Craft in a Changing World

Part ll: 1995–2021

Roger Bennett

The 1990s were good years for craftspeople in Ireland. With strong economic growth, rising employment and increasing tourism came an appetite for craft. Galleries and gift shops opened throughout the country; even large department stores stocked a wide range of craft items. Orders at Showcase, the annual trade fair, rose year on year – in 1998 by a full third on 1997 (*Stopress*, 1998). Craft had status: President Mary Robinson regularly gifted pieces to other heads of state. Jobs were being created. The Crafts Council of Ireland (CCoI) started pottery and jewellery courses to give the 'coming generation of craftspeople' the technical skills necessary for entering the workplace.

However, the Crafts Council was criticised for being too Dublin-centric, and some retailers felt that its HQ gallery represented unfair competition. In 1997 the organisation relocated its offices to Kilkenny, while the retail gallery was moved to DesignYard in Dublin's Temple Bar. The National Crafts Gallery opened in 2000 in the former Kilkenny Design Workshops, a beautiful space to hold eye-catching Irish and international exhibitions. DesignYard went into liquidation in 2003, ending the Crafts Council's presence in Dublin.

By the turn of the century, the picture was much less rosy than in the 1990s. Sales of Irish craft fell from over €100 million in 2000 to €76 million in 2001. The chairman of the Crafts Council outlined the reasons: the economic shockwaves of 9/11; a fall in American tourist numbers; and, most worryingly, 'the increase in well-designed and cheaply priced goods from China and other low-cost economies' (CCoI *Annual Report 2004*). There was a perception that design standards had fallen somewhat

in the boom years. With the availability of cheaper travel, consumer tastes were changing, and Irish craft lost some of its allure.

To meet these challenges, the Crafts Council launched initiatives to encourage better design and to target collectors at home and abroad; these were welcomed by specialist makers, but it is a moot point whether they were relevant to large-scale craft producers, several of whom did not recover. A '50% scheme' of matching funding was started in 2005 to help makers develop new designs 'for a specific market opportunity' such as a trade show (*Stopress,* 2006). A generous bursary was established 'to release the craftsperson from their usual commitments so that they can invest in the creative development of their professional practice' (*Stopress,* 2006). The Crafts Council embarked on a co-funding venture with the Department of Foreign Affairs to purchase craft pieces for display in Irish embassies and consulates, and with the National Museum to purchase pieces for the National Craft Collection at Collins Barracks. In 2005 the first Portfolio selection was announced, 'a directory of the best applied artists working in Ireland', with the purpose of promoting their work to overseas collectors (*Irish Arts Review*, 2006). Fifteen members were represented by the Crafts Council at that year's SOFA Chicago, the first in an ongoing series of Portfolio forays into the international market. Collectors' groups, especially from the USA, were brought on tours of Ireland.

In 2009 the country was rocked when Waterford Crystal went into receivership. The economic crash hit hard, and many craft businesses were badly affected. Nevertheless, Joseph McBrinn could write positively in an *Irish Arts Review* article that 'in the last five years the crafts in Ireland have reinvented themselves as a central force in post-modern, post-industrial society and they are, without doubt, more culturally and economically relevant than ever before' (McBrinn, 2009). The Crafts Council organised the Year of Craft in 2011. This was a high point in the story of Irish craft, with myriad events, exhibitions, workshops and retail

promotions. A special issue of five postage stamps featuring Irish craftspeople was released; craft featured prominently in big public events such as the St Patrick's Festival; many counties delivered local programmes. The WCC–Europe held its Annual General Assembly in Dublin Castle.

The Royal Dublin Society (RDS) continued to support Irish craft, in particular through the National Crafts Competition and Exhibition, which it ran for fifty years. This was a hugely important annual event for makers and the general public; it was most democratic in that there was no distinction made between hobbyists and professionals, and no hierarchy of disciplines. Selection for the exhibition was the makers' primary goal; an award was a significant addition to their career. Its ending in 2018 was greeted with dismay. However, it was replaced by the RDS Craft Bursaries, which give their recipients an invaluable boost to their businesses; these bursaries are a welcome addition to the various other awards available to makers, from the Crafts Council's Future Makers Awards and Supports, to the Golden Fleece Awards funded from the estate of Lillias Mitchell. And if the brilliant 'Made in Ireland' exhibition which opened in Kilkenny in November 2021 were to become a regular event, it would go a long way to filling the gap: featuring the work of over a hundred exhibitors across a wide range of disciplines, rigorously selected, it shows the breadth and depth of the best of contemporary Irish craft.

How to define and position the term 'craft' is a never-ending subject for debate. Journalist Fintan O'Toole calls it a 'baggy', 'fuzzy' term: 'On the one side, the idea of craft is associated with individual fulfilment and Enlightenment notions of citizenship. On the other, it is expected to generate growth and jobs and collective prosperity.' (O'Toole, 2011). Organisations that support and promote craft face the difficult task of reconciling its various aspects. Local Enterprise Offices provide financial, training and mentoring assistance. The Crafts Council, now renamed as

Design & Crafts Council Ireland (DCCI), offers support to makers – some 3,200 registered enterprises – and retailers through a wide range of programmes and initiatives, which include education and training, business and marketing advice, export grants, exhibitions, surveys, publications and participation in events such as Bloom gardening festival. Competition from imported goods made in countries with low-cost economies will always offer a huge challenge to Irish makers, who must strive for market share through the originality, individuality and high quality of their products, sometimes using recognisably local motifs and references in their designs. One of DCCI's most important roles is its management of Showcase Ireland, which has continued to be the go-to trade event for makers to pitch their products to national and international buyers; a lot of work has gone into enhancing the look and layout of the show by DCCI, supported by Local Enterprise Offices, and makers are incentivised by various awards to innovate and improve. In 2020, orders taken at Showcase totalled over €26 million. However, the number of shops in the country selling Irish craft has fallen since the heady days of the 1990s. DCCI estimates that in 2019 almost 50% of sales were direct sales, through makers' own or group outlets, makers' websites and craft fairs. Gifted, the annual fair in the RDS, has grown from 110 exhibitor stands in 1995 to over 500 in 2019.

Today, the top Irish makers have established international reputations: their work is included in major public and private collections and in prestigious exhibitions, and they regularly receive commissions for bespoke pieces. Is it possible to identify national characteristics? For the first Portfolio exhibitors at SOFA Chicago in 2006, it was the 'understated quietness' of their work which set it apart, and which led to several of them being taken up by American galleries (*Stopress,* 2007). For Jean de Blanchaert, curator of the Best in Europe section at Venice's Homo Faber exhibition in 2018: 'Ireland has a characteristic of bringing its works a flavour of the past, a flavour of poetry, a flavour of music, but

exceptionally interpreted today.' (Tipton, 2018). It would be fascinating to tease it out and see how this applies to the work of the fifty makers featured in the Irish Heroes selection, for example.

Irish craft has evolved and matured and found its voice since the dark days of the Scandinavian Report sixty years ago, which bewailed the 'lack of sophistication in matters of design' encountered in the country (*Design in Ireland*). That report kick-started the transformation of Irish craft; the visiting delegation which drafted it would be mightily impressed were they to return today.

Craft in a Changing World

Part lll: The Future)

Roger Bennett

2021 is a year of commemoration for DCCI, but of course everything is overshadowed by the global pandemic. It has been a time of grief and anxiety, economic and social disruption; but also, from cloud to silver, there is an opportunity for fresh thinking and new directions.

During the lockdowns of 2020–2021 many people have looked to artists and craftspeople for solace and inspiration. DCCI's successful 'Made Local' campaign has chimed with growing concerns about issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, waste of natural resources and social cohesion. There is a growing realisation that for this nexus of existential crises to be tackled, society's values and priorities must change drastically, and urgently.

Commented [PE1]: art of this piece feels a bit flat (sorry!). Could more be made of it? The performing arts had a steep learning curve during this time and, in fact, some had highly original responses to the pandemic. Not to mention that after the Black Death came the Renaissance, so might we see something similar now?

Annie Warburton, the former Creative Director of the UK Crafts Council, brilliantly describes the potential of craft as an agent for transformation:

‘I invite you to think of craft as a mindset, as a way of thinking that combines ingenuity, problem-solving, experimentation, remarkable skill, deep empathy and deep understanding of material. When you combine these qualities with science, with technology, with communities, then we have a revolution on our hands.’ (Warburton, 2018)

How can this mindset be developed and how might it make a difference? Here are some of the items on this maker’s wish list for developments and outcomes over the coming years:

- An upgrading of art, craft and design subjects in our primary and secondary schools, making them core elements of the curriculum, and taken by very many more students at Leaving Certificate level.
- A substantial increase in the funding of craft and design courses in our art colleges, with much more emphasis given to studio practice. If we want our students to learn to think outside the box, it helps greatly if they can actually make the box!
- A big push to promote apprenticeships and make them more attractive to school-leavers, so that they will be recognised as having the same status as degree courses.
- That priority be given to the opening of the promised National Design Centre; that its influence, with craftspeople and designers working together seamlessly on a wide range of projects, will mirror that of the KDW in the last century.
- That through their experiments with recycled and renewable materials, using substances as diverse as plastic waste and mushroom mycelium, our craftspeople will become pioneers in the campaign to save the world’s natural resources.
- That more attention be paid to the preservation, teaching and exhibiting of Ireland’s traditional crafts, not just because of their priceless heritage value, but also as sources of inspiration whose techniques can be adapted and used in new ways.

- That the increased appreciation of craft will help to erode the old hierarchical divisions between fine art, design and craft; craftspeople could have a members' association similar to Aosdána – called Aos Ceardaíochta, perhaps.
- Not least, that the greater awareness of and interest in craft in Ireland will lead to steady annual increases in jobs created in the field and in sales of craft products, both functional and non-functional; and that people will choose to purchase locally produced items for their intrinsic quality and small carbon footprint, strengthening community ties in the process.

Is this too much to hope for?

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