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The Irish Furniture industry and Design.
From the 15th century to the end of the 19th century.

A Thesis submitted by Caroline Phelan for the 15th March 1991 to the Faculty of History of Art and Design, in Candidacy for the Bachelor of Design in Visual Communicalions.

Contents

Introduction		*Page 1*
Chapter I	**The Roots**	*Page 3*
Chapter II	**The Product**	*Page 9*
Chapter III	**The Growth and Decline**	*Page 16*
Chapter IV	**Design in the 19th Century**	*Page 31*
Conclusion		*Page 35*
Bibliography		*Page 36*

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INTRODUCTION

> Many learned publications have been devoted to the subject of antique furniture produced in the leading capitals and major cities of Continental Europe and America. But not a word has appeared about the city which, within the possible exception of Paris, may well have been the largest furniture manufacturing centre in all Europe : Dublin.
> [Hinckly, 1971, p.5]

Similar is the case today for all of Ireland. Irish furniture of the past has been much neglected.

Most Irish furniture is untraceable before 1715, when, after great political unrest, there came a period of peace in Ireland. The tragic implications of the disturbed state of the country in the 17th century is that practically all the furnishings of the period perished and it is only possible to trace our furniture up to the 18th century by examining inventories, statistics, reports and ancient records.

The furnishings of the early 18th century Irish house are likewise difficult to track down, for so much has disappeared and left the country in the 19th and 20th centuries. This is due to the fact that many of the wealthy English living in large Irish houses left Ireland and returned to England. Today it is rare to find an old family still living in their original house.

My thesis is therefore an effort to review the history of the Irish furniture industry and design until the end of the 19th century, in an attempt to look for the missing link.

A concise but comprehensive definition of furniture is not easy to frame, for it would include all household fittings of utilitarian

or artistic appeal or be limited to components not in themselves part of the main structure.

The latter would be still too wide for my purposes. Carpeting and wall tapestry must remain for the most part outside the scope of study. In the interest of clarity the work of the cabinet-maker and upholsterer will receive most attention.

CHAPTER I

THE ROOTS

The Roots of Furniture

Wood, ivory, precious stones, bronze, silver and gold, have been used from the most ancient times in the construction and decoration of furniture. The kinds of objects required as furniture have varied according to 'the changes of manners and customs as well as with reference to the materials at the command of workmen in different countries and climates.' During the long Empire-strewn centuries, which intervened between the lapse of Egypt and the fall of Rome, household comfort developed very little. Furniture was little needed by people who lived mostly out of doors. This, and the natural fact that material decays, has meant that little ancient furniture of any country is extant. The chief sources of information about it have been mural and sepulchral designs and paintings. [Jones, 1989, p.16] From these notable points emerge.

It is interesting to see that most methods used for decorating woodwork made up into furniture are still in regular use and the processes of putting it together are the same as they have always been. Remains of woodwork and furniture thousands of years old have been found mortised, or joined by dowels, dovetailed at the angles and glued or nailed together. No big changes have come in methods of decorating furniture. Egyptian woodwork was painted in tempera and carefully varnished with resinous gums and the craftsmen were familiar with the art of inlaying. Veneering, inlaying and marquetry have long been familiar types of ornament. [Pollen, 1876]

The Roots of Furniture in Ireland

In Britain there is a long tradition of furniture, stretching from a modern Mahogany Age back to a Walnut Age and, in still earlier times, to an Age of Oak. In Ireland the position is different. The innate artistry of the race so often expressed in metals and stone has left extant a few examples of medieval furniture, but it is

almost impossible to trace any instance of a staple furniture manufacturer before the early 18th century. The amount of furniture of fine quality that survived from the Oak Age (Tudor to late Stuart era) or Walnut Age (William and Mary's reign to that of George I) is negligible. This is undoubtedly because Ireland was in a very unsettled condition and governed solely by military occupation. There was no resident nobility to encourage a native industry in furniture for the equipment of their houses.

Only one piece of furniture, dating from around 1600, exists in Ireland today : this ornate oak table (fig.1) originally housed in Lemeneagh House, Co. Clare, is now on display at Bunratty Castle not far away. The complex carving on the table was also found on cupboard supports. Here the subjects of the lions and figures supporting the table represent Hope and Charity. Other subjects commonly used were, for example : diverse heraldic beasts, carved rondels enclosing profiled heads. Huge beds were made with heavy wooden canopies ornamented with scrolls, strapwork and inlaying. The overall feeling of furniture produced in the late 1500's and early 1600's was one of strength and heaviness.

So much furniture was lost due to rebellions and wars during the 17th century. The diary of Elizabeth Freke of Rathbarry Castle, Co. Cork shows the problems of settlers in Ireland during the 17th century. Their house was burnt at the end of the Williamite wars in 1692 and only two rooms were habitable.

> neither a bed, table or chair, or stool fit for a Christian to sett on - dish or platt to eatte out of ... and this was the fifthe time I came to bare walls and a naked house since I was married. [Glin, 1978, p.2]

This gives us an idea of how much furniture was lost, destroyed or stolen.

It was not until the first half of the 18th century that the country became more settled and not until after this, when the

(fig. 1) The Armada table now at Bunratty Castle.
Glin, Knight of. *p. 1 Irish Furniture 1978.*

independence of the Irish parliament was established, that the presence of legislators in Dublin led to social conditions really conducive to the growth of the applied domestic arts.

Even in the early 18th century it is difficult to gain much information as to the state of minor industries. The Ancient Records of Dublin and Old Dublin Almanacs give some facts. We learn from these sources that the various arts and crafts in that city were, as in medieval society, organized into guilds. [Webb, 1913] It appears that the masons, joiners and carpenters of Dublin were joined into one guild in the 16th century. This was a natural association, because all these crafts were concerned with the building trade and the members of each individual craft were not sufficiently numerous to have their own distinct guild organisation. Another cause of association was the desire to lighten the burden of taxation, for taxes were often levied by the Common Council of Dublin on the guilds of the city in an effort to provide funds for civic needs. [Jo. of R.S.A.I., 1905] The Calendar of Ancient Records of Dublin for 1716-1730 records, in 1714, that there were then 24 guilds in the city. The saddlers and upholsterers were, appropriately, in one guild. The carpenters, coopers and joiners had their separate bodies and each had two or three representatives at the Common Council of the Guilds [Ancient Records Dublin, 1716-1730].

These are the earliest roots of the industry, an industry which had reached peak prosperity by the late Thirties of the last century and which then fell into decline. Dublin, in the 1830's, had 200 shops engaged in cabinet-making, many devoted exclusively to chair or bedstead making and close to 50 employed in the auxiliary pursuits of carving and turning. About 1,800 workers found employment in the dependent trades of sawers, carvers, turners, tanners, upholsterers, stainers and polishers. Machine made furniture was unknown and Irish workers supplied almost the whole domestic market. This flourishing trade had resulted from steady progress in the preceding century.

Before, and in the early years of the Georgian era (1714-1829), Galway enjoyed perhaps the largest share of Spanish trade in England or Ireland. Readily accessible to ships coming from the West Indies,

the natural inference is that mahogany in large quantities found its way there, if only as ballast, from some of the Spanish colonies. Recalling Galway's old prosperity, we may assume that much of this timber was turned into furniture, though no real evidence of this has, I believe, been found. The probability, however, is that Dublin and Galway were the great centres for feeding the Irish market.

In the first half of the 18th century there was comparatively little contact with London and Irish craftsmen often adopted earlier English models to which they added ornamental designs of their own. Much of Irish design, therefore, dated from the late William and Mary era in the late 17th century. Following the William and Mary Baroque style, which was originally brought to England from Holland, the Irish craftsmen made furniture, chiefly from walnut, that was light, sleek and sophisticated. Their surface treatment was very important - partly for protection of fine veneers and partly through love of fine finish.

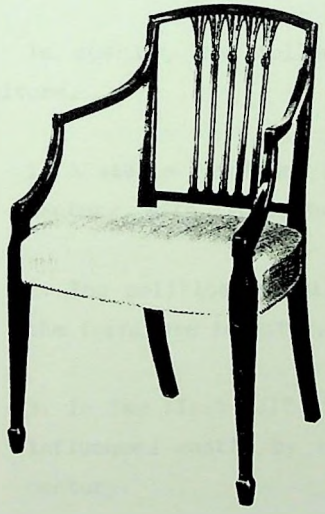
Theophilus Jones was one of the chief craftsmen of later 18th century Dublin and an impression of trading methods may be gathered from an advertisement of his in the Dublin Mercury, No. 83, 1766-68 :

> Theophilus Jones, cabinet-maker takes this method of acquainting his friends and the public that he has opened shop at the Sign of the Reindeer in Mountrath Street near Pill Lane where he intends to carry out his business in all its branches and hopes, by his constant assiduity and study, to please such patrons who shall favour him with their custom, to merit their encouragement and interest; and flatters himself that the cheapness and quality of his goods, as he is a young beginner, will secure to him the continuance of their favour. N.B. - Country commands shall be carefully obeyed [Wheeler, 1909].

The Directories of Dublin for the 18th century show that the number of cabinet-makers - or joiners, as they were known until about

1766 - steadily increased. In 1770 there were 24 cabinet-making manufacturers in the city and, according to The Dublin Almanac and General Register of Ireland, which registered 4000 traders in Dublin in 1788, there were 71 cabinet-makers, upholsterers and gilders working there in that year. In Wilson's Dublin Directory for 1795 there are cabinet-makers registered. In the middle of the century, Great George's Street seems to have been the principle centre of the craft. Capel Street and Bride's Alley (which was an entry to the present Bride Street from a point on Patrick Street mid-way between St. Patrick's Cathedral and Christ Church) became popular as the years advanced.

In the later century Cork, Limerick, Waterford, Clonmel and Kilkenny supported a flourishing trade. A Cork directory for 1787 shows that there were in the city seven cabinet-makers, a similar number of coach-building establishments and many carpenters, wheelwrights, carvers, gilders and timber merchants. These latter distributed imported wood. In Dublin a great warehouse close to the site of the Custom House was that city's receptacle for imported timber. It was known as Mahogany House. Cork and Limerick makers produced Irish Sheraton furniture of the highest quality. Designers of this period in England issued catalogues of their work. Irish craftsmen followed closely the designs of English men such as Adam (1765-1792), Sheraton (1751-1806) and Chippendale (1718-1789). These designers were working all during the 18th century and their catalogues of drawings were issued simultaneously in London and Dublin. Sheraton had a preference for carving and decorative veneers rather than inlaid decoration. Chests of drawers, cupboards, cabinets and commodes designed by him were similar in construction and style to his contemporaries Adam and Hepplewhite. His chests of drawers were either square, bow or serpentine-fronted, standing on turned or square feet often with spade shaping. He favoured the splay foot, which is a delicate plinth foot with an extended toe shaped like a spade (fig.2). Sheraton, like other designers of the period, favoured the classical style using the acanthus leaf, urns, flower and material festoon, on his friezes, rails, etc. He appeared to have favoured delicate carving in preference to pain or inlay, but he did use all three [Learoyd, 1981 p.88]. This neo-classical style



(fig. 2) A Sheraton Mahogany Chair with multi - splats decorated with rossettes and closed fans. Legs, feature the splay foot.
Learoyd, S. *p.65 English Furniture 1981*

was attributed to the Georgian period. Furniture produced in the earlier part of the Georgian era progressed from the Queen Anne style (1700-1730). Two major influences to the change was the arrival of mahogany and the trend toward magnificence brought by new prosperity. Wealth and growing leisure brought more travel and therefore an interchange of ideas with the rest of the world. The individual designer, such as those already mentioned, became important, due to rich patrons who made their personal styles the fashion.

There was little difference between Irish and English furniture design in the 18th century. In fact much of Irish furniture was sold as English in Britain. Most people recognised no difference due to the close approximation of design. In some cases, only by old bills, trade cards and drawings, are we able to identify Irish furniture abroad. In the 1950's an inquiry was made at the National Museum in Dublin on the subject. 'There are no criteria to distinguish what is Irish and what is English furniture!' [Hinckly, 1971 p.8] Despite our lack of originality in design, Irish furniture was of the highest quality and satisfied the home market.

To sum up, the following points review the roots of Irish furniture.

1. A stable furniture industry began firstly in the early 18th century, with little surviving from previous years.

2. The political stability during the 18th century encouraged the furniture industry, among others.

3. In the first half of the 18th century the work produced was influenced mostly by earlier English models of the late 17th century.

4. By the second half of the 18th century furniture produced in Ireland was of the highest quality. However, there was little difference between Irish and English furniture designs.

CHAPTER II

THE PRODUCT

In this chapter the specific categories and styles of furniture produced in 18th century Ireland will be discussed.

As mentioned, the 17th century in Ireland is characterised by a series of social and political upheavals, naturally then, we can expect the furniture products of such a society to reflect this fragmentation. What then were the outcomes in the 18th century after the turbulent 17th century.

In England the Elizabethan era (1558-1603) is generally admitted to have given that country her first native furniture style. This was followed by the Queen Anne style which was not really contemporaneous with the reign of the queen of that name, but ran through the last years of the 17th and the first decade of the 18th century. No inducement was given to the scanty group of Irish cabinet-makers to develop a native style until the Age of Walnut had passed in 1720.

But, turning for a moment to the more general aspects of wood working, in the 17th and early 18th century we find that a great deal of workmanship was applied to the multitude of partitions and panels in Irish houses. Both sides of partitions were worked upon and only the thickness of a single board divided rooms. Many woods were used, and besides the succession of oak, walnut and mahogany, cedar, chestnut and native varieties of fir were often in demand [Sadlier, p.62 1913].

As the 18th century advanced, large houses turned to plaster panelling and the more free design which is known as Rococo took advantage of this plastic medium. The Adam style arrived at the latter half of the century and, coinciding with the construction of a vast number of smaller houses in Dublin and provincial towns, due to increased prosperity, was eminently suitable. The Adam brothers' designs, which were published in Ireland, met the demand for smaller

furniture. Joinery became lighter, panelling almost disappeared and wooden mantelpieces came into vogue. Robert Adam's style was delicate and simple in construction, and his designs were based on a theory of reduction and refinement, therefore producing pieces of furniture which were less rigid and more graceful. He relied mainly on ornament for variation and designed normally for particular rooms and situations, e.g., niches, piers, etc. [Haris, 1973]. The architect, in his modern form, did not exist and the list of subscribers to any of the numerous works on the subject contain the names of many cabinet-makers and carpenters. Indeed, a certain knowledge of architecture was then considered an essential part of the mental equipment of a gentleman.

It is difficult to find descriptions of the more common domestic furniture of the 18th century, principally because its slight artistic value would prevent its preservation. In the Inventory of Howth Castle taken in 1748, the furniture is described in some detail. The full fashion of mahogany appears to be only just arriving and walnut is still popular. Skins made up for the remarkable scarcity of carpets. Common desks, tables and presses were fashioned, as they still are, of deal. Leather and rush bottomed chairs of walnut, oak or mahogany, elaborate four-post-beds and mahogany dining tables fill a great part of the list [Georgian Society, Vol.IV, 1912].

This diversity of woods is not surprising, for the introduction of a new wood, like mahogany, did not immediately close down the production of furniture in the material it superseded, or in the cheaper woods. The use of oak for furniture has continued from medieval times to the present day. Old craftsmen were conservative people and slow to imitate startling innovations, confining their efforts more to developments in the existing designs. New articles appeared mostly in fulfilment of a definite order from some rich or aristocratic patron and until the other well-to-do members of contemporary society demanded similar articles in sufficient numbers, such pieces would hardly be produced to form part of the ordinary stock in trade. Craftsmen, before the days of mass production, designed to no stereotyped patterns. Individuality marked their

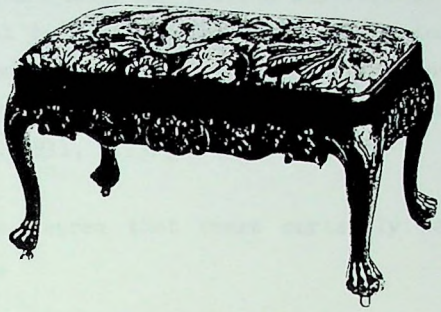
work, whether it was a costly piece made to order, or a piece for the most humble dwelling.

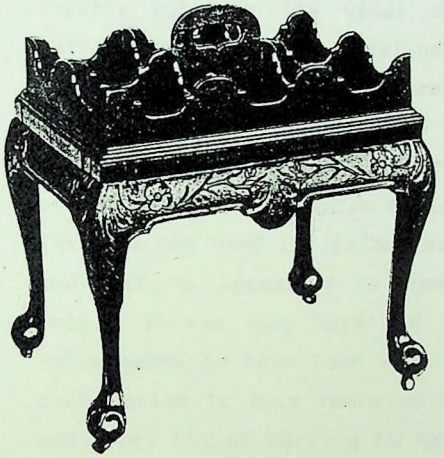
Considerable differences in treatment and decoration existed. There was a very wide range of articles in use : chairs, stools, settees, bureau bookcases (the type with glazed lattice doors was not made until the late 18th century) and cabinets. The age fully realized the decorative value of mirrors set into panels. Each well-appointed household had pedestal writing tables, card tables, side tables and dining tables (fig. 3). The side table was especially popular until 1770, when the mahogany top was introduced. Some are found with tops of marble slabs, black or yellow, when the article was of high quality and in other cases, white Sicilian marble. The table with a circular top and the firescreen with a needlework panel were other innovations of the period.

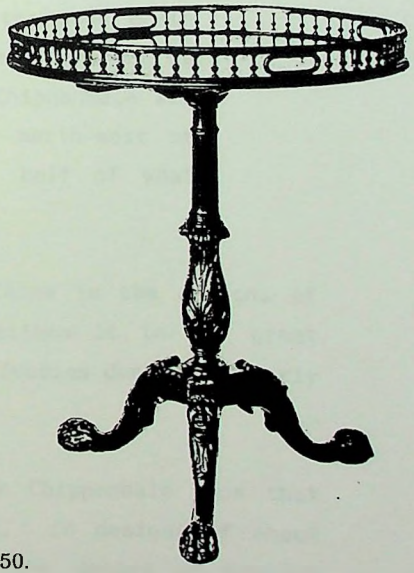
Thomas Chippendale, whose genius inspired so much of Georgian art, published his books of designs in 1754, 1759 and in 1762, [Binstead, 1904], but from 1725 to about 1755 this country produced a style which has become known as 'Irish Chippendale'. It approximates the English style but possesses certain distinctive features. Irish Chippendale is solid, rather heavy in form and ornamented with disconnected flat carving. Lion masks and paw feet are characteristic. (fig. 4) [Symonds, 1927] But, in spite of these differences from original Chippendale designs, I think it is difficult to know whether much of the so-called Irish Chippendale could really be called native furniture. This is because Chippendale's influence was so strong it seems that Irish features on the furniture were just additions to his original designs.

In 1749 the great duties on mahogany were reduced. Before that year the import amounted to £8 a ton. This was payable at the point of entry and there was no rebate on re-export. Whenever possible the wood was used economically. An Act, the 21st of George II, reduced the duty to £2.5.9. per ton on import in English ships, i.e., ships where the master and at least three-quarters of the crew were of English nationality, and to £2.7.9 when brought by strangers. These taxes were subject to a drawback of £2.2.0. on re-export in the log,

(fig. 3) Side table, giltwood and marquetry, byThomas Chippendale after a design by Robert Adam.
Jeol, D. *Funiture Design set free. p. 54 1969*







(fig. 4) Examples of Irish Chippendale from 1745 - 1750.
Symonds, R. *The present state of Old English Furniture. p.115 1927*

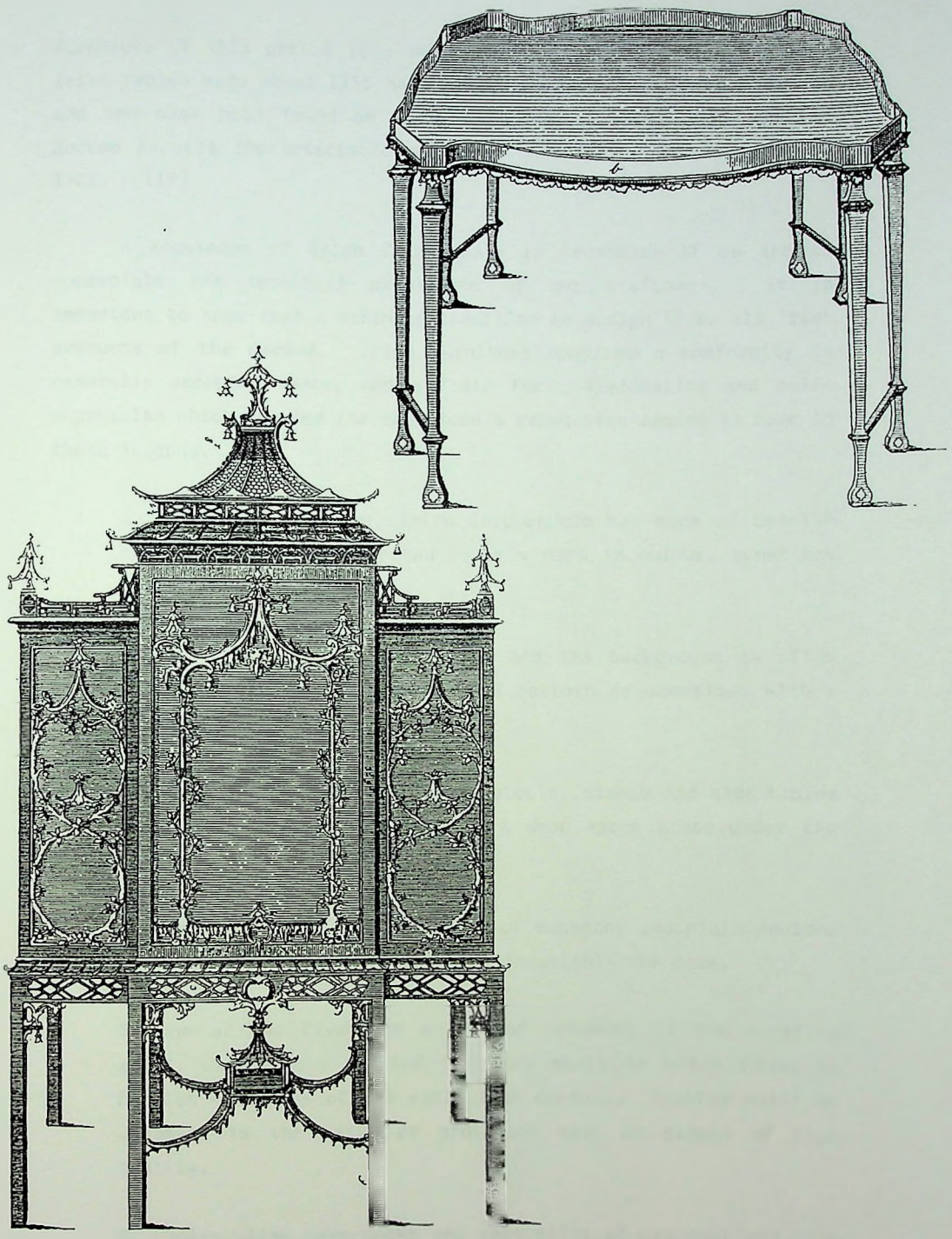
in boards, or in furniture, within three years. By the terms in which the Act was construed, shipment to Ireland was regarded as re-export, the duty being levied at the port of entry and refunded at the point of exit. Thus, furniture made for Ireland was free of any tax and it is probably true that this resulted in a style previously thought pure, being much adulterated due to the increase in contact between the two countries, naturally causing a certain degree of blending in styles. [Cescinsky, 1911, p.130]

Most authorities, however, agree that there certainly was a distinct Irish style. One says,

> experts consider its vital characteristic Dutch rather than English. Ireland did not draw from England or France because there the skilled workers were relatively prosperous and secure. Holland had a plethora of workers with average ability and many of them would find Dublin a pleasant residence ... The mahogany used in Ireland was on the whole good and uniform, appearing to come from one district only. It was very hard and usually dark. Each table seems to have been made from the same tree, each design to have emanated from the same brain and every bit of carving to have been fashioned by the same chisel. Relics of Irish Chippendale are widespread today but scarce in the north-west of the country. America holds about half of what remains extant. [Wheeler, 1904]

It is easy to see the influence of China in the designs of Irish Chippendale (fig. 5) and Wheeler ascribes it to the great importations of Chinese porcelain and carved ivories during the early Georgian era.

The broad characteristics of our Irish Chippendale show that the general inspiration had English sources. In designs of about 1735 our craftsmen appear to have copied the design of English furniture of about 1725. In fact, it may be said that the Irish



(fig. 5) Examples of Thomas Chippendale's designs showing Chinese influences.
Gloag, John. *A Short Dictionary of Furniture. p.186 London : Allen 1952*

furniture of this period is a decade later in design than English. Irish tables made about 1755 have a combination of the lion paw foot and the mask head found on English tables of about 1730 and the Rococo scrolls characteristic of about 1745 (fig. 6). [Symonds, 1921. p.115]

A knowledge of Irish Chippendale is necessary if we are to appreciate the technical excellence of our craftsmen. It is important to know that a definite tradition in design links all Irish products of the period. Irish furniture combined a comformity to generally accepted taste, and a flair for individuality and self-expression which secured its craftsmen a reputation second to none in these islands.

1. In the first place, Irish Chippendale was made of Spanish or San Domingo mahogany and is very dark in colour, sometimes approaching a black tone.

2. The carving is in low relief and its background is often decorated with an incised diamond pattern or sometimes with a punched design.

3. The cabriole legs of chairs, stools, stands and side-tables will invariably be connected by a deep apron piece under the frieze.

4. The side tables have the tops of mahogany and plain moulded edges. Until about 1770 this was invariably the case.

5. One of the favourite motifs of ornament is the escallop shell, undoubtedly adapted from the shell so often found in English furniture of the early 18th century. Another motif of ornament is the satyr or grotesque mask on pieces of high quality.

6. Chairs often have backs and seat rails of oak overlaid with mahogany veneer and chairs with cabriole legs were often designed with stretchers. Thus Irish furniture, up to 1755,

(fig. 6) Examples of elaborately carved Irish mahogany furniture, 1740 - '60, showing the Lion paw foot and mask heads.
Glin, Knight of. *p. 1 Irish Furniture 1978*

had not followed Thomas Chippendale's dainty styles. But in the 1760's taste lightened. English trade catalogues came in to influence design and Sheraton must have had a very big following for, in his Drawing Book of 1802, he mentions only two places where his book was on sale. One place was in England at 'W. Baynes, 54 Paternoster Row,' and the other in Ireland at, 'J. Archers of Dublin.' A. Hepplewhite and Co. published The Cabinet Makers and Upholsterer's Guide in 1794. The preface of this work runs as follows :

> English taste and workmanship have of late years been much fought for by surrounding nations and the mutability of all things has rendered the labours of our predecessors in this line of little use ... another reason in favour of the work will apply also to many of our countrymen and artisans whose distance from the metropolis makes even an imperfect knowledge of its improvements acquired with much trouble and expense. Our labour will, we hope, tend to remove this difficulty. [Hepplewhite, 1794]

The catalogue displays designs for 45 different articles of furniture and the whole amounts to 300 drawings engraved on 128 plates. The Appendix contains advertisements for numerous similar works on architecture, design and ornament. Such works have titles like 'Designs for Chimney pieces,' 'The Carpenters New Guide,' 'The Joiners Repository,' 'Ideas for Rustic Furniture,' and 'The Joiners and Cabinet-makers Darling'!! Robert Manwaring, a London cabinet-maker, in 1765 published a book The Whole System of Chair Making made plain and easy, stating in the Preface :

> The intention of the following pages is to convey ... full and plain instructions how the workman is to begin and finish with strength and beauty all the designs that are advanced in this book.

Chippendale's Gentleman's and Cabinet-maker's Directory had the widest renown. It contains 200 plates engraved by this master of design and impresses one with the fact that the trades of carver, gilder and picture-framer demand aptitudes very different from those of the cabinet-maker and must, therefore, have remained distinct branches of the furniture family.

Having looked at several of the definitive texts on furniture design of the 18th century I hope I have illustrated the characteristics of the Irish furniture product of the times. Of all these directories, the Chippendale Directory is the most exemplary because the style had such a strong influence on Irish craftsmen and has been recognized world-wide as a unique and priceless example of Irish ingenuity.

To sum up, I have described the various forms of furniture. The way in which the interiors of houses were constructed in the 18th century. The shift from a mainly English style in general to specific influences of individual designers such as Adam, Sheraton and Chippendale.

CHAPTER III

THE GROWTH AND DECLINE

In this chapter I shall examine how the Irish furniture trade developed in the 19th century. It is difficult to say whether the trade benefited from the Union of Ireland with Britain in 1801, or if this contributed to its decline. But I shall try to show what actually took place over this period. I shall also examine the place of each trade within the industry.

The intertwining of economics and politics immediately before and after the Legislative Union in 1801 made it difficult to acquire unbiassed information on the condition of our industries at the time. Indeed, in the 19th century, the case for Repeal of the Union was that Ireland suffered economically from alliance with Britain and the case against it that she grew even more prosperous. The furniture industry, if the evidence of directories is any guide, partook fully in what was undoubtedly a general increase in economic activity in the early century. According to the sixth Article of the Union, cabinet-ware, coaches and carriages were among the products, which for 20 years after January 1801, were charged with duties upon importation to Britain and Ireland respectively. But in a pamphlet published in Dublin in 1804, The Real Cause of the High Rate of Exchange, it is stated that :

> in spite of the high duties and the disadvantage of the rate of exchange, English manufacturers of all kinds, except linen, are imported into Ireland and sold there of a better quality and at a lower price than those of the country.

Balbriggan, in 1780, made furniture cloth of the finest and most durable kind. In 1818 it made it no more. [Freeman's letter, 1818]

The only possible conclusion to this is that costs of production in Britain must have been lower than in Ireland, perhaps because of Britain's head start in more industrialised methods of production, such as machine-powered sawmills for the rough cutting, or to lower internal taxes and labour costs.

We had never been self-sufficient in fabrics. In the years preceding the reign of a Free Parliament our imports had averaged about 6,000 pounds worth of carpeting and upholstery annually [House of Commons Jo., 1783-5, p.210]. Average import figures of carpets and carpeting (which presumably include upholstery ware) given for three years ending March 1793, 1800 and 1811, show increases from 58,062 yards to 58,610 yards and to 187, 998 yards. The author of these figures remarks that

> an increase in articles used for clothing, furniture and other domestic purposes, except in so far as the manufacture of the like articles may have decreased in Ireland, distinctly shows an improvement in the habits of the people and a more general diffusion of the comforts of life.

Imports of finished articles may have increased in quantity, but after 1803, there was also an increase in timber imports, and trading directories of the time show no evidence of a decline. Rather, a temporary slump seems to have existed immediately prior to the Union. [Wakefield, 1812, Vol. II, p.35]

To sum up, it appears that though the trade as a whole increased, the proportion of total sales made up by Irish production seems to have declined.

The Cabinet-Makers

In 1880 there were only 45 cabinet-makers and joiners shops in Dublin, while there had been 55 in 1795. Four years after the vital Legislation had passed into law, the number of carvers and gilders had declined, but the cabinet-makers, then with Bride's Alley as the

centre of their trade, numbered 51, but by 1810 had increased to 62. This, in spite of allowances for an increasing population, is a significant change. The following table illustrates the progress of cabinet-making in Dublin more clearly. The figures are from Wilson's Dublin Directories:-

Year	Amt.		Year	Amt.	
1795	55	Cabinet - makers	1830	78	Cabinet - makers shops
1800	45	" "	1835	125	" " "
1805	51	" "	1845	125	" " "
1810	62	" "	1850	100	" " "
1815	66	" "	1855	94	" " "
1820	70	" "	1860	104	" " "
1825	72	" "	1865	72	" " "

An interesting conclusion is reached when the information provided by Wilson's Dublin Directories, which give the figure for the number of cabinet-makers shops in the metropolis, is combined with the figures in the Census of Population returns, which show the occupational distribution of the population.

A.	A. Census of population	B.	B. Wilson's Dublin Directories	A.
	Number of Cabinet - makers		Number of shops	B.
1831	*628*	1830	*78*	8.0
1851	*728*	1850	*100*	7.3
1861	*782*	1860	*104*	7.5

The average number employed in each shop would appear to be seven. This, indeed, is corroborated in the case of Kilkenny City for which a directory of the year 1839 is extant. In 1831 the Census Returns show that there were 28 cabinet-makers in the city; in 1841 there were 27. This latter is a probable figure, then for 1839 the directory reports that three cabinet-making shops were established. [Wilsons, 1795, p.309]

By 1825 the trades of auctioneering and upholstering are often combined with that of cabinet-making and in 1830 it appears that Capel Street and Bride's Alley are losing their former representative character. Five years later, besides 125 cabinet-makers, there were in Dublin 31 turners, five chair makers, four carpet makers and 25 carvers, gilders and mirror makers. Though the number of cabinet-makers more than doubled from 1800 to 1850 the trade declined rapidly after 1850.

Coach-Building

In the 18th and 19th centuries coach building was one of our largest urban industries. In 1799 Dublin employed 1700 to 2000 hands, not including gig and chaise makers and about 40 firms were in business in 1800. Coach manufacturers bore a close relation to cabinet-making and furniture generally. A person expert in turning and fitting the elaborate components of a coach was a potential cabinet-maker, ever ready to turn to that branch of trade if his own declined. Many of the cabinet-makers of the country manufactured the doors of coaches in their own shops and sold them to coach establishments.

When railways spread in the years before the famine, many of the operatives in the industry were employed in the manufacture of railway carriages, not only in Ireland, but in England and on the Continent.

During the 1830's a change took place in the type of horse drawn car in private use. The light handy brougham took the place of the cumbersome costly chariot and the famine struck a blow from which the trade never recovered. But, 700 or 800 hands were employed even after the famine and there were 25 carriage works in Dublin in 1849. Carriages were shown at a National Exhibition in 1852 and a report on the Irish trades represented their comments on the wonderful craftsmanship displayed, regretting that the dearer London product should be so widely imported.

> Dublin can build 30% cheaper than London. Half the cost of a carriage goes into labour, very often, and according to the finish, two thirds. Why not buy the Irish product and not imitate those who even hire a carriage from London for a few years?

Cork, Youghal, Limerick, Waterford, Kilkenny and Charles Bianconi's from Clonmel coach-builders were represented at this exhibition. Cork found buyers for its exhibits from Scotland, England and even the West Indies. Belfast, Ardee, Londonderry, Newry and Omagh were

other centres of the industry when Perry's Mercantile Directory of Br. and Ireland was published in 1893, but the output must have been very inconsiderable for Dennis, in his work Industrial Ireland, states that, by 1887 there were only 10 coach factories manufacturing gentlemen's carriages employing all 200 hands and that only doctors, lawyers and merchants kept the trade alive in Dublin. One of the oldest coach builders in Dublin, Mr. Brown, before the Select Committee of Industries (Ireland) in 1885, attributed the premature decline to importation of cheap articles. He felt that the new proprietors under the Landed Estates Act were not the sort who encouraged the manufacture of high-class work. It was an industry, he said, which gave rise to a great number of subsidiary activities. It consumed a wide range of materials and required the highest degrees of skill. [Dennis, 1887, p.69]

Charles Bianconi, himself the originator in Clonmel of the cheap stage coach system, is an interesting case. Bianconi began business in the south of Ireland in 1806 as a carver and gilder. He set up shop at Carrick-on-Suir and acquired his gold leaf from Waterford. He later worked in Dublin and then returned to Clonmel. In the latter town his business prospered and three German gilders were soon in his employment. He would travel about the countryside, taking orders for mirrors and picture frames, and these, with religious and patriotic pictures and prints, formed his stock trade. It was a lucrative business. Eventually the toil of carrying his unwieldy luggage induced his belief in the financial possibilities of a cheap transport system. [Smiles, 1884, p.220]

Thus I have shown a similar picture for the coach-building industry. Prosperity with high numbers in the trade continued until after the famine when numbers employed fell to less than a third of those just before the Union. However, it remained a large scale industry spread all over the country.

The Turner

A short introduction to the turner and his art must not be omitted. He has been intimately associated with the chairs of

history. Some say the turned chair had its origin in ancient Byzantium and reached the British Isles through Scandinavia. There is admittedly a suggestion of the East about its unusual make up. At the same time we must not overlook the fact that turnery was known to the Romans and that it is from them that the art may have been learnt during the Roman occupation of Britain.

Oddly enough, when the turned chair came to be made regularly in Britain, and the output must have been pretty considerable, it took on a definitely English tradition. Inventories of the 14th and 15th centuries contain frequent references to chairs made 'Ad Modum Anglicanum' - in the English style - and it is to this particular kind that the term is believed to apply. [Tremaine, 1943, p.22]

Turners were included in the mention of the trades partaking in the procession through Dublin on the occasion of the riding of the franchises in 1767. They belonged to the Fraternity of Guild of the B.V.M. Mr. Robert Thompson, writing a Statistical Survey of Co. Meath in 1802, tells us that Irish turners were accommodated with raw material in quantities proportionate to their capital by building a hut in the woods and residing there while the timber was being felled.

> Buying and working those kinds of trees most suited to their purpose and paying for them as the manufactured goods are sold. In short (he adds) more general benefit arises from this practice than if every person wanting any particular piece of timber was under the necessity of buying a whole tree or perhaps more.

I have not found other evidence of turners distinctive activities, but there must have been much similarity between the guild proceedings in Dublin and in London. Turnery in former times occupied a prominent place in furniture production and its rights were jealously guarded. In London the Worshipful Company of Turners, which obtained its incorporation as a City Company in 1604, was an influential body and a very autocratic one. The Company required a

high standard of competence from the members of the Guild, each of whom, before he could set up as a master craftsman, had to make a test chair to satisfy the authorities. [Tremaine, 1943, p.30]

The turners, it seems, went so far in England as to try to set themselves up as dictators on furniture manufacture in general. This brought them into conflict with the joiners, a still older body in that country. The joiners had been incorporated some 30 years earlier, and since then were reinforced by the ceilers, who were not plasterers concerned with the ceiling, but woodworkers who "sealed" or panelled interior doors. In 1632 the London Court of Alderman issued a decree that the joiners be entitled to the 'exclusive manufacture of all chairs made with mortises and tenons'. This alliance of joiners and ceilers is interesting, for in this country, while the carpenters, millers, healers, turners and plumbers were in one guild, the joiners, ceilers and wainscotters belonged to a separate body. The similarity in organization is striking.

Other- Trades

In the years preceding the famine, Dublin possessed, in addition to these trades, furniture warehouses, furniture brokers, coach factories, mattress and curled-hair shops, bedstead and organ and pianoforte manufacturers. Many in these years of great industry engaged exclusively in the manufacture of chairs. As well as furniture gilders, coach and harness gilders and gig and jaunting car factories existed beside those for the manufacture of the conventional coach.

The furniture trade was one of very complex proportions in the later 18th and the first half of the 19th century. Examination of the trade impresses one with the astonishing revolution caused by the machine in modern economic life. The following list is not exhaustive; it includes only trades connected with the furniture industry, trades associated with the cabinet-maker and upholsterer in an intimate fashion. Yet, its diversity, in modern eyes, is very striking.

Furniture and Associated Trades

Carpet cutters and sewers	Feather pickers & dressers	Trunk & carpet bag makers
Rope makers	Furniture brokers	Turners of Ivory
Cabinet - makers	Furniture trimming makers	Quilt makers
Chain makers	Glass paper makers	Upholsterers
Curled hair makers	Hair cloth weavers	Size and Glue Makers
Carvers and gilders	Japanners	Bed joiners
Carpet weavers	Mattress makers	Mirror makers
Clock case makers	Mat and rug makers	Picture frame makers
French polishers	Patent spring maakers	Broom makers
Fringe and tassel makers	Turners of wood	Varnishers
Flock makers	Timber merchants	Pointers
Coopers	Iron bedstead makers *	Bog oak carvers*

* = *Only from 1850*

Source: Census of Population 1841, 1851.

An interesting comparison of the development of the predominant trades can be made with the aid of the detailed census returns which this country is fortunate in possessing. The following are figures which I extracted from such reports and show the number of craftsmen of each trade resident in Ireland in the respective years, from 1871. Upholsterers are classified under cabinet-makers from 1871.

	1831	1841	1851	1861	1871	1881	1891	1901
Cabinet - makers	1819	2678	2006	2236	2532	2428	2322	2652
Upholsterers	327	133	495	694	.	.	.	.
Coach and car' makers	997	1412	1238	1596	.	2214	2497	2849
Turners	929	719	677	323	547	742	.	805
Feather dealers	369	269	451	238	.	260	.	158
Carvers and gilders	244	218	385	418	303	193	205	223
French polishers	.	.	364	.	579	494	680	842
Japenners	.	13	19	29	.	24	18	11
Timber merchants	.	67	180	.	.	435	.	.
Carpet makers	.	16	36	42	.	62	88	149
Curled hair makers	.	1	75	18	.	27	.	.
Mirror makers	3	15	16	7	.	.	.	.
Coppers	7352	9374	6776	7218	6174	4781	4263	3089

Figures for the number of cabinet-makers domiciled throughout the Provinces are given below. Again upholsterers are included from 1871. There were seldom women in the cabinet-making trade, but in 1871, of the total number 2532, 1027 were females. The majority in this class then must have been upholsterers. Decline in cabinet-making was proceeding rapidly.

Number of Irish Cabinet - maker

	1831	1841	1851	1861	1871	1881	1891	1901
Leinster	*1016*	*1291*	*947*	*996*	*1218*	*1198*	*943*	*987*
Ulster	*308*	*604*	*563*	*658*	*768*	*828*	*949*	*1244*
Munster	*460*	*718*	*437*	*503*	*467*	*458*	*390*	*360*
Connaught	*108*	*114*	*59*	*79*	*79*	*71*	*54*	*55*

The decade before the Famine saw the cabinet-making industry reach peak prosperity. The source of its stimulus is not difficult to find. An expanding population was leading to a great number of new houses. The extraordinary expansion in house construction was the cause of the industry's prosperity. Over a century later, the furniture industry and its fortunes remain still in close sympathy with the ebb and flow of house building. The correlation is not confined to a particular period, but remains intimate enough to warrant our close attention to housing needs in our future economy.

As the famine blighted Irish life, the cabinet-making industry declined. The Report on the National Exhibition 1852 gives a hint of gloomy years to come -

> The greater number of the articles exhibited might be placed with credit to their exhibitors by the side of the cabinet work of any country, however refined taste or luxurious the habits of its people

for whom the cabinet-maker exhausts his powers of invention in producing graceful and fanciful designs. In no department of the whole Exhibition is the skill and taste of the Irish workman more conspicuous than in this; and yet singularly enough, we hear of repeated instances of our gentry, and even our mercantile class, purchasing their furniture in London and Paris; not being satisfied with what they could produce in work shops of their own country. The famine and the Encumbered Estates Court have impressed their salutary lesson on many a mind but there are instances where the interests of the native manufacturers and artisans are recklessly disregarded and sacrificed to the absurd ideas of a vicious and false fashion. The cabinet work now exhibited is of every description and quality, from the plain, solid and serviceable, up to the most useful, luxurious and highly ornamental. There is not an article which could not stand the test of competent criticism. Goods have come from various and distant parts of the country. Notable are the products of Arthur Jones - in particular the splendid carved furniture of bog yew, consisting of 18 pieces, with every article illustrating the ancient history of Ireland. This perfect execution stands as an enduring monument to what the Irish head can conceive and the Irish hand realise. Mr. John Fletcher of Patrick St. Cork has his "Shamrock Table" on view, a work of great beauty. Killarney's and Kilkenny's contributions show what can be produced by the Irish artists out of Dublin and Cork. The beautiful and ingenious cabinet work of Mr. James Egan and Mr. Justin McCarthy of Killarney and of Mr. Chaplin of Kilkenny have won wide reputation. [Maguire, 1852, p.69]

Waterford, Limerick, Clonmel and Youghal also presented examples of Irish cabinet work.

Work executed in bog oak had been shown at the Exhibition. Some of the finest Irish furniture has been manufactured of this material. The origin of the wood rendered it immune from the expansion and contraction caused by changes in the atmosphere. On the edges of bogs, oak was the wood most usually found, but further in, quantities of fir lay in large pieces. Yew of considerable size was frequently found buried and when the material was procured without cracks it made beautiful tables. Hely Dutton, writing on Co. Galway in 1824 remarks

> one of the most beautiful of these articles that I have ever seen is at the Rev. Dean Frenche's at Elphin. It is about four feet in diameter without the least flaw. Timber buried in the bogs is found by going on them early on a dewy morning, as the dew never lies on the bog over the tree; the searchers ascertain with a long spear if the timber is sound and worth extracting. [Dutton, 1824]

The products of Irish craftsmen were now becoming subject to unending competition from large-scale British firms. Decay was inevitable in all branches. Even where machines were introduced, the home manufacture of furniture was almost completely wiped out by wealthier, larger and more complete methods of man producing the different parts of various articles and assembling them in the finished state. Lack of capital and the weakness of our transport organization were contributing causes of decline. More and more of those who would have provided a market for the best in workmanship and quality imported their requirements.

In 1885 evidence to a select Committee on Irish Industries stated that

> Native cabinet-making of superior quality has nearly disappeared. 50 or 60 years ago provincial

towns had excellent workmen. Enniskillen had a particularly high reputation.

Mr. Sullivan, one of the witnesses, declared that cabinet-making had been lost to the south because the people refused to work on piece work and added that piece work was not at all common in Ireland.

Mr. Parkinson said that, in 1835 or 1845, there were excellent cabinet-makers in some of the provincial towns. Dublin had now become the warehouse for cheap English furniture and made very little use of first class quality goods. One reason might have been that dealers got goods on credit when dealing with English firms, but Parkinson felt that the real reason was the tendency for the public to buy the cheaper imported article. The Irish solid mahogany table was a purchase of the past. Another reason was that there was not so large a class of big money spenders as formerly. By this Parkinson didn't mean the exodus of the aristocracy. He once knew many wealthy traders who were not ashamed to live over their shops and who had as good furniture as any nobleman. Another witness, Mr. Keating, said that throughout the country generally no cabinet works nor any manufacturer of furniture remained beyond the commonest sort made by carpenters and expostulated for sale in open markets. Mr. Kerr felt that the Landed Estates Act had a lot to do with the decline in cabinet-making because the new proprietors would not buy high class products. He also admitted that free imports of inferior work and the long continued agitation leading to uncertainty and insecurity in the land problem were great detriments to the trade. He knew of no improvement. If anything the trade was declining. Improvement, Keating felt, depended on either a return of a wealthy class and security of tenure or a preference for Irish goods among the people. Technical education and good exhibitions were needed.

These witnesses went on to re-affirm the close relation between coach-building and cabinet-making. Indeed, in Irish, Coistide is the word for one who engages in the latter craft. The witnesses emphasise the relationship by explaining that, in the coach trade, there were once men making tables and chairs at home in their own room and selling them to the cabinet-maker. But in 30 years that

number of coach establishments had shut down. Cloyne, near Cork, had once sent coaches to London. Gorey was known for its tax carts, Dublin for its coaches. The bodymen - those who made coach bodies in their own homes and sold them to the builders, were a class extinct. The days when people took Dublin built coaches to London were no more.

In summary, the general increase in prosperity in the first quarter of the 19th century saw both a rise in imports and in the numbers involved in Irish manufacture. But clearly the benefits of much of the increased consumption was largely exported to Britain.

After 1850 decline was severe. This was due to the competitiveness of British imports, the declining market and what seems a deliberate discrimination against buying Irish.

The quality of Irish furniture was as good, if not better, than British, according to contemporary writers.

CHAPTER IV

DESIGN IN THE 19TH CENTURY

In this chapter I shall examine the changes in design and some innovations of the 19th century.

The Irish craftsman almost invariably copied British design. After the blossoming under the great master, Chippendale, Sheraton, Adam and Hepplewhite, the French designers became the leaders of the fashion in Britain and this trend then found its way here. For example, as the century progressed, the heavy furniture associated with the Gillow factory of Lancaster grew popular and, as it was a time when a great number of houses were redecorated, this fashion must have had a strong influence on production.

Victorian design won its place as a distinct furniture style about 1885 and its inglorious productions flooded the country from England, when native industry lay in decay.

The Victorian ear was, in the artistic sense, a revival of Gothic, Rococo and English Regency styles, which led to the muddled and eclectic forms produced. It was a period when patrons were no longer dictating transition and development of style. Astute businessmen and manufacturers, using widely printed furniture catalogues, were dictating the style and type of furniture available to the majority of the population. Much of the work produced was a pastiche of the fashions and styles of past centuries. Designs were adapted to suit the needs and fads of the middle-class of the industrial era during the second half of the 19th century. Manufacturers had a love of improving well-established and well-tried principles of form and decoration and turned them into comfortable and more convenient forms of furniture. The spindly back legs of a 17th century chair were shortened to make the chair more robust. The highly decorative, but rather formal and uncomfortable, upholstery of previous eras was rounded off. The most profuse Rococo elements of design were exaggerated. 'If a chair was to be sat upon in the 18th century, by the middle of the 19th century one was able to sit in the

chair' - modern taste was determined to combine comfort with what was considered to be style and fashion. [Irish Ind. Exh. Report., 1851, p.4]

Reports on industrial exhibitions in 1851 and 1853 in Ireland hint at a growth of decadence. Words from the report of a previous year run -

> Though fully sensible to the great beauty of the furniture, we regret that there have not been more specimens of ordinary furniture for general use, works whose merits consist in correctness of proportion, simple well cut design, beauty of material and perfect workmanship. [Irish Ind. Exh. Report, 1851, p.5]

Two years later, the criticism is unaltered

> We regret precisely the same defects ... there is an overweening desire for show and much remains to be done in combining elegance and economy. Extravagant ornamentation is committed in the manufacture of the class furniture. Another error lies in the use of inappropriate materials in construction and ornament. [Irish Ind. Exh. Report, 1853, p.4]

These points were well-founded criticism. The decoration of constructions was giving way to the construction of decorations.

Papier mache, leather and gutta-percha were widely used in chairs and small tables. These materials and ornamental borders for screens etc. were widely imported from France.

The Report of 1853 concludes by repeating the advice contained in the former publication.

> Much remains to be done in the improvement of the common articles of furniture. It would be better if some of our cabinet-makers did this instead of adorning costly articles. [Irish Ind. Exh. Report, 1853, p.4]

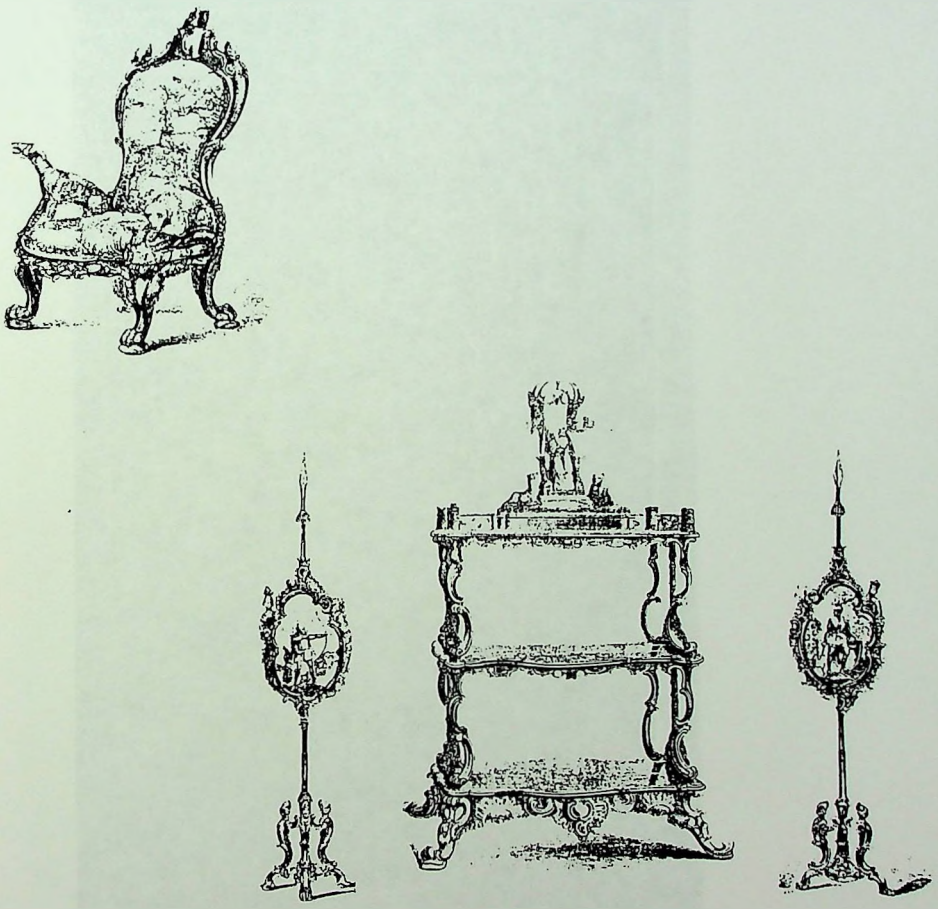
Bog Wood Furniture

The carving of bog wood furniture was widely praised throughout the century. The most intricate representational designs were produced by expert craftsmen. Arthur Jones and Co., established in the previous century, specialised in such work (fig. 7). Oak or yew from the bogs, after a little drying, would be cut into slabs about two inches thick with a circular saw and then, with another saw, into rectangular pieces. These, with marine glue (from shellac and Indian rubber), would be formed into slabs of any dimensions and the latter would be further secured by driving in oaken pegs previously dipped in the glue. Faults or flaws were filled up with melted shellac and oak sawdust. After treatment on planing and moulding machines, the slabs would be used for making all kinds of furniture and even in flooring and panelling. Heavy varnish was usually applied to bog furniture.

Inlaid Work

One innovation of the middle 19th century was due to Mr. Austin, a cabinet-maker of St. Andrews St., Dublin, who is mentioned in the Report of an Exhibition organised by the Royal Dublin Society in 1847. This states that he was the first to establish the manufacture of Boulle work in Ireland (fig. 8). This was a type of marquetry which originated in Italy and was developed to its finest in the 17th century under the French artist Mr. Boulle. It was a marquetry composed not of various woods, but of tortoise-shell and brass. It lost general favour in the latter years of the 19th century. [Report on Exh. of Produce and Inventions, 1865, p.7]

In the art of general inlaying, Fry's factory in Dublin won some reputation in the second half of the century (fig. 9). 40



(fig. 7) Examples of Arthur Jones Bog wood furniture shown at the National Exhibition in 1852.
Jones Historic Furniture of Ireland. *Dublin : Hodges and Smith 1853*

(fig. 8) Example of a Boulle Secretaire a Abattant inlaid with pewter, brass, mother-of-perl, ivory, mounted bronze-dore.
Gloag, J. *A Short Dictonary of Furniture. p. 240 London : Allen 1952*

(fig. 9) 19th century arbutus wood writing desk by Egans of Killarney, 1850, inlaid with local scenes.
Glin, Knight of. *p. 24 Irish Furniture 1978*

cabinet-makers and carvers were employed there in 1885 and the weekly wage bill was about £500. But this and several similar firms were to find that production of moderately priced furniture became more and more difficult. Many ceased manufacturing entirely and dealt in antiques which were especially in vogue at the time. This trade developed actively when the accumulating Land Legislation forced migration from large country houses and a changing social matrix led to the vacation of Georgian residences in the city. [Catalogue of Dub. Int. Exh., 1865, p.30]

The following points summarise the chapter as to what occurred in design during the 19th century.

1. As before, Irish craftsmen did not produce original design work. They remained influenced by British tastes, even when these were changed through French influence. And they adopted the new Victorian styles readily.

2. This Victorian design, definitely a form of decadence, was taken to extremes and the lack of practical and simple designs came in for severe criticism.

3. A form of work peculiar to Ireland was the making of furniture from bog wood.

4. Forms of inlay prevalent in the trade are also discussed.

CONCLUSION

From my study of Irish furniture in the 18th and 19th centuries several broad conclusions can be drawn.

As I said in my introduction, the subject has largely been neglected. I conclude that the main reason for this is the lack of innovation in furniture design.

I have shown that, throughout this period, British designs and designers were the main influence, most of the work being virtually direct copies of English work.

Though this might be surprising, given the Irish creativity and originality in other areas, it can be explained by tastes of the market which was largely made up of the landed gentry and middle-class of the towns. Their tastes were, of course, very similar to their British counterparts.

The standards of work and the quality of the furniture were however just as good, and, in many cases, better than that of England.

I found that, though the Active Union seems initially to have encouraged the trade, it did not develop as rapidly as the growing market. This was because of a large increase of furniture imports from Britain. After 1850 business declined, but the trade did remain larger over all than it had been at the end of the 18th century.

Even more lamentable than the economic decline, in my view, was the decline into Victorian vulgarity. Design decadence and ornamentation for its own sake replaced the fine lines and proportions of the likes of Adam, though something was gained in terms of comfort.

Thus the 19th century closed, not with the surge of creativity and innovation which one might hope for with the approach of a new century, but in a stifling atmosphere of decay.

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