

**DESMOND FENNELL**

# **ART FOR THE IRISH**



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# ONWARDS MODERN ART?\*

1.

**H**OW did modern art happen—how did painting get away from the people?

At the height of the Middle Ages in Western Europe the best painting was for all the people and especially for the poorest and most ignorant. The Church saw to that. As the Middle Ages ended, a growing share of painting was being done for the cultured business class, and, from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth century, for the bourgeoisie in general and for the aristocracy. In the Catholic parts of Europe the people at large continued to have a share of it through the agency of the Church, but it was a decreasing share. Throughout the nineteenth century most of the painting was done for the bourgeoisie and for the State—which often meant for public buildings—but in the later part of the century the best painters in Paris rejected this patronage and their rebellion was supported by a few enterprising art dealers.

During the first half of the twentieth century up to the present day this development has been increasing in scope. The best painting was no longer done either for all the people or for any socio-economic class: more and more it came to be done for the art dealers, for a growing number of art speculators and for the intellectuals. The role of the art dealer changed from that of a mere seller of pictures to that of a money-lender, propagandist and broker in an expanding stock exchange. As painting, set loose, became more “difficult,” the intellectuals gathered around it. Some of them appreciated very well what the painters were about and got real aesthetic enjoyment. Many were grateful to be able to rediscover mystery, which their modern rationalism had left them starved for. Others were flattered to be able to claim initiation in something arcane and esoteric, which proved them to be intellectuals and distinguished them from the insensitive mass of the people. And many of them enjoyed anyhow seeing ordinary people shocked and baffled.

From whatever motives, the intellectuals co-operated with the art

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*I dedicate this to those Irish artists who believe that art, to be serious, must emerge from entire souls and stand up in truth and goodness. It is my humble attempt to clear a space for them in the welter of shoddy fashion and tired thinking and to encourage them in the fight against priestly and lay indifference, fashionable coteries, cultural climbers and Common Marketeers.*

— D. F.

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dealers of Paris, London, New York, Zurich and Amsterdam to create the prestige of modern art in spite of popular opposition, and to raise the money-values of many painters and paintings for the benefit of speculators.

There has never been a time when the works of living painters fetched such high prices as the works of certain living painters do to-day, and there has never been a time when the best painting has been meaningful to so few. This latter development was inevitable, for neither society at large (through the Church or the State) nor any special social class any longer told the painter "Paint this!" Instead, increasingly, the art dealers (who were *primarily* businessmen) simply told him, "Paint anything you like as long as it is *new* and is likely to get talked and written about."

So the serious painter naturally painted for himself alone and for other painters—he engaged in painterly and philosophical experiments, gave himself to mystical musings and to painterly fun and joys. And a new class of chancers emerged who simply cashed in on all this by going through the required motions. More and more, the new paintings seemed to have no function other than getting bought by museums or stored in bank vaults or sent to biennales or reproduced in full colour in luxury art books. Of course, they also gave would-be intellectuals something to talk and show off about. But most of the people of Western Europe and the United States have been left with no share in painting.

"*C'est tres coté*" is the magical phrase a dealer says in Paris when he's pointing out some successful painter's works to you—say, a Dubuffet worth £8,000. "He's quoted high!" or, in other words, "That's a good investment." When one dealer in prints said this to me of a certain artist, I answered, "But I don't like him." "Oh, of course," said the dealer, "it's right to follow your own taste when you're collecting" (he *assumed* that I was collecting), "it's your luck then when your taste happens to coincide with the world's taste." He made me wonder was I odd, since I was merely looking for beautiful things.

In Paris you can go to the National Museum of Modern Art, stand near the two or three rooms which have been filled with paintings of 1958 to 1960 (great names all), and observe the summer crowds of visitors, both French and foreign. The Museum contains paintings done from about 1905 to the present day, and in many of the rooms the people stand still and gaze or else discuss the paintings with each other. But when they come to the sort of painting which has been

dominant in Paris since 1945, they show interest in the first room of it, a more cursory interest in the second and then, on reaching the rooms for 1958-60 and noticing that the same sort of painting continues with minor variations, most of them take a few steps inside the door, throw a quick glance round and leave again.

Now the fact that they have come to the Museum of Modern Art means that they belong to that minority of people who are predisposed to be sympathetic to the modern, but they treat the latest painting (which the critics praise and the dealers get high prices for) in exactly the same way in which they would treat a display of nineteenth century academic painting—they don't even look at it, neither to enjoy it nor to reject it vehemently. The truth is that they find it monotonous and that they just don't care.

And the truth is that, though a great deal of modern painting has engaged me passionately and enriched my life, I was at the same time overwhelmed and bored by this array of canvases, which happened to be painted by a variety of painters, but which might well have been painted by the same man. Rugs and neck-ties came to my mind. I remembered that Kandinsky, the father of abstraction, had something to say about this and I looked it up. Writing in 1912 about abstract painting, he said, "The artist must train not only his eye but also his soul, so that it can weigh colours in its own scale and thus become a determinant in artistic creation. If we begin at once to break the bonds that bind us to nature and to devote ourselves purely to combinations of pure and independent form, we shall produce works that are mere geometric decorations, resembling something like a neck-tie or a carpet. Beauty of form and colour is no sufficient aim by itself . . ."

Obviously, Kandinsky here was referring to *non-figurative* abstract painting. There was little of this in Paris before 1945, though there was plenty of what is loosely called "abstract"—all those modern manners of distorting visible reality on canvas which were evolved between 1870 and 1910. Probably most of the painting done in Paris to-day still uses these styles, now become mannerisms. The difference with the dominant painting of the last fifteen years is that it has been abstract in the non-figurative sense—it doesn't usually pretend to have any connection with visible reality, unless by "visible reality" we mean a square inch of slush or of rusty kettle, of rotting meat or of sand-stone boulder, enlarged twenty, thirty or a hundred times.

Completely abstract or non-figurative painting had its origins mainly in Germany and Russia between 1910 and 1915, when Cubism



had only just been heard of in Paris. But first the Bolsheviks and then Hitler deprived it of its focal points so that this North European modernism has led a nomad existence. It has come into its own since the last war in Paris itself and, even more decisively, in America.

The great names in Paris in the last fifteen years have been painters who use colour and form for their own sake. There are geometrical patterns strengthened by colour or colour harmonies emphasising easy or dynamic flow or recalling organic growth or evoking geological formation. In some paintings the effects are calligraphic, with heavy black or dark shapes standing starkly against monotone backgrounds. These calligraphic tendencies, which seemed to me the most promising, are due in no small way to Far Eastern influences and to a few Japanese and American painters who worked (or who work) in Paris and transmitted them.

All in all, the state of painting in Paris to-day shows that there has been no important new vision in pictorial art since the first eleven years of this century and that, in particular, the revolutionary styles of 1907 to 1911 have not succeeded in getting themselves accepted by a broad general public in the manner that the revolutionary styles of previous eras got accepted after forty years or so. But one can hardly say, in an age of advancing science and education, that this is because people are more stupid.

## 2.

The commercial art galleries of London offer a contrast which would be difficult to find in such an extreme form anywhere else. On the one hand, there is a mass of antideluvian paintings fit for stately homes, which it would be unfair to the Academies to call academic. On the other hand, both in certain commercial galleries and in the New Acquisitions rooms of the Tate, you will find "modern art" of an extreme kind, which outstrips Paris and approximates to New York.

You need only linger a few minutes among the "latest acquisitions" to realise that the painting which is now in the ascendant in London is by and large of the same non-figurative abstract sort which dominates Paris. But I found that a lot of the British abstract painting escapes the monotony of its French counterpart, for the very simple reason that the British painters are not so taken by colour as the French. They often leave a large part of their painting white or "empty," so that the painted shapes achieve a more compelling force and manage both to attract and to hold your attention.

In other words, the tendency of present-day abstract painting in Britain is strongly calligraphic. As I remarked already, there are French painters who are calligraphic, but the main stronghold of the calligraphic image is America, and it is quite clear that since the big American exhibition in London in 1959 British painters look more to New York than to Paris for guidance. The triumph of non-figurative abstraction—the specifically North European form of modernism—has, in fact, given British painters a chance to find themselves in an outburst of brilliance and enthusiasm, such as they never achieved collectively during the more recent centuries of figurative painting.

Taken together, the present-day abstract painting of Paris and London seems to indicate a great confused eagerness which has not yet discovered either where it is going or what it is eager about. But this much is clear. In both cities, everything seems to indicate that we are at the end of painting as Europe or indeed any other civilisation has known it—perhaps, simply, at the end of painting. On the one hand, the painters are dissatisfied with the flat canvas and are more and more frequently converting it into a plastic surface. Painted board cut into different levels, thin painted strips of wood set perpendicularly to the plane of the painting, great piled and squirted masses of paint, the "addition" of gravel, sand, leather and what not—these are all in vogue and they are all rejections of the two-dimensional flat surface.

In Paris you can see the "cinematic paintings" of Schöffer and Malina, which seem to me to be one of the most logical developments of non-figurative colour painting. These are composed of metallic and wooden constructions which revolve under a projection of changing coloured light and the whole effect is shown to the spectator through a misted screen. Suddenly, the forms and colours of abstract painting seem to acquire life and compelling beauty and you sit watching this mystic kaleidoscope, quite happy that it should go on for ever. The textile-like futility of so many coloured rectangles is gone.

Or else make the rectangles into non-figurative fetishes and sculptures; mobiles, if you will. Or keep the flat surface and make the impersonality of the thing deliberate (and therefore an advantage) instead of letting it be accidental (and a failure)—do this by making it into a lithograph, which is the strictest possible affirmation of the flat surface in its most impersonal form. The more calligraphic forms of non-figurative abstraction can be very impressive in this medium and many painters are using it in Paris. But, obviously, none of these developments is painting in any normal meaning of the word.



and fashioned themselves a will and exercised their retinas ; but it seems that they have opened only part of their souls. They have, if you wish, been *allowed* to open only part of their souls; Irish society has found no serious use for them. It is wrestling with its own split soul and hearts are temporarily strangled.

The dilemma is certainly there, otherwise Irish painting would be showing signs of being at least as different from the painting of, say Western Europe, as the spiritual climate and views of reality of the Irish is different from the spiritual climate and the views of reality prevalent in Western Europe. For to fool ourselves about the fact of this difference, as some of our intellectuals do, is either to be insensitive or to have unmanly inhibitions or to have a most undemocratic contempt for the intelligence of the majority of the Irish people and the validity of their perceptions. The most tangible realities of our political, juridical and economic arrangements reflect our mental world and our overall view of reality and these political, juridical and economic arrangements are proof sufficient of our uniqueness and originality, not only in Europe, but in the world to-day (something which any perceptive foreigner is not slow to remark).

I mean the combination of these facts: that we have a Christian Constitution and the highest degree of state enterprise this side of the Iron Curtain ; no State Church and (practically speaking) no Socialist or Communist party ; liberal parliamentary democracy loyally practised; almost everyone a practising Christian, religious diversity accompanied by extreme religious tolerance ; no important political party calling itself "Christian" ; the principal established "ideology" a linguistic one.

Not one of these facts *in concreto* need matter one whit to an Irish painter, but it is still surely a cause for disquiet (both to the serious painter and to the community at large) that the vision shown in Irish painting offers no distinctiveness to equal or even remotely to rival the originality of the Irish body social. It is also surely a cause for disquiet to all of us that the activity and the vision of many of the best Irish painters are of little concern to the majority of the people and are not meaningful to them, although the people can hardly be said to be brutish or stupid. The plea that this situation is common to many countries to-day is an excuse reeking of provincialism or of artificially-prolonged adolescence. Any new community which comes on the scene, whether it be Soviet Russia, Israel, Mexico after the Revolution or the Republic of Ireland, takes certain measures and leaves certain measures untaken, values this or that more or less

highly, and must surely be held at least primarily responsible for the state of affairs in its own household.

It is not my place to offer a solution for the particular dilemma of Irish painting, but I suggest that both the community and the painters should realise that an unresolved dilemma exists and be unhappy about it. Ultimately we are all responsible for the sort of painting we get—and when I say "sort" I am not referring to style or technique. Far too many painters to-day act as if the style were what they mainly cared about ; they make the style the instrument of an esoteric polemic which concerns very few, instead of using their painting as a whole (content and style together) for that good fight to which Picasso urges them. What matters is not the style, but the degree of inspiration, the suitability of style to content, as well as the general philosophical and social context in which the painting is done. When painters make the style the main thing, the *point* of their argument, they can hardly blame the public for taking them at their word and rejecting such a phoney scale of values.

It seems unlikely that a cultured socio-economic class will emerge to patronise and guide Irish painting. It also seems unlikely that the Church or the State will tackle the question in the radical way it needs to be tackled. Irish painters have therefore several courses open to them. They can acquiesce in their social ostracism, even priding themselves on it, and accept complacently the praise of *côteries* as a substitute for the hearts of the people. Or they can make war on their social ostracism, in the knowledge that it is a bad thing for their art, that the greatest art had its feet in the people and its head in the sky, that it could be enjoyed on several different levels, not just one esoteric level. They can make war on their ostracism with their hearts, or by trying, in their quality of citizens, to order society differently.

They can practise that comfortable provincialism which disguises itself as "keeping abreast of world trends" and which takes as its unproved premise that the centre of life is always somewhere else on earth. On the other hand, they can take the more uncomfortable view that all the ingredients of life and art are available everywhere, and that it is both harmful to one's art and unmanly to have inhibitions about a part of one's personal and unique consciousness of the world or about that view of reality which one shares with the primary community which one belongs to.

They can take the view that only *whole persons* make great art, and that to copy styles which are the products of powerful psychic necessities without oneself having really experienced those necessities is to thwart art and to practise mannerism. (Many French painters



behind the war of artistic styles a war of ideologies and philosophies is hidden. Not only the Soviets banned non-figurative art, but the Nazis did too, for even they, in their perverted way, wished the artists to glorify man.

A Christian would say that both their efforts were vain, because Christ is the key to true humanism, and a Greek would have said that their efforts were vain, because there can be no humanism without fear of the gods. What, one might well ask, does the modern West say? What, for that matter, do we Irish say?

## 3.

I have sometimes thought how different might have been the development of the art of painting in modern Ireland if some painters of outstanding talent had been as active in the national resurgence and revolution as certain poets and writers were and had come to power, so to speak, with the revolution, helping to shape its cultural policies. For many reasons this was not so. But if it had been so, painting might well have taken a development as distinctive and vigorous as it took in Mexico after the Mexican Revolution. Indeed (to reach somewhat further back), the peasant fight against landlordism, as well as the ancient mythology and legends and the ethos and accidentals of the folk tradition, might have provided the stuff of a distinctly Irish modernism in art.

As it happened, however, our revolution and its *élan* were bygone things, and already a generation had grown up which accepted justice-for-the-peasants and Irish distinctiveness as obvious and normal and regarded the myths and folk ways as outdated themes, *before* Irish painters were numerous and active enough to develop a consciousness of themselves and a common *élan*. Moreover, the strength of Christian belief in Ireland, combined with the inborn anti-intellectualism of the Irish, made Irish political life and social development pragmatic—nationalism was the only “ism” for which the Irish fell *en masse*, and even that was abandoned by the majority in its doctrinaire form, once the main aim of establishing national identity had been substantially achieved.

So Irish painters had not available to them as persons that involvement in political pseudo-religions which provided much of the driving force for great art movements on the Continent during the past half-century. Nor indeed, since most of them are Christians and all of them are cushioned by a Christian community, did they experience that fertile desolation of soul, that desperate need for

making contact with reality at all costs, which drove several non-Christian painters on the Continent to make great art and a host of other non-Christians to make a brave play for it.

Yet, as Christians and, indeed, the majority of them, as Catholics, living in a Catholic community of live belief, which was mainly rural and had a strong sense of cohesion, surely they enjoyed exactly those conditions in which most of the great art of Europe had been produced? Not all the conditions, for there was still the need of wholehearted Christian commitment and of a Catholic Church to call on their services, to show eager need of them, to give them walls to convert into beautiful things, as the Mexican State (taking the place of the Church) had done in such an enlightened manner. But, for a variety of reasons, the Catholic Church in Ireland did not do this—it did not woo the painters on behalf of the faithful; for painters, like young women, must be wooed and have a right to expect it, and if they are not wooed and called upon, no one has a right to say that they have failed in their obligations.

As a matter of fact, they have no obligations at any time except to the truth that is in themselves; but part of the truth that is in them can be their loving involvement as *persons* in the ideals and strivings of the community they live in. Indeed, the greatest art has always emerged from a happy fusion of the individual and potentially anti-social truth of an artist with the demands of a community to which, as a person, he emotionally belongs. “What do you think an artist is?” Picasso has said. “An imbecile who has only his eyes if he’s a painter, or ears if he’s a musician, or a lyre at every level of his heart if he’s a poet . . . On the contrary, he’s at the same time a political being, constantly alive to heartrending, fiery or happy events, to which he responds in every way. How would it be possible to feel no interest in other people and by virtue of an ivory indifference to detach yourself from the life which they so copiously bring you? No, painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war for attack and defence against the enemy.”

There can be no doubt about it that the development of painting has been the main artistic achievement in Ireland over the past twenty years. There has been nothing of equivalent value in literature or in any other art. But the achievement in painting has mainly been in the fact of its emergence and establishment as a thrusting, self-conscious activity in our midst—that, and the fact of its ambition and its increasing sensitiveness. Our painters have got hold of the tools



and fashioned themselves a will and exercised their retinas ; but it seems that they have opened only part of their souls. They have, if you wish, been *allowed* to open only part of their souls; Irish society has found no serious use for them. It is wrestling with its own split soul and hearts are temporarily strangled.

The dilemma is certainly there, otherwise Irish painting would be showing signs of being at least as different from the painting of, say Western Europe, as the spiritual climate and views of reality of the Irish is different from the spiritual climate and the views of reality prevalent in Western Europe. For to fool ourselves about the fact of this difference, as some of our intellectuals do, is either to be insensitive or to have unmanly inhibitions or to have a most undemocratic contempt for the intelligence of the majority of the Irish people and the validity of their perceptions. The most tangible realities of our political, juridical and economic arrangements reflect our mental world and our overall view of reality and these political, juridical and economic arrangements are proof sufficient of our uniqueness and originality, not only in Europe, but in the world to-day (something which any perceptive foreigner is not slow to remark).

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They can take the view that only *whole persons* make great art, and that to copy styles which are the products of powerful psychic necessities without oneself having really experienced those necessities is to thwart art and to practise mannerism. (Many French painters



did this when they learned the baroque style in Rome and most of the present-day Japanese did it, who took Parisian styles home with them.)

Some Irish painters have accepted ostracism or have chosen to opt out of the social and spiritual community which is so inefficiently offer to them. But I know of none who, on doing so, immersed themselves really and deeply in some other community of the actual present or the promised future. They simply reject Picasso's advice outright and choose isolation. More power to them! They face the terrible danger of self-deceit, of the half-measure, of retaining unconsciously in an *imagined* isolation the lingering comforts of Christian left-overs. That way mediocrity lies. Only when their loneliness has become a terror to them and their desolation of soul is quite utter can they claim to be serious isolationists and begin to hunger usefully for reality and hope to find it, *à la* Zen or any other way.

A Zen priest once said to me, when I asked him some prying questions, expecting facile answers, "You can't read Buddhism off a tree passing by in a train." The Western world to-day has already quite enough artistic dabblers in a dozen cosmic mysticisms, who are trying to crash through to Reality with brushes, canvas, knives and tubes. They overlook that it is only those who dwell already in reality who can hope to be great painters and that the Japanese masters of Zen spent years in purely spiritual discipline, destroying their false egos, until their hearts were changed. After that, some of them became artists.

## DESIGN AGAINST ART\*

OR

### THE TEMPLE ART OF EGO MATERIALISM

(On the occasion of the Report by the Scandinavian Design Group)

#### 1.

THE words Scandinavian Design bring to our minds domestic interiors of simple elegance filled with pleasing objects of practical use and of ornament made out of wood, metal, clay, glass and textile materials. The textures vary from the unadorned roughness of natural wood and skins to the smooth surfaces of machine-finished glass and ceramics. Some shapes emphasise the solidity or toughness of the material while others seem to fly from material and its implications and to take measured flight towards the incorporeal.

In a sense, then, Scandinavian Design is a concept of the beautiful and comely which expresses itself pre-eminently in the private and household sphere. It has achieved an aesthetic formula which brings together in this limited area the qualities of good craftsmanship, art, architecture and the manufacturing conditions of the machine age. These elements, united, are made into a work of art, just as canvas, oils, framing and the painter's art are combined to make a beautiful painting. The formula and its practical application have been worked out in Sweden and Denmark over the past forty years or so. Inspiration was drawn both from certain artistic theories and ideals which were current in Europe since the latter half of the nineteenth century and from some of the art of old China; but the achievement itself took place in the concrete social and religious context of Sweden and Denmark in the decades immediately preceding the middle of the twentieth century. That is why we call this particular form of man-made beauty Scandinavian Design, just as we call certain styles of palace architecture or of painting Italian Renaissance or certain styles of sculpture or decoration Bavarian Baroque.

There is a big difference, however, for while the Baroque and Renaissance aesthetic concepts expressed themselves successfully —

\* Based on four articles in the *Irish Independent*, March, 1962.



achieved beauty — in many wide fields from churches and merchants' houses to jewellery, painting, gardens and sculpture, Scandinavian Design has seldom achieved beauty outside the domestic and private sphere. Exceptions can be found, such as the Forest Cemetery at Stockholm, which is a sensitive poem to death. There are two or three new churches which have pleasing interiors, but whether they fulfil adequately the non-aesthetic (spiritual and devotional) functions of churches is at least as questionable as it is certain that their construction did not arise out of Christian belief. Anyone visiting Sweden and Denmark will see that when the principles of Scandinavian Design have been extended to largescale architecture, posters, stamps, lettering, underground stations, restaurants and so on, the result has at best been a sort of respectable dullness. And although it might seem that this Design was concentrated above all else on beautifying the life of Everyman, it will be seen that it does this only in the private sphere. When Scandinavians attempt adornment on a broad public scale for the delight of "the people" as a mass, the result is tawdry and vulgar. One might instance the "social centres" of the new housing estates near Stockholm, Tivoli Park in Copenhagen (which Danes are proud of as one of their most typical institutions), Liseberg Park in Gothenburg or any of the hundreds of playgrounds for adults which are to be found in every town of any size — "People's Parks" they are called. As for painting and sculpture, Scandinavian Design does not claim to have anything to offer them and these arts are not flourishing in Sweden and Denmark. There is a lot of public "art" on buildings or in connection with public works because there is a great deal of money and because it is fashionable for public authorities and business firms to play at "patronage." But much of this art is terribly bad and some of it — such as the "adornment" of the Stockholm underground — so bad as to be pitiful.

All of these facts might tell us a certain amount about modern Scandinavian culture, but they would not reflect in any way on the achievements of Scandinavian Design in the domestic sphere if the theorists and proponents of this aesthetic form had no pretensions outside this sphere. In actual fact, they have the widest of pretensions and claim that their formulae are applicable to the entire life of man. Design is called *formgivning* in Swedish, which means simply the *giving of form*. There is nothing to which the Scandinavian Design theorists believe they cannot give its "natural" and proper form, *whether that form be beautiful or not*. These proper

forms are in fact not beautiful except in the domestic sphere. They are efficient and rational (in the manner in which machines are efficient and rational) and for that reason they may give intellectual satisfaction to those who set store by such qualities; but they are not beautiful — beauty satisfies a good deal more than the intellect of man. It is here that we begin to notice the strong ethical and philosophical content in Scandinavian Design and to discern that it is not only an art form, but a totalitarian concept and programme. It is in fact the moral and liturgical art programme of the Swedish and Danish mandarin class, their design for an earthly Jerusalem.

## 2.

Only in the Middle Ages can we find art that was at once divine and truly popular — made for the people at large. A Gothic cathedral was ecclesiastical and concerned with the public cult, but it was also the people's art in a very true sense. Designed and built by craftsmen and born out of the people's dreams, it was the people's possession and their joy. Their own images looked back at them out of the statues and pictures; their every mood was reflected in those faces — even their nightmares and obscenities were not left out. (Tivoli amusement park is Denmark's nearest parallel to the Gothic cathedral and the Forest Cemetery is a Swedish counterpart. Both are for "the people" as a mass — in the Danish case, for the people seen as playful children; in the Swedish case, for the people seen as dead or as devotees of death.)

In Greek and Roman times and in Europe after the Renaissance, the great art was made for special social classes, though enjoyed by a broad public; in each case, it reflected simultaneously the chosen self-portrait of the dominant class and their religious or quasi-religious ideas. Modern Scandinavian domestic art (which is not great art, but the best available) reflects very faithfully both the chosen self-portrait and the quasi-religious ideas of the dominant class for whom it is made. The term "god-king," which is used by anthropological scholarship in the description of primitive societies, could be used to describe each of the members of this class, taken (as they take themselves) individually. But since they are, in a sense, collegiate, and are strongly averse to splendour, monarchy and the god-concept, they are best described as lay-monastic. Ascetic and thisworldly in their ideals, they hold power not by reason of armed men or of vast personal possessions, but by dispensing the



official public doctrine or orthodoxy and through their alliance with the big businessmen, of whom the more "enlightened"—and they are many—are accepted as associates. This alliance is institutionalised in the press, which is also the main source of the public doctrine (known as liberal rationalism). But orthodoxy is also found in books written by the intellectuals and it is taught by all the schools and universities. Only by accepting it fully can a man gain admission to the mandarin class, which is often called "the intelligentsia" or, in its broader connotations, "enlightened people." The Design theorists are the specialised art priesthood. Industrial designers are either full members of the mandarin class or else artists who have been persuaded to serve it. The broad central stream of their work (called Scandinavian Design) reflects mandarin values very adequately.

The mandarins are pious devotees of Matter in all its aspects and manifestations. Their "liberal rationalism" is really a confused and self-deceiving compound of all the various rationalisations of the cult of Matter which have been evolved in Western Europe since the eighteenth century: the thisworldly rationalism of the Enlightenment; the poetic melancholy of the Romantics; the secularised puritanism of Calvinist and Non-Conformist Protestantism; the individualistic Liberalism of the nineteenth century; positivism; utilitarianism; the anti-life attitudes of neo-Malthusianism and the cult of science. Behind all the verbiage Matter remains the ultimate object of reverence and everything else which is venerated will be found to be an aspect or an offspring of Matter. There is Nature, for instance, meaning plants and animals and the rather featureless landscape of Sweden and Denmark, with its monotony and muted colours. ("Nature" does *not* include, say, the Amazon jungles or the bird of paradise; neither does it include human nature—man with his reason, his emotions and his supra-rational faculties.) There is the Machine, which, for the mandarins, is Matter working rationally and creatively; for the businessmen, a fertility goddess mothering Mammon. The great god Death is the mortality of Matter (unredeemed) and the consciousness or soul of Matter dwells in the lonely divinised Ego. All these venerated values—they are equivalent to as many gods—are reflected in a state of fusion in Scandinavian Design.

The rationalism, puritanism and preoccupation with death are reflected in the eschewing of ornament, gaiety, bright colours or the evocation of emotion; rationalism and anti-humanism in the avoidance of evocative renderings of the human form—only extreme stylisations or distortions are considered seemly or respectful of reason; puritanism

and egocentricity in the concentration of beauty on the private, domestic sphere, the imposition of joyless, cold morals on the public sphere and the contemptuous treatment of the living mass of the people; reverence for non-human Nature in the passion for plain materials, untreated surfaces, muted colours and smoothness; life-weariness, materialistic ancestor-worship and reverence for non-human Nature in the devotion to the primitive artefacts (rather than the spirits) of long-dead generations; intense involvement with the ego in the neurotic emphasis on sedative effects, the avoidance of exciting elements; reverence for the Machine in simple shapes and smooth surfaces and in "functional" house architecture.

The aesthetic pleasure of Scandinavian household art is of that intellectual, de-humanised, sweetly despairing and narcissistic sort which the mandarin prizes most highly. Beauty on this scale is "controllable"; it does not fly higher than the mandarin's mind. Facing it, he sees himself reflected—beautiful, rational, superhuman self—and feels that he is master of the situation. For nothing—neither God nor truth nor goodness nor beauty—must make him tremble nor bring him to his knees. At the same time, these plain objects are the ego's attempt to break through to the divine pleasure of contemplation. They are points of contemplative departure, like the yogi's navel or a Zen rock garden. But they remain mere points of departure, for they have nothing but Matter to proceed to.

This household art has been named *brukkonst* in Swedish (in Danish *brugskunst*). Nothing could be a clearer indication of the totalitarian pretensions of the Scandinavian Design theorists in the field of art and life, for the word means "art for use" quite baldly, thus implying that all other art is *useless*. In the low-ceilinged world which Matter delimits and reigns over, the "free arts" have no "function." Since the Design theorists are the art spokesmen of the ruling class, this valuation, whether explicit or (as it more often is) implicit, is a death sentence for them. Moreover, the very fact that this *brukkonst* has flowered so brilliantly while good art of any other kind is singularly lacking in Scandinavia helps to promote the public identification of *brukkonst* with Art and to take the heart out of every other kind of artistic endeavour.

It is worth remarking that, although modern Sweden and Denmark have a higher level of popular education, more widely diffused, than any of the great cultures of the past and material resources far beyond those of ancient Egypt, of Pericles' Athens, of medieval France or Renaissance Rome, they have not produced anything at all in the



way of "great art" — certainly nothing to rival the achievements of those poorer and less educated societies. But they are following the example of all those societies — and confirming that the best art is always religious — by realising their highest ideals of beauty in the temples of their living gods.

## 3.

The high regard of the Design theorists for the craftsman and their attachment to the more primitive and austere forms of peasant art (mark well, not to *all* kinds of peasant art) might seem to indicate strong popular leanings. This, however, is not the case. These designers despise the living popular taste which they find around them and their main task has been and is to exclude from the market what the public actually liked and — with the aid of huge financial backing, advertising, the status symbol and snob-values — to fill the market with what the public *should* like because they, the mandarins, like it and think it right. Only in the domestic sphere are their pretensions justified by their achievements.

The public buy the new designs for a mixture of reasons and thereby hasten the day when they will buy them for the very good reason that there is nothing else available! They come to "like" the new objects for a mixture of reasons of which simple enjoyment is the least common. This means that, despite the fact that "good taste" comes more and more to dominate the market and to fill the people's homes, there is hardly any aesthetic education of the people. In many homes of the non-intelligentsia you can see highly orthodox examples of Design ranged beside collections of the most ordinary *kitsch* without the people of the household noticing any discrepancy. (Indeed, they may be much more attached to some of the *kitsch* and get much more simple enjoyment from it.)

The final result, when the *kitsch* has all been broken or lost and no more is to be had, might *appear* very similar to the Japanese situation, in which good taste was thoroughly "democratised" and became the real and treasured heritage of the people. But the substance of the thing would not be the same. For the aesthetic education of the Japanese people happened not in the name of "good taste" merely, but in a context of religious and moral ideas which were already the property of all — or which became the property of all with the aid of simple forms of elegance. The popular forms of beauty were thus related to the deepest levels of consciousness, inextricably connected with what was fitting (in a moral sense) and

divine. Beauty was made a vehicle for the civilising work of religion.

In Scandinavia, the new forms of beauty are experienced by the intellectual élite in a context of moral and quasi-religious ideas; but these ideas are not shared by the people as a whole and never will be except in the most formal sense. Because of the important elements of human nature which they reject and attempt to suppress, they are essentially minority ideas. In a word then, the techniques of craftsmanship have been adapted to satisfy the aesthetic needs and reflect the moral and quasi-religious ideas of a rationalist mandarin class which does not know joy and disapproves of ordinary human enjoyment. The people at large, who have no ideas at all since they abandoned the Christian ones, are not encouraged to develop ideas, but to be creatures of conformism and instinct, who pay lip-service to the mandarin ideas, provide a market which makes mass-production possible and reflect glory on the mandarin class by using and reverencing the objects which have been made in the image of mandarin mind.

## 4.

It cannot be stressed too much that the Scandinavian Design programme has produced beautiful things because the artistic effort was made by Scandinavians for Scandinavians in the specific circumstances of modern Scandinavian society. It could not have been more closely related to the social realities and the religious beliefs.

I know an Estonian woman who now lives in Sweden and is a well-known "designer" of ceramics. (If we are talking about an old Greek vase we refer to the "artist" who made it and there can be no doubt about it (a) that the old Greek vases are as beautiful as the Scandinavian vases, (b) that a beautiful vase is a work of *art*. But of this — more anon!) The work of this Estonian is not quite orthodox, but neither is it completely heretical. She uses in her plates and bowls and vases renderings of the human figure — mostly faces of young girls — which inspire pathos or other vague emotions. She also employs designs which depict irreverent cats with irreverent birds. She told me that the official criticism doesn't view her kindly. Her work has been condemned as "illustrative" and "narrative" — I use the word adjectively. Obviously, these are euphemisms for more fundamental errors — for the anti-social sins in a rationalist, puritan society of appealing to simple emotions or of causing amusement. Unconsciously, she herself illustrated how right the guardians of sad reason are in their fear of anti-social repercussions. She told me that on more than one occasion



she had seen women who were viewing her work in her studio break out in tears.

It is well-known what a passion the Scandinavians have for converting the simple peasant houses of their ancestors into open-air folk-museums and decking them out with all the old wooden furniture and utensils. These open-air folk-museums are temples of materialistic ancestor-worship. In the modern houses of the intelligentsia you can see the same old household artefacts hanging on the walls as icons. Not for adornment — a clothes-beater or a wooden ladle, a waffle-press or a cheese mould are seldom of such artistic quality as to provide adornment. They hang there as symbols of the deepest stratum of believed-in reality: plain material, worked on and used by the hands of dead people. To symbolise the deepest stratum of believed-in reality is the ordinary function of icons.

I was once visiting in the house of one of the experts who wrote the Report on Design in Ireland. After a good dinner and a pleasant evening, the highlight (for me at least) came when my host told me he would show me something very beautiful. He took down a book and, sitting beside me, turned the pages. It contained delicate paper cut-outs of people and landscapes which had been done by his grandmother. As he turned the pages, his face lit up and his voice filled with an almost ecstatic reverence. He told me that often of an evening he would take down the book and turn the pages — and be filled with happiness. His unashamed piety moved me. . . .

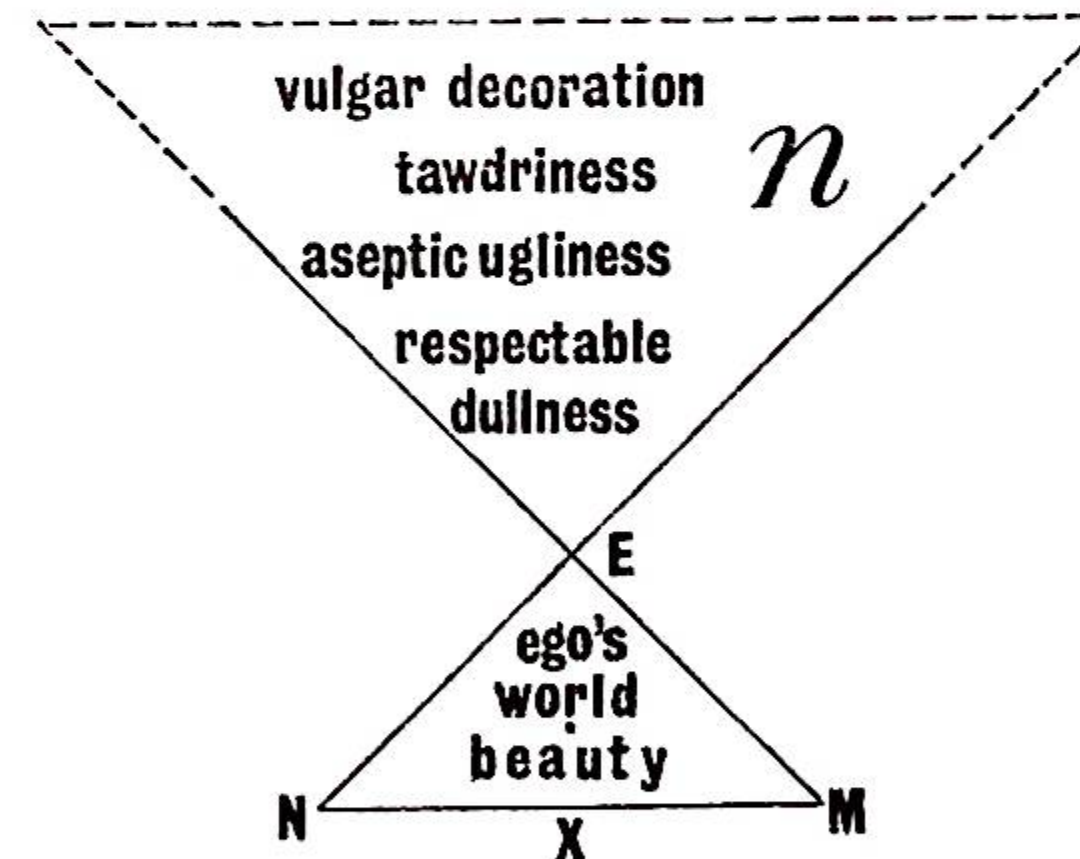
Clearly, then, Scandinavian domestic art is no exception to the general human experience that good art is made in an ardently religious context, with love and with moral earnestness. With sacrifice too, for it must not be forgotten that the first Scandinavian efforts to produce beautiful household goods within the framework of modern industry were lonely and unrewarding. The egocentric and rationalistic materialism of Scandinavia is the general religion of the post-Christian Western world. But it was the Scandinavians, not anyone else, who made the great breakthrough in household art because they got rid of Christianity more completely, accepted the new gospels more wholeheartedly and naively and were ruthlessly true to themselves and their beliefs in their new iconography. (What came after in the way of export trade — and it was a great deal — was forced upon them, so to speak, by an admiring world which saw that the Scandinavians possessed beautiful things). By right, England might have been expected to achieve what the Scandinavians did, since she was the pioneer of modern industry and produced the first great flowering

of the new "individualism" and the new materialism. But modern England has produced nothing remarkable in the way of art — neither of the *brukkonst* sort nor any other kind — because her rejection of Christianity was half-hearted and irresolute; she suffers from that most crippling of cultural diseases — a split soul.

## 5.

Three divinities united — Matter, Nature and Machine — preside absolutely over Scandinavian Design and determine its principles. Together they have inspired a programme which claims to encompass all of life — all of *useful* life, that is, for life not related to Matter or the Ego is useless and therefore not *life*. This programme takes one kind of design (design for efficiency or engineering design), a part of art (imitation of non-human Nature), a part of the artist (the craftsman), a part of the architect (the engineer) and a part of human nature (reason and the ego enmeshed in matter) and fuses them into a powerful weapon of assault on art, the artist and

the human personality. This new Whole or Universe is really a materialist Anti-Whole into which all human and material reality is supposed to force itself. It can be best illustrated with this diagram in which X is Matter, N non-human Nature, M the Machine and E the conscious ego. The triangle NEM encloses the ego's consciousness both of its beautiful, mortal self and of



NXM. This is the Region of Beauty and includes some architecture (domestic interiors and some houses), some art (objects of glass and ceramics, tapestries etc.) and some industrial design (household and personal objects other than dress). *n* or the much larger area enclosed by the production of the lines NE and ME includes all the rest of the man-made world. It expands continuously



as wealth increases and as population declines under the lethal, magnetic influence of the Beautiful Mortal Ego (which draws all things to Itself and kills them). Understandably, it is only the triangle NEM or the beautiful part of the programme which has become known both in Scandinavia and in the English-speaking world as "Scandinavian Design." (The expression is not current in the principal Continental languages.)

Translated into practice this programme results in modern flats or hotel rooms in Copenhagen or Stockholm which are really horse-boxes in contemporary style, affronts to the human personality; single beds which are horizontal projections from walls and seem measured in accordance with tests made to determine the average displacement to right or left of a central line of the average sleeper in an average night's sleep; dogmas that carpets shall be primarily regarded as "surfaces to stand on," shall be of a single "quiet" colour (or, at most, have a quiet geometrical pattern in quiet colours) and that they shall not depict roses, "because it is against the order of nature to make roses to walk on" and so on. One of the leading Swedish architects lives in a sylvan suburb of Stockholm in a house (made by himself) which all visiting designers and architects make a bee-line to see — or are advised to go and see. The architect's daughter (whom I know) often shows the people around, but she told me herself that so poorly sound-proofed is her own box-like room ("I can hear every sound from my mother's room," she says) that she takes refuge in a flat in the city-centre whenever she is working for an exam. As a machine, the house is faultless; but it is neither beautiful nor made for human beings. The "programme" also results in all that dreary architecture and industrial design, all that tawdriness and vulgar decoration, which I have referred to already.

Engineering is a discipline and so is art, but it is a misuse of words to say that design is a discipline or even a concept existing on its own. Design exists in engineering or in art as voice exists in speech or in song. Industrial design is like chant, a fusion of two separate disciplines by means of the element common to both. Voice cannot be said to exist *apart from* speech, song or chant and in each of them it functions according to different principles and criteria. "Design" cannot be taught or learned by itself without fraud taking place.

If the Scandinavian Design theorists say "We teach Design (*formgivning*)," one must ask them: "Is it engineering design, art design or industrial design, what kind?" They will probably say (making a concession): "We teach industrial design." One must then

ask them: "By what right do you make efficiency and functions the predominant factors and include a bit of architecture and some kinds of art?" And again: "If industrial design, then design for which precise industry?" For they are trying to put over a package deal of arbitrary moral-aesthetic dogmas under the guise of "Principles of (Industrial) Design."

No artist needs dogmas if he is to design for industry. He needs technical information and sometimes technical experience; the rest he possesses himself in his common sense, his human sensibility and his artistic capacity. Anyone who has been trained, say, in painting or sculpture can become a good designer of carpets or of glassware if he has the will to, if he is sensible and if he acquires the technical know-how. This can happen even in Scandinavia today though the Design dogmatists are trying to put an end to it. I knew a young artist in Sweden who had left art school at twenty years of age after a general art education. He got a job immediately in a provincial glass factory which required someone to give its production a touch of originality. For two years the factory invested in him while he became acquainted with the techniques of glass-blowing, the technical possibilities of the material — and while he attempted one design after another which had to be scrapped as impractical and unsaleable. Then, at last, he began to make things which were in extreme divergence from the dogmas of Scandinavian Design, but which were also eminently usable: practically useful or useful as ornaments. Sales came and they rose until he was soon one of the best-known names in glass in Sweden. An exception and a rearguard fighter, but he serves to make the point. Incidentally, he also engaged in "useless" arts such as painting and sculpture and he always called himself an "artist" not a "designer". (His heart was really in sculpture.) Any artist who is worth his salt knows that designing industrial goods is normally only a very secondary function for an artist — something he will do only if he needs money; if his talents don't rise to anything higher; if, for the moment, all higher inspiration is lacking; or as an experiment. On the other hand, if he is living in a society like Renaissance Italy which is producing an abundance of great works of art and which possesses (unlike Renaissance Italy) enough wealth and technical proficiency to fill every house with beauty, then it would be sensible and artistically justifiable for him to devote himself to industrial art with all his talent and all his soul. But this hasn't happened yet.

The use of the word *design* in an artistic context is very recent in origin — the concept has always been expressed by such words as



*composition, proportion or harmony* — and its use in that context today is confined to the English-speaking countries. In Cassell's English-German Dictionary and Harrap's English-French Dictionary (which I happen to have to hand) the equivalents give for "design" are in an engineering or architectural context, in relation to dress designing or decorative patterns, or else metaphorical (plan, scheme etc.) This corresponds to the traditional and normal use of the word in English. When the Scandinavians translated their new word "form-giving" with the English "Design", they betrayed some of their deepest intentions by using a word proper to engineering for a programme which includes branches of art. Oblique light is thrown on their *full* programme by the fact that the most common English extension of the word *design* outside the engineering and architectural spheres — the designing of dresses — is rendered in French by *création*. For the Scandinavian programme apes non-human creation (Nature), according to the principles of the Machine, of Matter as Creator. In the consciousness of the Scandinavian "form-givers" this creation is completely identical with divine creative activity, since they do not conceive of human beings as "created." In their own minds, they are not *aping* this divine activity, but are actually, as anti-humans *not* engaged in it; for they do/feel themselves human — they see themselves as divine. They are creators of a new Universe in the image of themselves; of themselves experienced as the mind-element of Matter.

The design of machines is a problem of engineering, not of aesthetics, and its aim is not beauty but efficiency. (If beauty occurs, it is incidental.) When the machine is a motor-car, an aeroplane or a neon-sign, a borderline area has been reached where the principles of good engineering confront the human personality and the principles of aesthetics and design becomes simultaneously a problem of efficiency, a human problem and a problem of beauty — beauty at a low-flying level, but still beauty. At the other extreme is the painting or the ornamental vase where design is concerned exclusively with aesthetics; in a crucifix or a religious statue design has both an aesthetic and a devotional context. The intermediate area between the two extremes is the realm of industrial design. (The design of paper or paper design is a specialised branch of industrial design.) In this area exists the artefact proper, which should be an object obviously made by and for man and obeying engineering (or efficiency) considerations and aesthetic (or beauty) considerations simultaneously. The final form and appearance should be the product of a three-cornered tension, with the human personality and aesthetics

together having the upperhand. But the Scandinavian Design programme, insofar as it includes design elements, decides this contest arbitrarily in favour of engineering design, making artistic design and the human personality incidental factors to function and efficiency. That is why most Scandinavian industrial design is unbeautiful, dull and even ugly. The same is true of most Scandinavian architecture, because the Design principles are applied to it as well.

Plastic art involves the transformation of all of nature by the human soul in accordance with aesthetic principles. Once again there is a three-cornered tension. But insofar as Scandinavian Design includes the artistic process, it imposes an arbitrary decision in favour of non-human Nature, making the human soul and (human) aesthetic principles incidental to the "rights" of non-human Nature. To assume that the aesthetic principles proper to man are those proper to non-human nature is to take an anti-human standpoint.

Similarly, when the Design theorists draw on the artist, they recognise in him only the super-craftsman or industrial designer and call him a "form-giver," nothing more. They see the artist as incidental to the craftsman. Indeed, the Design people (and they speak for the ruling class) openly express their irritation with artists and laud craftsmen to the skies. In a rich, monolithic, industrial society of thisworldly beliefs, the artist and the believer in an otherworldly religion are to an equal degree "non-conformists" and therefore threats to social stability. But a rich, monolithic, industrial society has many ways of making people dance to its tune, whether they be otherworldly believers or artists with a vision of beauty which goes beyond a rug or a vase or architects who believe in Architecture as a sovereign thing.

All those principals which the Design programme makes incidental — art design, the soul's transformation of nature in art, the human personality, the artist and the architect — find their rights only in the small central area of fusion, which is the area of domestic interiors and *brukkonst*. Together and at this relatively low level, they make this the Region of Beauty. But it is/called *beauty* by the *not* Design people, for they believe that their Design has made beauty outmoded. "What is beauty?" they say. (They also say: "What is truth?" "What is goodness?" "What is the soul?" For they know nothing of any importance and believe that this ignorance is the most sophisticated wisdom.) Out of their world of parts they have formed a powerful and internally consistent ideological weapon for the



imposition of their view of life to the exclusion of all other views and "outmoded concepts."

The spearhead of their programme is beautiful and it appeals flatteringly to the numerous new-rich individuals who have no heirlooms and who wish to surround themselves at home with beautiful things. The gospel and practice, so internally consistent, are as impressive as any other totalitarianism for half-educated, shallow and uncertain minds. Beauty and practical gospel together have the power to make men ignore the wide sweeping tail behind the beauty, the tail which is all ugliness, vulgarity and spiritual desert. Dazzled and flattered, the shallow men, who care for assurance and their own enhancement and for nothing else really, can be made forget that Art and Beauty are still there, as they have always been, waiting for men to make them once more into sovereign and autonomous realities. The spiritually poor are moved by Scandinavian Design, for they recognise in it the mind and handiwork of spiritually poor brothers and are consoled by this evidence that they, too, can have beauty and an exclusive, arrogant wisdom. The men on the make, who know that Scandinavian Design is a widely exported commodity, think that they can filch its secret, pay some artists and be rich men in the morning.

It is a spiritually poor society which can gather its little store of art into the confines of a few rooms. Art flies as high as the spirit of man flies. A spiritually rich society is crowned with works of great and glorious art which cast their reflection downwards, transforming everything in their image, and stopping only when the wealth and the technical resources of society allow them to reflect themselves no further. A society — such as Sweden or Denmark or Ireland — which is immensely richer in material goods and immeasurably more competent technically than ancient Egypt or Greece or Renaissance Italy ought to have no barriers to the extension of artistic beauty, so that beautiful homes and household art for Everyman would be the ultimate, logical extension. But it is a tragedy and a failure when this achievement is the only one and all other art is either withering or vanished.

## 6.

What reasons for improving Irish industrial design are given in the Report on Design in Ireland?

Only one reason is given — to promote the growth of our export trade. It is hinted that there might be some other motive for having good industrial design, but no such motive is mentioned.

What reasons are given for inviting foreign experts on industrial design to make an "audit" of the situation in Ireland?

The need for an "authoritative and impartial assessment" is mentioned and the tacit implication seems to be that foreign experts, if rightly chosen, would be authoritative and at the same time impartial in regard to the various schools, firms and other interests in Ireland which might be connected with industrial design.

So far so good. But it is well to keep in mind that there is a kind of Irishman who believes that there is nothing of real importance in the mind and soul of Ireland, that everything which is important is somewhere else on earth and that Irish people become important simply by reflecting it. When an Irishman thinks this, it is usually because there is nothing of importance in his own mind and soul and because he supposes that every other Irishman feels as empty. He would naturally assume that anything to do with making beauty would have to be taught to us by foreigners and he would accept the foreigners' judgments as decrees from heaven. How far such people had a hand in deciding to invite the Scandinavian experts it is, of course, impossible to know; but they certainly gathered around in clusters as soon as the Report was published.

What reasons are given for inviting Scandinavians?

We are told that "it was natural in the situation to turn to the Scandinavians." *In the situation* obviously means: in the light of our need to have an authoritative and impartial assessment so that we could improve our industrial design with a view to a growth of exports.

Is Scandinavian industrial design the best in Europe?

Most of it, far from being the best, is as undistinguished or as ugly as the general run of Irish industrial design, though in a different, more stereotyped way. Household goods (including textiles) are an outstanding exception. Taken together — not in their separate branches — they are the most beautiful in Europe. But cars, bicycles, liners, prams, postage stamps, posters, advertising (in all its forms), restaurant fittings, packages, lettering, books, magazine covers and dress are much more beautiful in France or Italy or Germany or Austria or, indeed, in most cases, in all four of these countries. Switzerland makes more beautiful books and watches. France makes beautiful aeroplanes and Germany beautiful cameras; beautiful Christian liturgical goods are made in Germany, France and Austria — Scandinavia hasn't an important production of any of these. Italian textiles and glassware equal the best of Scandinavia. French and Italian ceramic goods are more varied and at least as beautiful as



the Swedish and Danish. Irish advertising (in all its forms) is more attractive than Scandinavian; our lettering and our best textiles as beautiful as the best of theirs — our printed fabrics are inferior. Irish *haute couture* leaves that of Sweden behind.

Do household goods and printed fabrics constitute a large proportion of our exports?

According to the trade returns for 1961 these two branches of industrial production make up a very small part of our industrial exports.

Was there good reason to suppose that the Scandinavian experts would be "impartial"?

In regard to the firms, schools and other interests at present connected with Irish industrial design, yes, every reason. But there was no reason to suppose that they would be "impartial" in their aesthetic and moral evaluations and their aesthetic valuations are inseparably fused with moral considerations (as one of the experts was to tell us clearly in the course of a symposium). These moral standards are derived from the beliefs of ego materialism and they determine both what shall be considered beautiful and where the emphasis should lie in the distribution of beauty over the material life of society. It would be absurd to imagine that they could be "impartial" in this respect since they *must* believe, in order to be true to themselves, that their own views of beauty and morality, of the relationship between them and of the areas where the one or the other should predominate were the only true and right ones. If, during the Italian Renaissance, five painters and aesthetes from Augsburg had been invited to the court of the Sultan to assess the first efforts of Muslim painters and advise on the organisation of education in painting, they could not have been "impartial" in their aesthetic and moral judgments. Their advice would have been coloured by the South German Christian world from which they came and by the particular forms of their own limited success in painting.

Was the "growth of export trade" the principal motivation which led to the high achievements of Scandinavian industrial design within a limited area?

No. This had no part in the motivations of those idealists who created what has come to be known in English-speaking countries as Scandinavian Design. Their purpose was aesthetic and moral; in the conditions of a modern industrial society they sought to make beautiful things within a definite religious context. They did not seek to please foreigners or believers in any other religion with the things they made

or with their choice of which things should first be made beautiful — or which things alone should be beautiful. They sought to please and satisfy themselves alone and to render homage to the things they revered. This means that while, as intelligent people, they were aware of "world trends", they were not guided by them and did not seek to cater to them. They found the truth of themselves in art in a spirit of fiery insularity. So great was their success in the sphere of domestic industrial design, in interior design and in certain art forms suitable for private homes that what they had made for themselves *became* a "world trend".

If the principal reason for improving our industrial design is to increase exports, that is, to please foreigners with what we manufacture, wouldn't it have seemed reasonable to invite a team of buyers and ordinary consumers from those parts of the world where most of our exports go or are likely to go — England, principally, but also the Common Market countries? Or even experts in industrial design from those countries?

Yes. Even those Irish goods which are widely exported because of their beauty, quality and general appeal are hardly bought at all in Scandinavia.

How does the Foreword to the Report establish that it was "natural" to turn to the Scandinavians when we needed an authoritative and impartial assessment of our industrial design with a view to increased export trade?

It points out that the Scandinavian "achievements in design are enviable and, interestingly, of fairly recent origin." One must notice here that the word *design* is used without an adjective or adjectival phrase and is therefore meaningless. If industrial design is meant, then, of course, it is true that the Scandinavian achievement in one very limited branch of this discipline is "enviable." But it is a branch which includes two of our rare successes in industrial design, namely, tweeds and sisal carpets. The phrase "of fairly recent origin" seems to imply that we might achieve a measure of good industrial design in a hurry and so increase our exports in the very near future. But the large export of products known collectively as Scandinavian Design came only several decades after the first idealists had begun their researches.

The Foreword goes on to assert that the scale of Scandinavian industry, their raw materials and the patterns of their society are "similar in many aspects to ours." If we take the countries which gave birth to the Scandinavian Design movement, then it is more or



less true that the scale of industry in one of them—Denmark—is similar to ours. Raw materials are much the same throughout all of Europe except, perhaps, in the extreme south. But the Scandinavian raw materials differ from ours in an important aspect, namely, the abundance of wood and the widespread traditional skill in using it. Taking “pattern of society” in the materialistic sense of occupational statistics and the system of property ownership, Denmark is to some degree similar to Ireland. But so are other countries and Sweden is not similar at all. And if we are to understand “pattern of society” in its deepest and most important sense—in terms of human relationships, principles of social cohesion and social ethos—then neither Sweden nor Denmark is similar to us, whereas Italy or Southern Germany are. (Munich is an important centre of industrial design and there is a High School of Design in Ulm.) Ireland is, after all, Christian, and a society of Christians is simply not “similar to” a society of non-Christians.

The final ground given in the Foreword for its being “natural” to turn to Scandinavia is that “Scandinavian successes in export markets are impressive.” In view of the fact that the “growth of export trade” is the main reason stated for our desire to have better industrial design, it would certainly be “natural” for someone ignorant of the evolution of Scandinavian Design to suppose that it held a secret which we might filch to our profit. But it must be remembered that the concept Scandinavian Design includes several of the lesser arts and certain new forms of domestic architecture. These elements, which have, properly speaking, nothing to do with industrial design, have helped to raise the prestige of the purely industrial products which are associated with them and thus to increase the volume of exports. So that the sum total of exports under the heading “Scandinavian Design” consists only partly of goods whose attractiveness derives from industrial design.

Is there any other sense in which it might have seemed “natural” to turn to the Scandinavians?

Some people get their ideas of culture (including matters of art and industrial design) from glossy American magazines, from the better women’s magazines and from cocktail-party conversation. It might conceivably be “natural” for such people to think that it was “natural” to turn to Scandinavia for enlightenment in matters of industrial design, since they would hardly know that the Scandinavian success in this field has been extremely limited. Such people could easily fail to take into account those spiritual factors which, by

penetrating society and embodying themselves in the artist, primarily determine the material forms of beauty (including industrial design). It would also be quite “natural” for such people to regard industrial design primarily or exclusively as a factor in exports.

7.

Now that we have the Report on Design, what use is it to us?

The answer to this question must be different for different people, but it would seem obvious that its main use could be as a spur to thought and emulation. It is a challenge to us from a world of ideas which is not ours, a judgment of our work, our art education, our artistic values and our relative indifference to art and material beauty in the light of religious, moral and aesthetic ideas which are not ours, but which have expressed themselves successfully in a contemporary form of beauty. If we know how to evaluate this intrusion and this example, the Report could be of great use to us.

Of course, if we are to be true to ourselves, we must reject its “ideological” content completely. For instance, when it condemns the “casual joviality” of certain carpet designs not because they are unbeautiful but because they are “casually jovial,” the view—and it is only expressed as a view—can be noted. But in the light of the Irish temperament and of Irish human and social values, the contention, even implicit, that “casual joviality” *in itself* makes a design *wrong* must be rejected as nonsense. When the Report condemns us for “descending” to dyeing hand-knit sweaters into fashion colours, the moral disapprobation inherent in the word *descend* must be noted for what it is. It is not a broadly human or purely aesthetic valuation. After all, Irish girls may happen to *like* these sweaters in fashion colours and they have at least as much right to be heard as have wool and stitches. The dogma that the most important element in stamp design must be the indication of value derives from a view of the stamp as a piece of efficient “engineering,” but it leaves human beings out of account and is anti-aesthetic. It is a judgment from the stamp’s point of view, for to the stamp it doubtless seems eminently rational and flattering to show off its value above all else. But we know well that neither post-office assistants nor the letter-writing public read the numerals in order to know a stamp’s value—they know its value by its colour and general design. Which isn’t saying that the numeral shouldn’t be reasonably clear, but that a stamp’s main chance of giving *pleasure* to people, while being useful, is to have an interesting and beautiful design.

The Report interprets “tradition” in a narrow, materialistic sense.



The most important part of our "tradition" is in our literature, in our consciousness as Irish people and in the living people around us. It is mere fetishism, dullness and life-weariness to suppose that our creative activity must be tied to enigmatic Celtic interlacings and peasant knitwear. There is no special aesthetic virtue in primitive artefacts or in things made by the dead.

The strong prejudice in favour of the architect as a sort of spiritual father to the "designer" must be noted for what it is—a prejudice in favour of the architect *seen as a super-engineer*. In other words, a preference arising out of a predetermined view of architecture as a form of super-engineering. By taking the designer away from the engineer and technician and putting him under the influence of architects, an attempt is made to blur over the very real distinction between engineering design and art design. Each of these should have *equal* rights in industrial design, with art design and general human considerations together having the upperhand. By roping in the architect (seen as super-engineer) and the artist (seen as super-craftsman), the "useful" elements of architecture and art are filched and fitted into the Procrustean bed called Design—architecture and art as autonomous disciplines are negated.

The most dangerous aspects of the Report are the suggestions that Design is a sovereign and autonomous thing and that the Fine Arts should be included as a mere department in an "Irish Design School." This last suggestion is a monstrous assault on the traditionally human and specifically European valuation of art and its functions and on much else that should matter to us.

The most important and useful recommendation is the following: "we would strongly advise against the unqualified transplantation of *features* from Scandinavian countries to Ireland, even if such action would have passing economic benefits. We feel that the result of such an approach would be to kill what can be saved and what still exists of the original Irish values and culture." Note the very generic word *features*, which I have italicised.

Is this warning being heeded?

Since the Report was published it has become quite common to hear people say of some piece of work designed by an Irishman: "Well, I wonder what the Scandinavians would say about that!" or to hear something being praised because "it would please even the Scandinavian experts." In some circles it is thought "natural" to invite Scandinavian experts to act as judges in Irish handicraft competitions.

At least one Irish artist has been "sent" to Scandinavia to study "design" and others are to follow. There is talk of inviting Scandinavians here to teach. If this were happening in a society which was as convinced in its beliefs and view of reality and as seriously consistent as the Scandinavians are in theirs, it might not be dangerous; for the artists would be able to sift ruthlessly what was useful to them—mainly technical information and experience. They would be keenly aware of the alien ideological element in what they were being taught and would reject it. But modern Ireland is a doubting Christian society (just as modern England is a doubting materialist one); we are schizophrenically divided between Christian belief and the beliefs of ego materialism—the Scandinavians' own religion. So that many of our artists, as members of our society, share in our blurred mind and consciousness. Even worse, in this Design adventure, they are being asked to serve the interests of that part of the community which is most interested in quick money returns and least interested in art and in spiritual integrity.

Of course, a very obvious argument against taking the Scandinavians as masters in industrial design is their own failure, on the basis of their principles, to achieve beauty of this kind—or any sort of beauty—except in a very limited area.

The experts wrote: "We believe that one of the great factors in the success of Scandinavian Design abroad is that the production is based on what has already been established and on local demand rather than export requirements. The Scandinavians designed and manufactured work for Scandinavians . . ." Are the warning and the doctrine which are implicit in this clear statement being heeded in Ireland?

Far from being heeded, they are cynically contradicted by the anonymous Irish statement in the Foreword to the Report which names the "growth of our export trade" and that only as the motive for the improvement of industrial design.

Does the fact that the Scandinavians were guided and impelled by their own particular moral and religious ideals make their aesthetic valuations irrelevant for a Christian people living more or less in the same geographical area?

Not necessarily, if the valuations are abstracted from the moral justifications and limiting dogmas in which the Scandinavians have embedded them and then re-examined and "tested." For instance, the high valuation of material is not necessarily materialistic. Since Christ entered the world—since God became flesh and blood, bread



and wine—and since rock was made the symbol of our Church and wood the instrument of our salvation, matter has a holiness all its own which any Christian artist can experience without scruples and, indeed, to the benefit both of himself and of his art. Like so much else in the idealism of the post-Christian liberal-rationalist world—the horror of physical violence, the theoretical equality of man, the theoretical exaltation of the individual's worth, the schemes of "social welfare" where money is abundant and love scarce—the Scandinavian veneration of matter can be seen as the working out of intrinsic Christian logic in a non-Christian context. Neither is the Scandinavian reverence for "nature" meaningless for a Christian artist if "nature" be taken to include human nature (with its human soul and emotions and its relationship through Christ to God). The Christian valuations of human nature is, in turn, the basis for the Christian veneration of the individual human being. Rationality, in the context of faith, is also a high Christian value.

So that the aesthetic valuations of Christian artists working for Christians could certainly find room for the artistic forms of Scandinavian Design. But the Christian valuations would *include* what is beautiful in the Scandinavian forms and go far beyond, exploding their narrow world of dogma based on such a small part of the human personality and such a meagre and one-sided view of art. For the Christian artist would consider a four-roomed flat—or even a ten-roomed one—far too small a confine for his visions of beauty and his energy as an artist. Besides, in a society without art but possessing (by historical standards) great wealth and vast technical capacity, he would not think that chairs and ash-trays had the first claims on his art.

Isn't Ireland just that sort of society? Yes, indeed. For reasons which are partly historical, partly social and psychological, we have a great dearth of art, a great lack of material beauty. Our community is spiritually rich, but unable to come to the truth of itself and to be spiritually creative in a materially beautiful way. There has probably never been a Christian people that had so many ugly churches—great, alive churches, vibrating and thundering and whispering with rich human life and with the heart's beauty—but not offering to God and man the visible signs of love and devotion which art is or can be. Not surprisingly, their philistine shadow falls on nearly everything we make or build or have around us.

Is it likely that Irish industrial design will improve considerably? Under urgent pressure from state and private business interests, it

will probably wash its face, straighten its creases and generally become respectable in the accepted manner of the "international style." All you have to do is to look at some of the new hotel lounges throughout the country to see the kind of thing I mean. Since the declared purpose of the present zeal for better industrial design is to please foreigners, i.e., to get them to buy our goods, it will not be surprising if the mere Irish find their "improved industrial design" irrelevant or plain distasteful. But no matter how unattractive and dull much of this "good design" will be, its defenders will assure you that it is according to "the best standards of modern taste" and that you're just uncouth if it doesn't thrill you—or if it bores or repels you.

Not that the mere Irish deserve better industrial design, for they never asked for it nor pressed their artists to give it to them. We have no proper élite class. The clergy aren't as confident of their élite position and responsibilities as they were, say, in the political and social struggle seventy years ago. The nationalist revolutionary élite feel that their day is done. If either had the necessary certainty that they were social leaders with social responsibilities, they might by this time have got around to demanding art and material beauty, which they never in fact did demand. We are the most open and classless society that it is humanly possible to have; we are in fact *too* classless to produce beauty. Our conditions are ideal, in one sense, for producing an art for all of the people, but they are really only potentially ideal as long as there is no élite to canalise (as sharers in them) the people's dumb longings and to persuade the artists to turn them into art and into secondary forms of beauty. In other societies, a cultivated business class has often taken the lead in sponsoring beauty; but our business class is not cultivated and most of our businessmen—there are individual exceptions—think only of bigger export markets when they think of nicer packages and printed fabrics.

The people, left to themselves, couldn't care less. You have only to look at the way Irishmen wear their clothes to see how little we care for the external forms of things (look at a Swede, look at an Italian!). We value the person, the real content of a man as it shows itself in personality—we value this to a fanatical degree. We value social occasions so exclusively and passionately for their human content that we hardly even look at the poster which advertises, let alone care whether it is well-designed. We don't really care about having lots of exquisite and elegant things around us in our own homes, but we do care a lot about feeling at ease there and we



are proud and fulfilled when other people feel at ease and happy there. And if surrounding ourselves with elegant and exquisite things meant spending a considerable amount of money, we would much rather spend it in surrounding ourselves with a crowd at a race-track or with good fellowship in a golf club or with the din of a pub. And since we *are one people*, when I say "we" I include the best and truest and morally most admirable people in our society.

Meanwhile our artists flounder; for almost no one—and certainly no body of people whose desires they should respect—cares enough to tell them what to do. No voice of the community says to them: We need you for ourselves, we need personally and as a community what you can do. Instead they are told: We need you, at double-quick tempo, to make our industrial goods more saleable abroad.

In the artistic desert which is Ireland, there is no good cultural reason why the best of them or even the middle-best of them should devote their talents to industrial design. (That is another reason why, if our artists are true to themselves, our industrial design will probably be undistinguished.) There are much more important tasks to do and those artists who, against all odds, are trying to bring compelling beauty into our churches, are culturally on the soundest track. They are obeying that instinct which made the Egyptian and Greek temples and which produced modern Scandinavian *brukkonst*—they are obeying it in a Christian sense. But they are to be pitied, since they are working for a people which, in its richer and more educated échelons, is not quite sure whether the churches are in fact its proper temples.

Ultimately, the problem of Art for the Irish is a problem for the intellectual and moral leaders of the Irish people. If they remain superficial shilly-shalliers and opportunists of mind and soul, they will get the art which they deserve—no art worth talking about.

Is it possible that we will come to the truth of ourselves in art?

Only by doing what the modern Scandinavians did can we even hope to deserve this great prize. By looking at the world and ourselves as if Christ had risen yesterday, by nerve and stamina and that blind ruthlessness which listens only to the inmost soul and heart, by channeling our love and thoughts and desires into those things and those values which we believe most real and lovable, by fiery insularity, by believing, in blessed simplicity and self-assurance, that what man has to say of truth and what he has to say through art *can be said by us* (for *we* are men)—that way, and that way only! Our Golden Age took this way. Everything else is futile.



