



EMBROIDERED CLOTHS

Christian Dupont compares two embroideries illustrating an enigmatic poem by WB Yeats from the collection of Burns Library at Boston College

From Sotheby's Yeats Family Collection sale last September, we added a second embroidery executed by Lily Yeats illustrating her brother's enigmatic poem *The Players Ask for a Blessing on the Psalteries and Themselves* to our own Yeats family and Cuala Industries collections in Burns Library.

WB Yeats wrote his choral invocation for Florence Farr, one of his early muses, on the eve of their joint performance at Clifford's Inn on 10 June 1902.

not music is their object' – neither plain chant nor recitation, but a new form of auditory poetics inspired by ancient bardic traditions.

At the time, the only visual image to stand in for the displacement of poetry from the page ('I naturally dislike print and paper,' Yeats ironically contended in the opening of his lecture) was Farr herself, with 'a beautiful stringed instrument upon her knee.' Decades later, however, some other inspiration led to the creation of not one, but two strikingly different interpretations of WB Yeats' tribute to Farr in embroidered cloth. Both were designed by the painter Brigid O'Brien Ganly for Lily's needle, and both incorporated Yeats' verse visually – apparently the only times Lily would stitch words into her art needlework. In 1929, Yeats commissioned

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To introduce their 'new art' to London audiences, Farr would 'lilt,' or rhythmically declaim lyric verses to notes she plucked on a psaltery crafted for her by Arnold Dolmetsch. Yeats would then praise her subtle skill in a programmatic lecture titled 'Speaking to the Psaltery,' in which he explained that 'poetry and

O'Brien to design Stations of the Cross for Lily to embroider on Irish silk poplin in a fashion reminiscent of the banners she helped the Dun Emer Guild create for Loughrea Cathedral at the turn of the century. In a similar style and probably around the same time, O'Brien also composed a grouping of three musicians playing lutes and lyres on an Irish hillside, the players wrapped in colourful cloaks and contemplative gazes, with the closing couplet of Yeats' poem wrapped around them: *'The proud and careless notes live on/But bless our hands that ebb away.'*

Yeats arranged such commissions to supplement his sister's income, as a thyroid condition sapped the energy she needed to supervise the embroidery section of Cuala Industries, forcing its closure in 1932.

Yet what inspired O'Brien to design a second, 'blackwork' version of the same couplet for Lily to embroider? The second composition places the three musicians on a Tuscan hillside, and the psaltery strummed by the central figure is clearly modelled on the one Dolmetsch designed for Farr, albeit upside down.

O'Brien spent much of 1933 in Italy, mainly Florence. Did she visit Yeats at Rapallo, or otherwise obtain his guidance? Was Yeats missing then his early muse, who had died during a self-imposed exile, of sorts, in Ceylon in 1917? Unlikely, perhaps, yet in the preface to his dramatic verse play, *The King of the Great Clock Tower*, printed by his other sister, Lolly, at the Cuala Press in 1934, Yeats recollected the aspirations that lay behind their collaborations. The proud and careless notes – the accidents of imperfect art – attain an incongruous immortality in Yeats' poetic vision. So, too, the embroideries produced by fragile hands that would soon ebb away, but not before Yeats himself. ■

This is the fourth in a series of articles on Burns Library and its collections that attempts to provide context for appreciating the work of Irish artists and their reception in America.

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1 LILY YEATS (1866-1949) and ROSE BRIGID GANLY (née O'BRIEN) HRHA (1909-2002) embroidered threads on green silk, c. 1929-1931 29x37cm Provenance: James Jaffe Rare Books, 2015; Whyte's 26 Nov 2012, Lot 56 Photo: Museum Textile Services

2 LILY YEATS (1866-1949) and ROSE BRIGID GANLY (née O'BRIEN) HRHA (1909-2002) embroidered threads on linen, c. 1935 38x27cm Provenance: Sotheby's London 27 Sept 2017, Lot 144; Anne Yeats Photo: Boston College Media Technology Services