

AN EXHIBITION OF IRISH GEORGIAN FURNITURE
NEWMAN HOUSE, ST STEPHEN'S GREEN, DUBLIN 2.

AUGUST 26TH-29TH 1998, 2PM - 9PM.



J & *A* Johnston
Antiques

AN INTRODUCTION BY DESMOND FITZ-GERALD, THE KNIGHT OF GLIN

It is somewhat of an occasion to see the gathering together of a collection of Irish 18th Century furniture in Dublin. This reverses the trend of the past 80 years or so which saw the exportation of so much Irish art and decorative arts to England, the United States and elsewhere. It is therefore a comment on changing economic times when we see a now prosperous Ireland attracting back to its shores part of its artistic heritage.

Dublin, after the end of the 17th century with its attendant wars, land resettlements, and general bloody strife, had by the 1720s settled down to become the second city of the British Empire. By the mid 18th century Dublin boasted a population of about 150,000 and, for the most part, the British colonial landed elite were now secure in their lands, drawing rents and market dues from the more or less vanquished native Irish who made up well over 80% of the population.

The 'Protestant Ascendancy' or the 'Garrison', as these Anglo Irish settlers were known, started to build country houses – large and small, lay out gardens and commission furniture, clothes and other luxury goods in the capital city. Many workshops and merchants were established, although these were mostly Protestant, under a rigid Guild system. Dublin, with its House of Lords and House of Commons, was the focus for this landed society who were soon building rows of splendid red brick town houses. By the mid century the elite's ostentatious life style was in full swing.

A close study of Dublin 18th century newspapers shows how the furnishing trade grew. Advertisements proliferate as the century goes on and auction notices show the amount of elaborate suites of seat furniture, commodes, high and low boys, console tables, gilt mirrors, paintings and prints which comprised the contents and decorations of those splendid Dublin houses and Georgian mansions all over the countryside.

The horrors of the Famine, the land wars of the 1880s and the ensuing Land Acts around the turn of the century made these country houses anachronistic and totally

AN EXHIBITION OF IRISH GEORGIAN FURNITURE

uneconomical as their supporting lands were shorn away. The Act of Union of 1801 and the removal of the Irish Parliament to Westminster had reduced Dublin to a shadow of its former self, although magnificent furniture continued to be produced there until well into the 1830s. By the second half of the century sales and auctions were commonplace and the quay-side premises of the Dublin antique dealers and auctioneers were awash with fine things.

It is tragic that of all the houses in Dublin only one today has any of its original furnishings and this is the superb Provost House of Trinity College. In other townhouses magnificent plasterwork or woodwork or in some cases the original chimneypieces survive but no longer complete with furniture or textiles.

The story in the countryside is only marginally better. Russborough, one of Ireland's most elaborate Palladian villas, preserves many of its original gilt mirrors and some of its seat furniture. Sadly these are divorced from their original setting as through the Milltown bequest they are now in the National Gallery of Ireland. Malahide Castle has a few important original pieces and these have been recently augmented by Ronnie and Doreen MacDonald's important collection of 18th century Irish furniture. Florence Court is at this moment retrieving much of its original 18th century contents through the goodwill of the late Lady Enniskillen's Will. Castle Coole nearby has more of its original contents than any other house in Ireland through the generosity of the Earl of Belmore. Castletown, Dunsany, Birr, Kilruddery, Tullyally and Bantry all possess some of their original furnishings. The Irish mahogany furniture at Glin is a mixture of long standing 18th century pieces along with the fruits of more recent collecting. Charleville and Stackallan have fine collections assembled over recent years. Abbeyleix and Castletown Cox, two magnificent houses, are at this moment being immaculately restored and will no doubt be show cases which will include Irish decorative art.

AN EXHIBITION OF IRISH GEORGIAN FURNITURE

Returning to the loss of Irish artefacts, in about 1908, when her husband was Chief Secretary, Lady Randolph Churchill wrote: 'We had many nice bits of old furniture which we had picked up in Dublin, where they had found their way from the dismantled houses of impecunious Irish landlords. Things could be bought cheaply in those days, the artistic craze being confined to the eclectic few. Now collecting millionaires have bought up nearly everything, and what is left is held at fabulous prices.'

Advertisements such as the following were not unusual²:

HISTORIC IRISH MANSIONS

Owing to the fact that Irishmen have always been great travellers, many of the finest collections of art treasures have, in times past, found their way to the country mansions of Ireland. It was in Ireland that the Franz Hals, sold recently for an enormous sum, was discovered in 1906.

The examples of fine old Queen Anne and Chippendale Furniture, rare, Oriental Porcelain, old Dutch and Italian Masterpieces, French Tapestries and other Art treasures found in Ireland, are too numerous to mention.

From a variety of contributory causes, chiefly owing to the various Land Acts, the large landowners in Ireland have, during the last decade or so, been disposing of their land to the tenants, and consequently many lovely collections have been brought into the market.

Mr. Burgess Hill, of Dublin, has, during that time, collected together many of these Art treasures, and they are now displayed in his Antique Galleries at

55 & 57 MADDOX STREET

first door from Bond Street

London, W

AN EXHIBITION OF IRISH GEORGIAN FURNITURE

All through the 30s and 40s, during which Ireland was relatively poverty stricken with its economic war and the isolationism of De Valera, containers of Irish furniture were exported to Britain and the United States.

Very little has been written about Ireland's 18th Century 'material culture'. However this exhibition, and I believe this to be one of the first in Ireland, will concentrate the minds of the purchaser as well as the scholar. According to Susan Foster, whose article on shopping in 18th Century Dublin³ is a most unusual and fresh view of Ireland's 18th century consumer society, current books and articles on the decorative arts published in the *Irish Arts Review* and the *Bulletin of the Irish Georgian Society* 'while often of the highest quality, usual give primacy to style and aesthetics; they rarely engage in issues central to the history of design or the 'new' art history. The look of the object is the main concern; little thought is given to methods of production, how they were marketed and sold, who bought them, and what range of social meanings the objects acquired once they were part of a household.' Dr. Toby Barnard's painstaking trawling through estate papers, inventories and Irish manuscript material, is also beginning to throw a bright new light on how this Irish elite spent their leisure time and what they favoured for their town and country houses and estates⁴. Amanda Vickery writes about 18th century England and her words are also applicable to the Irish scene: 'Gentility found its richest expression in objects'. Thus not only silver, porcelain and silk, but also mahogany furniture announced wealth and privilege to the neighbours⁵.

It is therefore, as I have said, an example of the change in economic times that pieces of Irish joinery and carving are returning to their country of origin from Britain and America and are now being appreciated for their craftsmanship and quality and not regarded as part of a distasteful British colonial past.

A gathering of furniture such as this exhibition shows some notable pieces even

though their provenance and, with one exception, their makers are now lost to us. The individuality of Irish furniture has long been recognised and this collection shows much of this fascinating, unusual and often somewhat quirky style.

Look for instance at the double scrolled trifid foot on those superbly springy cabriole legs on the shell-centred dish-topped tea table (No. 17) or the side table with its stylised basket with a rosette centring a cabbageleaf-like acanthus flanked by pomegranates and festoons of oak leaves (No. 7). The card table (No. 12) with central cartouche and acanthus leaves has that typically Irish punched diaper pattern as a ground for the somewhat flat carving. This flat carving, which has an almost seaweedy quality, is typified by the shell decorated console table with its cabriole legs and familiar Irish hock or muscle above the squarely formed lion's paw feet (No. 5).

The shells, paw feet, leopard and lion masks, are symbolic of the gods and goddesses of classical antiquity. These motifs are inspired by ancient poetry such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and while recalling paradisiacal Arcadia and ancient deities, they also indicate the presence of love in a home. The shell, for instance, alludes to the triumph of Venus, the goddess of love. The shell served as a chariot, when the nature goddess was carried from the sea to land, where the grass and flowers sprang up at the touch of her foot. Bacchus, wine god of festivities, had his chariot drawn by lions or leopards, so their presence refers to his triumphs. It is said that the Muses of artistic inspiration decorated their cave on Mt. Parnassus with leaves, and this practice of foliate ornament continues with the decoration of furniture with acanthus, also known as the Roman leaf. As the oak was sacred to Jupiter, father of the Gods, the presence of oak garlands, emblematical of hospitality, conjures up memories of the gods' banquets. Jupiter, in his role as the law-giver, was attended by an eagle which is therefore an appropriate ornament for a bookcase. As the eagle served on one occasion to bear aloft the youthful Ganymede, to serve as Jupiter's cupbearer,

AN EXHIBITION OF IRISH GEORGIAN FURNITURE

it is also an appropriate ornament for diningroom furnishings. Finally, the diaper pattern, such as found on the card table mentioned earlier, imitates trellis-work, providing an architectural framework for flowers⁶.

These arcane classical allusions are perhaps lost on today's viewer but it must be remembered that the educated patrons, artists and ornamentalists of the 18th century were steeped in Greek and Roman literature.

Other plainer pieces (Nos. 1, 2, 4, 10, 18) in this exhibition show the fine form and robust composition of Irish Georgian furnishings with their sober uncluttered lines which often appealed to the American collector accustomed to the plainer American colonial idiom. David Stockwell of Wilmington, Delaware, for instance was one of the first to see the similarities between Irish and Philadelphia furniture⁷. Recently American scholarship has begun to pinpoint these colonial contacts and parallels; for example Ronald L. Hurst's investigative study⁸ of Ireland's influence in the Rappahannock river basin in Virginia is groundbreaking but much more research needs to be embarked upon.

This exhibition celebrates the revival of interest in Irish furnishings and it is hoped will further stimulate research and prompt Irish collectors to replace the deprivations suffered in less prosperous times in Ireland. Perhaps it would not be too much to suggest that there should be a major exhibition of Irish art and the decorative arts of this country in the not too distant future.

The Knight of Glin
Dublin, August 1998.

FOOTNOTES

1. Mrs. George Cornwallis West *The Reminiscences of Lady Randolph Churchill* New York 1908 p139.
2. *The Connoisseur* May 1913, kindly communicated to me by David Griffin of the Irish Architectural Archive.
3. 'Going Shopping in 18th-century Dublin' *Things* 4 Summer 1996 p35.
4. 'Art, Architecture, Artefacts and Ascendancy' *Bullán* Vol. 1 No. 2 Autumn 1994 pp17-34 and 'Integration or Separation? Hospitality and Display in Protestant Ireland, 1660-1800' *A Union of Multiple Identities, The British Isles c.1750-c.1850* Manchester 1997 pp128-146. 'Learning, the Learned and Literacy in Ireland 1650-1760' *A Miracle of Learning* editor Toby Barnard and others, Aldershot 1998 pp209-235.
5. Antonia Fraser 'Georgian Gentlewomen of the House' Review of Amanda Vickery's *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* New Haven and London 1998. *Sunday Times Books* June 14th 1998.
6. I am indebted to John Hardy of Christie's for this information.
7. 'Irish Influences in Pennsylvania Queen Anne Furniture' *Antiques Magazine* March 1961 pp269-271. Mr. Stockwell however did much to confuse Irish and American pieces.
8. 'Irish Influences on Cabinetmaking in Virginia's Rappahannock River Basin' *American Furniture* editor Luke Beckerdite, The Chipstone Foundation Hanover and London 1997 pp170-195. See also Fiona Dolan 'Colonial Quirk, Irish Georgian Furniture and its Influence on the Philadelphia Movement 1740-1790' *Ireland of the Welcomes* Vol. 47 No. 4 July-August 1998 pp22-27.

AN EXHIBITION OF IRISH GEORGIAN FURNITURE
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The logo for Johnston Antiques features a large, stylized 'J' that incorporates a diagonal line, followed by the words 'Johnston' and 'Antiques' in a serif font. The background of the entire page is a dark, textured surface with a faint, repeating pattern of the company name and logo.

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THE ADARE CABINET.

An Irish Mahogany Linen Press or Cabinet in two parts, the base having five graduated drawers supported by hairy paw feet. The top with two doors having four fielded panels, with fluted pilasters surrounded by carved Corinthian capitals. The swan neck pediment with gilded rosettes and cartouche framed by greek key moulding. Circa 1750.

Note: Christie's Adare Manor sale, 9th June 1982, Lot No. 320.



AN IRISH MAHOGANY KNEEHOLE DESK

with carved moulding on the plinth and under the top drawers. The upper section raised on scallop edged supports enclosing pigeon holes, under a dentil and gadrooned moulding. The back finished with four serpentine panelled faux doors. The desk is on its original castors, the sides with four brass carrying handles. Circa 1740.

AN EXHIBITION OF IRISH GEORGIAN FURNITURE



AN IRISH MAHOGANY LONGCASE CLOCK,

the hood having blind fret-work pediment with carved rosettes and Doric columns.

The brass dial by Graves Aickin of Lurgan. Circa 1760.



AN IRISH MAHOGANY KNEEHOLE WRITING CABINET,

the base having a fitted top drawer with original brass lock plate. The knee-hole section enclosing three drawers. The top section with two glass panels under a swan neck pediment with carved rosettes and a eagle in the centre. Circa 1750.

Note: A number of these cabinets are known; the one from Adare Manor, now in the Victoria & Albert Museum, is discussed by John Hardy 'The Adare Bureau Cabinet and its Origins', *Irish Arts Review Yearbook* 1996 vol. 12 pp168-169. An almost identical example is at Newbridge House, Co. Dublin, where there is a receipt for it dated 1764, though Hardy considers these cabinets to date from the 1740s.



AN EXHIBITION OF IRISH GEORGIAN FURNITURE

ITEM NUMBER FIVE

AN IRISH MAHOGANY CONSOLE TABLE

on two cabriole legs with carved knees and terminating in hairy paw feet, the scalloped edge frieze with the shell in the centre. Circa 1740.



A PAIR OF IRISH MARBLE TOPPED PIER TABLES.

The bases having cabriole legs terminating in a faceted club foot. The front legs with shells on the knees, the friezes with seaweed marquetry panel in the centre. Circa 1730.

Note: A mahogany console table with its original marble top (private collection, Dublin) has an identical inlaid shell and acanthus decoration; see the Knight of Glin 'The Marquetry Decoration of Early 18th Century Irish Furniture' *Irish Arts Review Yearbook* 1997 vol. 13, page 39 fig. 7.

AN EXHIBITION OF IRISH GEORGIAN FURNITURE



AN IRISH MARBLE TOPPED SIDE TABLE

on carved cabriole legs terminating in hairy paw feet, the frieze with carved swags, rosettes and a basket of flowers in the centre. Each side having carved rosettes enclosing a shell. Circa 1740.

Note: A very similar table was in the Bennetts' Sir W. Thornley Stoker sale, Ely House, November 8th, 1910.

AN EXHIBITION OF IRISH GEORGIAN FURNITURE



AN IRISH MAHOGANY CONSOLE TABLE

on cabriole legs with carved shells and terminating in hairy paw feet. The frieze and sides having carved acanthus decoration enclosing scallop shells. Circa 1740.

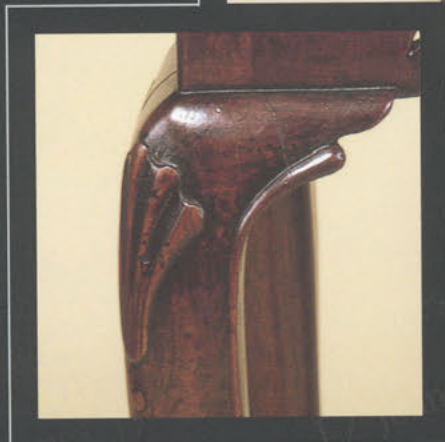
AN EXHIBITION OF IRISH GEORGIAN FURNITURE



AN IRISH MAHOGANY TRAY TOPPED SILVER OR TEA TABLE

on cabriole legs with shells on the knees terminating in hairy paw feet. The frieze with open fret-work and a shell in the centre. Circa 1740.

AN EXHIBITION OF IRISH GEORGIAN FURNITURE



AN IRISH MAHOGANY CABINET

on bracket feet, the four doors having fielded panels, the top with a swan neck pediment and carved rosettes having a shell in the centre. Circa 1750.



AN IRISH MAHOGANY SIDE TABLE

on cabriole legs, with shells on the knees and hairy paw feet, the apron having a scalloped edge and a shell in the centre. Circa 1750.

Note: A very similar example is in the Guinness collection at Leixlip Castle.



AN EXHIBITION OF IRISH GEORGIAN FURNITURE

ITEM NUMBER TWELVE

AN IRISH MAHOGANY CARD TABLE.

The frieze having a central cartouche, flanked by acanthus and rosettes. The carved legs terminating in hairy paw feet. Circa 1750.



A PAIR OF IRISH 'CHIPPENDALE' SIDE CHAIRS

on square legs with stretchers and shaped open brackets. The backs having carved acanthus decoration and fluted ears. Circa 1760.

AN EXHIBITION OF IRISH GEORGIAN FURNITURE



AN IRISH SATINWOOD AND MARQUETRY SIDE TABLE

attributed to William Moore of Dublin. The semi-elliptical top having a fan paterae in the centre surrounded by a band of inlaid flowers and crossbanded in kingwood. The frieze inlaid with finger fluting. The square tapering legs inlaid with bell flowers. Circa 1790.

AN EXHIBITION OF IRISH GEORGIAN FURNITURE



AN IRISH MAHOGANY WINE TABLE,

the rounded top with reeded edge, and having two flaps at the rear, the centre having a brass swinging arm. The reeded legs terminating in brass caps and castors. Ex-collection the Earls of Arran, Castle Gore, Co. Mayo. Circa 1815.

Note: This type of table is made to a Gillows pattern and this example could be attributed to the Dublin firm of Mack, Williams and Gibton.

AN EXHIBITION OF IRISH GEORGIAN FURNITURE



AN IRISH MAHOGANY FOUR POSTER BED,

the show uprights carved with wheat sheaf and acanthus decoration, surmounted by carved Corinthian capitals over finger fluting. The canopy with carved gadrooning. Circa 1760.

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AN EXHIBITION OF IRISH GEORGIAN FURNITURE



AN EXHIBITION OF IRISH GEORGIAN FURNITURE

ITEM NUMBER SEVENTEEN

THE HEATON TABLE.

An Irish Mahogany Dish Topped Silver or Tea Table. The cabriole legs carved with shells and acanthus decoration. The double trifold foot carved with scroll and wheat sheaf decoration. The frieze also carved with a acanthus and shell pattern, with punch marks along the edge. The sides similarly carved also having rosettes. Circa 1750.

AN EXHIBITION OF IRISH GEORGIAN FURNITURE



AN IRISH MAHOGANY TALLBOY

having eight graduating drawers with original brass plate handles on bracket feet.

Circa 1740.

AN EXHIBITION OF IRISH GEORGIAN FURNITURE



AN IRISH MAHOGANY SLOPE FRONT BUREAU CABINET.

The lower part having three long and two short drawers with brass plate handles, on bracket feet. The interior stepped with drawers having a door in the centre framed by two marquetry inlaid pilasters. The upper part with two panelled doors below a dentil cornice. Circa 1760.



A MID-18TH CENTURY GILT LOOKING GLASS

by Francis and John Booker of Dublin. The rectangular plate framed with an interlaced mirrored glass border, flanked by fluted Corinthian columns, entwined with festoons of flowers supporting a swan neck pediment, partially fluted frieze and centred with an urn with further floral festoons, the whole supported on consoles and a mirrored backed frieze with central shell and acanthus. Circa 1765.

Note: A very similar example is at Bantry House, Co. Cork. See the Knight of Glin 'A Family of Looking Glass Merchants' *Country Life* 28th January 1971, pp195-195, and the Knight of Glin 'Dublin Directories and Trade Labels' *Journal of the Furniture History Society* vol. XXI 1985 pp261-262.



AN IRISH MAHOGANY BAIZE LINED CARD TABLE

on cabriole legs with carved acanthus decoration on the knees terminating in claw and ball feet. The shaped apron with a shell in the centre. Circa 1760.

Note: A similar example is in the Ronnie and Doreen MacDonald collection at Malahide Castle.

AN EXHIBITION OF IRISH GEORGIAN FURNITURE

