

## Book Review



### Irish Country Furniture and Furnishings 1700–2000

Claudia Kinmonth, *Cork University Press*, 2020. 576 pp., 454 b&w and col. illus., cloth, €39.00. ISBN: 9781782054054.

This book has been long anticipated by design historians as well as folklorists, ethnographers, historians and indeed a more general readership. In its handsomely produced pages, we find a rewritten and much-expanded version of Kinmonth's excellent *Irish Country Furniture 1700–1950* (Yale, 1993), one of the first design history books to focus on Ireland.

As Kinmonth explains in her new preface, her fieldwork in the late 1980s mainly involved knocking on the doors of likely looking farmhouses and asking if the occupants

had any old furniture. She originally embarked on that research 'with a sense of urgency' as so much vernacular furniture had already been bought up and exported by dealers, some of whom had 'arrived complete with upholstered suites of modern furniture with which to barter' (p. xviii). Nevertheless, she found that a lot still remained, and conversations with the owners as well as her documentation of furniture in situ provided the sort of contextual information that is often absent from museum collections and displays. It also generated valuable oral history testimony, which she continues to draw on in this new volume, and that is synthesized adroitly with historiographic, literary and visual sources to produce a completely unique record. Kinmonth is a trained furniture maker as well as design historian, and a special pleasure of this book is her deep knowledge and analysis of the tools, materials and practices used to make, mend and adapt these artefacts as well as her understanding of their meaning and use.

Since Kinmonth's first tranche of research, the country has undergone considerable change accelerated by the so-called 'Celtic Tiger', the economic boom of c.1996–2007 which saw the rapid displacement of ways of life and material cultures such as those documented in the original volume. Over the past three decades, she has thankfully kept going with her fieldwork and explorations into domestic material culture in Ireland and how it has been represented. This included research into genre paintings resulting in her second book *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (Yale, 2006) and a number of highly focused articles on particular object types. The new *Irish Country Furniture and Furnishings* is augmented by this recent research as it includes an additional chapter drawing on her work on horn spoons and noggins (staved or woven eating vessels), many additional fieldwork photographs and a broader timescale, ending in 2000 rather than 1950. It is almost double in size in terms of pages and now includes more than 450 illustrations, more than three-quarters of which are colour photographs—the original book had 320, mainly in black and white. The text is organized in 10 chapters, seven on different kinds of furniture, a new one on small furnishings and utensils, one on how clothes and

food were stored and one on the hearth and shrine, the two functional and spiritual fulcrums of the Irish home.

In the introduction, the author sets out the focus of the book in terms of rurally made furniture (hence the 'country' definition) that are mainly individual examples rather than serially produced, and often fabricated within the home. As well as a range of woodworkers, householders themselves made and adapted the furniture and were 'accustomed to twisting the rope for new seats for their "*sugán* chairs" and repainting their furniture'. Usually regionally specific, and reliant on the availability of local materials, the furniture includes chairs made of straw, stools recycled from butter boxes, tables of driftwood and then more elaborate dressers and 'formidable' four-poster beds (p. 2).

Among the comprehensive array of examples, certain themes emerge that help us understand the furniture and the lives of those who made and used it. Frugality and aspiration seem to be to the fore. Before that, however, as Kinmonth says, it is important to understand Irish vernacular architecture, which 'had a greater impact on furniture design than perhaps any other factor' (p. 5). Many of the items under discussion were fitted into the home and often literally built into the walls. Different kinds of roofing generated different kinds of furniture, for example canopy beds protected their occupants from insects and other small creatures who lived in the thatch above their heads. There were two key house types according to geography, and they often determined the kinds of furniture found within. For example, in the south and east the front door of dwellings was positioned adjacent to the hearth, which was screened by a wall forming a small lobby. This 'jamb' wall provided the back for a built-in settle bed, a particular form of high bench seating that could be opened out to provide a sleeping area at night. In fact, like the settle bed, 'few things were made to serve only a single purpose', and so the practice of keeping laying hens in the house led to certain solutions including dressers with hen coops deliberately designed into them below the shelves on which delph was displayed. This combination furniture is 'yet another symptom of the shortage of space and timber in many less affluent homes, as well as the primary concern of rural Irish furniture makers with functionalism' (p. 235).

As in the above example, access to timber in this highly deforested country was of fundamental importance.

Kinmonth explains this in a lengthy section, with the clever solutions in maximizing timber one example of the way material economy and recycling was 'an integral, essential and normal part of rural life in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ireland' (p. 24). For some items, this persisted well into the second half of the twentieth century, as in the case of woven flour sacks and meal bags which had a bewildering range of uses including bedding, clothing, curtains and to line thatched ceilings. Some makers were savvy to the further re-use of the bags, and the 'potential stigma attached to their use' (p. 310) so K.B. Williams millers in County Cork printed 'TO REMOVE THIS LABEL SOAK IN WATER' on the front of their 'elaborate' Pride of Erin flour bags (p. 311). This was not a peculiarly Irish phenomenon—in the USA, millers competed by 'stamping their bags with floral prints, perfect for recycling into dresses' (p. 458).

As intimated by that reluctance to expose domestic recycling of a commercial material, aspiration was also important in the design and use of country furniture. This is evident in vernacular versions of more expensive items, such as chair forms popularized by Chippendale and the use of a grained finish on assorted woods to suggest more expensive figured timbers such as oak and mahogany. As well a valuable explanation of different graining techniques, the book includes a wonderful photograph of a set of graining tools made of fragments of tractor and car tyres, carved leather nailed onto wood and bits of hair combs.

While writing on traditional or vernacular culture in Ireland can sometimes drift into dehistoricized romanticism, Kinmonth's book and decades of research are deeply historical. As well as her expert analysis of specific objects, the range of sources she draws on including poetry, inventories, memory and the Irish Folklore Commission Archives both enliven the text and help to locate this material in time and space. It is a major achievement, and contribution, and has been well worth waiting for.

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