

IRELAND: CROSSROADS OF ART AND DESIGN, 1690 – 1840' AT ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO



Portable harp by John Egan, circa 1820. Maple, spruce, ivory, brass and green paint with gilt decoration; 35½ by 19¼ by 8 11/16 inches. The O'Brien Collection. During the early Nineteenth Century, the Irish harp, an emblem of radical Irish politics, became a mainstay in elite British parlors.

—Jamie Stukenberg, Professional Graphics photo



Epergne or sweetmeat dish by World's End Pottery, 1755–65. Tin-glazed earthenware; 16 3/8 by 9 by 8 3/4 inches. Private collection. The exhibition includes 20 examples of Irish delftware.

By Kate Eagen Johnson

CHICAGO, ILL. — “Ireland: Crossroads of Art and Design, 1690–1840,” on view from March 17 through June 7 at the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC), challenges engrained stereotypes about the arts and material culture of historic Ireland.

Christopher Monkhouse, the Eloise W. Martin Chair and Curator of European Decorative Arts, and Leslie Fitzpatrick, the Assistant Research Curator of European Decorative Arts, have mounted the first exhibition on either side of the Atlantic devoted to celebrating artistry and fine craftsmanship in Eighteenth Century Ireland. They have gathered 320 items made, used and/or displayed in Ireland during the era from 85 collections located primarily in North America.

The subtitle speaks to the fluid and



Secretary cabinet by John Kirkhoffer, 1732, Dublin. Walnut, oak, holly, mirror glass and brass; 85½ by 49½ by 22 inches. Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Robert Allerton. This is the earliest signed and dated example of Irish furniture known. The penciled inscription "John Kirkhoffer / fecit / 1732" appears on the bottom of a drawer.

multifaceted nature of arts creation and consumption during this underappreciated but critical period. The time span begins in 1690 with the Battle of the Boyne and accompanying Protestant Ascendency

and ends in 1840, a few years before Ireland's Great Famine or Great Hunger. The exhibition features portraits, sporting and landscape paintings, architectural renderings, pastels, mezzotints, furniture, glass and textiles as well as the perhaps less expected miniatures, ceramics, silver, decorative leather bindings, musical instruments and arms. The cultural composition of Ireland during the Eighteenth Century was complex.



"The Adelphi Club, Belfast" by Joseph Wilson, 1783. Oil on canvas; 24 by 29 inches. Private collection.

Decanter, circa 1815, probably Cork. Lead glass; 10 by 4 7/8 inches. Courtesy of Historic New England, gift of Susan Norton McCullagh. The engraved initials "NG" stand for Nancy Gay of Gay's Island in present-day Maine. In his catalog essay, Peter Francis discusses the export of Irish glass to America as early as the Seventeenth Century.



There were native Irish and Anglo-Irish, Catholic and Protestant, and urban and rural inhabitants of differing classes and educational levels. Also involved were the many artists, artisans and influences from England, the Continent and beyond. The mobility of both art makers and takers stands as a dominant theme.

The impressive, nearly 300-page catalog contains 18 essays by leading scholars. The catalog will be a particular treat for American readers who may not be aware of recent developments in this subject area. Monkhouse concluded, “I hope that people will better understand Irish arts through this exhibition. The saying used to

be ‘when in doubt, call it Irish.’ We are trying very hard to get attributions correct and to announce what makes a piece particularly Irish. We want to give people the opportunity to see new objects and to refine their connoisseurship skills.”

For additional information,
www.artic.edu or 312-443-3600.

Kate Eagen Johnson is an expert in American decorative arts and an independent consultant to historical organizations.



“Walker’s Tour through Ireland, a New Geographical Pastime,” published by William Darton Jr, March 9, 1812. Engraving with watercolor on paper; 19 11/16 by 33 11/16 inches. Rolf and Magda Loeber. Scenic tourism in Ireland was integrally tied to the popularity of landscape painting. —Tom Little photo