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THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

"THE NATIONAL MUSEUM: DECORATION AND ORNAMENT"

A STUDY SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF EDUCATION AND IN CANDIDACY FOR THE
DIPLOMA FOR ART AND DESIGN TEACHERS

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 "THE NATIONAL MUSEUM: DECORATION AND ORNAMENT"

The theme I have chosen for both my personal and class projects is DECORATION and ORNAMENT and the main source for my information is the National Museum at Kildare Street.

1.2 For my personal project I have decided to investigate through drawing the decoration of the Museum as a building as well as the decorative contents which the Museum houses. Having made many preliminary drawings and sketches, the final piece, a culmination of all exploratory work, is a series of three mixed media drawings which form a visual representation of a personal response to the decoration of and in the Museum.

1.3 The project was both an exercise in observational drawing and drawing as a means of investigation. The project as a personal experience was also a very important factor and the final work is a culmination of my experience, visualizing what I discovered along the way.

1.4 The class project also began at the Museum where pupils investigated through drawing, the decorative animals found on the Museum exterior, the entrance hall, but most importantly on the objects of the Irish Treasury section of the Museum. Following the Museum visit pupils were required to make observational drawings of animals and then stylize this work, remembering how the Celts stylized as a means of decoration. The pupils' work resulted in a decorative panel, the layout of which was based on the carved walnut and oak doors in the Museum. Working in pairs, pupils were given a section of the overall panel on which they painted their design of a stylized animal. All nine pieces were then brought together and assembled to make one overall decorative panel. Work was carried out in a flat colour onto canvas and each canvas was then sewn onto a dark background. The whole piece was stretched onto a wooden frame and presentation completed.

1.5 This project had many educational relevances. Observational drawing was employed and strengthened. Problem solving was developed . A whole area of artistic heritage was explored as well as the skills of painting and presentation being progressed. The project also involved working in pairs and subsequently as a group from which emanated a range of social skills. The project, I feel, was instrumental in the education of pupils' artistic and aesthetic development.

Chapter 2

PERSONAL PROJECT

“The World is stilled deceived with ornament”.

The Merchant of Venice

William Shakespeare: 1600

2.1 Introduction to project

Ornamentalism is the term given to the application of ornament to the surface of things in a manner not necessarily related to structure or function. It is characterised by a fascination with the surface of things as opposed to their essence. It is elaboration as opposed to simplicity; sensory stimulation as opposed to intellectual disciplines; borrowing as opposed to originating.¹ Such a hypothesis could be said to hold true for the art of graphic design as opposed to the fine arts of painting and sculpture, where the area of graphic design focuses on the aesthetic presentation of a subject to be communicated rather than the intellectual contemplation and discipline of the fine arts.

My own previous study in the discipline of graphic design has furnished me with an understanding and appreciation of the world of design in all its aspects. It has left me better advised as to how to solve problems of a visual nature. This includes balancing, harmonising and structured manipulation of ideas.

At the beginning of this academic year I became aware of the strong emphasis of pattern in my work. Consequently I became interested in the whole field of decoration, pattern and ornament. This I chose as the subject for both my personal and class projects, albeit with a different approach for each.

2.2 The Project

The Kildare Street building of the National Museum of Ireland, like so many other museums of its kind, houses a wealth of decorative ornament in the form of

metalwork, glassware, ceramics, textiles and other such decorative objects of antiquity. However it is not only in the objects housed by the Museum that we find decorative ornament but in the building itself. The building (fig. 1) designed by Thomas Newenham Deane in the 1880's, has been described as "an accomplished exercise in the Victorian Palladianism".² Many features of the building are decorative rather than functional, such as the classical columns which surround the exterior of the rotunda or entrance hall. Like many other building of its era we find decoration in the plasterwork of the exterior. On the interior one finds examples of carved foliage and figures on the walnut and oak doors. this work was carried out by Cambri of Sienna and Mulligan of Dublin.³ The door surrounds and mosaic floors are also striking features of the decoration of this fine building.

Continuing my subject and source I set myself the task of exploring through drawing the decoration and ornament of and in the National Museum. My drawings (figs. 2-4) form a personal response to my experience of the Museum. They are not necessarily intended to be decorative in themselves yet they form a visual representation of a personal exploration of the many forms of decoration, and ornament, which the museum invites us to investigate.

Personal Project

The first drawing (Fig. 2) is my interpretation of a ceramic Indian vessel from the early nineteenth century. The vessel is decorated with siliceous glaze, bearing floral decoration. It was the decoration which first attracted my attention. Further investigation revealed the beauty of the form which the drawing represents. It also symbolises, for me, the decorative crafts of other cultures which we can enjoy both for pleasure and for it's educational significance.

The second drawing in the series of three (Fig.3) shows detail of the carved stonework which decorates the walls, ceilings and pillars in the museum. At first the curious faces may go unnoticed but when observed they reveal grotesque features of abstracted animal and human faces. The stone is sandstone and beautiful golden hues enhance the decorative features. This drawing represents the close attention to detail of the design of the museum and the Victorian influence of ornate architectural decoration. In places the stonework reveals lion heads, symbols of the crown and reminders of British Rule in Ireland at the time when the museum was built.



Fig. 1: Exterior view of the National Museum of Ireland, Kildare Street, Dublin 2.



The third and final drawing (Fig. 4) is a silver coffee pot by John Wilme, or James Wyer, of Dublin and dates back to 1767. This represents the tradition of design and craftsmanship in metalwork in Ireland. It takes the viewer beyond the more familiar aspects of metalwork, on display in the Irish Treasury Section of the Museum. It also bears witness to Ireland's long tradition and achievements in the decorative and applied arts.

The three drawings combined symbolise cultural involvement with and influences of other civilisations, architectural accomplishments of our capital city, as well as our on-going involvement in the decorative arts and design. They also signify artistic and cultural heritage and source of inspiration and influence for future artists and designers of this country. This is of great importance if we are to sustain an art put out of good design and creative ability in future generations.

In visual terms my personal project endeavours to create an aesthetic representation of the above mentioned ideas. This was done by firstly treating the paper to render it textured. I did this by staining the area with tea, creasing it, then burning the edges. This textured base created an effect of antiquity in harmony with the theme of a museum. I then used torn paper, pure white, which was stuck onto the background. The most detailed work was carried out on this area, as though glimpsing the past. The remaining area was carried out in line drawing without showing detail or colour. Certain areas are depicted by drawing around the shape and using no line at all. This creates a descriptive quality in the drawing, where the object is described rather than shown as it is on the detailed areas. Some areas are left out altogether and merely suggested.

The textured background, the torn paper and the drawing all form integral parts of the work as do the three pieces as one series.

The work, drawing on decorative ceramics, architectural decoration, and metalwork design, is supported by preliminary drawings and sketches. This was a vital stage in the visual exploration of the museum.

Chapter 2: Footnotes

1. Robert Jensen, Patricia Conway
Ornamentalism (Great Britain, Allen Lane, 1983)
p. 2.
2. The Architectural Association of Ireland,
Public Works: The Architecture of the Office of Public Works: 1831-1987,
(Dublin, 1987)
p. 24.
3. Ibid

Chapter three

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Introduction 3.1

In this chapter it is my intention to set my project in an historical context.

3.1.1

To begin I would like to consider the National Museum and its ornament from an historical point of view. This history provides an interesting and important link to both my personal and class projects. Research into the history of the Museum and the circumstances surrounding its existence led to my greater understanding and appreciation of this National Monument and source for my work. This aided my project in a personal way. With reference to the class project, the interest which the girls took in how the Museum came to be, induced a greater degree of investigation and personal interest.

3.1.2

For my historical references, I have chosen to consider movements in a design rather than the work of individual artists or designers. The first to be discussed is the Celtic Revival and the Arts and Crafts movement. My reasons for choosing the Celtic Revival was to examine how artists and designers of that period in Ireland looked to our national heritage as a starting point for their work. This ties in with both my personal and class projects. The Arts and Crafts movement covers the whole area of the applied arts, as design was referred to at the turn of the century and includes decoration and ornament.

3.1.3.

I decided to skip several decades and arrived at the Post-Modernist era of design. My reasons for so doing were to contrast earlier design with what is currently taking place, and examine how far we have come in terms of design. The Memphis group of designers fall broadly within the category of Post-Modernism and are Italian based.

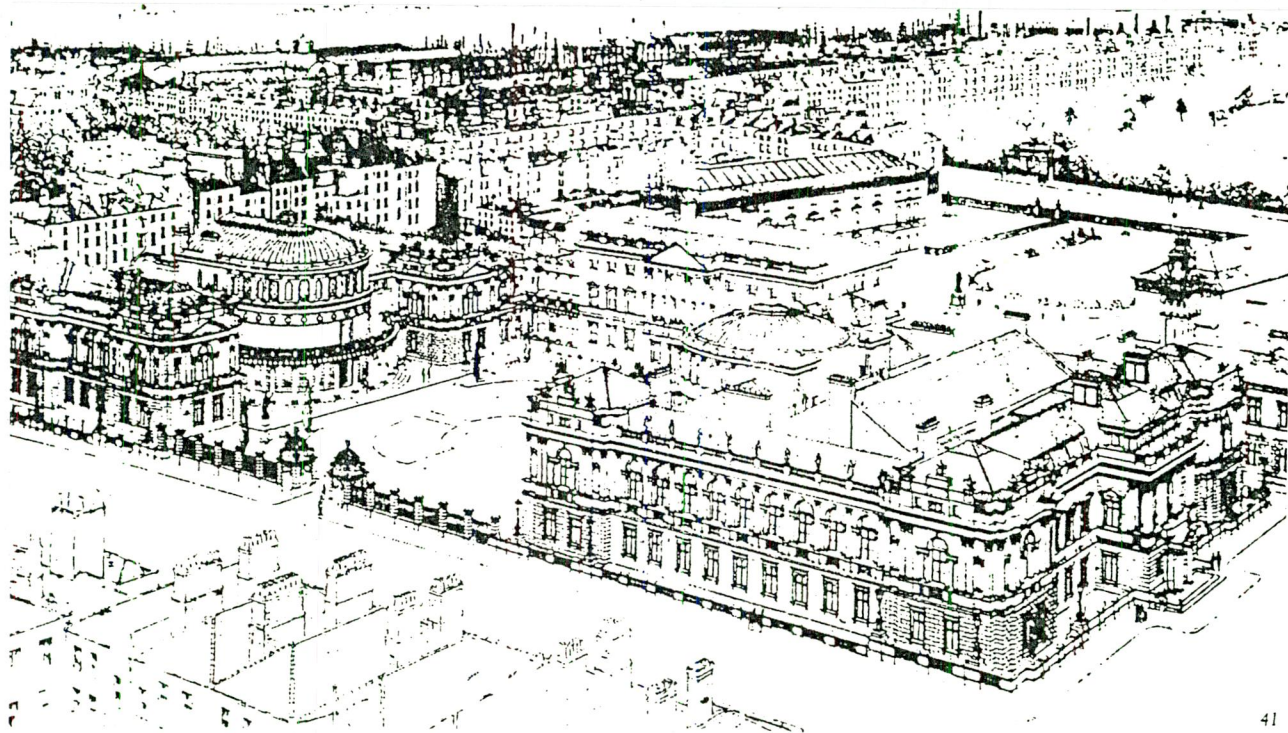
The contrasting contemporary European design and that of early twentieth century Ireland gives a broader perspective to the discussion and relevance of this chapter.

3.2 The National Museum of Ireland (Fig. 5)

Ireland of the nineteenth century was an integral part of the United Kingdom of Ireland and Great Britain even though it might have been regarded by many as separate from Britain. Governmental endeavours and policy of the period led to the development of certain movements and institutions. The establishment of the National Library and National Museum of Ireland was the outcome of this policy. Both institutions owe their origins to the Royal Dublin Society, which was founded in 1731 as the Dublin Society. The Society strengthened throughout the nineteenth century, gradually developing a large and important library, covering both science and the humanities. A committee, selected to examine the affairs of the Society came to the conclusion that the library should not be intended solely for the few individuals who belonged to the Dublin Society. It proposed that the library should be open to all persons who wished to avail themselves of the library for the purposes of literary research. The years that followed saw the need for cultural institutions in this country with the Royal Dublin Society seen always as the nucleus. Following much research and negotiations the British Government acquired the RDS headquarters at Leinster House in Kildare Street for a sum of £10,000.¹

This cultural complex was to include the National Library and Museum. The next problem was to find an architect suitable to carry out the design for the complex.

In December 1881 an architectural competition was launched to find a design for the Museum, which was to be built in the area bounded by the forecourt of Leinster House, Kildare Street, and Kildare Place. To the embarrassment of the authorities the finalists of the competition were all English and mostly unknown architects. After much lobbying of Irish politicians and letters from aggrieved Irish architects which appeared in the press, the matter was raised in parliament and consequently a new competition was launched. The winner of the new competition was Thomas Newenham Deane and Sons, of Dublin.²



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Fig. 5: Architects' drawing for the National Museum Exhibited at Chicago's World Fair, 1901.



The elevational treatment of the Museum was designed to complement the facade of Leinster House. Both the interiors of the Museum and Library are very successful, paying great attention to carved decoration. The woodwork, commissioned from Cambri of Sienna, is particularly fine (Fig. 6). The entrance hall of the Museum was modelled on the rotunda of Shinkel's Altes Museum in Berlin, built some sixty years earlier.³

The structures were to be faced with chiseled granite from the Dublin mountains and details of the doors, window surrounds and pillars of the colonnades (Fig. 7) were made of Mount Charles sandstone which unfortunately began to decay early on. The work of building was carried out by contractors, Beckett Brothers costing about £200,000 for each building and was completed in 1890.⁴

The foundation stone for the Museum was laid by the Prince of Wales in April 1885. On its completion Thomas Newenham Deane was knighted for his services. In 1894, the long awaited lecture theatre was built, not in the Museum but in the adjoining Leinster House. However in the 1920's it was remodelled to accommodate Dáil Éireann.

If the purpose of the National Library is to preserve the written documentation of our people, the function of the National Museum is to collect and maintain the material relics of our past. It is the documentation of things. Much material that have been lost to Ireland has been saved.⁵

3.3 The Celtic Revival and the Arts and Crafts Movement in Ireland:

Political events of the nineteenth century had a marked effect on Irish cultural life of that time. The changes that occurred had strong links with our Celtic cultural past. A strong sense of national identity prevailed and strong opposition to rule from London grew at this time. The Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 which gave civil rights to Catholic subjects of the crown, gave a political identity to the bulk of the Irish Nation. Ireland and Irish people became increasingly aware of the differences that existed between Ireland and England. Ireland began to look to the past to restore her self respect by drawing on the great cultural and artistic achievements of Early Christian Ireland. A sense of nationalist feeling penetrated the arts and and



Fig. 6: Carved Oak Door at the National Museum by Cambri of Sienna.





Fig. 7: Detail of plasterwork decoration in the National Museum. Chiseled granite.



particularly literature during the nineteenth century. This spirit of regeneration in Ireland became known as the Celtic Revival.⁶ For the purposes of this chapter it is the applied and decorative arts on which I would like to focus.

Irish art of the early Christian period is now known extensively throughout the world with the help of touring exhibitions which include the Ardagh Chalice, the Tara Brooch, the Cross of Cong as well as illuminated manuscripts of the Books of Kells and Durrow. Such objects of Irish art need little introduction to us now but this was not always so.

It was the publication of historical research by scholars such as George Petrie, a Dublin antiquary, and English zoologist and art historian J.O. Westwood, that first brought early Irish art to the public's attention during the mid nineteenth century. Until then only very few people were aware of the existence of a native school of religious art in earlier times in Ireland, let alone appreciated the characteristics of ornamentation to be found in various combinations on stone crosses, fine metalwork and illuminated manuscripts.⁷

The human figures and other symbols which were to be found as ornament on objects of early Christian art lacked the quality of works from ancient Greece and Rome which won them the admiration of the Western World. Some would even say that Irish art bore a curious grotesqueness which was to be found even on sacred works. To classical taste this may have been rude or even offensive yet it was in ornamental rather than representational art that the early Christian Irish art excelled.

Ornament characteristic of the early Irish Christian period includes the spiral, angular geometric step and key patterns, elaborate ribbon interlace, as well as human and animal or zoomorphic interlace. Although ornamentation of the early Christian period does reflect some foreign influence it has been generally agreed among mid-nineteenth century art historians that the Irish could be considered inventors of this highly fantastic style of decoration.⁹

During the nineteenth century Irish symbolism and symbols from Celtic Ireland became a very popular form of decoration. This was far more evident in the applied or decorative arts rather than the more other fine arts. Stone carving, furniture and

jewellery were all designed and made in the reproductive forms of Celtic ornament. Grave-yards became littered with reproductions of old high crosses and jewellery and objects bearing Celtic ornament became widely popular. Yet such objects were always mass produced mechanically and so lacked the skill of craftsmanship of the original works.¹⁰

However, there was one movement at the turn of the century that used Celtic ornament in a imaginative way. This was the arts and crafts movement, and spanned the years from 1902 to the 1930's. It was responsible for much talented and creative work in all areas of design, including metalwork, embroidery and graphics.¹¹ The following are examples of each.

3.3.1. Metalwork

In 1912 the firm of Hopkins and Hopkins recreated an interesting piece of metalwork which was adapted from the escutcheons under the handles of the Ardagh Chalice (Fig. 8). This 1912 design was made of silver and called the "Ardagh Clasp". It was intended as a buckle for vestments or for ordinary wear. The two halves of the buckle are 10.2cm wide and bear sections of ribbon interlace in relief. The interlace is highly reminiscent of the interlace on so many pieces of metalwork from the early Christian period. At the centre where the two halves meet we note on either side some curious animal heads, four in all. Each pair marks the end of the stirrup-like shape which encompasses an interlace pattern. Again the zoomorphic inclusion has been taken from the many zoomorphic patterns of the early Christians. In each piece is found a translation of a section of the Ardagh Chalice. It is highly decorative in design and, as with early Christian metalwork, decoration dominates over function.

3.3.2 Embroidery

The Honan Hostel Chapel in Cork was completed in 1916 and is one of the great monuments of Celtic Revival Art. Harry Clarke (1889-1931) was one of the finest stained glass artists of the period and much of the stained glass in the chapel was carried out by this fine and talented artist (Fig. 9). His stained glass is highly original in its design and fantastic detail. The colours are both rich and brilliant. Another

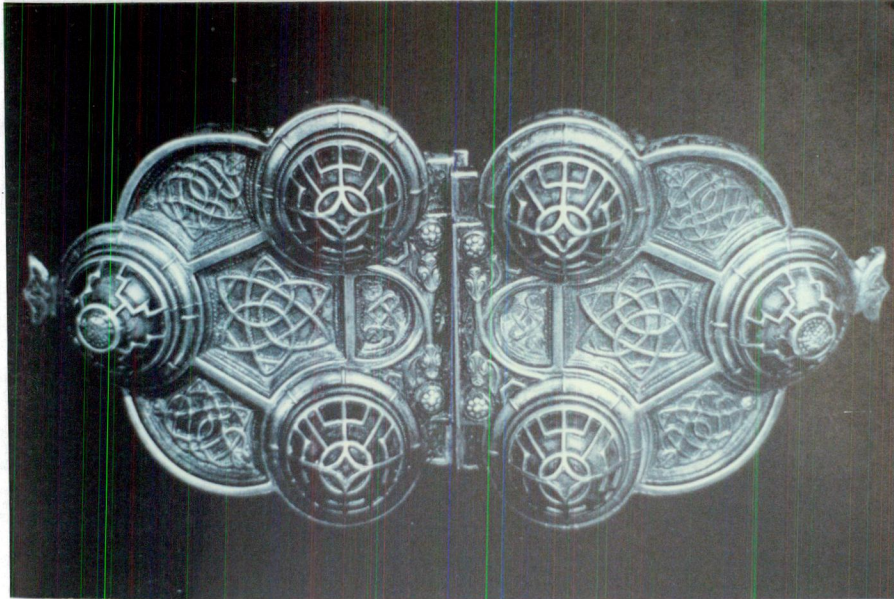


Fig. 8: The Ardagh Clasp. Hopkins and Hopkins. Dublin 1912.

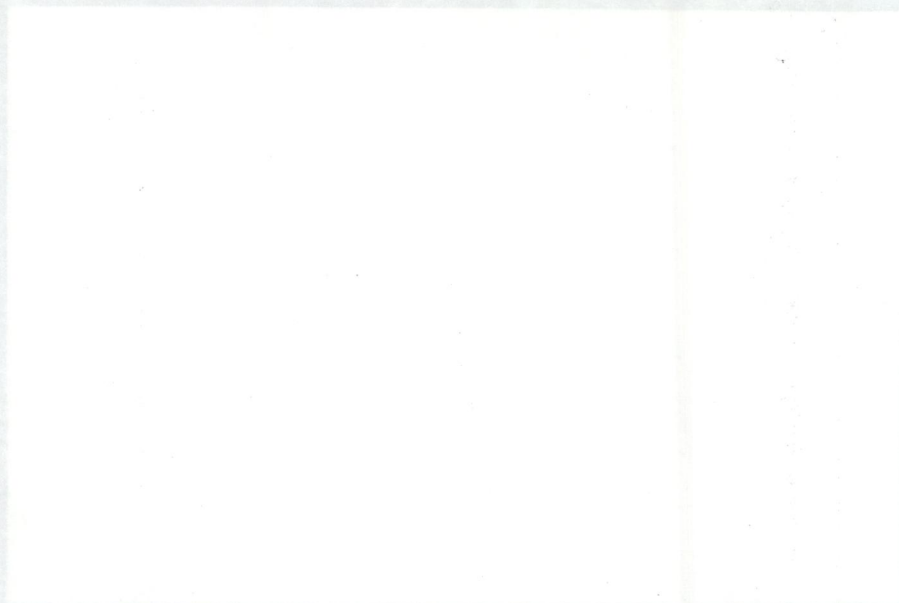




Fig. 9: Stained Glass at the Honan Chapel, Cork. Harry Clarke, 1915.



feature of the chapel is the brilliantly coloured mosaic floor (Fig. 10). The detailed floor illustrates a Gaelic poem which sings God's praises in all his works. Also inspired by the early Christians is the metalwork carried out for the Honan Chapel.¹² But it is to the splendid embroidery that I would now like to refer.

Most of the colourful vestments were embroidered by thirty girls from the workshop of Egans and Sons of Cork (Fig. 11). In his book on the chapel, Sir John O'Connell described one set of vestments.

The finest set of vestments consists of a cape, chasuble, and dalmatics for High Mass, made of cloth of gold, very richly embroidered with a subtle and delicate scheme of interlace work, was designed by one who united an extraordinary understanding for the intricate beauty and mysterious charm of Celtic ornament with an exceptional capacity for expressing its feeling both in line and colour; she has, unhappily, passed away before she could see the working out of these exquisite designs. The orpheys of the cope and the chasuble and dalmatics, have let into their Celtic interlaced decoration embroidered panels of the evangelists, the wonder-working saints of Ireland and of our patron Saint of Cork, and they are completed by panels bearing the arms of the Hostel.¹³

The designer in question was Ethel Josephine Scally, who died in 1915. Her name and those of the embroideresses is given on the inside of some of the vestments.

3.3.3. Graphic Design

The latter years of the Celtic Revival saw graphic work that drew heavily on the illuminated manuscripts of the early Christians. One designer who re-called rather than copied the early manuscripts was Art O'Murnaghan (Fig. 12). His book, *Leabhar na hAiseirighe*¹⁴ (The Book of the Resurrection), was commissioned by the Irish Government as a memorial book of the 1916 Rising. O'Murnaghan's work is highly decorative, intricately detailed and finely designed. His work meant that he covered twenty-six sheets of calf-vellum. His design consists of complex interweavings, symbolic details and Irish poems. The highly complex design and interlacing incorporated birds, fish and sacred trees, with words from texts taking secondary importance to the elaborate designs.

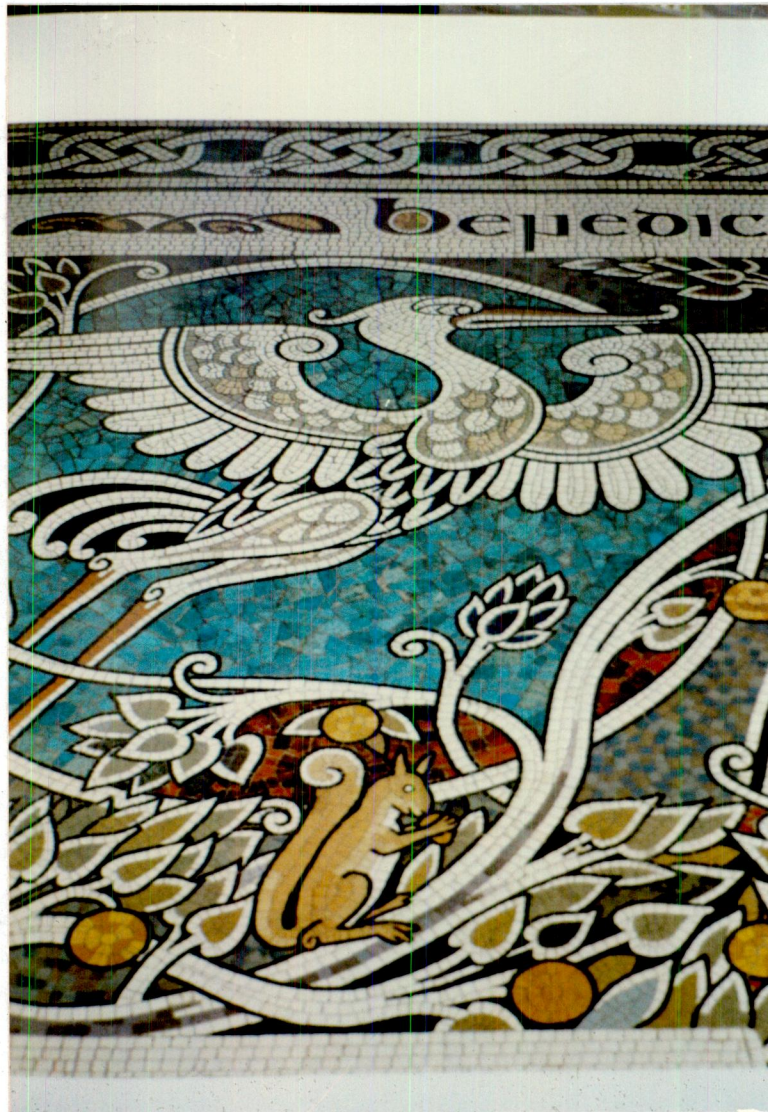
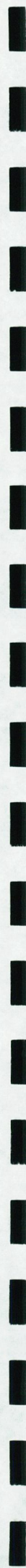


Fig. 10: Mosaic Floor. Honan Chapel, Cork.



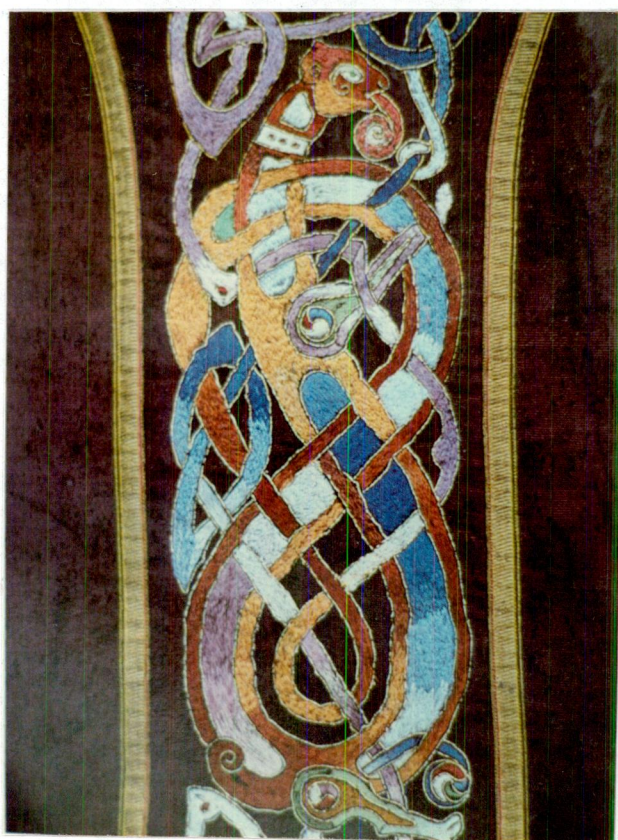


Fig. 11: Embroidered Vestments. Egans and Sons, Cork, 1915.

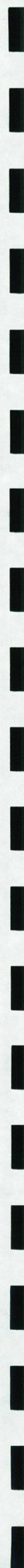
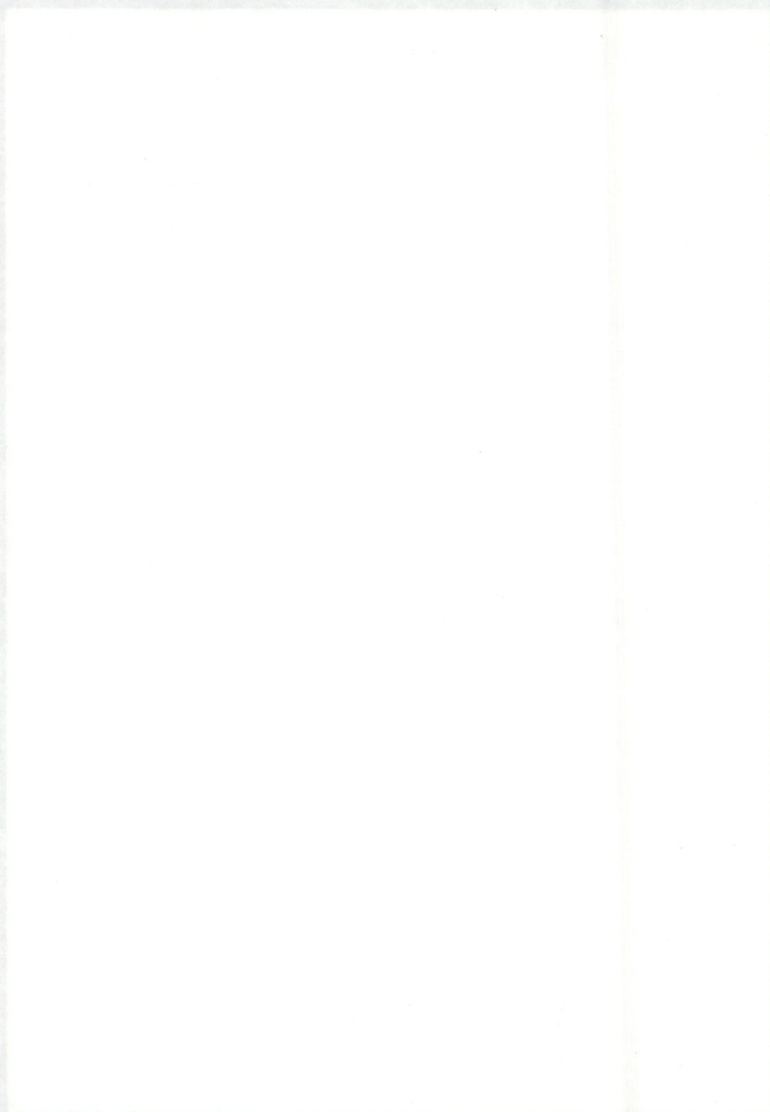




Fig. 12: Art O'Murnaghan. Leabhar na hAiseirighe, 1916.



O'Murnaghan's designs, while they are tightly controlled, are freely and confidently developed. Although he drew on the ancient motifs of the illuminated manuscripts he goes further to make his work personal and creative thus bringing a new vitality to work based on traditional Celtic ornament.

3.3.4 The mid-twentieth century gave way to modernism and Ireland began to look Europe and the future rather than the historic past of Celtic design and ornament. Although the Celtic style of the early Christian period may seem to have faded into the distance, subtle reminders linger on in the form of postage stamps, currency notes and coinage.

3.4 Memphis

By the late 1950's the term design was used internationally and was synonymous with "good taste"; consumer appeal, and high world market exports. The old terms applied and decorative arts, were brought together by this new and abstract concept.¹⁵ By the late 1980's the media and advertising industries used the term 'Design' as the way of claiming "added desirability" in products.¹⁶ In 1981 a group of Italian designers emerged that turned the world of design on its head. This group was led by the celebrated designer Ettore Sottsass and was called Memphis.

During the mid-sixties Sottsass took his inspiration for design from "pop" and "op" art as well as from minimal sculpture. With designer Andrea Branzi he was first associated with Studio Alchimia, in Milan but in 1981 he led a group of international architects and designers to form a new and radical design group, to be called Memphis.¹⁷ The following section is based on findings from MEMPHIS written in 1985 by Memphis founder member, Barbara Radice.

Memphis began with the idea of changing the face of international design. This change was to be a radical move away from tradition and convention associated up until now with industrial design. Memphis, in the spirit of the 1980's, designed for production. The question of once-off objects or works of art was never considered by Memphis designers. Should a small edition be produced it is because demand for that object is limited. Memphis was attracted rather than repelled by the consumer society of the late twentieth century and designed to supply such an audience.¹⁸

"The Memphis style," says designer Sowden, "consists of broadening the area of style itself, of never being satisfied with what has already been done, and of looking for a new style all the time".¹⁹ With this in mind the idea of the Memphis debut was to make an immediate impact. The response which followed was mixed. Many critics felt the design of Memphis was a "fad", and soon to be forgotten. Yet the Memphis designers saw this idea as a positive one. They saw parallels between the impact of their design and fashion design had on the world. They were not afraid of fashion, of being a fashion or of going out of fashion.²⁰ (Fig. 13).

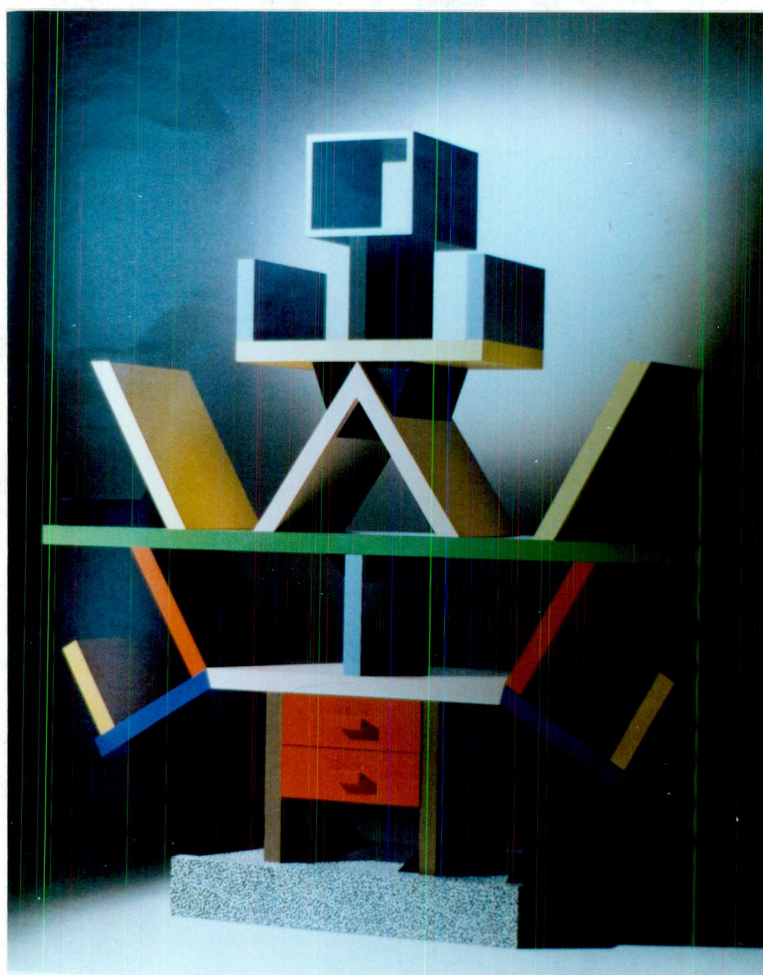


Fig. 13: Ettore Sottsass. "Carlton" design for Memphis, 1981.



Sottsass believed that "Today everything one does is consumed, It is dedicated to life, not to eternity."²¹ Memphis design is for consumption by a contemporary culture. Memphis designers are not preoccupied with solving functional problems through their design, but producing work that is consumable, seductive and infinitely desirable. Memphis does not propose to solve anything. By refusing to solve problems it created a challenge to common sense and "good taste".

One of the major innovations of Memphis design was the use of plastic laminates in furniture design, particularly decorated plastic laminated. Until this, plastic laminates had been regarded for their practical and functional qualities. They appeared only in less "formal" areas of homes and interiors, such as cupboards, bathrooms and kitchens. Radice refers to plastic laminates as still being a metaphor for vulgarity, poverty and bad taste. Because of their status they were excluded from public areas that aspired to good taste and elegance.

Memphis took all of these considerations into account and altered the situation. Now plastic laminated were to be seen in living rooms, on tables, chairs, sofas, book cases and all objects of furniture that could be decorated (Fig. 14).

Radice refers to the patterns of brutally decorative geometric motifs ... Others evoke stereotypes of false Venetian blinds, flesh meshes, false serpents, even false masterpieces of paintings. Or, as in Hore Sottsass's now familiar "Bacterio" and "Spugnato" patterns (Fig. 15-16) the laminates evoke neutral and anaesthetizing organic forms".²²

Since the patterns first appeared on furniture design they have been adapted and appeared on T-Shirts, sweatshirts, as backgroup for graphics, and as a print for a new-wave brand of shoes.

In addition to the plastic laminates used in Memphis furniture design, materials employed by the designers include printed glass, zinc-plated and textured sheet metals, celluloids, industrial paints, coloured light bulbs and other industrial products. Memphis materials are used for their textures, patterns and colours, appealing more to the physical qualities than to the intellect (Fig. 17).

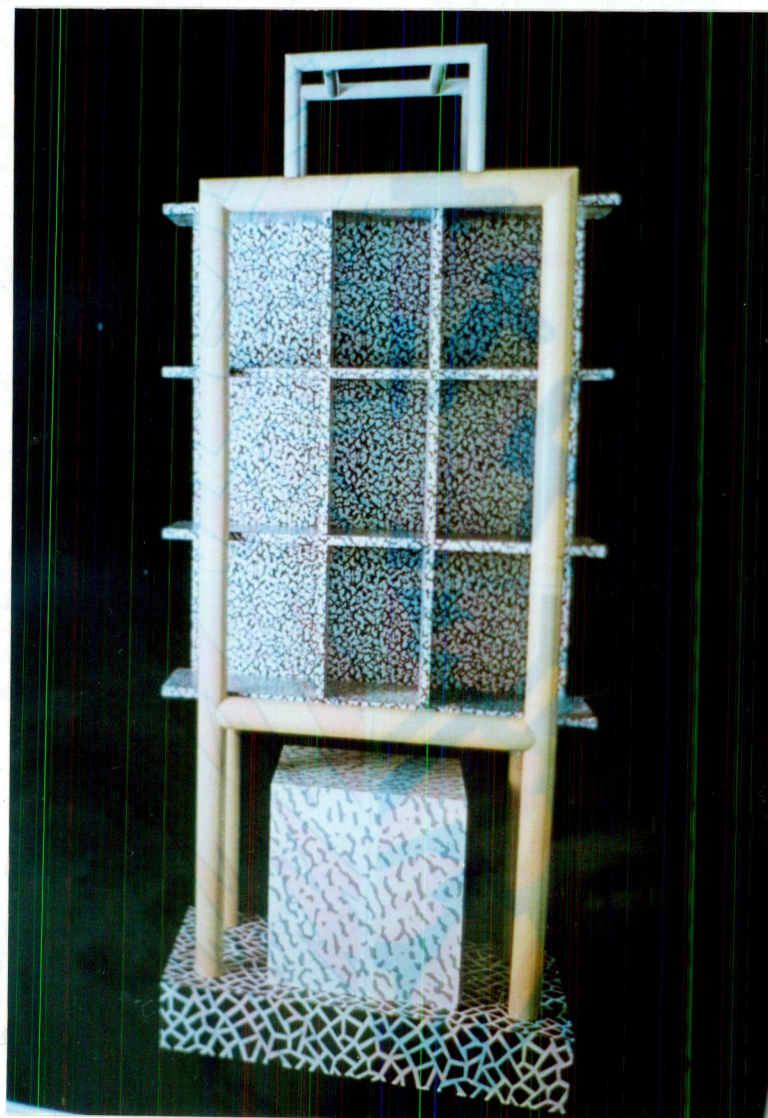
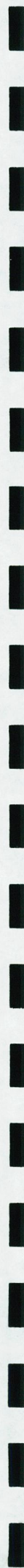
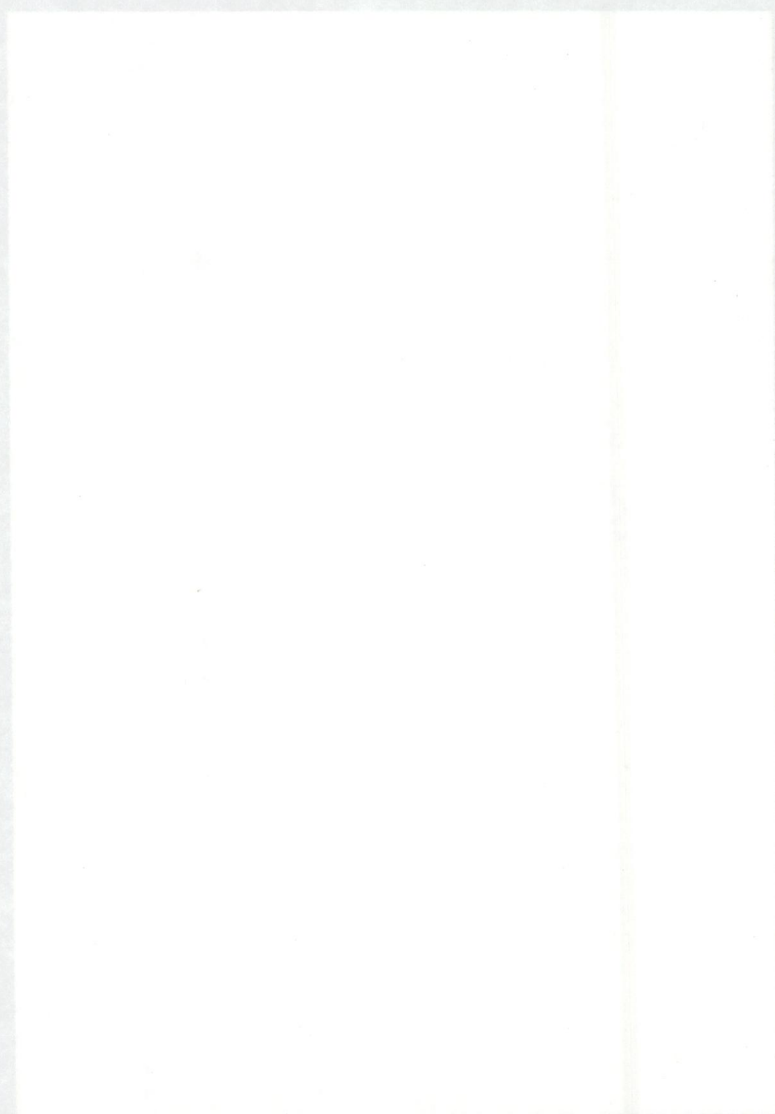


Fig. 14: Marco Zanini. "Union" Bookcase. Design for Memphis, 1983.



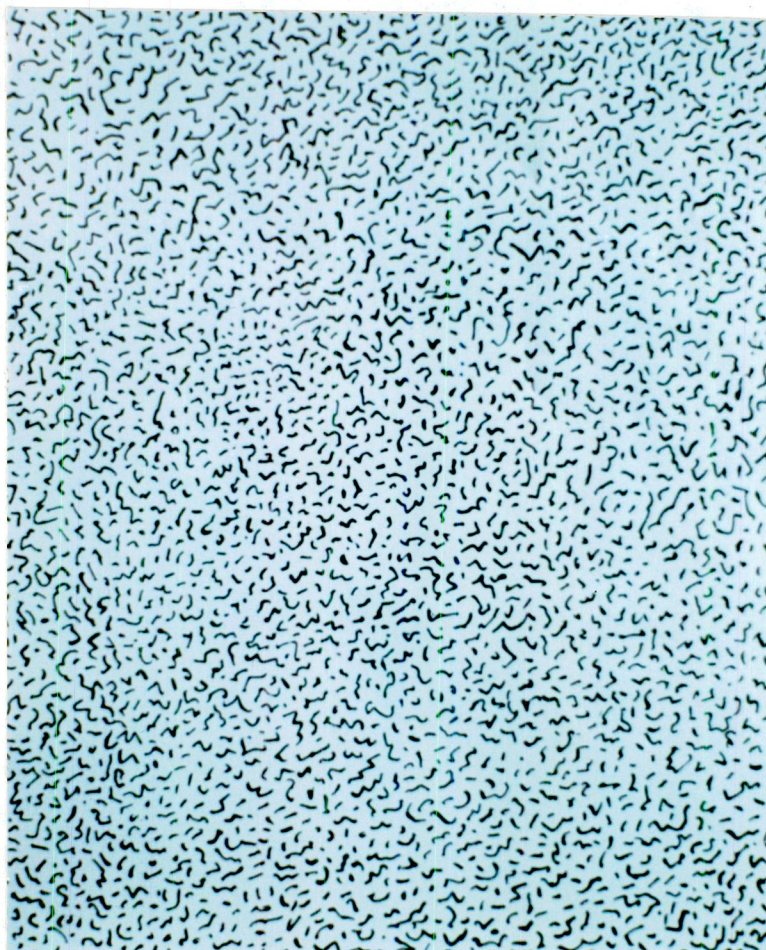


Fig. 15: Ettore Sottsass "Bacterio" 1978.

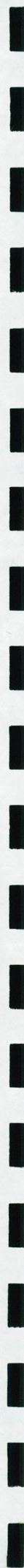
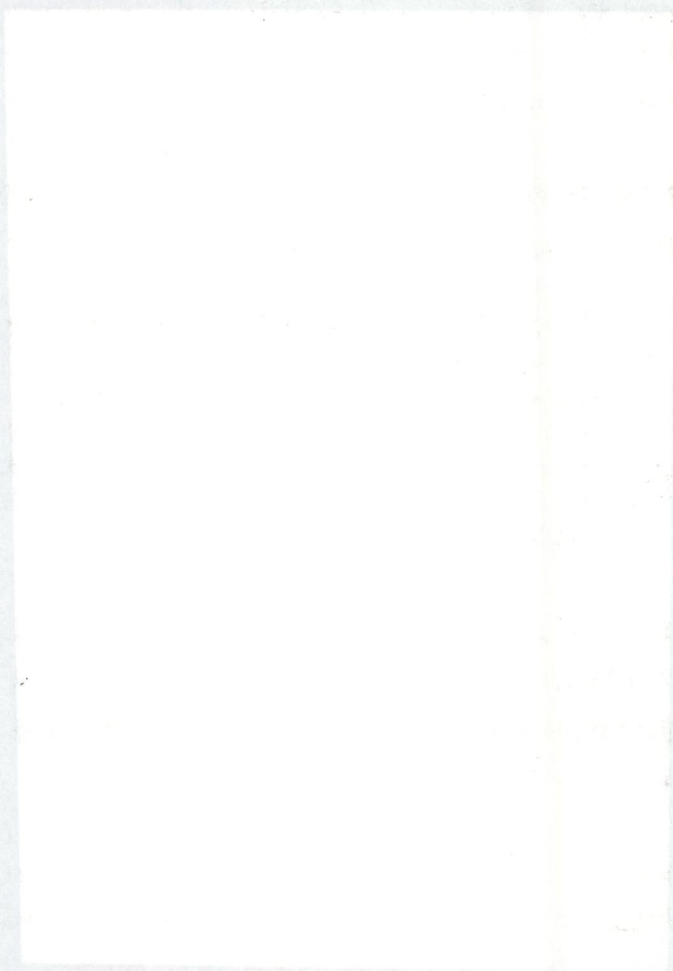




Fig. 16: Ettore Sottsass "Spugnato" 1979.



Often these materials are used in unexpected situations, such as marble used out of context with fibre-glass or aluminium. Memphis materials break the boundary of convention, combining materials that are cheap and expensive, rough and smooth, opaque and sparkling, to produce an end result of complex and attractive combinations. For Memphis what is important is the image and the design of the final product and not a representation of reality.

Memphis design are frequently decorated with a surface pattern. The designers regard decoration as a fundamental and integral part of the design.

Typical Memphis decoration is generally non-directional, homogenous, repeatable, abstract. It tends to disrupt the stability of static structures and suggesting a hypothetical expansion of the pattern in all directions it blurs the objects outlines. It is born with the design as an organic image of its molecular structure. It comes to the surface with the same logical naturalness as the grain in a piece of wood. The truly disconcerting thing is it obvious peremptory "necessity".²³

Nathalie du Pasquier's pattern design are typically Memphis (fig. 18 and 19). They are highly decorative using sharp patterns of flat, bright colour. They retain a high degree of spontaneity and visual stimulus. According to du Pasquier, decoration "... lays bare the soul of things."²⁴

In this respect like body and soul, design and decoration are born of one another. Decoration presents an image for our contemplation. It can be accepted or rejected, but whichever, it cannot be ignored.

It is not possible to isolate any one area of a Memphis design from the overall impact and appeal, of the object. Pattern, shape and form, materials and decoration form integral parts of the design. They cannot be divorced, Marco Zanini's vases for example (Fig. 20) are an exciting and innovative approach to ceramics. They are curious forms which present feeling to our contemplation. Individual pieces such as these and Michelle de Lucchi's "First" chair of 1983, (Fig. 21) are the greatest success of Memphis. Although Memphis is design for a consumer society these objects would be equally at home in the context of a Museum of Modern Design or in a domestic setting.



Fig. 17: Ettore Sottsass. "Sol" fruit dish 1982.





Fig. 18: Nathalie du Pasquier's pattern for Memphis 1982.



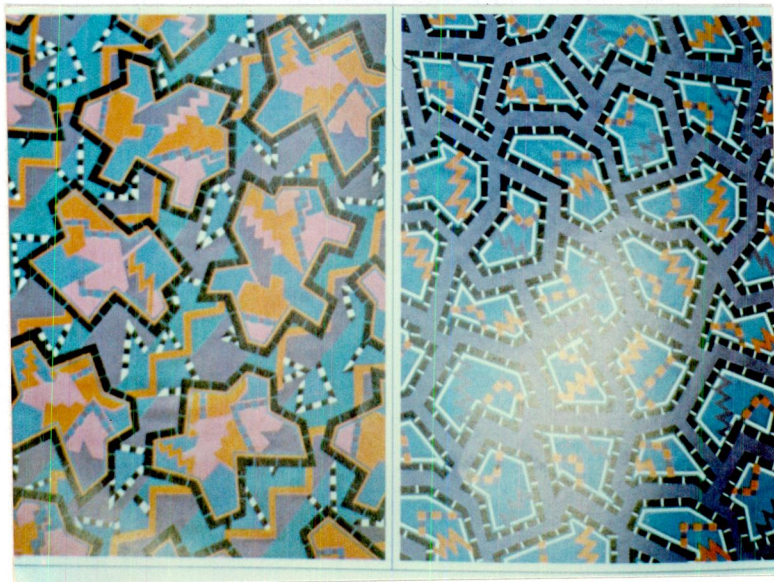


Fig. 19: Nathalie du Pasquier's pattern for Memphis, 1982.



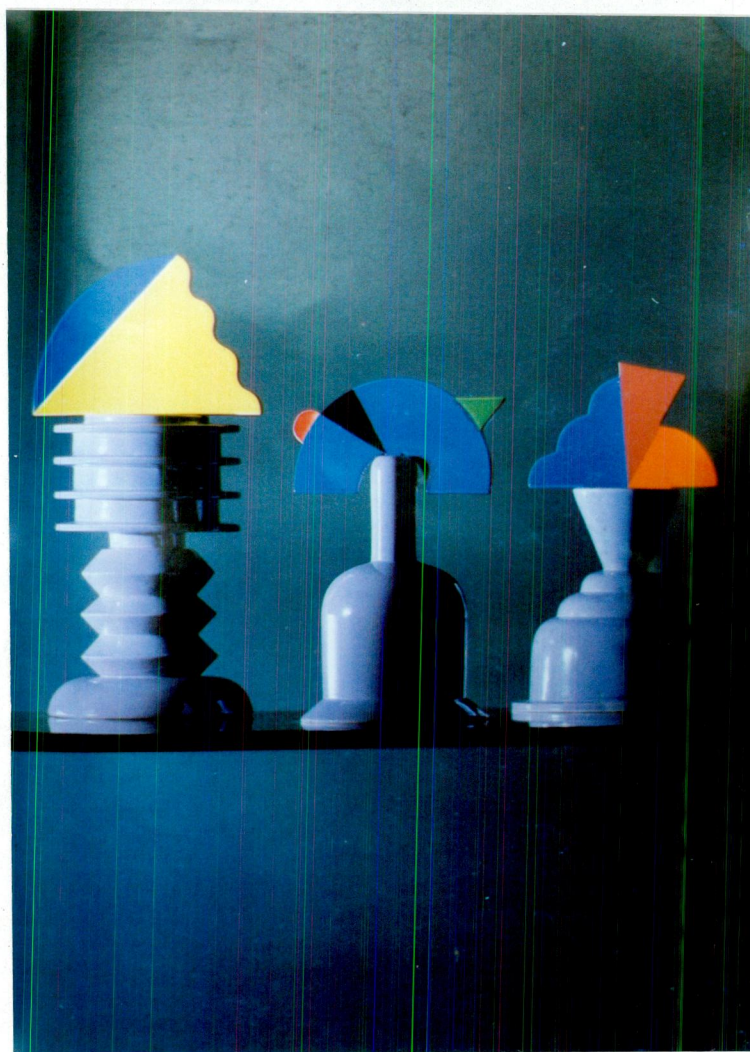


Fig. 20: Marco Zanin's ceramic vases. Memphis 1983.





Fig. 21: Michelle de Lucchi's "First Chair". Memphis 1983.



3.5 Conclusion

In the latter half of the twentieth century the term "Design" has become widely used in place of the applied and decorative arts. Design has also become synonymous with good taste with a link between certain objects and social status. The forces of mass consumption and desirability have taken over from the less aggressive processes employed in the arts and crafts movement at the beginning of this century.

In terms of design we find the focus has altered. Decoration and ornamentation now forms an integral part of a design which cannot be divorced from it. The Celtic Revival saw the addition of elaborately detailed decoration to objects whose structure had an existence of its own. This is true of architecture also, if we compare Thomas Deane's National Museum to Ettore Sottsass's design of 1983 for a Museum of Applied Arts (Fig. 22).

As with the art of any period design is of its time. While we are engulfed in a consumer society of the late twentieth century, design falls prey to the needs of such a society. The need for status, for "good taste" and for style are fulfilled by consumer conscious designers.

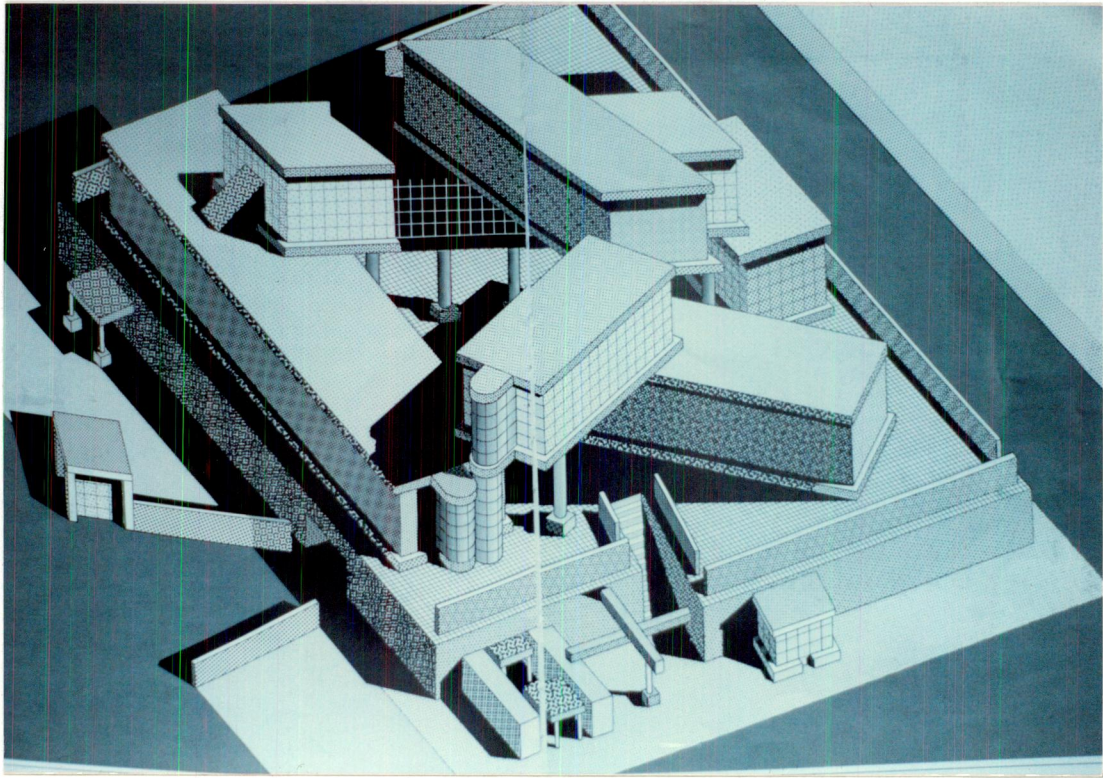


Fig. 22: Ettore Sottsass' design for a Museum of Applied Arts. Memphis 1983.



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Chapter 4

EDUCATIONAL RATIONALE

4.1 It is the intention of this chapter to consider the place of the visual arts, art, craft and design, in the post-primary curriculum, with particular reference to Irish education. Firstly, I would like to refer to the proposals put forward by the Curriculum and Examinations Board outlining the place of the visual arts in Irish Education. Consideration shall then be given to the aims and objectives of the Junior Certificate syllabus in which Design is a central aspect of the visual arts programme. The pupils' project is design based. I would therefore like to highlight the importance of a design education programme. Finally, in this chapter, I would like to support the arguments for the teaching of art, craft and design by referring to the views of art educationalist, Elliot Eisner. This consideration will refer to particular aspects of both my personal and pupil's projects.

4.2.1 The Arts in Education

In 1985 the Curriculum and Examinations Board published a discussion paper, *The Arts in Education* in which three general aims of arts education were put forward. These were as follows:

- “ — to develop a love of, interest in and value for the arts
- to achieve a balance between artistic education (making art) and aesthetic education (receiving art).
- to acquaint the student with the traditions of art.”¹

4.2.2 The Visual Arts

The afore mentioned aims cover all aspects of the arts yet it is with particular reference to the visual arts that I would like to consider them.

Visual arts education is a process through which the pupil learns to see and think visually, involving both artistic and aesthetic experience.² The Arts Discussion Paper claims that an arts education should provide the pupil with

“... an education in both making art (artistic education) and receiving art (aesthetic education), these are two complementary processes”.³

4.2.3 Aims and justifications for a Visual Arts Education:

While the Curriculum and Examinations Board points out the aims of a visual arts education in doing so it also highlights the justifications for the visual arts in as a part of the school curriculum.

These aims are as follows:

- (i) To foster in pupils a love of, an interest in and a value for the visual arts.
- (ii) To help pupils to know themselves and the world through a structured integration between perceiving, thinking, feeling and expressing.
- (iii) To offer the pupil a wide range of visual arts experience with an appropriate balance between artistic education (the pupil making art) and aesthetic education (the pupil receiving art).
- (iv) To develop pupil's ability to make a wide range of symbols, images and forms appropriate to their developmental level, cultural background and personal disposition.
- (v) To develop the ability and confidence of pupils to make and understand visual symbols and so to think visually.
- (vi) To foster personal and social development through encouraging the making of art individually, in pair and in collaborative group projects.
- (vii) To engage pupils in the creation of problems which must be perceived and solved and which are inherently ambiguous and have no single correct solution.
- (viii) To place value on the individual visual expression of each one and mutual respect for the work of others.

- (ix) To provide pupils with experience in a wide variety of media. This will help develop an awareness and understanding of the range of ideas, meanings and feelings that can be created and expressed.
- (x) To help pupils to become aware of the continuity between art, craft and design and other areas of the curriculum and the work outside the classroom.
- (xi) To introduce pupils to the history and traditions of art and to develop an understanding of the art of other cultures and contemporary artists.⁴

4.2.4 The Junior Certificate Syllabus for Art, Craft and Design:

The introduction of the Junior Certificate programme for art, craft and design in 1989 saw the implementation of many of the aims of the Curriculum and Examinations Board. The aims of the new syllabus provide a firm basis from which to rationalize the place of Art, Craft and Design in our curriculum.

These aims are as follows:

- (i) To promote pupils' personal development through experience and learning of art, craft and design.
- (ii) To promote in the pupil a developing awareness of a discriminating attitude to the environment by means of the visual, tactile and spatial.
- (iii) To develop pupils' critical understanding of art, craft and design in the historical, cultural, economic, social and personal contexts. This must include pupils' ability to evaluate his/her own work and the work of others.
- (iv) To bring the pupil to a familiarization with and a competence in the basics of constructional design and problem solving.

- (v) To focus the pupil's knowledge, competence and understanding in two and three dimensional work by developing his/her self confidence through exploration, imagination and creativity.⁵

One of the most significant changes to the syllabus is the designation of the broader title "Art, Craft and Design" to the subject hitherto known as "Art"⁶. This allows for equal importance to be given to all three areas of Art and for the first time Design is seen to have place in the second-level curriculum.⁷

4.3 The Importance of Design in the Second-Level Curriculum:

For some time it was recognised by many involved in arts education in Ireland that sufficient emphasis had not been given to Design in our post-primary curriculum. The Curriculum and Examinations Board, Arts Discussion Paper, recommended that greater emphasis should be placed on Design and design related skills.⁸

"Existing visual arts syllabuses should be reviewed and design and design-related skills should be given greater emphasis in such revision".⁹

This has now been recognised by the new Junior Certificate Syllabus:

Design should not be regarded as mere decoration or embellishment of finished products.

Students should be taught how to analyse design problems, plan and research, to use design processes appropriate to the task in hand, to clarify ideas through the use of working drawings, to carry work to completion and to evaluate the finished work.¹⁰

Design education is concerned with "...developing a critical understanding of human needs and gaining experience in evaluating whether these needs have been adequately met"¹¹ When one speaks of design one cannot evaluate if it is good or bad but how appropriate or inappropriate, how efficient or inefficient the solution is to the problem.¹²

Design decisions relate to the process of problem solving. This process involves firstly identifying the problem to be solved and then testing a proposed solution.¹³

Design education involves the developing of pupils' evaluative skills. This takes the form of a solution from those tested and evaluating the extent to which the chosen solution has fulfilled the brief.

In the case of the pupils' project the brief was to design a section of a panel suitable for use as a decorative element. For this, pupils needed to be discerning and critical in their selection of a proposed solution. It also called for involvement with other members of the class, working as a team, to ensure that each solution worked well with the one next to it.

A design education develops in the pupil an ability to analyse a problem and to exercise judgement when it comes to decision making. There is seldom a unique and inevitable solution to a design problem. Therefore the pupil become educated in the area of problem solving and judgement making. Other qualities inherent in a design education are the urge to make new things, to develop the imaginative side of the brain, the ability to conceive in the mind's eye, to draw on experience, and to exercise criticism of one's own efforts before reaching a decision.¹⁴

The Design Council of London puts forward a further justification for the inclusion of Design as part of a second-level curriculum.

We are all becoming more dependent in work and leisure on products and systems of all kinds. These products and systems influence the environment in which we live and can have far-reaching social consequences. We should therefore all be aware of the nature and significance of designing and it is logical and right that schools, both primary and secondary should include design in the curriculum for all pupils.¹⁵

An education in design encourages creativity, the developing of problem solving skills, decision making and evaluation. These are all valuable in adult life. It also provides an opportunity for those with a talent for design to recognise their ability and perhaps pursue the subject further with a view to a career as a designer.¹⁶

4.4 In support of a Visual Arts Education

Prominent art educationalist Elliot Eisner puts forward two main types of justification for the teaching of art. These he refers to as the contextualist and the essentialist theories.¹⁷ Both are opposing views.

The contextualist, Eisner believes: “emphasises the instrumental consequences of art in work and utilizes the particular needs of the students or the society as a major basis for forming its objectives”.¹⁸

The contextualist believes that art in a programme of education can only function when the context in which it works can be fully understood. Therefore both the characteristics of the student and the needs of the larger society must be considered.¹⁹

The contextualist argument for the teaching of art (craft and design are also included here), operates within a framework of the needs of those being taught. Such an education depends on who the child is, on the needs of the community and the problems facing the larger society. When these needs have been assessed then an art education programme should be formed so as to meet these ends.²⁰

Opposing this view is the essentialist justification for the teaching of art, craft and design. Essentialists believe that art is a unique aspect of human culture and experience. The most valuable contribution art can make is directly related to its' particular characteristics. What an art education can offer in the human experience cannot be given by any other subject.²¹

Educationalist John Dewey argues that:

“Art is the living and concrete proof that man is capable of restoring consciously, and thus on the plane of meaning, the union of sense, need, and impulse and action characteristic of the live creature. The intervention of consciousness adds regulation, power of selection, and redispotion. Thus it varies the arts in ways without end. But its intervention also leads in time to the idea of art as a conscious idea — the greatest intellectual achievement in the history of humanity.”²²

Dewey believes that art is intrinsically valuable, relatively rare and as essentialists argue it should not be subverted to other ends.

To use art as an instrument for other ends as contextualists would, "is to violate the very characteristics that art, as experience, possesses".²³

For Dewey art is a unique experience and one which vivifies life and makes an appraisal of it. Art education allows us to identify that experience as a unique event in one's life.²⁴

Thus essentialists believe that art has essential characteristics through which it can offer an unique experience in one's life. Only art can provide certain contributions to human experience and should not be used to achieve other ends.

But Eisner goes even further to reveal what I believe to be an important value of an education in art. This is

"... the unique contributions it makes to the individual experience with and understanding of the world. The visual arts deals with an aspect of human consciousness that no other field touches on: the aesthetic contemplation of visual form".²⁵

I believe the contemplation which Eisner speaks of finds manifestation in the form of observational drawing. Drawing when used as a means of inquiry articulates our understanding of the world around us.

This visual inquiry carried out in my personal project enabled me to find new values in the objects I chose to observe through drawing. Such an experience reawakened certain awareness of visual forms that lay dormant until then.

In the same way pupils observation of animal forms called to their attention the visual and aesthetic values of the animals. This activated pupils' sensibilities and developed in them an understanding of animals that art as an experience offered.

Both my personal project and that of the pupils exercised responsive capacities by increasing the personal response to the forms which were presented for our contemplation.

As Eisner claims, art "enlarges our consciousness".²⁶ Both projects, personal and pupils', gave rise to this experience, concentrating visual awareness, contemplation and response to visual forms.

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Chapter 5

THE CLASS PROJECT: DESIGNING A DECORATIVE PANEL

5.1 The class project was carried out with a group of 14 to 15 year old girls, from Alexandra College. This school takes a liberal approach to education. The arts in general and the visual arts in particular play a central role in the school curriculum.

5.2 For the class project the pupils, seventeen in all, were divided into pairs. The one remaining carried out work on one section in consultation with other class members. Nine pieces make up the overall panel, the layout of which was derived from one of the carved walnut and oak doors in the National Museum. Each of the nine designs was carried out in flat colour on canvas and finally sewn together to form a whole. Designs were based on observational drawings of animals. Consideration was given to the animal decorations found in the National Museum. This support study was both a historical and visual reference for the group.

5.3 The project commenced in February with a slide show and discussion of work from the Irish Treasury section of the National Museum. For this lesson I made a selection of pieces of metalwork which bore stylized images of animals as a means of decoration. Such pieces included the Ardagh Chalice, the Tara Brooch, St. Lactin's Arm, the Lismore and Clonmacnoise Croziers, the Cross of Cong and St. Patrick's Bell.

Close up shots revealed the various animal decorations of the surfaces, some decorative forms were so stylized that it was impossible to recognise the animal from which the design originated.

The lesson proved a strong motivating factor and pupil participation was high in this area. Many questions were asked and discussion prompted. Pupils were keen to point out the animal forms on the objects and attempted to disclose their identity.

5.4 The lesson which followed the introduction to the Museum objects was a visit to the National Museum. Pupils were afforded the opportunity of observing the objects from a first hand point of view. On arrival at the Museum pupils were given a worksheet which had to be completed. Pupils were divided into three groups and

allocated one of three areas in the Museum. These three areas were the exterior of the building, the rotunda and the Irish Treasury.

Having completed work in one area the group involved to the next area.

Pupils were required to investigate animal decoration in the Museum through observational drawing. Drawing was used as an exploratory process, and as a means of recording information.

During this visit pupils showed a knowledge of the objects which they had learnt both in the art class and history lesson. In this way the Museum visit touched on the wider areas of the curriculum.

Completion of the worksheet brought the Museum visit to an end. (Fig. 23)

5.5 Having studied ways in which Celtic artists used animal imagery as a way of designing for decoration the next stage of the project was to make observational studies of animals. These drawings were to form the source for pupils' own designs for the decorative panel. (Fig. 24) Studies from observation were done from taxidermic animals brought to the classroom. Studies were carried out in oil and chalk pastel, focusing on colour, form and texture of the animals.

5.6 Source work was now completed and the following task was to use the observational studies as the basis from which to create a design to form part of a decorative panel. At this point pupils were given the opportunity to be highly creative. The one restriction was that they should be rendered in flat colour. Patterns or any decorative elements could be included as part of the design if pupils felt it would enhance their piece.

It was also pointed out that colours need not have been, and indeed it was preferable if they were not representative of reality. This was to be a design using real animals purely as the source. The work should not have attempted to reflect real life. Such a design problem, I felt, freed pupils' imaginations and broke away from the common misbelief of pupils of this age that art should reflect reality. It also served to develop in pupils an appreciation of other artists' work which in a way appears to be part of the "real" world.



Fig. 23: Pupils at work in the National Museum, February 1991.



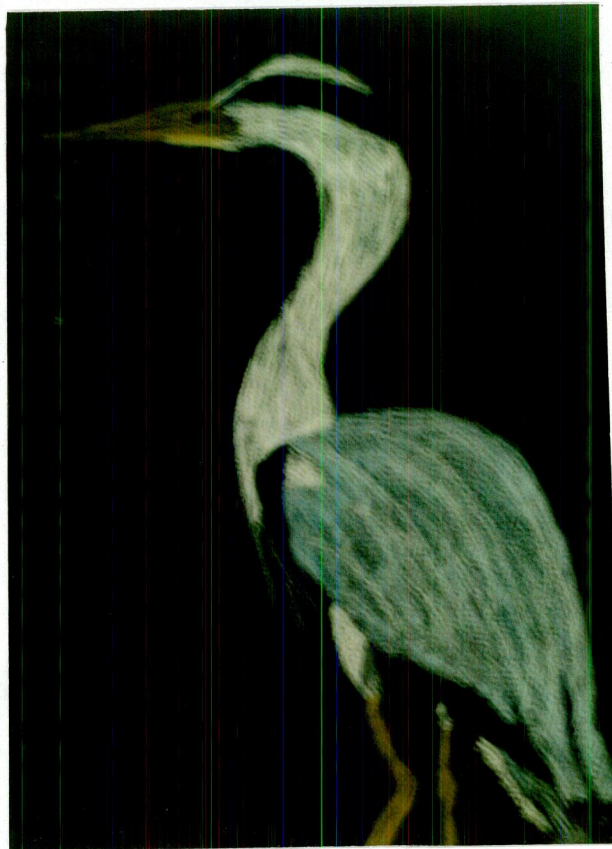


Fig. 24: Pupils' work: Observational Studies of Animals, February-March 1991.



5.7 Skills of discernment and selection were developed in the following lesson. In this lesson pupils were required to make a viewfinder of similar shape to their given area on the panel. With the viewfinder pupils selected an area of their design which was compositionally pleasing and lent itself well to the shape of their canvas piece. Pupils were at all stages of the design process encouraged to look at each others work. This was done with the intention of maintaining unity as a group, and working towards a common goal. (Fig. 25)

5.8 When the selective process was complete pupils were guided in how to transfer their chosen design onto the canvas of the panel. In some cases the size of the chosen design was relatively consistent with that of the canvas and transfer by eye was carried out with facility. However in cases where the canvas was far greater in size than the area in the viewfinder, pupils subdivided the canvas and view in equal proportion, and carried out work on one area at a time.

Painting with acrylic then commenced. Colours were vivid and flat and very striking. (Fig. 26)

5.9 When all nine canvas were painted they were mounted by sewing onto a black cloth background. The dark areas in between the brightly painted canvases gave a dramatic and impressive look to the pieces. When all of the mounting was finished the whole piece was stretched onto a wooden frame and work on the panel was then complete.

Skills of presentation played an important part in the finish of the panel. Such skills are central to any design work and form an integral part of the whole design process. The precision and concentration needed for presentation are qualities which filter through to the broader areas of a pupils' life and as such were an important part of the project.

5.10 The project came to an end in April with the panel in its final form ready to be displayed as a decorative piece. This panel was designed to enhance the environment in which it hangs such as the central area of the school itself.

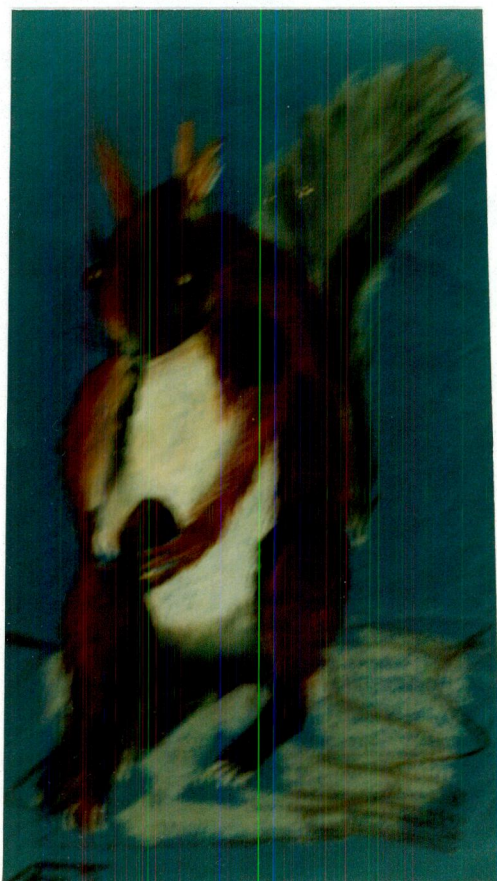


Fig. 25: Pupils' work: Observational Studies of Animals, Feb.-Mar. 1991.

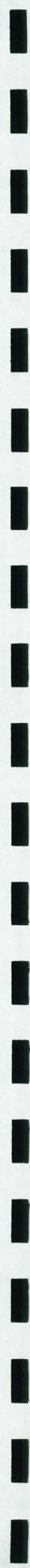




Fig. 26: Pupils at work on class project.

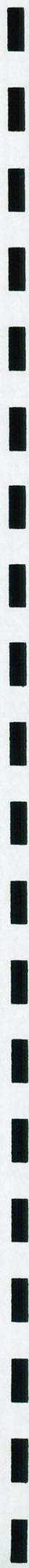
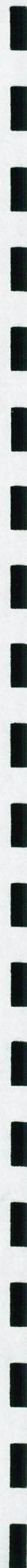
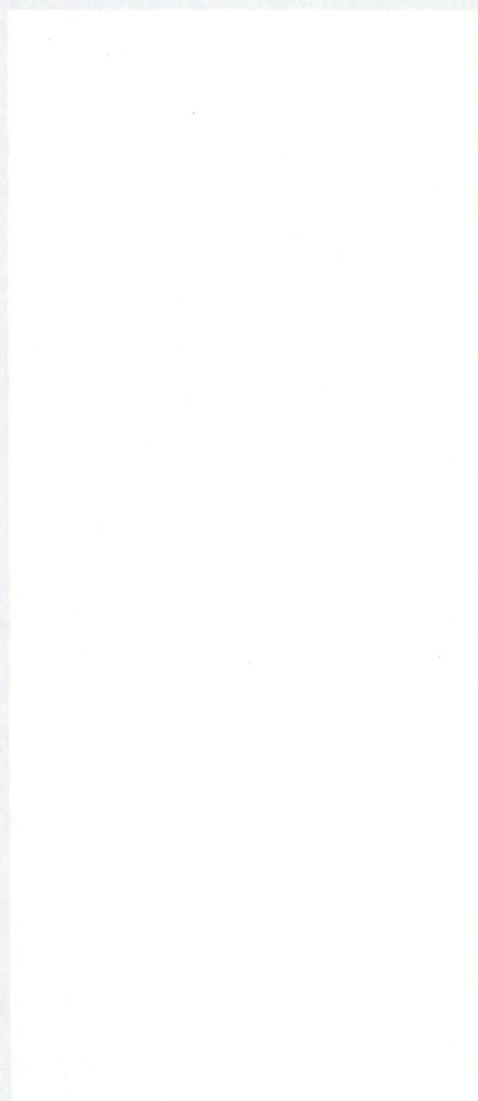




Fig. 27: The finished decorative hanging, April-May 1991.



CONCLUSION

The National Museum provided a starting point for both my personal project and the project carried out by the pupils in school. Both, however, took a different approach. My personal project was an exploratory exercise in visual terms. I explored aspects of decoration and ornament displayed on the structure of the museum and found within the objects on display. My studies concluded in a series of mixed media drawings.

These drawings represent for me a personal experience of and response to the work in the museum. It would be nothing less than pretentious to propose the work to have any spiritual, emotional or intellectual tendencies, or relevance. They are aesthetic representations of closely observed subject matter. They border more on illustrations than paintings. Yet it was not the outcome which had most significance for me but the journey travelled to arrive there. This experience made a national monument a personal event. The many visits and close observations focused my attention in a way that will make it difficult to be a casual observer on future visits.

The class project began in the museum when pupils observed examples of animal imagery as decoration. Their project was to design their own decorative animals for use on a panel or hanging.

Throughout the project pupils worked with fixed attention and enthusiasm for their project. This was helped by a step by step approach to the design, from observational drawing to the final design. Pupils knew exactly what had to be covered in a given time. Working in pairs gave weaker pupils an opportunity to work with stronger areas and so raised their goals and confidence in their ability.

The finished design was bright, appealing and effective and fulfilled both the pupils' and my own aspirations for the project.

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