National College Of Art and Design

Craft (Metalwork)

Irelands past and present furniture.

By

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And Complementary Studies In Candidacy For The Degree Of
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INTRODUCTION

Over the past fifty years of furniture design, people seemed to reject the art of hand-crafted pieces. People resorted to buying the industrial products which seemed to be more appealing without taking quality and originality in consideration. Traditional craft techniques no longer seemed important or exciting to them, and as a result of this the furniture became dull, bland and purely functional.

Furniture in the 'Rural' houses of Ireland in the nineteenth century were merely pieces of equipment to fulfil the household and utilitarian purposes. These houses which contained hand-crafted furniture usually made by their occupiers, were bursting with originality and character which is something that the designs from the 60's and 70's were lacking desperately in. Their creativeness and their craftsmanship produced magnificent forms which obviously were successful as we can see in the revival of the 'Traditional Irish Vernacular' designs in the work of Irish furniture designers today. Although functionality dominated the design of most Irish country furniture the simplicity of it was very effective. . As they were limited to the choice of materials, craftsmen took full advantage to bring out materials natural beauty.

In the 60s, 70s and early 80s the natural beauty of the 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 or 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.

Although Irish Craft Manufactures have had a back seat drive for many years in the Irish Manufacturing Industry, an increase in craft based industry has been apparent over the past five years. It seems that attitudes in Ireland are changing and this is reflected on the increase in craft industry. With this change in

Industry, partially due to the 'Kilkenny Design Workshops'. Moreover the change in manufacturing, a development of native timber would prove beneficial to the development of furniture design in Ireland.

Todays craftspeople such as Micheal Bell, Eric Conner and Paul Berg who work mainly in native materials, are constantly creating new and exciting styles in their furniture today. Eric Connor resorts to the traditional styles of the vernacular and rural furniture of the nineteenth century. Connor who focuses in on chairs, has revived the country style in a more contemporary form.
Micheal Bell draws his inspirations from the natural structure and form of wood and creates wonderful pieces of furniture with the impression of weather beaten and storm-wracked effects.
Paul Berg creates furniture which draws its inspiration form mythology, sea creatures, dream images and historical events. The past represents stability to us and our artists have brought back personality back into our homes. Berg brings mythology and magical tribal elements into the interior. His type of furniture is as multifunctional as the mass-produced Victorian replicas which can still be found in many of our shops today. Its functions and manifestations are in many ways similar, and although attitudes of design may have differed, it certainly has become a little bit more adventurous than the mass-produced. The emphasis on hand-crafted pieces have become much more serious and consumers are beginning to acquire furniture that expresses artist ability, individual personality and a longer life.

The Furniture which I have given most attention, the rural vernacular and Irelands more recent designs, are inevitably a very small selection. They have been chosen for a combination of their styles and qualities and their significance in the nineteenth and twentieth century to our ancestors. Some are chosen as examples of characteristic rural making, they have not been chosen for the quality of decoration as most of the amusing designs are simple and ingenuous. I think that the purely structural qualities which appeal most to me will

proclaim themselves clearly enough through the illustrations and photographs which I have selected.

The unhappily high proportion of the vernacular furniture illustrated in this thesis have either disappeared or have been mutilated or thrown out e.g. the straw chair.
When a piece of historical furniture has been threatened or destroyed, the least we can do for it is to record its qualities, or even restore its qualities which is what the Ulster Folk Museum has done. There are times when the reaccurance of old pieces furniture and delph can be found when digging the garden etc. which usually mystifies us and leaves us inquisitive of, by whom was it used by, or how old could it be. At the Ulster Museum it gives us the opportunity to investigate.

It is important that the scope of this thesis must exclude the mass produced range of today, which is well-known, and place extra emphasis on what the Irish craftsmen produced in the past and what is forthcoming in the near future.

CHAPTER ONE

Section 'A'

Our native design in the nineteenth
and early twentieth century,
and how our ancestors lived.

Section 'B'

Furniture in the 'Great Houses' in Ireland.

The last twenty-five years has seen profound changes in the traditional patterns of Irish rural life. For more than a century following the great famine of the 1840's the farmhouse and cottages of the Irish Countryside, like the lifestyle of their inhabitants, remains intact and undisturbed. With progress, however, has come the abandonment of the old houses, and the consequent of dispersal and destruction of that remarkable body of domestic appointments that furnished rural dwellings throughout Ireland, termed collectively 'Irish Country Furniture'.

Today, current enthusiasm for 'Country Pine' has made the articles themselves familiar: storage-chest, dressers, cupboards, tables, chairs, beds and benches nearly always of pine, practical in form and durable in construction, they may readily be identified as belonging to that tradition of vernacular furniture that once flourished in Britain and mainland Europe and across Canada and north eastern states of America. Irish Country Furniture is of more recent origin than its counterparts. Since elsewhere the making of vernacular furniture has been a specialised aspect of the general woodworking skills of peasant craftsmen for centuries. In Ireland the eighteenth century was well advanced before any equivalent context may be said to have exist at all.

From the coming of the Normans until the Williamite settlement of 1690, the state of Ireland had been turbulent, to say the least, and a dispossessed and landless peasantry remained permanently impoverished. Such conditions taken together with the whole destructions of native forests and woodlands, precluded the development of vernacular furniture tradition. The basis for such, had circumstances been more favourable, did in fact exist in the furnished houses of the English and continental settlers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, who brought to Ireland if not furniture itself, certainly the habits of its use and construction. Nothing of theirs has survived to prove the point precursors of the dressers, chest and chairs we know today.

The dramatic rise in population which proceeded the great famine in the 1840s made its effects even more devastating. Although there had been many periods of famine throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries due to crop failure , this one was especially devastating because it endured for several successive years. It effected every county in Ireland to some extent, but the west and south west suffered particularly bad. The reason for the famine was a fungal growth which caused the potatoes, the staple diet of the majority of the population, to root in the ground. Starvation and disease on a precedented scale resulted. Over two million people either emigrated or died. In the face of such hardship it is hardly surprising that material pocessions lost their significance as valuable pieces of furniture was either exchanged for food or used as firewood to keep the fire going as this was their only means of heat.

Two notable styles of furniture prevailed in Ireland throughout the nineteenth and early Twentieth century were the Period and the rural Irish vernacular furniture. Much of Ireland's designs in the nineteenth century were not influenced by fashion nor by political climate but rather the fundamental shortage of timber which inevitably affected the rural poor above all.
It was a result of this absence of wood that invited the 'Sugan chair', the straw and the hedge. People had to resort to using other alternatives such as straw, willow, rush and even turf, which were in greater abundance.

In Ireland the vernacular style consisted mainly on reproduced designs from England adorned with nationalist symbols.

From ancient times the domestic life of the Irish peasantry centred round the hearth. In poor homes the fire was the principal source of light as well as warmth; the family cooked on it, ate round it, and at night with friends and neighbours drew close to it for music, story and talk. While in England and elsewhere the table from the late seventeenth century supplanted the hearth as the domestic gathering point, even in the homes of poor labourers, visitors of Ireland in the late eighteenth century remarked on the habit of the peasantry of spending long hours around the fire, seated on logs, flat stones, even large sods of turf. There was never any

mention of chairs, except to the occasional mention to the 'creepie' (fig 1) a rough stool, usually three legged, and involving no more than a flat log raised some inches off the floor on three or four pegs.

A hundred years later, domestic habits were unaltered, the fireplace remained the centre of social life, yet in peasant homes throughout the country were found a range primitive chairs in styles that have remained unchanged until recent times. The most original and sentimental chair in which I discovered during my visits to the Ulster Folk Museum, Cultra, was the 'nursing chair', (fig 2). This short-legged and half moon seat chair was designed especially for mothers to sit on while nursing their babies and while rocking the cradle. This was usually accompanied with the 'Windsor chair' which was so much the common furniture of cottages in these remote and picturesque areas, and its popularity got stronger as it was cheap and readily obtained; it was one of the earliest types of furniture to be mass-produced and widely distributed from a single centre.

Much of the rural furniture was designed to accommodate spontaneous gatherings. Stools, chairs, tables and many other everyday objects were designed to be hung on the walls as the floor had to be cleared quite quickly for whatever may occur. Because of their Celtic origins, a love of music and dance flowed through their veins. Fiddle, concertina and Melodeon music filled the low ceiling cabins and cottages, while the people beat out the rhythm of their hearts in the set-dancing on the stone floors.

Since the fire was at floor-level, chairs needed to be low, like a stool. As has been mentioned, no furniture making centre existed in rural Ireland, so chairs had either to be individually made by a craftsman, the expense of which would have been prohibitive for the poor, or else made by the householder form whatever material was available as driftwood or in the hedgerows. Thus many of these chairs have a homemade look, but, as with other household objects which the peasant might make, are none the less sturdy and serviceable for that.

(fig 2) 'The Nursing chair'

(fig 1) The 'Creepie'

THE SUGAN CHAIR

The sugan chair (fig. 3) was first an exercise in the use of indigenous materials.The lack of timber encouraged the use of the sugan for a seat and the traditional Irish weave of twisted oat straw rope, which lent its name to the sugan chair.

Unlike the English rush chair (fig. 4) its seat was finished with a front to back weaving, broadening slightly towards the wider front. The Ash-frame work was constructed in a style suited to this thick weaving, with its high front legs which was created for the uneven floors. The chair frame would have been constructed while the wood was unseasoned, so after the rope had been fitted it was left to dry beside the fire making the frame-work shrink aswell as the sugan. Soon afterwards the sugan would settle and become matted and shiny with use.

The sugan chair has a style which reflects its origin, together with the 'Irish Dresser', the settle bed and the Hedge chair. It can be quickly recognised as one of Irelands peasantry vernacular pieces with its personal style, as it was much more rustic than the English rope chair.

(fig4) The English rush chair

The 'Straw Chair'

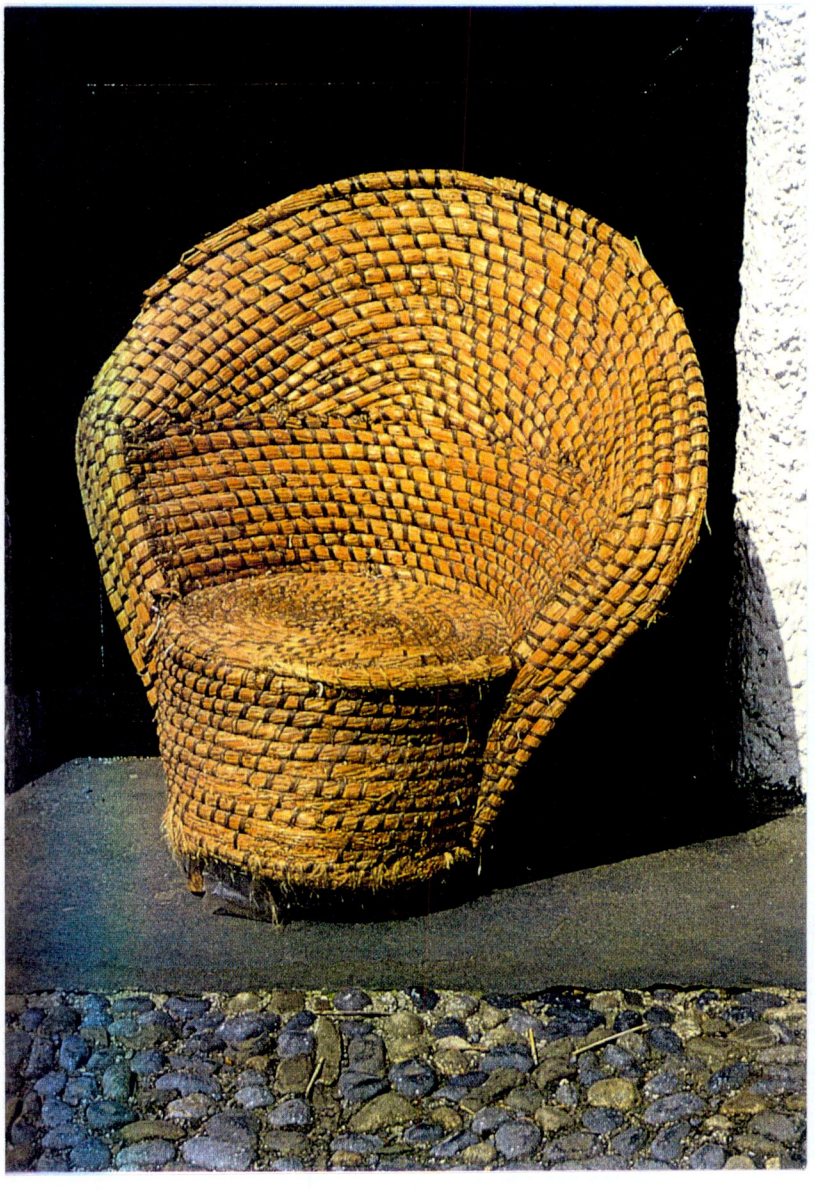
The Straw chair (fig 5) was once a common sight in small farm houses, but unfortunately it has become extremely rare. In the 1830s straw was used for making quite a number of household items such as cradles, seed baskets, curtains and sometimes doors. As straw was an easily commanded material it was even fashioned into chimney pots but its main use was for making chairs and stools which was also known as Shaystogs and bosses. It is obvious that the shortage of timber was the derival of this technique of plaiting straw. There use

(fig 3) The Sugan chair

of straw was amazing, any technical problems that may occured in the construction of the chair such as becoming flimsy through use. This was cleverly repaired by stuffing them with packed straw in order for them to gain strength and as they avoided using timber. Straw chairs had seemingly been more popular in Irelands midlands rather than the coast. Could the reason be that most coastal counties had local ports and more access to imported materials?
Although the remaining few that can be found are in coastal areas such as Donegal but there wooden frames may also explain their existence. Most counties had their own name for the straw chairs and stools, in Cork and Kerry they referred to it as the saoitin and saoisteog and the suistins in Donegal. These words derived originally from the Irish language meaning a bench or a seat. Straw was used extensively for making mats for hedge schools. The childrens mats or better known as a 'hassock' which looked like a round thick mat were usually plaited by their parents. You can still find some of these hassocks today which you would recognise as rectangular door mats and come across quite a few by visiting old local cottages around the coast of Down.

When we use the word straw, this wasn't always the case. When creating these pieces, the makers would sometimes interpret turf and sometimes blackberry briers and rushes, but straw had a winning advantage over these as it was much longer in order to make a chair. Rushes and briers were more suitable for making stools.

Straw seating was commonly used all over Ireland within living memory. Many people can still remember how these straw bosses and armchairs were favourite fireside seats, although they might seem dangerously inflammable by todays standards. The fragile nature of their construction has resulted in disappearance. Straw deteriorates quickly when allowed to get damp aswell as being inflammable and prone to be mutilated by rats and other vermin. It is ironic that the very fact that their were so common has also contributed to their distruction. People disgarded them as cheap and unimportant pieces of furniture and not realising their importants in the future. Because straw chairs were mainly owned by small local houses who could not afford timber, they were probably delighted to see timber furniture and the back end of straw.



(fig 5) The Straw Chair

England and Wales techniques of coiling straw and binding it together was known as 'lip-work' and because they used split bramble bark to bind it, they have a lot more surviving examples. In Scotland there also quite a number to of straw chairs to be found as they attached substantial bases to them as timber was more available to them. When such a sub-frame was continued down to ground level it prevented the inevitable wear on the straw around the base of the chair. The Scots would sew rush and seagrass in through it to give it that bit of contrast. Unfortunately Ireland has only about a dozen examples that are known, the rest have either been mutilated or exported to America by antique dealers.

The 'Hedge Chair'.

The Irish Hedge chair (fig. 6) was also constructed in the way that any damaged components could be removed and replaced by a new piece. Hence the name 'Hedge' , chairs had been made from hedgerows aswell as much of Irelands other furniture which were constructed from whatever materials were available to them. Sometimes driftwood would be incorporated into the making of the chair also. The lack of native resource of wood, seemed to have a continuous factor in preventing the development of furniture design and manufacture in Ireland.
This would also be the reason for huge variations of wood used which could have been seen in the construction of the chair.

The most important thing which Irelands native designs can boost about are its ingeniously simple methods of design which was effective and could be mass produced.

(fig6) The Hedge Chair

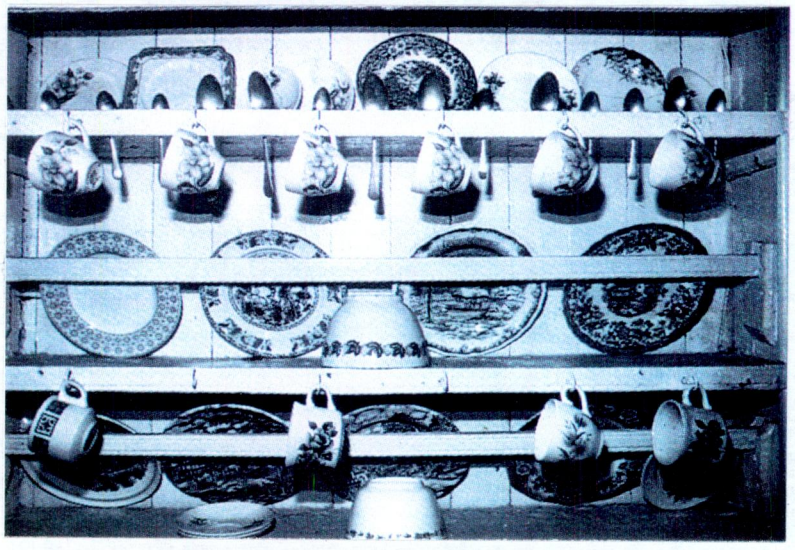
The Dresser.

More often than not, the Dresser (fig 7) was the only item of furniture that the carpenter took extra time to ornament with carved or fretted work, before it was painted. The various plates, bowls, and utensils which the dresser held had an important influence on the overall designs. The dresser would have been classed today as a functional 'Whatnot' as it displayed the owners most cherished pocessions which were either wedding presents or their ancestors pocessions which were handed down. The Dresser also stored their every day utensils such as pots and pans in the press underneath. Some of the more recent dressers had doors fitted or curtains (fig. 8) so it was less conspicuous. The positioning of them in the kitchen was also important, the majority of them were usually placed against the wall opposite the hearth, reason being that the plates were tipped forward in this way in order to reflect the fire-light and catch the in-comers eye.

Every dresser was an 'individual one' as the householder usually made it aswell as many other pieces. Different designs would have derived from different tool-kits as each rural woodworker made their own. The shortage of timber also influenced the design of the dresser, as most of them didn't have backs to them, but instead they were built into the wall.

Some were designed for the presence of chickens (fig. 9) whilst hatching their eggs. Others had various numbers of spoonholes were they displayed their spoons on (fig 10). Three spoons were held on leather loops which have been nailed to the shelf front or sometimes slots would have been cut out of the shelf, The reason for this may well have been the absence of drawers, but then the idea of displaying spoons may alternatively have filtered to the rural population form displays in the 'big houses' of Irish gentry.

(fig 9) Hen coop Dresser

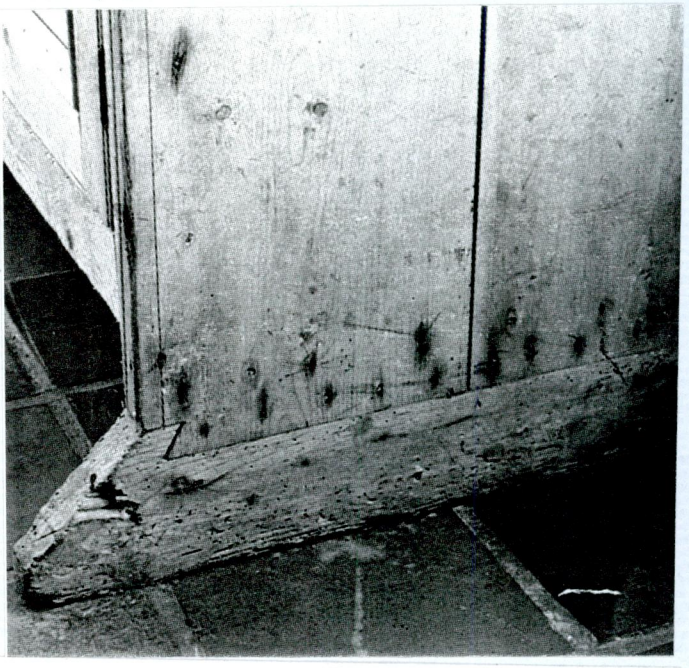


(fig10) Spoon Display Dresser

(fig 7) ' Donegal Dresser'
with open base displaying
some large cooking pots

(fig 8) 'Irish Dresser of the
nineteenth century

Another unique structural feature of the dresser was the 'Boot-Foot'(fig.11) at the base of the unit which served functional reasons. The reason being 'rising damp' and as it was attached by dove -tails it could be periodically knocked off and replaced if it become rotten, thereby prolonging the life of the dresser for future generation.



(fig 11) Boot-foot Dresser

The imaginative resources of a peasant culture that could produce monumental a conception as the dresser illustrated in (fig. 12) and originating from a farmhouse in the west of Ireland must have been considerable. It assigns ti the Irish peasantry an inherent inability to express themselves visually, other than through naive imitations of an alien tradition. The formal entablature reveals a close understanding of Classical models, yet its lower section rough-hewn and almost rudimentary, makes for an over-all balance and sense of proportion, which, though owing little or nothing to classical rules, lend it great primitive power and authority. Even though denuded of its original paint it is so visually arresting that the description 'decorated dresser' seems wholly inadequate a term to do it justice. By some oversight of National appreciation many dozens of such dressers have left Ireland for antique shops of Britain, Europe and America. Fortunately this master work remains to remind us of what has been lost.

In addition to the major pieces of furniture, the rural craftsman was called to supply a whole range of domestic items, such as salt-boxes, knife-boxes various kinds of shelves and racks, cupboards and interior fitments. Upon such necessities little particular store was set, and they suffered the same hard usage as today's mass-produced household objects.

(fig12) The Western Dresser

It was small, containing a room and a half, all very clean. Opposite the door was the bed, likewise very clean; beside the bed was a box containing meal, and beside the box a tub containing feathers. The fire was turf. In the cabin were two small children and a girl about twelve years old; they were sitting round the fire, and politely rose up to make way for me when I entered.

From the Countryman Spring 1971.
Article by Ann Moore. p.82ff

The use of slate became common in Irish vernacular houses. It was introduced in the early nineteenth century on houses of high quality, such as 'The Big Houses'. Its widespread adoption was in the second half of the nineteenth century where many of the traditional cottages transformed from thatch to slat. Once more our rural householder had been influenced by the renovations of the big houses. The infatuation of the big houses was more or less the explanation for this change. Peoples attitude towards creating their new identity after the famine, was very much the case of imitating whatever the gentry had done. They were also easily intimidated by their neighbours in what they might think or say if their furniture had not been representative of the traditional design.

Furniture in the 'Great Houses of Ireland'.

Today works of art are more likely to leave Ireland than to be brought in and the unfortunately no law to prevent this. Antique dealers have for years been scouring the country, buying Irish furniture to sell abroad.

The furniture in the 'Big Houses' has a definite character of its own. It is often black- even mahogany was sometimes blackened to resemble bog oak and the carvings on them were

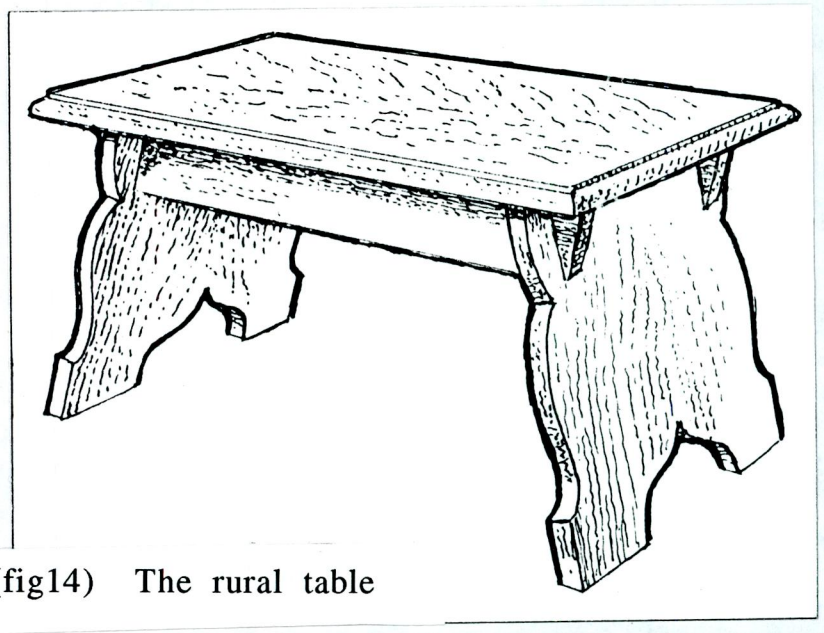
nothing like anything in England or by the rural carpenter for that matter. Carvings of lion, satyr and human heads were widely used, both as a centre piece and on the knees and sides of tables, like this 'card table' (fig 13). The features were twisted into spine chilling grimace, apparently gazing out of the sea.

The craftsmanship, which is very different from the expressionless carvings on English furniture, signifies the earnest of craftsmen in the eighteenth century. From carvings of snakes eating their own tails and little distorted animal masks with haloes of shells, it was certainly an example of the sinister way of life in those times.

Unlike the simplicity of the interior of the rural houses, the houses of the gentry seemed to be over-decorated leaving some of the most beautiful and fascinating pieces lost. The long- suffering and submissive detail that complimented the furniture and ornaments could not be recognised as there was so much going on around you. It looked like the exhibited everything should it clash or not to signify his wealth and well-being.

In the rural houses this was not possible as the furniture had to be designed for everyday use. The one table entertained every occasion from mealtimes to the occasional games of cards. Some houses would have had a card table which would have been very plain and simple, just to fit the purpose, it was not as elaborate as the one in (fig 14).

(fig13) Georgian Card Table



(fig14) The rural table

CHAPTER TWO

Section (A)

Design appreciation and Design awareness in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

Section (B)

How British Interior influenced Irish Interior in the post-war years.

DESIGN APPRECIATION AND DESIGN AWARENESS IN THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURY

Many of Irelands young furniture designers have a tendency to look at the 'goings on' in Europe for inspiration rather than observing what is happening in Ireland today and emphasising the movement of the nineteenth and twentieth century furniture.

It is important that our education systems should place extra emphasis on quality of design and try to influence students to look at native designs. Even at second level education, practical subjects should be given serious attention. Students should be pointed in the direction of native designs and the works of our painters and sculptors for inspiration rather than European designs.

In Sweden home-furnishing problems are discussed with the children in primary schools, in the attempt to acquaint with some of the demands of modern living.

HISTORY OF MODERN FURNITURE
PAGE. 130

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century Ireland, people did not have a wide choice of furniture to choose from even if they could afford it. Having to design and make their own, they developed their designs and ideas to their greatest ability. The population of today have a much wider range to select from that they have no recognition or appreciation of quality of design.

Design appreciation plays an important role in the craft world and until present generation begin to recognise good designs, the craftspeople of Ireland will find it difficult to enter the European Market if they are not succeeding in their own. Design awareness and appreciation was not essentially important . Having said that, everyone may have had an Irish Dresser, a sugan chair or a bed settle, but each one of them were totally different, due to the householder.
The practicality of the piece was more important than the design, each piece brought out the woodworkers personality in it from whatever he carved into it, should the woodworker

have lived near the coast they probably carved fish or shells into it or hearts and running wheels, but nothing too elaborate.

Personality is something which cannot be obtained through mass produced pieces. If it expresses anything at all, it is precise accuracy of a formula.

The idea of knock-down furniture was certainly Scandinavin, but the brain-child not of a designer, but of a 20-year-old Swedish whizzkid Ingvar Kamprad, who in 1950 set up a company called IKEA, selling by mail- order form his home. But whatever his genesis, Habitat touched some kind of atavistic nerve and, perhaps more importantly, it was affordable and easily available. What Habitat sold was a lifestyle, a belated acknowledgement of life without servants.

PENELOPE DENING
(THE WAY WE LIVE NOW)
IRISH TIMES 4- 1-93

It was known that 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 Scandinavians, producers of quality wood furniture form indigenous materials, to assess our design ethics. Such a decision reflects the yearning to aspire to such standards.

The invasion of plastic and sterile interior were kidnapping the population of Ireland and England as shops contents consisted of nothing else. From rural houses to city apartments people adopted to it quite quickly simply because it was in-expensive leaving a lot of our designs being rejected and possibly thrown out.
The Swedish Hansen easy chair (fig 15) which was tailored for mass production with the attempt to achieve the look of a handmade and expensive, as you can see failed miserably in all these aims and lacking desperately in 'artistic quality'.
Objects made by hand enter into this category obviously without fail. They have a physical presence, as maximum

(fig 15) Sweden's 'Hansen chair'
(HISTORY OF MODERN FURNITURE)

utility is continually violated in favour of tradition and imagination.

Decorative qualities, whether for sheer visual impact or conceptual purpose are often pointless in the manufacture of similar goods. Some would argue that industrially produced goods can be works of Art but surely the absence of an Artist's full creativity and imagination would render industrial designed and made products.

How British interior influenced Irish interior during the post-war years.

The influence which British design had on Irish design was quite strong. From as early as the seventeenth century the Irish craftsman had been duplicating specific vernacular furniture which the British craftsman produced, (this I have mentioned earlier in the dresser. This similarity of interior continued into the nineteenth century when the use of steel came about and eventually reached the homes of the Irish.

The use of steel came about during the post-war years when England had an exhibition of consumer goods naming it 'Britain can make it'. This exhibition demonstrated what they called 'good design for everyday life', which entailed steel beds, chairs tables and side boards. In (fig16.) you can see a section displaying a bedroom with a steel bed.

Even though Utility furniture did not receive a very long life-span on the market in Britain, it still seemed to manage its way across the water to Ireland. It was first adopted by the people from the inner cities who probably seen it as the modern furniture which was affordable while many of the rural houses were still using there traditional furniture with which they were accustomed to. The fact of it being cheap and within means of the majority of consumers in Ireland, than the prices of non-utility goods, might well have been the result of the major attraction to people towards utility. People also began to pay more attention to cleanliness, hygiene and the changing role of the easy-to-clean modern fittings which may well have welcomed the labour saving gadgets aswell.

The commencement of Utility goods may well have been another reason for the absence of our traditional vernacular as it was probably rejected by our people. The exchanging of the vernacular to the utility obviously a regrettable on as most of our homeowners now realise their mistake. They have become aware of the value not only in money but sentimentally aswell.

From talking to members of the public about where I might a certain piece of vernacular furniture their answer was usually;

"I used to have one of those here, but I threw it out when I got this one"

Local Housewife - Jan 94

The case being that the vernacular piece had been thrown and replaced by utility furniture. When people threw out the old traditional things, collectors became interested and began collecting them which then were probably sold for a small fortune to American buyers. It was also known for collectors and antique dealers to proposition rural occupiers with utility furniture in exchange for their old furniture with a small cost aswell, and they probably seen it as an offer they couldn't refuse. By this time there is probably more original designs in America and England than there is in Ireland.

When Utility first came about in England members of the public were taken at random, mainly housewifes and questioned on the popularity of utility furniture, it asked interviewees to indicate how satisfying were the qualities and designs of the furniture they had seen, the reply was;

I don't like that steel furniture, I wouldn't buy it. Its not at all snug or cosy. It looks to much like an aircraft factory.

26 year old housewife)
Home Front Furniture pg.68

CHAPTER THREE

Contemporary Irish Designers - their work and influences.

CONTEMPORARY IRISH DESIGNERS - THEIR WORK AND INFLUENCES (FOCUSING ON PAUL BERG)

Over the past ten years, the Irish Craft movement has become increasingly sophisticated. The disciplines of marketing, presentation and self motivation have been developed by individual craftsmen to ensure their products remain visible and successful in an increasing competitive world market. Due to the Irish Crafts Council and our Industrial Development Authority we have received much support in the struggle of achievement.

In the past, particularly during the hi-tech eighties, many of us were prepared to suffer the discomforts of chairs designed as visual statements rather than seats to be sat on: appearance triumphed over function.

In Ireland if there is any signature-style for the nineties it is a diffuse and eclectic one. Drawing on inspiration from a tradition and innovative in equal measures, Irish furniture remains aesthetically pleasing, but is now designed to be lived with aswell as admired

Mary Henry praises Ireland's furniture designers of the 90's-

Ireland's creative identity has never been stronger of more confident. After a largely barren period, during which innovated Irish furniture designers proved to be a rare and elusive breed, we are now seeing the emergence of a talent and accomplished, crop of craftspeople.

If our island status causes us to look ever-outward, it gives our craft environment unique advantages. Ireland absorbs the most influential designs movement from abroad and welcomes travelling craftsmen and women into their fold. These elements combine with the rich, natural and varied landscape, which supplies both raw materials needed to indulge the creative impulse and the inspiration needed to fire it.

MARY HENRY - IRELAND OF THE WELCOMES
(JAN-FEB 94)

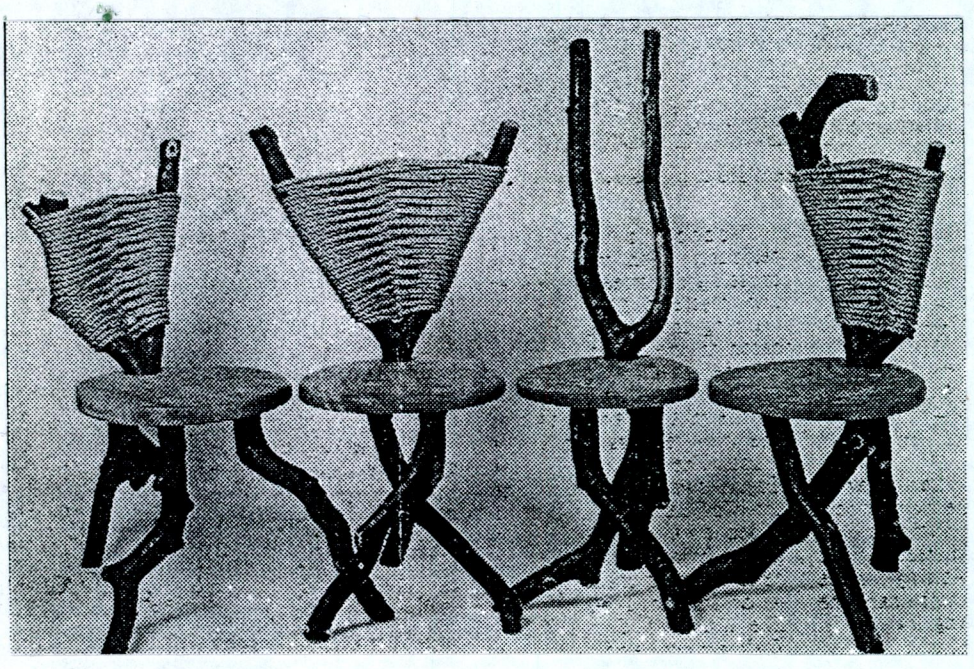
One of the smallest and influential groups among Ireland furniture makers today are Paul Berg, Micheal Bell and Eric Conner. Their work combines the best of the cutting edge European designs with a unique and highly personalized style. A diversified crew of craftsmen all seeming to possess an extraordinary unity with wood they form and shape their creations in a variety of ways.

MICHEAL BELL

Mr Micheal Bell has a natural love for wood. 'Stark, storm-wracked landscapes of gnarled ivy and lighting-stripped beaches are suggested by the organic furniture that distinguishes Micheal Bell's collection. These are startling one-offs, moulded and crafted in complete sympathy with raw material, Micheal plunders form farmers fields and tree surgeon's cast-offs and from doing this he protrays a simplicity in his furniture which is derived from the use of native woods. From the magnificence of his " Phoenix " (fig 17) throne to the primitive magic of his rustic chairs. These are pieces so elemental you'd be forgiven for assuming man played little in their creation.

Bell's three-legged rustic chairs (fig 18) are functional as well as whimsical. Beech branches originally destined to become firewood are used for the legs and the back support, while the seat is hand-crafted from elm. The forked beech branches on the back of the chair with natural rope fibre to form a cushion of back support. Bell maintains that his inspiration for these chairs came from suitable sylvan quarters - he see's each piece as representing an individual incarnation of the forest - god Pan. Truly organic creations, Bells rustic chairs represent a perfect fusion of man - crafted and natural, with only a modicum of intrusion or intervention.

" Hidden depths " (fig 19) is one of many unique pieces which Bell has created. The wavy-edge doors of a walnut wall-cabinet overlap and conceal solid walnut shelves and a draw with a bog oak pull. When closed, the cabinet is no more; it lies hidden behind a facade of apparently solid startling behind wood.



(fig 18) Three-legged-Rustic chairs

(fig 19) 'Hidden Depths' Cabinet
Materials- Walnut and Bog Oak
Dimensions-

(fig 20) 'The Console' table
Materials- Walnut

The " Console table " (fig 20) crafted in Irish elm, seems to possess a floating top panel; its uncluttered style to reminiscent of the purity of Japanese architecture. Micheal Bell's work is notable for the intricacy of his design and his keen attention to detail. Bog oak used for pins for colour-contrast and durability but also reverentially - Micheal believes this wood represents a primeval energy - source older than history itself.

Floating panels, hidden hinges and hand - adzing work may all be Bell's trademarks but, in the great tradition of the oldest furniture craftsmen, his work is designed not only to provide pleasure today but to endure indefinitely into tomorrow.

ERIC CONNOR

Eric Connor concentrates his focus on chairs. To limit yourself to one piece of furniture may appear restrictive, but it has resulted in an attention to details and soundness of technique that is evident in each chair - each the result of a single minded and virtuoso performance. Working largely within the parameters of the vernacular tradition, but endowing each piece with a character that is unmistakably contemporary. Eric's chairs are primitive with polish.

Classic's such as the " Hedge chair ", ski-rocker, or comb-back (fig. 21) are interpreted afresh, to create chairs that take us to a simple age while remaining resolutely timeless.

One chair that would really invite attention is Connor's "Wisteria " (fig. 22). Well - known for his contemporary re-creations of Irish vernacular pieces, the Wisteria is very much an original and the result of Connor's own creative processes. It could almost be described as Spartan in its lines, but has a characteristically deep and wide seats of ample proportions. Back uprights consist of two central and two side supports, steam bent into shape to form the fluid lines of a sitters back.

Just as the 'Shaker' revival in the United States causes a re-examination of levels of excess, resurgence of interest in the Irish vernacular traditions, and it's modern incarnations, has

(fig 21) The Comb-back Chair

(fig 22) The Wisteria chair

led to an appreciation of the beauty of sound technique and simplicity of designs.

Eric Connor's contemporary chairs work as dinning-room, kitchen of fireside companions with equal aplomb. While very much of the present they allow us to glimpse how fireside may have looked in some of our earliest rural homesteads. He makes few confessions of modernity of the machine age in the creations of his chair. By using his own kiln so that the quality of the can be controlled, native woods - primarily elm and oak, but also ash and cherry - are dried in plank form for up to eighty days. Upright poles and back struts are steam bent into the desired shape and left in wooden frames to set, to ensure that domestic central heating or temperatures fluctuations will not affect the finish chair. After assembling, each piece of varnished and finished by hand. Eric is currently experimenting with colour washes to be laid over the wood so that grain and definition are highlighted rather than obscured. His professional promise to work on only one chair a week seems to be both realistic and necessary when one considers the time involved in the various processes.

PAUL BERG

The product that is in most demand today is no longer a primary material, nor a machine, but a personality.

Paul Berg was born and educated in Rotterdam. In 1980 he entered his first year in painting and sculpture at Rotterdam Art College. After working in sculpture Berg began to adapt a feeling for quality of materials, working 3-dimensional forms and construction. Having a strong interest in harps, he decided to challenge himself and make one. After long hours of hounding, Berg persuaded his tutors to purchase new equipment which was the beginning of many magnificent pieces.

During his time in Rotterdam Art College, Berg came to Ireland on exchange to Dublin's Institute of Technology. Here he proceeded to make 3-dimensional forms of sculpture and furniture.

After returning to Rotterdam having finished his exchange in Ireland, Berg decided to return to Ireland to persue a career in designing and making furniture. It was not long afterwards that Berg was commissioned to design and make a playground, aswell as lending a hand to a bit of cabinet making.

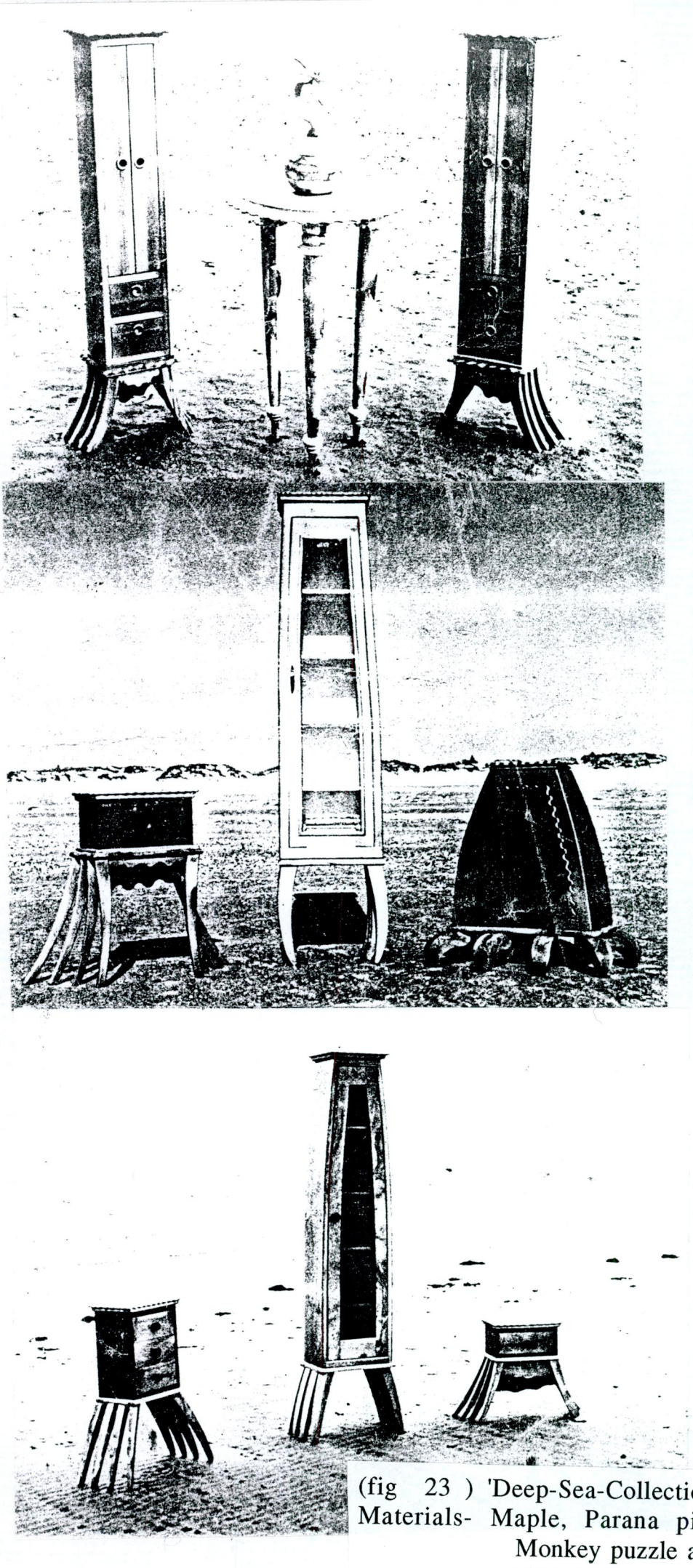
Through visiting places and passing social hours, Berg spent a lot of time out along Dolymount Strand and from this he became increasingly interested in the forms of sea creatures. Some of Berg's earlier work (in which I will go into greater detail later on in this thesis) resembles the form of jelly-fish and other eight-legged creatures in which he has titled " The deep-sea-collection" (fig 23).

After making various sketches and putting a few ideas together the resembling forms are eventually translated into his work.

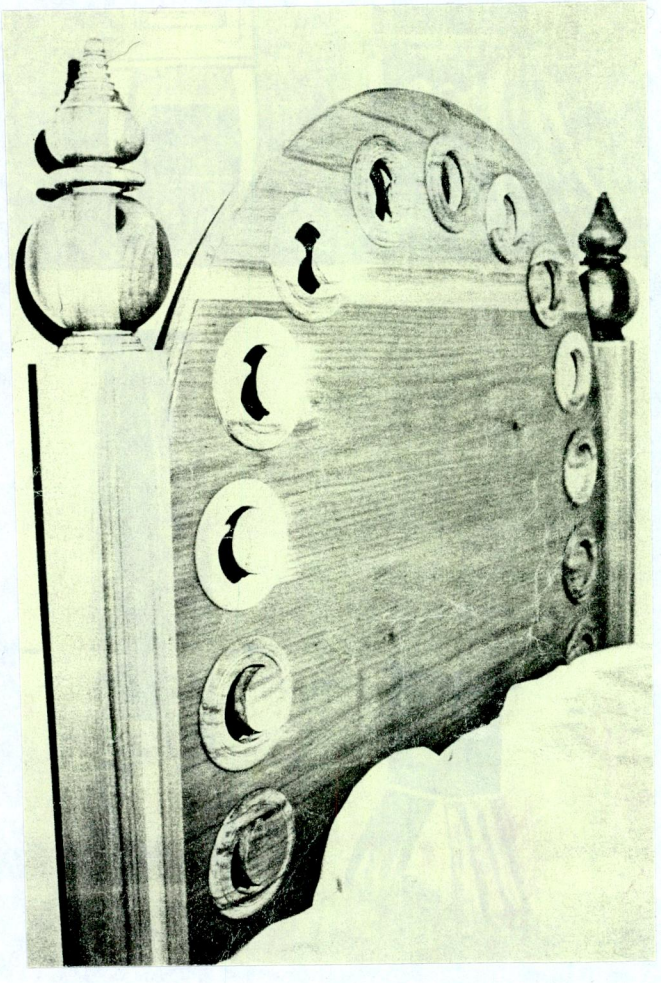
While at Rotterdam Art College, Berg was particularly fascinated by the works of Richard Snyder, an American craftsman who is renowned for creating furniture which draws inspiration from mythology, animals and tribal cultures and events. Paul like Snyder, draws inspiration from mythical, distant countries and 'King Solomons Shelves', 'Screen of Five Moons' and the 'Tower of Katmandu' elicit visons of flying carpets, the snow-capped Himalayas and golden carpets. The inspiration of Snyder is discretely seen in Berg's work through the form and how he titles his work e.g. ' Bed of Fifteen Moons' (fig 24). This is an astounding mixture of curvilinear and severe forms made from Parana Pine and Maple which supports the headboard of 'Fifteen Moons' which are arranged in the order of a decending moon.

His chaise longue-ish (fig 25) and Louie 1 draws (fig 26) are classic and inevitable twist. 'The Louie' a five drawer unit sits perched upon chunky bobbin legs - an unlikely confluence of styles that works because it flouts our expectation of which style fits with which.

Berg's way of designing and developing his ideas are by ignoring the drawing board and going straight into using whatever materials are available to him. Paul is wary of tags and laments the fact that aesthetics have, in his words -



(fig 23) 'Deep-Sea-Collection'
Materials- Maple, Parana pine
Monkey puzzle and
tulipwood



(fig 24) ' Bed of fifteen Moons'
Materials- parana pine, maple
Dimensions- 900 x 1900 x 1000mm

(fig 25) The Chaise Longue-ish

(fig 26) 'Louie Drawers'
Materials- Parana pine
Dimensions-

'Been hi-jacked by technicians'.

IRELAND OF THE WELCOMES
JAN-FEB 94

His creations are perfect fusion of energy between man and materials. A plank of wood decides its own fate as it becomes what it suggests, Berg then sits down and makes a few sketches, working a design around the form before deciding on the final design. Pauls workshop which is based in 'Whitegate, Co. Clare is a resting place for off-cuts that insist on being legs and great slabs that are destined to be reborn into newer and altogether different forms of seating. He aims to bring decoration back into furniture in a sculptural form aswell as surface decoration. A majority of Berg's colours that he uses are natural.

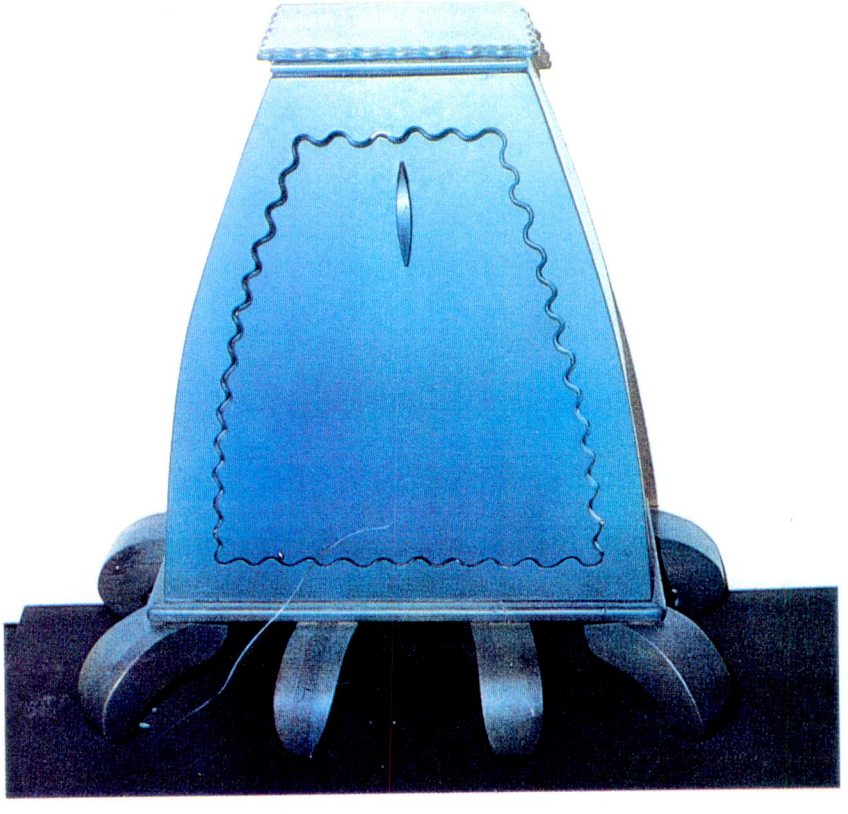
Berg has stated,

" I work on colours, I buy wood that has strong natural colours so that I can keep its own colour. This is mainly why I use a lot of monkey puzzle wood and tulip wood. I try to prevent using stains as much as possible".

Interview- November '93

Berg's work has a reputation for strength and colour. The strength of the furniture is its structure which gives it the visual impact which allows it to stand among other hand-made furniture. His techniques in forming the wood is not an original one but definitely an exciting one.
Berg begins to work with the wood before it is fully seasoned and when its moist and flexible, so when the piece is constructed and left to dry, its begins to warp into irregular shapes and forms to create decorative assemblages of different elements which images allude other sort of images of sea-creatures e.g. his 'Deep-Sea-Collection' which features lobster and crab-claw legs, scalloped edged tables and multicoloured drinks cabinets aptly entitled 'The Octopus'.

The 'Octopus' (fig 27) designed and made by Berg, is one of his first pieces of this series. Bergs use of monkey puzzle and Barbara pine are transformed into curvaceous creations that evoke images of the undiscovered with its eight-legged crab-



(fig 27) 'The Octopus'
Materials- monkey puzzle and parana pine

claw legs which gives it the impression that it has the ability to crawl sideways. The Aqua-Marine blue of this piece is a result of painstaking applications of layer upon layer of lacquer. 'The 'Octopus' being Berg's first piece with which he approached the Crafts Council was rejected by them.

Berg quotes:

"just as I was leaving the H.Q someone came in and bought it and I've been there ever since".

Interview - November '93

Now that Bergs main opening is in the Crafts Council H.Q. Powerscourt Townhouse, there was a Interior exhibition held in it during the months of September and October 93, where well-known members of the Public were asked to each take a room and decorate it. Alfred Cochrane from Alfrank designs was amongst them and when asked why did he chose what he did for his 'Hotel Lobby' he replied;

"The 'Hotel Lobby' was to reflect the excitement, anticipation, grandeur and mischief that hotels have to offer.....
It is a theatrical production that most people will be the nearest they will come to being on stage. The 'Samba Drums' are the added excitement".

Irish Times-11th September 93

And in this case they have been beautifully made Paul Berg and mounted on wheels- (fig 28).

When the 'Samba Drums' were exhibited and viewed by other members of the team they asked, "Why wheels"? It was answered very defensively by Anya Von Gosseln.

" Paul grew up in Rotterdam not far from Magritte, and others like him played around with absurd things, so he has the sense to be absurd".

Anya Von Gosseln
Irish Times -11th Sept 93

(fig 28) 'Samba Drums'
Materials- Maple, Goat skin and Aluminium
Dimensions-

Berg also states himself that he has the tendency to root in skips and dumps. When questioned about his furniture he replied;

" I don't make furniture - I don't even like furniture. I make things.

Interview - November 93

He doesn't have furniture in his house, he says, as in expensive furniture, but things he might have found in skips that he can use as furniture and old antiques. As a highly skilled craftsman he can exploit the visual over the functional of vice-versa, it is such mastery of techniques that allows Bergs work to be so diverse.

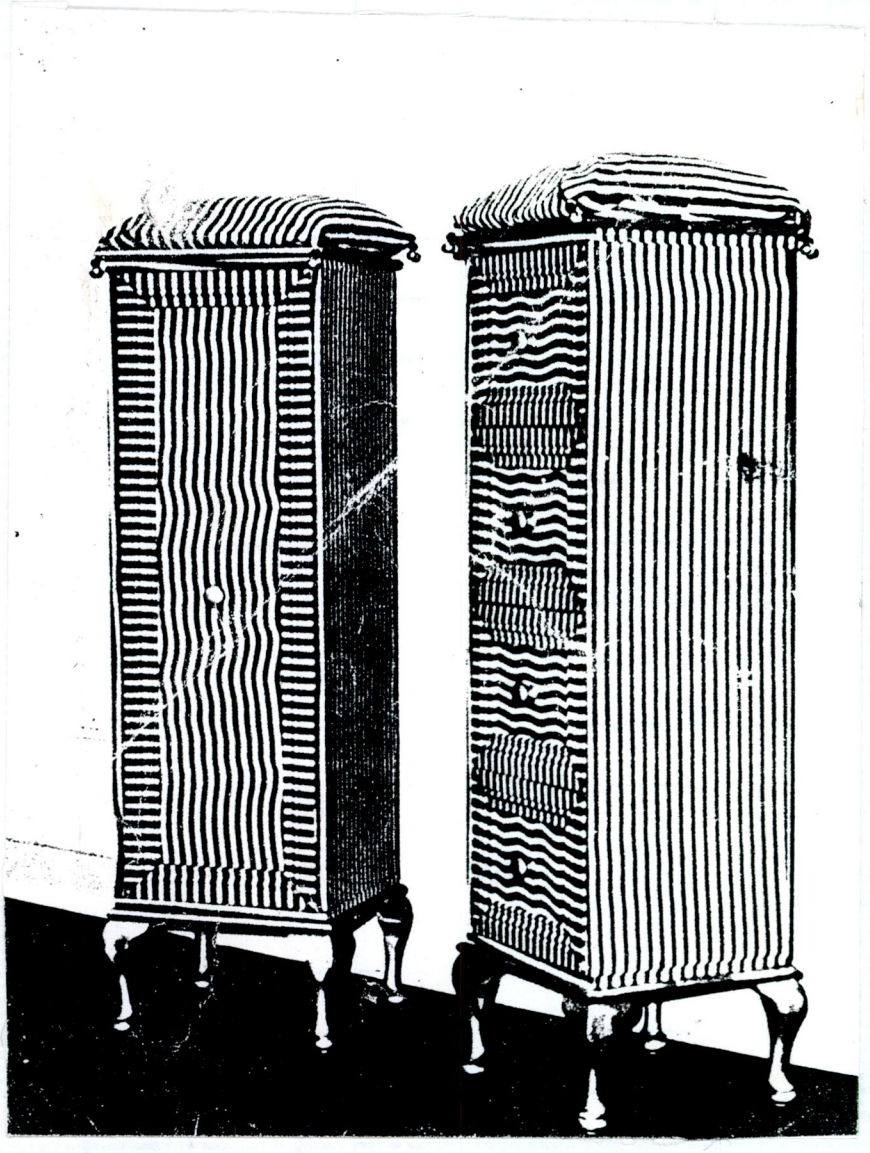
Colour too is a vital and integral part to all Bergs which we can see clearly in his 'Cabinets of the Night' (fig 29). Their crazy stripy pyjamas which has resemblance of the 'Tall-Man' cabinets, are upholstered with black and white stripy cotton. Berg himself states that his colour schemes are used to add light-heartedness and cheerfulness to his furniture.

The colour which normally compliments Bergs are usually natural and are obtained by careful choice of wood which is mainly monkey puzzle, tulipwood and maple.

By no means the only woodmen or furniture makers creating ripples on the contemporary Irish scene, Micheal Bell, Eric Conner and Paul Berg are representative of Irelands new creative identity.

Working with the same raw materials , each one possessed with a singular enthusiasm that borders on the obsessive, the outpourings from their fertile imagination couldn't be more different.

The sheer scope and diversity of their styles is an indication of the broadness of our contemporary crafts movements.



(fig29) 'Cabinets of the Night'
Materials- wood, cotton (laquered)
Dimensions- 420 x 420 x 1400mm

CONCLUSION

Many must wonder today why, notwithstanding the worthy and expensive programme to revive the Irish language, so much Irish Country Furniture. The most eloquent record of rural culture now as vanished as that of the Druids or the builders of Newgrange - should have received so little attention form the world of official Irish culture as to have been allowed either to disintegrate or to be exported wholesale. Fortunately, today, some dedicated craftspeople and individuals are meeting with success in stemming this tide and there are hopeful signs that official recognition of the standing of Country Furniture in the list of achievements of our past is growing.

Perhaps it is wrong to be too critical, the terrible afflictions of the famine, emigration, eviction, grinding poverty and the political struggle, suffered by so many of the Irish peasantry in the last century, were real enough and maybe so poisoned the memory of those who came after, that New Nations were glad to forget. For them rural Ireland was no Eden and the nineteenth century was no Golden Age. Yet when all has been said the finest examples of Irish Country Furniture command as attention that goes beyond a casual antiquarian curiosity about points of detail.

The Irish industry hold exciting potential as yet unexploited. For many years in Ireland there was a lack of design appreciation and furthermore recognisation of quality furniture, although in the past five years, consumers are eventually beginning to observe craftsmanship and quality before purchasing. They are also looking towards with representation of humour and characteristics of the artist rather than just serving a functional purpose. Being able to recognise good design and appreciate good design is very important to our craftspeople as they struggle to create long-lasting designs which can be eventually passed down through the generations.

The Furniture that our designers are creating today are truly Irish and even though it took it some time to develope, it is exactly what our Irish craftspeople should be creating, a national style that can be recognised in the European Market. The revival of native designs and materials in a more contemporary style is what our consumers are requiring also.

Functions and art are once again allowed to exist side by side in our furniture. Through the work of a new breed of furniture artists, an idea of emotion can be conveyed through an ingenious and innovative process

The Artists, Micheal Bell, Eric Connor and Paul berg being prime examples, feel that beauty, humour and excitement have been over the last century, taken from our everyday context and embodied into the designs of their furniture. The reclaiming of the function which furniture can possess is over-powered by these designers, making our furniture not only functional but admirable and a real conversation piece.

In this reclamation of the traditional styles and humour it emphasis the asethic self consciousness of the mid twentieth century modernism, which drew furniture into geometric and simplified forms and shapes, have eventually been rejected and considered an inevitable period in the history of furniture. Its negligence towards appearance was apparent as its function

over-ruled rather than beauty. Artists and craftspeople are now, in the late twentieth century going back to their roots which are embodied in the work of 'primitive' man. The instinctive creativity which is injected into every day life through not only history, ritual and religion, but through the amazing functional pieces of furniture which are carftspeople are creating today.

Inspiring and highly humourising furniture is what people want today and due to mentioned craftsmen, this is what we are receiving. It can be adapted and brought back into our lives. It is proven that even before we were subjected to the capitalist entrepreneur and production plants which supplied us with purely functional equipment, furniture could amuse us, in the characteristic forms and actually make us think. The curiosity of many rural designs still quizzes peoples minds for what reasons some pieces were made, and reasons of scale and form e.g. 'the nursing chair' (fig 2).

For some time, the machine asethic intimidated the craftspeople of the 60's and 70's and destroyed all sense of humour which could have been found in their designs, but

instead organised peoples way of thinking and acting. But now through our non-industrial societies and rejection of mass-production, craftspeople of today are liberating us from our habitual sense and converting us into consumers that requires lighthearted and humorous furniture, shattering our expectations of function. By bringing art, character and humour into todays furniture. Craftspeople are addressing the deprivations of society and bringing it directly into our living room.

Through the furniture that our leading designers and makers are producing today, life no longer has to be lived according to the hard-hitting rules and regulations of the mass-produced modernist movement.

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