



Irish design comes out of the shadows to stand proud on the world stage, writes **Eleanor Flegg**

TALENT LIGHTS UP

It's been said that Irish design is the poor relation on the world stage and that we don't really have a coherent design tradition of our own, apart from reed baskets and woollen blankets. It simply isn't true. Contemporary Irish furniture and lighting is as witty and inventive as anything else on the international circuit right now.

Moreover, there is a subtlety of thought and humour behind the designs that could be described as characteristically Irish.

This was clearly illustrated at Source, a display of new Irish design at the Irish Furniture & Home Accessories Fair at the RDS earlier this month. The display was curated by Leo Scarff, the leading lighting and furniture designer whose range of Contour trays (from €20) won a certificate of merit in the Interior Accessory of the Year category.

"Good Irish design is available and out there," says Scarff. "It's still difficult to get Irish manufacturers to use Irish designers. A lot of the firms are very small, some are single-person operations. It's hard for that size of business to get the funding to promote its work. But there are a lot of small firms doing really great stuff, and there's a wealth of design work and expertise out there."

Some of the designers, such as Ronan Lowery and Eric O'Donnell of Design Onion are still students. They exhibited a quartet of twisted cubes that can be used singly as stools, stacked in a sculptural manner, or combined to form a coffee table.

Trevor Vaughn and Nic Shannon formed the design company Vaughn Shannon in 2007 to realise some of the creative ideas that they'd been working on together since graduation.

"We are doing our best to create an Irish studio that can compete on the international stage, and so far we're really delighted with the response," says Vaughn. "We were a bit sick of spending fortune on design books and magazines, and not seeing a single Irish design studio represented."

"At the moment we are in the very early days of setting up. As yet we don't have a studio and the two of us are working full time in our current jobs — it's very stressful — but we will go solo as soon as it is feasible. We're looking for manufacturers for all of our products, and in the meantime we're having small batches manufactured ourselves."

Madra, an amusing magazine rack in the shape of a dog, is made from laser-cut steel and available in a variety of colours. The magazines hang from the body of the dog, while its flat head provides a small side table, about the right size for a cup of coffee (€190).

Happy Lamp, also by Vaughn Shannon and priced at €650, is a steel standard lamp. Halfway up the stem, the lamp branches into a V-shape. One branch continues upward to carry the lamp shade, the other stops short, ending in a touch-sensitive dimmer switch.

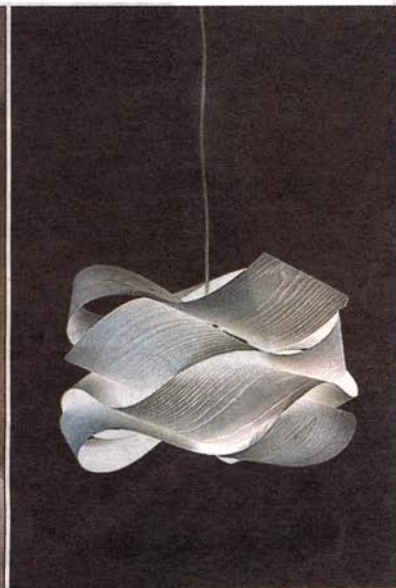
Peter MacCann presented the Halo clock, made of laser-cut folded aluminium. The numberless clock is framed by a circular halo, mimicking the face of a traditional clock. Within this circle two hands, one black and one orange, tell the time, and below it swings a



Hughes's lamps are inspired by nature; above right, the Link lamp by Ray Power



Happy Lamp by Vaughn Shannon



launched by a UK manufacturer, and retails at €110.

For Ina Koenig of Unleaded, it's all about letting people know that it's possible to source high-quality Irish furniture and lighting. "We all want to make a living, but there's more to this than just a commercial motivation," says Koenig. "The designers have really thought about these things and put their time, effort and heart into these pieces. We want to achieve something special. It's refreshing to see the quality of the products and the way that they all work together. The pieces are very different from each other, but they are all speaking the same language."

Ray Power, an Irish designer working in Spain, presented the Link lamp, a twisted pendant in polywood veneer that he describes as a "study of form, repetition, and geometry".

The stoneware lighting of Christine Hughes is inspired by natural textures. All the pieces are made by hand by Hughes.

"The lamps are all about texture," she says, "and I stick to very simple forms to set off the texture as best I can."

Unlike most ceramicists, Hughes has managed to bridge the divide between craft and interior design. Although firmly craft-based, the lamps are a clearly defined high-end interiors product. The steel stem of the Moho floor lamp (€1,600) cuts through a series of ceramic spheres which are graded in both size and shade. In the Taranis feature lamp (€590) a simple shade rises from one of three identical ovoids, set on a white oak base.

■ www.leoscarffdesign.com; www.designonion.net; www.vaughnshannon.com; www.nofixedabode.ie; www.unleaded.ie; www.raypowerdesign.com; www.christinehughes.com.

■ Other exhibitors included www.charlesfurniture.ie; www.finedesign.ie; www.made.ie; www.gordonbyrmedesign.com

pendulum made out of the same material as the Halo. "The pendulum doesn't have an operational function," says MacCann, "but the design makes use of the pendulum idea to deconstruct the clock into a series of component parts."

One of the main challenges for designers is the search for a manufacturer who shares their vision and is prepared to take on their product. MacCann's Halo clock was recently