



## Writing Visual Culture

### **‘Made in Ireland’? National Narratives and Hybrid Identities in Irish Design History**

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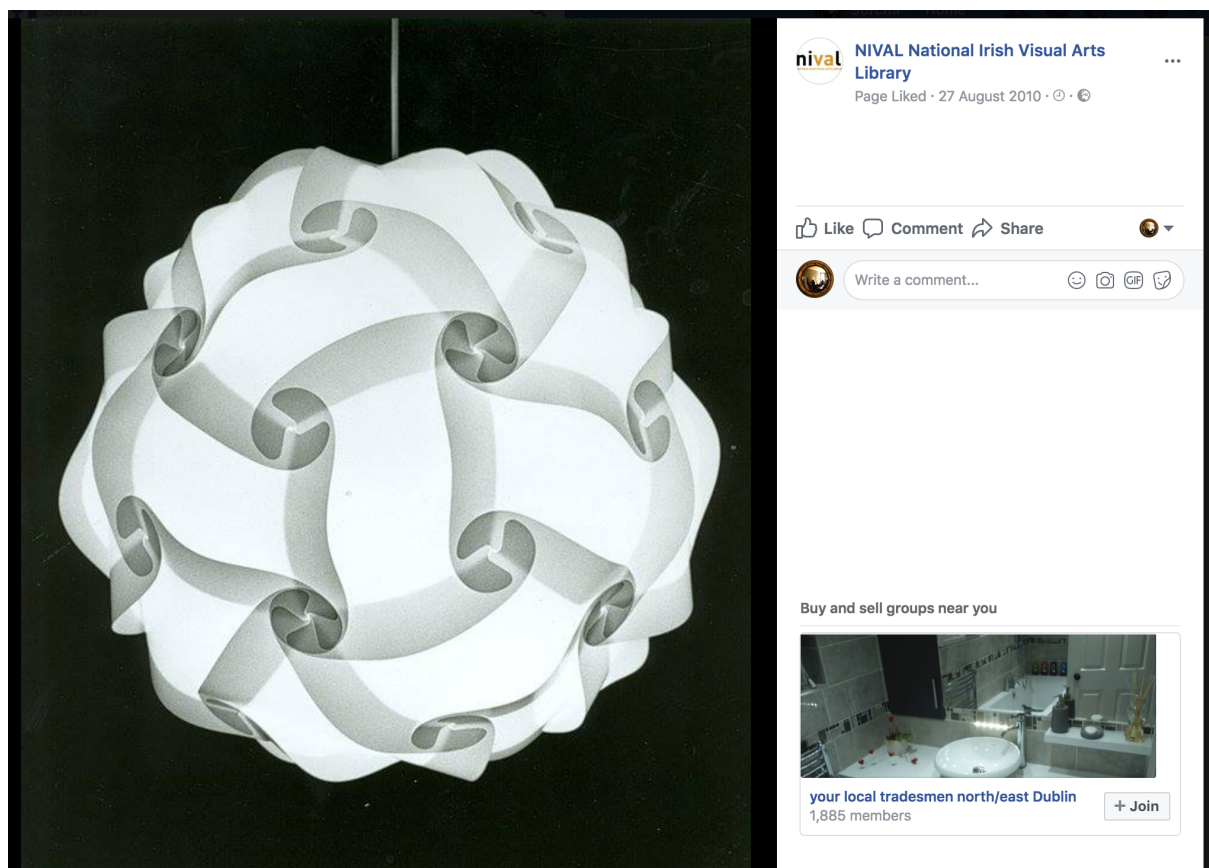
#### **Abstract**

In 2010, the author reposted an image of the IQ lamp on Facebook from the Kilkenny Design collection held at the National Irish Visual Arts Library in Dublin, which sparked a discussion amongst Scandinavian and Irish design historians about the inclusion of the lamp within the respective canons of Scandinavian and Irish design. This lamp was designed in 1973 by Danish packaging and product designer Holger Strøm during his time working for Kilkenny Design, and this article will consider its positioning within the canons of both Irish and Scandinavian design, as well as that of the washing machines and vacuum cleaners produced by a factory opened in Wicklow by the Dutch company FAM in 1957. The article considers the possibility of creating hybrid categories of national identity for designed objects that sit outside the simple narratives of objects that were designed, manufactured and sold within a single national context.



## Introduction

In 2010, I reposted an image of the IQ lamp on Facebook from the Kilkenny Design collection held at the National Irish Visual Arts Library in Dublin [Fig. 1], which sparked a discussion amongst Scandinavian and Irish design historians about the inclusion of the lamp within the respective canons of Scandinavian and Irish design. This lamp was designed in 1973 by Danish packaging and product designer Holger Strøm during his time working for Kilkenny Design, and this article will consider its positioning within the canons of both Irish and Scandinavian design, as well as that of the washing machines and vacuum cleaners produced by a factory opened in Wicklow by the Dutch company FAM in 1957. The article considers the possibility of creating hybrid categories of national identity for designed objects that sit outside the simple narratives of objects that were designed, manufactured and sold within a single national context.



**Figure 1 – Post about the IQ Lamp on the National Visual Arts Library Facebook page, 2010. Copyright permission NIVAL and Martin Chaffer.**



## **Irish Modern Design and the Scandinavian Report**

The established narrative of Irish modern design has been largely tied to the 'Scandinavian Report', an analysis of Irish design industry and training by a group of eminent Scandinavian designers of Irish design and craft. This report was commissioned by Coras Trachtála Teo (CTT), the Irish Trade Board, which had been founded in 1959 to market Irish goods abroad. Kaj Franck, Erik Herlow, Gunnar B. Petersen, Erik Sørensen, and Åke Hult visited Ireland in 1961 to carry out their research and it was published in 1962, and the accepted narrative runs that this resulted in the setting up of the Kilkenny Design Workshops, which brought modern design, or possibly just design, to Ireland (Marchant and Addis 1985).

Kilkenny Design was initially staffed by a number of British, German and Scandinavian designers, working with Irish colleagues, apprentices and manufacturers, with products promoted as Irish. This national narrative is reinforced by articles by John Turpin and Paul Caffrey in the 1990s, as well as in the introduction to the report itself, which Paul Hogan, an Irish graduate employed by CTT as secretary to the Group, identifies as being written by William H. Walsh (Turpin 1986, Caffrey 1998, Scandinavian Design Group 1962: xi, Hogan 2005: 1-3). This introduction states that 'it was natural to turn to the Scandinavians' for help with developing Irish design, demonstrating the unselfconscious search for inspiration from Scandinavia in Ireland of the early 1960s (Scandinavian Design Group 1962: xi). However, Walker pointed out that this narrative writes out the role of Thomas Bodkin and the early Arts Council in promoting ideas about design in the earlier parts of the century, and Hogan later emphasised the role of Walsh in developing the design section of CTT and then spearheading the setting up of Kilkenny Design itself (Walker 2013, Hogan 2005: 1-3).

## **The IQ Lamp**

This narrative also manages to appropriate the intentional policy of importing design expertise to the country as part of a 'natural' process, something which is still being presented as part of the promotional narrative about Irish design. This is still in evidence in Irish magazines, where *Image*, a glossy lifestyle magazine, recently included the IQ Lamp with its selection of Irish Design classics (Hanley, Meade, and Phelan 2017). The Crafts Council of Ireland's display at the 2013 London Design Festival also name-checked Strøm as the designer, with the IQ Lamp presented as 'born in Ireland', a conveniently fuzzy way of



glossing over its multi-valent beginnings and fitting it into the Irish narrative (Mulrooney 2013: 3).



Figure 2 – The IQ Light assembled and in kit format, 2017. CC BY-NC-ND 4.0, The IQ Light Company.



Originally manufactured and sold in Irish shops by KDW spin-off company Kilkenny Illuminations, the IQ Lamp was design by Strøm as a ready-to-assemble kit in a flat pack format, with different versions supplying different numbers of the basic interlocking shapes required to create a number of spherical lamp designs [Fig. 2] (Butler 1973, 1973b, 11, Walker 1973). It was even incorporated into Irish language discourse, with an article in *Inniu* only referring to it in terms of its Kilkenny origin (1973a). The IQ Lamp was re-issued by Strøm in 2000 as 'a unique piece of original Danish design' and sold through a website presented in English and Japanese, which gives some idea of the target market outside of Denmark (Strøm 2017a). The reissued lamp also won the Danish Design award in 2001 and displayed alongside other 'Scandinavian design classics' in Royal Copenhagen's shop in Copenhagen [Fig. 3], which presents the conundrum that same product can be at once 'Irish' and 'Danish' through different lenses, as well as having a local identity as being from Kilkenny (Strøm 2017b: 1974).



Figure 3 – The IQ Light on display at Royal Copenhagen shop, Copenhagen, 2017. CC BY-NC-ND 4.0, The IQ Light Company.





## National Identity

In the context of these shifting identities, the idea of the national canon continues to have relevance, but it is vitally important for design historians to look at how we can unpick the accepted narratives of national identity. This is particularly important in a world where national divisions increasingly don't work as neat divisions of national 'character' any more, as products are designed in one country, manufactured in another, and designers and manufacturers are from either country or possibly a third one entirely. Design history is currently expanding out of the Anglo-centric and Western European world, exemplified by work of the ICDHS and increased publication in English on East Asia, Latin America and Turkey, as well as publications in Spanish and Japanese (ICDHS 2017: 47-67, Lee and Kikuchi 2014: 323-34, Lara-Betancourt 2016: 241-58, Gürel 2009, Kirkham and Weber 2013, Fernandez Garcia 2012).

In design history, the 'global turn' has largely taken the form of an expanded geography, both in topics researched by design historians and in the sites of design historical practice. This tendency, which often draws inspiration from intellectual movements such as post-colonialism and world history, seeks to correct the dominant, lopsided representation of the history of design as occurring primarily in Western Europe and the United States, particularly in the modern period, by expanding the field of vision to include design as it is practiced and consumed around the world (Adamson, Riello, and Teasley 2011: 2).

But what is the European or North American design historian to do in this scenario? The answer seems to increasingly be to go back and look at the narrative of your own canon, take a look at what narratives are at play and look at what objects, people and ideas are or were challenging that. This has already commenced in Dutch and Scandinavian contexts, and this article is attempting to think through the Irish context (Meroz and Gimeno-Martínez 2016: 213-77, Fallan 2012). Irish design history has been around for a while, but with a relative paucity of publications, the majority of which are focused on the work of individuals such as Harry Clarke or Eileen Gray (despite having spent most of her working life in France), the Arts and Crafts Movement and the modernism of Kilkenny Design (Gordon Bowe 2014, Larmour 1992, Gordon Bowe 2015, Marchant and Addis 1985, Quinn 2005, Adam 2000, Goff 2014). Only a small number of recent publications address the relationship between modernity and national identity in Ireland, with the issues of more recent decades yet to be tackled in detail (King and Sisson 2011, O'Brien 2017, King 2011b). This is the



narrative that we need to complicate, the world of the famous named designer and the famous design company, and *Ireland, Design and Visual Culture* has been the first step to challenging this narrative, including articles on technology, borders, and national promotion at home and abroad, including an article by Linda King on Dutch graphic designers advertising Ireland with Aer Lingus posters (King 2011a). This book is an intentional study of modernity in Ireland, bracketed by the foundation of the state and the start of the Celtic Tiger, which writes against the dominant narrative that Ireland was never modern, with a predominantly verbal culture.

### **Irish National Identity**

It is important to point out here that Irish national identity is not in itself a stable one, as the political history of Ireland, the Irish Free State, the Republic of Ireland, Éire, Northern Ireland and that non-existent entity 'Southern Ireland' have overlapped and competed throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, where the continued contested territory of 'the North' and competing claims of political legitimacy have spawned an entire industry of academic and not-so-academic writing about Irish national identity for decades. Irish history has already had its own revisionist debate, with a 'vigorous and at times vicious' debate sparked by the Troubles in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s finally running out of steam in the 1990s with the IRA ceasefire and the rise of the Celtic Tiger (Boyce and O'Day 1996). This revisionist position, including historians such as Roy Foster and Cormac Ó'Grada developed an intentional decoupling of Irish historical writing from the overtly nationalist positions, not without controversy (Foster 1988, Ó'Grada 1994, Brown 1985, Lee 1989). It has left recent scholarship on Irish design history with a healthy awareness of the idea that 'national canons can operate to reproduce the hegemony of the nation-state' (Meroz and Gimeno-Martínez 2016: 219).

Post-colonial theory has played a central role in conceptualising Irish history in recent years, particularly in Irish Studies, the Irish-American hybrid which mostly studies Irish literature and occasionally theatre and film (Bartlett et al. 1988, King and Sisson 2014, 56-83). While this has direct resonance for the study of the colonial period up until 1922 and directly afterwards, as well as overtly political areas such as political graphics and the continuing issues surrounding Northern Ireland, I would question its usefulness in considering later time periods in the Republic, as well as areas such as product design, interiors and fashion (Swan 2011: 133-47). There is a tendency to overstate the relationship with Britain as the defining factor in Irish identity, closely followed with the United States of



America, downplaying the existing and continuing relationships with different European countries, and indeed the EEC and the EU.

Possibly the most useful conceptualisation of the multiple competing ideas of national identity comes from Caoilfhionn ní Bheacháin, considering the 'ghost' Republic that existed after the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922, where multiple versions of the state existed simultaneously in imaginings of different political groupings, which did not correspond to either the ideal nation, or indeed the actually existing state (Ní Bheacháin 2007, ní Bheacháin 2012, Anderson 1991). These multiple myths of Ireland have their own descendants today, and allow for a more nuanced reading of Irish national identity as something contingent, contested and continuously updated and performed.

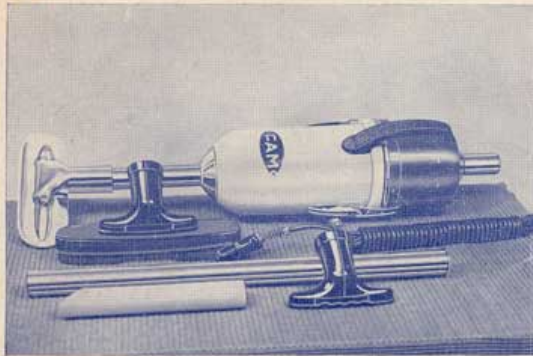
### **Dutch-Irish Design?**

Verenigde FAM-Fabrieken was a Dutch product design company which had existed from the mid-1940s, selling washing machines and vacuum cleaners to both national and export markets. It was run by one Ale Kouperus until his death in 1966, with a main factory in Maarssen, close to Utrecht, and advertised its products in both Dutch and Dutch colonial newspapers (Brouwer 1968: 47, 1966: 6, 1950: 5, 1961b: 3). Again, these are promoted in the domestic market as 'de allerbeste stofzuiger in Nederland!' or 'the very best vacuum cleaner in the Netherlands' [Fig. 4], at a time when the country was a small open economy influenced by some American business methods, with Philips as the dominant appliance company, one of a number of cartels and agreements that dominated Dutch manufacturing (Poortman 1950, Sluyterman 2013).



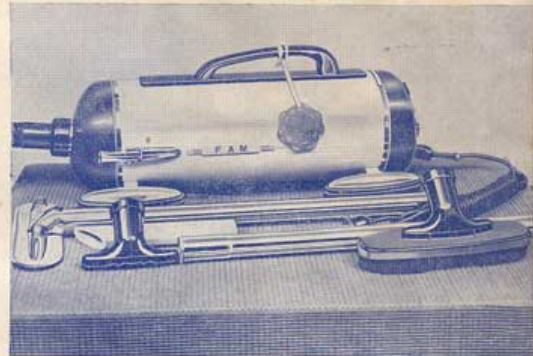


**EEN LUST VOOR HET OOG IS DE PRACHTIGE COLLECTIE F.A.M.-STOFZUIGERS, ALLEN MET ZEER DOELTREFFENDE EN ONVERSLIJTBARE HULPSTUKKEN, WAARONDER DE ONMISBARE, DRAAIBARE ZUIGMOND.**



**FAM-HANDSTOFZUIGER** f 120,—

Fris witgelakt model. Zeer handig voor klein behuizen, op trappen, voor de auto, enz. Precies als alle hier afgebeelde stofzuigers heeft ook dit model de motor met dubbele ankerwikkeling, waarop FAM patent heeft. Hierdoor HOGERE ZUIGKRACHT bij LAGER STROOMVERBRUIK. En natuurlijk ook DRAAIBARE ZUIGMOND.



**FAM-FS55** f 135,—

Met alle FAM-voordelen, zoals de onverslijtbare patent-motor met dubbele ankerwikkeling, draaibare zuigmond en alle andere afgebeelde hulpstukken.  
Verkrijgbaar in de volgende kleuren: Grijs mantel met rode kappen; Ivoor mantel met rode kappen.  
Een kwaliteitsstofzuiger voor Uw leven!

## **De FAM stofzuiger** *is de allerbeste stofzuiger in Nederland!*



**FAM-FS6 LAK** f 135,—

Verkrijgbaar in 4 verschillende uitvoeringen: Beige mantel met rode kappen; Grijs mantel met zwarte kappen; Grijs mantel met rode kappen; Licht groene mantel m. donkergroene kappen.

**FAM-FS6 CHROOM** f 148,—

Ook verkrijgbaar in 4 kleuren, naar keuze: Rode - blauwe - groene of grijs mantel, alle drie met CHROOM kappen.



**FAM-DS3 LAK** f 158,—

Prima kwaliteitsstofzuiger met onverwoestbare motor en hoogste zuigkracht. Uitgevoerd in moderne mode-tint: Beige mantel met beige kappen.

**FAM-DS3 CHROOM** f 168,—

In 3 verschillende mooie kleuren: Rode - blauwe of groene mantel, alle drie met CHROOM kappen.

**Thans is de keus nog groter.** De fabriek heeft nog 3 nieuwe modellen aan haar sinds vele jaren beroemde serie (zie op de bladzijde hiernaast) toegevoegd.

Figure 4 –FAM vacuum cleaners advertised in the Maxwell catalogue, 1950s. Image permission Jan Poortman (www.pa3esy.com)



What brings FAM out into what Meroz and Gimeno-Martínez call 'the expanded field' of Dutch design and into the Irish myth was the setting up of an Irish company Couper Works in mid-1957, with capital of 50,000 Irish pounds, and numbers of Irish assembly staff sent to the Netherlands to train (1960: 13, Dáil Éireann 1960: 57, Meroz and Gimeno-Martínez 2016). The factory was managed by Dr M. Baradi, who was married to Kouperus' oldest daughter (1966: 6, 1960: 13). Couper Works was one of ten companies which were enticed to set up in Ireland in 1956 and 1957 by the IDA, the Industrial Development Authority set up in 1949 to bring foreign investment into Ireland (Barry and O'Fathartaigh 2015: 476). The IDA was working with the idea of 'import substitution', encouraged by Sean Lemass, who was Tánaiste and Minister for Industry and Commerce intermittently throughout the 1950s. The idea of 'industrialisation by invitation' was adopted in 1956 and still forms the basis of Ireland's low corporate tax regime today, and has politically been seen as a forerunner of the trade liberalisation of the 1960s championed by Lemass and TK Whitaker's Programmes for Economic Expansion (Barry and O'Fathartaigh 2015: 460-61). A later Dutch newspaper article with his sons after Couperus' death gives an alternative narrative, stating that the Irish factory was started in response to the Suez Crisis of 1956, as their father was concerned that the Netherlands could be invaded by the Russians, giving a geo-political impetus to the enterprise, as well as the possibility of ensuring that his Egyptian son-in-law was remote from possible conflict (Brouwer 1968: 49).

FAM brand washing machines and vacuum cleaners were advertised throughout the late 1950s in Ireland as economic and efficient appliances and as symbols of modernity, with newspaper advertisements continually mentioning the Irish roots of the brand, using straplines such as 'These famous appliances are Irish-built at Wicklow for Irish homes' [Fig. 5] (1958: 4, 1959: 9, 1964b: 14, 1964c). While they may not have used overt symbols of Irish nationality such as shamrocks and tricolours, they assert the Irishness of the brand, conflating the idea of Irish-built rather than Dutch, which is not mentioned here at all. This Dutch-Irish factory, possibly run by a Dutch-Egyptian, produced an appliance brand that was increasingly promoted as Irish to a mythic level during the 1960s, when the factory was wholly appropriated as Irish, exporting 'Irish washing machines' to Austria (1961a: 6). FAM was included in the CTT Irish stands in the 1964 and 1965 International Hardware Trades Exhibition in London, alongside Waterford Ironfounders, Arklow Pottery and Carrigaline Pottery (1964a: 11, 1965: 10). The naturalisation of these Dutch designed appliances as 'Irish' is completed when they featured in an Irish language newsreel from 1962, covering the Ideal Homes exhibition in the Mansion House in Dublin (Irish Film Institute Gael Linn Collection 2017).





Sets a **NEW**  
**Standard**  
in **VALUE**

Yes, indeed! FAM is setting a new standard in Value and in performance. These famous appliances are Irish-built at Wicklow for Irish homes.

**WASHING MACHINES** A range of sturdy, sensibly-priced machines. Smartly styled and trouble-free in use.

**SPIN DRIERS** Banish wash-day weather worries with a FAM Spin Drier — all the wash damp-dried for the iron in a few minutes.

**VACUUM CLEANERS** Really hard-working Vacuum Cleaners that make light of cleaning round the home.



All these FAM appliances are available at your dealers — and on very attractive Easy Terms if you desire.

IRISH BUILT for IRISH HOMES

**COUPER WORKS LTD., WICKLOW**

Trade Enquiries: Couper Distributors, Ltd., 32 Nassau St.  
Dublin. Telephone 77306

Figure 5 – FAM advertisement, *Irish Press*, May 22 1959, p.9. With thanks to Irish Newspaper Archives and *The Irish Press*.



## Conclusion

In the case of FAM washing machines and vacuum cleaners, the existence of Couper Works complicates the narrative of modern design in Ireland before Kilkenny as either not existing or being purely about imports. While the appliances seem to be actually designed in the Netherlands and, in some ways, could therefore be classed as 'an expanded Dutch design', if the frequency and range of the advertisements are to be believed, the Irish company enjoyed a longer and more fruitful existence than the Dutch one, which stopped advertising in the early 1960s. As Teilmann-Lock commented on the myth of Danish Design, the design, manufacturing, advertising and use of products in different countries and by people of different nationalities complicates the easy identification of products as 'Irish' or 'Danish' or 'Scandinavian', although the incorporation of products into these national myths continues to happen, often prompted by crossing of national boundaries (Teilmann-Lock 2016, 159-61). Rather than retreating into default positions of national origin, would it be possible to be both at once, unpicking the need to be part of one or other national narrative – for a product to have a hyphenated Danish-Irish or Dutch-Irish identity? This is part of what thinking about the particular situation of Irish national identity can bring to the debate, dealing with the problematic of defining Irishness when you don't even know what Irish is. There is an argument for being porous on the borders, both the physical one with the North of Ireland and the UK (soon to be outside the EU), but also the transnational flows of people, objects and ideas that created overlapping and layered identities (Lara-Betancourt 2016: 243-44).

Irish design history cannot be understood in isolation, as, along with all other national histories it needs to recognise the importance of trade networks and the transnational movement of people. These networks and mobilities operate as a set of relationships that may be controlled by national laws and policies, but which operate at the level of the company and the individual, and decisions are made at these levels as much as at the political one. My conclusion is that there is no definitive Ireland, but a hybrid one, which can be lots of overlapping things at once: it can be local to Kilkenny or Dublin, it can follow the political boundaries of the state, or the multiple positions of Northern Irish identity, to be queer or straight, to be feminist, Catholic or agnostic, techy or crafty, to be an emigrant to the UK or further afield or an immigrant from Poland or China, to be at once European as well as Irish, all of which influence national identity just as much as geography, climate, religion or social structure (Thunder 2017).



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