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In-the-know eyes are on Ireland, as designer-makers reinvigorate traditional crafts and local materials with contemporary élan. **Nicole Swengley** reports

Irish handwork has long been admired for its skill, attention to detail and beautiful materials – think of Irish linen and crystal. But as a fresh appreciation of contemporary crafts takes root, it's increasingly clear that designer-makers based in Ireland are having a major impact.

While a cohesive "Irishness" is hard to discern, what's new is the emergence of a distinctive contemporary aesthetic. Irish ceramics, glass, stonework, textiles, rugs and furniture – all handmade and often bespoke – offer a sense of narrative and authenticity. "Craft skills were retained in Ireland because there was no industrial revolution and therefore no mass production," says Brian McGee, market development director at the Kilkenny-based Design & Crafts Council of Ireland. "Design education really only began in the 1970s, and now a younger generation of design graduates is reinvigorating the craft tradition with a respect for materials and a strong sense of place."

If proof were needed that craft is "cool", look no further than the international design fairs. Brands such as Nike, Vivienne Westwood and online fashion, design and art retailer Yoox.com collaborated with craft artisans during Milan's Salone del Mobile in April, while luxury fashion house Loewe's foundation launched its inaugural craft prize in April (the winner will be announced in 2017).

A push by the Design & Crafts Council of Ireland to connect Irish makers to a global audience follows the year-long, government-backed Irish Design 2015 initiative. Earlier this year a Design Ireland pavilion exhibited work by 22 designers and makers at Maison&Objet in Paris,



IRELAND



From far left: Shane Holland aluminium Etang table lamp, €135. Ceadogán wool Lime Sun rug by Andrew Ludick, €810. Andrew Ludick earthenware Fern Jug, €140, and beakers, €50 each

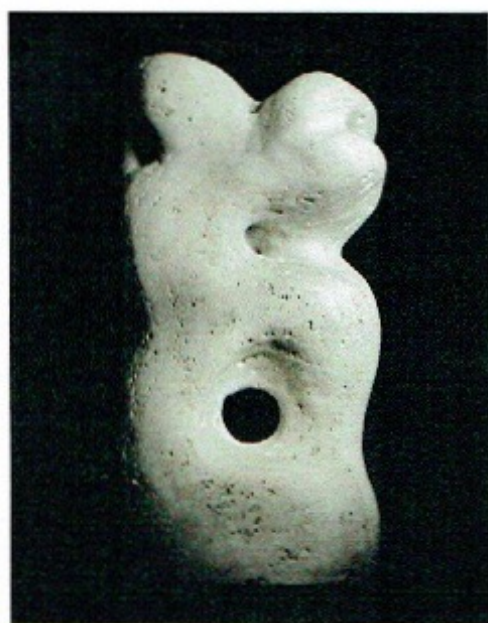
while Heal's held its first Irish group presentation since 1972, with 20 exhibitors and live craft demonstrations in its windows. And Irish craft was on show at London Design Fair (formerly Tent London) for the fourth time during the London Design Festival in September.

Waterford's historic association with crystal is being rejuvenated by J Hill's Standard, founded in 2014, through collaborations with contemporary designers such as Scholten & Baijings – each glass in the Dutch design duo's Elements series (€160-€545) features an individual pattern of cuts. Italian designer Martino Gamper's Cuttings series (€120-€220, pictured on fourth page) takes a more sculptural approach to surface decoration, with distinctive cuts creating a strong, rugged effect.

Craft values are also apparent in Wexford-based Ceadogán's vibrant customised and bespoke rugs (wool from €53 per sq ft; silk/wool from €75 per sq ft). Owner Denis Kenny's collaborations with contemporary Irish artists and textile designers include fashion designer Helen Cody's glamorous limited-edition rugs inspired by midcentury Scandinavian ceramics. Specially dyed wools brighten artist Patricia Murphy's painterly rugs, while a boldly coloured debut collection by US ceramicist Andrew Ludick – now based in Kilkenny – is influenced by artists Paul Klee and Joan Miró (Lime Sun pictured left, €810). And moody Irish landscape colours inspire Clonmore-based Marce Hensey's meditative designs.

At his own studio, Ludick treats white earthenware clay as a blank canvas crying out for colour and pattern (vases,

D OF PLENTY



Based in County Down, silversmith Cara Murphy has work on show at The Silver Trust Collection at Downing Street

bowls, jugs and beakers, €45-€250, examples pictured on previous pages). Pure white porcelain also offers a tabula rasa for Fortstewart-based Adam Frew's inky cobalt drawings. His one-off designs (from €500) and functional wares (stacked jars, £200; lidded jars, £50-£85; mugs, £30; pitchers, £85) are inspired by traditional eastern forms. Some are decorated simply with a single line; others convey a busy, abstract narrative. "I've always been passionate about drawing and strive to maintain the aesthetics and energy of abstract mark making," he says.

Osaka-born, County Antrim-based Scott Benefield's passion is for Venetian glass. Intricately patterned vessels and tableware display the cane techniques such as filigrana, zanfircio and reticello – initially developed in 16th-century Venice to create complex integral patterns within the glass itself – employed in his New Collage (from £850) and Lattimo (from £750) collections of one-off pieces. Similarly, his one-off Vetru Mosaico designs (example pictured overleaf, £730) riff on the traditional murrine techniques, in which tiles cut from patterned cane are fused together and blown into vessels.

Further innovative designs can be commissioned from silversmith Cara Murphy. Having trained at London's Royal College of Art, she is now based in Hillsborough in County Down and has work on show at The Silver Trust Collection at Downing Street. Sculptural forms inspired by nature animate her silver cups, bowls, spoons, teapots, candleholders and desk sets (Meniscus bowls pictured on final page, £5,500). Not all her tableware has an immediately obvious use. Seed Heads, a sculptural centrepiece created for Queen's University Belfast Collection, invites diners to discover how the cruet's salt and pepper are dispensed. And silver Connect cups, each set with a pebble that becomes integral to the piece, fit together like a puzzle. "I aim to create

movement while still retaining the sense of ritual and ceremony linked to silver," she says.

Movement is also central to Liam Flynn's tactile wooden vessels (example pictured on final page, €3,100). Based in Limerick and from generations of woodworkers, he's an almost entirely self-taught woodturner. He favours Irish hardwoods, particularly tannin-rich Irish oak, which responds well to finishing techniques like fuming and

Clockwise from top left: Shane Holland furniture, including the steel and glass LU coffee table, €950. Helen O'Connell travertine Aquatic study sculpture, €5,200. Zelouf+Bell mahogany, bolivar and sycamore Oak Leaf console, €16,700



ebonising, as well as bleached oak, ash and sycamore. The wood is lathe turned to near-paper thinness while still green and left to warp naturally as it dries. "I relish the challenge of anticipating what the timber will do, how much movement will occur as the vessel dries out and what influence that will have on the final shape," he says.

With some vessels the grain is allowed to create the pattern; others are carved simply or fluted. The emphasis is on subtlety of form and weightlessness. Presenting a single vase and bowl on a wooden plinth (Still Life with Oak, €1,200) reinforces their status as artworks. The V&A, National Museum of Ireland and Minneapolis



Clockwise from far left: J. Hill's Standard crystal Cuttlings glassware by Martino Gamper, from €120. Scott Benefield glass Vetro Mosaico vase, €730. Sasha Sykes rose petal, resin and acrylic Shogun stool, €3,200. Simon Doyle Spanish chestnut Hall table, €3,200



Kilkenny limestone is chosen for its lustrous black shades, Dublin/Wicklow granite for its flecks of mica, and Connemara marble for its green colour

Institute of Art display Flynn's work, although greater enjoyment is to be had from handling it at home.

An organic feel also characterises Helen O'Connell's stone vessels and sculptures (example pictured on previous page, €5,200), carved mainly from Kilkenny limestone. What she brings to this ancient, weighty stone is a sense of lightness and serenity. "It's a beautifully versatile material composed of marine life compressed over thousands of years," she says. "Chipping away can be a meditative experience and I enjoy the pace and methodical approach demanded by the material."

O'Connell is a Dublin native. Having trained at Leinster Sculpture Centre and studied marble carving at Italy's Nicoli studios in Carrara, she now works from

a Dublin studio and in Bray, County Wicklow. She cites Japanese art and design as her inspiration. "Increasingly I want to impose less of my vision on the stones and encourage people to appreciate the beauty of the material and to take time to engage with it."

Also based in Wicklow is Eric Byrne, a second-generation stonemason at Hennessy & Byrne who initially created fireplaces

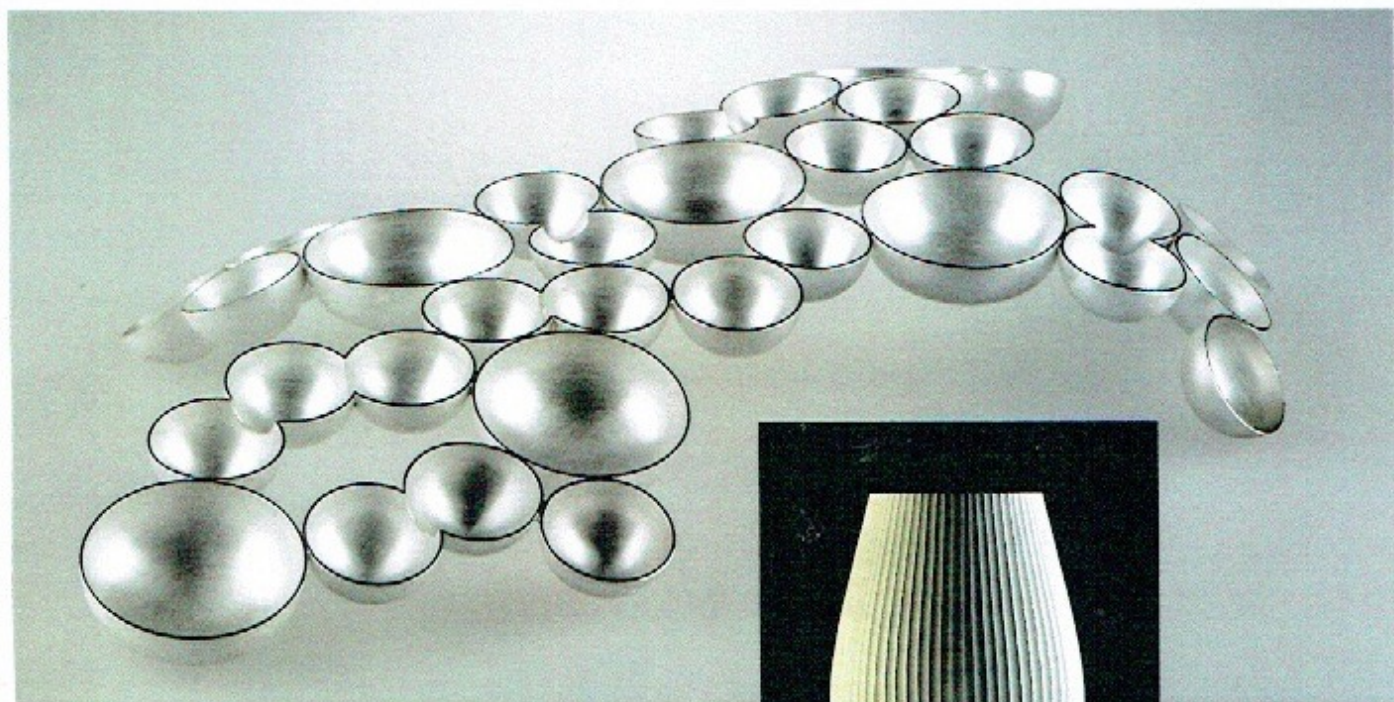
and headstones with his father. Now he makes home accessories from indigenous Irish stone, handpicked for colour and strength. Kilkenny limestone is chosen for its lustrous black shades (two candlesticks, €100; condiment set, €55; pair of tea lights, €55), Dublin/Wicklow granite for its silvery flecks of mica (six napkin holders, €70; salad server set, €55) and Connemara marble for its green colour and swirling grey veins (carver set, €110; egg cup, €16; cake slice, €25).

Organic material of a more ephemeral nature – wildflowers, thistles, lichens, ferns, seaweeds, shells – are embedded within hand-cast transparent resin in Sasha Sykes' furniture. From her studio in County Carlow, she works to commission on designs

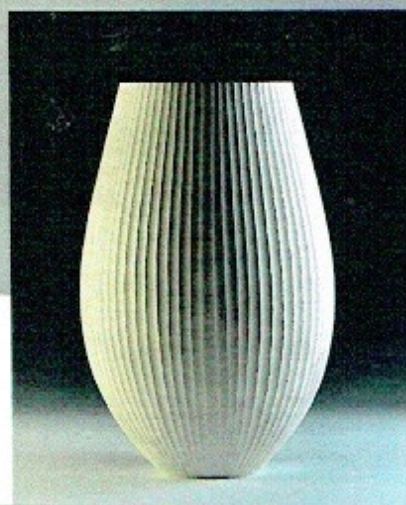
as diverse as coffee tables (from €5,000) and stools (€3,200, pictured above) with rose petal-filled surfaces and chests of drawers made from gorse and black acrylic (from €6,000). Screens (from €8,000), lamp bases (from €1,000), consoles (from €5,000), chairs (from €4,000), benches (from €3,000) and shelving (from €5,000) have all received similar treatment. "I like to reveal the beauty of the natural world by transposing its elements into a completely unfamiliar context," she says. "I use furniture as a medium, just as artists use paint on canvas, and my sculptural work has grown out of that."

In contrast, the Shakers' austere aesthetic is cited as an early influence by Dublin-based furniture-maker Simon Doyle. Traditional joinery meets industrial manufacturing such as metalwork in thoughtful designs focused on symmetry and balance. Vertical Connemara marble slabs support shelving (€5,500) made from oak and Valchromat (dyed wood-fibre panels). The tambour top of his Irish walnut jealousies cabinet (€4,000) echoes its base, while a Spanish chestnut Hall table (€3,200, pictured above left) has an adjoining storage box with double-sided drawers.

A more sculptural approach is taken by Shane Holland, whose lighting and furniture merge craft materials with industrial processes and materials. His Wilde Cage lights (€225-€759) – bare bulbs framed by a Squirrel cage – were a big hit at the 2014 London Design Festival, while



The elegant, sweeping shape of Zelouf+Bell's walnut Span table was inspired by a bridge on Dublin's M50 ring road



his Etang table lamp (€135, pictured on opening pages), made from a roll of sheet aluminium, is in the National Museum of Ireland's collection. Light bounces off a solid copper disc in the Cymbal chandelier (€350-€795) and spills through holes in the spiralling anodised-aluminium Twister table light (€85). Recycled materials are favoured along with found objects, such as cast-iron window weights in the 686 table (€960, signed edition of six) and 8108 table (€1,150, signed edition of six). The LU coffee table (€950, signed edition of 24, pictured on third page) similarly embraces industrial materials, with steel "L" and "U" sections topped by toughened glass. Elsewhere craft materials are championed in a Valencia slate and Irish sycamore coffee table (€1,166) and the Emperador table (€1,450, signed one-off piece), with its organically shaped Irish spalted sycamore top and solid marble base. "Local materials give each piece a story and provenance," says Holland.

The furniture meticulously made to commission by Belfast-born Michael Bell and New Yorker Susan Zelouf, of Dublin-based studio Zelouf+Bell, has more in

common with contemporary art than industrial design. Take the dazzling Cocteau cabinet (€20,000). Its purple lacquered exterior is inlaid with ebony and mother-of-pearl, while its pink bird's-eye maple interior is fitted with glass shelves. The Oak Leaf console (€16,700, edition of six, pictured on third page), whose mahogany panels have ripple sycamore leaves inlaid in green bolivar (tulipwood), was inspired by a William Morris wallpaper. And the Koi Pond in the Snow cabinet (€16,100, edition of six) is a glorious confection of blue bolivar with marquetry in grey and ivory ripple sycamore, ebony, red birch, orange bolivar and yellow koto (a west African hardwood).

Yet Zelouf+Bell's decorative designs are very functional.

The Fan desk (€25,700, edition of six) in macassar ebony and bleached bird's-eye maple offers drawers within two fan-shaped pedestals, while Monarch end tables (€5,680 for a pair), with inlaid marquetry, slide over sofa arms. And

inspiration is often local – the elegant, sweeping shape of the walnut Span table (€15,000, pictured left), inspired by a bridge on Dublin's M50 ring road, speaks of a deep-rooted love of the island. That's something we can all appreciate as Ireland's fine craft traditions are increasingly refreshed by contemporary design. +

IRISH PICKINGS

Adam Frew Ceramics, Flowerfield Arts Centre, 185 Coleraine Rd, Portstewart BT56 7PL (07745 774 605; www.adamfrew.com). **Andrew Ludick**, Castlecomer Discovery Park, Castlecomer, Co. Kilkenny (+35387 910 8927; www.andrewludick.com). **Carm Murphy**, 07811 958 807; www.carmurphy.com. **Ceadogán Rugs**, Barrystown, Wellingtonbridge, Co. Wexford (+35351 561 349; www.ceadoganrugs.com). **Helén O'Connell**, +35386 330 7364; www.oconnellsclulpture.com. **Hennessy & Byrne**, The Forge Yard, Russborough House, Blessington, Co. Wicklow (+35387 230 7521; www.hennessyandbyrne.com). **J Hill's Standard**, +35387 650 4565; www.hillstandard.com. **Liam Flynn**, +35387 610 6989; www.liamflynn.com and see Sarah Myerscough Gallery, **OliverSearsgallery**, 29 Molesworth St, Dublin 2 (+3531 644 9459; www.oliversearsgallery.com). **Sarah Myerscough Gallery**, 15-16 Brooks Mews, London W1 (020 7495 0069; www.sarahmyerscough.com). **Sasha Sykes**, +35386 871 1901; www.sashasykes.com and see OliverSearsgallery. **Scott Benefield**, 07833 626 108; www.scottbenefield.com and see Vessel Gallery. **Shane Holland Design Workshops**, Unit 11C, Duleek Business Park, Co. Meath (020 3012 0491; www.shanehollanddesign.com). **Simon Doyle**, +35387 752 4535; www.simon-doyle.com. **Vessel Gallery**, 114 Kensington Park Rd, London W11 (020 7727 8001; www.vesselgallery.com). **Zelouf+Bell**, The Old Chocolate Factory, 515 Kilmearin Sq, Dublin (+35387 230 5386; www.zeloufandbell.com).

Clockwise from top left: **Cara Murphy** silver Meniscus bowls, €5,500. **Liam Flynn** sycamore Fluted vessel, €3,100. **Zelouf+Bell** walnut Span table, €15,000