

Design Notebook: Kilkenny Design Workshops use the best Irish artisans and designers.

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New York Times (1923-Current file); Jul 27, 1978; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times pg. C11

Design Notebook | Ada Louise Huxtable

CONTRARY to popular belief and enduring clichés, Irish art and design is not limited to Celtic masterpieces or Waterford glass. The first image has been magnificently reinforced by the superb show of Irish art treasures that has been touring American musuems — not without mixed feelings about their absence in Dublin — with its dazzling displays of golden torques, brooches and buckles and such legendary marvels as the Books of Kells and Durrow.

The second image is the result of a seemingly bottomless demand for glassware of conventional traditional design and consistently high quality which keeps the Waterford factories humming. Beyond that, and a few other standard items such as Belleek china, is the welter of tourist offerings that look as if they might have been made by leprechauns or knitted by Mother Machree.

Which brings us to the Kilkenny Design Workshops. Unless you are well informed about what is going on at the top levels of design on an international basis, you will probably be taken by surprise by the Kilkenny Design Workshops. A visit to the Kilkenny Design Center, a retail shop on Nassau Street in Dublin, or to the shop that is part of the Kilkenny headquarters about 75 miles from Dublin, is a revelation of sophisticated design products for the home that make most other “good design” efforts seem limited and sterile. This is a level of low-key superiority usually associated with Scandinavia.

No leprechauns here; just the best Irish designers and artisans working in collaboration with both local and foreign manufacturers (the number of foreign-owned plants and multinational corporations in Ireland is rising) under direct Government sponsorship. These are neither the artsy-craftsy, clunky handmades often associated with crafts promotions, nor the cerebral “museum” interpretations of “good design” of intellectual tastemakers.

Kilkenny's products suggest a rational, relaxed approach to today's tastes and needs; they will fit equally well in a city penthouse or a country place. They have nothing to do with this year's decorating trends; they are not on the same planet with Italian superchic. Their character is a gentle excellence, and their range is the broad field of mass manufacture as well as individually made items. Whatever their source, they stress a subtle sensuousness and a knowing feel for texture, color and form. It is all lovely in the hand and easy on the eye.

You can drift in rainbow clouds of mohair, delight in pottery, porcelain, glass and silver of suave simplicity, discover cookware and kitchen utensils

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of comfortable elegance. There is a luscious range of fabrics from bedcovers and table linens to sweaters and scarves; there are baskets and woodenware and objects of leather and straw. To see these things is to covet them instantly.

And as if that weren't enough, on the balcony of the shop (a space nimbly transformed from “bare-bones” commercial square footage to two levels joined by stairs in mirrored cylinders by the architect Sam Stephenson) is the Kilkenny Kitchen. Here, words fail me. In a pleasant area of green plants and blond wood tables and chairs, with attractive Kilkenny place settings, is a self-service restaurant for morning coffee, lunch and afternoon tea, where the food and ambience match: salads of surpassing freshness and variety, tiny shrimp in a creamy dressing, dark soda bread, confections of meringue and strawberries, and the best coffee in the world with heavy yellow cream.

The quality of the Kilkenny Design Workshops is no accident. The company is a state-sponsored enterprise under the direction of Ireland's Minister for Industry, Commerce and Energy. It has three principle aims — to raise the level of public awareness of good design standards, to provide practical design assistance to appropriate industries, and to develop job opportunities for young designers by encouraging demand for their services.

Financing comes from Government grants and income from royalties, design fees and sales. This year Kilkenny has a budget of about £1,242,000, or about \$2,235,600, made up of \$675,000 in grants and \$1,560,600 from fees and commercial activities.

The fields dealt with include engineering-based manufacturing as well as textiles, housewares and furnishings, graphics, packaging and crafts. An advisory board of about 30 specialists sets the design standards. The emphasis, according to Kilkenny's chief executive, James King, is on the development of “entrepreneurial craftsman-ship” rather than “hobby craftsmen.” And its aim, in Kilkenny's own definition, is “the promotion of the best of

Irish design and workmanship in useful and familiar things.”

That objective provides an interesting mix. The shop features the hand-blown glassware of Simon Pearce and the distinctive pottery of Stephen Pearce (both members of an Irish family with a fine crafts tradition), earthenware birds by the sculptor Oisin Kelly, and the beautiful wools of Avoca Handweavers.

But it also offers tableware by the Japanese firm of Norotaki, designed with the help of the Kilkenny Workshops and the Arklow Pottery and manufactured in Ireland, for results that far surpass anything in the acres of Norotaki products found elsewhere. An ingenious do-it-yourself lamp kit is the work of a Danish designer, Holger Strom, for an Irish manufacturer. James Kirkwood designs for Celtic Ceramics are produced by Rosenthal in Ireland.

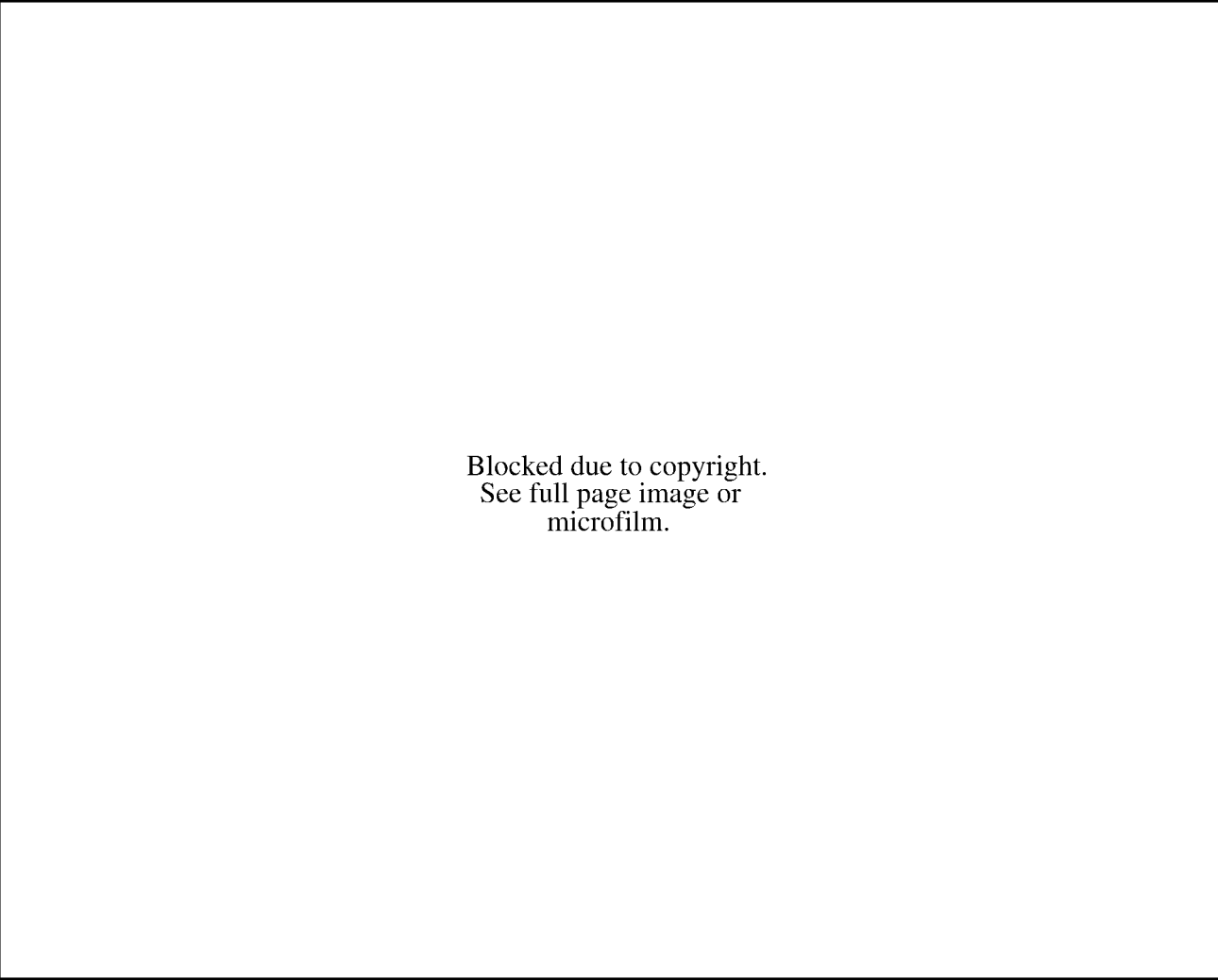
Established in 1963, the Kilkenny Design Workshops began operations in 1965 under the direction of W. H. Walsh, who guided the company until two years ago. The Dublin store has been open only since late 1976. The workshops' headquarters are in a handsome group of early-19th-century stone buildings that were once the stables, carriage houses, stores and harness rooms of Ormonde Castle in Kilkenny. Two lovely Georgian houses are used as a designer training and development center, with both resident and visiting designers. A training program has also been established with the National College of Art and Design.

There are about 100 employees now in Kilkenny and Dublin, including those who staff the stores. In addition to the store sales area, an exhibition space is featured, which may display anything from a new Gaelic typeface to prize-winning book designs of exceptional quality.

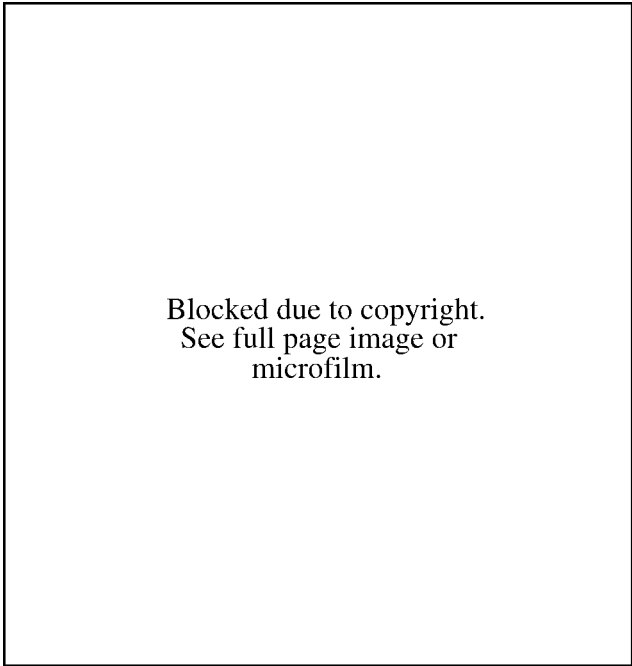
And that is not quite all. When New York's Metropolitan Museum, currently engaged in redoing its American Wing, wanted to reproduce a 200-year-old fabric believed to have come from Ireland, its curators went to Brunswick & Fils, who went to Kilkenny. Castlerae Textile Products Ltd. is making the long-line flax cloth, and it will pay a royalty on its commercial production to Kilkenny.

The Kilkenny operation cannot be measured by cost benefits alone. Beyond their immediate economic value, these products have important cultural dimensions in terms of the Irish image and reputation in design and manufacture.

For at least this visitor, it was an unexpected dimension. And at least one New York apartment, absolutely innocent of Waterford, has added contemporary Irish design to its eclectic mix.

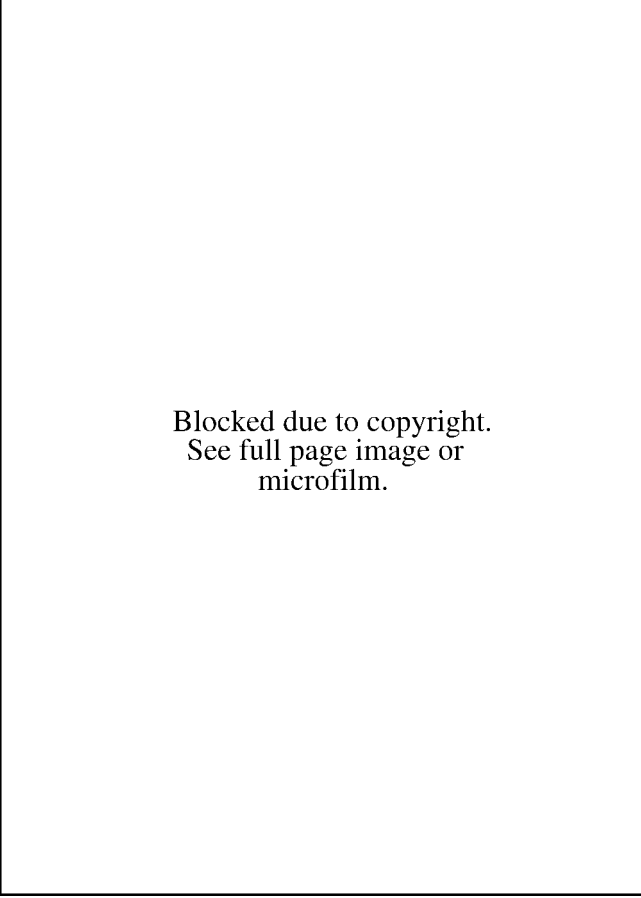


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Garth Huxtable

The shop at Kilkenny headquarters, top, offers products that have a feeling for texture, color and form.



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