

Interiors

Eleanor Flegg
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Clockwise from above: Orla Reynolds and her As If From Nowhere table and chairs which can be concealed in a bookcase; Orla Reynolds coffee table; Tricia Harris from Stido Harris has designed this spindleback bench; the Phoenix coffee table from (left) designer Colin Harris.



Crafty creations with an Irish twist

Sustainability and simplicity are priorities for Irish designers producing their own furniture

There's no easy way of being a furniture designer in Ireland, but there are several different approaches. Some designers make their furniture themselves; some produce designs to be made in small Irish workshops; some design with a view to mass production. Where furniture is made in Ireland, production costs are inevitably high and this tends to push the prices up.

On the other hand, the appetite for indigenous and sustainably produced furniture has never been stronger. When they can afford it, many Irish people are prepared to pay a more for something that has been locally and sustainably made. And designers are working hard to keep the prices down.

Colin Harris is a designer-maker, but he'd love to find an Irish manufacturer prepared to produce his designs in small batches. At the moment, if you like one of his designs, he'll put it together for you himself in his workshop in Co. Dublin.

Expect the process to take about eight weeks which, in fairness, is a standard lead-time for many international furniture companies. It's not cheap—Irish furniture can't be because of the cost of living and working in this country—but Harris has worked very hard to make his designs more affordable.

With a scholarship from the Design and Crafts Council Ireland, he received mentoring with John Jenkins, a former manager of furniture design at Heals in London.

"It was all about paring down the design and making things that worked commercially," he says. Now, his Spiral floor lamp costs €495 and his range of Reposhelving, which leans against the wall, starts at €525, as does the Trigonon side table costs €525.

The latter is a clever piece with the glass tabletop dovetailed within the top of each leg and secured by the tension of a brass rod that runs diagonally between two of the legs. Designing it was a real conundrum. "I couldn't use glue, because it's against my ethos, and drilling holes in the glass was too

expensive... but out of that popped a really good solution to a glass-topped table."

He likes to think that there's a simplicity to the design, but admits that achieving simplicity is not always a simple process.

The wooden element is either made in ebonised European oak or wild Irish ash, sourced from Co. Wicklow. Using local, sustainably sourced materials is hugely important to Harris.

"These trees are either wind-blown or have reached their end of life and need to be taken down," he says. "If they weren't used to make furniture, they'd be chopped up for firewood." But there's an aesthetic element to it too. Wild trees have a variety of pattern and colour in the wood that is more diverse and more interesting than cultivated trees, which are grown for homogeneity.

Tricia Harris (no relation) of Studio Harris has taken a slightly different route. Trained to design and make furniture in GMT Letterfrack, she's based in Co. Kerry where she designs pieces inspired by Irish vernacular furniture. These are made in workshops around the country.

"It's a collaborative approach," she says. "I'm interested in production-led design as it makes things more affordable, but furniture made in Ireland is always going to be expensive. You're paying for someone's weekly wage as well as the cost of materials."

She too is deeply committed to sustainability. "For me, it's about buying less. I don't want to be creating more and more stuff." Her aim is to create well-made furniture that has been designed in a considered way, and that has longevity and a bit of character.

A fireside stool with space for books beneath it from Studio Harris costs €360 and her Spindleback bench is €2,200. Both are made in the manner of Irish country furniture. "The bench is made in Galway. The spindles are traditional but the look is a bit more modern."



Keeping it simple: The Spiral floor lamp from Colin Harris; fireside stool from Studio Harris



they have the money," she says. "That's why I've done smaller products as well. So people will be able to buy something."

Orla Reynolds, a Dublin-based furniture designer, is on the lookout for a manufacturer for her iconic design, As If From Nowhere, which is a bookcase that conceals a table and four chairs. If the pieces are made to order, as is currently the case, the ensemble costs €4,200 although you can buy the chairs (€700 each) and table (€820) separately. If they were mass-produced, which has always been her intention, the complete set

could cost around €2,500.

"I'm not Ikea. I'm never going to be and I don't want to be," she says. "I don't want to be adding to the earth's waste. I want my furniture to be produced in a sustainable way." Ironically, this may mean having it made outside Ireland.

"I would love to have it made in Ireland but there's a huge demand for it in Italy. The Italians really like my stuff. So it would make better sense to have the production and the market in the same place."

In the meantime, Reynolds is off to Milan Design Week (September 4-10) where she's exhibiting a new set of prints with 5Vie, a Milan-based "global cultural network". The bold, graphic, monochrome prints are inspired by the legendary Irish designer Eileen Gray and her Villa E-1027 in the South of France.

They are made in Dublin by Damn Fine Print where an unframed hand-pulled screen print costs €70; an A4 digital print costs €17.50; and an A5 greeting card costs €5.50. Something for everyone in the audience, so. "Damn Fine Print are brilliant," she says. "I'd never leave them, so the prints are always going to be made in Dublin but I would love to see the designs translated into textiles or rugs. I'm open to manufacturing partnerships."

For a snapshot of Irish furniture design in action, check out The Milking Stool Project, an exhibition of milking stools by Irish designers at The Secret Garden, Nano Nagle Place, in Cork. It's part of this weekend's Design Pop festival which takes place in venues across the city from August 27-30. Both Tricia Harris and Colin Harris will show their riff on the traditional milking stool, with other designers including: Sara Murphy; Sam agus Nessa; Brian Tyrrell of Bear Creation; Warren Hayes of Coolree Design; Ben Gabriel; Cian O'Driscoll of Cian's Creative Concepts; Joe Bishop; Adrian Duyn; and David Scannell of Five Horizons Design with "Foley & Crowley Architects. The Irish vernacular won't know what's hit it."

See designpop.ie, colinharris.ie, studioharris.ie, and orlareynolds.com

Must haves



SIGN FOR OUR TIMES
Take comfort from this Giclee art print, designed by lettering artist Rachel Joy Price with April and the Bear. Price's great grandfather was one of a team of sign painters who worked on the Titanic. You can't beat the optimism! It costs between €50 (for an A3 print) and €80 (A2) unframed from aprilandthebear.com.



GREAT GAS
The Arkke 3 carbonator promises fizzy water without the guilt of purchasing plastics. At €269 in copper or €249 in polished steel, it's considerably more expensive than a standard SodaStream, but a great deal more attractive as a countertop companion. It uses standard CO2 cylinders (see meadowsandbyrne.com).



BUTTON UP
The Henrie footstool is an offshoot of a Chesterfield-esque range from DFS, which is largely dominated by button detailing. This one's in forest green fabric but there are also leather options. At 160x90 cm, it's a fairly expansive piece of furniture and might work well at the end of a bed. It currently costs €579 from dfs.ie.



JUGGLING TASKS
The Cécile stoneware jug has a pretty repeat pattern in rosepink with a bamboo handle. At 17cm high, it's the kind of vessel that could see active service as a jug or a vase and currently costs €16.95 from theirishcountryhome.com.



GO MCNUTT
The cushions from McNutt of Donegal are designed and made in Ireland. This one's in merino lamb's wool, which is soft on sensitive skin. They come in a soft palette of pinks, purples, blues and herringbone storm. This one's Golden Sun (€64.95 from kilkennyshop.com).