

IRISH FURNITURE DESIGN:
A DEVELOPING INDUSTRY ?

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by

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Preface

Granted the opportunity in January 1992 to study in Denmark, I willingly availed of the offer. While I was there I further availed of the opportunity and travelled throughout Scandinavia, in an effort to absorb the culture. The expansive forests of Scandinavia, was enthralling (Fig. 1.) but even more so was the reflection of this resource in the furniture design of these countries.



Fig. 1 Kvikkiokk. North West Sweden.

The presence of this natural resource was inescapable. It was evident that forestry and timber formed an integral part of design.

In this thesis I hope to concisely assess Irish forestry, the qualities of the wood and their potential. Combining this anticipated potential with tradition and the high level of design and manufacture currently displayed in Ireland today, it is my aim to highlight a set of conditions which would form the base of a platform, from where Irish furniture design could develop. From here a standard of design and manufacture would develop which could compete on an international level for design recognition.

Introduction.

Early in the twentieth century the founding of a forestry committee in Ireland, known as the '1907 Committee', advocated the planting of trees and pioneered a forestry programme. At this time in Ireland less than 2% of the country was forested.¹ This national scheme of afforestation, pioneered in 1907 by this committee, was one of the most significant developments to date in Irish forestry. The committee aimed to plant one million trees in eighty years: this record planting figure was achieved in seventy eight years. This committee had achieved its aims, but by the time they were realised many of the pioneers of this afforestation had died and Ireland had gained its independence from England. This committee's aims were realised as a national scheme of afforestation for an Independent nation, something totally unforeseeable at the initiation of the scheme. 1958 heralded great strides in the afforestation programme as it marked a period of expansive planting, but also marked a change in species types commonly grown in Ireland. The influence of such planting, in relation to the furniture design industry, will be analysed later on in the thesis.

At the backdrop of this development of one of Ireland's natural resources, in another department namely that of the Trade and Industry, the Irish Government was engaged in a comprehensive review of Irish design. In doing so they sought the assistance of five influential Scandinavian designers. It is both significant and ironic, that the Government turned to the Scandinavians, producers of quality wood furniture from indigenous materials, to assess our design ethics. Such a decision reflects a yearning to aspire to such standards. It's also ironic in that much native hardwood timber, inherent to the development of Irish furniture design, was exported from the Danish kingdom of Dublin, 'Dyfflynarskiri', to such places as the far reaching Pharaoh Islands.² This surely contributed to the depletion of our forests. The 1961 Scandinavian Report on Irish Design was the climax of the Government's efforts in reviewing the design sector. This report on Irish design came at a time of

1. Forestry statistics, throughout the thesis were obtained from an interview with Mr Tim Hickey, Coillte. Updated figures are available in Coillte's annual report.

2. Neeson, 1991, Pg. 23.

significant change in Irish social and economic arenas. The 1960s in Ireland had a curiously individual air about them and allowed a generation to discover a new world, one that had eluded its elders. The development of a television network in Ireland in the early 60s, promoted an outside view of life and added an extra dimension to a previously sheltered life. This was manifested in a consumer boom of new products in the Irish economy.

Let us analyse the more recent history of woodland and its role in commercial industry. Following World War Two, cheap china, tin and plastic became widely available. All of these materials were suitable for the ever increasing machine of mass production. New styles, fashions and trends were also increasing in popularity through the medium of television. Soon these factors compounded the decline of wood products in the home. Wood became less of a practical commodity, and more of an ornamental one, especially on the domestic scene. Furniture and furnishings such as chairs, tables, ladles, tubs, bowls and drinking vessels soon made their way onto the market, manufactured from plastic and laminates or other wood substitutes. Craft based industry was no longer economically viable after the war years and the engineering industry in particular, was an expansive growth sector between the 1960 and mid-'70s. The transition of wood from functional to ornamental value in the home, was synchronous with the gradual move from traditional rural dwellings, to the modern urban environment.

The natural beauty of wood was subsequently hidden and replaced by plastic, alloys and other more modern materials. These were materials of no natural beauty or character and they offered no explanation of origin. Due to the unpredictable nature of wood, it did not lend itself to the area of commercial mass production. Wood remained primarily a craft orientated material. With a noticeable decrease in craft production after World War Two the use of wood massively decreased, subsequently wood remained an undeveloped natural material in Ireland, high in aesthetic and structural qualities.

In the midst of a boom age for engineering and one of decline for

craft, the Irish Government founded Kilkenny Design Workshops, (KDW.), the first Industrial Design practice set up by the Government in Ireland. Some implied that it was the first design practice ever set up in Ireland. In its infancy KDW sought to develop an identity for Irish design, which would be recognised both at home and abroad. It aimed to do so through many different mediums but one such medium was the use of indigenous materials, such as pewter, black limestone, and bog oak. It also aimed to educate the public about the need and ability of, design in Ireland. Through the 1970s and early '80s KDW developed and expanded into a wide ranging design team. Its influences were felt in many areas of Irish industry.

Although Irish craft manufacture has had a back seat drive for many years in the Irish manufacturing industry, an increase in craft based industry has been recorded over the past five years.³ It seems that attitudes in Ireland are changing and this is reflected in the increase in craft industry. With this change in attitudes, moreover the change in manufacturing, a development in the native timber industry would prove beneficial to the development of furniture design in Ireland. Designers constantly seek new and exciting styles as sources of inspiration for the generation of products, for their buying customer. In Ireland there is a definite source of inspiration in tradition for the furniture designer/craftsman. In this thesis, I hope to show that through the use of native timber in conjunction with this inspiration, Irish designed furniture can develop into a recognised industry.

After the second World War and throughout the 1960s and '70s, mass communication, mass media and mass culture provided an exciting period for design in Ireland. It produced a multitude of styles and ideas in Ireland, most of which did not last very long, but entered the library of styles, ideas and fashions which may be drawn upon in the future, for further stimulation. The mass availability of products in this era rendered themselves out of date quickly. A new or dominant style has not developed from the 1980s, or indeed from the early 90s. Perhaps this is a recovery period from the mass consumerisation of the 1960s and '70s, or is

3. Reed, 1993, Pg. 18.

it an indication of the diversity in consumer tastes? With a notable rise in the area of craft production in recent years, a shift to traditional values encompassed in a modern style, could provide a focus for the consumer in Ireland. Given proper conditions, the development of a variation of products, including furniture design, is highly possible. It is the aim of this thesis to explore the conditions required for such development.

Chapter 1.

Developments in Irish forestry and the applications of its produce.

These goods may deserve commendation on the score of being produced in Ireland; but what we want in addition to these exhibits, and distinct from them, is a class of goods, wholly the production of native materials, and the workmanship of native artisans. If our exhibition is to be a representative native one, care must be taken that it shall be what it is represented to be, and no hybrid.

(Irish Builder, April 1882, Pg 8)

Just before the turn of the twentieth century, the use of native materials in furniture design was of major importance to the 'Irish Builder' journal. Leading up to the Dublin exhibition of 'Irish Arts and Manufacture' in 1882, the Irish Builder issued the above statement. At the time this proposition was badly needed in the Irish furniture industry. It was a positive approach to one aspect of Irish design; the use of indigenous materials. The enthusiasm enjoyed by subscribers to the Irish Builder was not realised by the participants in the 1882 Dublin exhibition. At this time resources of Irish wood were massively depleted, having been plundered by the English for their own building purposes, in the earlier parts of the nineteenth century. Irish oak was the dominant wood used for the reconstruction of Westminster Hall in London, in the nineteenth century. This call for the use of native materials is synonymous with the idea; if one is to develop a national idiom, it should rely on its natural resources and the ones most available. This advocate from the Irish Builder has been reinforced again and again over the years and most recently in the development of KDW.

In retrospect it was believed among craftsmen and the general public, that the Irish Builders concern for the use of native materials would have been more beneficial, if it had also steered its concern into developing a native Irish form, rather than advocating the wide spread use of Irish wood, which resulted in a development of English Period Furniture. However at that time in Ireland, 1882, a lack of native wood prevailed yet a distinct need for this resource was observed. This

lack of native timber retarded the development of Irish Furniture.

The plight of hardwoods, especially tropical species, was put in perspective, at the World Summit on the Environment in Rio de Janeiro last June. Maurice Strong, secretary general at the Summit had the following to say:

Let us be clear and realistic. Until nations and people that depend on forests for their economic well being can see that their economic interests are served in the development of forests, the destruction of forests will continue.

(ENFO. 1992, Pg. 1.)

The main concern for the preservation of tropical forests is their role in stabilising atmospheric conditions, through converting poisonous greenhouse gases to Oxygen. Further concern is felt when one considers that in the last twenty years, human activity has cleared as much of the Earth's forest as was previously cleared in all of history.

(ENFO. 1992, Pg. 2.)

In light of this global position Ireland may now serve a dual purpose in developing a sustainable forestry service, with a diversification of species. Firstly developing a platform from which Irish furniture design and manufacture may develop, and secondly, reducing the countries need to import tropical hardwoods and thus reducing, to some extent, the destruction of tropical forests.

Unlike our European counterparts, Irish forestry is young. 70% of all our forests are under the age of forty years. Irish forestry is also quite restricted, with only 7% of our country under forestry as compared with a national average of 24% in the E.C.. The species which constitute our forests, represented in Fig. 2 are quite varied with softwood, (Conifers), dominating the scene.

Species such as, Sitka Spruce, Lodgepole Pine and Douglas Fir, all softwoods, constitute 77.5% of the managed forests in Ireland. Such

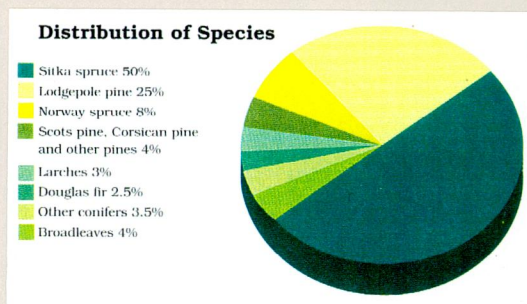


Fig. 2 Distribution of Species.

species were introduced to Ireland in the 1950s and quickly adapted to the Irish soil types and climate. These coniferous forests help Ireland to boast



Fig. 3 The Oak Tree.

some of the fastest growing plantations in northern Europe. Despite the dominance of softwood in Irish forests today, Ireland has a strong tradition for producing hardwoods, reflected in the fact that our national tree is the Oak tree. (Fig. 3.) At present approximately 4% of Irish forests are hardwood trees. Hardwoods offer a wider range of colours and textures, and offer greater constructional qualities than their

softwood counterparts. For clarity, conifers trees produce softwoods while broadleaf species produce hardwood.

In light of the recent World Summit on the environment, Ireland has endeavoured to develop the planting of more broadleaf species. One of the aims set out in the report, resulting from the summit is as follows:

planting a diversification of species, in particular the encouragement of broadleaf trees, to improve visual amenity, to provide additional habitats for flora and fauna and to provide quality hardwood timber."

(Department of the Environment, 1992, Pg 40.)

Broadleaf trees will grow in Ireland as efficiently as conifers, yet they can take up to twice as long to mature. While our coniferous species developed, Irish broadleaf forestry remained undeveloped, yet we import over £16 million of hardwood every year.¹ Huge efforts are being made in recent years to nurture, develop and harness the potential of broadleaf forestry in Ireland. 'Coillte', 'Crann' and the 'Tree Council of Ireland' are all involved in developing the broadleaf industry. Jan Markey of 'Crann', at her lecture in Trinity College Dublin in mid-November of 1992, advocated the planting of more broadleaf species. The following is a

1. Coillte, 1992, Pg. 28.

number of concluding points to that lecture, which could lead to development in the broadleaf industry.

1. There is a clear request from craftspeople and furniture designer/makers for a range of species. Minor species such as Holly and Walnut need to be planted and not just the more traditional species of Beech, Oak and Ash.
2. More information needs to be made available throughout the broadleaf industry. Users need to tell sawers what they want, and growers need to tell sawers what's coming on stream.
3. Native hardwood needs to be made available throughout the school system in order to foster pride and appreciation in Irish grown hardwoods, design and manufacture.

In a concluding point to her lecture Jan Markey had the following to say:

Just as the unplanned coniferous afforestation resulted in public concern, so too will the unplanned harvesting of our existing hardwood resource. I feel that it is of vital importance that the existing resource be managed in such a way as to take into account, both social and economic considerations.

(Markey, J. 1992, Trinity College Dublin.)

The anticipated development of broadleaf forestry in Ireland will result in extra availability of quality raw material. Such a resource will contribute to the development of Irish furniture. For Irish designed furniture to be recognised as Irish, it is essential that it should be manufactured from Irish native timber. In light of the Irish Builders advocate in 1882, it is apparent that an Irish idiom in furniture design will not arise out of the use of native timbers alone. Despite this, the development of such a resource will provide a continuous, quality, reliable raw material, which is one of the conditions necessary for the development of furniture in Ireland.

Man's deep affinity for wood and trees, originates from the times of early human evolution. As humans we evolved from tree dwellers and have depended on trees from the early ages. Trees provide shelter,

protection, fire wood, housing and furniture, and food for the table. Above all trees provide us with the sheer pleasure of just looking at them. Trees as compared with mortal men seem to last forever, as they spring into new lie every year. In life we are surrounded by timber structures and wooden commodities. Our homes and work places are partially and sometimes wholly constructed from timber. We frequently eat, sleep or work with wooden furniture or utensils; children are reared with wooden toys or playthings and quite often develop a yearning to build a tree house, while adults rely on wood supplies for recreational needs in the form of sports equipment, gameboards or even walking in the forest. Wood is so commonplace that we invariably take it for granted, yet once it is worked and the inner beauty revealed, wood is anything but ordinary. Wood has lasting qualities like no other material. It is both warm and pleasing to the touch. While its multitude of colours and textures are a delight to certain designers, they are such that they inspire a uniqueness in every single wooden piece.

The multitudes of colours and textures arises from the different species of trees, but other features of some trees provide organic patterns and shapes with a diversification of colour. The features providing the most excitement are, burls, spalting and ripple. The crotch of many trees also provides interesting grain pattern or structure, especially for the production of veneer.



Fig. 4. Burl Elm.

Fig. 4. Burls are abnormal growths on the trunk of many trees, although it is common to the Elm tree. Burls display an attractive pattern of tightly packed bud formations that appear as rings or dots in the wood. These are highly prized for furniture and small woodware design.



Fig. 5. Spalted Beech.



Fig. 6. Rippled Sycamore.

Fig. 5. Spalting is popular in the Beech tree but also occurs in other species. This is represented by thin black lines running through the grain of the timber. It also causes a diversification of colour within one piece of wood. This condition is caused by bacteria in the wood and only occurs when the tree is cut down and left for a period, before being converted.

Rippling is a feature common to the Sycamore family and results in a wavy, curly figured grain pattern. This feature must firstly be detected while the tree is still standing and secondly converted by the

proper method in order for the feature to be exposed. This feature is often reserved for the construction of violin backs. Hence it is often referred to as 'fiddle back sycamore'.

These natural beauties, although not unique to the hardwoods of Ireland, enhance an already beautiful material, increasing design and manufacturing possibilities.

The development of conifer species, either by planning or not, has been given priority in Ireland over the past forty or fifty years. This is due to the fact that softwood matures quicker than hardwood. Furthermore certain softwoods mature quicker in Ireland, than some of our European counterparts. The production of quality softwood in Ireland over the past fifteen years has resulted in a diversification of uses in the

construction industry and also the architectural section of design. Several projects, of notable implications have been executed in Ireland with the use of native coniferous woods.

The Killykeen Forest park development is situated on the shores of lough Oughter in County Cavan. The development consists of twenty eight self-catering chalets, a recreation centre, an equestrian centre and a managers office. Mike Roberts, architect from county Kilkenny, designed and constructed his own dwelling from native conifer wood. These two projects alone, demonstrate the potential of properly managed forestry.



Fig. 7. Killykeen Forest Development.

of Modern Architecture, in the same city. Such publicity results in the recognition of Irish ability in design and manufacture.

A unique feature of the landscape in Lavistown County Kilkenny is the home of Mike Roberts. This dwelling is constructed entirely of native conifers, and every piece of wood in the construction is left unpainted. The effect is a warm comfortable one. The natural reds and whites of the different species contrast and complement each other, as seen in *Fig. 8*, to create an environment, a home, where man can relax and feel protected. Such was the feeling of our former tree dwellers. These two projects resulted in, international recognition of Irelands ability

The Killykeen forest development, seen here in *Fig. 7*, has been the single largest-scale use of native timber to date. It was developed to display the full potential of Irish softwood in the design and construction sector. This development has represented Ireland in the C.L.E.A.U. exhibition in Paris in 1987 and has also appeared in the Museum

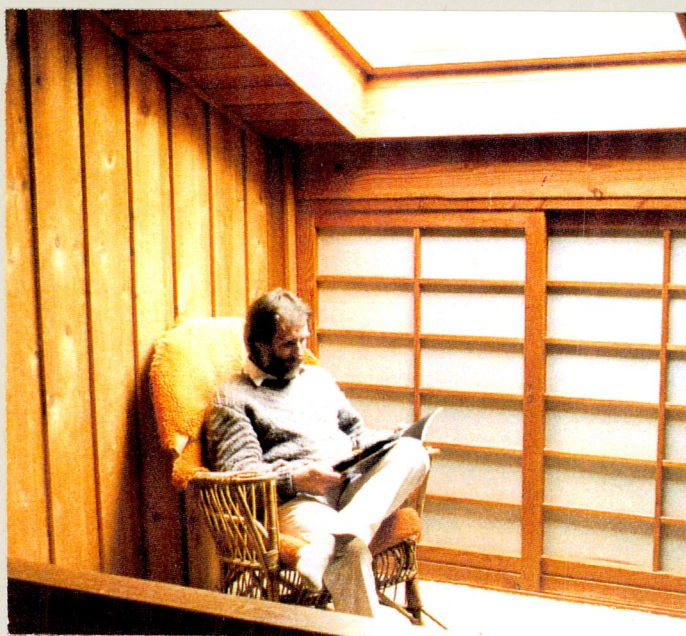


Fig. 8. Internal view of Mike Roberts Dwelling.

in the construction industry, which was made possible by the availability of a quality raw material. Further developments in the Irish softwood industry are still afoot. What is known in the trade as 'Glue Lam', is still in development stages in Ireland.

'Glue Lam' is a semi, man made material. The term Glue Lam describes the operation of making the material and hence the name. Thin slices of wood are cut from a single plank to a thickness of two to four millimetres to form laminates. These laminates are then glued together to form a sandwich like structure. This material offers potential for bending and forming, qualities which the wood in plank form could not offer. Applications of Glue Lam are evident in certain pieces of Scandinavian furniture, but also in the construction industry it is becoming widely acclaimed for its use in the design of modern buildings where a combination of strength and aesthetic qualities are of importance, as demonstrated in Fig. 9.

Fig. 9. Glu Lam Trusses.



The potential of native softwoods, for the production of 'Glue Lam', is currently being researched and developed at the Wood Technology Centre in the University of Limerick.

"There is no other wood that does so well agree with the glue as the Spruce."

(Neeson, E. 1991, Pg 247.)



Fig. 10. *Sitka Spruce. Irelands most popular softwood tree.*

The mass availability of quality softwood, and especially Sitka Spruce has resulted in new options for the construction industry, and makes the research and development of Glue Lam possible. The potential in the research of 'Glue Lam' was evident at the Wood Ireland exhibition in University College Dublin in September 1992. A range of furniture, including tables and chairs, was exhibited and won much attention not least for the fact that it was designed and constructed wholly of Irish wood.

In conclusion, the mass availability of a quality raw material has resulted in development and new options for the construction industry in Ireland. A comparatively smaller progression has been recorded in the furniture industry. It is imperative to design that a quality resource made widely available prevails, to allow for development. It is encouraging to note that arising out of the lecture on 'Broadleaf Trees in Ireland', at Trinity College Dublin, a more coherent approach in the broadleaf industry was sought. Such a coherent approach should result in a quality resource of Irish hardwood being made available, which would fulfil one of the conditions from where Irish furniture design can further develop.

Chapter Two.

Old Irish and Vernacular Furniture.

A Source of Inspiration?

..."designers have continually shifted their focus from the past to the present and back again to the past, in search of styles to delight, shock and comfort their buying public"...

(Sparke, P. 1986, Pg 8)

To develop a set of standards which Irish furniture must meet in order to be termed 'Irish', would at the least, prove to be quite difficult, but furthermore would prove to be worth nothing more than folly. A source of inspiration from where Irish furniture design may developed is going to be highlighted. It is with this in mind, spurred by the quote of Penny Sparke, that designers constantly seek inspiration from the past, that I endeavour to explore the area of Irish vernacular furniture, as a possible source of design inspiration, for modern Irish furniture.

Two notable styles of furniture prevailed in Ireland throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Eighteenth century Period furniture and Rural vernacular furniture. In Ireland the Period furniture style consisted mainly of reproduction English forms, adorned with nationalist symbolism. As a style it has no value in tracing the true character of Irish life, as it remained an originally English form and style. In contrast Irish vernacular furniture has much to transmit. The furniture boasted honesty and simplicity in both form and construction. Irish vernacular furniture was not altered by fashion nor political climate, but was rather a subconscious expression of the Irish nation. This expression was hugely visible in the cottages of Ireland. It resulted in an expression that lacked a visual sense, reinforced by the fact that Irish vernacular furniture was highly functional, with little respect given to the aesthetic. The lack of visual expression in the household, is one of the reasons why a design identity has not emerged from Ireland. The severe lack of such an expression may be attributed to many factors but poverty was the most influential one in nineteenth century Ireland.

In the late eighteenth, throughout the nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries Irish furniture lay in a dilemma. Did it stand as a statement of nationalism and hence display the attributed connotations; or was it to be an expression of the people of the nation? Wherever the answer lies there is no doubt in the value of vernacular furniture, as opposed to the Period furniture of the same era, in terms of portraying an expression of the majority community in Ireland at that time, the rural population.

Nineteenth century furniture in Ireland never elevated above the elaboration or imitation of predominantly, English forms. Vernacular furniture, influenced by the peasants needs rather than social, political or fashion changes, provides a more realistic view of Irishness in furniture design.

The early half of the nineteenth century in Ireland depleted the nation's population to almost half through successive famines, resulting in death and emigration. Despite this, vernacular furniture was still produced even under adverse social and environmental circumstances, but such circumstances prevented any real development in the design of Irish vernacular furniture, unlike certain European counterparts. By 1841 nearly half the rural population in Ireland were living in mud cabins, such as that sketched in Fig. 11. The rural population constituted over 85% of the total population in Ireland at that time.¹ Such was the extent

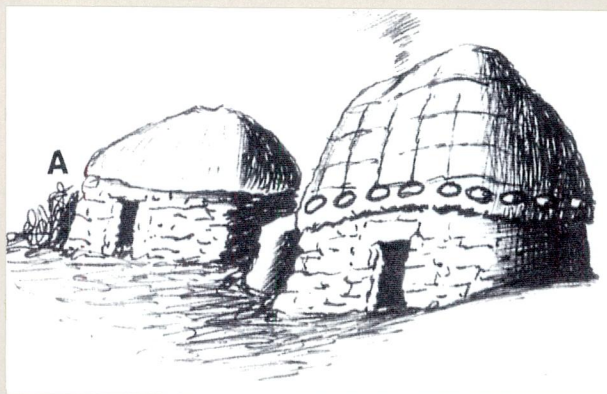
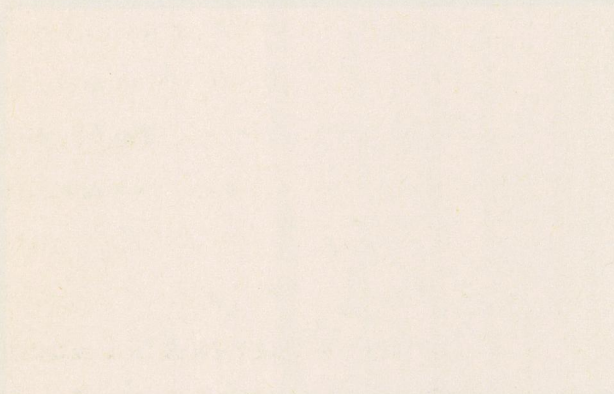


Fig. 11. Single Roomed Cabins. A common Dwelling in the Early Nineteenth Century.

of the factors that influenced and shaped Irish vernacular furniture. Despite the obvious differences between Irish and European vernacular furniture, such as standards in manufacture and finish, there are other traits that set Irish vernacular furniture apart from a collective brand of European vernacular style furniture.

1. Evans, 1957, Pg. 12.



Traits such as decoration, uses of materials, influence of environment, particular construction methods, and innovation in design can be used to analyse certain pieces of vernacular furniture to determine their origin.

In Scandinavia as early as the sixteenth century, social and economic conditions had stabilised, and raw materials were in greater abundance. Environmental factors such as heavy snowfall isolated individuals, allowing them time to develop designs and improve craftsmanship in their furniture, in a truly indigenous manner. Conditions in Ireland had not stabilised until considerably later, in the latter half of the nineteenth century. National stability was again rocked through civil and world strife throughout the twentieth century, thus any possibility of development was again postponed. Vernacular furniture that displays a sense of Irishness, when analysed under the above traits, include, the Hedge Chair, the Bed Settle and Irish Table, the Irish Dresser and the Sungan Chair.



Fig. 12. Irish Hedge Chair. *"I like the chair because it breaks all the rules. It's not the right height, it tilts, it just shouldn't be comfortable yet it's incredibly so, and it's so simple".*
(Monahan, C. 15/11/92. Pg.24.)

The Hedge Chair.

The Hedge chair, Fig. 12, developed in the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, a time when social and economic conditions in Ireland were showing some signs of stabilising. The severe lack of resources to construct the chair contributed highly to the lack of, an acclaimed identity within the chair. The chairs were constructed from a variety of woods, and quite often within one chair. Basically the chairs were constructed from what ever wood was available, from hedgerows or sometimes

pieces of drift wood may have been used. The lack of a native resource of wood, seems to have been a continuous factor in preventing the development of furniture design and manufacture in Ireland.

Prior to the hedge chair the three legged stool, or 'Creepie', constituted the majority of the furniture in the Irish cabin, throughout the nineteenth century. The Hedge chair is directly evolved from the basic structure of the 'Creepie'. Like the Creepie the chair was ingeniously built to survive the adverse conditions of the environment in which it had to perform. Irish cabins were damp, smoky, and possessed highly uneven floors. Integrated in the chair are design solutions to typically Irish problems. The height of the chair, referred to by Mr Pearce, contributed to seating the user below the smoky pale within the 'chimneyless', cabins of the time. The original three legged structure of the Creepie, obviously adapted to the uneven floors. The early hedge chairs also possessed solutions to typical Irish problems. Despite the huge variation of wood in the construction of the chairs one thing they had in common was the ingeniously simple method of design/manufacture. This simple method was due to the availability of one board large enough to form the seat of the structure. All other components of the chair were connected to the seat, which allowed for easy removal of any damaged components. Damage was anticipated due to the dampness and unevenness in the floors of the Irish cabins. The top of the seat displayed the method of construction, as the point of joining the individual legs to the seat was apparent. The apparent method of construction was a round tapered mortise, with a split wedge insert across the grain of the leg, shown in Fig. 13. Such a joint prevented the leg from protruding above the flush level of the seat pan. The fact that no stretchers connected the legs of the chair coupled with the honest method of construction allowed for the,

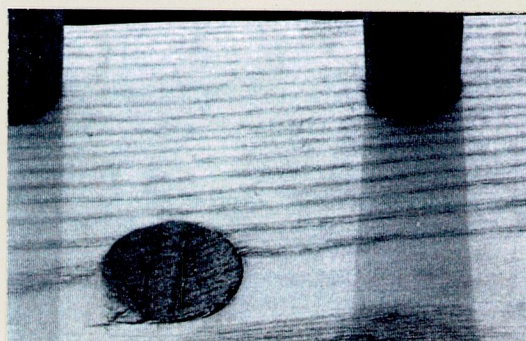


Fig. 13. Construction Detail.

previously mentioned, easy removal of damaged or rotten legs. Such honesty in manufacture would have undoubtedly pleased the purists of the English Arts and Crafts movement at that time.

The Irish hedge chair evolved as a particular design exhibiting honesty, minimalism and utility all of which represent characteristic traits of Irish life at that time. The functional and undecorated form of the chair has been compared to the similar Shaker style furniture. Despite this comparison, Shaker furniture reached a level of finish and manufacture that the Irish hedge chair did not. Furthermore the perfection in finish and manufacture coupled with the functional undecorated style of Shaker furniture was religiously inspired; the style of the hedge chair was a reflection of adverse living conditions, such conditions that called for the improvisation of timber and the use of particular construction methods. It is the interplay of these two factors that has left the Hedge chair so functional and undecorated. It is the factors causing the interplay between, using particular construction methods and improvising timber uses, that depicts the Hedge chair as particularly Irish, as opposed to conforming to a European style of vernacular furniture.

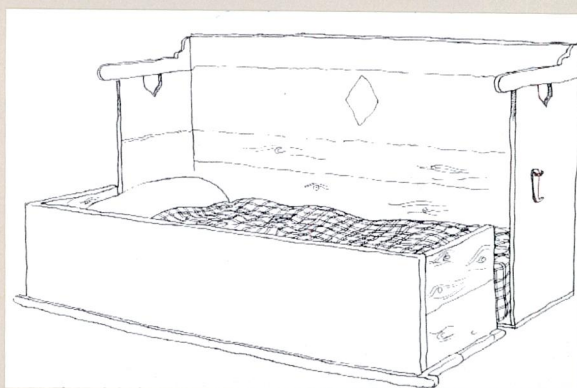


Fig. 14. The Settle Bed. Which folded up to make a bench seat.

Settles.

Vernacular furniture embodies characteristic of a nation, region or place. However with this, variation within designs may arise. The Settle Bed is recognised as a particularly Irish innovation. The settle in Fig. 14. provided

seating by day and bedding by night. The tradition of hospitality in Ireland is reflected in the design of the settle. It provided and secured a bed at night for the ever unexpected guest. The development of the bed settle was also advanced by the ever growing number of children. The lack of space in the Irish dwellings aided the notion of one

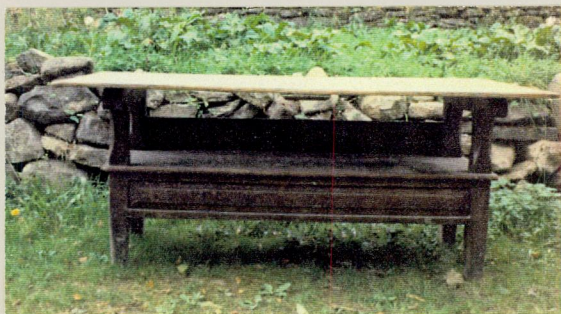


Fig. 15. Irish Table.

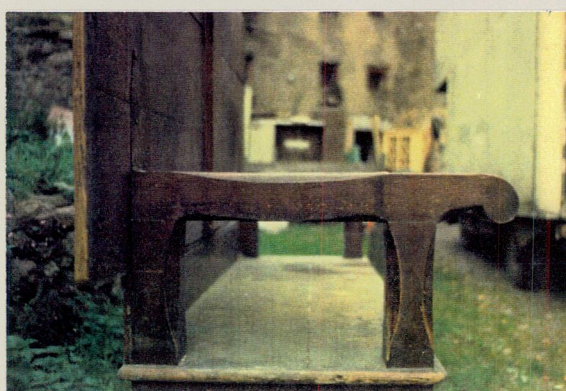


Fig. 16 Table top hinges back to accommodate seating.

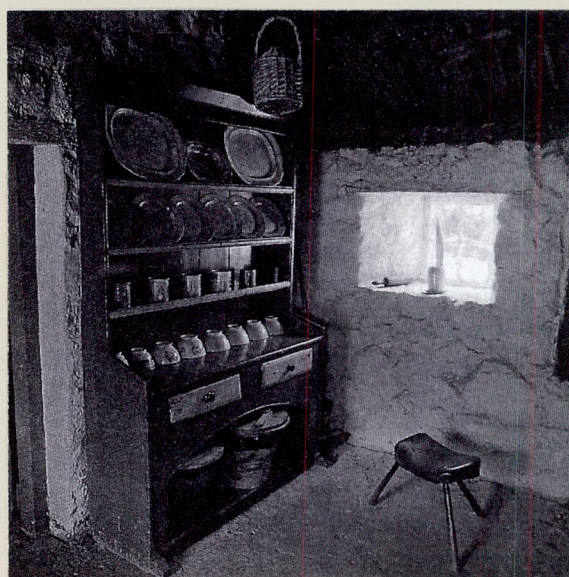


Fig. 17. Irish Dresser with Creepie in the foreground.

piece of furniture serving two functions. This notion led to the development of settles, and from this the Irish table, Fig. 15, developed as an original design. The table top hinged, Fig. 16, at one side to allow a seat to be revealed for use when the table was pushed against a wall or partition. Combination furniture was very popular in Irish dwellings. The settle bed demonstrates characteristics of Irish life through its very existence, it is the originality of design in the Irish table and bed settle that depicts them as Irish style vernacular furniture.

Irish Dresser.

The Irish dresser's primary function in the home, was to display and protect the highly prized wares of a household. Such wares formed the centre point of many Irish kitchens, and would have been collected over the years or possibly handed down from past



Fig. 18. Variation of Irish Dresser, The Chicken Coop Dresser.

was the 'boot foot', (plinth), at the base of the unit. The thinking behind the boot foot, was similar to the thought in the construction of the Hedge chair. The plinth could be easily removed and replaced which was necessary, given the character of the floor on which it rested. Owing to locality some dressers were painted while other boasted carving. The painting of some dressers indicates a subconscious craving for quality woods. Shades of brown and red were the most popular colours, as they presented a similar look to timbers like mahogany

generations. The bottom half of the dresser was used to store items of inconspicuous value. Quite often the bottom half of the dresser was converted for the use of hatching chickens. Hence it was called the Hen Coop Dresser, Fig. 18. The Irish dresser boasts certain decoration and construction methods which lends itself to an Irish style. The dresser was often built in situ, and when constructed it sometimes left its owner wondering, how it would ever be removed from the house if the need arose! One of the unique structural features of the dresser



and teak used in the construction of much period furniture.

The Sugan Chair.

The sugan chair, (Fig. 19), was at first an exercise in the use of indigenous materials. The characteristic roughness of the

Fig. 19. Sugan Chair.



Fig. 20. Winding straw to form the Sughan, for the seat of the chair.

chair from the particular materials, together with its place in the cottage dwelling, portrays a thorough vernacular design, based on indigenous materials and the application of such. Fig. 20, shows the straw being twisted into a Sughan, to form the seat base. The Sughan chair did not require the fine structure of the early Period furniture. It didn't require fine dry wood for its

construction, but rather adapted to what was available. The Sughan chair demonstrates an ability to establish a style through the use of available materials, synonymous with the social and economic times of its creator. The Sughan chair has a style which reflects its origin. Together with the Irish dresser, the Settle Bed, and the Hedge chair it can be considered Irish, as opposed to being part of a European vernacular style and origin.

Restrained decoration, a lack of indigenous hardwoods, reliance on imported softwood, low social standing and the absence of a native aristocracy, contributed to the development of Irish vernacular furniture which reflects native Irish characteristics.

The rural furniture maker in Ireland, often just a household member, was not concerned with the promotion of national ideas through their furniture. They were rather in the business of producing basic furniture to fulfil the basic needs of the rural community. In providing for the mass community the style associated with that, good or bad by today's standards, is a reflection of an Irish style furniture.

Nineteenth century furniture of the farmhouse, cottage dwelling and the peasant dwelling is the only truly Irish furniture. It arises from a native and local tradition of design, craftsmanship and functional requirement.

(Clive Curtis Nunn, 1971.)

Furniture manufacture in Ireland was a limited organisation, and still is today albeit to a lesser extent.

To sum up the present situation of people designing and making furniture in wood here: there were hardly any ten years ago and relatively few now.

(Mc Crum, S. 1991. Pg. 9.)

Our vernacular style has not developed in similar fashion to European countries. The English Windsor chair, for example, gained sophistication and recognition as it developed. The availability of quality hardwoods was inherent to its development. It is understood that a number of factors contributed to the lack of development displayed by Irish vernacular furniture, but primarily the lack of quality timber was detrimental. While Irish vernacular furniture remains undeveloped it is evident that it is a source of inspiration for contemporary designers. A style of furniture with such embodiment of Irishness, as the Vernacular furniture of Ireland, must hold potential inspiration for future designs, pertaining to an Irish style.

Chapter 3.

Design awareness and appreciation in Ireland.

That an Irish design style never developed can partly be attributed to the fact that, Ireland as a free state nation did not exist until 1922. The true characteristics of Irish life were sheltered and contained by the English, through their lack of incentive to aid Ireland's industrial development. The popularity of Period furniture among Irish craftsmen further portrays the oppression and frustration felt by the Irish, under British rule. Following the infant years of the free state, little development in design took place due to the effects of civil and World Wars, and furthermore poverty still remained evident. Any hopes of design development in Ireland in an indigenous fashion, were dashed after the Second World War. Design development in Ireland especially in the furniture industry, would have been best served through the development of craft industry. The availability of materials lending themselves to mass production, hindered the development of craft industry and hence the development of Irish furniture design. These materials were far from original yet they appeared so to the majority Irish public. Products, so far out of reach in recent times, were now available to the mass population. The sheer mass availability of these products rendered them cheap, though quickly out of date. These seemingly 'new' products, styles and forms gave a previously oppressed lifestyle, an air of affluence. Such products, styles and forms were accepted without question, and traditional values were quite easily and quickly forgotten in the process.

Excitement, glamour, Rock 'n' Roll and fashion revelled into the Sixties. All such factors contributed to providing a life of unquestionable superiority to that of traditional life. By the early '70s the frenzied excitement that captured the '60s began to surrender. People began to question their lifestyle, in an effort to establish some identity. This attempt to establish an identity was anticipated at an earlier stage by the Irish Government. Yet Ireland progressed through the '50s, '60s, '70s and

'80s without a recognised development of lasting consequence in the field of Irish design. This is why the Irish nation is left floundering in search of an identity, to which it can relate.

An attempt to initiate the development of an 'Irish style' in design, was undertaken by the government in 1961. The obvious need for development in industry in general, was targeted by the Government through the medium of design. The development of industry was essential, given the anticipated entry to the then termed, E. E. C.. The invitation to five Scandinavian designers to assess our design ethics, was at the time undeniably necessary. The responsibility to coordinate the assessment was granted to Coras Trachalta and they organised the assessment, which resulted in a concise report in April of 1961. The Scandinavians suggested that Irish design should rely on tradition, but furthermore, at the time of the report, the most enterprising industries were those which successfully interpreted Irish traditions. It all seems quite obvious really, the best results are most likely achieved from, doing what you know best but furthermore, doing it well.

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 tradition and our whole way of living.

(Scandinavian Report, 1961, Pg. xi)

Highlighted in the report was the development of Irish culture in the direction of literature, theatre and the spoken word ; rather than the creation and development of the visual arts, by hand or machine. This point reinforces the notion as to why, a design style has not developed in Ireland, which was referenced in chapter two. Italy, Germany and Spain all boast a national style of design today, which compete on a European level. The 'European style' often referred to in furniture design is, the dominant national style, which competes for recognition on the European circuit. The importance of a recognised coherent style is evident. Italian design is probably the powerhouse of western design. Emerging from World War Two in bad shape, Italy put design to the fore, and sought development, through the medium of design. The resulting success and

popularity of Italian design is now evident.

Design and innovation in Ireland took a secondary role in Irish life as literature and the spoken word remained dominant. This resulted in a lack of respect for designers and hence the obvious knock-on effect of quelling any design development.

We gained a strong impression in many 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 frivolous addition to the staff, rather than having the status, of any member of the management team.

(Scandinavian report, 1961. Pg 3)

In an age of high competition and market strategy, innovation is quite often considered a waste of time and more importantly to industry, a waste of capital investment. Embodied in this notion is the safest design policy for Irish industry, which is to imitate apparently successful designs. In consuming products manufactured under such principals, the Irish retailer and consumer may be considered as being subconsciously encouraging this notion. Furthermore, this idea relates back to the early ages when Period Furniture, dominated the furniture design industry in Ireland. No development of Irish furniture took place



then, and it is unlikely that with today's policy on design, any major development in Irish design will occur in the near future. While **imitation** is accepted as **design** in Ireland a style of Irish descent will never evolve. The imported product will always determine our style. This cannot and should not be allowed to happen. The Allied Irish Bank, 1992 Export Company of the Year award, was awarded to a furniture manufacture in county Monaghan, manufacturing such pieces as that in Fig. 21. The only merit one can attribute to this company to deem it deserving of this award, is that it contributed to increasing export trade

Fig. 21. Three Corner Cabinet.

figures and also in keeping the balance of trade surplus up, as enjoyed by Ireland over the past number of years. The company produces 90% of its furniture for the English market, yet no attempt is made to promote design and innovation in the produce. Its fair to assess that such an award, given the nature of the sponsor, does not take into account design, innovation or craftsmanship. More likely the company's annual turnover, is the deciding factor in judging the award.

The official opening of Kilkenny Design Workshops in 1965, by the then Minister for industry Mr P.J. Hillary, aimed to combat the lack of respect for designers in Ireland and furthermore, aimed to promote development in Irish industry. The work of this organisation was at the time much acclaimed but "KDW may in retrospect be criticised, for failing to appreciate that it is by leading a nation's industry from the front rather than pushing it from behind, that best results are likely to be achieved." (Marchant, N. 1985. Pg 22).

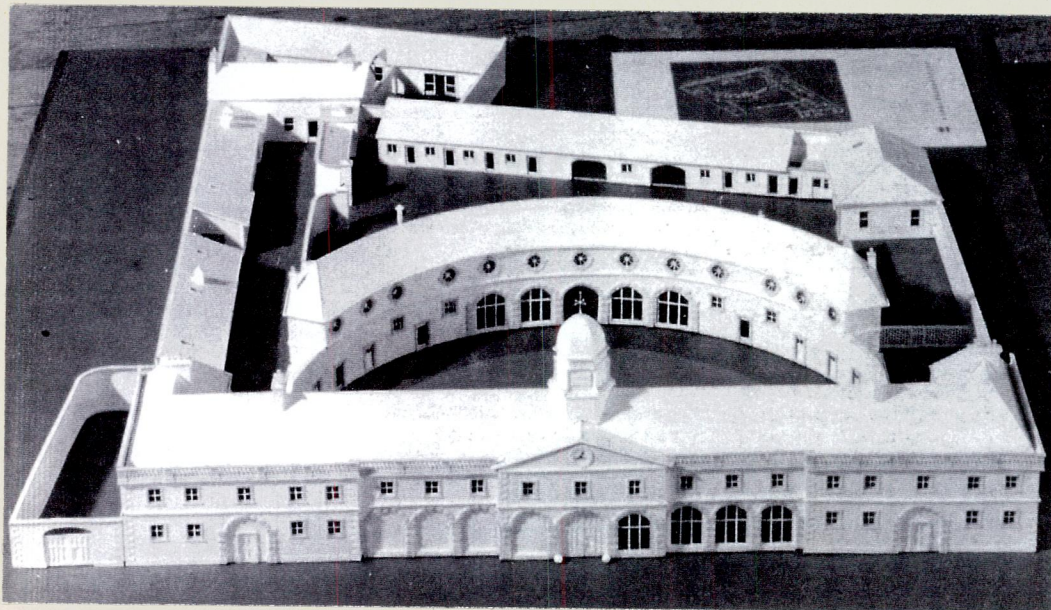


Fig. 22. Scale Model representation of KDW.

Kilkenny Design Workshops, represented in Fig. 22, sought to develop or surpass, the handicraft industry in Ireland. It seemed that the handicraft industry lacked the coherence and ability, to develop into an industry capable of semi-mass or batch production. In terms of wood products designed and manufactured by KDW, cheese boards, salad

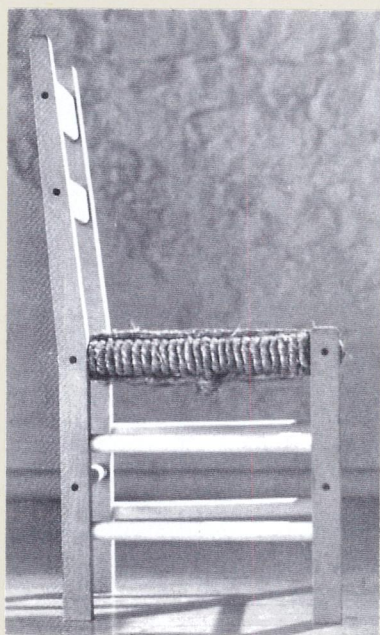


Fig. 23. Adaptation of the Traditional Sughan Chair.

bowls, toys, wooden figures and some pieces of furniture, indicated in Fig. 23, were all produced. The use of indigenous materials was inherent to the design of their pieces. The echo of the advocate of the Irish Builder in chapter one, is now ringing loudly. The use of native materials was, in 1882, and again in 1965 considered of paramount importance, in the development of Irish design. Much of KDW woodware relied heavily on a production method with a strong tradition in Ireland, that of wood turning.

Woodturnery is one of the most ancient of all woodworking crafts, dating back to ancient Egyptian times. It involves the design and creation of a wide range of functional, ornate and artistic objects in solid natural wood. Indigenous woods, such as bog oak, were used by KDW in the production of their products. Despite that, wood obtained from hedgrows, bog lands or demolition sites, such as that in Fig. 24, can be utilised by the woodturner. The reawakening of interest in this craft is a positive indication of its worth, but furthermore it's an indication of the popularity of its produce among the Irish consumer. In 1982 the Irish



Fig. 24. Stump of Yew Tree, Reclaimed from Firewood.

Woodturners Guild was formed with an aim to promote and develop design in wood, but also to show off the natural beauty of wood. Woodturned products highlight the potential when these two factors combine, under the craft of woodturnery.

Under pressure from the Government, KDW was forced to prove its worth in Irish industry. Under financial difficulties at the time, the organisation could not support itself, and the closure of an organisation, inherent to the development of Irish design, was evident. The philosophy at KDW to educate people in their relative fields proved to be counter productive for itself, in that many of its employees left the organisation to set up their own companies.



Fig. 25. Kilkenney Design Shop, Dublin.

The popularity enjoyed by KDW was significant and it is demonstrated today by the fact that, their two Irish shops are still trading under the name of Kilkenney Design; despite the change of ownership to Blarney Woollen Mills. The retention of the label Kilkenney Design is significant in that, it must be recognised as a symbol of quality, in design and manufacture. The fact that the products in these shops are produced by craft based industries around Ireland, implies the appreciation of such produce. The development of a label or name such as that of KDW, contributes to enlightening the public on matters of design, through the produce of quality goods, being made widely available to which the Irish consumer can relate.

Let us consider the effort it takes to develop a label such as that of KDW. Quality, style, and function surly contribute, but value for money, appreciation of materials, understanding of origin and establishing an identity with the product, either consciously or subconsciously influences our choice, our evaluation of a product. It is with this in mind that I refer back to one of the points arising out of Jan Markeys Lecture in Trinity

College Dublin, mid - November 1992.

Native hardwood needs to be made available throughout the school system. Education about the hardwood industry needs to be made available to our schools in order to foster pride and appreciation in Irish grown hardwood, design and manufacture. "

The appreciation of materials combined with an understanding of origin, climaxing in being able to identify with a product, was further highlighted in the Scandinavian design report:

The Irish schoolchild is exposed in a much lesser degree to drawing and the manipulation of materials than his/her Scandinavian counterpart.

The idea that the Irish schoolchild is exposed in a much lesser degree to drawing and the manipulation of materials is evident throughout our education system. Apart from the Wood Technology

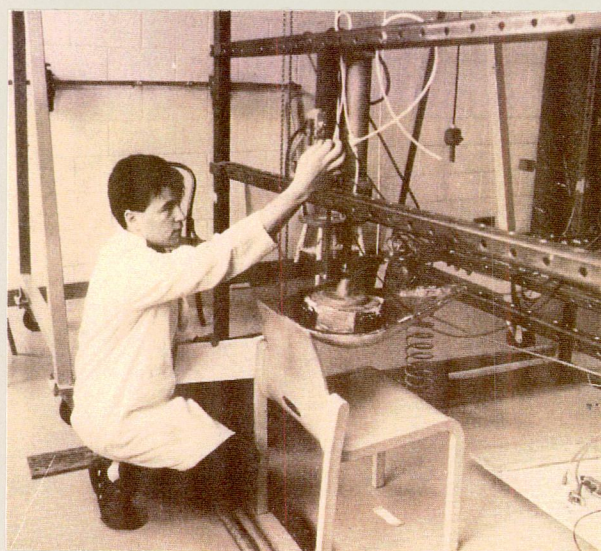


Fig. 26. Furniture Testing, Wood Technology Centre.

Centre, in the University of Limerick, and the School of Fine Woodwork, in Letterfrack county Galway, Ireland boasts no major educational facility for furniture designers. Much of the work at The Wood Technology Centre evolves around researching and testing, (Fig. 26), the

qualities of native wood. The training of secondary school woodwork teachers is also carried out here. Irelands future designers are forced abroad to seek recognised education in furniture design. While abroad, skills may develop but the original inspiration for potential

Centre, in the University of Limerick, and the School of Fine Woodwork, in Letterfrack county Galway, Ireland boasts no major educational facility for furniture designers. Much of the work at The Wood Technology Centre evolves around researching and testing, (Fig. 26), the



Fig. 27. Letterfrack Chair. Native Beech.

Irish products may be lost, or quelled by foreign influences. The School of Fine Woodwork in Letterfrack educates individuals in the area of furniture design and manufacture. This college has a unique capability afforded to it by its location. It allows potential Irish furniture designers to work with native materials in a native environment, displayed in the design and manufacture of the Letterfrack chair. (Fig. 27)

It is our aim to establish a centre in Letterfrack which will be able to contribute to the development of modern Irish furniture industry. For preference we use home grown timbers; it's getting easier to get them every year. 80% of the work we do is now with home grown timber. "

(Fitzgearld, M. 26/1/'93. Pg. 28.)

Design awareness and appreciation in Ireland in on the increase. Design appreciation can be encouraged given proper attention in our education system, starting at primary school level, and carried right through to post graduate education. The development of Irish furniture will be influenced by public appreciation. The potential to produce quality furniture pertaining to the Irish nation, is apparent in Ireland. When this produce is made available to an informed and educated public appreciation will follow, and so too will development in the Irish furniture industry.

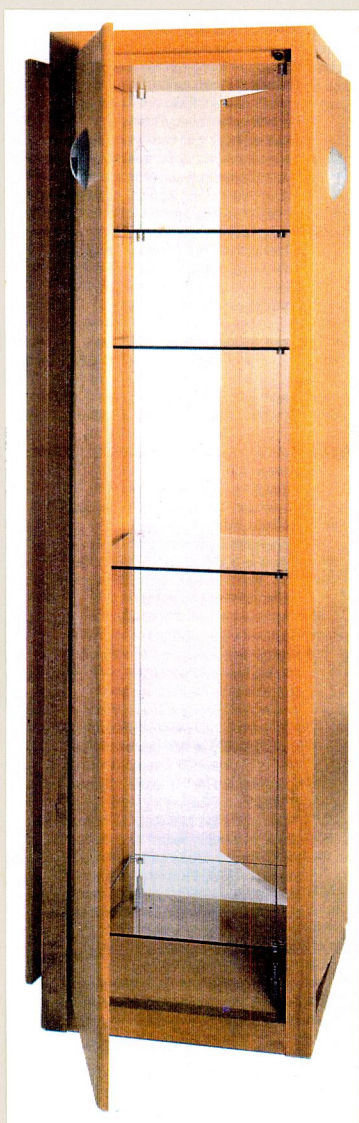
Chapter 4.

Contemporary Irish Designers. Their Work, and Influences

"A mass of poorly designed products hide behind the facade, of a small number of well designed items."

(Dublin Stationary Office, 1973. Pg 12.)

Preliminary research carried out by the Dublin Stationary office for the 1973 report on Irish furniture, showed that the physiology of the furniture industry in Ireland differed from other furniture industry structures, such as that in Italy, Denmark or Belgium. On the continent a high manufacture quality, good design execution, and a definite national style, evolved from a large number of firms employing thirty to forty people, rather than a few firms employing many people. Such a physiology highlights the importance of the designer in the furniture industry, as it



is inevitable that at least one designer, will be employed by each firm. This provides scope for a diversification of design within a national scene. For small firms design quality and a determination to succeed, are more important than export trade figures. This attitude is both admirable and rewarding. In Scandinavia and Italy such an approach to furniture design has resulted in aiding the development of a national style or idiom, which is representative of its origin.

When I spoke with Mr Klimmek, designer of Fig. 28, about his furniture I asked his opinion on the 'Irishness' of his pieces, he believed that ones environment influences ones work and had the following to add;

"I am sure you will find that there are as

Fig. 28. Free Standing Cabinet. Irish Cherry and Oak.

many approaches and philosophies, as there are designers and furniture makers, which can only help to create interest and diversity.'

(Klimmek, K. Dublin, 4/12/'93.)

This is certainly true as its apparent among furniture industries in other European countries. The physiology of the Irish furniture industry is slowly changing. There is a continuous swing towards craft based industry for a number of reasons including, improved design execution, economic sense and ensuring a high quality of manufacture. This change in the industry sector in Ireland is apparent, in that four of the leading furniture designers in Ireland, work from a craftbased workshop. Mr Leslie Reed from the Crafts Council of Ireland mentions that it is the unwillingness of the craft companies to expand that proves beneficial to the sector.

(Irish Times. 25/1/'93. Pg 18.)

This unwillingness to expand, results in a development of the craft industry. The physiology of the furniture industry in Ireland is slowly following that of its European counterparts. The diversification of design associated with such a physiology is already displayed by designers in Ireland today.

Among the leading furniture designers in Ireland today are Mr Michael Bell, Mr Knut Klimmek, Mr Eric Pearce and Mr Clive Nunn. They each poses a personal style, yet unlike Italian or Danish furniture, the designers do not combine, in an effort to promote their work collectively as 'Irish furniture'. The design style of the individual designers, are as far apart as the designers appear on the map of Ireland. It's true for Mr Klimmek, that environment influences design and also the more designers that exists the greater the interest and diversity:

"My designs I feel tend to originate from the interplay of shapes and volumes, the material in which they are to be executed (often timber) is a secondary choice.

(Klimmek, K. Dublin. 4/12/'92.)

"Through my pieces, I hope to restore dignity to timber

destined to have its natural beauty forever lost. By using this wood, I am simply offering others a chance to enjoy some of the fascinating shapes and textures nature creates.

(Bell, M. Laois. 11/1/'93.)

The diversity in design is apparent, yet so too is the lack of coherence within our furniture industry. This is displayed by the fact that, Ireland does not have a recognised style of furniture, to compete with that of our dominant European counterparts.



Fig. 29. "Wee Brian." 3 Legged stool By Mr Michael Bell.



Fig. 30. Hall Table, By Mr Michael Bell.

Mr Michael Bell has a natural love for wood that is displayed in his produce. (Figs. 29 & 30) His recent exhibition at the Cologne furniture fair, January 1992, attracted much attention from German and Japanese bodies. He portrays a simplicity in his furniture, which is derived from the use of native hardwood. Such promotion, as Mr Bell initiated in Cologne for Irish furniture, can only prove beneficial to the furniture industry. Indeed such promotion will instill pride in the produce of Mr Bell. A more coherent approach bringing together furniture designer/makers within Ireland, would prove even more beneficial.

Eric Pearce's excellence as a designer/maker is evident in the products he has designed. His portfolio includes, eighteen Oak tables for the dining hall, in Trinity College Dublin, the reception area of the Crafts Council of Ireland Headquarters, and a collection of tables for the Taoiseach apartments in the Government buildings in Dublin, (Fig. 31.), among many others. Eric Pearce has a natural ability to make furniture



Fig. 31. Circular Oak Dining Table, with radial cut, Oak veneer top.

that functions, while laying bare the natural beauty of the wood, incorporating elements such as the grain, the knots and the texture of the material. Inherent to the design of one of the tables manufactured for the latter project, is the ripple grain formation of sycamore wood, explained in

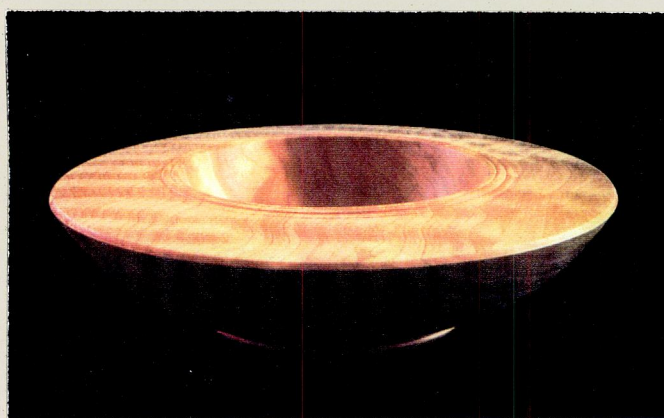


Fig. 32. Turned Bowl. Fiddle Back Sycamore.

chapter 1, and further displayed in Fig. 32. Mr Pearces work, based on the use of native Irish hardwoods has become increasingly recognised in both the public and private sector. The use of native hardwood is inher-

ent to the design and manufacture of Irish furniture, and it is inherent to the development of this sector.

Mr Clive Nunn has been involved in Irish furniture for over twenty five years. His recent work includes, a reception desk manufactured in steel and Kilkenny limestone for, 'The Mill, Post Production House' in London; bar and bar fittings for the 'Merrion Inn', Dublin, (fig. 33.) and the reception and controls desk for the 'Northern Ireland Tourist Board Offices', in Naussa Street, Dublin. In the 1970s his concern was largely



Fig. 33. Bar and Bar Fittings, Irish Cherrywood.

profound knowledge of vernacular furniture can be detected in some of his more modern pieces. (Fig. 33.)

Some artistic flair shown by certain designers has been lost in the quest for commercial success. This artistic flair, previously lost by designers, is now utilised by woodturners and is ironically developing into a commercial success. In some instances artistic flair has been incorporated



Fig. 34. Stump of Yew, marked out for working.

with Irish Country furniture and his interest in these finite artifacts led to him being instrumental in forming the 'Irish Country Furniture Society', in 1979. Its Mr Nunns preferred use of indigenous materials coupled with his skills alongside his awareness of the historical influences that sets him apart as a peculiarly Irish designer. Hints of his

with functional products producing exciting results. Liam o Neill, Peter Sweetman and Brother Ciaran Forbes are among the best-known woodturners in Ireland today. Mr O Neill was instrumental in the organisation of the first national seminar in the craft of woodturning, and

subsequently became the first secretary of the Irish Woodturners Guild. Such is the nature of the craft that it allows for the very best to be achieved from any reasonable piece of wood. Unlike most furniture designer/makers, the woodturner crafts his produce from the very raw state of the material, demonstrated in Fig. 34, and therefore can maximise the potential of any piece of wood. A collection of woods such as that in Fig. 35, expands the library of colours, textures and features and with it expands the possibilities for design.



Fig. 35.
Yew, Ash,
Beech, Oak,
Plum, Hazel,
Elm.
All collected for
use, previously
destined for fire
wood.



Fig. 36.
Spalted
Beech Bowl.
Turned by
Brother
Ciaran
Forbes.



Fig. 37. Burl & Spalted Elm..

quantities of timber useful to his/her trade, is highly beneficial to the development of woodturnery. Wood such as that in Fig. 35 was collected by the woodturner over a period of time. It would not prove economically viable for saw millers to collect isolated quantities of timber to convert and make it available to furniture designers and the joinery industry. This is why a lack of quality native hardwood, in ready to use form is not available.

It is apparent in the area of furniture design, that Ireland no longer suffers a "lack of sophistication in matters of design", as reported by the Scandinavians in 1961. With a coherent approach from the furniture designer/makers in Ireland, Ireland has the potential in both design and manufacture to develop its furniture industry. With this development it is possible to establish a national style, under which Irish furniture can compete for recognition on an international design level.

Features such as burl and spalting can be fully exploited and often form an integral part of the finished product. Brother Ciaran Forbes produced some pieces to complement the furniture of Mr Pearce for the Taoiseach apartments. The use of spalting and burl is highly displayed in some of his produce. (Figs. 36 & 37). The woodturners ability to cite and possess isolated

Conclusion.

The Irish furniture industry holds exciting potential, as yet unexploited. For many years in Ireland there was a lack of design appreciation and furthermore a lack of available, native raw materials. There is a growing knowledge among Irish designer/makers about utilising indigenous materials to their utmost potential. In order for the industry to develop, and for the potential to be realised certain points should be addressed, the first highlighted by Eoin Neeson.

A major problem with which forestry has to contend with is a general view among land owners, based on the view that trees take a long time to grow, and unlike farm crops gives no quick return, leading to the conclusion that forestry doesn't pay.

(Neeson, E. 1991. Pg 117.)

Despite this general apathy among land owners developments in Irish forestry have been made, although primarily in the conifer area. Further plans are afoot to develop the hardwood industry, following the World Summit on the environment. The Irish report detailing plans to improve the environment, indicated that 30,000 hectares of forestry will be planted in 1993, with a specific interest in the development of national hardwoods.

The diversification of species in Ireland is highlighted in the work of Irish woodturners. Woodturners through their own initiative, have access to a limited supply, of a broad range of timbers, which is adequate for their productions. The proper management of existing resources together with the implementation of such plans, arising out of the World Summit, is vital for Irish forestry and to ensuring a continuous quality supply of raw material. The availability of this material is inherent to the development of Irish furniture. To combat any apathy among land owners and ensure the development of Irish forestry the Government has reviewed and updated its grant schemes.¹

The lack of quality wood for design was apparent in the vernacular furniture of Ireland; so apparent in fact, that it became part of a recognised

1. Coillte annual report, 1992.

style. Irish vernacular furniture had a definite style of its own. It did not conform to being a part of a European vernacular style. This furniture is at present the only true Irish furniture, despite the fact that it was never developed to a finished stage. The level of contribution that social and economic conditions had on the design of Irish vernacular furniture is reflected in the pieces, therefore a sense of Irishness is portrayed within



Fig. 38. Dresser by Clive Nunn.

the vernacular style. The vernacular tradition in Ireland, is an important source of inspiration for the modern Irish designer. The vernacular tradition conveys the plight of a previous generation, and a sense of Irishness is encompassed within such pieces as the Hedge Chair or the Irish Dresser. Clive Nunn found inspiration in the latter object, for some of his earlier work. (Fig. 38.) In the work of Mr Pearce (Fig 39) at the Government buildings it was reported that ;

"Each of these pieces has been motivated, by a wish to show up the special nature of different well known native hardwood, and by a growing interest in the vernacular forms of country furniture, where simple equals best".

(Bowe, N.G. 1991. Pg 7)

The exciting possibilities of such an approach, is evident in the work of Mr Pearce. There is a growing enthusiasm and skill in the furniture design industry in Ireland, which is evident among the contemporary



*Fig. 39.
Solid Ash table,
with ash laminated
underrail.*

furniture makers and woodturners. It is important that our education system should place extra emphasis on practical subjects, to afford the work of such craftsmen the appreciation it deserves. Such efforts were made with the introduction of the Junior Cert to second level education in Ireland. This has put extra emphasis on practical subjects, including woodwork. The call from Jan Markey to make native hardwoods available throughout our school system, in order to foster pride in the hardwood design and manufacture industry, may well seek example from neighbouring England. The schools there are in abundant supply of quality native hardwoods allocated from the off-cuts of large saw mills, producing timber for the furniture and joinery industry.

The potential of Irish hardwoods, is evident in the work of contemporary Irish furniture. The development of this industry results in the appreciation of Irish hardwoods, reflected in the recent advocate to plant and develop our hardwood resources. It is a symbiotic relationship, where the development of one industry results in the initiation, to develop a second industry, on which the first relies.

Given the growing need, and the general concern for hardwood in Ireland, it is inevitable that good management will ensure the development of the hardwood industry in Ireland. Such development

would render quality native hardwoods, readily available to furniture designer/makers. Utilising their growing skill and craftsmanship to manipulate the available materials, while pertaining to a vernacular tradition, furniture designer/makers may produce quality furniture, for an informed public to consume.

Under these highly possible conditions I will conclude: that yes, Irish furniture design is a developing industry.

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