

This accessibly written, well referenced and attractively produced book accompanies the Irish Arts and Crafts exhibition held at the McMullan Museum of Art of Boston College earlier this year. It is intended to act as more than a catalogue of the exhibition as the twelve specially commissioned essays it contains seek to chronicle and broadly assess Irish design from the early-mid 1800s through to the 1950s. The first part of the book is divided into four sections each comprising three chapters that consider the wider cultural context, architecture and the total-work-of-art, the movement's greatest achievements in stained glass, and the politics of gender in a roughly chronological format.

“Arts and Crafts” as a term emerged from the design reform movement that sprang up in mid-late nineteenth century Britain in reaction to the perceived shoddiness of mass-production. Conditions in Ireland were of course different than in Britain but, as several of the chapters suggest, historiography has tended to gloss over these. National calamity, immigration, uneven industrial development and rapid de-industrialization created a form of poverty that shocked even William Morris when he came to Ireland in 1877 and again in 1886. As such many of the Arts and Crafts enterprises established post-Famine were motivated by philanthropy. Ireland, however, proved equally fertile ground for the industrialist as well as the charitable aesthete. That factory-made preceded handmade lace in Limerick, that engineering and textile innovation sustained experiments in craft pedagogy in Belfast and the association of Celtic design with a sexualized cultural decadence as much as Nationalist and Unionist semiotics, are just a few of the fascinating subjects touched upon by several of the authors.

Of note are the three exceptional chapters by Andrew Kuhn, Janice Helland and Fintan O'Toole that address the issues of women's rights, craft in the market economy and the organisation of labour and collectively suggest that the subaltern female craftworker was not without agency or affect. The second part of the book is given over to beautiful colour plates of the 169 objects in the exhibition. Since the 1990s Boston College has committed itself to putting on major exhibitions of a wide range of Irish art and design and to producing significant and substantial publications. They are to be congratulated if the fact sadly highlights that there is no comparable institution in Ireland itself.

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