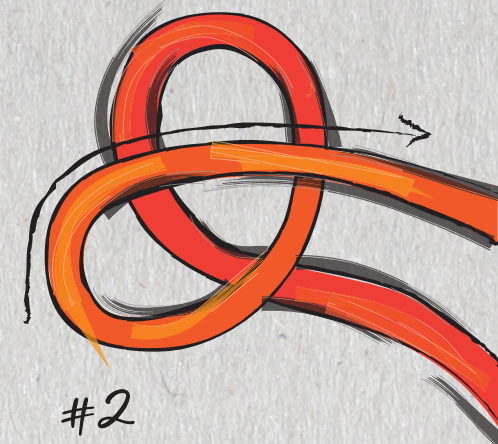
ACTIVITY

Using your materials, follow the directions below to weave a celtic knot.



#1

Make a loop



#2

Make another loop to the left. Cross the strand over the first loop.



#3

Using the strand on the right, make a third loop. This will go on the right side of the top loop. Weave the strand over the second loop and under the first loop.



#4

Pull the third loop strand through the top loop. Weave it over the second loop, under the first loop, and back over the bottom of the second loop.



#5

Pull the the ends of the strands tight and your knot is complete. You can make the design into jewelry or use it as an applique for your own outfit. If you use thick rope, you can use the pattern as a coaster or trivet.

DANCE IT OUT

LEARN THE BASIC “1,2,3’s” OF IRISH DANCING

Irish dance is a distinct form and its dancers are known for fast footwork, athleticism, and flexibility. Irish dance is an important part of the cultural heritage of Ireland. Much of Ireland’s cultural traditions come from the Celts and druids, pre-Christianity. There is evidence that Celts danced during religious ceremonies. In the eighteenth century, dance teachers travelled to different regions, teaching dance, and styles became more refined. These teachers would dance against each other, which is how dance competitions arose.

QUESTION TO CONSIDER

Think about how traditions are passed down. How has Irish dancing changed throughout the years? What is the same?



Point

Start with your right foot pointed in front of your left.



Hop

Lift the right leg and hop up (like you are skipping.)

1

Bring the right foot down and the left leg up.



2

Bring the left foot down as the right foot starts to come off the ground.



3

Place the front right foot down and bring the left leg back up



Repeat!

Repeat but use the opposite feet starting with the left foot in front this time.

LEGEND

There are a lot of misconceptions about Irish dancing. One of the main questions that dancers get asked is “Why the straight arms?” Unfortunately, no one actually knows. Several legends claim the English are to blame. Foreign occupation suppressed Irish culture, and dancing was banned. Some claim the Irish could dance with straight arms behind the windows of their homes. The rigid upper body tricked the English as they could not tell. A similar story is told but with Catholic priests in place of the English.

WATCH

Watch this video for a step-by-step tutorial on 1,2,3’s from the MJP Academy of Irish Dance



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