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A Look at Contemporary Irish Furniture

by

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Contents

List of Illustrations

Introduction

As we approach the end of the twentieth century, I would argue that the Irish contemporary furniture design industry has reached an exciting height. Within the last ten years, the market for high quality furniture in Ireland has emerged from practically nowhere. To-day, the consumer seeking a unique design, either hand-crafted or industrially produced, can be assured of a choice of top designers who will willingly and capably meet their needs. Particularly within the past five years, the media coverage of contemporary designers has broadened and the demand for contemporary furniture has accelerated enormously.

Designer furniture has rarely been a very prominent part of the Irish culture. Irish made furniture for centuries was produced within local communities when it was required. Claudia Kinmonth writes of this in her book "Irish Country Furniture 1700-1950". Design revolved around the materials available and how they were constructed. As furniture was made in this manner, it was not given specific design status in any great way. It was vernacular furniture which was in constant use and for much of the time was taken for granted or cherished. This was not however, for its design but for its function.

This century has given us much mainstream "off the shelf" furniture, the design of which was not very outstanding and rather basic. Historically, there have been, however a constant number of craft furniture makers. The tradition of craft furniture making in Ireland was such that anyone from a boat builder to a wheelwright may have made pieces of furniture. Each piece showed a certain technique which set it aside as having come from the workshop

of that particular tradesman. We can look at these works of craftsmanship and see certain design and production patterns appearing in relation to the area of origin around the country. (Kinmonth, 1993. p. 3).

There was not a huge demand for Irish contemporary designed pieces until the idea was brought to public attention towards the end of the 1980's. Suzanne MacDougald, owner of the Solomon Gallery in the Powerscourt Townhouse, Dublin organised an exhibition featuring the best of Irish contemporary designed furniture in 1987. At that time there had not been a collective exhibition of high quality Irish furniture. It was this exhibition which was to trigger a beginning of awareness of Irish furniture design, which is only now, ten years later, finally beginning to take its place as a valid part of the Irish interiors market.

To represent a cross-section of what is available in to-day's Irish furniture design market, I have chosen to investigate what motivates four designer businesses which are competing well in the present climate of interest and growth. Paul Berg is a designer craftsman who produces furniture for both domestic and corporate commissions. He works from his home and studio in Co. Clare. Likewise, Michael Bell is a designer craftsman who caters for domestic and corporate clients while working from his home in Co. Laois. Robert Drennan runs the contemporary interiors shop, Foko and designs furniture which is manufactured in batch industrially for corporate clients and retail outlets abroad. Tadhg and Simon O'Driscoll are brothers who work together as designers for domestic, hotel and corporate ventures. They run their business from an office in Dublin and employ two other designers to complete the team.

Through the process of interviews with each of the designers and researching written articles in Irish newspapers and magazines on the subject of Irish contemporary furniture, it is my intention to look at how each business works. While researching the topic of Irish furniture design in general, I found that it is not a subject which has been broadly written about. Claudia Kinmonths book "Irish Country Furniture 1700-1950" appears to be the most capable of dealing with the subject. It is, in my opinion, a very important guide as to where we have come from, where furniture is concerned and how some of these past vernacular traits still survive in contemporary furniture, no matter how subtle their presence. To further strengthen this information, I have read about furniture design and production mainly relating to Britain as so little has been documented on Irish furniture. I have found books by Peter Dormer and John Heskett to be most helpful in introducing the idea of how both craft and design for industry have revolved under the ever critical eye of society.

Each business is quite different in how they design and carry this through to production and retailing. All are successful in their own niche and their work is thriving due to demand from the Irish market. I intend to uncover both their differences and similarities within their brief, to supply the Irish market. Modern designers in Ireland have dealt with conflicting issues regarding design and production. They are now producing work which can stand on the international as well as the Irish stage.

Chapter 1

The Design Process

How each designer approaches the design of a piece of furniture is particular to that designer. Influences in our everyday environment present themselves as inspiration for contemporary design. A certain amount of subconscious design is undertaken before ever a person sits down with the intention to form a design for creation of a three-dimensional form. These subconscious influences are a starting point and to follow this each person will physically form their own method of designing. It may be on paper or computer, in an extremely precise manner or through a looser more intuitive way.

The rugged and varied landscape of the Irish countryside presents a basis for sophisticated design within organic shapes on both a craft and semi-industrial design level. Organic and softly rounded shapes have come to the fore in contemporary furniture design. The consumer demands a fuss-free, calm, clean design. Designers produce elegant, curvaceous furniture which introduces simple organic lines back into our living and working space.

The work of brothers Tadhg and Simon O'Driscoll is an example of Ireland producing quality contemporary design work for both the corporate and domestic sector. They admit to drawing on certain elements of the organic as input into their design work. They feel it is important also to introduce the vernacular element, as contemporary design revolves around what surrounds the consumer. While taking this on board, they bring these influences

forward in their designs to a realm of unique one-off domestic pieces or batch produced furniture for contract or public use.

Ireland is known for its beautiful countryside which has been used for centuries as a basis for design. It is usually associated with the craftmaker who for ideological reasons, would arguably be more deeply influenced by the organic. Peter Dormer writes of the craftsperson:

> "Usually the lifestyle involved moving to the country and seeking to be as independent as possible". (Dormer, 1988, p. 139).

Over the years, Irish vernacular furniture has been made from wood with very often, twisted, flowing forms. As the twentieth century closes we find that timber is still used as a material and the organic is still a great source of influence.

This century has also brought a major influence in the form of the modernist movement. Peter Dormer explains that

> "The modern movement had supplied the visual metaphors for progress" (Dormer, 1987, p. 15).

Progress in much of the contemporary furniture design industry has stemmed from the modernist ideology. Simplicity and functionalism in design have been carried through to change how designers approach design to-day. This combined with technical strides in the materials available aids designers and manufacturers alike.

The O'Driscolls are very much in touch with this and are interested in innovative use of materials. Knowledge of materials and their interaction with each other, a living space and environment and the human touch is what brings a certain excitement to their designs. The O'Driscolls understanding of what a client needs and wants coupled with their combined knowledge of both design and craftwork, means that their outfit is handled in an efficient and businesslike manner. They also call on influences from architecture and design in accordance with an architectural setting.

Tadhg and Simon O'Driscoll are originally from Kildare. Simon qualified in Furniture Restoration and Design at the College of Marketing and Design. Tadhg qualified from the John Makepeace School for Craftsmen in Wood, in Britain. Part of their success may be attributed to the fact that they are brothers and the notion, with which they agree, that they are of a similar way of thinking when it comes to making decisions concerning design. It is interesting to see the joint product of a craftsperson and designer. Tadhg does not lament the fact that he is no longer a maker. He feels that his knowledge of materials and construction can only be an advantage in the realisation of their designs.

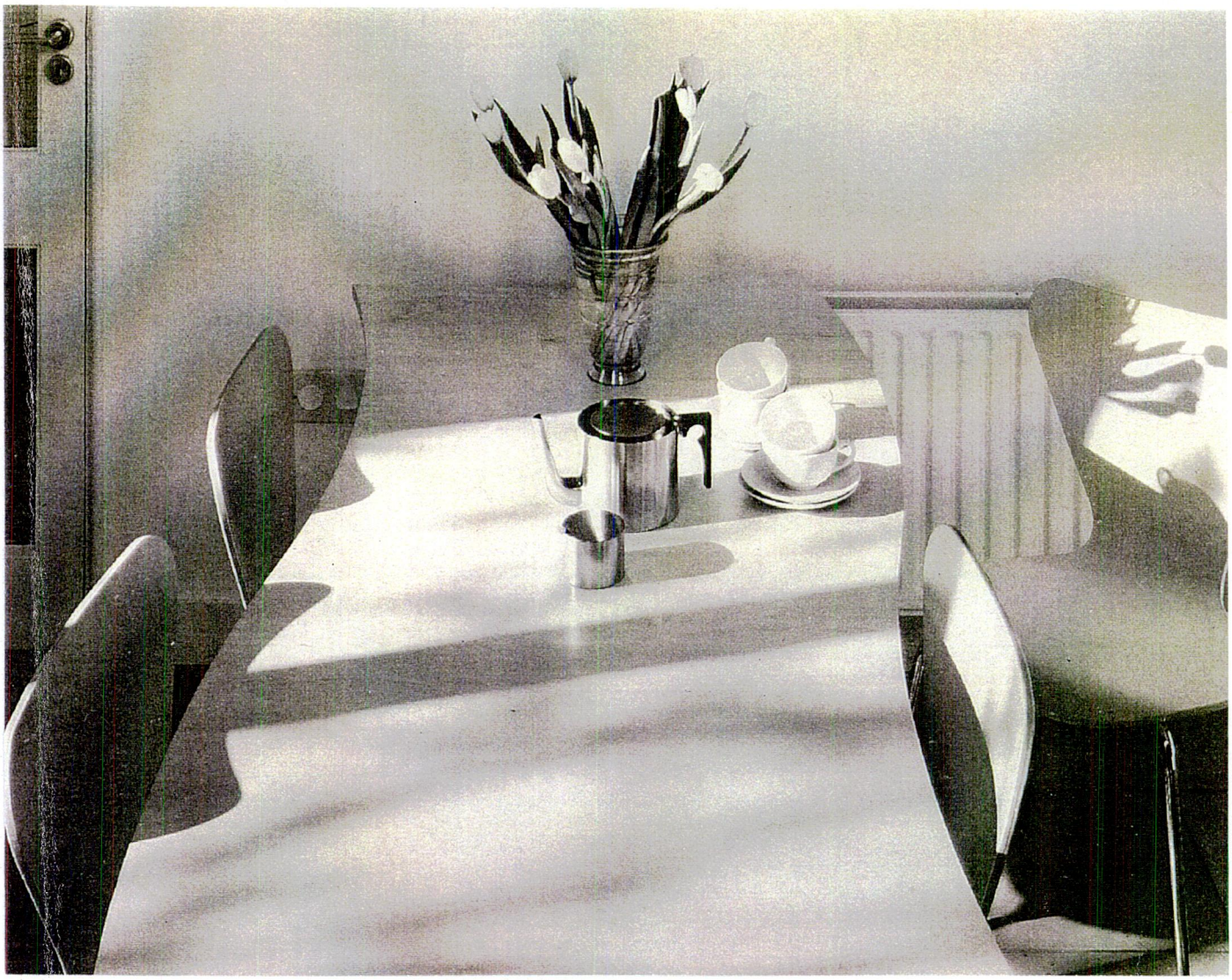
What the brothers supply is an item of furniture customised to the clients requirements. Even though neither Tadhg nor Simon are physically involved in the manufacture of the product on a hands-on level, they are very much in tune with the importance of how materials may appear to the client. They allow the client to have an input into the material content of the piece by showing samples of suitable materials which can vary from wood, glass, metal and stone to leather and plastic. The use of technology is helping enormously

on both a design and manufacture level. To assist further in the visualising of furniture in situ, photo-realistic, three dimensional computer simulations are incorporated into the design process. This combination of materials and computer visualisation helps in the clear relaying of a design to the client.

A whole new culture is being introduced into Ireland as design overlaps internationally. People are travelling and seeing what is abroad. This creates an openness to both international and distinctly contemporary Irish design which may have a slight international flavour. The modern culture that is capsulated in Ireland to-day springs from constant exposure to international music, media images and fashion. For both the designer and consumer this awareness of international design creates a starting point, as the consumer searches for an international design product and style on the Irish market. The designer is then open to design Irish contemporary furniture which is of the quality and style found on the international market.

Amid this modern culture, it is not only the designs of foreign furniture that are influential. Also of influence is the work of architects and artists abroad, each with their own national style. The O'Driscolls have achieved a style which is sophisticated, natural and creates a simple order within a space. What is designed for a boardroom may also sit on a more adapted level within a domestic dwelling (fig. 1).

(fig. 1.a) Boardroom design from O'Driscoll Furniture Designers



(fig. 1. b) Table designed for domestic use from O'Driscoll Furniture Designers

The key element of clear lines, be they simply curvaceous and fluid or more rigid and geometric is what links the designs of the brothers. Minimal embellishment allows the materials to play their part and enhances the energy of the line and overall form of a piece of furniture. Decoration takes the form of the piece itself within a specific space. This can sit comfortably as a modern piece, as it has encompassed all that is prevailing in a modern society and so works in harmony with modern architecture. it is a product of modern Ireland and yet could easily take its place among its equivalent overseas.

Another product of modern Ireland and quite a different one from any piece produced by the O'Driscolls, would be any piece of furniture by designer and maker Paul Berg. Berg crates his furniture with the view that they are 'things' or sculptures which merely happen to be comfortable and appealing to sit on. (Interview, 15.12.97)

Deirdre McQuillan has written for the Sunday Times, that Paul Berg makes

> "Fantasy furniture which is clever, impish yet practical, as well as being superbly finished". (Sunday Times, 23.01.94).

Paul Berg is, in to-days furniture market, classed as a craftmaker. Berg brings a whole different approach to designing furniture. As he designs and makes the pieces himself, he is very much his own boss in how he chooses to lay down designs and execute them. He has stated:

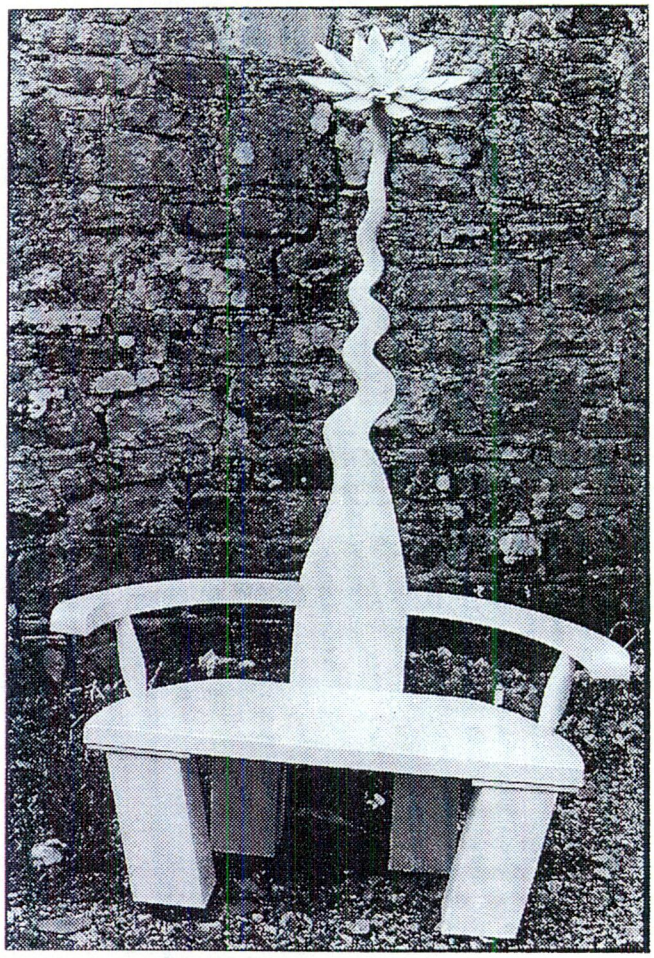
> "I don't even like furniture, I make things". (Interview, 15.12.97)

He began with this notion when he first started making "furniture".

Berg is originally from Rotterdam and has a training in painting and printmaking. This is no doubt where the more "fine art" approach that he has to his pieces comes from. He soon found that people were accepting his work as interesting, wacky furniture. It could enhance an interior in a very different way to any other piece of furniture available on the Irish market.

In a way, it may be suggested that Berg contradicts himself in his views and his work. He claims that he doesn't like furniture, yet he is now happy to accept that his creations can be categorised under furniture. He admits to enjoying his work and part of his enjoyment seems to be derived from the unique way in which he designs. To look at a finished piece by Paul Berg, we can see an amalgamation of easily understood sculpture and a functional object which can be classed as furniture.

He is perhaps, most noted for the various "Flower" chairs (fig. 2) which he creates. The basic structure of this chair appears to resemble an oversized wooden chair with arched armrests and high central backrest. The strip of wood used for the backrest tapers in a rippling line to act as a stem for the large wooden flower at the head. The front legs come in at an angle in the centre of the chair, under the seat and appear decidedly unsteady. They are in fact, perfectly sturdy and give a certain quirky character to the piece. This characteristic has become known as the wacky style of Paul Berg.



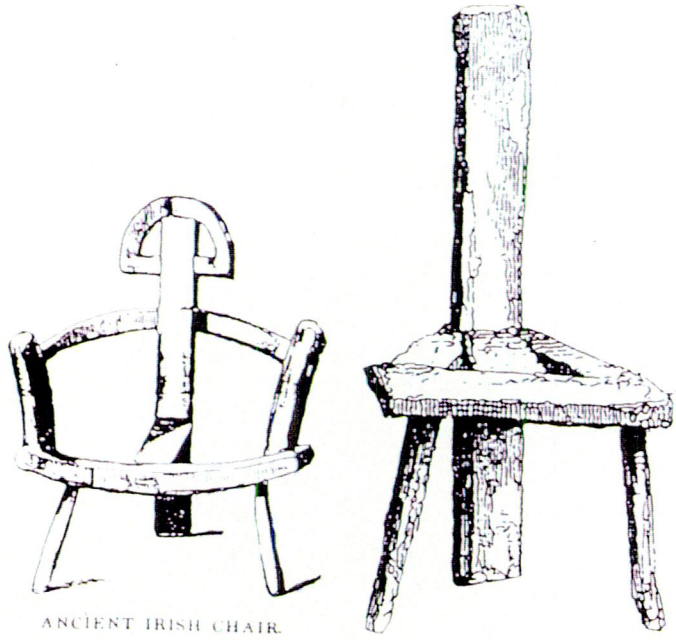
(fig. 2) "Flower" chair in ash and yew designed by Paul Berg

If we look at modern vernacular furniture, the "Flower" chair stands out as unusual but still acceptable for a modern interior. It has shunned the modernist principal of minimal ornamentation and is now more in sympathy with the return to decoration of postmodernism. However, in her book 'Irish Country Furniture', Claudia Kinmonth documents the use of a "Sligo chair" or "board chair" in early nineteenth century Irish homes (fig. 3). The basic structure of this "board chair" consisted of a single board for a backrest, joined to a basic T-shaped seat, three or four legs and occasionally, curved armrests. This "board" chair is visually quite similar to Berg's "Flower" chair. (see figs. 2 and 3).

Berg commented that he found this book and the whole subject of Irish vernacular furniture fascinating. (Interview, 15.12.97). It is interesting to see how an immersion in Irish culture, when mingled with a Dutch fine art training can produce a humorous, contemporary piece of furniture that also has echoes of our Irish heritage.

The trademark of Berg's pieces is his use of wonky looking carved or turned feet or tops. Motifs of flowers, sun, moon, animals, sea-creatures and birds all make regular appearances in Berg's work. As conscious design decisions, these motifs are brought into being as tops of chairs or even cabinets. Berg seems adamant that the consumer accept his pieces for what they are. He forcefully dictates how his piece will be used.

"Those tops stop people putting vases of flowers on top". (Barker, 28.09.96).



(fig. 3) The "Sligo chair" or "board chair" found in the early nineteenth century Irish home. (Kinmonth, 1994, figs. 59 & 60, p. 51).

This attitude seems to insist that the client take him as he is, which is unusual in the present marketplace. Usually the clients every need is taken into account before the design is undertaken.

However, the way in which Paul Berg designs is not a conventional one. He does not believe in sitting at a drawing board to account for dimensions, but allows the materials available to him to dictate what they wish to be. On consulting with the materials to hand, he works with the loosest of sketches as an aid. This is the method of design suitable to him and it seems to work. His finished work is of the highest standard and quality and the Irish market seems to be taking this on board.

Michael Bell is also a craftmaker. However, he works in a very different way to fellow craftsman Paul Berg. Michael Bell is originally from Belfast but is now living in Co. Laois. He does not have a formal training in design and previously worked for a tobacco company. He had always pursued woodwork as a hobby and gradually it came to the fore. He is now making a business of it. He believes that his intuitive feel for wood gives him what he needs to understand how to design successfully.

He employs a furniture design graduate from the Furniture College in Letterfrack, Galway and an apprentice who has worked with him for a number of years. As other people are dependant upon him for guidance when it comes to the making of a piece, design on paper is crucial. Bell runs his business in a manner which allows him control over both the design and making process. His previous job gave him many opportunities to travel. He feels this

has helped to give him an over view of what other countries have to offer culturally and in terms of design. Bell is of the opinion that his lack of formal training brings a freshness to his designs which people can relate to.

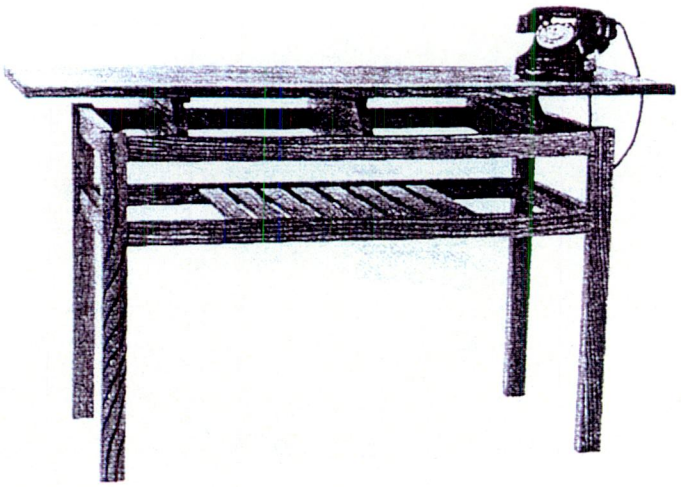
> "I find the very fact that I haven't formally been trained in furniture design is very freeing". (Interview, 08.12.97)

As with Berg and the O'Driscolls, materials play a major part in the motivation of design. The materials Bell uses are salvaged trees and these often suggest a design in themselves. In that way, the Irish countryside has supplied the material and inspiration for design. However, this craftsman is also very aware of what is going on around him. He finds influences in everything from architecture to fashion.

The work produced by Bell has a simplicity of line and a certain presence within its structure. His "Console table" (fig. 4) is inkeeping with contemporary style and what is in demand on the domestic Irish market, yet it's elegance and simplicity suggest Japanese influences. The journalist, Mary Henry says of Michael Bell's furniture:

> "A contemporary range of pieces redolent of all things Oriental are fluid and clean in their streamlined symmetry". (Henry, 1994, p. 29)

The essence of Michael Bells design revolves around his respect and immense love for the wood with which he works and his keen attention to detail. Decoration is kept to an absolute minimum to maintain the simplicity of the line and form.



(fig. 4) Console Table in Irish elm designed by Michael Bell.

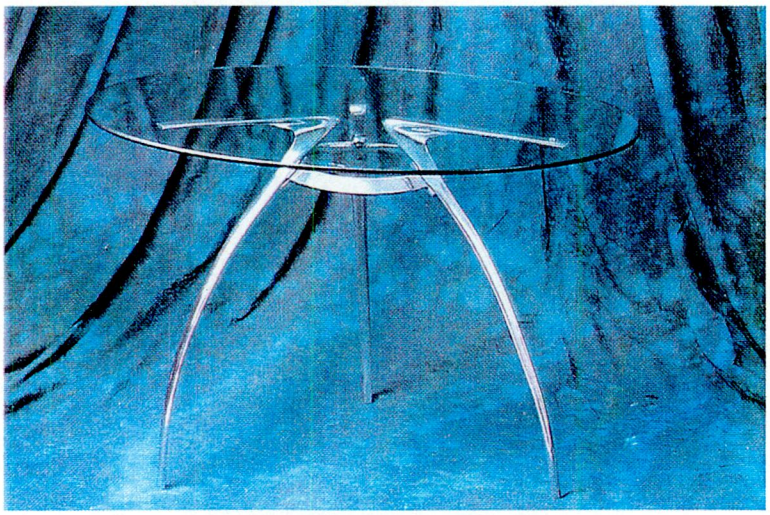
The notion of simplicity creating a sophisticated design, is one which applies very much to the design work of Robert Drennan. He runs the contemporary furniture company Foko, with branches in Dublin and London. Robert Drennan is originally from Co. Kildare but studied Industrial Design at Suffolk College of Art and later, design at the London College of Furniture. He has also travelled and has sufficient experience working with furniture companies such as Aero and Parker Knoll in Britain, to know what is needed in the business of contemporary furniture design. The Suffolk College gave Drennan a good grounding in techniques, production methods and materials. This enables him to design with a knowledge of how his designs can best be translated into batch production.

For Drennan, design takes on a very business like format. In his opinion, design

> "has to do with styling. It has to do with the brief for the product that you get. It has to do with the market that you are entering". (Interview, 01.12.97)

He is very definite when stating that this is what he believes is the essence of good design practice. He seems to be of the opinion that design and art and craft cannot mix to give, what to his mind is proper design.

Robert Drennan is indeed skilled at designing successfully for semi-mass production. In 1991, Drennan showed his "Spider" table (fig. 5a) at a furniture show in the Solomon Gallery in Dublin. Mary Dowey, writing for the Irish Times made this comment:



(fig. 5.a) "Spider" Table in glass and aluminium designed by Robert Drennan.

> "While it's clear from the Solomon show prototypes that Robert Drennan is a craftsman, his real interest lies in designing good modern furniture for mass production". (Dowey, 23.03.91)

It is interesting to see Robert Drennan being addressed as a craftsman. He is now obviously involved in designing, with a knowledge of materials and technique, but not within what we would see as a traditional craft situation. As Irish furniture usually originated from a craft basis. Drennan's designs are evidence of how far the Irish design of furniture has come, having began with a craft orientation.

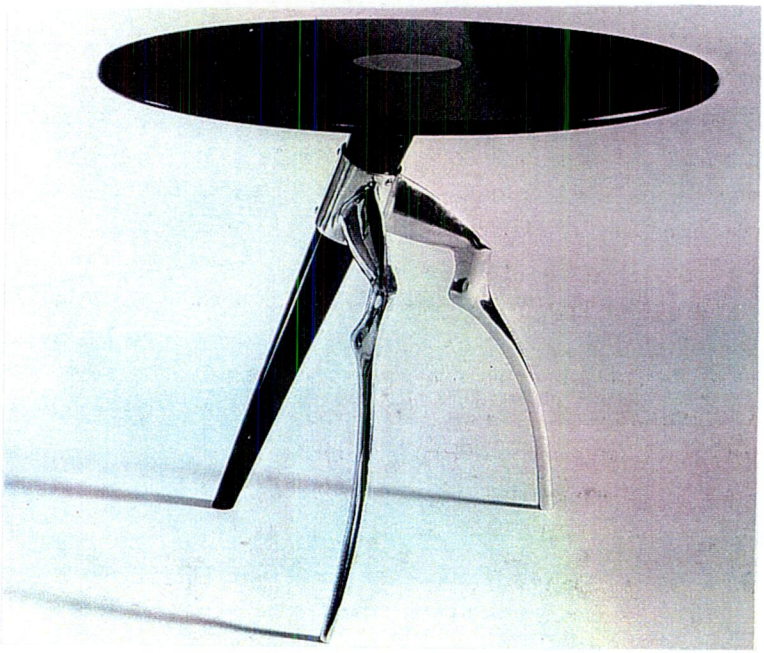
In the 1980's, the designer Matthew Hilton designed a circular, three legged table entitled "Antelope Table" (fig. 5b). There are similarities between the design of this table and Drennan's "Spider" table even though the materials used are different. Like Hilton, Drennan has chosen to name the table to suggest movement of an animal within a functional form. Susan Lambert has suggested that Hilton's table

> "takes as its model the three-legged table, a vernacular design associated with the cottage". (Lambert, 1993, p. 59)

If we see the similarity between Hilton's table and Drennan's design, we can see both designers taking the vernacular element into consideration.

The "Spider" table is the ultimate in simplicity which serves the consumer in a functional and stylish manner. The circular glass top is supported by three aluminium arched legs which on meeting at the centre, run just underneath the glass to the outer circumference of the circle. This design was formed with the restrictions of manufacture in mind and is done

so with cost, overall aesthetics and construction all accounted for. In fact, all designers must conceive a product and allow for the demands and reaction of the modern consumer. In relation to methods of manufacture used and the quality of finish, which they will be receiving within the product, the consumer dictates very often, the trends in materials.



(fig. 5.b) "Antelope" table designed by Matthew Hilton in 1987. Materials used are MDF, stainless steel, sycamore and aluminium.
(Lambert, 1993, fig. 66, p. 59.)

Chapter 2
From Design to Production

The translation of design into production is vitally important. One process depends on the other for the whole to come together in perfect unity. The concept of producing any piece of furniture begins with a design or idea for what is to come. Therefore, whether the piece is hand-crafted or 'manufactured industrially', the people responsible for the original idea are classed as designers. How each designer chooses to realise their design, can affect both the design and production process.

The increased popularity of industrial manufacture in producing practically every object that surrounds us has led to much questioning of craft furniture. There are many and varying views on the validity of the craft method of furniture making placed beside the mass and batch produced items. John Heskett has stated in his book "Industrial Design"

> "A clear thread of development is discernible however, in that design, the conception of visual form has become progressively separated from the act of making". (Heskett, 1980, p. 7)

This may indicate that the overwhelming trend in the twentieth century has been for industrially produced goods.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, we saw a revolt against the whole industrial movement with the presence of the Arts and Crafts movement. (Heskett, 1980, p. 10). In this century much of this craft movement has survived, perhaps not in as obvious or extreme

ways. Craft has modernised and brought the basis of quality handmaking and design through to cater for the consumer of to-day. There is inevitably a certain difference in how the consumer society as a whole views craft furniture and industrially produced furniture within the same market.

The mainstream furniture market has been dominated by mass produced pieces. This gives the consumer the security of familiarity in that the designs stem from popular successful furniture styles of the past. Until recently, affordable "designer" contemporary furniture which is industrially batch produced and is well designed has not been available in Ireland. Now that the demand is there for well designed industrially made, contemporary furniture, the designers are answering this demand with original pieces of quality manufacture. These stand beside craft pieces which may often cost more.

Of course, traditionally the idea of a craft based and designed piece of furniture was that it would endure in age and quality. It may also have cost considerably more than an industrially, manufactured item of furniture, as it was a unique design and a one-off piece. Peter Dormer writes that

> "since a piece of handmade furniture is inherently expensive, it made marketing sense to make the furniture express its expensiveness". (Dormer, 1988, p. 140).

This need to express expensiveness manifested itself very often in ornamentation which modernism shunned.

However, craftmakers and designers are holding their own amid to-days industrially driven world. Modernism and industrial production has inevitably affected how craftmakers design furniture. Peter Fuller quotes Herbert Reed as saying

> "The machine has rejected ornament; and the machine has everywhere established itself". (Fuller, 1988, p. 120)

Mechanically produced goods have become the norm in our modern environment. Craft items must present elements within their design which make them compatible in our industrial surroundings. This can result in a streamlining of design form to compete with the modernist aesthetic. Likewise, a revolt against compatibility can result in a distinctly craft orientated piece.

Designers working in Ireland to-day, such as Paul Berg and Michael Bell have moved with the times and are tuned into what the modern consumer needs. They have then taken it a step further by adding the characteristic unique style of a hand-produced piece. This combined with a sleek design which fits into the modern interior, gives hand-produced items a premium over industrially produced counterparts. Some may argue that there is a coldness and a lack of human participation in industrially produced furniture which is not present in a handcrafted piece. This is where we can question how strong the link between original designer and their method of production is. John Heskett believes that if an entire process is accomplished by one person, there is a greater understanding and coherence of a piece on a human scale.

> "In mass production industry this coherence is fragmented" (Heskett, 1980, p. 7).

The production of furniture obviously appears to be important in shaping the public perception of a piece of furniture. If craft and industrially produced items were isolated and presented without knowledge of how they were made, perhaps there would be an openness to both processes equally. Some items of furniture appear obviously to have been designed and handcrafted. Other pieces may not scream of handcraft and so furniture may be examined on a design level. After this it would be interesting to then look at how each piece was produced.

In some ways, this introduces the question of how relevant artistic creativity is in the overlapping situation of design and use of materials in production. Peter Dormer opens his essay entitled "Thoroughly Modern Making" with the sentence

> "In the 'art' world the word 'craft' is shunned:" (Dormer, 1992, p. 29)

Within the "craft and design" world, is the word "art" shunned? Historically art has been seen as superior and craft has always strived to gain a similar status. Hence to-day, there seems to be less difficulty with the craft and design sectors accepting "art" as opposed to the reverse situation.

Certainly, within craft furniture there is more of a willingness to combine and accept art as being a component.

The designer, Paul Berg is very much in favour of a crossover from the art world into the realm of craftwork. As he comes from a fine art training, he approaches his own work from a sculptural standpoint. While he works with quality of techniques and finish in mind, he feels that aesthetics have "been hi-jacked by technicians" (Interview, 15.12.97).

Attention to technique would be more readily associated with craft commercial work than art work. Peter Dormer states that

> "Art furniture is a commercial activity". (Dormer, 1987, p. 141)

If we are to believe this, then craft technique, it seems cannot mingle with "art" and still be addressed as art.

Production may bypass design in some instances. This is where we see technicians taking over where there would be a designer. Michael Bell is certainly a gifted technician. Details of construction within a piece, can become incorporated into the design. The perfection of beautifully formed joints within a piece can only enhance the success of a simple uninhibited design. The influence of modernism has led to a simplification of design within the craft production process. This affects how production methods are applied in craftmaking.

Though he may not wish to admit it, Paul Berg is, in a sense, using production methods to guide his design. He sees his work in artistic terms which have only recently been introduced to craftmaking. Berg draws inspiration also from Irish Vernacular furniture,

which has, for centuries, been led very strongly by craft technique (Interview, 15.12.97). He works with unseasoned wood which is moist and flexible when he is forming a piece. On drying out, the wood then warps to create the irregular shapes which are characteristic of his pieces. These shapes which are crafted traditionally, are what create Berg's "art furniture". Therefore the input that each of these designers has in the production of their furniture is vital to the sympathetic union of design with making.

As it is questionable to what extent artistic creativity is involved in craft design, so also is the notion that art can enter into the design of furniture which is to be industrially manufactured. Robert Drennan of Foko sees design and production as being rather separate. Production of a piece overlaps into the design in the fact that it must be accounted for when more than one piece is being manufactured. In this way, he is designing around manufacturing processes and allowing their limitations to affect his designs.

As that forms part of his brief, he does not become involved to the degree in which a craft designer would in the actual production process. He sees this as being a very definite difference between designing for manufacture industrially and for craft production.

> "It's important to be able to design to a company's brief, not to your own. Unless you can do that you're an artist or a designer - craftsman, - not somebody who designs for manufacture". (Dowey, Irish Times, 29.03.93).

This is Robert Drennan's view on design in relation to craft and industrial production. He seems to see design in a very business like manner. Good design does not involve letting your own brief enter into the process.

When designing for mass or batch production there is a certain brief set out by the client. The nature of mass production insists that a designer must remain within that brief. Designing a one-off piece of furniture allows more scope to be flexible within the brief, as the client can be consulted. However, in both design situations, it is the creativity that the designer brings to the brief which makes a product successful. This is true whether it is for the industrial or craft area.

Expressed creativity is probably more recognised with the work of craftmakers. Peter Dormer wrote of such work:

> "The craftsmens' wares were expressive of the hand, and implicit in every craft product was the idea of one human being producing for another rather than the anonymity which is implicit in mass production". (Dormer, 1988, p. 139)

In the late nineteenth century, William Morris chose this notion as his working ethic. It was the basis of the Arts and Crafts movement. However, Charles R. Ashbee, founder of the Guild and School of Handicraft is said to have realised and acknowledged the affect that mechanical manufacturing would have on civilisation, declaring that

> "Modern civilisation rests on machinery and no system for the encouragement or the endowment of the teaching of the arts can be sound that does not recognise this". (Fuller, 1988, p. 119)

This leads the way for how industrial manufacture was to affect the craft movement. We are seeing a change as more craft designers are approached with corporate commissions.

To-days craft designers can also work to a professional design brief and yet allow the creativity which makes them a craftsperson to come through. Even though a designer may design for industrial manufacture, it is still possible for the individual creativity of the designer to come through in the manufactured piece. Paul Berg believes that when he sees Robert Drennan's "Spider" table, that it definitely shows Drennan's mark of personality (Interview, 15.12.97).

In that case, is the essence of a beautiful piece of furniture purely in the design? Comments are constantly passed on the personality expressed in Paul Berg's pieces. If we take away the fact that these pieces are hand-crafted, it would seem that we are looking at a wacky design. This then, must be the personality of the piece and it may have nothing to do with the mark of the hand, with which Morris was so occupied. We can accept this but it is still possible to suggest that the energy of human involvement in the craft process of production can lend an extra dimension to the piece.

Tadhg and Simon O'Driscoll develop designs for mainly the corporate end of the market. They deal with one-off domestic pieces through to hotel and complete office fit-outs and use only industrial manufacturing processes in the production of their pieces. Although Tadhg was originally a craft designer, the pair now concentrate on design. His training brings valuable insight as to how materials work in relation to each other and under certain industrial treatments. Their designs take the form of simple very modern lines with no obvious indication in any way towards craft.

The material available and how they can benefit their designs in the manufacturing process plays a large part in how designers choose to create their pieces. The O'Driscolls have moved away from traditional materials such as wood and brass. Instead, while still using timber, they are combining materials such as steel, glass, plastics, polycarbonates and leather. In order to successfully accomplish a professional union of these materials, it is essential to use an industrial form of manufacture.

Also for Robert Drennan, the only means suitable to what he wants to achieve is an industrial one. Like the O'Driscolls, he has chosen very contemporary materials such as steel, aluminium and glass and mixed these with timber to form very up-to-date furniture. Michael Bell uses indigenous woods where possible and occasionally incorporates glass into his work. He finishes his pieces by rubbing with oil or beeswax, a process which is completed after a couple of weeks.

For Paul Berg, the colour provided naturally by the woods, he uses is a very important factor in the materials he chooses to work with. He tries to keep the use of stains to a minimum and finds that woods such as ash, monkey puzzle and tulip wood give suitable lights and darks with which to bring subtle colours into his pieces. All the furniture produced by each of these designers is in demand on the contemporary furniture market, yet each piece is distinctively different both in design and especially in how it was manufactured.

Due to the materials used in the making of each piece, the construction will then vary in accordance with those materials. The use of screws, nails or glue is practically unknown in the crafting of pieces by both Berg and Bell. Glue is sometimes but rarely used. Both craftsmen rely on the collaboration of design with the natural properties of the wood which has the capacity to create joints when carefully treated.

The batch produced pieces designed by the O'Driscolls and Robert Drennan present a mixture of correct wood joints with screws used, for example, in the construction of Drennan's "Spider" table. Bonding, stitching, heat treatments and screwing are used for industrial production. The materials tend to supply any colour needed in both the industrial and the craft produced pieces.

Production is an extremely important, carefully considered stage in the step leading to the finished piece. Very often, although production is important for the designer, the consumer may not consider the nature of that step as a major deciding point in purchasing a piece of furniture. There is still a small percentage of customers who want to buy craft items on the basis that it is craft. However, most consumers approach the buying of furniture looking purely at the aesthetic. The "look" tends to override the production concerns for those not equipped with specialist production knowledge. The consumer often seems to be unaware of the significance of the production methods which lie behind the final presentation of the "look" which so appeals to them.

Chapter 3

Marketing the Product

There has been a distinct change in attitude towards contemporary furniture in the last decade. The antique furniture market still thrives as does the market for cheap antique classics which are mass produced. Both of these markets are targeting a class of consumer with different standards, taste and expectations in relation to the design quality of furniture. The modern, more educated and design aware consumer tends to fall into the middle to high class bracket. It is this niche in the market that quality contemporary furniture designers and craftspeople supply.

Exposure to what has been available abroad helps to open the public's eyes. The consumer is now more aware of what quality design is all about. Shops such as Habitat, Brown Thomas, Minima and Foko in Dublin have all played an important part in leading the way for contemporary interiors to finally become a reality in Ireland. Habitat , which opened a branch in Dublin in 1994, have started to give the consumer food for thought where creating a stylish interior is concerned. This has enabled the more "designer" outlets such as Foko and Minima to introduce both international and Irish furniture of the highest quality.

All of this, combined with an improved economy, has given people the confidence to seek out a unique piece of furniture which is in touch with what is currently happening in interiors. An increased level of awareness has also been formed by an increase in the number of people travelling abroad. People are witnessing what international designers are

producing. Travel can, in turn, inform the Irish consumer as to what they may find on the Irish market.

The furniture designers Tadhg and Simon O'Driscoll agree that travel has played a large part in the growth of the industry here in Ireland. Simon O'Driscoll commented that

> "Domestic clients are becoming more open, whereas five years ago, it was just traditional". (Interview, 28.11.97)

He admits that this openness has raised their clients expectations of what quality furniture design is. After looking to furniture outlets for this standard of design and on not finding what they need, the client turns to the O'Driscolls to design a piece to their specifications.

Paul Berg, Michael Bell and Robert Drennan have all commented on what brings clients to commission them. All have agreed on the lack of designed-to-order pieces which thus leads clients to approach them. The commissioning process was very often dismissed by clients in the past as it involved researching each designers portfolio. There was also a belief that to commission a unique piece of work would be an outrageously expensive undertaking. It is now becoming clear that it does not have to cost a vast amount to own a piece customised to your own requirements.

The quality of modern furniture both in its design and structural quality is also becoming more apparent. Young people are favouring a more contemporary look over traditional pieces. Designers in Ireland to-day have taken on board our traditional craft background as

a nation and moved it to fit into what is called for to-day. Helen Kilmartin, owner of the interiors shop Minima, says of the younger people who are becoming her customers

> "Mostly, they like a contemporary look rather than the heavy traditional thing". (Irish Times, 03.10.96)

Robert Drennan, who runs the interior shop Foko, also sees a change in how young people are buying furniture. He aims at a target market of ages between twenty-five and thirty-five. He comments that the Irish furniture industry

> "Is still a very underdeveloped market and is changing very quickly". (Interview, 01.12.97)

As regards the domestic market for furniture design, Michael Bell, a craftsman, finds that many of his clients are not rich people. They are those who can appreciate quality and the fact that a piece will endure if it's well made. They are looking for something special which will last.

As the younger generation in this country become more open and better visually educated, the furniture industry is introducing more contemporary furniture. As Ireland is moving into its own as a country which has much to offer, Irish designers are given the opportunity to display their work to a sympathetic audience. Dublin city also is becoming popular with foreign tourists as a modern, sophisticated city with a fresh contemporary air to it.

The main outlets for designers to exhibit their work were usually craft galleries. If the gallery was not showing a piece of work by a designer, they would hold a portfolio of their work to present for potential clients to view. Exhibiting at European furniture fairs is Robert Drennan's way of keeping in touch with contacts in Germany, Italy and Spain. For Paul Berg and Michael Bell, the Craft Showcase Exhibition in the R.D.S. in Dublin, yields much commission work and is a valuable form of advertising. In Dublin, Design Yard in Temple Bar and the Crafts Council Gallery in the Powerscourt Centre, as well as the Killkenny Design Shop are the main outlets of show for craft furniture designers. Some of these outlets aid in the commissioning process and act as an intermediary between designer and client. This can add a little to the overall price charged at the end of work. However, it is a unique service as it saves the client doing all of the research necessary before agreeing on contacting one designer.

Many more people are turning to these services as they are not content with what they are seeing in interior shops. Some shops such as Habitat provide a well designed item of furniture but one which may not possess the quality at the manufacturing stage. These shops can also be criticised as selling a compact lifestyle in a packet. More people are now beginning to venture away from this and create a more eclectic style of their own. This wielding of choice is part of the satisfaction involved in commissioning a piece. From consultation with the client and consideration of the space the finished piece will occupy, a style can be created to fit with their personality.

The fact that people are more designer aware in turn leads to publicity which is of the most valuable kind. The O'Driscoll brothers find that people come to them, having heard of their work from a previous client of theirs or having seen the work and feeling that they would like something similar. Word of mouth can be one of the greatest assets to a designer and helps in the initial stages of setting up a business.

The marketing of a product is crucial to its success. It is clear that there are many gifted furniture designers and craftspeople who do not market their product and this is the one downfall in their business. The image a designer shows to the public is through the style of his or her work. Therefore, marketing is much needed when a designer is beginning to break into the Irish furniture market. Martina Gillan, owner of The Cat and Moon Craft Gallery in Sligo believes that

> "There is a commercial purpose for handmade items that is beyond the aesthetic. Like anything else on sale, craftwork is a business". (D-side, 1996, p. 1)

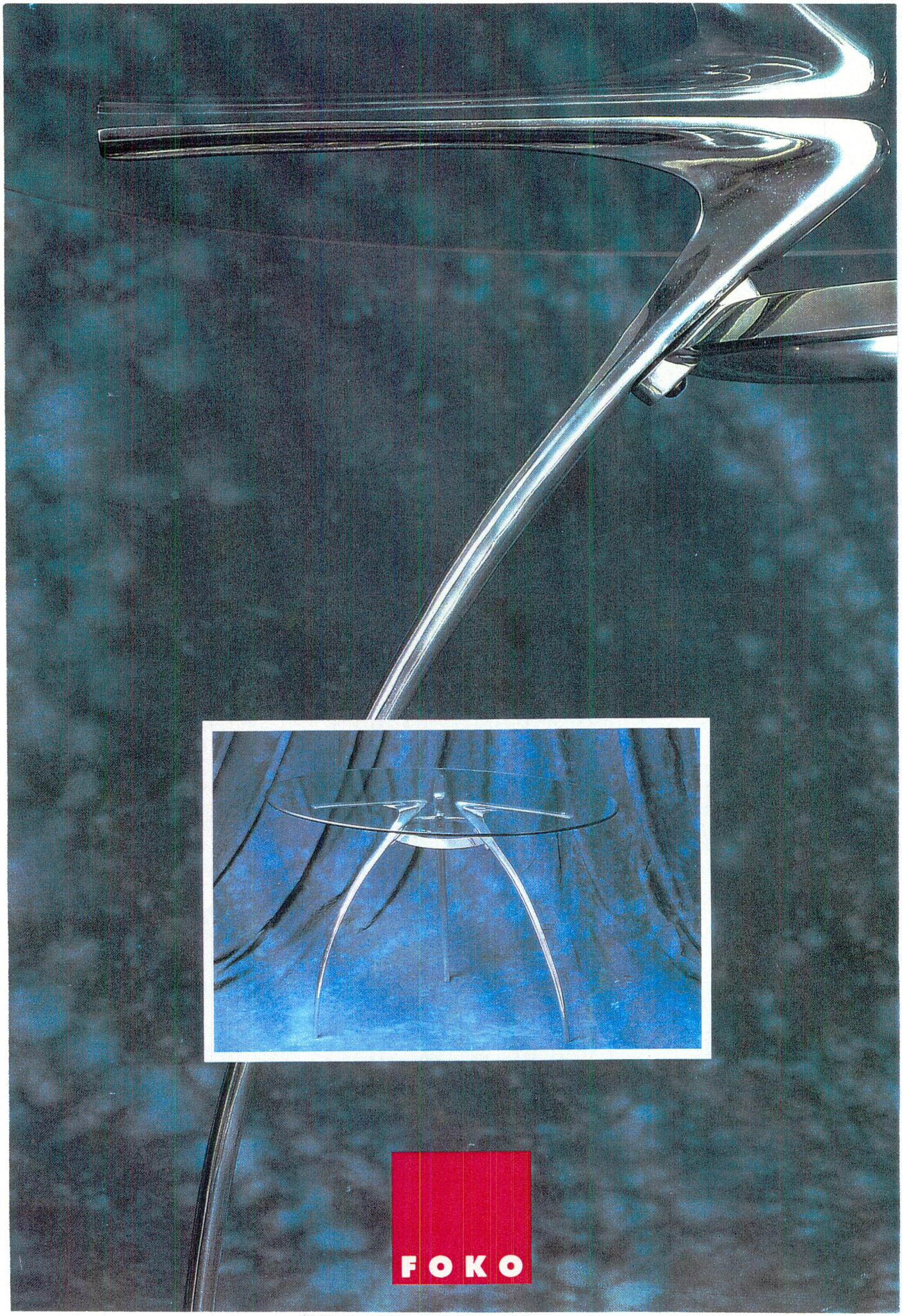
The importance of business training for designers has been given prominence in recent years with courses run in the Crescent Workshop in Kilkenny to address the matter properly.

How each designer handles marketing can vary as much as the style of designs vary. Michael Bell works with his business partner, who manages all public relations work and is responsible for creating a name which is known. This consists of pushing to get articles and photographs of work published in interior magazines and newspapers, putting together a portfolio of suitable work for galleries and developing reliable client contacts.

Irish interior magazines such as Image Interiors, Irish House and Home and Select Magazine have all become available to the Irish public within the last seven years. These publications offer coverage for designers which reaches their target market. Select Magazine features the best of craft from around Ireland and supplies contact addresses for the reader. Also, the Irish television programme "Beyond the Hall Door" advertises the notion of contemporary interiors and furniture to a wider audience. The programme visits furniture fairs and homes and includes a makeover section. All of this introduces the viewers to what is available and achievable with modern interiors.

Paul Berg believes that it is very much a business in which the designer must contact the media and potential clients. It means advertising their work as something which has a certain personality, style and quality which sets if apart from all other work in its field. Berg sells work to galleries in the US and also has some steady outlets for his work in this country. The Design Concourse in Galway and the Cat and Moon Gallery and Shop in Sligo have proved to be popular outlets for his work.

Both Robert Drennan and the O'Driscolls have compiled catalogues of their work (fig. 6 and 7). This works as a good visual method of advertising. The O'Driscolls explained that through circulation of this catalogue and word of mouth recommendations, they have



(fig. 6) The cover page of Robert Drennan's catalogue for Foko. Designed by Robert Drennan.

(fig. 7) The cover page of Tadhg and Simon O'Driscolls catalogue for their business. Designed by design factory.

managed to attract clients both from Ireland and abroad. Robert Drennan's company Foko, use advertising in a number of ways in addition to the catalogue. Postcards are available on the shop counter and advertisements in newspapers (figs. 8 and 9) are simple and very clear to attract attention easily. It is noticeable that the advertisement uses a modernist sans serif typeface. This typeface suits the furniture it is promoting. It is more commonly used by industrial designers than by craft designers and this illustrates the difference in relation to how each business chooses to advertise their work.

The more people are exposed to new and innovative furniture and hear of certain designers, the more common it will become to regard contemporary designed furniture as the norm. Paul Berg says of people's reaction to his work

> "People find bizarre things very normal after a while". (Irish Times, 09.05.96)

Whether contemporary Irish furniture design is bizarre or otherwise, people are accepting it more readily and this may well be due to advertising and the boom in the whole interior design sector at the moment. With better marketing, we may yet be seeing an emergence of further talent and with it a thriving market for furniture in Ireland.

(fig. 8) A postcard for the interiors shop Foko. Available from the shop.

(fig. 9) An advertisement for the interiors shop, Foko, which uses a modernist sans serif typeface. (Irish Times, Thurs. 22.01.98).

Conclusion

Contemporary Irish furniture design has finally been recognised as a valid contributor to the Irish interiors market. Design and production in Ireland has improved to provide high quality furniture from both the craft and industrial sectors. To-day furniture businesses are either craft or industrially design orientated. However, I have discovered that one cannot simply categorise many designers strictly under either section as each varies slightly in their methods of production. By interviewing the designers from the four businesses and relating their answers to my secondary reading, it is possible to see them as representative of a range of ways of making.

Michael Bell and Paul Berg are both craftsmen. Their work, however is very different in design and ideology. Bell produces simple, functional pieces which are beautifully made and speak very much of the craft method of production. Paul Berg also creates beautifully crafted pieces but with a wacky design which does not shun decoration. Both Michael Bell and Paul Berg work to domestic and corporate commissions, while still using handcraft as a method of production. Michael Bell is now working on a number of designs to produce a range of furniture which would be batch produced and handcrafted. Producing a standard range of furniture in this manner would usually be associated with a designer designing a range for industrial manufacturing.

The O'Driscolls and Robert Drennan design furniture which is to be industrially produced. Tadhg and Simon O'Driscoll design mainly for the corporate market and so what they

design is usually batch produced. Robert Drennan also serves the corporate market but designs a prototype for semi-mass production.

Influences such as modernism, technology and foreign design are all attributed to how the designers of to-day think. The principle of simplicity, truth to materials and minimal decoration of the modern movement all appear to influence the design of the O'Driscolls, Robert Drennan and on a craft level Michael Bell. Paul Berg's approach could be seen as a postmodernist one as he is very content to apply decoration to his quirky pieces.

The debate of whether craft produced items hold a certain premium over industrial ones can be examined by looking at contemporary Irish designers. It appears that they all hold a strength in the area of design and that personality and character can be evident in both craft and industrially produced items.

As I came to this thesis more in sympathy with a craft way of thinking, I have found that the process of research has helped to increase my appreciation of industrially manufactured furniture. While appreciating the design of both craft and industrially produced furniture, it is still my opinion that there is a certain energy present in the craft process that lends more to the finished piece. However, in the modern market for furniture in Ireland both types of furniture are accepted. Irish consumer attitudes towards contemporary furniture are changing as society becomes more design aware. This awareness can only strengthen the Irish contemporary furniture design market for the future.

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