

NC 0020186 3



**The Development of Contemporary
Metal Furniture Design in Ireland.**

**By
Vincent Galligan
Craft Metal Design
5th March 1993**

**Tutor: Dr. Nicola Gordon Bowe
Department of History of Art
N.C.A.D.**

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people for their help and advice in compiling this thesis.

Dr. Nicola Gordon Bowe	-	N.C.A.D. History of Art Dept.
The Library Staff	-	N.C.A.D.
The Library Staff	-	C.O.M.A.D., Mountjoy Square
Alfred Cochrane	-	Alfrank Designs Ltd
Owen Molly & Conleth Boothman	-	Dublin Ironcraft
Colm Bagnell	-	Bushypark Engineering
Gibson & O'Rourke Interiors	-	Dawson Street
Margaret McAnnallen	-	Crafts Council H.Q., Dublin 2.

Contents

Page No.

Acknowledgements

Contents

Introduction

Chapter 1 / Chapter 2 / Chapter 3/ Conclusion

Chapter 1: looks at the designers and companies which have become part of the contemporary metal furniture industry. It looks only at the history and commercial development of these designers and companies.

Chapter 2: looks at the specific work and design skill of each of these, and examines how the level of success achieved in design reflects the level of commercial success in each case.

Chapter 3: looks at the problems currently facing the contemporary metal furniture industry and also looks a the future for Irish contemporary furniture.

The Development of Contemporary Metal Furniture in Ireland

The past fifteen years or so have seen a remarkable change in the Irish furniture industry. That change is the birth and development of a contemporary furniture scene which has grown to be respected as representing the cream of Irish design. Knut Klimmeck, Erick Pearce, Tadgh O'Driscoll and Alfred Cochrane have become well known and respected and these represent only the tip of the iceberg of an avalanche of designers beginning to break in the contemporary furniture scene.

While most contemporary furniture designers here, have worked mainly with wood there has recently been an upsurge in interest in using other materials such as metal and stone. Having studied craft metal design at the N.C.A.D., I am particularly interested in this area and hope to design and make contemporary furniture myself in the future. Although there are only six designers actually producing work in metal so far, they make up a significant part of the Irish contemporary furniture scene and are certainly responsible for helping to generate the new levels of interest and enthusiasm which there now are in the industry.

Interest in the area of designer furniture is slowly but steadily increasing. Following very successful exhibitions of Irish work at the Solomon Gallery in 1987 and in the Crafts Council's H.Q. Gallery in 1989 and 1991, interest is now broadening beyond the design conscious into the high street. Here in Dublin, for example, two of the city's leading department stores had exhibits of contemporary Irish furniture in their windows for January-February of this year. While this conveys that interest in general is increasing in designer furniture, the fact that both of these exhibits were of metal furniture shows the particular interest developing in this medium.

Although this interest and enthusiasm are indeed encouraging, the contemporary furniture industry is not without problems. A lack of educational institutions specialising in the area for example has resulted in a very slow development in contemporary furniture and a lack of diversity and creativity. Also with the world recession, as

contemporary furniture is classed as a luxury item, salability and production costs tend to overtake creative and visual aspects of furniture design. This has resulted in a sense of conservativeness in much Irish contemporary furniture design. High percentage mark-ups by sales outlets and even a lack of exhibition-friendly outlets contribute to dispel any illusions that the contemporary furniture industry is a run-away success story.

It is therefore an exciting but challenging time for the contemporary furniture industry. Needless to say those designers and companies specialising in metal furniture production share in both the excitement and the problems facing the industry as a whole, but also have to face problems which are particular to metal furniture production. In the following chapters I intend to analyse the development of this particular section of the industry; look at the problems which are particular to it and also those which face the contemporary furniture industry as a whole.

Chapter One: A Summary of Irish Contemporary Furniture Designers and Companies.

In the mid 1970's, Alfred Cochrane who had been born in Dublin, returned to Ireland from Italy, where he had been studying architecture, to set up his practice in Dublin. While refurbishing his house he sought some contemporary furniture, in particular an alternative to a mahogany dining room table. As there were no contemporary furniture designers in Ireland at this time, the best he could find was an imported glass sixties table with accompanying leather chairs. These he purchased at a knockdown price from Switzers in Dublin, as they had been in the shop for years and had received very little interest. This conveys the level of interest in designer furniture at the time.

Having studied furniture design as part of his training to be an architect, Cochrane was familiar with the designer furniture which other countries were producing. He was not altogether happy with the dormant scene in Ireland and decided to do something about it. Not long afterwards he joined forces with Frank Carroll, a Dublin businessman and formed 'AlFrank Designs Ltd', Ireland's first designer furniture company. It was to both design and manufacture the work. With Cochrane designing and Carroll looking after the marketing the company has proved to be a major success both at home and abroad. Cochrane's success and his role in kick starting contemporary furniture in Ireland has been acknowledged widely. "In Ireland, this revolution is being led by Alfred Cochrane."¹

AlFrank first began in a garage cum shed in Rathmines, where Cochrane designed his first collection. This was in 1980. Cochrane was aware of the growing market for designer furniture in Europe and particularly in the growing demand for artistic metal furniture. It is not so surprising that he felt perfectly at home with the medium and designed his first collection entirely in metal (mild steel and gold leaf). While the exhibits at the Milan furniture fair at this time were growing increasingly more design conscious and expressionist, Cochrane opted for a more conservative approach, and used historical influences in his work. This first collection showed an Egyptian-Baroque influence. The resulting

work was quite ornate and fussy but the sense of grandeur it created gave it appeal (fig. 1 & 2). This first collection consisted of a shelving unit, a dining table and chairs, a coffee table and a range of accessories such as book ends and lamps. In the early 1980's AlFrank began exporting their furniture to Holland, a country chosen at random as a starting point for exports, which unfortunately turned out to be the wrong place at the wrong time. Holland at this time was going through a minimalist period, and the self conscious designer furniture which was gripping Europe was very much in fashion. As AlFrank's work was too decorative and fussy, it did not sell well. In 1981 AlFrank began to export their furniture to America, where it became instantly successful. Soon 'AlFrank's' furniture was for sale in world famous super stores such as Bloomingdales and Maceys at New York, and many other smaller retail outlets. AlFrank also managed to get their work onto the sets of several famous T.V. chat shows such as the Oprah Winfrey show which increased its popularity and boosted sales, by exposing it to millions of viewers. The resultant increased demand spurred AlFrank to move from their small set-up in Rathmines to a much larger premises in Spitalfields in Dublin's liberties. Here AlFrank now occupies a large warehouse which has been converted into a factory employing ten to twelve people, an office suite and a showroom.

The next collection designed by AlFrank was their 'Pompei' collection. This collection was designed in 1984 and remains the flagship of the company. Inspired again by historic imagery Cochrane designed another all metal collection. This time it was the Ionic column which inspired Cochrane. Having seen the ancient ruins of Rome when he was studying in Italy, Cochrane described them as having enormous impact and the consistent use of the ionic Column in architecture throughout the ages has given it a timeless quality, he says. This timeless quality is something Cochrane admires in design and thus has tried to create this in his own work (fig. 3-8).

This collection contained a larger number of pieces and a huge range of accessories and lighting. This was because AlFrank was receiving great demand for the smaller products in the previous collection and sought to capitalise on this, by increasing their range of small items.

With the launch of this collection, AlFrank predicated the American recession and began to look at the nearer U.K. market. They acquired an agent to work for them there and soon built up a strong and thriving business, selling to the U.K. This was enhanced by their success in acquiring floor space in Harrods of London in 1988. Not long after this their work became flavour of the month (Feb 1989) and resulted in an impressive front window display at Harrods which won them much appraisal and business. The AlFrank work shop at Spitalfields was redesigned at this time to cope with the increasing orders and a certain amount of process stream-lining enabled more work to be produced faster. Business increased by almost thirty percent at this stage, with the British clearly identifying with AlFrank's designs. A look at (figs. 3-8) reveals just why the work is so popular. The first important factor which sells the work is its scale and use of familiar shapes echoing those already in the conservative tables and chairs of most houses. By not altering the overall size and shape of the work beyond that of conventional standards, the work thus remains familiar to, and does not intimidate people. Another selling point is the way the furniture can blend with both contemporary and traditional settings, which gives it a much wider market, and allows people to mix it in a room with all kinds of other furniture. The nice sturdy feel of the work is also a reason for its popularity. Metal furniture in general has always been for the garden where it needed to be sturdy, but this has become part of the attraction of AlFrank's work. The icing on the cake is the way in which the furniture is finished. The cool green patented finish hit the mood of the eighties perfectly and has been much copied since it first appeared. This gave the work an antiquated look without destroying the overall crisp contemporary feel of the furniture.

Following the success of the Pompei Collection, AlFrank have released 'the Acanthus Collection' (Fig 9-15). This is similar to the Pompei collection but includes delicate pressings of Acanthus leaves which are purchased abroad. The acanthus collection is slightly more angular than the Pompei Collection with its central component being a triangle shape with concave semi-circular top and an acanthus leaf dangling down in the middle. Overall though, it has the same qualities of the Pompei collection and is selling equally well.

Over the past five years, while AlFrank have been selling to Britain, they have also naturally been selling in Ireland. The Irish market has grown in importance in that time particularly as the recession in Britain has seen a slight slow down in trade. While the Irish market was once of little significance it has grown to become seventy five percent of AlFrank's total market. This clearly indicates the growing level of interest in contemporary furniture in Ireland. The Irish market is becoming competitive however, as more and more Irish furniture designers get established. In recent times the Pompei and Acanthus collections have had to share the limelight in the salesrooms with a number of new designers works.

The work of Dublin Ironcraft is one such example. The company was formed two years ago and is based in a unit of the Liffey Enterprise Centre in Dublin's docklands. Two N.C.A.D. graduates, Owen Molloy and Conleth Boothman jointly design and manufacture a range of hand forged iron furniture and fittings.

Boothman has worked with Albert Paley in Rochester, New York, and also spent some time learning traditional blacksmithing skills in Italy, while Owen Molloy is qualified in craft glass design. Rather than designing individual collections, Dublin Iron Craft has created an overall look which is applied to all their work. The look could best be described as a curious mixture of squiggles and spirals and rather sinister gothic uprights (fig. 15-23). They produce a diningroom table and chairs, a console table, coffee table, shelving unit and a variety of accessories such as candle holders, lamps, mirror frames etc..... They also cater for commissions and have worked in several restaurants in Dublin, and in a number of country estates in different areas around the country. In chapter two I shall examine their work more thoroughly and analyse their design skill.

As yet Dublin ironcraft is still a small operation. However, following their recent success at the R.D.S. Crafts Fair, where they were awarded the I.D.A. perpetual craft trophy, they have received considerable attention and business is expected to increase. To cope with this, Dublin Ironcraft may have to expand their operation.

On my recent visit to them, they explained they would ideally like to take on apprentices and set up a small factory-type unit, perhaps similar to AlFrank. But there are risks involved and much capital to be raised, so Owen and Conleth are not making any hasty decisions. With commissions coming in at a nice steady pace, they are, for the moment at least, content to keep going the way they are.

Another exhibitor, with a range of contemporary metal furniture at this years R.D.S. Crafts Show was Bushy park Engineering. Based in the old village forge on the outskirts of Enniskerry, Co. Wicklow, in a picture postcard setting, they have been in business for six years but have only recently ventured into contemporary furniture while specialising in the restoration of antique metalwork, they have been exhibiting for many years at the R.D.S. but this year was the first that they exhibited their contemporary ware. Colm Bagnall, who forms half of Bushy park Engineering, explained that "there was incredible interest in the work at the show"² and that he had not anticipated such a strong response.

They produce a small range of furniture, largely a coffee table, a console table, a diningroom table and chairs, and a variety of light fittings and candle holders. The work is made mainly from mild steel using both box section and solid bar lengths and is finished in either matt black or grey steel finish. The designs tend to be very simple, embracing function and practicality and choosing to ignore the 'designer look' i.e. which other contemporary designers go for. Colm explained that this was because "designs tend to be produced by experimenting around rather than by a very conscious design effort on the drawing board"³ figs (24-28)

Sales of Bushypark Engineering's work have not as yet really been tested. They are only new to the area of designer furniture and so far are only supplying two or three outlets. These are retail outlets, one in Enniskerry, one in Blackrock Co. Dublin and one in Dublin City centre. Colm Bagnall who manages the company explained that they were really only selling large numbers of the accessories at the moment and that the larger pieces of furniture were being more difficult to sell. The company intends to produce a catalogue soon which will include their furniture designs, and is to look more seriously at the whole area of

contemporary furniture design. For the moment they are pleased to be getting the attention while continuing their existing line of business but no doubt soon contemporary furniture design from Bushypark engineering will be seen on the market.

Robert Drennan from Naas in Co. Kildare is another contemporary furniture designer who has shown his ability and talent in recent times. Drennan studied furniture design at the London College of Furniture design in the late Eighties and says he has also been greatly influenced by the new Spanish school of furniture design.

Dublin's first chance to see Drennan's work was on his participation in the Soloman Gallery's exhibition of Irish Furniture in 1987. Drennan made a huge impression with the three pieces he exhibited, a table and two chairs, all three made from highly polished cast aluminium with the table glass topped and the chair seats made of wood and upholstered suede (figs 29-51). They were very sophisticated designs clearly showing the influence of the work of some of Europe's leading designers such as Perry A King and Santiago Miranda. As these three pieces are the only ones Drennan has exhibited in Ireland it is difficult to assess how appreciated or sought after his work is. From the one exhibition he has participated in his work was very well received at least one Irish Company has already asked him to design new office chairs for them. His No. 78 chair and this table were subsequently launched at the Cologne Furniture Fair later that year and Drennan had plans to mass produce his furniture. These plans have now come to life and Drennan is currently mass producing his work in England where he is now based, so it is probably just a matter of time before we see Drennan's work in large quantities throughout the country.

There are a number of other designers such as Janny Peters, and Gerry Polman who produce on-off pieces and are not as yet established full time metal furniture designers. Of this group Tadhg O'Driscoll is the most important. Already very well known for his wooden furniture designs he has recently begun to include metal in his work and has produced some interesting pieces of metal furniture. (fig 32)

O'Driscoll trained at the John Makepeace School for Craftsmen in Wood in England and initially set up his own workshop there. O'Driscoll who was born in Dublin, returned here in 1991 and joined Knut Klimack at his workshop in Fumbally lane. Since then he has been going from strength to strength proving to be a craftsman of much skill. Most of his work has been commissioned from major clients such as Guinness Peat Aviation, T.C.D., Stokes, Kennedy Crowley, etcand usually involves substantial amounts of large scale furniture in wood. more recently, however, O'Driscoll has ventured into the area of metals, and has produced a number of one-off tables, some of which could be easily mass produced. O'Driscoll is a very versatile and talented designer. He can use a good variety of materials such as steel, glass, wood and slate, in a skillfull way, always carefully balancing the aesthetic and functional elements of his designs. (Fig 32 & 33). He does not sell work directly to shops, but has exhibited his work all over Dublin in venues such as the Taylor Gallery, Newman House and the H.Q. in Powerscourt Townhouse Centre. Most of his work comes in the form of specific commissions but O'Driscoll has not ruled out mass production and his latest promotional leaflet includes prototyping as an available service.

In this summary of the designers and companies which are relevant to the contemporary metal furniture scene, I have discussed their origins and commercial development to the present day. This enables us to have an idea of their background, inspiration sources, training qualifications, size of operation etc...which ultimately shapes their designs. Chapter two looks in much more depth at the actual work of the various designers and companies, assessing the level of skill involved in the designs and examining how this level of skill in design is affecting their commercial development.

Chapter 2: The Work and Design Skill of Irish Contemporary Metal Furniture Designers and Companies.

Function is the most important element in furniture design. All furniture must function, otherwise it is not furniture at all. Those objects designed to look like furniture but which do not actually function have to be classed as either art or sculpture 'about' furniture. It could be said that the better a piece of furniture functions the better the design but this is a much too simplistic view. It is easy to assemble a table which will fulfill its functional expectations but much more difficult to make a table which will not only fulfill its functional element but which is also aesthetically beautiful. Good design therefore is a careful balance of both the aesthetic and functional elements of an object. Overall, contemporary Irish metal furniture rates quite well in design standards but there is still quite a bit of room for improvement.

One of the best designers in the field is Alfred Cochrane. he spends much of his time at the drawing board where he works out precise measurements of each component of his pieces. He considers everything relevant to the functioning of his furniture: leg spacings, chair back angles, balance and sturdiness all have to be considered with lots of other details. This rather thorough approach, needless to say, results in furniture which embraces function. Alfred however, likes to go beyond this to the point of making the furniture user-friendly. For example, he found that people felt uneasy about glass edges such as those on a glass table top, and so he designed his larger tables in such a way that the glass top sits onto a metal frame and this gives the table a more secure feeling. Similarly, he pays particular attention to upright and standard lamp designs to make sure they look well balanced, as any amount of unsteadiness causes similar unease, in those who have to live with them.

Cochrane also shows great skill in the area of cost and production. production and material costs are vital to the success of any manufacturing industry and have to be kept to a minimum. For this reason, Cochrane uses pre-made box section, gun barrel and angle steel lengths which are relatively inexpensive materials, as a means of making the basic structures of his work. Production involves only three processes firstly the cutting up of the lengths into the various sizes

required by means of jigs , a device which enables someone to cut up lengths of raw material into required lengths quickly and repeatedly and secondly, welding the pieces together to produce an item and finally spraying and painting the desired finish. Fig 39 shows an exploded view of a candle holder which is a good representative of Cochrane's work in general revealing how by means of a simple assembly procedure (not the clever positioning of the welds) and the use of relatively inexpensive materials. he has successfully taken production and material costs into consideration in his designs. Production costs are kept down even further by the way he designs collections around a particular component, such as the ionic Column in his Pompei Collection. Keeping the number of different components to a minimum saves complicating the organizing and general production procedures.

Regarding the aesthetic and visual quality of Cochrane's work, it is clear that he is by no means a failure in this area. His education in furniture design and his personal commitment to design perfection are evident in the standard which he has achieved. Despite Cochrane's training in furniture, he has not been particularly influenced by any other furniture designers contemporary or otherwise. Instead, he draws his inspiration from history and mythology of ancient times. I have mentioned earlier, how he has used the Ionic column and the acanthus leaves in his work. While these may have the advantages in marketing furniture by making it appealing to large numbers of people already familiar with these symbols, they are a sign of Cochrane's conservative attitude to design. He has no time for the spontaneous or the accidental element in design. Everything is dogmatically planned and worked out. (Figs 8-15) are typical examples of Cochrane's work.. The meticulous attention and planning of every detail clearly pays off. The harmony between the various pieces, the elegance of line, and the subtle use of decorative elements all convey the skill of the designer, and it is little wonder that his furniture is so popular.

In the future however, it would be nice to see more creative work from Cochrane. While his current work is aesthetically pleasing it is also very safe and by using such well worn historic details a bit cliché. Having so

far shown his ability as a designer of good taste and much skill, I am sure this would be no problem.

Alfred is currently experimenting with new designs and considering the use of wood into his work as he feels it has a country element which may not suit the city furniture look which he aims for. He is very happy with the results he has achieved by using metal and explains "There is a lightness with metal that you don't get with wood and after all, this is the age of steel."⁴ He has no desire to produce any work of a more personal or one-off standard. "I don't think about that anymore., I just think High Street"⁵. With this dedicated attitude and his ability to make good design look easy, Alfred Cochrane is set to remain one of Ireland's leading contemporary furniture designers.

The recent large window display of contemporary metal furniture, by Dublin Ironcraft in Brown Thomas on Dublin's Grafton Street was very impressive on first sight, but for those who took a slightly longer look, it revealed some lack in design skill. There appears to be a willingness to sacrifice function for the sake of both the aesthetic element and ease of production in their work (Figs 20 & 21)

The diningroom chairs, for example, are extremely uncomfortable, with both the base and seat of the chairs at fault. The flat inch bars with half inch spacings between them which make up the seat are too hard, smooth and straight for bodily curves ever to get comfortable and the base of the chair made up of two big spirals, jabs uncomfortably at the large bones in the shoulders. The dining room table is also fault-ridden. It allows two people to sit at both sides of the table but because of the poor positioning of the table's supports, there is no legroom for anyone to sit at either end of it. Should anyone attempt to sit at these tables end, regardless of such details, there is yet another design fault awaiting them.. This is the positioning of a large upright spike in the centre of the table's support, around knee height. Although it is unlikely that one would get physically damaged by this, the fact that it looms so dangerously close to ones more vulnerable parts would cause great unease to even the calmest of dinner guests. Such blatant bad design cannot be justified. Considering that Dublin Ironcraft make everything by hand, where there is always going to be a certain lack of exactness

and precision, it would be futile to compare them to an operation like AlFrank, but the priority which AlFrank shows towards' function in design should be adhered to.

Not all of Dublin Ironcraft's work is fault-ridden, thankfully. They produce a number of well designed candle holders and console tables which show that they can get it right sometimes (Figs 18, 19, 22 & 23). The console table featured in fig 23 is a beautiful and delicate piece, sensitive in scale to its likely surroundings and showing the company's considerable skill in forging. It is both functionally and aesthetically successful. the candle sticks (figs 18 & 19) are also testament to their design ability. these are elegant and slender with nicely forged scrolls and spirals, adding a sculptural quality to the work. As I have mentioned earlier, Conleth Boothman spent some time in 1988 working with Albert Paley in Rochester, New York. The Paley influence is clear in the work of Dublin Ironcraft (fig 36) shows a table by Alfred Paley, his wonderful spiraling and twisting coils echoed in those of Dublin Ironcraft's Console table. Boothman was also influenced by the Italian blacksmith with whom he worked later that same year. This is where Boothman picked up some of the Gothic overtones which appear in his work, particularly in the candlesticks (figs 18 & 19). Owen Molloy, the other half of Dublin Ironcraft, is a glass designer and has very recently begun to use his own glass to complement some of the Dublin Ironcraft pieces (fig 37).

As neither Boothman or Molloy has trained to be furniture designers this is perhaps why they sometimes run into problems with their designs, the artistic background which they have, and influence from working with Paley is no doubt of much help, particularly in the area of making the work visually pleasing, and indeed they excel in this area, but when it comes to the functioning of their work it leaves a bit to be desired.

Visually their work is generally very good with only one item of production, their coffee table needing a re-vamp (Fit 22). the problem with his piece is that the twisted cross bars which join the main leg supports of the table look too insignificant by comparison to the rigidity of the main frame of the table . The twisted bars look stuck on, where

they should look like they are holding the table together. This piece is exceptional however and most of the other work they produce is very successful aesthetically. When seen in a group, their dining room tables and chairs with a candlestick here and there, create an almost fantastical image of swirling spirals and curls against the tall vertical uprights. Their use of line in the work is very successful. By the very nature of the material and the process used to make the pieces the work takes on a sculptural quality normally found in external architectural fittings and garden furniture. It is a good indication of the change in Irish people's ideas of furniture, to see their work being well received and selling.

Regarding the cost and production side, Dublin Ironcraft will have to do some research in this area, as they intend to expand and increase production. This sort of work would be difficult to mass produce in any mechanised way so it may have to remain as hand made. This should not mean taking liberties with design. It is imperative that the length of time required to make a piece and the amount of material and work involved be given very careful consideration at the drawing board stage without sacrificing other elements of design. I fear that a much too hasty and unthought through design process led to their semi-torturous diningroom chair. The back of the chair, composed of two big spirals, may be reasonably cost effective to produce as it uses materials and man power economically, but the result is poor because function has been compromised and the chair is uncomfortable. the diningroom table suffers a similar fate. For Dublin Ironcraft, I believe its a back to the drawingboard stage. They need to work out their designs more carefully and then hopefully, we may see work which we cannot fault.

At Bushypark Engineering even less time is spent at the drawing board, but this is because, as Colm Bagnall explains, they like to design three dimensionally with designs produced from experiments in the workshop rather than a conscious design effort on the drawing board. Designs are kept simple, with the functional element given priority over all others. Bushypark Engineering use a mixture of both box section and solid bar, mild steel with glass and wood accompaniments for their furniture. For example, there are no elaborate production methods; most pieces are made by working the metal cold and welding and then

applying a finish (Figs 29 & 25). For some of their accessories such as a three arm electric light they use a simple but pleasing cooling procedure, which again is achieved by working the metal cold. By keeping the designs simple and using fairly cheap materials, Bushypark find it reasonably economical to produce a piece, and see mass production as a strong possibility for their designs. For the moment, however, they are only really finding their way and beginning to look more seriously at the designer furniture area. Fig 29 & 25 show two pieces which represent a typical example of Bushypark's work the function of both pieces seems to have dictated totally their design. With the decorative element only being added to enhance the overall look of the work as an afterthought. Again we have a glass table top which has become almost standard in the furniture produced by designers of today. These pieces in their elegant simplicity have been produced by Bushypark Engineering without them having any knowledge of current trends in European furniture design. By strange coincidence what they have produced is very close to what is the latest in designer furniture produced by people such as Enrico Baleri and Thomas Althaus. Both of these have started to re-address function as a priority in their work and are producing very straight forward simplistic furniture (figs 38 & 39).

By keeping their designs simple and in the method by which they actually design. Bushypark Engineering are being less than creative. In producing work in this experimental way, there is a tendency to use materials in a conservative and unoriginal way. A piece of mild steel box section in the hand, dictates too obviously what it could be used for, but a line representing a piece of box section in a concept drawing will be more likely to be manipulated creatively to produce a better design. There is nothing wrong with overall simplicity in design, in fact quite often the best design is the simplest design, but if creativity is squeezed out too much, designs can become boring and lose much of their appeal. Bushypark's designs are on the very edge of what could be classed as designer. They stray just enough beyond the basics of conservative furniture design to be included in this class. It will be interesting to see how their design skill develops creatively if they launch into the industry on a bigger scale. It can not be denied however, that in the areas of function, cost and production. *Bushypark Engineering are indeed successful*

If creativity is Bushypark Engineering's downfall, it is Robert Drennon's strong point. His work is creatively wonderful and leaves a lasting impression (figs 29 & 30). It is easy to see that this man is trained in furniture design not just because of the boldness and sophistication of his designs, but also because his work is on a par with that produced by some of Europe's best furniture designers. At the London College of Furniture, "He performed brilliantly" as a student and he has also been strongly influenced by the new Spanish School of furniture design. Although he uses an array of materials in his work. He is particularly fond of using metal and his three pieces exhibited in Ireland were all largely made of metal. Figs 29-31 illustrate his skill in using metal. Aluminium is a difficult metal to work with : it is practically unweldable and difficult to cast because of its lightness which encourages piths (piths are imperfections caused by air and additives in metal which can appear in the surface of a cast) in the finished cast. Drennan has masterly overcome these problems to produce a table and chair which use joints rather than welds to hold together and achieved good clean surfaces which have been brightly polished. His addition of glass, wood and suede gives them a cosmopolitan and trendy feel.

Functionally Drennan's work is equally successful. His chairs are comfortable and sturdy and his table is well balanced and a suitable size and shape, for most people. The only apparent fault is that the glass table top, held onto the table by three small (penny sized) adhesive pads, might create a feeling of unease for those who are a little on the conservative side.

In the area of cost and production Drennan has been successful. This table and his number 78 chair were both designed to be mass produced and this he has successfully started to do along with other newer work in England. The table is an assembly of two types of casting and the glass top, while the chairs are made from two castings (opposites) and then the seats. Drennan has cleverly designed these so that the number of different castings is kept to a minimum as this makes production cheaper. By using aluminium, a cheap metal, Drennan is also taking into account costs of production and materials.

Overall it has to be said that Drennan is one of Ireland's brightest designers. He shows great skill in all areas of furniture design, and is leading the field regarding Ireland's chances of ever catching up with the great design nations of Europe. His work has been likened to that of Phillippe Starck for example, although Drennan himself denies that he has been influenced by his work

"Philippe Starck, that Bob Geldof of design, was glimpsed at the recent exhibition of contemporary Irish furniture in The Soloman Gallery. Not in the flesh you understand, but in echoing the sinuous cast aluminium lines of various pieces by Robert Drennan"⁷

Finally let us look at the work of Tadhg O'Driscoll and assess his design skill. There is no doubt about the aesthetic beauty of his work (Figs 32 & 33). His tables are light, elegant and expertly made. Having trained at the John Makepeace School for Craftsmen, he has acquired superb skill in woodworking in general but excels in the area of joints. His interest in avoiding the more conventional types of joints can be seen in his metalwork (figs 32&33). Like Robert Drennan O'Driscoll uses a large variety of materials and often his work includes components in unusual materials such as stone, slate and plastic. There is no particular area or source which inspires him, he relies on his own ideas and through concept drawings, works out his designs. He considers function and creativity as equal elements in design and designs with both in mind simultaneously.

As O'Driscoll has only begun to produce one-off pieces of furniture in metal, and works mainly in the area of Commissioned work, production and material costs do not matter so much. Obviously it is best to keep costs as low as possible whenever possible and he does, but unless he gets seriously involved in mass production, he is not too bothered about it. O'Driscoll has earned himself a reputation as a furniture designer in wood and if he continues to produce metal furniture to the same standard he will soon be known and respected for this too.

Considering these Irish designers and companies, it is good to see that overall, there is mostly well designed work appearing on the market. While some are struggling with their design ability, this is probably

due to the numerous problems which have become apparent in the contemporary metal furniture industry and indeed in the contemporary furniture industry as whole. The following chapter looks at some of these problems, examining the effect they have on the industry and also looks at the future for Irish Contemporary furniture.

Chapter 3: A look at the problems currently facing the contemporary metal furniture industry in Ireland and at what the future may hold for it.

One of the most pressing problems with contemporary furniture in Ireland is the lack of educational establishments specialising in furniture design. There are only two such establishments in the country which offer a comprehensive education in this area. These are the College of Marketing and Design in Mountjoy Square in Dublin and the Letterfrack School for Furniture Design in Wood in Galway.

The College of Marketing and Design runs a three year course in furniture design, using all kinds of media, while the Letterfrack school specialises solely in wooden furniture design. Apart from the those who study craft design or industrial design at the various art colleges around the country and then self educate themselves in furniture design, there are no other options within the country. The situation is worsened by the fact that there is no substantial design education for students at secondary level in Ireland.

With such limited possibilities of being educated in furniture design in Ireland, it is little wonder that so many go outside the country to train in the area. Of the five or six companies and designers which make up the contemporary metal furniture scene for example, more than half of these have trained abroad. Alfred Cochrane trained in furniture design as part of his architectural training in Italy; Robert Drennan at the College of Furniture Design in London; Tadgh O'Driscoll at the John Makepeace School for Craftsmen in England.

This lack of educational facilities means fewer people here ever get the chance to be educated in what is an exciting and growing industry. The fact that there is no design education at secondary level means that for people like Colm Bagnall and Bushy Park engineering who has wandered into furniture design quite by chance, are now limited to what they can achieve independently. Even a general education in design would be beneficial to him now.

The small number of educational establishments is partly to blame for other problems in the industry. The fact that "there is no effective

surviving tradition in Ireland for furniture designing/making to call upon"⁸ means "No tradition in the sense of a body of unbroken experience"⁹ has survived to develop upon or revive. This has left furniture designers totally free to develop their own ideas and styles for furniture design. In the area of contemporary metal furniture designers this indeed is the current situation, with designers using both personal and borrowed influences from abroad in their work. But for contemporary furniture designers working with wood, this has led to big problems, and a similar situation could arise for the metal furniture designers, in the future. Basically the problem is that by having no tradition in furniture designing and making to build on, designers naturally began looking for influences both at home and abroad. Too many designers became influenced by the same sort of approach to designing and making furniture and this approach has now evolved to be seen as the correct one. "Change from it takes place as reaction against it, something which wastes time"¹⁰. The reason too many designers became influenced by the same sort of 'approach is because there are too few educational establishments teaching contemporary furniture design. More furniture design schools would mean a different ethos and would promote a healthier and more diverse design environment

This leads me to a further point also caused by this lack of educational establishments teaching contemporary furniture design. The large numbers of designers using wood in Ireland is largely because it is the easiest medium to be trained in, should you manage to get into /one of the two furniture design schools. The school at Letterfrack specialises in wooden furniture design and Mountjoy Square also teaches it. It is little wonder then, that so few designers are working in metals or other media, as there is an almost total lack of educational facilities for them.

Recently I had the opportunity to speak to Margaret McAnallen from the Irish Crafts Council, who is familiar with most of Ireland's leading craftsmen and designers. She pointed out that the Irish contemporary furniture scene in general lacks creativity and diversity, particularly in the area of creative use of materials. She agreed that there is a definite need for at least one new school in furniture design which would cover

metalwork and also other mediums such as textiles, plastics, glass and ceramics.

Besides the various problems causal by the lack of educational establishments, there are other problems hindering the designer furniture industry. The absence of an organised group or board to synchronize the activities of various sections of the industry is one such problem. Ireland is a country not noted for its design. There may be Waterford Crystal and Beleek porcelain but when it comes to the reputations which say Italy or the Scandinavian countries have for design, Ireland is a very long way behind. Therefore, we need a national body or group to help promote the industry and its image abroad. Soon Ireland will be the only European country separated totally from the main land and this should encourage us to make sure we build up a good reputation for our work which will eventually lead us to the trade we need. This group could also form links between the various sections of our industry. Furniture needs raw materials, wood, metal, glass etc. and there should be synchronisation with the forestry section or metal producers to ensure longterm growth in the industry.

The current growth rate within the industry is very slow and this is due to a number of factors. World recession has pushed designer furniture into a luxury items bracket; these are obviously not essentials in hard times. This has made it very difficult to sell designer furniture, particularly if it is expensive. This means that the market is very competitive which makes it difficult for new companies to become established and even for established companies to be profitable. Although 'AlFrank Designs' have shown good initiative in marketing efforts and they lead the field in this area, there remains a need for an organised body or group to assist in this area.

The availability of outlets for both the sales and exhibitions of contemporary furniture is of vital importance to help the industry get established in the most accessible market, the home market. The small number of these and the fact that they are not all well known is another problem which inhibits the development of the industry. Overall there are only a handful of outlets in the country, most of which are in Dublin. Of these many are badly positioned and located regarding access to the general public. (A contributory factor to the closing down of the

Furniture Gallery). While the whereabouts of these places may be known to interior designers and architects, the fact that the general public do not get the opportunity to see the work means less people are likely to buy it. The lack of even a small percentage of designer furniture stock in the more general furniture stores means that as the general buying public don't see any designer furniture, it never occurs to them to consider buying it. Considering it is sometimes as cheap or cheaper than the mass produced, antiquated rubbish which still graces the rooms of most Irish houses, then this is clearly a lost opportunity.

Despite this problem and all the others, there are brighter times ahead. The designer furniture market in general is earmarked as having enormous potential. This potential extends far beyond successfully dealing with the home market and sees Ireland as achieving a "doubling of our market share"¹¹ in Britain over a five year period, for example. The scale of this potential becomes apparent if we look at the statistics. The British home furnishings market exceeds four billion pounds per annum. Irish manufactured goods account for less than three percent of that, at the moment. Minister Seamus Brennan Minister for Trade and Marketing pointed out at an address to a trade seminar, that a doubling of Ireland's market share is feasible over a five year period. "This could create up to seven hundred additional jobs and help reverse the relative decline in this high potential export sector".¹² Although the U.K. is our largest and most accessible trading partner, there is obviously potential for exporting to other countries also. The recent relaxation of European border export and import controls should make this easier.

Much of of success in harnessing this potential will depend on our design ability. Minister Brennan also pointed out in his address to the trade seminar that "Better design has been singled out as being the key to Ireland doubling its share of potential markets over the next five years". While design standards are okay in the designer furniture industry's overall, we must bear in mind that there is room for improvement.

The future for contemporary metal furniture in particular is looking good, not that it has any lead in the marketing area but because it is

currently very fashionable and destined to become even more so. The eighties have come to be known as the age of steel, due to the launch and success of much steel furniture in this time. Fortunately, instead of becoming passé or last year's thing, metal furniture has increased in popularity and demand, with the Nineties set to see lots of aluminium, steel, iron and other metals in furniture design. Many of Europe's top designers have encouraged this popularity with metal furniture by using metal with great skill and verve in their work. While most of this work came into the ultra-sleek minimalist category which is now out of fashionable demand, popularity for metal is increasing but in more practical designs.

Overall, the future looks good for the contemporary furniture industry. The problems which have become apparent are serious ones however, and the whole industry needs to be carefully monitored to ensure these problems are cleared up and that more don't occur which might inhibit the industry's development still further.

Conclusion

The contemporary metal furniture in Ireland is still in its infancy. Indeed the whole contemporary furniture industry is just really beginning. The new wave of enthusiasm and interest in the area is helping progress and boosting the confidence of our designers. Although the industry is besieged with problems at all levels which are inhibiting development the wheels of industry are still turning albeit slowly in the hope that the problems can be solved and that the future will be brighter. Statistically it looks good, there are markets to be broken into which are potentially lucrative both at home and abroad and within a bit more design effort we will soon have a reputation for our design talent.

Never before has there been so much to gain for the designer on both personal and professional levels. Irish contemporary furniture designers really should be setting their ambitions high and thinking beyond the visible horizon. There seems to be little real passion for design in Ireland and certainly very little challenge towards furniture design. An apparent national conservativeness seems to be preventing us from taking the bull by the horns; so to speak and going all out for the kill. Our furniture may be well made well designed and viable to produce but overall it lacks that extra dimension to push it over the mediocre line. It seems to lack excitement and innovativeness. In the contemporary metal furniture scene for example, really only one designer, Robert Drennan's work offers much by way of visual stimulus. While it must be appreciated that furniture must be functional and practical, this should become part of the challenge in designing furniture and not the death of it aesthetically. Surely we can rise above the mediocrity of okay design and aim higher and begin to assess ourselves in worldly rather than national standards.

As it is very early in the hopefully long life of the industry, I suppose really we should be just glad that at least we have started the ball rolling. Although development is slow it is with great anticipation that I hope to see the industry go from strength to strength in the future bringing new appreciation and honour to Ireland and its designers.

List of Quotes

1. Siobhan Cronin - 'Furniture fashioned in Spitalfields'
The Irish Times - 16-6-87
2. Colm Bagnall - Bushypark Engineering Interview
- February 1993
3. Colm Bagnall - Bushypark Engineering Interview
- February 1993
4. Alfred Cochrane - in 'Furniture fashioned at Spitalfields'
- The Irish Times - 16-6-87
5. Alfred Cochrane - Interview - January 1993
6. Mary Dowey - 'A Rising Starck'
- The Irish Times - 23-3-91
7. Mary Dowey - 'A Rising Starck'
- The Irish Times - 23-3-91
8. Sean McCrum - 'Growing Up' - feature in Craft
Review - Issue 2 1991
9. Sean McCrum - 'Growing Up' - feature in Craft
Review - Issue 2 1991
10. Sean McCrum - 'Growing Up' - feature in Craft
Review - Issue 2 1991
11. Des McDermot - 'Design - Key to £4bn Market'
Evening Herald 3-11-88

12. Seamus Brennan
Minister for Trade & Marketing - 'Address to Trade Seminar'
November 1988

13. Mary Dowey - 'A Rising Starck'
The Irish Times - 23-3-91

Information Sources

- Interviews - Alfred Cochrane - AlFrank designs - Jan. 93
- Owen Molloy/Conleth Boothman, Dublin Ironcraft February '93
- Colm Bagnall - Bushypark Engineering, Feb. '93
- Margaret McAnallen - Crafts Council - Feb. '93.
- Books/Magazines- Design Yearbook 1992 by Andrée Putman and Rick Poynor, Thames and Hudson, Published 1992, N.C.A.D. Library 745.442/INT.
- Craft Review Periodical
Issue No. 4 - 1991.
'Gerrit Rietveld' - page 7.
- Issue No. 24 - 1991
'Growing Up' - page 3.
- 'Wood for the Trees', Booklet Crafts Council of Ireland, 1991.
- Other Information - N.C.A.D. Library File on Irish Furniture.
C.O.M.A.D. file on Irish furniture.
Gibson O Rourke, Interior Designers
Dawson Street Dublin - Information on Robert Drennan.



FIG. 2+3



FIG. 4



FIG. 5



FIG. 6



FIG. 7



FIG. 8



FIG. 9 . 10 . 11 . 12 . 13 .



FIG. 14

FIG. 15



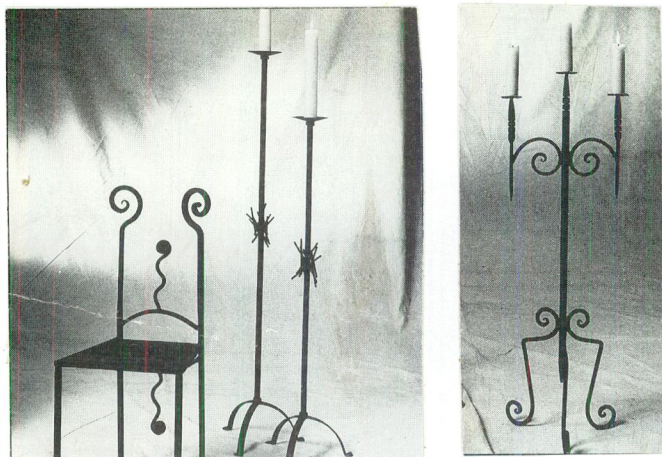


FIG 18,19.



FIG. 17

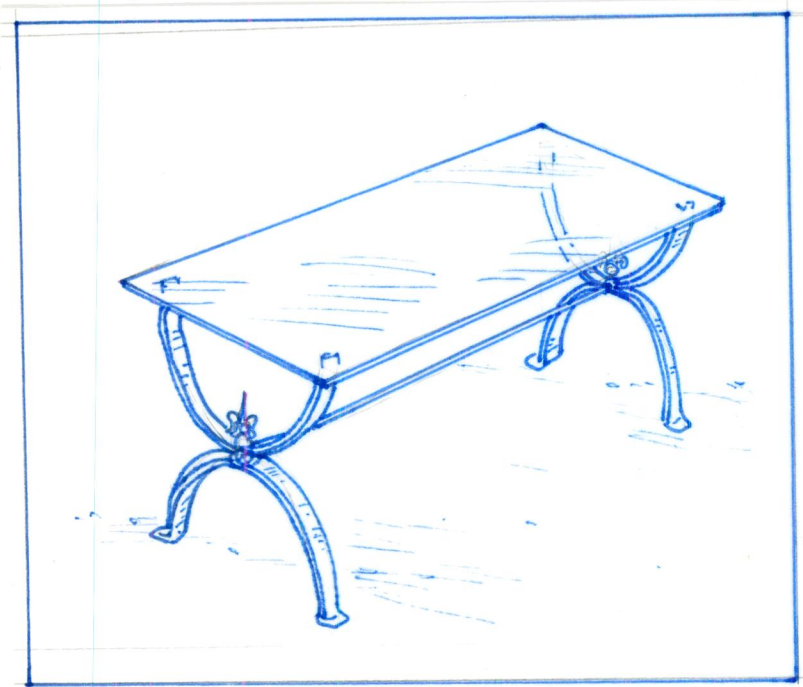


FIG. 20



FIG . 21

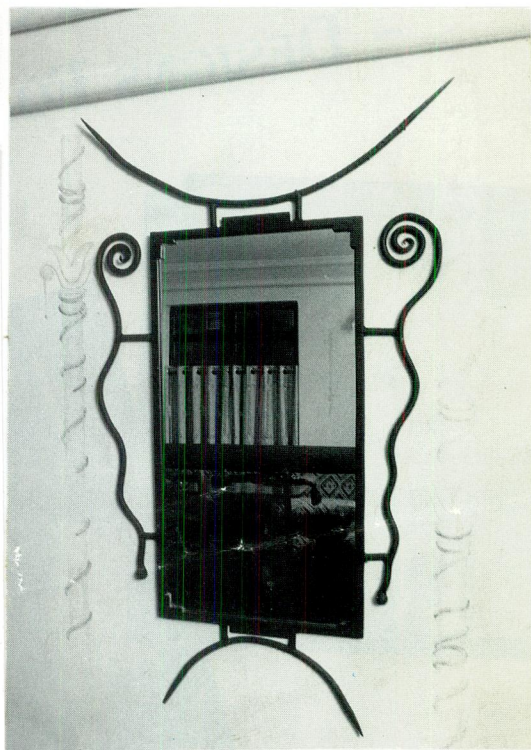


FIG .16

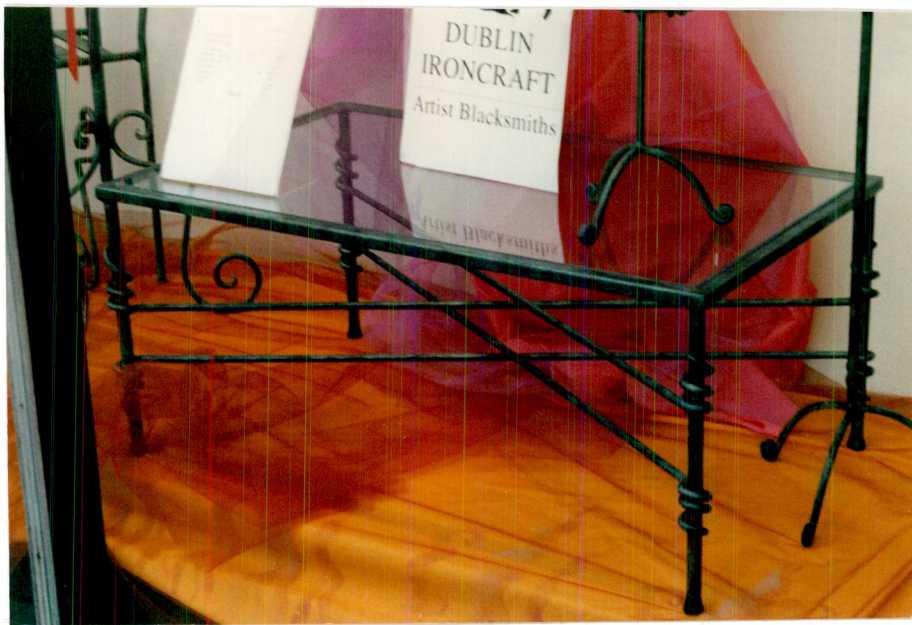


FIG . 22



FIG . 23

FIG . 24.



FIG. 28.



FIG. 29.



FIG. 30



FIG 32.

FIG 33.



FIG 37

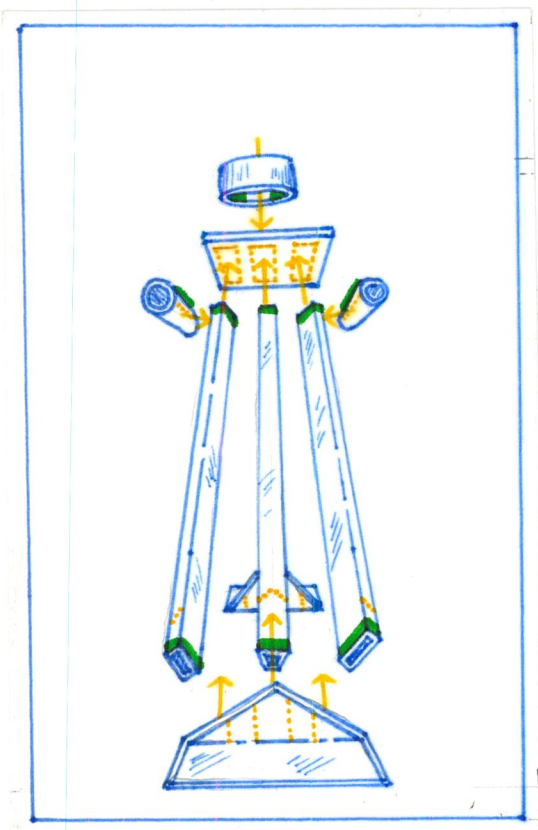


FIG 39.

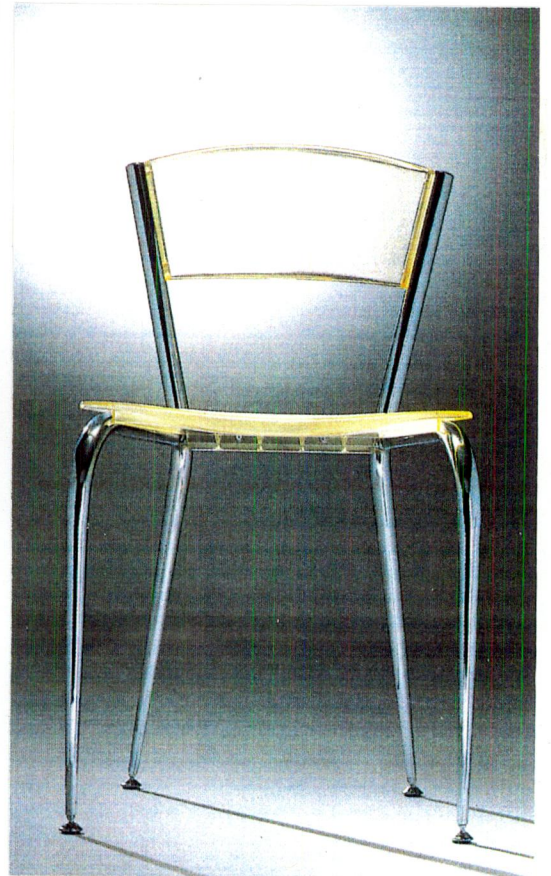


FIG 38



FIG. 39.