

# The Scandinavian Report: its origins and impact on the Kilkenny Design Workshops

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The publication of *Design in Ireland: Report of the Scandinavian Design Group in Ireland* in 1962 has been described as providing the catalyst for change in the Irish state's approach to design.<sup>1</sup> The Report was commissioned by Córas Tráchtála, the Irish Export Board, a state-funded company, and the Scandinavian Design Group was formed expressly for the purpose of writing the Report. As well as stimulating protracted debate, and eventually some change in design education in Ireland, the Report also provided a reason for establishing the state-funded Kilkenny Design Workshops and offered a blueprint for its early years of production.

In considering the origins and significance of *Design in Ireland*, generally referred to as the Scandinavian Report, a number of recurrent underlying themes arise. These include the assumed desirability of state intervention in the area of design, the perceived necessity for particular national attributes in goods designed in Ireland, and the need for an improvement in public taste.<sup>2</sup> The assumption that it was 'natural' to emulate the Scandinavians, and the supposed similarities between Ireland and the Nordic counties, are tropes also frequently repeated in the literature surrounding the Report.<sup>3</sup>

The paper will start with a brief overview of the Report and the rationale for commissioning it. This will be followed by an examination of government interventions to improve design standards in Ireland from the founding of the State until the 1960s. The paper will examine the origins of Scandinavian influence on the evolution of public policy on design in Ireland. It will question whether the Report expanded the discourse on design in industry in Ireland, and assess the influence of the Report during the early years of the Kilkenny Design Workshops. This research draws on unpublished material from the Irish National Archive as well as the Thomas Bodkin Collection at Trinity College Dublin, the Arts Council of Ireland Archive, and the Kilkenny Design Workshops Archive held by the National Irish Visual Arts Library.

<sup>1</sup> John Turpin, 'The Irish design reform movement in the 1960s', *Design Issues*, 3: Spring 1986, 4-21; Paul Carrery, 'Commentary', *The Journal of Modern Craft*, 2: 3 November 2009, 325-330.

<sup>2</sup> This concern with public taste predates Irish independence. In the United Kingdom, which until 1922 also included all of Ireland, eliminating 'wrong taste' was the impetus behind the establishment of official design schools in the 1840s and their reform in the 1860s.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance: Susan Forsyth, 'An Experiment for industry in Ireland', *Design Journal*, 224: August 1967, 48-51; Caffery, Paul, 'The Scandinavian Ideal: A model for design in Ireland', *Scandinavian Journal of Design History*, 8: 1998, 32-43; Jeremy Addis and Nick Marchant, *Kilkenny Design: Twenty-one years of design in Ireland*, London, Lund Humphries, 1985.

## Background

*Design in Ireland* was produced following the visit of members of the Scandinavian Design Group to Ireland in April 1961 and published in February 1962. The Scandinavian Design Group was initiated by William H Walsh, the general manager of the Irish Export Board. The Group was made up of three Danes - Erik Herlow, Gunnar Biilmann Peterson and Erik Sorensen - one Finn - Kaj Franck - and one Swede - Ake Hultdt, all of whom were engaged in design in industry and design education in their respective countries.

An earlier Export Board proposal had been to engage a design consultant as a permanent staff member. A Department of Finance report on economic development from 1960 indicates that potential candidates were considered from the US and Britain as well as Denmark and Sweden.<sup>4</sup> The suggestion that an 'industrial designer of international calibre' be engaged is repeated in the Export Board's own annual report for the financial year ending in March 1960.<sup>5</sup> There is no indication in the 1960-61 annual report as to why this earlier proposal was changed or why the Report, shortly to be published, was commissioned.<sup>6</sup> Nor is there any explanation of the selection of a body of experts drawn solely from the Nordic countries. It appears that some related documentation may not have been preserved in the relevant files deposited in the National Archive.

The foreword to the Report, which is unattributed though Hogan identifies the author as William Walsh,<sup>7</sup> states that the Export Board, with its recently acquired responsibility for improving design standards in industry, sought an 'authoritative and impartial assessment of where we now stand'. It goes on to say it 'was natural in the situation to turn to the Scandinavians'. Among the reasons for considering it natural Walsh lists their significant and recent success in design and the fact that 'the scale of their industry, their raw materials, the patterns of their society, are similar in many respects to ours'.<sup>8</sup> These claims are worth exploring further.

Scandinavian Design has been described as referring to 'domestic objects and furnishings, particularly those that combine practical and functional features with aesthetic qualities in a distinctive manner'.<sup>9</sup> The development of what became known in the 1950s as Scandinavian Design had its roots in the arts and crafts movements and the emergence of nationalism in the nineteenth century. At this period anthropological folkloric studies in western and northern Europe concentrated on vernacular architecture and domestic interiors, identifying 'native' forms which provided sources for the visual expression of nationhood. The research on material culture from archaeology and anthropology was utilised in the

<sup>4</sup> Government of Ireland, Department of Finance, *Report of the Economic Development Branch*, Dublin, National Archives, 1960, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Córas Tráchtála, *1959-60 Annual Report and Accounts*, Dublin, National Archive, 1960, 7-8.

<sup>6</sup> Córas Tráchtála, *1960-61 Annual Report and Accounts*, Dublin, National Archive, 1961.

<sup>7</sup> Crafts Council of Ireland, *Designing Ireland: a retrospective exhibition of Kilkenny Design Workshops 1963-1988*, Kilkenny, Crafts Council of Ireland, 2005, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Scandinavian Design Group. *Design in Ireland; Report of the Scandinavian Design Group in Ireland April 1961*, Dublin, Córas Tráchtála /The Irish Export Board, 1962, xi.

<sup>9</sup> Ulf Hård af Segerstad, 'Unity and Diversity in Scandinavian Design' in *Scandinavian Design 1880-1980*. D.R. McFadden (ed.), New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1982, 26.

production of a contemporary material culture centred on the domestic sphere and which responded to political aspirations of the period.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the grouping together of the Nordic countries under the banner of ‘Scandinavian’ their shared history is a story of conquests and mergers, with Sweden as an imperialist power often dominating its neighbours.<sup>11</sup> Denmark also had a history as a colonial power. While Ireland in the 1960s shared similarities with the Nordic countries as regards size of population, and with Finland in particular in relation to gaining independence from a powerful neighbour followed by a bloody civil war in the first quarter of the twentieth century, in other important respects there were major differences. The Nordic countries were pioneers in adopting the welfare state model, while resistance to state intervention into many areas such as health and education continued in Ireland in the 1960s. This resistance was spearheaded by the Catholic Church which continued to hold a privileged position in the state. In contrast the main religion in all of the Nordic countries was Lutheran Protestantism, reflected perhaps in the minimalism and functionality of their design. The inappropriateness of Ireland modelling itself on Lutheran countries was implied by some commentators in adverse reactions to the Report.<sup>12</sup>

With hindsight it is now clear that during the 1960s the influence of Scandinavian design was in decline. According to Sergerstad the close connections and frequent exchanges between the five counties dating from early in the century laid the foundation for the expansion of craft-based industries after the Second World War when there was ‘enormous demand for beautiful things’.<sup>13</sup> The generous state support for these industries in all of the Nordic counties at this time helped create ‘international prominence’. Sergerstad notes that by the 1960s, as other countries recovered from the War and became more competitive, Scandinavian dominance declined. The shift of influence from Scandinavia to the USA in architecture in Ireland by the 1960s has also been noted.<sup>14</sup>

Although the members of the Design Group are listed as the authors of the Report, Paul Hogan, a young graduate employed at the Export Board, who acted as secretary to the Group has stated that he ‘interviewed the five members of the group where possible and transcribed their views in their own words’.<sup>15</sup> Paul Caffery goes further and states that Hogan ‘actually wrote the report’.<sup>16</sup> It is clear on reading the report that it represents an attempt at synthesising the opinions articulated by the individual members of the group, organised to present a unified whole. Although organised conventionally enough there are neither conclusions nor a summary of the

<sup>10</sup> Victor Buchli, ‘Architecture and the domestic sphere’ in Victor Buchli (ed.), *The Material Culture Reader*, Oxford, Berg, 2002, 206-213.

<sup>11</sup> The Nordic countries are Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. The term ‘Scandinavian’ is only normally applied to Denmark, Norway and Sweden.

<sup>12</sup> See Desmond Fennell, *Irish Independent*, 5 March 1962, 3; 6 March 1962, 8; 7 March 1962, 2; 8 March 1962, 4. See also D. Fennell, *Art for the Irish*, Dublin, Mount Salus Press, nd, which contains an essay ‘Design against art’ based on these four articles.

<sup>13</sup> Segerstad, ‘Unity and Diversity in Scandinavian Design’, 35.

<sup>14</sup> See Ellen Rowley ‘From Dublin to Chicago and Back Again’, in *Ireland, Design and Visual Culture: Negotiating Modernity, 1922-92*. Linda King and Elaine Sissons, (eds.), Cork, Cork University Press, 2011, 211-234.

<sup>15</sup> Crafts Council of Ireland. *Designing Ireland*, .2.

<sup>16</sup> Caffery, ‘The Scandinavian Ideal’, 32-43.

recommendations which are scattered throughout the text. The proposals on education are disjointed, and for an official report, much of it retains a conversational tenor which may seem odd to a contemporary reader.

The Group were not issued with set terms of reference to guide them, rather they were asked to 'select for inclusion in the report those matters which from their own observation it seemed most pertinent to examine'.<sup>17</sup> This broad remit, which resulted in the encroachment of the Group into areas, particularly education, outside the scope of Export Board and its parent Ministry, the Department for Industry and Commerce, led to questions in Dáil Eireann, the Irish parliament, following the publication of the report.<sup>18</sup> The absence of clear terms of reference may have led to the expansion in the scope of the recommendations, and may also account for the lack of clarity in the structure of the Report.

Having received briefing papers before their arrival, the Group spent two weeks in Ireland, visiting a cross-section of factories and workshops to examine a range of Irish-manufactured goods, as well meeting representatives of universities, colleges of art, and technical schools, and professional bodies, e.g. the Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland.

## **Introduction to the Report**

The introduction raises the three core themes outlined above: the desirability of developing a national style; the need for state intervention in design matters; and the need to improve public taste. The Group observed that there appeared to be a general bias towards literature and that drawing and the plastic arts were neglected in Irish schools.<sup>19</sup> They suggested that without better art education at all levels it would be 'impossible to produce the informed and appreciative public so necessary as a background to the creative artist'.<sup>20</sup> They make it clear that they are not recommending the adoption of Scandinavian designs in Ireland. The Group stressed that the success of their products arose from their development from traditional crafts and the 'application of traditional forms to modern conditions' (5). They felt that adoption of forms produced elsewhere would undermine the remains of indigenous culture and 'stifle the development of true Irish tradition' (2).

In conclusion they state that if their recommendations are to be carried out then 'all elements of Irish society will have a part to play – the Government, educationalists, manufacturers, architects and designers, department stores and the organs of publicity, the press, radio and television' (4). They are explicit on the role Government departments can play in raising design standards in areas within their remit, but there is also an implicit assumption that this Report and its recommendations, commissioned as it was by an organ of the State, can influence all of Irish society. This assumption on behalf of the Design Group may reflect their

<sup>17</sup> Scandinavian Design Group. *Design in Ireland*, xii.

<sup>18</sup> *Dáil Eireann Debates*, Vol. 194, No. 8, 4 April 1962. Accessed 01/03/2011.  
<http://debates.oireachtas.ie/dail/1962/04/04/00037.asp>

<sup>19</sup> Drawing had been removed as a compulsory subject from the school curriculum in 1922. See Brian P. Kennedy, *Dreams and Responsibilities*, Dublin, Arts Council of Ireland, nd (1990), 21-22.

<sup>20</sup> Scandinavian Design Group. *Design in Ireland*, 2.

experience of political processes in their individual countries. In fact there was a history in Ireland of commissioning reports on cultural matters which were either not published or if published, not acted upon.<sup>21</sup>

### **Review of Irish products and recommendations**

Before embarking on the product review some background is provided on modern Scandinavian manufacturing, which they say arose from ‘special local conditions’ and that until recent times ‘the bulk of Scandinavian-designed products were created for an appreciative home market’ (5). They argue that the aim of improving the quality of designed goods in Ireland should not be primarily to satisfy overseas markets, but in the first place to improve the quality of life of the Irish people. In viewing Irish products the Group searched for ‘national characteristics’ (5). They felt these were manifest in rural handicrafts, the Georgian tradition, and in early Christian culture. The Georgian they dismissed as English in origin. However, presumably referring to the Celtic Revival and Irish Arts and Crafts movement, they also found fault with the use of complex patterns and motifs from early Christian culture in the previous 75 years.

The main body of the report (approximately one half of the total) is devoted to reviewing products manufactured in Ireland – ranging from textiles, kitchenware, and furniture, to souvenirs and stamps. The Group noted that the best designed products they had seen were “based on traditional craft industries successfully interpreting the Irish tradition” while the worst had ‘not the slightest chance of competing successfully on the world market’ (2-3).

The design attributes which the Scandinavians embraced have been described as ‘capitalising on the inherent qualities of materials...paying attention to proportions, functionality, production processes and ergonomics and the emphasis on collaboration between the designer and manufacturer’.<sup>22</sup> In the Design Group’s review of Irish products two themes dominate – praise for those items which most closely conform to the Scandinavian design preferences, and repeated advice to explore Scandinavian experience by calling on help and advice from external experts and consultants. They suggest that the textile, carpet, glass, and ceramic industries would benefit from mentoring from Scandinavian and other designers, but in relation to furniture they recommend that a workshop be established under the direction of ‘excellent foreign designers and craftsmen’ (24).

The qualities which the Design Group felt would improve the competitiveness of Irish products were first-rate ‘craftsmanship’ and design and also an ‘understanding of the original Irish culture’ and the penetration of a ‘distinctive Irish spirit into Irish production’ (9). While not advocating the adoption of designs

<sup>21</sup> See B. P. Kennedy, *Dreams and Responsibilities*, 17-21, on the commissioning of the Report on the School of Art and the Report on the National Museum, both completed in 1927 and largely ignored. Three French experts were engaged to write the School of Art report, and four Irish experts (including Thomas Bodkin) and a Swede, Professor Nils Lithberg, commissioned to write the National Museum report.

<sup>22</sup> Anna Moran, ‘Marketing Irish Modernity: Kilkenny Design Workshops and selling “good” design at American department store promotions, 1967-76’, in *Ireland, Design and Visual Culture: Negotiating Modernity, 1922-92*. Linda King, and Elaine Sissons, (eds.), Cork, Cork University Press, 2011, 192.

produced in Scandinavia, the Design Group did propose that the historical processes, which had resulted in the success of their designs both at home and in the export market, could be replicated in Ireland.

The Group's proposals for encouraging public interest in design concentrate on the role that department stores might play in educating the public. This allocation of an educational role to the commercial sector was justified by a veiled criticism regarding Irish museums, stating that 'it would probably be better to wait a couple of years before involving them (museums) in the responsibility of organising design exhibitions etc., as in our view the best place to commence such action is in the department stores' (36). The department stores were urged to hold exhibitions and competitions and also to educate their buyers to value good design. The Design Group also suggested that a survey of 'man-made Ireland' might be explored which could act as the basis for future exhibitions and assist the education of Irish people 'who have never evaluated their cultural resources or sought how best to interpret their own visual traditions' (39).

It is in relation to education that the Group made perhaps their most provocative statement, saying that Ireland was extraordinary in having a 'multiplicity of art, architectural and craft schools, not one of which appeared to us capable of adequately satisfying the needs of the country in regard to design' (3). The need to address education for designers occupies the final two chapters of the report. In order to address the problem of a shortage of designers in the short term, while awaiting the reorganisation of art and design education which in the medium term would produce new designers, the Group suggested that industry should turn to architects, skilled craftspeople and designers from Scandinavia and elsewhere. They suggested that seminars, workshops and summer schools aimed at designers, manufacturers and retailers should be instituted. Arising from their visits to existing art schools and to university architectural departments they were of the opinion that nothing short of a completely new school could solve the educational problems. They envisioned architects, designers, painters and sculptors being educated together in this new institution, which would replace all of the existing schools and be located on a completely new site. Rather confusingly the final chapter proposed establishing yet another body - an Irish Institute of Visual Arts - as a necessary step prior to the formation of the new art school, and possibly also a small working committee as a forerunner of this Institute (52-55). The task of the working committee, and eventually the Institute of Visual Arts, would be to formulate policies for the content and delivery of design education in Ireland.

### **Reaction to the Report**

The publication of the report stimulated a bout of press articles and letters from the public. Initial response was generally positive but the proposals on education inspired heated debate. John Turpin, while supportive of the report credits it with precipitating a crisis in art education which continued into the 1970s.<sup>23</sup> The most outspoken critic of the report and its authors was Desmond Fennell, a journalist and

<sup>23</sup> John Turpin, 'The Irish Design Reform Movement of the 1960s', *Design Issues*, 21.

cultural commentator who had spent some time living in Sweden. In a series of articles published over four days in the *Irish Independent* he questioned the artistic achievements of the Scandinavian countries and queried the worth of their design outside of the domestic sphere.<sup>24</sup> He was of the opinion that Scandinavia had created no great art, which he considered undermined the worth of their achievements in the applied arts and made this an inappropriate model for Ireland.

### **The campaign to improve design in industry**

The argument that a country which creates great art elevates public taste for art and good design which in turn stimulates the production of well designed products was one frequently repeated in assessments of the place of art and design in Irish life, particularly in the influential writings of Thomas Bodkin, a lawyer and future director of the National Gallery of Ireland, earlier in the century.

Although the Report was considered as innovative in many respects it also reflected attitudes about design in industry which had been current in Ireland since the founding of the state. From the earliest days of the Irish Free State concern had been expressed about the quality of the design of many items manufactured in Ireland. Bodkin was at the forefront of proposing state intervention in the arts, in which he included art and industry. In early 1922, following the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty which would establish the Irish Free State, he prepared a paper on the functions of a ministry of fine arts which was initially submitted to the Ministry for Home Affairs, and then forwarded by them to the Minister for Education.<sup>25</sup> In it he suggested that 'the maintenance of public Art Galleries, Libraries, and Schools and Academies of Art and Music' would be the principal responsibilities of the Ministry of Fine Arts.<sup>26</sup> He proposed that in conjunction with the Ministries for Trade, Commerce and Economic Affairs plans should be prepared for 'the education of craftsmen, through technical schools or schools of design' pointing out that in other countries similar institutions ensured their reputation for producing 'high-class goods'.<sup>27</sup> He recommended that the Ministry of Fine Arts should liaise with other ministries on design matters, such as with Finance in relation to issuing new coinage and Defence on the design of uniforms, and also advise on the decoration and furnishing of State departments.<sup>28</sup> Despite the measured tone of this document, and his assurances that the ideal Ministry of Fine Arts 'should be small and inexpensive' little progress was made in forwarding Bodkin's plans.

Less measured concern about the design of Irish manufactured products was expressed in the press. A 1924 article in the *Irish Statesman*, entitled 'Buying Irish Goods', complained that people had been urged to buy products for patriotic reasons 'not because they were good, but because they were Irish. All kinds of articles, which

<sup>24</sup> See Fennell, *Irish Independent*, and *Art for the Irish*.

<sup>25</sup> TCD, MS 6965/12, letter to Thomas Bodkin, January 1922

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Bodkin, *Memorandum on the Functions of a Ministry of Fine Arts*, 1922, TCD, MS 6965/10.

<sup>27</sup> Bodkin, *Memorandum*.

<sup>28</sup> Bodkin, *Memorandum*.

revolted us because of bad taste or inferior quality, were thrust upon us'.<sup>29</sup> An unsigned article on 'The Arts and Industry' published in 1925 pointed out that the neglect of the visual arts in Ireland had had a deleterious effect on Irish industry, and that appeals to support native industries fell on deaf ears when the quality of design was poor.<sup>30</sup> The author suggests this situation could be improved by employing artists and 'securing the best design, to give beauty and national character to our industries, and to win some international repute for quality', whereas any 'attempt to compete with the great industrial countries who have concentrated on mass production was almost certain to fail'. These are sentiments which are repeated, in almost exactly the same terms, over 35 years later in the Scandinavian report. The 1925 article calls on the Government to institute a policy which would result in the training of craftspeople capable of contributing to the construction of new public buildings and to the 'general development of architecture, the fittings, decoration and furniture of Irish houses'. In an early reference to examples from Nordic countries it noted that in 'Sweden some policy like this was carried out in preparation for the building of its famous City Hall at Stockholm'.

The issue of arts and industry was raised by Bodkin as part of his chapter on 'Modern Irish Art' in *Saorstát Éireann*, the Handbook of the Irish Free State, in 1932.<sup>31</sup> This short text raises themes which Bodkin in future lectures and publications repeats: the lack of a distinctly Irish school of art; the neglect of the arts since the founding of the State; and the need for better design in Irish industries. He states that with some few exceptions 'Irish furniture, pottery and textiles are, as a general rule, undistinguished',<sup>32</sup> and then makes reference to the glass industry in Sweden as an example of what might be achieved in Ireland.

Bodkin's interest in Swedish glass may have been stimulated by his visit to the 1930 Stockholm Exhibition of Swedish Arts and Crafts and Home Industries. There are two unpublished accounts of this visit which provide vivid descriptions of the visit but little detail of the exhibition itself.<sup>33</sup> The Stockholm Exhibition is chiefly remembered as the catalyst for the adoption of functionalism in Swedish architecture.<sup>34</sup> Bodkin omits any mention of the architecture of the exhibition pavilion at all. He gives only a very brief description of the exhibits, concluding

My admiration for the artistic products of Sweden...grows apace. I am most attracted by the glass, particularly the products of the great firm of Orrefors which is scarcely fifty years old and was founded as a mere bottle factory.

<sup>29</sup> Anon. 'Buying Irish Goods', *Irish Statesman*, 2: 1, 15 March 1924, 5-6.

<sup>30</sup> Anon. 'The Arts and Industry', *Irish Statesman*, 4: 11, 23 May 1925, 326-7.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Bodkin, 'Modern Irish Art', in *Saorstát Éireann*, Dublin, 1932, 239-244.

<sup>32</sup> Bodkin, 'Modern Irish Art', 244.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Bodkin, TCD, MS 6912/04, *A memorable day in Sweden*, 18 June 1930, and TCD, MS 6912/19, *Five Days in Sweden*. A note in pencil on the latter MS says 'Irish Times 1930'. This MS is eight pages long and breaks off in mid-sentence. It does not appear to have been published in the *Irish Times*, although a scored out statement in the body of the text says that Bodkin is representing that newspaper. Much of both of these texts is devoted to observations about the people Bodkin travelled with or met during this visit, including members of the British Institute of Industrial Art, Mr Ambrose Heal of Heal's furniture store in London, and the Crown Prince of Sweden.

<sup>34</sup> See Paul F Norton, 'World's Fairs of the 1930s', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 24: 1, 1965, 27-30.

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Thanks to the intelligence of its owners and the skill and taste of its designers it now exports about three quarters of its production to all the countries of Europe.<sup>35</sup>

Bodkin made another visit to Stockholm for the 1933 International Congress of Art History at which the main theme was the emergence of national styles, particularly in the recently independent northern European states.<sup>36</sup>

Following his resignation as director of the National Gallery in 1935, Bodkin delivered a lecture at Trinity College Dublin entitled *The Importance of Art to Ireland* in which he took the opportunity to develop some of the themes raised in his 1922 memorandum on the functions of a ministry of arts, and his 1932 text.<sup>37</sup> In the introduction he states that as he was no longer a civil servant, he is speaking 'for the first time with the muzzle off' and proceeds, in a very subjective manner, to outline his previous efforts to raise the level of cultural policy in Ireland.<sup>38</sup> He blames the government for the lack of interest in the visual arts in Ireland, the lack of a distinct school of art, and the 'want of proper taste' among the people,<sup>39</sup> which he felt had inhibited the flowering of design in Ireland. He uses historical references to the development of the applied arts in many European countries which resulted from the flourishing of the fine arts.<sup>40</sup> In relation to contemporary craft-based industries he remarks on the investment made by the French and British governments in the arts,<sup>41</sup> and again quotes the Swedish example, along with Denmark, Belgium and Fascist Italy, as providing lessons for Ireland.<sup>42</sup> Bodkin at this point left Ireland to take up an appointment as the director of the Barber Institute in Birmingham, though he continued to be associated with the arts in Ireland.<sup>43</sup>

### *Report on the Arts in Ireland*

The Minister for Industry and Commerce appointed an advisory committee on design and industry in 1937. Although the committee met often and issued numerous reports it made little headway in instituting change, possibly because of its advisory character. It ceased operating at the outbreak of the Second World War.<sup>44</sup> Following a change of government the Taoiseach (Prime Minister), John A Costello, a

<sup>35</sup> TCD, MS 6912/19.

<sup>36</sup> Krista Kodres, 'Freedom from theory? An attempt to analyse Sten Karling's views on (Estonian) art history', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 3, December 2010.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Bodkin, *The Importance of Art to Ireland*, Dublin, At the Sign of the Three Candles, 1935.

<sup>38</sup> Bodkin, *The Importance of Art to Ireland*, v.

<sup>39</sup> Bodkin, *The Importance of Art to Ireland*, 8.

<sup>40</sup> Bodkin, *The Importance of Art to Ireland*, 5-7.

<sup>41</sup> Bodkin, *The Importance of Art to Ireland*, 11-12.

<sup>42</sup> Bodkin, *The Importance of Art to Ireland*, 9-10.

<sup>43</sup> See Kennedy, *Dreams and Responsibilities*, for extensive references to Thomas Bodkin, his relationship with successive Irish governments, and his ambitions and frustrations in achieving key public appointments.

<sup>44</sup> Kennedy *Dreams and Responsibilities*, 44, references numerous industries investigated by the Committee. However according to Thomas Bodkin the committee met on forty-two occasions 'but they never presented any report on progress'. See Thomas Bodkin, *Report on the Arts in Ireland*, Dublin, The Stationery Office, Dublin, 1951, 42.

long-time supporter of Bodkin, commissioned him to write a report on the arts in Ireland in July 1949. Exploring questions of design for industry formed part of the very broad terms of reference, which included making recommendation for museums and galleries, national monuments, art education, and the promotion of the arts at home and abroad. Bodkin was asked to examine 'the existing relations between the Arts and industry in Ireland, including such activities as technical training in craftsmanship, the provision of industrial designs and of appropriate advertisements for tourist development, and upon the steps that might be taken to arouse the public interest and the interest of manufacturing industries in the importance of design in industry'<sup>45</sup>

The Report was ready in September 1949, just over three months after the official announcement of Bodkin's acceptance of the commission.<sup>46</sup> It is possibly not surprising that some of the report was based, often verbatim, on Bodkin's 1935 Trinity College lecture and was equally blunt about the short-comings of cultural institutions and the failure of successive governments in treating the arts seriously. The design in industry chapter, in addition to repeating the references made previously to historical examples which might act as models for Ireland, and in particular the Swedish glass industry, also includes a good deal of new information about the Council of Industrial Design set up in Britain in 1944. Bodkin was obviously impressed by this organisation, which had promotional, advisory and educational roles. In correspondence with the Council's director, Gordon Russell, he stated that '[I] will probably make some recommendation that the Government here should set up some sort of organisation like yours though necessarily on the much smaller scale'.<sup>47</sup>

However, there is some inconsistency between the recommendations scattered throughout the rather discursive text and those made in the Conclusion which are much more focused. Bodkin revisited his 1922 proposals for a ministry of arts, though now modified as a department within an existing ministry, which would embrace the wide range of cultural institutions and tasks covered by the *Report*.<sup>48</sup> Among these tasks he suggested the development of an organisation similar to the Council of Industrial Design in England, and another similar to the 'Arts Council of England'.<sup>49</sup> Although Northern Ireland had had its own arts council – the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts – since 1943, surprisingly no reference was made to it in Bodkin's Report.

### **Establishment of the Arts Council of Ireland and the Export Board**

Bodkin's proposal that a government department of fine arts should be established was not implemented. The main outcome of the *Report* was the 1951 Arts Bill which instituted the Arts Council of Ireland. Many of those tasks which Bodkin had supposed would be the responsibility of an arts department were in fact assigned to

<sup>45</sup> Bodkin, *Report on the Arts in Ireland*, Dublin, 5.

<sup>46</sup> Although completed in 1949 the report was not published until 1951.

<sup>47</sup> TCD, MS 6965/66, letter from Thomas Bodkin to Gordon Russell, 22 July 1949.

<sup>48</sup> Bodkin, *Report on the Arts in Ireland*, 58-9.

<sup>49</sup> Bodkin, *Report on the Arts in Ireland*, 58.

the Arts Council, and among these was the remit for design in industry. In fact the definition of the arts employed by the 1951 Bill and the Arts Council, including not only design in industry and architecture but also the applied arts, was very broad.<sup>50</sup> The responsibility for design in industry was eventually transferred to the Irish Export Board in 1961 but in practice the Export Board, which was also set up in 1951, was associated with the Arts Council in propagating examples of design from the early 1950s.

The Irish Government had set up the Export Board as a limited company with the objective of promoting exports to what was described as the 'dollar area', by assisting exporters by developing outlets for exports, conducting market surveys for Irish goods, and advising on shipping, credit facilities, sales methods, and packaging and design. This company was financed by grant-in-aid from the Department of Industry and Commerce and also received assistance from the Economic Co-operation Administration of the United States.<sup>51</sup> In addition to their Dublin base offices were also opened in New York and Montreal.

The Export Board was concerned with the promotion of exports from Irish industries, and as such also had an interest in product design and marketing. In October 1953 the Board organised a meeting between Misha Black, one of the architects of Festival of Britain Southbank Exhibition, and Marcus Brumwell, both of the London-based Design Research Unit, and Dr O'Sullivan, Secretary of the Arts Council. Subsequently in a letter to the Arts Council the Export Board explained that the Research Unit had carried out some work for them and were now proposing opening an office in Dublin. The Export Board was encouraging this as no similar organisation existed which could advise manufacturers in Ireland on design and presentation of goods which would make them more acceptable to the American and Canadian markets. The Board noted that the Dublin office of the Design research Unit would open in early 1954 and asked if the Arts Council might organise an exhibition of design in industry to coincide with this event. The letter concluded that '[we] feel that an Irish Design Research Unit, as envisaged by Mr. Misha Black, is worthy of every encouragement and support'.<sup>52</sup> Dr O'Sullivan and the Arts Council welcomed this development. In a further letter from the Export Board reminded Dr O'Sullivan of the proposal for an industrial design exhibition and enclosed notes prepared by the Design Research Unit on how this might be organised.<sup>53</sup>

### **Arts Council promotion of design in industry**

The Arts Council was closely involved with the London office of Design Research Unit in the practical aspects of the exhibition – securing exhibition premises,

<sup>50</sup> The full definition as quoted in the Arts Council First Annual Report reads 'The Arts are defined for the purposes of the Act as Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Music, the Drama, Literature, Design in Industry, and the fine and applied arts generally'. Arts Council of Ireland, *First Annual Report*, Dublin, Arts Council, 5.

<sup>51</sup> *Dáil Eireann Debates*, Vol. 127, No. 1, 31 October 1951. Accessed 01/03/2011 <http://debates.oireachtas.ie/dail/1951/10/31/00044.asp>

<sup>52</sup> Arts Council of Ireland Archive, *Industrial Design Exhibition – Dublin*, C.E.241, opened 13 November 1953.

<sup>53</sup> Arts Council of Ireland Archive, *Industrial Design Exhibition*

borrowing display cases, and organising the launch. The original Research Unit proposal had been to show work by English manufacturers,<sup>54</sup> but this was expanded to include work from Canada, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Switzerland and the USA. The exhibition opened in June 1954 and later travelled to Cork. The exhibition catalogue included a short statement by Herbert Read, British art historian and founding member of the Design Research Unit, which suggested that the experience of the Nordic countries in the field of industrial design was 'within reach of a comparable country like Ireland'.<sup>55</sup> He pointed out that the Nordic countries had overcome their disadvantages in the international market by ensuring the quality of their design.<sup>56</sup>

Building on the success of the 1954 exhibition the Design Research Unit were invited to collaborate with the Arts Council in an exhibition of Irish industrial design. In this instance a much more tangible connection was made with Scandinavia. The Arts Council described the Irish Industrial Design Exhibition as 'the most important Irish exhibition to be presented by the Council since its foundation' and, in view of the scale of the undertaking, had been 'fortunate in securing the services of Mr. Ake Huldt, Director of the Swedish Council of Industrial Design' to select the work.<sup>57</sup> The suggestion that an external adjudicator be found had come from the Design Research Unit in London and they also provided a list of suggestions, predominantly British, but also including Ake Huldt, and Eric Herlow, both of whom would later become members of the Scandinavian Design Group.<sup>58</sup> While in Dublin to make the selection, Ake Huldt delivered a lecture entitled *Swedish Design To-day* in University College Dublin.<sup>59</sup> Huldt selected almost 250 exhibits including furniture, carpets, textiles, ceramics and glass, electrical goods, packaging and graphic design. Barely six years later the Design Group, including Huldt, were condemning whole branches of Irish industrial design including most shown in this 1956 exhibition. The question must be asked – had the quality of design diminished in the interim or were goods of lesser merit accepted for the exhibition?

In addition to these two exhibitions organised in conjunction with the Design Research Unit the Arts Council also sponsored an exhibition of Italian industrial art in 1956. From 1958 they offered small grants to commercial firms to cover the costs of employing a designer to improve the design of packaging and in 1960 awarded a substantial industrial design scholarship.

### **Transfer of responsibility for design in industry**

The problematic positioning of industrial design in the sphere of cultural provision was recognised by the government a few years later. As part of the Government's plan for economic expansion the original Export Board was dissolved and a new

<sup>54</sup> Arts Council of Ireland Archive, *Industrial Design Exhibition*

<sup>55</sup> Herbert Read, draft of statement in Arts Council of Ireland Archive, *Industrial Design Exhibition*

<sup>56</sup> Arts Council of Ireland Archive, *Industrial Design Exhibition*

<sup>57</sup> Arts Council, *Annual report 1955-56*, Dublin, The Arts Council, 1956, 10.

<sup>58</sup> Arts Council of Ireland Archive, *Design Exhibition – General*, C.E. 372, opened 15 December 1954.

<sup>59</sup> Arts Council, *Annual report 1955-56*, 10.

statutory entity was established by the passing of the Export Promotion Bill in 1959.<sup>60</sup> In a Dail (Irish parliament) debate in 1960 it was noted that the Economic Development Branch had examined the measures taken to improve the quality of Irish industrial design and had concluded that the progress made by the Arts Council was limited. They recommended that the Arts Council should be released from this obligation which should be transferred to the Export Board which had been very active in this field.<sup>61</sup> When this was questioned a few years later the Taoiseach stated that it had been a mistake to place responsibility for industrial design with the arts council as they presented design 'to business people as an arty matter, whereas, in fact, it is an entirely commercial matter'.<sup>62</sup> He noted that the Export Board, through their commissioning and publication of the Scandinavian Report, had promoted 'greater interest in industrial design...than all the exhortations of Ministers and Arts Councils and others had succeeded in doing'.<sup>63</sup>

### **The Scandinavian Report and the Kilkenny design Workshops**

Many of the major recommendations from the Report were not acted upon – although there was protracted debate on design education no new educational institutions were created. However, one new organisation which was able to implement many of recommendations of the Report was founded. The Report had suggested that furniture design workshops should be established but in the event the Export Board opted to establish a multi-disciplinary, state sponsored design consultancy: the Kilkenny Design Workshops. The idea for setting up the Workshops was stimulated by a visit to the Plus Applied Art Centre in Fredrikstad, Norway, by William Walsh after the publication of the report in 1962. These workshops for weaving, textile printing, ceramics, glass, silver, wood working and furniture had been founded in 1958 in a fortress town about fifty miles from Oslo.

Kilkenny Design Workshops were registered as a limited company by the Export Board in April 1963, and for a number of years following their establishment received grant aid directly from the Export Board. The company Memorandum and Articles of Association followed a standard business model and one has to look to the *Second Annual Report* for an articulation of the Workshops aims. These were listed as

To supply new designs to industry  
To generate new manufactures through the provision of designs and  
prototypes

<sup>60</sup> *Export Promotions Bill*, 1959. Acts of the Oireachtas. Accessed 01/03/2011  
<http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/1959/en/act/pub/0020/index.html>

<sup>61</sup> *Dáil Eireann Debates*, Vol. 183, No. 13, 19 July 1960. Accessed 07/04/2013  
<http://debates.oireachtas.ie/dail/1960/07/19/00047.asp>

<sup>62</sup> *Dáil Eireann Debates*, Vol. 199, No. 6, 31 January 1963. Accessed 07/04/2013  
<http://debates.oireachtas.ie/dail/1963/01/31/00005.asp>

<sup>63</sup> *Dáil Eireann Debates*, Vol. 199, No. 6, 31 January 1963. Accessed 07/04/2013  
<http://debates.oireachtas.ie/dail/1963/01/31/00005.asp>

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- To discover and create opportunities for designers and craftsmen within the country
- To form a link between industry and designers
- To provide a focus of public interest in design
- To provide a centre where overseas buyers can work with designers and manufactures to develop new ideas.<sup>64</sup>

Work on renovating the derelict form Kilkenny Castle stables was begun in 1963 and by the official opening of the Workshops in 1965 five workshops – silver and metalwork, weaving, textile printing ceramics and wood working – were in operation. At a very fundamental level KDW was influenced by the example of the Scandinavian focus on craft-based industries rather than on design for light or heavy industries. In line with the Scandinavian example the emphasis was on the craft-based industries and items for the home. The Workshops also provided an opportunity for implementing the advice to make use of Scandinavian and other designers as mentors until native talent had been developed. In the period from the establishment of the Workshops until the early 1970s many of the designers were from outside Ireland, often staying for a relatively short period, though some chose to make Ireland their permanent home. The *Second Annual Report* notes that designers from America, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland have been employed, in addition to those from Britain.<sup>65</sup>

Among the many designers from outside Ireland was Bertel Gardberg, a Finn, the Workshop's artistic manager in the latter half of the 1960s. Initially he produced designs for high-end silver holloware, which were aimed at an elite market, and still in production twenty years later in 1986 when the KDW London shop opened. However, he also designed products utilising local materials, such as Kilkenny marble, and products for a mass market in ceramics and wood. In keeping with the advice in the Report to explore traditional materials and techniques Gardberg also designed items in cast and wrought ironware. The Report had recommended that the textile industries should explore the development of furnishing fabrics with the aid of designers trained abroad. Helena Ruuth, a Swedish designer, produced designs for a wide range of woven textiles including blankets, bedspreads and upholstery fabric which were produced by Irish companies. Two young British designers, Jenny Trigwell and Jenni Green, produced colourfully printed furnishing fabrics.

More specific advice from the Report was also followed. In relation to metal work the Report stated that the design of cookware was poor overall but some good cast iron pieces were noted. In the early 1970s a range of cast iron cookware was designed for production by the German WMF company. It was also suggested that Irish sculptors might cooperate in the production of new metal products. Oisín Kelly took up a part-time post at the Workshops and designed cast and wrought iron items in the 1960s, but also designed textiles, silver holloware and ceramics. The Report had been particularly critical of the quality of souvenirs produced for the tourist

<sup>64</sup> Kilkenny Design Workshops, *Second Annual Report 1966-1968*, Kilkenny, Irish Export Board, 1968, 6.

<sup>65</sup> Kilkenny Design Workshops, *Second Annual Report*, 8.

trade, considering the use of Celtic ornamentation to be crude and the drawing poor. It is suggested that 'If people wish to draw on inspiration from the past, they should study the Book of Kells, the stones of Clonmacnoise etc.'<sup>66</sup> A series of glass cloths based on the Book of Kells, designed by Katherine Kennedy, was produced by the Workshops in 1968 and in the early 1970s Oisín Kelly designed a range of wall hangings based on rubbings from tombstones in churches and cathedrals.

However, in some important respects the advice of the Report was not followed by Kilkenny Design Workshops. The Scandinavian designers had been emphatic in their belief that well-designed products should be aimed at the home market in the first instance. During the first decade of its existence, while the Export Board owned the company, the Workshops concentrated on promoting products to the international market. The Irish public could buy some goods from the shop on the Workshops premises, and Kilkenny designed products for export were shown in exhibitions such as the annual Royal Dublin Society shows, thus going some way to fulfilling the mandate to improve public taste. In 1974 the legal status of the Workshops was changed when ownership was transferred from the Export Board to the Ministry of Industry and Commerce. When announcing this Justin Keating, the Minister, indicated that in future the emphasis would be on supplying the home rather than overseas market.<sup>67</sup>

## Conclusions

By the early 1970s it was becoming clear that Kilkenny Design Workshops needed to diversify into areas of production beyond the craft-based industries. A survey of the needs of engineering companies was undertaken in 1973 in response to the enormous expansion in this area since the 1960s. Plans were drawn up to provide model-making, prototyping and technical support for engineering concerns. However, the oil crisis and the ensuing financial slow-down removed any chance to securing the necessary capital investment. The Workshops did change over time and became involved increasingly in working with companies as diverse as Nokia, Apple, and GEC. It could be argued that the Report, harking back as it did to traditional techniques and materials, had in fact inhibited the development of industrial design in Ireland. The political realities and inherent conservatism in Ireland at the time of the Report's publication perhaps made this more indirect, tentative approach inevitable.

In tracing the evolution of public policy for industrial design in Ireland it is possible to see clear connections between the concerns expressed by earlier commentators and those expressed by the Scandinavian Design Group. As can be seen much of the connection between Ireland and the Nordic countries in relation to design had been quite tenuous until the commissioning of the report, and in fact UK institutions were a more practical source of advice. The Design Group Report examined individual industries in more detail than previous texts, and some of their recommendations differed markedly from previous advice. Whereas Bodkin and

<sup>66</sup> Scandinavian Design Group. *Design in Ireland*, 26.

<sup>67</sup> Anon. 'Keating takes over design workshops', *Irish Times*, 13 March 1974.

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Read proposed observing and learning lessons from experience elsewhere, the Design Group proposed involving outside experts directly in changing the existing design culture in Ireland. The fact that this measure was couched in familiar terms – necessary state intervention, building on traditional foundations, and improving public taste – perhaps made it more acceptable. The fact that this suggestion was made by Nordic experts, rather than for instance coming from the UK, perhaps also added to its acceptability. Undoubtedly the publication of the Scandinavian report propelled debate on design into the public realm and contributed to the economic, political and social revolution in Ireland of the later 1960s.

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