Designing Ireland
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Researched and curated by Joanna Quinn

A Crafts Council of Ireland Exhibition for Cork 2005: European Capital of Culture
with the support of O'Callaghan Properties
Exhibition
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Curator: Joanna Quinn
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Special thanks to Jenny Trigwell, who entered into the detective aspect of this project, and to Paul Hogan for his personal contribution and assistance.
Kilkenny Design Workshops are often thought of as having been established on the recommendation of the Scandinavian Design Group, the team of design experts who visited Ireland in the spring of 1961 on the invitation of Córas Tráchtála Teo (CTT). They were not. The creator of the workshops was Mr W H Walsh, then general manager of CTT. The idea, breathtakingly ambitious as it seemed, to convert an abandoned stables turned grainstore into an internationally recognised design centre was his. It is doubtful if anyone else could have done it.

Mr Walsh had recognised early the importance of design for Irish manufacturers and the urgent need for improvement in design standards if exports were to prosper. However, official design promotion was the responsibility of the Arts Council since its establishment in 1951. Reflecting the view of design as applied art, the Act defined “the arts” as “painting, sculpture, architecture, music, drama, literature, design in industry and the fine arts and applied arts generally”.

The Arts Council responded to its brief by holding a series of design exhibitions, by awarding premiums for design and helping establish the Design Research Unit of Ireland (an offshoot of DRU in London). However, despite its best efforts, the Council was not equipped to build bridges to industry and in October 1960, at the direction of Taoiseach Seán Lemass, ceded responsibility for design promotion to Córas Tráchtála. This was later confirmed in the Export Promotion (Amendment) Act of 1967 which empowered CTT to:

(a) promote, assist and develop Irish industrial design and the improvement of the standard thereof
(b) advise the Minister on matters affecting or in any way connected with the promotion, assistance or development of Irish industrial design or improvement of the standard thereof

Armed with this mandate, Mr Walsh moved fast. He immediately established a design section within CTT, which became my responsibility, and undertook an active programme of promotion directly to industry, involving the payment of cost-sharing grants towards the employment of designers. Ireland

Introduction

Paul Hogan
was the first country in the world to do this, and in 1895 the Society of Designers in Ireland repaid a debt by conferring Honorary Life Membership on Mr Walsh stating that, “No one has done more to advance the status of design and designers in this country”. These grants were supported by a consultancy service to identify suitably qualified designers, many of whom came from abroad, and a series of exhibitions directed to different sectors of industry.

Mr Walsh’s next big idea was the survey by the Scandinavian service to identify suitably qualified designers, many of whom had established in the Old Town of Fredrikstad on Oslo Fjord. The very first activity in the still unrestored workshops was a textile seminar conducted by Professor Edna Martin from the Art and Design School in Stockholm. The first employee was Michael O Hilar, a young silversmith from County Down. Others followed and when a sufficiently large collection of designs based on the potential of Irish industry had been built up, the workshops were opened by Dr P J Hillery, then Minister for Industry and Commerce, in November 1965. It was a struggle to get to this point, particularly when dry rot was discovered in the main building, and several times the project was in danger. The support received from the Department of Industry and Commerce, in particular from the Secretary, J C B McCarthy and John Donovan, was vital in ensuring its survival.

The development of the workshops is chronicled elsewhere in this catalogue. The astonishing quantity and quality of its output is illustrated in the exhibition. However, mention should also be made of the huge change in the environment in which Kilkenny Design operated, in large measure brought about by its activities.

The workshops were set up at a time when good modern design was a rarity, when handicraft was dying, and when education for those wishing to become designers was clearly inadequate. Today, it is possible to find well-designed Irish products in most areas of manufacture. Where it is not, it is not because of a lack of design skill but of inability to compete with low-cost imports. There is a flourishing handicraftsmen industry sector. A self-sustaining design community, with trained and confident young designers, is capable of meeting all the needs of government, industry and commerce. The quality of Irish design is recognised overseas and the work of Irish designers included in museum collections.

The breakthrough in design education had to wait until the CTT-organised Industrial Design Education Seminar in Kilkenny in 1970. The following year a Bill was introduced by the government to reconstitute the National College of Art as the National College of Art and Design. Today, there are a dozen third-level institutions offering courses in design which experienced outside assessors have adjudged to be up to international standards. From the perspective of 50 years’ involvement in design, this transformation is nothing short of miraculous.

Of course, Kilkenny Design was not directly responsible for all of this but with CTT and Design in Ireland it opened a door and started a process which, step by step, led to two Design Councils, the establishment of the Crafts Council of Ireland, the National College of Art and Design Act, and the setting up of the Society of Designers in Ireland (now the Institute of Designers in Ireland).

The vital contribution of KDW was to set standards. Not just in design, where performance was monitored by a panel of experts from Ireland and abroad, but in packaging and presentation, retailing, and even in the culinary arts. Mr Walsh was a proponent of excellence and an implacable foe of the “sure it’ll do” strain of Irishness. KDW pioneered modern silverware, home furnishings, industrial design for high technology products and book design awards. Many independent designers and craftsmen got their start at Kilkenny Design. It was part of the style of the 1970s and its influence was often oblique. It helped Kilkenny rediscover itself through its Arts Week. It was responsible for enormous favourable publicity abroad.

It is right that Kilkenny Design Workshops should be the subject of an exhibition. It was an extraordinary institution and one which made a contribution quite disproportionate to the resources expended on it. The government’s investment has been returned tenfold in terms of altered attitudes, increased competitiveness in industry and heightened awareness of the environment.

The restored Ormonde stables alone are an enormous asset. It was a magic place and I am glad to have been a part of it.
In early February 1962 the Irish newspapers were full of indignant references to “invading... Norsemen” and “Godless Scandinavians.” The furore had been caused by the publication of a report by a group of Scandinavian designers invited the previous year to conduct a survey of the state of design in Ireland by William H Walsh, general manager of Córas Tráchtála Teo (CTT). The Design in Ireland report was published, 3 February, it was described as a “bombshell” by Senator E A McGuire, president of the Federated Union of Employers, in an interview with the Irish Press. The painter Sean Keating, a professor at the National College of Art, said in the same newspaper that it should not have been given to the press but seen only by those who requested it. Such responses were hardly surprising: the Scandinavian Group had been highly critical of design education in Ireland.

The five Scandinavian designers who spent over two weeks in Ireland in April 1961 had impressive credentials. Kaj Franck was head of design at the Arabia ceramics factory in Finland and art director at the Finnish School of Industrial Arts. He was joined by Åke Huldt who had been involved with a 1956 Irish design exhibition and was director of the Swedish Design Centre, Svensk Form. Three colleagues from the Royal Academy in Copenhagen joined them: Erik Herløw, an architect and professor of industrial design; Gunnar Biilmann Petersen, professor of graphic design and typography; and Erik Christian Sørensen, professor of architecture. Paul Hogan of CTT’s Design Section arranged for them to visit the few studio potteries and ceramic factories that were in existence, textile, carpet and glass factories, small weaving and tweed producers and colleges of art, technology and architecture around the country. The subsequent report, Design in Ireland, or the Scandinavian Report as it was more generally known, was to cause controversy and debate regarding design education, reform and adaptation in Ireland for the next ten years.

In Irish Independent, February 15 1962, p 10.

Left: Male and Female candleholders, cast iron, Oisín Kelly, Waterford Ironfounders, 1967.

The Scandinavian Group and the Design in Ireland report

Joanna Quinn
CTT regarded the lack of suitable education for designers as a major stumbling block to industrial development and stated in its 1960(1) Annual Report:

A formidable stretch of leeway has to be made up if any real progress is to be made of the firms producing textiles, ceramics, furniture, printing, shoes, carpets, souvenirs to name a few obvious items... We have helped to locate design-artists for individual firms and some particular problems have been solved or partially solved. It has become clear however, that this question cannot be tackled as a succession of unconnected problems. It involves the education and the focussing of public attention on the whole subject.

The Design in Ireland report suggested methods for tackling design education which included the setting up of a joint architecture and design school which would have close ties with industry. The immediate import of this recommendation was not implemented, they contributed to the debate which carried on into the 1970s. Design education was the responsibility of the Department of Education, which was not convinced by the case for thorough reform in design education. However, he also commented, "the main value of the report was not in the evidence it collected or its recommendations, but in its exposure of Irish design to the shock of international comment". The day the report was published an editorial in the Irish Times warned, "A great many people will be surprised and annoyed by the report..." while the paper's art critic declared:

The findings are devastating... without much difficulty one can read a desire on the part of these experts to let us down as lightly as possible since there is obviously little about which they can be optimistic.

Cormac Mehegan, later to become a board member of Kilkenny Design Workshops, expressed his annoyance with both the Design in Ireland report and the art critic in a letter to the editor on 13 February, 1962:

Perhaps some useful purpose has been served by the visit of the sombre and serious men of Scandinavia. Your critic seems to be impressed by their findings. I, for one, am not! There is such an ignorance of design in Ireland that there is a danger that these people will be accepted as prophets.

John Turpin, an academic writing 20 years later, recognised the conflict between the go-ahead, capitalist modernism of the Department of Industry and Commerce in favouring design and the traditional, cautious conservatism of the Department of Education, which was not convinced by the case for thorough reform in design education. However, he also commented, "the main value of the report was not in the evidence it collected or its recommendations, but in its exposure of Irish design to the shock of international comment". The day the report was published an editorial in the Irish Times warned, "A great many people will be surprised and annoyed by the report..." while the paper's art critic declared:

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While the report was not generally positive about Irish design, it did make exceptions, principally in textiles. The Scandinavians were most impressed with the Donegal tweeds and hand knitted sweaters of "traditional design" which had been promoted by Muriel Gahan and the Country Shop in Dublin since 1930. Waterford Glass was severely criticised, an unpopular element, as its revival had been viewed as a success. Established ceramic factories such as Arvilk did not fare much better. Overall, Irish design was considered to be derivative and over decorated. The art of Early Christian Ireland was considered to be a suitable inspiration for the development of a new Irish design style, although the excesses of Celtic interlace were condemned.

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The mistaken belief that the Design in Ireland report led to the setting up of Kilkenny Design Workshops is documented in an internal memorandum written at the Department of Industry and Commerce, probably in the mid-1970s (the memo is undated) which explicitly states this:

In 1961, Córas Tráchtála had set up a special section to deal with design. From the beginning this design section provided information and consultancy services but its resources in its first few years were mainly devoted to the setting up of the Kilkenny Design Workshops Limited (inspired by the Scandinavian Report).

Yet there is no suggestion in the Design in Ireland report for the development of workshops. The idea came from William H. Walsh, inspired by his visit to the Plus Workshops in Fredrikstad, Norway in 1962.

Once Walsh had chosen the stables at Kilkenny Castle as the location for the new design project, architect Niall Montgomery (who had accompanied him to Fredrikstad) was contracted for their restoration. The buildings included a long straight front facing the Castle with blind arches (later opened to become shop windows), a long semi-circular building called the Crescent enclosing the first courtyard, behind which were small workshops enclosing a second courtyard and a long garden back to the Castle’s dower house, Butler House. Montgomery was later awarded a Silver Medal by the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland and the project was given a National Heritage Award.

Design work began in Kilkenny Design Workshops in 1963. An early promotional brochure states that the project:

- has been established by Córas Tráchtála/The Irish Export Board, to provide a design service for industry. Its aims are to develop new products and to make new designs available to existing industries.

One of the first designs produced by the Workshops was the double KK logo, designed by the painter Louis le Brocquy who was on the first Board, along with Sir Basil Goulding.
advisory services generally, while KDW were to provide actual designs and prototypes for industry in certain sectors. The Workshops were established to give a physical and practical dimension to CTT’s design promotion programme. As such, they were unique at the time. Kilkenny Design Workshops were going to promote good design by producing it.

In assessing the significance of the setting up of the Workshops and the work they undertook, it is essential to consider the economic climate in Ireland in the 1960s. Irish industry was moving, or rather being pushed, from the security of protectionism and tariffs in place since the 1930s, into the free market of the European Economic Community which Ireland attempted to join with Britain in 1961. The French veto of Britain’s membership in 1963 stalled Ireland’s own application until both were accepted in 1972. However, preparations for the eventual entry to the EEC continued through the 1960s. The Committee for Industrial Organisation was set up in 1961 and produced reports on 26 industries, none of which were felt to be ready for competition and free trade. Aid was available to these industries in the form of grants for design consultancy, management training and subsidised overseas sales and promotional trips; however the take up on these was low. Ireland’s economy was stagnant throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s. Consumers either did not have the disposable income to pay for relatively expensive but well-designed goods or if they did have the money, the range of goods available to them was limited because of protectionism. Factories generally did not have trained designers and often copied designs from Britain. The economic significance of design was generally not understood by Irish industry, which, if it thought about it at all, equated it with styling and packaging rather than product design and marketing. Adaptation Councils, An Foras Forbatha and Regional Technical Colleges were set up to assist industry as it sought to adapt to the new environment. Jim King, who had worked at CTT in export promotion, and later became general manager of the Workshops, credits Walsh with being the first to promote the concept that price and multiple production were not the only competitive elements and that Irish industries could use other strategies.

The Workshops did not have the field to themselves in the realm of design in Ireland. CTT’s Design Section was responsible for design promotion and for consultancy and...
Early days – the 1960s

Kilkenny Design Workshops were officially opened by the newly appointed Minister for Industry and Commerce, Dr Patrick Hillery in November 1965 and a reception held in Kilkenny Castle. It was the first time the Castle had been used in over 30 years.

While the Workshops were to focus on design for industry the feeling, according to Paul Hogan, was that they “had to start somewhere”. Following the Scandinavian model which put artists, designers and craftsmen into factories, a decision was taken to tackle craft-based design and design for craft-based industries initially.

The first annual report of the Workshops for the years 1965 and 1966 explains the focus on craft-based industries:

Consumer goods… such things as textiles, clothes, furniture, carpets, shoes and all types of leatherwork, cutlery, glass, earthenware and china, metalwork and jewellery, wallpaper, sports goods, printed matter and a host of others. These are the things in which design plays a decisive part and on which a country – especially a small country – depends most heavily to establish recognition for itself in world markets.

William H Walsh left CTT to take over as chief executive and chairman of the Workshops, with Jim King as the general manager. Kilkenny Design Workshops received their first grant from Córas Tráchtála, £72,896, in 1964. The figure for 1965 was £75,000. KDW had an operating surplus of over £50,000 in the first year (1964) and over £40,000 in the second. The greatest expenses in 1965 were running the workshops, followed by salaries and then travel. At this stage, the Workshops were almost 100% financed by the grant.

The silversmithing workshop was the first to be opened, set up by Michael Hilliar in 1963. It was soon joined by workshops for candlemaking, ceramics, woodturning and printed and woven textiles. The textile industry embraced KDW and many companies such as Birr Fabrics, Robert Usher/Greenhills,
Bertel Gardberg from Finland came to the Workshops as head of 3D Design and Rolf Middelboe, a Dane, was head of 2D design. Gardberg was prolific and undertook designs in wood, wrought iron, silver and ceramics; Middelboe mostly worked in printed textiles. Bertel Gardberg was a huge catch for the Workshops as he was an extremely well-known designer who is credited with laying the foundations of the Finnish silversmithing industry and whose work is now in the Finnish Design Museum.

One of the most frequent criticisms of the Workshops is that they were staffed by ‘foreign’ designers who imposed their own, mostly Scandinavian, influences on KDW and failed to create an ‘Irish’ sense of design. “Anything that hasn’t got curly legs is regarded as Scandinavian by certain people,” William H Walsh said in an article in the Irish Press in November 1969. He went on to show the journalist a woven bedspread which had been ordered by a Stockholm firm in five different colours because of its ‘Irish look’. The bedspread had actually been designed by a Swedish designer, Helena Ruuth. Walsh relished the irony of the story.

Design magazine in 1967 referred to “a kind of Scandinavian undertone”, and advised that the Workshops had to fight against the self-consciousness and artiness that could result from such a closed community. The recruitment of designers from abroad was a necessity considering the lack of training for designers in Ireland at the time. A notable exception was the well-known sculptor Oisín Kelly who gave up his teaching post in St Columba’s School in Dublin and worked as a part-time ‘artist-in-residence’ at the Workshops from 1964 until his death in 1981. He designed some of the items which are perhaps most recognised as KDW products: the Irish birds series, produced in Kilkenny until the Workshops closed in 1988; the tea towels with their Irish script and old Irish proverbs; and the St Patrick’s Breastplate which was presented to Pope John Paul II on his visit to Ireland in 1979. Kelly travelled from Dublin each Monday morning by train and returned on Tuesday evening. Most of the staff at the Workshops in this period remember his tea-making on the gas ring in his little office in the Crescent buildings.

The painter and architect Pat Scott, who served on the Standards Advisory Panel for the Workshops and on the Board for 18 years, also designed textiles for KDW. His best known designs are perhaps the rainbow rugs which were produced in limited editions by V’soske Joyce, based in Oughterard, Co Galway.

The Dutch ceramic artist Sonja Landweer was invited to the Workshops and worked there for a year in 1965, after a six month period at the Arabia factory. While at the Workshops, she undertook extensive glaze testing and clay research, most of which was unfortunately lost when she left. David Reeves, a ceramic designer from England joined the Workshops and did some work for the Arklow and Carrigaline factories. This was the type of cross-fertilisation that was expected between art, craft and design and was the epitome of the Scandinavian model.

A young German, Rudolf Heltzel, was brought over to replace Michael Hilliar in the silversmithing workshop and set it up with training facilities for apprentices. “Training was needed to ensure the continuance of silver hollowware production in Ireland,” says Heltzel. Both Sonja Landweer and Rudolf Heltzel continue to live and work in Kilkenny.

Ministers often sent visitors who expected to see people working, bus tours were becoming more common, and in a bid to limit the disruption caused to workshops, a demonstration area was set up in 1967, where craftspeople could be seen using traditional skills. This lasted only until the early 1970s as it was difficult to keep staffed and still interfered with work.
The middle period –
the 1970s

The 1970s saw more work with indigenous industries, the development of the industrial design studio and the continuance of many of the craft workshops including ceramics, silver and metalworking and textiles. Jim Kirkwood came to the ceramics department in 1971 and undertook large scale projects for WMF, Rosenthal and its Irish subsidiary Celtic Ceramics in Kilrush, Co Clare and work for the Belleek, Wade and Arklow ceramic factories. At the same time Niall Harper from Kilkenny, came for a nine month training period and was succeeded by Jack and Joan Doherty who each started as pottery demonstrators before becoming studio potters. They worked separately and together, producing porcelain jewellery in Joan’s case and little stoneware and porcelain boxes with delicate cut out birds in Jack’s. Together they won a gold medal at a prestigious ceramics competition at Faenza in 1974 in the contemporary ceramic art category, competing against well known British potters John Maltby (who also won a gold medal) and Alan Caiger-Smith. The Dohertys went on to win a gold medal at the 5th International Biennale of Ceramic Art in Vallauris in 1976. Their work was selected for exhibitions in Canada and for the 1973 Craftsman’s Art Exhibition in the V&A; as part of this exhibition, their work was featured in Design magazine in February 1975. They were the only Irish ceramicists in the exhibition.

This juxtapositioning of design for industry with a studio pottery and silversmithing workshop which could produce prototypes and finished products tended to confuse the public’s perception of the role of KDW: ‘...the sight of craftsmen practising the ancient arts of throwing pottery, weaving textiles and beating silver. Perhaps this image of handcraft which a casual visitor leaves with has been one of the most detrimental to grow up with the Workshops, for the public does not see nor the social columnists record the work which the KDW is carrying out for industry behind the “folksy” façade’.

Ireland was changing rapidly and the Workshops finally had a chance to tackle their primary aim – industrial design. Incentives were

Damien Harrington, a young Irish graphic designer who had trained in the Netherlands joined the Workshops to set up the graphic design studio in 1968. He developed the P+T logo and van design for the Department of Posts and Telecommunications with its distinctive marigold colour (not called orange for political reasons) around this time. The bright colour was chosen after a couple of nights testing colours under street lights in Dublin to ensure that the P+T vans would be as visible as possible in a bid to reduce the number of accidents.

Mortimer O’Shea, who originally came to the Workshops on secondment from Gaeltarra Éireann in Donegal, became head of textiles and remained in the Workshops until he retired. Jenny Trigwell and Jenni Green were recruited by Pat Scott and William H Walsh from the Central Saint Martin’s College of Art and Design in London to the textiles department and became known as the ‘Spinning Jennys’. Their printed textile designs are also highly recognisable as KDW designs.

According to Mary Mullin, assistant to William H Walsh, there was a deliberate attempt to recruit young designers with older technicians who had experience in industry. The modellers and mouldmakers employed in the Workshops’ extensive prototyping facilities had an immense effect on Irish industry and craft as they were often loaned to factories. Mike Dawson who was trained as a ceramics modeller and mouldmaker in the Workshops and went on to further training in Germany, spent periods in three potteries and factories in Ireland, training and advising in specific tasks. Marie Hennesy, who painted Oisín Kelly’s birds, was also sent out to undertake consultancy work with ceramic factories.

Above: P+T van with marigold and white livery.

Below: P+T sign, logo designed by Damien Harrington, sign designed by Nick Marchant.


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From the beginning, the Workshops had been involved with exhibitions and promotions, often with CTT. Two exhibitions were held at Heal’s department store in London in 1967 and 1972. Pat Henderson, who worked in the accounts department from the beginning and later became the third chief executive, remembers that stones from the base of Nelson’s Pillar (which had been blown up in 1966) had been rescued by William H Walsh and brought over to the store to spell out the name Heal’s during the 1967 promotion.

KDW began to mount more exhibitions. One of the most memorable was in 1971 when Gustav Sauter asked the recently arrived packaging designer, Holger Strøm to produce modular cubes in cardboard as a display for the Spring Show in Dublin in 1971. Strøm had produced cardboard displays for clients in Denmark, but this was the first time anything like this had been seen in Ireland. While at the Workshops he designed cardboard furniture and toys for children, packaging for clients such as Belleek, and the IQ light – made up of interlocking modules of plastic – which is still being produced.

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Group on Design Needs (including Jim King from KDW) which reported to CTT:

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The 1970s saw one of KDW’s most ambitious plans come to fruition. Butler House, was, with an adjoining house, renovated to accommodate a residential training scheme for graduates from the design courses which had been set up in Kilkenny and Dublin, often with original KDW designs. Some production was still being undertaken in jewellery, silver hollowware, ceramics and textiles. Numbers employed by KDW had risen considerably. Approximately 35 designers, craftsmen and technicians were employed in the workshops in 1968. Staff numbers had risen to 74 in 1975 and by 1982, KDW employed 130 (48 of these in the shops).

The Butler House project matured, taking in graduates for a year long placement in the KDW design teams so that they had direct contact with industry. The Young Designer Awards which had originally been established by CTT were renamed the Designer Development Awards in 1980 and presented bursaries to students or young designers who submitted design proposals to a panel. The Design Management Awards were launched in 1984 to award companies who had shown excellence in design management – winners included companies such as Arco of Waterford which had benefited from KDW expertise and those who hadn’t such as Superquinn. KDW ran competitions to encourage creativity in school children such as ‘Make a Clown’ or ‘Make a Martian’ and the results were exhibited in the Dublin shop.

A new approach was taken in the industrial and graphic design areas with design management and the concept of multi-disciplinary design. Departments became less important as designers worked together in teams. Clients who had approached the Workshops for product design and development ideas often returned with requests to design corporate identities. A large project of this nature came from Gaa, a Swedish company for whom KDW designed a switch. The Workshops later produced a corporate identity manual for Gaa and won a contract for the complete interior design of their Scandinavian corporate headquarters.

Kilkenny Design Consultancy was set up with Jim Dunne at its head in 1984 and this section took on design commissions. Gerald Tyler looked after the design promotion aspect, mostly exhibitions, design competitions and special promotions. Roderick Murphy oversaw the retailing element which, during the 1980s, played an increasingly important role in the KDW story.
Retailing was not part of the original concept for the Workshops; however, the disposal of prototypes, which could have been a problem, became an opportunity. The first shop opened in Kilkenny in 1966 and retailing soon came to be seen as not just a way of shifting prototypes, but of influencing consumers, providing leverage with manufacturers and not insignificantly, of generating income for the Workshops.

The first KDW annual report (1965-6) explained that, “each workshop in addition to producing prototypes for quantity production maintains a small output of its own in order to keep a gap from developing between the drawing board and the processes of industry”. Even at this stage, the potential benefits of retailing were clear:

“This output – just beginning to emerge at the end of the year under review – should be substantial in future years and make a useful contribution towards expenses. The textiles, ceramics, silver etc., so produced are being sold primarily to export outlets and in the KDW shop, and provide valuable market information.”

Jim King feels that the development of the shops was critical to the success of the Workshops in that it allowed KDW designs to get into production and into people’s homes. The shops made good design immediately available to the public by selling the output of the Workshops and that of KDW-linked manufacturers who had set up in business to produce KDW designs such as Ronore (jewellery), Peter Donovan (silversmith), Kilkenny Trading Company (general KDW designed products) and Kilkenny Marble Crafts. Many KDW prototypes were sold first through the shops where their salability could be demonstrated before they were sold on a royalty basis to a manufacturer. The ‘Ennis’ ceramic design, for instance, first started life as ‘Kilkenny High Strength Stoneware’, was adapted for earthenware production and sold to Celtic Ceramics in Co Clare, who then supplied the Kilkenny shops, among others.

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The importance of the Kilkenny Design shops

Joanna Quinn
In 1967 a long term KDW shop promotion was set up in B. Altman’s Fifth Avenue department store in New York and in 1969 a shop was opened in the Ghirardelli Square shopping complex in San Francisco. Both shops took staff from Kilkenny either permanently or on an annual basis. They principally sold Kilkenny Design’s pottery, wood, wrought and cast iron, candles and silk screen and tapestry work. The textiles manager at the Workshops, Murtimir O’Shea, believes that the relationship with B. Altman was particularly important for Irish textiles manufacturers as Altman’s would furnish KDW with the specifications for textiles they wanted to buy, allowing KDW to ensure manufacturers knew what the market required. Helena Ruuth designed a towel for the Altman collection which was highly successful and much copied.

The original Kilkenny shop in Kilkenny was quite small and plans to develop a shop in Dublin began to ferment in 1971. It was felt that while Irish goods were being marketed abroad, more needed to be done to promote them in Ireland, especially in the capital. In November 1976 a much larger and more ambitious shop opened in Nassau Street, Dublin, just in time for its first Christmas rush.

A policy decision was taken to stock non-KDW designs: the best of Irish goods from craftsmen, factories and independent designers were to be included. According to Mary Dowling who managed the Dublin shop until 1986, the aim was “to supply everything for the house which was produced in Ireland and was of good quality”. Finding suppliers for this venture took a year as Mary Dowling and Roderick Murphy, accompanied by designers such as Gustav Sauter and Helena Ruuth, travelled the country looking for designs that could be presented to the shop’s standards committee. Products that had passed the selection panel bore a ‘Kilkenny Selection’ label, distinguishing them from KDW-designed objects. The shops thus gave many Irish craftspeople exposure in an appropriate and upmarket setting.

The Dublin shop became a showcase for Irish products and was used as such by CTT, who brought visiting dignitaries and buyers to see Irish made goods. Mary Dowling used her extensive knowledge of the Irish craft sector to help national and foreign buyers to source Irish products. Many international buyers visited, but she particularly remembers a Japanese delegation taking over the KDW offices while they met suppliers from all over Ireland.

The Dublin shop had two other strings to its bow: the Kilkenny restaurant and the exhibition space which hosted design exhibitions. Mary Dowling had started as the internal catering manager in Kilkenny before moving into the retail area and was responsible for the excellent standards that prevailed in the staff canteen and were later brought to Dublin. Her approach to food was based on simplicity and local produce long before they became fashionable: “It was traditional, made modern. We tried to keep a home influence and used traditional recipes. We were often asked for those recipes and always gave them out freely.” She particularly remembers Kilkenny’s oatmeal biscuits and pea and mint soup. Salads were served in pottery bowls as a promotional device for the potters who often went on to supply other restaurants. The restaurant was important as a way of bringing people into the shop and creating a lively atmosphere.

Exhibitions were staged every four to six weeks and were often used to launch new designers or craftspeople who were supplying the shop. KDW or international exhibitions such as ‘The Bowl’, ‘Workmanship’ and ‘Danish Design’ were also hosted in the exhibition space. Each opening was an important event and these regular exhibitions contributed to the feeling that exciting things were happening in Kilkenny.

KDW benefited from the excellent relationships the Dublin shop developed with journalists, generating abundant press coverage. Visiting VIPs tended to come to the shop, creating regular photo opportunities and enabling Kilkenny Design to maintain a relatively high profile. Peter Ustinov was an enthusiastic supporter and declared that, on trips to...
£160,000 in 1979. Loans now totalled £381,000 and the interest payments on the outstanding loans were £161,000. The financing of the Dublin shop almost completely by borrowing, coupled with the rise in interest rates in the early 1980s, lead to a very precarious situation for the Workshops. This was recognised by government and in 1982 the Kilkenny Design Workshops Ltd. Bill was passed which allocated share capital of £1 million to KDW, with £500,000 being immediately available to pay off debts incurred in setting up the Dublin shop and renovating Butler House. By 1983 the Workshops were recording an operating surplus of £13,000.

Meanwhile, the wholesaling division of the Workshops expanded: the increase was due to more KDW designs being produced by companies who had commissioned the designs, such as Foxford Woollen Mills and Charles Gallen, or companies which had been set up by ex-KDW employees. KDW designs were marketed as a whole and sold on to other shops. In Ireland these included many independent craft shops and department stores such as Arnotts in Dublin. The mail order catalogue which had been in operation since 1983 was also popular and sold both KDW and non-KDW designs. During the Crafts Council of Ireland’s annual trade fair Showcase, then in its infancy, a display of KDW promoted products would be made in the Dublin shop and buyers brought in from Showcase.

The Kilkenny shops were now the consumer ‘sales’ Kilkenny Design and Kilkenny Design products and this could make it difficult for the public to understand KDW as a whole. This problem was recognised by the art critic Aidan Dunne when he wrote “the shops could suggest that it is largely a cosmetic organisation,” in an article in 1984:

Kilkenny Design is still a contradictory institution. To most people it is incarnate in the craft products on sale in the shops. Yet KDW’s role in many of these products is minimal: it is not a manufacturer.

As the shops, particularly the Dublin shop, became more successful, additional pressure was applied to make money for the organisation, which had not been the focus in the early 1970s and had two people producing furniture prototypes full-time but found it difficult to find furniture manufacturers to undertake the risk of producing and selling unfamiliar designs, so furniture was commissioned from manufacturers using KDW designs for exclusive sale through the furniture floor which opened in the Dublin shop in the late 1970s. A complete interior service, Kilkenny Design Contract Interiors, was also established and large contracts undertaken for the Bord Gáis headquarters in Cork and the offices of the South Eastern Health Board in Kilkenny.

The opening of the Dublin shop at the end of 1976 contributed to a rise in annual sales of 63%, but 1976 also saw a fall in the grant aid to KDW and a corresponding operating deficit of £3,945 – the first recorded in the accounts. Two long term loans totalling £201,741 were taken out in 1976 and 1977 – partly to finance the Dublin shop and partly for the development of Butler House.

Sales broke £1 million in 1980. The deficit for that year was £102,000 after a peak of £160,000 in 1979. Loans now totalled £381,000 and the interest payments on the outstanding loans were £161,000. The financing of the Dublin shop almost completely by borrowing, coupled with the rise in interest rates in the early 1980s, lead to a very precarious situation for the Workshops. This was recognised by government and in 1982 the Kilkenny Design Workshops Ltd. Bill was passed which allocated share capital of £1 million to KDW, with £500,000 being immediately available to pay off debts incurred in setting up the Dublin shop and renovating Butler House. By 1983 the Workshops were recording an operating surplus of £13,000.

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the beginning. “We saw the shops from the outset as a promotional vehicle rather than a wealth generator,” says Pat Henderson. The contradictory aims of the shop: to make money, yet promote design or products that might not yet be profitable, led to problems. “I had things in that shop that would never make the tills ring, but we had to have them because they were Irish and we had to be seen to promote them,” says Mary Dowling.

Sales in the two shops reached a peak in 1985 at £2.8 million, accounting for 70% of the Workshops’ income. Grant aid at this stage accounted for 17%, design fees for 11%, and ESF funding for 2% of income. There was a small drop in sales in 1986 to £2.5 million and in 1987 to £2.2 million, attributable to a fall-off in standards and the bitten of the Irish recession. The availability of KDV designs in other shops may have cannibalised the Kilkenny Design shops’ own business, contributing to a decline in sales. Yet before this decline began, KDV started planning its most ambitious retail venture of all, a shop in CTT’s Ireland House on London’s Bond Street.


Above: Ground floor of the Dublin shop in the late 1970s.

In mid 1985 the Board of KDW, chaired by Margaret Downes, presented a commercialisation plan to government: this programme envisaged that in the period 1984-1987 the design practice would be developed and become self-supporting while profits from the shops would cover new product development and market information to manufacturers. The grant aid would be used for design promotion activities. The plan also stated that the Workshops would become completely self-sufficient between 1988 and 1990. On acceptance of this plan, in 1985 the government allocated another £262,000 from the original 1982 £1 million share capital.

The London shop, which opened in November 1986, was seen as a method of increasing revenue as the grant aid to the Workshops declined. However, when the London shop began to experience financial difficulties just as the Irish shops saw a decline in sales in 1986 and early 1987, resulting in a further capital injection by government of £225,000 in March 1987, it drew attention to KDW.

As the recession bit in the mid 1980s, semi-state organisations were increasingly scrutinised by the media. Articles with titles such as ‘The subsidy junkies’, in Business and Finance, July 1987, ‘Reforming the semi-states’, in the Sunday Independent May 1985, and ‘The power hungry bodies that gobble your tax’, in the Irish Independent July 1985, contributed to a public feeling that all semi-states and the companies they grant-aided were money pits kept supplied by hard pressed taxpayers. KDW were not mentioned specifically in any of these articles but the logo and figures were included.

The failure of the commercialisation plan was recognised and, as the recession in Ireland deepened, the government could not justify supporting an organisation whose services were becoming increasingly available in the private sector. The rise in the number of designers in Ireland, while in many ways attributable to the Workshops, also contributed to its demise, as private business went into direct competition with a state subsidised company.

The government approved the phasing out of grant aid to KDW in January 1987 and the first redundancies of some of the long serving staff began that year with 29 losing their jobs. It was hoped that the saving on these salaries would
make it easier to get back on a sound financial footing. The entire reduced grant allocation for 1988, £536,000, was drawn down in the first three months of that year to settle outstanding debts with creditors. It was now obvious that the Workshops were in severe difficulties and the government asked the Board for a rationalisation plan in April 1988. This would include the sale of the shops in Dublin and Kilkenny and resulting redundancies. £250,000 was made available to the Workshops to continue trading while the shops were wound down in an organised manner.

The London shop is viewed by many as the downfall of KDW. Some ex-KDW staff blame its location in Ireland House on Bond Street as being too ‘shop-window’ and not sufficiently retail orientated, others believe the figures were too ambitious from the beginning and that it was expected to make a profit too soon. In any case, retailing distinctively Irish goods could not have been easy in London in the 1980s. The Bond Street shop was closed in May 1988 having accumulated losses of stg£1.1 million, and later in the summer of that year, the Dublin shop was sold to Freda Hayes of Blarney Woollen Mills and the shop in Kilkenny to Kathleen Moran. Both kept the word ‘Kilkenny’ in the name of their shops. (The Kilkenny Shop in Dublin and the Kilkenny Design Centre in Kilkenny), confirming that the name had become synonymous with Irish craft and design.

Originally the government had decided that the design function of KDW would continue in Kilkenny but in November 1988 Taoiseach Charles Haughey announced the closure of KDW. It was a difficult time for the staff of the Workshops which had now been in serious financial trouble for almost a year. A civic trust was set up in Kilkenny to take over the buildings, including Butler House which now operates as a hotel and conference centre and is still furnished in the ‘KDW style’. The Crafts Council of Ireland (CCoI) was given the remit for the training element of KDW and moved into the Crescent with its Craft and Design Business Development Course and later a Jewellery Design and Production Skills Course. Some of the ex-KDW designers and craftspeople set up workshops in the complex.
The craft and design sector in Ireland has its origins in various associations, organisations and the work of committed individuals. That Ireland has a craft industry at all is remarkable, considering that it spent 50 years in the middle of the twentieth century with little government support, with individual craftspeople scattered through the rural communities, creating work that had outlived its traditional function and was not in any sense commercially viable. The design industry is a much newer phenomenon, the product of design education reform in the 1960s and 70s and the influence of Kilkenny Design Workshops.

By the time the Crafts Council of Ireland was formed in 1971, stalwart efforts had already been made to keep traditional crafts alive. The Crafts Council was able to benefit from the legacy, as well as the practical assistance, of several other bodies. The oldest and most distinguished of these, the Royal Dublin Society (RDS), was founded in 1731 to promote arts, agriculture, science, and industry in Ireland. Its first major exhibition, in 1834, included crafts and the products of small craft-based industry. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the RDS awarded premiums to those engaged in the improvement of crafts: wool, basketry, glass, and lace-making. Awards were also given for new methods of tanning and inventions that improved the wool industry. The current RDS National Crafts Competition, which takes place at the Dublin Horse Show, has been held annually since 1968 and has played a major part in giving Irish craftspeople a national showcase. The competition has grown with the times: early competitions had five or six categories; there are now 19.

The RDS was not alone in efforts to promote Irish craft and design. The Arts and Crafts Society of Ireland, founded by the Earl of Mayo in 1893, ran an annual exhibition and did much to support the Celtic Revival of the early 1920s. The Society went into a gradual decline and, by the early 1970s, had ceased to play an active role. The Irish Countrywomen’s Association (ICA), founded in 1910 as the Society of United Irishwomen, has been a long-term supporter of women’s craft around the country, and organisations like the Strokestown Craft Cooperative and the Society of Cork Potters had a significant influence on specific crafts. Vice-chairperson of the RDS in the 1960s and involved in the ICA, Country
Rowe remembers the publication of the Scandinavian report, *Design in Ireland*, in 1962 as a significant turning point in Irish craft: “It was a damning report, but it was also like a new light shone on the scene. People began to realise that there could be money in craft.” Although the KDW brief was industry rather than handicrafts, in practice this distinction was sometimes difficult to make. The need for a separate administrative body to support handicrafts became apparent.

By 1970 talks were in progress on the setting up of a body similar to the recently established British Crafts Council. Paul Hogan, who had worked with the Scandinavian Group, remembers the setting up of the Crafts Council of Ireland:

- The traditional crafts were being kept alive on a life-support system, and the Arts and Crafts Society had more or less run itself into the ground and wasn’t doing anything useful. The RDS felt that it could no longer bear the burden of administrating Irish crafts, and KDW, keen to make a clear distinction between design for industry and non-industrial handicrafts, hoped that the creation of a Crafts Council might free it up to concentrate on its main objective.

- A World Crafts Council conference in Dublin in 1970, which included a visit to the Workshops, provided the catalyst for the setting up of a craft body.

- The Crafts Council of Ireland was set up as an association in 1971 under the influence of the RDS, which provided it with offices and a secretarial service for the following five years. In 1976 it became a limited company in order to receive state funding via the Industrial Development Authority (IDA). This was the year of the first Craft Fair, now known as Showcase, where 30 stands sold wholesale produce to craft shops. In 2005 Showcase hosted over 600 stands with sales of €35 million.

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Markets and the emerging Credit Union movement, Muriel Gahan founded the Country Shop (1930-75) on St Stephen’s Green in Dublin and had an immense personal influence on the revival and development of textiles and basketry.

Bord Fáilte was another early champion of Irish craft, especially in far flung rural areas. From the 1950s Bord Fáilte took a major interest in the production of souvenirs. In those days, tourists were the people most likely to have discretionary income, and the marketing of genuine Irish craftwork to tourists promised added income for people in areas of rural Ireland where there were few earning opportunities. The trouble was that little was available beyond the mass-produced keepsakes manufactured in the Far East that gave the word ‘souvenir’ its dubious connotations.

“One of our problems was that tourists couldn’t spend their money,” says Michael Gorman, then of the Bord Fáilte Publicity Department. “The quality and range of the available products was very poor. I was once sent a sample of a product: a small grey stone stuck on a piece of green board, made in Japan, and labelled ‘A piece of the genuine Blarney Stone’. That’s the sort of thing that we were up against.” The establishment of a Visitor Purchases Department in Bord Fáilte represented a genuine move by the tourist board to try to raise the standard of what was available.

Blanaid Reddin, who was to become a founder member of the Crafts Council, spent 20 years working with Bord Fáilte: “We were the link between the craftsperson and the retailer. There were very few craft shops in those days and the crafts workers were in a kind of limbo. We opened a shop and showrooms on St. Stephen’s Green, which helped to raise awareness, and we also worked with the craftpeople themselves, helping them with display and pricing. We also offered small grants for practicalities like labelling.”

Veronica Rowe, who has made a long and active contribution to the Irish craft industry, remembers the Bord Fáilte ‘souvenir officers’ of the late 1950s who travelled throughout rural Ireland giving support and guidance to craftpeople and retailers. The 1960s are now regarded as the Dark Ages of Irish design, but a few traditional crafts continued to thrive.

“There was beautiful handweaving up in Donegal, although that was more industry than craft. Knitting was good, even then, especially in the Aran Islands, and lace making was going strong at Carrickmacross,” she recalls.
According to Leslie Reed, now chief executive of the Crafts Council of Ireland, throughout the 1980s KDW was much more important to Irish craft than the Crafts Council:

KDW was the most influential retailer in Ireland bar none. It blazed the trail for a fairly sophisticated retail style. The Kilkenny shops were ahead of their time in that they marketed ‘lifestyle’ before it became a buzzword. Their shop windows made craft relevant to the modern interior and showed the consumer how it could be integrated into the contemporary home. This transformed consumer perception and made craft desirable, it influenced other retailers, and laid the foundations for the boom years for craft sales in the 1990s. Just as importantly, it gave craftspeople confidence in themselves and in their products.

Mary Mullin was, with Blánaid Reddin, one of the founding members of the Crafts Council. Mullin sees the positive influence of the influx of non-Irish craftspeople as crucial to the development of the industry, and as an enduring aspect of the legacy of KDW:

KDW set the precedent for this by bringing master craftspeople to Ireland, not to produce actual pieces, but to produce ideas and prototypes that could be shown to industry. It was a role that was simultaneously practical and inspirational. The tremendous boost that KDW gave to Irish craft was, in many respects, a beneficial side effect of its main function, which was to raise the standard of design in Irish industry. The Institute of Designers in Ireland (IDI) is a professional body representing the interests of Irish designers and regulating the quality of Irish design. Set up as the Society of Designers in Ireland in 1972, it ran in parallel to KDW, but also covered other elements of design, such as fashion, that were not under the KDW remit.

Ireland is a small country; we’ve always had to look overseas for inspiration. Young designers have tremendous opportunities to travel now, and we also have the tradition of people coming from abroad to live and work in Ireland. KDW set the precedent for this by bringing master craftspeople to Ireland, not to produce actual pieces, but to produce ideas and prototypes that could be shown to industry. It was a role that was simultaneously practical and inspirational.

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was much greater than it was in Ireland, and it served as a model for an international basis. It gave Ireland a reputation as a design-aware country and, because it brought in foreign designers, it created a huge international network of contacts in design-based business.

The Institute of Designers in Ireland has taken on some of the activities of KDW including design promotion. As part of its Design Week, a William H Walsh Memorial Lecture examines current challenging design issues. Graduate Designer Awards are given to students on design courses in recognised colleges while the IDI Design Awards are presented to practising professionals for the most outstanding work produced each year. “Before KDW, the concept of professional designers in Ireland didn’t really exist,” according to the current president of the IDI, Arthur Duff. “KDW embraced all design disciplines, as the IDI does today.”

Charles O’Toole, a furniture designer who graduated from NCAD in 1994, stumbled on KDW by accident. “When I was in college I heard very little about KDW. I picked up the Twenty-one Years of Design book for £1 and was amazed to see examples of Irish design which have been largely forgotten.” He sometimes works with Mannings of Carlow, the only furniture manufacturer which made KDW designs still in existence. “The KDW design style in furniture was basic enough but they were trying to get things made within many parameters and they operated under a lot of restrictions. Considering that, I think they did exceptionally well. It’s a pity that something didn’t grow on from KDW as it appears to be the beginning of something that was stopped rather abruptly.”

McNulty, who established Dúmoren, a Dublin-based product development resource, in 1991, acknowledges that KDW created the market that allowed people like himself to prosper:

A by-product of KDW’s efforts to promote the value of good design in Ireland was that it also did a good job in promoting its own brand and image internationally. KDW’s reputation abroad was enhanced further by the Kilkenny Design Centres, which were opened in New York, Paris, Tokyo and London. Similar centres were opened in Australia, Canada and Italy. These centres not only helped to promote the sale of Kilkenny products but also served as a basis for the creation of a worldwide network of contacts for Irish designers and manufacturers. The centres also served as a base for the promotion of Irish design in other countries, and they helped to establish KDW as a leading force in the international design scene.

In response, many craftspeople have begun to sell directly to the consumers, either via craft fairs, craft cooperatives or through their own workshops, thereby increasing their revenue by taking the mark-up themselves rather than giving it to the retailer. This may be a short term option, as while the total gross sales figure achieved by craftspeople expands slowly, its slow growth is in contrast to a rapidly expanding market for consumer goods and services. Crafts’ share in that market from 2001 to 2004 has stabilized and shows no signs of growth. Despite the fact that the state is highly unlikely to publicly fund a retail outlet in competition with the private sector, as it did with KDW until 1988, the lack of a state sponsored showcase in the capital to select, display and promote Irish products is obviously felt in the Irish market. Irish craft is at risk of becoming invisible as it retreats from the larger craft shops and more craft is sold directly from studios which are often quite difficult to find. This is backed up by recent consumer research carried out by the Craft Council of Ireland which reports that most young gift buyers cannot find craft products because they are not in the shops they visit regularly, such as larger department stores.

Even the name ‘craft’ is not liked by these buyers who equate it with crowded shops, tourist products and spiels on the worthiness of a handmade product, irrespective of its design or overall quality.

“It’s becoming increasingly difficult to source good new products,” according to Kathleen Moran, owner of the Kilkenny Design Centre.

Some of today’s best known names in craft received a lot of promotional support from the Kilkenny shops which is what helped them to grow into successful businesses. That type of on-going support does not seem to be available today. As a result, craftspeople are going out of business after only a couple of years and there is no continuity of product offer and no chance to build a brand image.

To recapture consumer imagination, design inspired crafts may benefit from being placed within a contemporary retailing context, just as KDW did in the 1960s and 70s by undertaking an intensive programme of new store openings in Dublin. KDW continued its campaign to promote the value of good design in Ireland. While that market is still in transition, a return to pre-KDW days of dying craft skills and the impossibility of making a living from craft production is no longer happening. The Kilkenny Design Workshops played a crucial role in the creation of this environment.


In May 2005 a panel of curators from around the world gathered at the Crafts Council of Ireland in Kilkenny to select Irish work worthy of being presented to an international market in Portfolio, a new digital catalogue. They commented that two crafts stood out in terms of excellence: woodturning and silver hollowware. An exploration of each reveals that the influence of the Kilkenny woodturning and silver and metal workshops, and of those who came to Ireland in the mid 1960s to work there, continues to be felt among designer-makers working today.

The silver and metal workshop

Along with Kevin O’Dwyer who trained in the USA, and Richard Kirk who studied in Belfast and London, Séamus Gill is one of Ireland’s leading silversmiths. Now beginning to make his mark in the US market, he was introduced to his craft by Peter Donovan, who moved from London in the mid 60s to work there, and of those who came to Ireland in the mid 1960s to work there, continues to be felt among designer-makers working today.

The influence of Kilkenny Design Workshops

Ruth Thorpe

In May 2005 a panel of curators from around the world gathered at the Crafts Council of Ireland in Kilkenny to select Irish work worthy of being presented to an international market in Portfolio, a new digital catalogue. They commented that two crafts stood out in terms of excellence: woodturning and silver hollowware. An exploration of each reveals that the influence of the Kilkenny woodturning and silver and metal workshops, and of those who came to Ireland in the mid 1960s to work there, continues to be felt among designer-makers working today.

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While Séamus was at Grennan Mill in 1981, Oisín Kelly died. The two had never met, but everyone around Séamus expressed a great deal of respect for Kelly both as a person and an artist, and through them he felt his influence. When it came to choosing a thesis subject at NCAD, he chose Kelly. “People could relate to Oisín Kelly’s work – from public sculpture to teatowels. He didn’t have a great
intellectual argument pushing them as works of art. I also make things people can relate to – “I’m not into trying to shock with my work as so many are”. Séamus Gill is sure that without KDW, Peter Donovan would not have come to work in Ireland and Séamus would never have thought of going to art college or becoming a silversmith. He finds it difficult to imagine the Irish crafts scene without the influence of those drawn here by KDW such as Rudolf Heltzel.

When Heltzel came to Kilkenny from Germany in 1966 to head the silver and metal workshop, he could see that urgent action was required in both the silver hollowware and jewellery industries. In the 1960s there were several large established silver hollowware companies in Ireland, all heavily reliant on the ecclesiastical market. Unfortunately, despite Heltzel’s best efforts, they were not interested in producing KDW’s non-ecclesiastical designs by Bertel Gardberg, Michael Hilliar and Heltzel himself. When their core market evaporated after Vatican II, these companies closed.

He feared little better with the jewellery industry: “I was shocked by the quality. Protected by high duty on imported jewellery, there were a number of companies producing abysmal stuff in low grade metals for the home market. They were not interested in producing quality jewellery.” With little or no uptake from industry, the KDW silver and metal workshop became a production workshop, supplying the Kilkenny shop and other retailers, by bypassing industry to bring the public well designed work.

This part of KDW may have failed in its original aim of raising the quality of design in existing Irish industries, but because of Heltzel’s commitment to the survival of the skills, the workshop he headed became a standard bearer for excellence in education. “When I arrived in Ireland, there was an apprenticeship of sorts, but no structured way of training in all of the techniques. Apprentices were taught a limited amount and many were more like technicians,” explains Heltzel.

He employed two goldsmiths and one silversmith (Donovan) with two apprentices each. These six were joined by four apprentices from Fáilte of Kilkenny on a scheme Heltzel devised with full support of KDW whereby apprentices spent four days a week in the workshop and one day at vocational school, learning freehand and technical drawing, together with various aspects of goldsmithing such as the mathematics for alloying and the properties of stones and precious metals.

Des Byrne, who came to the Workshops in 1968 as a qualified silversmith from a commercial company employing 80 in Dublin describes “two different worlds”. The commercial environment, producing ecclesiastical pieces, placed the emphasis on speed. Silversmiths were constantly under pressure to meet production levels and apprentices learned mainly by assisting craftsmen. “In Kilkenny, the emphasis was on creativity and doing things better rather than faster,” he says.

Rudolf Heltzel left KDW after two years to set up his own workshop in Kilkenny, demonstrating, significantly, that this could be done, but the apprenticeship system continued.

In three consecutive years apprentices trained under this system won first prize in the national apprenticeship competition and went on to take part in the international apprenticeship competition. In the first year, 1968, the Irish competitor came last, but the following year the result was 12th out of 18 and 5th in the third year. “Quite an achievement for a country with no jewellery making tradition,” comments Heltzel.

The apprentices trained under the scheme Rudolf Heltzel initiated were considered the most skilled in the business. Most, like Liam Costigan, James Mary Kelly and Michael Rafter, went on to set up their own businesses. Rudolf Heltzel explains that because “training apprentices is prohibitively expensive” that generation has not been able to train apprentices under the same type of structured system he devised.

James Mary Kelly was planning to become a draftsman at an engineering works when he first encountered the Workshops on a vocational school trip. Having begun his apprenticeship in the silver and metal workshop in goldsmithing, he then worked under silversmith Peter Donovan. He describes the KDW training as “regimental” recalling exercises and assignments and a great deal of repetition. “Clean, simple Scandinavian style pieces are not simple to make,” he comments. Des Byrne remembers making prototypes of hollowware to Bertel Gardberg’s exacting standards. He was later to work on Oisin Kelly’s St Patrick’s Breastplate, presented to Pope John II on his visit to Ireland. When KDW were closed, he and James Kelly took over the silver and metal workshop and set up their own businesses within the Castle Yard. Both still make hollowware to commission, but due to market demands, make mainly jewellery, some to KDW designs.

“Irish people have a huge interest in jewellery,” says James Kelly. Without Rudolf Heltzel’s sustained interest in training, however, Ireland would be in no position to cater for this interest with Irish made work. During the difficult economic conditions of the 1980s and early 1990s, Irish jewellers had to struggle hard to make a living, never mind training others. For
The Woodturning Workshop

In the world of woodturning one name stands apart, that of Maria van Kesteren. She is a woodturner who dislikes wood. “I am not charmed by wood but use it as a medium,” she explains. During her exceptional 50 year career, her circular forms have remained quietly eloquent in the face of a rising tide of woodturning boasting loudly of technical bravado.

Now, as the National Craft Gallery prepares to stage a significant exhibition exploring the influence of international woodturners on contemporary Irish turning, ‘Tracing the Line’, it is appropriate that Maria van Kesteren is taking pride of place as the first to have had an impact through her work with KDW.

Invited by William H Walsh to set up a woodturning workshop, Maria van Kesteren spent 18 months in Ireland from late 1965. She left extremely reluctantly, drawn home to Holland by the artistic stimuli Ireland lacked. Her time in Ireland may have been relatively brief, but her influence on the development of woodturning in this country has lasted decades.

She is optimistic about the future for jewellers in Ireland. “There is a new generation beginning to set up on their own and beginning to make their mark. Irish people can now afford to spend on jewellery and, while she considers too many jewellers use too much silver, she predicts there will increasingly be an appreciation for good quality jewellery in the highest quality metals.

As more designer-makers manage to make a living from jewellery in Ireland, Rudolf Heltzel’s role should be remembered, not just as a passionate advocate for teaching goldsmithing and silversmithing skills, but in setting an example over almost 40 years in business. “He has never ceased to earn his living as a jeweller and to have the highest ethical standards,” says Jane Huston. “Rudolf has made a tremendous contribution to the jewellery trade in Ireland and this has not been properly acknowledged.”

The Kilkenny workshop, complete with lathe, tools and wood Maria had brought from Holland, had only one apprentice, Jim Holohan. It attracted woodturners from around the country, keen to gain technical expertise and open to the new concept of design. Maria also travelled in her Mini to their workshops, taking prototypes and demonstrating ways of refining work which she says, generally solid, heavy and badly finished. “They were so easy to get along with, so anxious to learn. They felt they should be more skilled,” she recalls.

In the creative community of KDW, she collaborated with her friend, ceramicist Sonja Landweer (who had suggested William Walsh invite her to KDW) on a design for ceramic jars with wooden lids and with Bertel Gardberg on wooden bowls for which he designed silver spoons. She remembers British sculptor Henry Moore, on a visit to KDW, enticed into her workshop by the smell of wood, staying to talk for an hour instead of attending a specially arranged lunch with general manager Jim King. Maria also contributed to exhibitions at the Municipal Gallery in Dublin in 1966 and Heal’s in London in 1967.

Her main role, however, was to produce prototypes to be put into production by other...
woodturning workshops. All her designs were functional – bowls, candle holders – with what she describes as the simplest of shapes. Her porridge bowls were produced in vast quantities for Habitat by George Galbraith’s workshop in Abbeyfeale. Designs made in various workshops were for export to England and the USA and for sale in the KDW shop in Kilkenny.

Keith Mosse, still in his late teens, visited Maria’s workshop and credits her with much of his love for the craft: “I still turn using the simple, sensual form that she gave me. I have never wanted to get too smart or complicated.” Someone else who came to meet Maria in 1966 was John Shiel who had set up a woodturning workshop in Dublin in 1963. On his first visit she asked him to copy a prototype. Next time he left with an order for two a dozen of bowls. He spent some time in the KDW workshop both before and after Maria’s departure, before setting up a workshop in Bagnalstown, Co Carlow, producing KDW designs. “I learned a great deal from her as an instructor. I was self-taught and very green. Now I would place her at an inspirational level, but at the time I didn’t realize the shapes she was making were influenced by factors about which I had no knowledge.” John Shiel’s workshop, at its busiest employing a dozen, continued to produce Maria’s designs, plus prototypes and production of KDW designs by Bertel Gaidberg and Gerald Tyler, exporting large numbers of salad bowls and lamp bases to London and San Francisco.

When Liam O’Neill joined as John Shiel’s apprentice in May 1968, he benefited not only from the experience of creating prototypes from KDW drawings but from the highly skilful turning and sanding techniques Maria had taught in the KDW workshop. “These days tools are made from toughened steel but then you had to be extremely skilful because the technology was primitive,” says Liam O’Neill. It was this level of training over a four year apprenticeship that gave Liam O’Neill the ability to make the transition to artistic wood turning when he returned in 1980 from the seminal gathering of international woodturners at Parnham House, Dorset. Also at Parnham was Ciarán Forbes, who in 1970, at a crucial time in his early development as a woodturner, had been trained in basic techniques at KDW by the Irish person most familiar with Maria’s working methods, Jim Holohan. This was shortly before Jim left to design and make moulds for Galway Crystal in 1971 and the KDW woodturning workshop closed.

“For me, the foundations were laid at KDW,” says Ciarán Forbes. “When I left, I was able to produce work with a sense of form and line and had the confidence to enter the RDS Competition. After I won third prize in 1974, KDW showed me some drawings of a range of tablewares and asked if I wanted to put them into production, but it wasn’t for me.” Ciarán’s early work was heavily influenced by the Scandinavian style he had encountered at KDW. Jim Holohan taught him to make the type of lidded boxes Maria van Kesteren had designed and Ciarán still occasionally goes back to the first shapes he made, most recently a straight sided bowl for an exhibition in Florida in 2004. His discovery in Simon Pearce’s Dublin shop of Richard Raffan’s work and through him, the concept of working from the tree rather than planks of exotic hardwoods, took him in a new direction and he went to work with Raffan for six months in the late 1970s. Yet, Maria van Kesteren has remained an inspiration, particularly since her 1981 exhibition at Rath House in Kilkenny where she showed ebonised and bleached pieces, and he has made visits to her studio in Holland and special trips abroad to see her exhibitions in the intervening years. “So many woodturners are striving to be artistic. Maria van Kesteren has always been where they want to be. She stands apart from and above them all. There is an enormous sureness about her work. She is very self-possessed,” says Ciarán Forbes.


Below: Box, rosewood, Maria van Kesteren, KDW, 1966.
“The KDW was not the Bauhaus,” is a comment often heard when talking to KDW critics. The Workshops were never meant to be like the Bauhaus. KDW’s remit was to work with manufacturers to raise design standards. Not simply a design promoter or advocate, KDW adopted an innovative practical approach. Some industries responded better than others to their message. However, in general, the Workshops achieved and often exceeded their aims. Education and retailing were not in the original remit, but they made immense contributions to both.

“Kilkenny Design Workshops stimulated visual awareness in terms of the things that people put into their homes,” according to Jim King. Following a period when consumer choice had for political and financial reasons been severely restricted, the primary significance of the Workshops was that KDW designers produced well designed objects that were seen and used by the people of Ireland. Many of these products were sold through the Kilkenny shops which were hugely influential in advancing retailing and promoting individual designers and craftspeople. KDW designs ranged from ceramic tableware, textiles (including tea cloths, towels and curtain), silverware, furniture, industrial products and graphics. For much of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s KDW contributed to the Irish visual landscape through designs like the marigold and white Post and Telegraph van with its P+T logo, the Telecom Éireann logo, the churn and shamrock logo of the National Dairy Council, the OPW logo, the yellow litter bin, the brown and black Ennis tableware range and Oisin Kelly’s Irish proverb tea towels.

The KDW style was natural and warm, a sort of sophisticated rusticity. The textile designer, Jenny Trigwell remembers that the German company WMF which produced many household items, often in stainless steel, came to the Workshops with a brief for a ‘Kuhstall’ (cowshed) look to complement their own rather cold products.

KDW’s influence on the craft sector was enormous, as it revitalised often dying craft-based industries, attracting non-Irish
Craftsmen and, through the shops, contributing to the
selling of craft in Ireland and therefore making the craft
sector economically viable. The formal apprenticeships in
the metal working workshop and the informal apprenticeships
that operated in the other workshops trained many craftsmen
who went on to have successful careers in their own sectors.
Its promotions abroad helped create markets for Irish products,
KDW designed or not.

The Crafts Council of Ireland acknowledges a debt to KDW
for the advancement and promotion of crafts in Ireland and in
playing a role in its founding. The Workshops also assisted in
creating an Irish design sector both by leading the way and by
training young graduates in the Butler House scheme. Many Irish
designers working today spent some time at the Workshops.

The aim of ‘Designing Ireland’ is to show examples of the range
of work undertaken by KDW. Working models and prototypes
have been included to demonstrate the design process in the
Workshops. Most people viewing this exhibition will remember
some of these pieces in their homes, but many will not realise
that they were designed by KDW. While this knowledge was not
important at the time, it means that Kilkenny Design Workshops
have vanished from sight very quickly and their legacy is largely
forgotten.

Less than twenty years after their closure, KDW’s disappearance
from public view is worrying, because they are an important
element of Irish design history. The Workshops were criticised
for being a foreign import, but with little or no training in
Ireland for designers in the 1950s and 1960s, Kilkenny Design
Workshops were only possible because of the number of
designers who came from around Europe to work in Kilkenny.
KDW succeeded from the beginning in attracting designers they
targeted such as Maria van Kesteren and Rudolf Heltzel and in
taking advantage of the presence of others in Ireland such as
ceramic artist Sonja Landweer. Later, recruitment forays were
often made to the degree shows of the art colleges in England.
Designers had often heard of the Workshops due to the positive
coverage in influential European design magazines such as
Mobilia, Design and Abitare and were eager to come to Ireland
to work on this interesting design experiment.

The combination of young designers, experienced technicians
and CTT staff with in-depth knowledge of Irish industry
contributed to a creative and exciting work environment.
There was also a sense of responsibility. Jenny Trigwell who
joined KDW at 21 explains, “it was more than just a design
job, we were trying to help companies turn themselves around.
We would often go to factories expecting to see a large well-
equipped operation and find a local workforce in small premises
using old though still functioning machinery. We were trying to
help keep these people employed.”

The city of Kilkenny changed fundamentally, from a county town
to a tourism centre with a reputation for craft, arts and design.
KDW were involved in the development and organisation of
Kilkenny Arts Week; Damien Harrington designed the logo and
the graphic designers Richard Eckerley, Tony O’Hanlon and
Peter Dabinett designed many of the early posters. Gerald
Tyler wrote a book on the architecture of Kilkenny. KDW staff
also contributed to the preservation of some of the heritage
buildings in Kilkenny at a time when Ireland was not known
for appreciating its architectural and visual heritage.

As the Workshops were experiencing difficulties in 1988,
Paul Hogan wrote an article in the Irish Times which stated:

Kilkenny has been in existence for 25 years... [and] the
conditions which brought it into existence have changed – largely through its own efforts. It may be
that the time has come to call it a day and for Kilkenny, always an innovator, to show that it is possible for an Irish
state-supported institution, its work accomplished, to lay
down its tools and go into well-merited retirement.

That retirement appears to have taken Kilkenny Design
Workshops out of public consciousness and it is time for their
contribution to contemporary Ireland to be acknowledged.
Catalogue

Catalogue entries include item name, material and technique, designer(s) names, maker or client, and year of design.

1960s


Above: Male and female candleholders, cast iron, Oisín Kelly, KDW, c 1967.


Above: Fruit bowl, silver, Marcus Huber, KDW, first designed 1968, made 1978.

Above: Platters, enamel on copper, Brigitte Banta, KDW, 1969.


Relief candle, Oisín Kelly, KDW, 1967.

Candleholder, afrormosia, Maria van Kesteren, KDW, 1966.

Candles, Damien Harrington, Boramic Candles, c 1969.

Porridge bowl, ash, Maria van Kesteren, Galbraith and Sons, 1966.

Salad servers, teak, Gerald Tyler, KDW, 1969.

Children’s wooden houses, Oisín Kelly, KDW, c 1967.

Potato sack, Damien Harrington, KDW, 1968.

Above: Box, rosewood, Maria van Kesteren, KDW, 1966.

Wall bracket, wrought iron, Oisín Kelly, Cork County Crafts, 1967.

Above: Bowls and plates, wooden, Bertel Gardberg, KDW, c 1967.

Porridge bowl, ash, Maria van Kesteren, Galbraith and Sons, 1966.

Relief candle, Oisín Kelly, KDW, 1967.

Candleholder, afrormosia, Maria van Kesteren, KDW, 1966.

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Above: Box, rosewood, Maria van Kesteren, KDW, 1966.

Wall bracket, wrought iron, Oisín Kelly, Cork County Crafts, 1967.

Above: Bowls and plates, wooden, Bertel Gardberg, KDW, c 1967.
Above: Ring, silver, Marcus Huber, KDW, c 1969.

Above: Ring, silver and citrine, Marcus Huber, KDW, c 1969.

Above: Cufflinks, silver, prototypes, Rudolf Heltzel (left and right) and Marcus Huber (centre), KDW, 1966/67.

Above: Bracelet/neckpiece, prototype units, not produced, Franz Bette, KDW, c 1969.


Above: Ring, silver and goldplated silver, prototype, Marcus Huber, KDW, c 1969.


Above: Ring, silver and clear blue enamel, Brigette Bette and Franz, KDW, c 1968/69.


Above: Necklace, silver, Marcus Huber, KDW, c 1969.

Above: Ring, silver with monad motif, Bertel Gardberg, KDW, c 1969.

Above: Ring, silver and clear blue enamel, Brigette Bette and Franz, KDW, c 1968/69.

Above: Ring, silver and citrine, Marcus Huber, KDW, c 1969.

Floor tiles, earthenware screen printed, David Reeves, KDW, 1965.


Above: Teapot, earthenware, David Reeves, KDW, 1966.

Square bottles, earthenware, David Reeves, KDW, 1965.

Bonbonnières, earthenware, David Reeves, KDW, 1966.

P + T colour chip and shade card, Damien Harrington, 1968.

‘Designs for Production’ catalogue, Damien Harrington, 1969.

Scarves, silk, hand screen printed, Maria Ketola, KDW, 1967.

Above: Headsquares, foulard silk (three colourways), Pat Scott, KDW, 1969.

Headsquare, foulard silk, Pat Scott, KDW, 1969.

Above: Headsquares, foulard silk (three colourways), Pat Scott, KDW, 1969.

Headsquare, foulard silk, Pat Scott, KDW, 1969.

Above: Wrapping paper for the Kilkenny shop, Damien Harrington, KDW, c 1968.


Above: Curtaining, printed linen, David Wilson, Lamont & Sons, 1965.

‘Maytime’ from the Kilkenny Collection, printed cotton, Jenni Green, Kilkenny Trading Company/Seafield Textiles, 1969/70.


Above: Bag symbols, Damien Harrington, KDW, 1968.


Above: P+T logo, Damien Harrington, Department of Posts and Telegraphs, 1968.


Left: Chair, beech and paper string, Peter Hiort Loneroen, Ardee Chair Company, 1968.
1970s
Above: Medal celebrating Ireland’s entry to the EEC, silver, Oisin Kelly, KDW, 1972.

Chalice, silver and rock crystal, passing out piece for an apprentice, Pat Behan, Shanagolden Parish Church, c 1973.

Candlesticks, silver, Asger Max Andersen, Royal College of Physicians, 1974.

Above: Glassware, soda glass, Gerald Tyler, Fermoy, design later manufactured by Cavan Crystal as ‘Tantulus’, 1970.

‘Tantulus’ boxes, Holger Strøm (packaging), Elizabeth Fitz-Simon (graphics and name), Cavan Crystal, 1973.

Bowl, glass, Gerald Tyler, Cavan Crystal, 1972.

Savings box tins, Damien Harrington (Rainy Day), Jenny Tripwell (Going to the Fair) and Helena Sebardt (Early Irish Coinage), KDW, Metal Box Company, 1972/73 with art work for other money boxes.


Chalice, silver and rock crystal, passing out piece for an apprentice, Pat Behan, Shanagolden Parish Church, c 1973.

Candlesticks, silver, Asger Max Andersen, Royal College of Physicians, 1974.

Above: Teapot, silver and casein, Jim Kelly, KDW - apprentice piece, 1975.

Above: Medal celebrating Ireland’s entry to the EEC, silver, Oisin Kelly, KDW, 1972.

Apprenticeship qualifying medal, silver, Oisin Kelly and Rudolf Hetzel, KDW, 1966; Rehab ‘People of the Year’ award medal, silver, Oisin Kelly, KDW/Jewellery and Metal Company, c 1975.

Necklace, silver and tiger’s eye, not produced, Thelma Robertson, KDW, c 1973.
Above: Pendant, silver, Asger Max Andersen, KDW, c 1972.


Above: Ring, silver with amethyst, Asger Max Andersen, KDW, 1971.

Ring, silver and agate, Asger Max Andersen, KDW, c 1972.


Above: Ring, carnelian and silver, prototype, not produced, Thelma Robertson, KDW, c 1970.
Above: Samples for Dripsey, woven Dralon, Jenny Trigwell, Dripsey Woollen Mills, c 1970.


‘Hopscotch’ curtaining from the Kilkenny Contract Interiors Index, printed cotton, Helena Ruth, Textile Design Centre, c 1972.


Tie, wool, Jack Lenor Larsen/Mortimer O’Shaughnessy, KDW, 1970.

Bedspread, wool, Stephanie Barry, KDW, c 1972.

Above: Knee rug, wool worsted, prototype, Jenny Trigwell, Kerry Woollen Mills, c 1974/75.

Knee rug, brushed mohair, prototype, Jenny Trigwell, Cushendale Mills, c 1976.

Knee rug, brushed wool, Jenny Trigwell, Kerry Woollen Mills, c 1976.


Above: Samples for Dripsey, woven Dralon, Jenny Trigwell, Dripsey Woollen Mills, c 1970.


‘Chequers’ curtaining from the Kilkenny Contract Interiors Index, printed cotton, Helena Ruth, Textile Design Centre, c 1972.

‘Feathers’ from the Duette Collection, printed cotton, Jenny Trigwell, KDW/Textile Design Centre, c 1971.


‘Diamond Daisy’ from the Duette Collection, part of a co-ordinating range which included wallpaper and sheeting, Jenny Trigwell, 1979.

‘Canasta’ from the Duette collection, part of a co-ordinating range which included wallpaper and sheeting, Helena Ruuth, original design 1971, adapted 1979.

‘Gavotte’ from the Kinsale Collection, samples, printed cotton satin, Jenny Trigwell, Kilkenny Trading Company/Seafield Textiles, 1973/74.


‘Connections’ from the Kilkenny Collection, Jenny Trigwell, KDW/Textile Design Centre, 1979.


‘Connections’ from the Kilkenny Collection, Jenny Trigwell, KDW/Textile Design Centre, 1979.


Samples for WMF project, paper and linen, Jenny Trigwell, KDW, 1972.

Product brief for Jenny Trigwell for the WMF project, form and sticker designed by Damien Harrington, KDW, 1972.

‘Noah’s Ark’ table, cast iron, Oisín Kelly, KDW, c 1973.

Lampbase and shade, Clare Jones, Hacketts, 1979.


‘Cirrus’, bed, chest of drawers, blanket box, Clare Jones, KDW/Mannings of Bagnalstown, c 1978.


Child’s table and stool, cardboard, Holger Strøm, Smurfit Corrugated Cases, 1970.

Exhibition cubes, cardboard, Holger Strøm, KDW, 1971.

‘Kilkenny Chair System’, booklet and price list, Damien Harrington, KDW, 1974.


Boxes for Belleek plates, Holger Strøm (packaging), Elizabeth Fitz-Simon (illustration), Belleek, 1970-73.

GAA Plate, porcelain, Oisín Kelly, Belleek, 1977.

Bud vase box, Holger Strøm (packaging), Elizabeth Fitz-Simon (graphics), Belleek, 1973.


Boxes for Belleek plates, Holger Strøm (packaging), Elizabeth Fitz-Simon (illustration), Belleek, 1970-73.

GAA Plate, porcelain, Oisín Kelly, Belleek, 1977.

Bud vase box, Holger Strøm (packaging), Elizabeth Fitz-Simon (graphics), Belleek, 1973.
Above: Birds; sparrowhawk, wren, raven, eider duck, mallard, sitting and crouching grouse, snowy owl, puffin, male and female teal, stoneware, Oisín Kelly, KDW, 1975-1978.


Above: Pebble boxes, stoneware, Mike Byrne, KDW, 1977.

Above: 'Standing Man' one of the 'Two Working Men', stoneware, Oisín Kelly, KDW, 1977.

Above: Gannets; single gannet and two groups, stoneware, Oisín Kelly, KDW, 1975-1978.

Above: 'Money pig', stoneware, Mike Byrne, KDW, c 1978.

Above: Four Apostles, wall plaques, stoneware, Oisín Kelly, KDW, c 1972.


Lamps, earthenware, Mike Byrne, KDW, 1978.

Lamp, earthenware, Mike Byrne, KDW, 1978.


Irish wildflowers’, flan dishes, earthenware, Jenny Trigwell (illustration), Celtic Ceramics, 1976.


Above: Kilkenny Arts Week, logo and car sticker, Damien Harrington, Kilkenny Arts Week, 1974.


Above: World Crafts Council visit to KDW folder, Damien Harrington, KDW, 1970.


Industrial design seminar/CTT/KDW booklet, Damien Harrington, KDW/CTT, 1971.

- ‘Danish design’ exhibition, folder and invitation, Damien Harrington, KDW, 1978.
- ‘European Conservation Year’ stamp, Damien Harrington, Department of Lands, 1970.
- ‘Ireland Today’ newsletter layout, Elizabeth Fitz-Simon, Department of Foreign Affairs, 1976.

Above: Local Authority logo, Damien Harrington, Kilkenny County Council, 1976.

Below: European Conservation Year logo, Damien Harrington, Department of Lands, 1970.


Above: Forest service logo, Damien Harrington, Department of Forestry and Wildlife, 1972.

Eirebus logo, Elizabeth Fitz-Simon, Eirebus, 1972.


Below: OPW logo, Damien Harrington, Office of Public Works, 1973/74

‘A Sense of Ireland’ four posters, Richard Eckersley, Sense of Ireland, 1980.

Above: ‘Katto’ poster, Richard Eckersley, Kilkenny Arts Week, 1975


1980s

Above: Corner seats, beech and wool upholstery, prototype, unknown designer, possibly Peter Minards, KDW, c 1982.


‘Thistledown’ from the Kilkenny Collection, printed cotton, KDW/Textile Design Centre, c 1981.

Curtaining for KDW boardroom, handwoven, sample, Jenny Trigwell, KDW, 1980.

Above: Montserrat Island hand towels and runner with colour yarn samples, sea island cotton, Jenny Trigwell, Montserrat Sea Island Cotton Co., 1985.


Above: Corner seats, beech and wool upholstery, prototype, unknown designer, possibly Peter Minards, KDW, c 1982.


Bord na Móna newsletter with new logo, Damien Harrington (logo), Lorenzo Tonti Sayoud, 1986.

Tennis ball packaging, Peter Dabinett, Tretorn, 1982.


10th Listowel Writers’ Week poster, Tony O’Hanlon, Listowel Writers’ Week, 1980.


Irish Steel design manual, Damien Harrington and Peggy McConnell, Irish Steel, 1980.


Right: Telecom Éireann logo, Peter Dabinett, Telecom Éireann, 1981.


Above: ‘Handmade in Ireland for exhibition’ poster, Tony O’Hanlon, Cultural Relations Committee, Department of Foreign Affairs, 1980

Above: ‘Ormonde’ table, prototype, mahogany veneer with synthetic inlay, Raymond Turner and Dan Smith, KDV, 1983/84.

Above: ‘Ormonde’ chair, beech and wool and cotton moquette upholstery, prototype, Raymond Turner and Dan Smith, KDW, 1981/82.

Sling shelves with straps, beach and nylon, Oliver Hood, KDW/Mannings, c 1982.

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Right: Telecom Éireann logo, Peter Dabinett, Telecom Éireann, 1981.


Above right: Designer Development Awards poster, Peggy McConnell, KDW, 1981.


Above: An Post forms, Tony O’Hanlon (forms, pre-existing logo by Bill Bolger), An Post, 1983/84

Above: Breadboards, plastic, Seán McNulty, Kelly Handles, c 1983.

Spaceship, plastic connectors for cola cans, Seán McNulty, Pepsi, 1985.

Above: Laptop, block model, Bryan Leech, CPT, 1985/86.

Above: Desktop computer terminals, Dan Smith and Seán McNulty, Beehive Ireland Ltd, 1982.

Above: Switch, Oliver Hood, Seán McNulty and Pat Brannigan, GEA, 1984.
Design in Ireland
Design in Ireland

Report of the Scandinavian Design Group in Ireland
April 1961

Kaj Franck, Erik Herløw, Åke Huldt
Gunnar Billmann Petersen,
Erik Chr. Sørensen.
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The part played by commercial firms in providing facilities for the Group to examine their plants and design departments requires special acknowledgement, particularly as they cannot be mentioned by name. It is also noteworthy that of the many firms which were approached none demurred at full inspection even with the knowledge that their present design performance in many cases fell short by European standards.

KAJ FRANCK
Head of the design department at Arabia ceramic factory and Notujö glass works, Finland. Art Director at the Finnish School of Industrial Art. Awarded the Fulbright Scholarship 1955, the Lunning prize 1955; Triennale Milan, Diplome d’Honneur, 1954, Grand Prix, 1957. Compasso d’Oro, Milan 1957. Member of the jury for the Compasso d’Oro, 1960, Kaufmann International prize award 1961.

ERIK HERLOW
FOREWORD

In October 1960 Córas Tráchlí was given responsibility by the Government for the improvement of standards of industrial design. Good design is an undeniable necessity to the growth of our export trade, but standards cannot be raised for export goods only. The factors which determine the quality, good or bad, of the designs we produce are deeply rooted in our homes, our schools, our shops, our historical traditions, our whole way of living.

In confronting this many-headed assignment we felt that the first need was for an audit of the existing situation, an authoritative and impartial assessment of where we now stand. Lacking such an assessment any measures we might attempt could be no better than random politeaces applied with more hope than conviction.

It was natural in the situation to turn to the Scandinavians. Their achievements in design are enviable and, interestingly, of fairly recent origin: the scale of their industry, their raw materials, the patterns of their society, are similar in many aspects to ours; their successes in export markets impressive.

The response to our request for assistance was most heartening. Six industrial designers and teachers of design, of international reputation—three from Denmark, two from Finland and one from Sweden—were approached to make the survey we required. All accepted, the Scandinavian Design Group was formed and arrangements made for
the visit to Ireland to take place in April 1961, with the preparation of a report to follow as quickly as possible thereafter.

During the period of a two-week stay the members of the Group visited a representative cross-section of factories and workshops in Dublin and throughout the country. They examined the range of Irish-manufactured goods displayed in our shops; they studied the source material for design which exists in our libraries, art galleries and museums. Visits were made and discussions took place with Principals, members of the staffs and students at the National College of Art, the School of Architecture in U.C.D., the Colleges of Technology in Bolton Street and Rathmines, and the Schools of Art in Cork and Waterford.* Meetings were arranged with the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland and with other groups and individuals professionally concerned. At the conclusion of their visit the Group conducted a series of five seminars for those engaged in different aspects of industrial design.

In order to avoid the rigidity imposed by terms of reference the Group were asked to select for inclusion in the report those matters which from their own observation it seemed most pertinent to examine.

This report does not purport to be a comprehensive review of industrial design in Ireland; more time than was available on this occasion would be needed for such an undertaking. It is rather the synthesis of views of five eminent practitioners and educationalists from three countries who made a brief, but very intensive, survey of our situation. Their findings are here presented.

* Pressure of time prevented the Limerick School of Art from being included in the Group's itinerary.
INTRODUCTION

Our stay in Ireland was a brief one. Despite this, however, we were able to form quite specific impressions on the situation of design in Ireland, and the degree of importance which your society attaches to it. We were assisted in this by having received a most comprehensive briefing preparatory to our arrival, and also by the fact that we were working in our own fields and were able to bring our professional experience to bear on the problems we encountered. We also received invaluable aid from many distinguished educationalists, designers and manufacturers who collaborated with Córas Tríochtá by giving us detailed information and opening the doors of their schools and factories. A countrywide tour of Ireland took us to schools, museums and factories in Cork, Donegal, Galway, Kildare and Waterford.

A remarkable feature of Irish life which we noted, even after a few days, is the manner in which today's Irish culture has developed a distinct leaning towards literature, theatre, the spoken word and abstract thinking, rather than creation by hand or machine and the visual arts—the other side of human activity in civilization.

While understanding something of the historical circumstances which contribute to this situation, we feel that the lack of creative and visual activity is paralleled by the fact that the Irish school child is exposed in a much lesser degree to drawing and the manipulation of materials than
his Scandinavian counterpart. Without our being able to
gauge exactly the significance of general art education at
an early age for the artist or artisan, it is quite natural to
believe that the interest and appreciation of the layman
are stimulated by such early personal experience. In fact it
would probably be true to say that without some reason-
abley developed form of art education in the various levels
of schools in Ireland, it will be impossible to produce the
informed and appreciative public as necessary as a back-
ground to the creative artist.
We would emphasise at this stage that it was not our
mission in Ireland to recommend the ‘adoption’ of Scan-
dinavian design, indeed we would strongly advise against
the unqualified transplantaion of features from Scan-
dinavian countries to Ireland, even if such action would
have passing economic benefits. We feel that the result of
such an approach would be to kill what can be saved and
what still exists of the original Irish values and culture,
and stifle the development of true Irish tradition and the
great opportunities which the present situation seems to
offer.
Scandinavian production in the realm of arts and crafts
and industrial design is largely based on the development
of traditional crafts and abilities. We believe that one of
the great factors in the success of Scandinavian design
abroad is that the production is based on what has already
been established and on local demand rather than on
export requirements. The Scandinavians designed and
manufactured work for Scandinavians and the ultimate
export success depended on this outlook.
In general, the best-designed products we found in Ireland
were those based on traditional craft industries successfully
interpreting the Irish tradition. Outstanding examples were
the Donegal tweeds and the handknitted sweaters of
traditional design. At the other end of the scale, we found
many products which were badly designed and executed,
and which, in our view, would not have the slightest
chance of competing successfully on the world market.
We understand that many of the industries we visited
have been established only relatively recently and, taking
this into consideration, their accomplishments have been
remarkable.
Nevertheless the successful development of these indus-
tries will depend on their placing much greater emphasis
on design than heretofore. We gained a strong impression
in many of the factories we studied that product design
was not considered with the serious attention it demands,
and that the designer, when he existed, was regarded as a
somewhat frivolous addition to the staff, rather than having
the status of a key member of the management team.
The question of education of designers will be explored in
the succeeding pages, and at this stage we shall only say
that we encountered in Ireland the extraordinary situation
of a multiplicity of art, architectural and craft schools, not
one of which appeared to us capable of adequately
satisfying the needs of the country in regard to design.
We have in the following pages reviewed various institu-
tions and industries and have tried to do so frankly and
in a constructive manner, keeping very much in mind the
fact that Irish products contribute fundamentally to the
picture of Ireland presented to the outside world, and that
Irish export trade and the tourist industry depend heavily
on design.
Some of our proposals may seem far-reaching, but we
would stress that isolated attacks on the problem will have
very little impact. A designer here or a seminar there will
not appreciably alter the situation. A co-ordinated scheme for raising the standards in schools, buildings, factories, in education and in industry should be aimed at. This, in our opinion, can best be accomplished by the creation of an Irish institute devoted to the promotion of the visual arts. This recommendation is dealt with fully in a later section of the report.

In carrying out the recommended programme all the elements of Irish society will have a part to play—the Government, educationalists, manufacturers, architects and designers, department stores and the organs of publicity, the press, radio and television. In particular the departments of the Government have a most significant contribution to make towards raising the level of design by reviewing the design of public buildings, office furnishings, publications, stamps, etc. and taking positive steps to remove those features which are bad and ugly and reflect no credit on Ireland. It is obvious that the Churches also can be of particular help by raising their standards of architecture and decoration.

In our view, Ireland, by virtue of her lack of sophistication in matters of design, has a unique opportunity, denied by circumstances to many more developed countries, of making a great contribution, not alone to her own prosperity and culture, but to the culture of Western Europe. We believe that with courage and foresight, the possibilities can be realised.

I. DESIGN IN IRELAND

When in the introduction to this report we warn against Irish acquisition of Scandinavian features, it is due to our knowledge that modern Scandinavian production is the result of a cultivation of special local conditions. Up to the time when exports began to increase, the bulk of Scandinavian-designed products were created for an appreciative home market and what led to a wider interest abroad was a sense of quality in regard to materials and craftsmanship, and, to a considerable extent, the application of traditional forms to modern conditions.

The use of borrowed forms of decoration is common enough in modern production, but shallow utilization of old or foreign models has never led to the creation of anything of value. In our passage through Irish production, therefore, we have constantly paid attention to what valuable national characteristics we could find, which would enable Ireland to put on the market something out of the ordinary with a distinct Irish quality.

We have searched after good Irish design tradition and we have been asked what we meant by 'Irish tradition'. According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, tradition is opinion or custom handed down from ancestors to posterity... artistic principles based on accumulated experience or continuous usage. What has been handed down in Ireland and what has been accumulated from experience has today in Ireland two or three different manifestations.
The most perceptible are the rural handicraft, the Georgian tradition, and the early Christian culture. In tweed weaving, knitting, etc., the rural handicraft is still alive and so is even the Georgian tradition but in so attenuated a form as to be difficult of application. As to the early Christian culture, its artistic manifestations had lapsed long before the Georgian period and thus today's use of the early ornaments is scarcely more of a tradition in Ireland than elsewhere. However, Ireland has abundant sources of inspiration in the high crosses and ornamental objects and they have been utilised for the past 75 years. It deserves notice that the designers have almost invariably turned to the queerest and most complex motifs, the interlaced animals, etc., which are apt to lose their proper character when reproduced in modern processes and will rarely harmonise with the surroundings of our time. On the other hand there is an unemployed treasure of Irish patterns fit for design usage; the simple granite carvings and the small ornaments scattered over the pages of the illuminated manuscripts. We would not, however, like to see designers turning to these sources merely to bring something new on to the market. This ancient culture is worthy of artists who will understand and respect the simple strength and organic rhythm of the antiquities.

The Georgian tradition we regard as English, not Irish, in its origins, even if the considerable supply of Georgianism in Ireland is modified to give it some especial characteristics. In England, its natural home, it is barely alive and at the last extremity.

This reminds us of a parallel with Denmark. Both Ireland and Denmark have a large overpowering neighbour, and as Ireland has been influenced by England, so Denmark has been influenced by Germany. For many years the Danish kings and nobility were German or almost entirely so, and furthermore, since the Reformation, Denmark adopted German Lutheranism. Ireland never adopted the English form of worship, but it has had an English Government and English-minded ruling class. It has had materials and products from England, and for unnumbered years the handicraft and architectural culture of the country has been influenced by England. But it has seemed to us that the Irish when confronting the English market have frequently adopted the most common and hackneyed features of English production.

Of course every country must be influenced by its neighbours and it can be said straight away that the particular forms of Danish furniture, silver, ceramics, etc., which led to economic success in later years, were based to a large extent on what came from Germany. But the core of Danish style derives from the work of a series of Danish artists, architects, painters and sculptors who through generations were aware of the essential qualities of materials. They animated each other in their common sympathy for exquisite material and its properties, for treatments which paid regard to proportions, problems of production and use, and finally, to the normal human scale. This to an extent which makes ornamentation almost superfluous and which at any rate is not unduly influenced by passing fashions.

To illustrate this spirit, it should be mentioned that for many years Scandinavian artists have avoided staining and high glossy polishing of wood. Similarly in many cases they have refrained from ornamenting silver or ceramics and concentrated instead on cultivating the relationship between form, clay and glazing, a development which is now accepted as an art in its own right.
A very close relation to this respect for the structure of materials is to be found in the Scandinavian comprehension of colour. In some countries one often finds rooms with nearly the same colour on walls, ceilings, windows, doors and upholstery, as if the entire room had been soaked in a dyer’s vat. We find a modern cult which attempts to make exactly the same shades of colour on wool, silk, paper, plastics, paints, etc. In Scandinavia, for instance, such efforts would not be popular as Scandinavian designers believe that different materials with differing functions claim different colours. To the Scandinavians, moreover, there is a perceptive relation between colour and material which is dictated by the very nature of the latter. Kaare Klint, the furniture designer who had the greatest influence on Danish production, always preferred unstained leather for upholstery. He tolerated neither de-greasing or levelling of colour but wanted to have the natural dark line along the backbone in the middle of the chairs, etc. The same artist felt the impracticality of clear or violent colours for carpets, just as he found it against the order of nature to make roses to walk on. He developed a production of carpets geometrical in design and made from Icelandic wool unaltered in colour—unbleached white, different shades of buff and black—in fact just as it grew on the sheep.

The original tweeds and a great many other Irish products derive their effect from a similar connection with nature and, bearing in mind the above examples, we must advise you to take care of this line of production and pay attention to good materials, careful craftsmanship and practical form, as attractive design in our case has developed from an acquaintance with materials, methods of production and the main human requirements.

In common with other nations, Ireland must of course pay attention to passing fashions, but as competition from countries with very big populations is too strong in the field of cheap goods, quality of craftsmanship and design becomes absolutely essential. Here is where the study and understanding of the original Irish culture is of great value, for the penetration of this distinctively Irish spirit into Irish production will develop abilities in the appraisement of forms which will be useful even when leaving the national traditions.

Textiles

The field of textiles is one of the most interesting as far as Ireland is concerned and is of course a wonderful field for designers. On the same loom the same material can produce at the same price a wonderful fabric or a dull uninteresting cloth. The manufacturer himself may sometimes lose sight of this, preoccupied as he must be with prices, production and tradition. At the same time it is worth while to note that the textile field is more influenced by fashion than most of the other commodities we shall discuss. Textiles are one of the big items on the world market, but the successful selling product seems to be unpredictable. It follows that the textile designer must, besides the technical knowledge and feeling for the material, have a flair not only for the rapidly changing fashions as manifested in this year’s taste, but also for the more profound transition in the way of life taking place in the world today. However, the designer who takes a trip to London or Paris to try and pick up the colours and patterns which will be in vogue next season, will do his manufacturer a disservice and leave him still only competing in price. What the designer should be able to do is to help set the
policy of the firm. Textiles are world-wide and the businessman can buy from Hong Kong as well as Milan. A firm in this field must set its goal, have a clear and well defined aim, and with good production it will surely find its true customers.

In Ireland the industry seems to be divided between firms basing their production on traditional handicrafts and more recently established firms set up to replace imported textile goods and protected against their competition. We feel that many of the faults to be found in Irish textiles spring from this cause. Because they are attempting to replace the foreign-manufactured article they have tried to imitate it and manufacture a great many lines with a mixture of foreign styles and production techniques. Instead of being Irish, their textile goods are French, English or Japanese, and we know from our experience that this is a disastrous approach. A preferable policy would be to strike out and experiment with new ideas and production methods, to concentrate on a few lines of excellent quality rather than copying the production of other countries, and endeavour to produce something of unique design and quality. We believe that ultimately this would be a more economic policy. These remarks do not, of course, apply to all Irish textile mills. Some of the factories we visited were working on the lines outlined above, but they were exceptions.

Textile Printing

In this field, as in others, we shall have to generalise as it is not our intention to single out individual firms for either praise or adverse comment. Textile printing in Ireland is a very young industry and technically has made good progress. The workshops are equipped with the best machinery and are producing technically good work. They have, in our opinion, definite possibilities of manufacturing first-class printed cloths. Two of the firms we visited had their own design studios but too often the work was based on casually chosen designs of foreign origin purchased from the "pattern parasites" of Europe. These "pattern factories" produce designs which are today distributed all over the world. The patterns are superficial, made by routine, and with no particular person in mind.

A fabric, like a dress or a piece of jewellery, has to be designed for a certain person. This somebody is very often the artist himself. What makes the creation appreciated by other people is the natural wish of the artist to evolve something desirable which somehow "charges" the creation and gives it a stronger meaning. To design a pattern for a fabric is to create a surface that holds together. The motif or figure has to be subordinated to the rhythm, shades, and colours. From the very beginning the pattern has to be specially designed for a particular fabric and related to its thickness, transparency and other qualities. Too often the managements of printing factories fail to understand this and instead of employing qualified designers have some copyists who re-work and simplify the Continental cartoons on the advice of the firms' salesmen. The result is that already inferior patterns lose the last of their charm. The copyists are not supposed to create anything themselves and this is the weak point of the system. The designer of the pattern should develop it himself, choose the material to be printed and the colour schemes, be involved in new articles, fashion and display. It is possible to expand this field of work even further.
Textile Design
In the studios we visited there seemed to be a lack of artistic understanding of the medium, which is probably due to the absence of proper educational facilities for designers. The lack of a qualified designer at management level was particularly apparent in the choice of materials. Very often the wrong materials are utilised and it is evident in many of the designs that there is not an awareness of such fundamentals as the ultimate function of the material.

The Finnish printing industry provides a good example for Ireland, for up to five or six years ago Finnish patterns were merely developments of European-purchased designs. Then a small daring team of textile designers took over a printing workshop in Helsinki. After some experiments they put on the market a collection of patterns that they unreservedly liked themselves. These patterns had a limited success; some people liked them but they disappeared in the flood of international patterns overflowing the shops. Some stores would not even take the fabrics. The result was of course grave economic difficulties. The designers next opened a boutique and successfully sold dresses made of simple cotton with the new gay Finnish patterns. The new designs gradually became accepted. Originally the designs were made for the founders themselves and their Finnish countrywomen whose figures and colouring differ somewhat from other Scandinavians. In this way a distinctively Finnish fashion was developed, a style that partly follows the fashions of the Continent but whose patterns and colours have their own laws. Because of their originality these fabrics have become a successful Finnish export. The large textile factories who had been closely watching these advances, gradually appreciated that here was an idea which could achieve positive results. Consultants, colour experts and designers were employed by the big firms and were allowed to design patterns following their own ideas and not based on imported patterns or customer's calculations. Good results have been achieved but it must be stressed that only by great determination and dedication was success possible.

In Ireland something of the same spirit is needed. The bulk of Irish production is in fashion fabrics and consequently the different firms should establish qualified contacts in this field abroad. Furnishing fabrics are not developed but could be if the industry encourages young gifted designers who would have to be trained abroad. We should like to see the industry bringing in qualified consultant designers at board-room level and at the same time sending their young apprentice designers abroad for training.

Linen
Irish linen needs no praise. The quality still seems to be the very best. Among the damask patterns we found designs with a somewhat roughly composed naturalism (shamrock and other plant motifs) which hardly did justice to the material. Both flower motifs and geometric patterns can undoubtedly be cultivated to a higher artistic perfection and the quality of Irish linen deserves the very best of damask drawing.

Woollen and other woven cloths
Influence from abroad is nowhere more evident than in this section of the textile industry, and our earlier remarks in this section apply especially to it (see p. 10). The cloths for suitings, etc., are largely derivative and the necessity for the development of new ideas and designs is apparent.
Poplin
As far as we know Irish poplin is woven by only one firm. Materials, colouring and weaving seem to be of the highest quality. The colours are to a rather large extent dictated by tartans, regiment and club stripes, but many of the independent colours and patterns are excellent. We were saddened to hear that because the number of apprentices in hand weaving is so small one of the main problems is to secure the maintenance of this old trade which throws such a lustre on Irish production. In our view, because of the distinct and unique nature of the material it has great opportunities on the world market, and strenuous efforts should be made to keep it alive by encouraging apprentices to the trade.

Donegal tweeds
Probably the most valuable and brilliant facet of Ireland's textile industry. We can have nothing but praise for the production and one of the firms we visited could stand as a model to all others. It occurs to us that the traditional patterns and colours seem immediately more valuable than where the designs are more or less dependent on changing fashion claims. Therefore we propose the establishment of a tweed museum which would illustrate the history of the craft/industry and show the various stages of growth and development and the techniques used in production. All the old colour recipes, directions on colouring methods, samples of the original ways of spinning and weaving, etc., could be collected and preserved so that fading and other changes are avoided. On the basis of this element a production could be started, the patterns and quality of which would remain unchanged from the ancient ones. The goods produced by the industry in catering for changing fashion would thus maintain the high standards acquired through generations. It could be that the collecting of the old materials would result in a revival of the colours and cloths in which people have lost interest and it would be possible for designers, given the opportunity to study the collection, to create variants with influence on the fashion-centres.

Hand knitwear
Again an excellent industry. The production is based on Irish traditional patterns of great beauty and the quality of the yarn is superb. It would probably be of great benefit if the white wool could be supplemented with natural black or brown and experiments could be undertaken in spinning together the wools of different colours. (We did not see any black sheep on our travels, but could not somebody breed them?) We do not approve of the tendency, which we noted, to descend to the dyeing of the yarn into fashion colours. In the traditional patterns, rope, diamond, cable, moss, you have a treasure which is capable of further development, but which at the same time must be safeguarded.

Handmade carpets
The production of tied carpets is of a very high quality but artistic standards need to be raised and could be by the choice of better patterns and designs, and by attention to the finish of the carpets which we consider too shiny at present. A collection of carpet drawings showed that the work of the designer's office was skilful but dull. We were told that the only patterns utilised were dictated by the customers or their architects, so that the entire production is concentrated on supplies for certain places existing or
being built. As for goods for stock, nothing is made except a few pieces for exhibition purposes. These latter surpassed in no way the articles made to order. In our view, the industry would be well advised to make their samples works of art in order to animate their customers into buying better drawings than those they usually produce for themselves.

A fine Irish rug ought to be one of the items at the next major international fair or exhibition. The industry should experiment with natural earth colours in conjunction with natural wools which we think would be suitable for the technique. It could also be recommended that a foreign consultant be employed during the period of transition.

Machine-made carpets
We saw two different types of carpeting, the normal machine-made carpet and sisal carpeting. In regard to the former we found all the faults we have mentioned when referring to textile printing—imitations of foreign carpets, attempts to anticipate next year's fashions, resulting in shallow and worthless design, and a general lack of understanding of the medium by all concerned with production. It is difficult to generalise, for in one firm we visited we were conscious of efforts to improve the production, while in another there was clearly no attempt being made to make an individual contribution to the industry. In one factory we were told that monochrome carpets sold best. This is not surprising as the correct conception of the carpet is as a surface to stand on, a ground which perfectly reflects the materials, wood, brickwork, metal and wall coverings which are used in interior decorating.

A firm cannot hope to get the best from its designers if they are, so to speak, placed at a drawing board with blinkers on their eyes, the noise of the looms in their ears, and wool dust in their noses. The artists should have an opportunity to see the latest developments in architecture and interior design in Ireland and abroad and picture the carpets in the surroundings of homes, hotels or public buildings.

The patterns we saw were not good. Those based on oriental or antique models were violent, as the pattern detail had been torn out of the composition of a complete carpet and then this detail had been endlessly repeated. We missed anything in the line of discreetly patterned carpets (striped, stippled, checked and so on), which catch the marks and flecks without creating any impression of depth or glinting pile. The "modern" patterns, whether they had been cooked up from cubist or informalist paintings, were extremely irritating to look at. We cannot believe that a carpet is composed simply as a little colourful decoration designed to catch the eye in a catalogue or shop window. We do not think that the tension of a non-figurative painting, or the charm of the tachist's whimsical brushwork can be forced into the formula of the Jacquard card, or that rapid changes in fashion should influence the designing of carpet patterns. The Axminster and Wilton type carpets appear to be of good quality and not very different from their British models. So far, however, in these young industries, we do not find that genuine feeling for textiles which distinguishes so many Irish wool products.

Sisal carpets
From a qualitative point of view the Irish sisal weaving maintains a very high level of production. It is an interest-
ing type of fabrication in that it depends on native skill
applied to a foreign product and for this reason assumes
an especial importance. The patterns we saw had a casual
joviality which was not to our taste. The design problem
is to produce something which is a practical floor covering
and at the same time retains the natural character of the
rough and stiff sisal, which with careless design or colour-
ing can easily be made to look like an artificial product.
Where this conflict exists a firm must give the most careful
thought to its choice of designer.

Glass
Everyone who sees the Irish glass must initially be
impressed. It is a magnificent achievement to develop an
industry based on skilled craftsmanship in such a short
space of years. The idea of reviving the old trade name and
basing the production on models from the museum seems
good at first sight. What then is wrong? First, the chosen
originals are in many cases not good enough, and in any
event the industry has moved away from the prototypes as
the demand is not covered by them. Today the production
can best be described as playing on the layman’s senti-
ments. The glass is excellent and the industry is to be com-
plemented on getting top-class assistance in order to bring
the technique to such a high level. Unfortunately the
shapes are often not artistically satisfactory and even the
copies are not true to the cultivated eye. The relationship
between the shape and the decoration is sometimes an
unhappy one. Maybe the diamonds are placed a couple of
millimetres too low on the glass for example. It seems
perhaps a small point, but details of this sort distinguish
the first from the second class product. In our view while
technique and craftsmanship have been developed in the
industry, the keen eye has been neglected and the natural
sensitivity of the artist has not been employed. This means
that the industry will not only be unable to advance with
new shapes, but will fail to set the standards of perform-
ance necessary to keep a tradition alive. We would con-
sider it desirable that the industry which is doing so out-
standingly well commercially and technically, make a
radical re-orientation in its outlook by retaining the
services of a top design consultant, to help evaluate the
existing situation, and by regular consultation at manage-
ment level, develop a new and more inspiring policy for
the future.

Ceramics
The technical equipment and other facilities in the china
and pottery works which we visited are quite satisfactory
and sufficient to give a much higher standard of produc-
tion. In their present state of development these factories
could not hope for success in competition with, let us say,
the German factories. What is now produced is mainly
based on bad English production, both as regards design
and form, decorated with transfers which have been
imported from England and elsewhere. It follows that the
relation between the shape and decoration is haphazard
and meaningless. No one can expect an artistic result from
having Dutch transfers of an English scene with no specific
purpose, put on a cup in an Irish factory. These designs
are difficult to change, partly because they are customary
and partly because the patterns are so much in use that
even the replacements for the broken sets demand a con-
siderable production. It is unlikely that the form of deco-
ration could be changed in the near future, for it would be
difficult to find or train hand painters. Where patterns of
Irish origin have been employed they have been treated wrongly and do not fulfil their purpose of being expressions of Irish tradition. Much of the pottery industry's production consists of sets for restaurants and cafés and many of the models are so ordinary that they could be improved by quite small alterations in shape and decoration. The function of the decoration on a shape is what matters and while the identification mark on hotel or restaurant ware probably does not call for a creative artist, it still needs a man with professional insight.

If a draughtsman could be trained to a certain sensitivity to be able to judge how light or how heavy a print should be in relation to a shape and how it should follow the form, it would be quite reasonable for an Irish printer to take up the manufacture of transfers. The demand for advertisement articles alone should keep a printing machine busy.

The managements of the china and pottery factories should consider setting aside money for development work, e.g. for training casters. The casting at present is poor and unsatisfactory and it would be very easy to raise this standard by sending men to study in Denmark where casting techniques are more highly developed than in England. Better glazes and chemicals should be used, which means a more qualified selection and contact with the manufacturers of glazes abroad. At the same time it might be worth while to try to interest Irish sculptors and craft potters, who from their professional background have many of the qualities needed to spur an improvement in shape and quality through having had the foresight to introduce a quality through having had the foresight to introduce a technical adviser from abroad. Their problem is one of marketing and design policy rather than the need of any outside help.

A genuine overhaul of the china and pottery industries cannot be carried through, however, if just a printer or a draughtsman supplements the model shop. Original-thinking artists with a complete knowledge of production must be put to work—ceramists who will select the clay, the glaze, the form of decoration. It is clear that without some radical change in design policy it will be impossible to produce anything but the commonplace.

The smaller potteries
The small pottery is a most valuable adjunct to the ceramics industry and there are many cases in Scandinavia where prototypes and techniques developed by individual potters were subsequently put into large-scale economic production by the bigger works. Also the small pottery acts as a stimulus to the industry and as an innovator in new design concepts and developments. Consequently we were very interested in the small potteries in Ireland and visited two of them. Once again it is difficult to generalise, for one was an instance of love and care lavished on a craft and was an example to all connected with the industry. The other had spirit and courage but we felt lacked professional inspiration and education in artistic fundamentals.

Metalwork
We found very few examples of worthwhile design in metal. In cutlery, kitchenware, tools and appliances, the designs seemed to be all derivative and without understanding of the materials. As with glass or clay, a real appreciation of the material and its possibilities is necessary for the designer in metal. The absence of the small workshops and individual craftsmen is possibly responsible for the low standard. In the National Museum, we saw excellent examples of metal
handicrafts, cooking pots, forks and oil lamps, simply designed with the emphasis on human requirements and the limitations of the manufacturing processes. There is no reason why the quality should not be raised, but designers, who must be given the opportunity to study the functional requirements of the various products, must be introduced into the steel and aluminium factories. Electric heaters we are told were developed in Ireland and, after satisfying technical requirements, their shape was entrusted to a foreign designer. This is altogether an incorrect approach. The designer must work with the technical staff from the beginning and their talents should complement each other. This is particularly so in regard to tableware, where the copies produced reveal no understanding of the originals and have moved far away from practical requirements. To raise the standard an experienced designer should be engaged, who would supplement the technicians, analyse the elements of these articles and produce a consistent functional form. The remarkable success of Danish tableware is based on a detailed study of day-to-day requirements allied with craftsmanship of a very high order. We noted one attractive production of cast iron kitchen-ware, but most of the pots and pans, aluminium and otherwise, were completely non-competitive in design and function. The possibility of co-operation with Irish sculptors who are working in metal and have a feeling for shape and form, should be explored and might result in new ideas.

It is common knowledge that the commercial success of certain machines, radios and industrial appliances has owed a great deal to talented industrial designers who have not merely been able to make the appearance of the products attractive but have redesigned their complex machinery. We do not know the extent or status of the light engineering industry in Ireland, but if it is intended to develop original products foreign design talent will be necessary.

Furniture and articles of wood

From an Irish point of view this is justly taken as one of the most difficult problems. In the stores, we are told, it is more difficult to sell contemporary furniture than period furniture, despite the fact that the reproduction of the old forms is without any understanding of the original work. The modern furniture is nearly all based on "Continental models". Usually plagiarism in furniture degrades the original because there is very little confidence in the joinery and Irish plagiarism lacks all the advantages of the originals. From our point of view it has continually been emphasised that design essentially rests on knowledge of materials and the ways in which they may be treated. The different techniques and ways of manufacture which are the basis of furniture production have been neglected in Ireland.

We are able to find a parallel case in Denmark in the middle of the 18th century. At that time Danish joinery was so bad that all furniture of a better kind was imported from England or Hamburg. This situation was remedied by Government intervention. Promising craftsmen were sent to England and after a period of education there, returned with experience and drawings, and an institution "De Kongelige Meubel Magasiner", was established. This institution helped the joiners with technical information and furniture was sold under a label of guaranty. When the organisation was disbanded the standard remained high and a distinctive Danish style had developed on English foundations.
A similar action is necessary in Ireland, but it must be so extensive that great sacrifices will have to be made, while at the same time it will not give immediate results. One approach would be to send craftsmen abroad for further training, but our Scandinavian respect for the spirit of the workshop, makes us suggest the establishment of an Irish workshop under the direction of excellent foreign designers and craftsmen, where it would be possible to make furniture of the highest quality. The apprentice could, after finishing at the Irish workshop, then be sent to the “Teknologisk Institut” in Copenhagen to join the class which is attended by the best young Danish journeymen, working with modern machines and surface treatments.

In the stores and tourist shops we saw some thrown bowls of wood. Their quality was acceptable but not as good as the Danish which in turn is inferior to the Japanese. The answer must lie in the fine Japanese wood which lends itself to more slender and elegantly designed throwing.

At the National Museum in Dublin, we saw some drinking cups of wood, semi-squared, with either two or four handles carved from a single piece of wood except for the fitted bottoms. These “meters” are a characteristically 16th-century Irish form, which correctly reproduced, would match modern surroundings very well, and could form the basis of a valuable handicraft activity. If the carving of wooden objects should be entrusted to home workers, it would cost very little to perform a rather close rawform in machine-work, but here also the woods play an essential part. Furniture, thrown articles and carving demand fine wood. We suggested to one of the leading joiners in Dublin that the trade should agree to stockpile timber until matured, supplementing the store as it was consumed. In reply we were told that there were insufficient trees to fell in the country. It may well be that we have touched on a task for the Government, because in studying ancient Irish work we have gained the impression that Ireland should be able to supply itself with beech, oak, elm and yew of fine quality.

Souvenirs
The slogan “the customer is always right” when applied to product design is not alone incorrect, but, in relation to the production of such a commodity as souvenirs, highly dangerous. And yet this we found was the reply when we gave it as our opinion that the bulk of Irish souvenirs are of a very low quality. As very often the country is represented by the small things which visitors to Ireland place in their homes, or give to their friends as “something Irish”, we feel that it is of great importance to have a high standard in the production of souvenirs. The aim should be to give the tourist the type of souvenir he needs rather than that which he merely wants. After all, it need cost no more to produce something worthwhile than to produce a tasteless thing.

We are not dealing here with Irish goods which may be sold as souvenirs, such as a length of tweed, but rather with the souvenir proper; the purely decorative object, or the usable article with an inscription referring to Ireland. These latter fall into two categories, the handicraft souvenir and the factory products. Among good handicraft souvenirs are to be mentioned St Brigid’s crosses, the most simple of the rush baskets and a wooden model of a primitive Irish boat. Clumsy reproductions of Irish rustic houses made of painted peat, landscapes produced from
tweed stubs—and worthless as landscapes—and similar rough and artless products should not be encouraged.

Some factory-made souvenirs are to be noted because they are often of a better design than others, e.g. cuff-links and simple objects of green marble. The leather goods are too rough and heavy and the copper products seem more scamped than primitive. The earthenware and china are on an average of a common and insignificant shape which is not improved by the fact that the tourist factor has been introduced by transfers of poor drawings. In these transfers, and on copper and leather also, the motifs from the Celtic and early Christian times are very dominating. It is regrettable that the oddity of the old ornaments have been utilised, the interlaced animals, etc. They are indeed conspicuous, but at the same time their character is difficult to read. So as we have already mentioned, the modern adaptations of this distinguished art are always depressingly incorrect and ugly and generally seem strange when placed in modern surroundings. If people wish to draw inspiration from the past, they should study the Book of Kells, the stones of Clonmacnoise, etc., where they will find sources of simple drawings and colour compositions which would be quite natural to use, because they are almost modern, and because the reproduction of their character is a practical proposition.

We feel that Irish souvenirs could reach a much higher standard both artistically and technically but the producers are obviously in need of guidance and assistance. For more than fifty years the handicraft people in Denmark have had an association directed by first-class architects and artists, the Handarbejde Fremme. Special models have been drawn, old handicrafts have been revived and, through a magazine, drawings and working instructions have been sent out all over the country. Additionally, local agents have worked to raise the production to a high standard. In Ireland we noted that these techniques are being employed most successfully in the handknitting industry, and during our tour we met people who with training would be capable advisers to the souvenir producing industries and the individual craft workers. We would recommend that such talented people should be sent abroad to study production and promotion methods.

As an additional method of raising the standard, an annual selection could be made of the best souvenirs. The designers and manufacturers would receive a special award and the winning souvenirs could be shown at airports, hotels, and in special show-cases in the department stores. They would have to be given special publicity in order to bring them to the notice of the general public as well as the retailers.

Graphics

The practising graphic artist in Ireland is facilitated by the existence of a highly developed printing industry, which we learned is capable of producing technically good work. Gravure printing is of the highest standard but we observed a definite lack of quality in Irish blocks and blockmaking. There are more artists employed in commercial art work in Ireland than in any other field. Many of them are foreigners and this was to us surprising until we studied the educational facilities and found that an up-to-date education for graphic artists is not available. Despite this, however, we saw some good work but generally speaking the standard was poor.
All branches of graphic art, packaging, posters, advertisement, design, typography, etc., suffer from a lack of trained designers, and perhaps also an unwillingness to utilise the talent available. Nevertheless, we noted some well-designed posters and show cards but they seemed to be exceptions to the general run of production and it is clear that without the provision of suitable educational facilities no great improvements can be hoped for.

We notice that Ireland has a fine tradition in sign writing and shop-front lettering, better examples occurring in the country rather than in Dublin, and it was good to see this tradition being preserved and developed in Bolton Street school, where we saw students trying to reproduce the old-style lettering.

Irish printed books are generally of a low standard, which we find strange, as we have seen examples where the production was as good as anywhere else. But in the “make ready” stage there is an apparent lack of care and finish.

Packaging
Packaging design has assumed great importance in the past few years and the packaging designer fulfils a vital role in modern industry. His art is the meeting-point of graphic and functional design. The successful packaging designer is a man who has a broad enough training to enable him to tackle a variety of problems and has the background necessary to appreciate engineering and technological considerations.

The lack of adequate training for the designer was emphasised by the fact that many of the successful Irish packages have been designed abroad. A piece of packaging design which very readily strikes the eye are designs for match and cigarette cartons. The labels on the Irish match boxes are, we feel, better than most, but on the other hand, we find certain Irish cigarette packs too sweet in colour, with a femininity more suited to a perfume sachet and with crude lettering and ornamentation.

Lack of character and of a strong motif, bad lettering and ornamentation; these faults are to be found in profusion in Irish packaging. While we give it as our opinion that Irish packaging is generally bad, we must add that the same applies to nearly every other country. This springs from lack of interest in the subject, and in many Irish packages it was apparent that no research had been made into the design, disposition of colour or shape.

We would like to see Irish packages being produced free from unnecessary detail and with a balance between the different parts, colour, lettering, and decoration, to make a whole and absolutely clean thing, in which elements foreign to the motif have not been introduced. Far too often modern packs are spoiled by competition between the different parts of the composition. In the designs for beverage labels, we found the same careless, often pointless, design. As many of these bottles are for use in the home, their labels are too forceful. For instance, the over-stressing of a large single word can be very unpleasant, yet we found just such an approach in Ireland. To derive the full force from a certain scheme the design need not be heavy and coarse, but it should be absolutely clear and true to its own style. In this way it will have a greater impact without being offensive.

The difference between packages one throws away immediately and those which one retains should be recognised. A package should never be an intruder on the person or in the home, and this must govern the design
as much as functional considerations. Good examples of packages whose character is correctly related to their use are rare in Ireland.

Again and again we saw cases where it had been decided to use three colours on a job and they had been slapped on indiscriminately, all competing with one another. The result was to disturb the balance of the design without achieving the desired result which was to produce something with impact. There is a classical principle that if one prints in three colours, one should predominate, another should be firm and the third just a slight complement to the other two. Use contrast indeed but use it with cunning.

On the cheaper level of production we noted bread wrappers and other mass-produced throwaway packages. These were produced in runs of thousands and yet clearly no artists had been employed. Why?

Stamps

We have decided to include in this report a detailed examination of the Irish postage stamp for we feel that the inclusion of a demonstration of the study and evaluation of such a design problem may be of value. Quite apart from this we are aware of good reasons for such an inclusion. First, because postage stamps are the first Irish-manufactured products that many people see and in this way are capable of conveying a good or bad impression of Ireland. Secondly, as a commodity handled by nearly all the people in the State, they are a profound factor in the moulding of public taste. Thirdly, they are a case in point where the Government by direct intervention can set standards for public design. The Irish coinage is an admirable example of such intervention. Finally, although not so important as the other points, we understand that many countries derive considerable revenue from the sale of attractive postage stamps.

The stamps presented here are a random selection from some one hundred and fifty stamps covering the whole production from the foundation of the State. They are divided into three categories:

A: Stamps with portraits, (1-17)
B: Stamps with figures, landscapes, buildings, etc. (18-33)
C: Stamps with symbols, coat of arms, etc (34-41)

They have been divided in this way to make comparisons easier, because every stamp design should be judged according to the problem presented or the demand it should satisfy.

What is important for a stamp is, in priority:

1. Clear indication of value
2. The name of the country clearly visible
3. An easy and balanced composition or lay-out
4. Being a paper of value it should not be easy to counterfeit and it will be if this is not inherent in the design
5. If possible the subject or eventual picture on the stamp should appeal to the public.

On (1) Indication of value: In many cases very bad. It has almost vanished among the other parts of the picture in nos. 2, 5, 7, 13, 21, 25, 26, 34, 39 and is difficult to read in nos. 6, 9, 27 and 28.

On (2) The name of the country: Poor in nos. 2, 7, 8, 23, 33, 36 and 41.

On (3) The composition or layout: It is far easier to have an unobstructed layout in stamps with portraits or
coats of arms than to have it in category B. A head or a symbol is in itself a well defined thing and the illusion of depth is a simple statement which permits the whole picture to take on a controlled appearance related to the surface of the paper. How destroying for the total impression of a stamp the lines of perspective can be is to be seen in nos. 21 and 28. There are very few stamps in category B where design seems to fit the stamp. Unrestricted lines, apparently uncontrolled, are going everywhere but to support the size and proportion of the stamp, although no. 27 comes very close to being a wholesome modern composition. The reproduction of the classic works (nos. 19 and 23) are more convincing and preferable, however, even if St. Peter had to suffer from too many surplus details and the Madonna makes less impact because of a completely unnecessary noisy background. With a stable symmetry, no. 33 has a better unity than most of the others, but the proportions are bad: the four coats of arms are dominating the building. The symmetry of no. 32 does not hold the stamp enough together to create a fixed balance, and a portrait, an eagle and a harp are three unrelated things just pinned up together.

Not even all the stamps with portraits and arms have a united composition. In nos. 2, 5 and 6 the design is too split-up and nos. 13 and 14 are only half stamps. The childish and insignificant asymmetric placing of elements in the background of no. 34 misses a correlation of the details which could have marked the design. The motif of the diagonals in no. 36 is so timid and transparent that it is killed by the pedantic and boringly executed ornament next to it.

On (4) The idea of a bondpaper: A paper of value is more easily conveyed by copperplate, but the original for the engraving is of such importance that some of the xylographed stamps are more pleasant than the poor engravings. Artistic and technical quality is what gives the atmosphere of value and should be stressed. It has already been pointed out that the fine originals for nos. 19 and 23 made them the best in category B, but still the craftsmanship is not very select and technically nos. 4, 12 and 16 are much better. Of the xylographed stamps nos. 8, 40 and 41 are of a high standard placing them superior to most of the engraved. What low-class print can do together with deplorable layout on a stamp can be viewed on no. 26.

On (5) The popularity of the subject: Possibly no. 26 and with it no. 21 are what some people might find interesting. But it seems to be an exception if the small size of a stamp can cope with the dramatic. The braveness of the armed man is but an attitude, and the way in which the building, rendered in perspective, bites him in the stomach seems vulgar to those not prepared to accept the strangeness and dishonesty of some of the lower branches of advertisement design.

On the basis of the above evaluation the following rank highest:

In category A: Nos. 4, 17, 12, 8, 9, 16, 15 and 11.
.. .. B: = 23, 19, 27 and 33.
.. .. C: = 40, 35, 41, and 39.

and the lowest:

In category A: Nos. 5, 6, 1 and 2.
.. .. B: = 26, 21, 22, 18, 20, 28 and 24.
.. .. C: = 34, 36 and 37.

As a brief summary it can be said: The most important thing is concentration or singlemindedness of purpose. The chosen subject has, even where delicate details are involved, to be rendered with authority so that its features are
immediately perceptible. The primary text must be clear. The design of the stamp shall form a unity natural within the size.

No. 4 is the best in all the collection. A clear and well executed subject in balance within the surface, and with a distinct text not harmful to the picture, and a secondary text that is subordinated to the rest. The old paintings in nos. 19 and 23 also support the subject and are well related to the size. When no. 1 is placed among the bad ones it is because of the needless light effect behind the portrayed head. When 15 and 16 are also rated low, it is because of the "art-photo" manner, hostile to the fine engraving and destroying the unity without adding anything of value. Cf. also nos. 3, 13, 14, 21 and 22.

To give a further illustration of what is meant by single-mindedness, we shall add that we rate no. 35 as a good stamp despite its lack of bond character. It is readily perceptible and the design is very well disposed in relation to the size. No. 37 is rather poor because not enough attention has been paid to the subject. A geographical map is an amorphous figure and to be discernible it has to be made as big as possible and isolated. In this case the arch and ornament ought to have been omitted, being incongruous to the subject. Furthermore the proportion plays an important part in the total impression. Note two well made xylographic stamps, nos. 8 and 11, both of which are artistic failures. It is not the size of the stamp or head that spoils them, but the absence of a correct artistic relationship between the different parts—here, the head and shape in which it is placed.
II. CREATING INTEREST

Having discussed various aspects of Irish design, we now come to the all-important question of raising the standard of design in the country as a whole. One cannot expect to alter the standard of Irish product design if, at the same time, a home market is not created for the new quality products. We readily appreciate the problem of Irish manufacturers who, while perhaps willing to experiment with new products, are deterred from doing so by the existence of an unresponsive public.

To raise the public interest in design it would be quite natural to use the ordinary channels of information: newspapers, magazines, radio, television, exhibitions in stores and museums, visiting exhibitions from abroad, etc. Specialists could be called in from other countries to give courses, make broadcasts, etc., and the newspapers could, in addition to featuring the various activities, publish weekly pages on different aspects of design. It would be a simple matter to arrange for an exchange of articles on design between the Irish and Scandinavian press. We also want to suggest the use of many films on design subjects produced in Scandinavia, the United States and other countries. A design library could be formed and the systematic translation of articles on design could be a service of great value to designers and to industry. As a bucket of more continuous interest, we are suggesting the formation of a body one of whose aims should be to promote public interest in matters of design.
This body could also act as a stimulus to designers by forming the groups for discussion and study which are so necessary to the ordinary creative mind. The lack of encouragement from some such group was very evident when we visited two small potteries. One with young people, full of drive and good spirit, but with a considerable lack of educational background, the other composed of older people who had turned from amateurs to professionals but were finding themselves lonely hunters.

Each Scandinavian country has a national Society for Arts, Crafts and Industrial Design which exercises considerable influence. They operate on a national scale and include representatives of manufacturers, designers and retailers. These organisations act as a sort of exchange for all the channels of communication in design, thus working for the benefit of all parties. They serve as a forum for artists and manufacturers, for private individuals and institutions, for industry and Government, and it is these organisations who, by promoting exhibitions in different parts of the world, have immeasurably helped the success of Scandinavian exports.

Several museums in different parts of the world hold instructive exhibitions periodically, or have permanent exhibitions concerning the problems of design and art. We feel that as far as the Irish museums are concerned it would probably be better to wait for a couple of years before involving them in the responsibility of organising design exhibitions, etc., as in our view the best place to commence such action is in the department stores. At a later date contact between the European and Irish museums could be established, with exchange of exhibitions between the two i.e. European exhibitions in Ireland and vice versa.

The department stores have a very important part to play in this work of arousing general design consciousness. We feel that it is their function to act as publicists of good design and, from what we have seen of your stores, they are quite capable of fulfilling this function. Together with a conscious effort to point out good examples of design, they should be encouraged to make special design displays and notes on the articles on display could be circulated for press and broadcasting. Generally speaking, the lines on which we envisage the department stores participating in a design programme are these: the managements should first keep themselves informed on current methods of stimulating design in other countries, e.g. La Rinascenza in Milan, which every year awards the Compasso d'Oro for design. A prize like this could be established by the department stores and a qualified jury named to award the prize, to be followed by a scholarship. Good design competitions could be arranged for different products and it is important that these competitions should receive maximum publicity and the results be shown to the public at exhibitions. If the department stores sponsored design competitions, it would be desirable that they should undertake to put the winning designs into production on their own account, and also established their own design policy by commissioning articles from various industries. Additionally, the department stores could have a number of exhibitions during the year showing the best Irish designs in specially equipped exhibition space. They could also present small exhibitions from abroad which would have an educational value for the general public and would be an inspiration to Irish industry. These exhibitions, we would suggest, should not be very large, but care must be taken to ensure that only products of
the highest quality are shown. We would recommend that exhibitions of this nature are concentrated on special subjects, e.g. tableware, furnishing fabrics or industrial products. A most important facet of the department stores’ work would be to educate their salesmen and buyers to a greater appreciation of quality and design. The Federation of Irish Industries would seem to be an appropriate body to undertake the organisation of an exhibition of the best Irish-designed products, although we feel that such an exhibition, like the other proposals concerning the promotion of Irish design, should not be inaugurated until the programme is well under way and there is an appreciable improvement in Irish design standards.

All these activities, exhibitions, courses, competitions, etc., should culminate in an Irish Design Year, with a national exhibition in Dublin and shows all over the country. The best of the exhibits could ultimately form a travelling exhibition for America and Europe. We heard talk when we were in Ireland of the desirability of establishing an Irish Design Centre, and our view on this is the same as our view on an Irish exhibition of design. Both are good ideas, but must wait until the programme has begun to show results and a certain number of designers have been trained.

We feel that a valuable initial activity might be to present in Ireland an exhibition of European design with the best products being selected by a competent jury. Such an exhibition would set a standard for future design activity.

The departments of Government can play their part by running competitions for the design, decoration and furnishing of Government buildings, etc. A percentage of the cost of public building projects might be devoted to the encouragement of Irish design and architecture. A further activity which we have not explored in any detail is the idea of making a survey of all “man-made Ireland”. This survey when completed could be the basis of an exhibition which, with the right comments on the items, would provide an ideal background or fund of information from which discussions, education and explanations of the thought could be extracted. Other purposes served by such a survey would be to establish the origin of what is good in Irish design and give a new meaning to the subject for those connected with it. The collection of information on tweed weaving, already referred to, could be part of the same project, and not alone information on textiles but details of all the traditional skills, knitting, dyeing, carving, building techniques, etc., could be collected and filed. Knowledge of such a retrospective technology would be of invaluable help in formulating educational policy and deciding the direction in which Irish design should develop. By holding an exhibition, the concepts of design would be carried to a much greater audience. It would enable Irish men and women to gain a better understanding of their own traditions and form a point of contact for creative minds in Ireland. The survey would clarify the situation in Ireland for people like ourselves, and we also feel for many Irish people who have never evaluated their cultural resources or sought how best to interpret their own visual traditions. We feel that, if undertaken, this very large project would not only have immense beneficial effects on the country itself but would be a noteworthy contribution from Ireland to West European culture.
III. EDUCATION

The immediate need

We have now discussed various Irish industries and how their interests may be served by raising the general level of design consciousness. Lasting results, however, cannot be hoped for unless the vital matter of design education is tackled with energy and foresight.

We think that it is impossible for Ireland to make progress in design without a radical change in the existing educational institutions and a new approach to the problems involved. Based on our experience and what we have seen during our visit, we have set down the broad outlines of the type of design education which we think is needed and is suitable for Ireland today.

In our view there are two problems:—

1. The problem of the reorganisation of the schools, and other long-term measures.

2. The problem of how Ireland is to get the industrial designers she needs now.

An immediate need for qualified designers exists, as we learned again and again during discussions and at the seminars in Dublin, and we shall deal with this problem first. Not very much has been done to train designers for industry but it might well be possible to train selected craftsmen, trades people and artists to be useful designers who could fill the gap for the next few years before any school activities could bear fruit.

We have found that in many cases painters and sculptors cannot easily adapt themselves to working with industry or industry with them, for while many artists have all the personal qualities and sensitivity needed to turn themselves into good designers, their attitude towards society and the traditional media or means of expression of the artist are of a kind alien to successful co-operation with craft and industry. We have seen some outstanding commercial work executed by Irish artists, but we learned that they were exceptions, as they would be anywhere.

We think that if industry turns towards architects and craftsmen more positive results are likely. The architect from his professional experience is familiar with co-ordination and economic considerations and many talented architects possess the kind of artistic sensitivity and enjoyment of form, colour and texture that is necessary to produce good design work. Furthermore it was among Irish architects that the group met the best and most intelligent attitude towards design problems. We met fewer Irish artists than architects, so the above opinion is based more on general feelings for the problem at home than observations from our tour. Ideally the first products from the educational schemes, if they are initiated promptly and wholeheartedly, should be becoming available to industry well before 1967. In the meantime we recommend that Irish industry turn towards firms of talented architect/designers who could supplement their staffs by the addition of specialists in various fields from Scandinavia and elsewhere. Another piece of advice for the immediate situation, is to point out that many Scandinavian industries have derived great profit from co-operation with skilled craftsmen who have started their own workshops and been able
to transfer their experience and ideas over to the greater production of a factory. 

Undoubtedly many Irish industries could achieve fruitful results by employing foreign designers and technologists. It must be stressed, on the other hand, that the success of such action would depend on the designs being executed in an Irish milieu. The machinery for such a scheme could very easily be brought into being as an extension of the work already being done by Córas Tráchála.

If an industry wants to employ designers, whether Irish or foreign, it is of the greatest importance to attract qualified personnel who will work at management level and become part and parcel of the whole running of the firm. The designer who is caged into a small room, divorced from management and production alike, will achieve nothing of value. In an Irish pottery we noted that the designer regarded his work on the shape and his work on the decoration as being separate problems. In the course of the seminars it was pointed out that the shape and the decoration were one problem, not two things which could be dealt with separately. Such evident lack of understanding of design problems, we feel, is possible only where the designer is discouraged and isolated. Nobody from the group would argue for a moment over the role of the designer in industry in relation to the invested money; industry pays the piper and must have the selection of the tune, but it is plain bad business to let unguided commercialism take the leading role.

We recommend that young craftsmen from Irish industry should be sent on study trips to some of the outstanding workshops which are to be found so abundantly in Scandinavia and elsewhere. They could study production methods and techniques in a short visit, or remain for a longer period if they had talent capable of development. Such a scheme could be related to the one outlined above. We would hope that students whom you send to our countries to be trained, would on their return be available to Irish industry as a whole, or as teachers, and their work not confined to one specific factory.

However, it must be remembered that the Scandinavian situation between the arts and crafts and industry is very special and this should be taken into consideration when planning co-operation and making comparisons. We must stress that to make education available on even the short-term lines we are discussing here, not to mention the more far-reaching recommendations we intend to make here in the report, your State must make available funds to a far greater degree for design and art education than it has done in the past. We recommend that the authorities concerned should study the way this problem has been handled in Denmark by the foundation of the Statens Uddannelsesfond, which provides funds for the higher education of students. In addition to State funds, private bodies, firms and industrial associations could raise money for the education of students. We discussed this with some three or four firms in Ireland during our stay and found them receptive to the idea.

As a suggestion for the immediate stimulus of Irish designers, we feel that before regular school courses are established, it would be possible to hold summer courses of from two to three weeks. A group of designers, educators and craftsmen could be gathered and a series of lectures and discussions arranged. We can refer to the summer school held in Oslo in 1954 with participants from the Scandinavian countries and teachers from the Institute of Design in Chicago. We can here point out that lecturers
from foreign schools such as the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm might be available to conduct such a school in Ireland, and we could suggest suitable people from our own countries also.

In addition to summer courses for Irish designers, seminars lasting a shorter period could be held for people engaged in actual production in the craft industries, glass, ceramics, textiles, etc., aimed at giving a better appreciation of design and the functions of the designer. A third type of seminar would be for top management and deal with productivity, product design, etc. Also, as in Sweden, week-end meetings could be arranged between manufacturers and designers in order to establish basic understanding. Seminars like these can be self-supporting through the entrance fees of the participants. It is of the greatest importance to secure the understanding and collaboration of salespeople and retailers in order to create a higher standard of design. Special courses could be arranged in the larger cities for information about materials, production methods, design policy, etc.

Schools

We have already mentioned the emphasis in present-day Irish culture on the spoken word and the theatre. This becomes very apparent when one comes to discuss education in design and the visual arts in Ireland.

As has already been said, none of the institutions which we saw or heard of provided an education for designers or architects which we consider adequate. An ideal or perfect education furthermore is not as far as we know to be found any place; so we cannot include a recommendation to look to any particular school in existence. The replanning of schools can only take place after serious consideration and study of other institutions and their curricula. To our minds the importance of programme planning and the reconciliation of it with particular Irish problems cannot be overemphasised.

We feel that Ireland must be prepared to call in foreign teachers to the new design schools. The best teachers that can be found should be invited to come and plan the curricula and help organise the new institutions. It would be unrealistic to expect such eminent men as we envisage to sever connection with their own countries, but they could stay long enough in Ireland to evaluate the situation, choose their assistants, and lay down the lines for future development.

At the National College of Art in Dublin, we found facilities and space which at first sight appeared to be sufficient and offer possibilities for development. However, the final impression which we took away from this school was that the methods of education were completely out of date and it is our opinion that the National College of Art as presently constituted cannot be the starting point for the education of people in the different crafts or indeed for the education of painters, sculptors or designers.

The College of Technology in Bolton Street is a big school with excellent technical equipment. Almost all the activities of this school as it is set up at the moment are outside our terms of reference, but we feel strongly that education in design ought not to be carried on there despite the fact that we found a well-run school. In principle we are opposed to the education of the designer allied with that of the engineer or technician. As regards education in the craft-based industries in Bolton Street, study time is far too short for anyone to get a satisfactory grasp of design problems.
While the education of architects was not directly within the scope of our visit, architectural education is so closely allied to the education of the designer that it is impossible not to take it into consideration. Again, being professionals ourselves and teachers in our professions, we were keenly interested in the Irish situation. The unsatisfactory state of affairs in Ireland is not a specifically Irish problem but it is common to all Europe. In very few places, at least to our knowledge, exists a healthy up-to-date architectural education.

In Ireland, the problem can be simply described as having all the inherent defects of association with the Royal Institute of British Architects. The course prepared by the British Institute, and the general educational policy as followed in Ireland, does not even reach the standard of the better English schools and it is quite impossible to expect a new generation of Irish architects brought up in this way to compete with their better-trained European colleagues. This they will not be able to do under the system followed at the moment and the prospects of their contributing to a new Irish movement are extremely poor.

In thinking of the educational part of the programme we are all agreed on the close relationship between architectural and industrial design training. Furthermore, it is evident from our experience that schools where architects are studying with artists have a more stimulating atmosphere than where the designers form part of an engineering school. In Denmark and Sweden it is believed that the designer who is most able and who possesses the best foundation of knowledge is turned out in a school where he is brought up with architects, or who has made a postgraduate study following his architectural course.

We are all agreed on the desirability of concentration of education for designers and craft artists and we would strongly recommend that a completely new school be established freed from unhelpful tradition. We would hope that a new school would be set up for architecture and design together.

Considering the total population of the country, it appears reasonable to us that there should be only one school where all activities and research should be concentrated. We think that the provincial colleges at Cork, Waterford and Limerick are up against too many odds. Concentration or architects, painters, designers and sculptors into one school is, apart from being highly desirable, a logical step for a country of Ireland’s size and resources.

The length of the education of designers in the new school, hereafter referred to as the Irish Design School, would in all probability be the same length as the existing course for architects, plus an additional year for the industrial designer, subject to the condition that industrial design is included in the curriculum for the last two years of the architect’s course and that students are orientated towards the subject from an early stage. We should also mention that any proposed school of this kind should work in close cooperation with industry.

We think it of the greatest importance to have a board for the Irish Design School who can clarify the basic concepts and keep the professional aim unhampered by the tendency of trade schools to produce visible and quick results. It is a very common phenomenon in architectural/design schools today to find that the enlarged field of professional activity seems to tempt the school to cover as much ground as possible, with the unavoidable result of superficiality. For example, not only in the architectural school of University College, Dublin, but also in the Scandinavian schools, we see students making designs and drawings of
what they think architect's work looks like instead of doing architectural work. Imagine the situation of having fourth-year students working in a few weeks on a complex problem like a civic centre or hospital which would take a fully equipped professional office with all consulting help years to produce!

In establishing an Irish Design School it would be advisable to expose the student in the very beginning to the study of the professional basis of ideas, i.e. the theory of the art. This early presentation of the totality of the subject will (i) give immediate nourishment to talent, (ii) discourage those without ability before valuable years are wasted and (iii) provide a core around which further study can have a natural growth. At the same time this approach to some extent solves a conflict that exists in art education. Because art has to be viewed in a comprehensive way, there is in teaching a natural wish to convey a vision of unity while on the other hand the practical training of the student demands a step-by-step progression. Similarly the desire to let all the development be rooted in the student's personality is not always easy to respect when one has certain absolute standards of performance. An art school has to train its students in a practical working method in order to give them a basis on which to tackle their professional problems. As a school cannot provide the guidance and support that the professional can draw from society, it must make principles intelligible through simple examples. This is why we feel that it is more important to ensure that the student has practical experience outside the school than to have fine tools and workshops.

We have dealt in some detail with the Irish Design School and our recommendation that the education of architects, designers, painters and sculptors should be concentrated in one institution. This is partly because it is so important and also because it is a radical departure from what exists at present. The Irish Design School would thus incorporate a number of departments: the Crafts, Industrial Design, Architecture and Fine Arts. The Craft department would cater for the requirements of industries such as textiles, ceramics, metalwork and those activities generally referred to as handicrafts. At the same time divisions between departments should be sufficiently flexible to permit free interchange between the different departments for we regard it as of the utmost importance that all branches of the visual arts should have opportunity to learn from each other. Such a form of organisation we believe would best stimulate the intellectual and artistic activity which is so necessary for any creative endeavour.

This school should also be the training ground for teachers for the primary and secondary schools. We have already referred to the importance of drawing or the manipulation of materials, a neglected aspect of education in the Irish schools. We should stress that by drawing we do not mean merely the production of finished art work or watercolours but the study of the means of visual communication in the widest sense, from abstract geometric forms to the qualities of the different handicrafts. This training of the perception and awareness of a child to his surroundings seems to us as important as the teaching of the mother tongue. In any event, to set up a new school of design and at the same time ignore the fact that the Irish school-child is visually and artistically among the most under-educated in Europe, would appear to us unwise.

It is important that all sections of the projected school, painters, crafts students, student teachers, etc., should be governed in the same spirit and be under one and the
same authority which would be an Irish Institute of the
Visual Arts. We feel that under the system of organisation
which we have outlined above, the Design department
should produce from five to ten students annually with an
especial knowledge of industrial design. To meet the
demand for craft designers, the number of graduates from
the Craft Department would be much larger, and the study
period would be relatively shorter. These would be the
designers in, for instance, the glass, ceramic, textile and
furniture industries, advertising and the various commercial
art fields.

If this programme were followed (and we as outsiders
cannot adequately weigh the many practical, organisational
and personal difficulties involved) we feel that it should
be possible to aim at 1964 for the complete reorganisation
of the existing system and the setting up of the new school.
In the meantime teachers could be sent to Scandinavia
for training, where it could be arranged that they work
as assistants in the schools and academies there, and we
would suggest as a practical possibility that the Royal
Academy of Copenhagen act as the co-ordinator for this
part of the programme.

With regard to design education at the College of
Commer in Rathmines, we feel that here again is a
department which is up against too many odds and that
the isolated art and advertising training should be trans-
ferred to the new school. The function of the College of
Commer within the programme we would see as a
centre for design appreciation courses for buyers and sales
personnel and we recommend that this important work
be entrusted to the College.

For the physical location of the new school we recommend
that it should be situated in Dublin or on the outskirts
of that city. It is very important that such a school gives
its students possibilities to draw on the many activities
of modern society which in Ireland only the capital will
give them.

We know well that there may be great difficulties in
setting up the school on the lines suggested and it might
be that one would have to start in a small way and let
the enterprise expand according to the successes achieved
by the teachers and students. The question of how should
the school be started is answered by saying that a school
should draw its students from those most ready to work
there.

If it is the architects, start the school with an architect’s
course, and if it is, for example, people from the textile
industry who are most ready to work for the development
of Irish tradition and ideas, let the Craft department
commence with a textile course. However, regardless of the
scale on which the work commences, it must be with the
clear understanding by all concerned that it is the ultimate
aim of the new school to assimilate and supplant all exist-
ing institutions for education in the visual arts.

On two points we are quite definite: that however it is
done a new design school must be brought into being in
Ireland, and that this school will only be successful if
authorities, qualified teachers and a body of students are
found who have faith in the new school and are prepared
to support it and work for it.
While we consider the setting up of a New Irish Art School to be of paramount importance, we would emphasise that mere physical changes and regrouping of facilities will be insufficient if unaccompanied by a new outlook. It must be ensured that the new attitudes towards art and design which have developed in our time make their way into the new schools, while at the same time preserving what remains of the Irish visual tradition. There is also the problem of personnel, the recruitment of new teachers and the employment of existing teachers to the best advantage. The solution to these and many other problems depends, in our opinion, on the formation of an Irish Institute of Visual Arts, which we feel would be the logical forerunner for the setting up of the new art school. It would be practically impossible to set up a new school without preliminary activity on the lines outlined in the section on “Creating Interest”.

The Institute should be formed as a core around which present-day thinking in art and design can grow. The difficulties involved in the development of worthwhile design today, and the problem of relating the particular Irish situation to modern trends is what we as a group feel is of real importance for the professional activity of our colleagues in the future Ireland. An Institute of this type would be able to guide the first steps in the establishment of new schools and to evolve a policy by which seminars, exhibitions and courses could be directed.
We are hampered by our lack of detailed local knowledge when we come to describe the precise functions of the suggested Institute. As we see it, it should be an autonomous body, with its administrative powers directly responsible to the Government. It should be entrusted with the sole responsibility for education in the fields of art, architecture and design. Rather than setting up a separate organisation for the promotion of design on the lines of the Scandinavian Arts and Crafts Societies, we would recommend that these duties be carried out by committees of the Institute of Visual Arts. The advantages of such centralisation are evident and need not be pointed out.

At the same time we must seriously warn against the danger of such an Institute developing into a group of persons representative of only a single viewpoint who might exclude others from being represented. The development of academies in some countries shows that rules must be carefully drawn which will ensure a fair representation of the various forces and outlooks alive in Ireland at any given period.

Pending the formation of the Institute, which may take some time, we would venture to suggest the setting up of a small working committee. This forerunner committee could act on behalf of the not yet formed Institute in initiating study programmes and teaching policy and recruiting suitable designers for industry. It is clear that one of the prime purposes of the committee would be to collect on behalf of the Government the data and information necessary to set up the Institute of Visual Arts. We also feel that the Committee, and ultimately the Institute, should have a home and premises of their own, ideally situated on the outskirts of Dublin, and including facilities for summer schools, lecture theatres, accommodation for visiting designers, etc.

We would finally note that we have considered the possibility of adapting existing bodies to this purpose, but it is our opinion that no existing organisation or association in Ireland could cope with the problems involved in the development of design in Ireland, and consequently a new body must be brought into existence.
Crafts Council of Ireland

The Crafts Council of Ireland (CCoI) is the national economic development organisation for the craft industry in Ireland and is funded by Enterprise Ireland.

The Council acts on the industry’s behalf:
- by advising government and state agencies on issues affecting the industry
- by assisting the industry in promotion and marketing
- by assisting vocational craft and design training

National Craft Gallery

The Crafts Council of Ireland set up the National Craft Gallery (NCG) in December 2000. NCG runs a dynamic national and international exhibitions programme which aims to:
- Stimulate quality, design, innovation and competitiveness in the craft sector
- Communicate the unique cultural and commercial attributes of craft
- Promote the importance of quality to consumer and craft manufacturer alike
- Stimulate innovation in design and manufacture via special exhibition themes
- Encourage mutual transfer of exhibitions with other international craft agencies

Further information on Crafts Council of Ireland projects and programmes is available from:

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