



Walsh's San Martin table; right, the Golden Delicious table, made by Lee



Walsh with one of the chairs from his sculptural series called Figure of 6

Man who carved out his future



DARA FLYNN

When a self-taught furniture-maker sells a table for a reported €72,000, it's clear that things are happening in the world of Irish design

As soon as the Interior Design and Art Fair at the RDS had wrapped up in May, the rumour mill in the Irish interiors industry began to creak and churn. "Pssst! A furniture designer sold one of his tables at the fair — for €72,000."

"In a recession? It must have been one hell of a table."

It was a hell of a table — a Joseph Walsh table. Its lucky buyer may have been relieved of wads of cash, but not merely for the pleasure of spilling ciabatta crumbs on a nice piece of polished French walnut. As an owner of an original Walsh, he or she is now a collector, sitting on a long-term investment.

Walsh belongs to a select group of artisans whose work straddles the worlds of furniture-making and art. His tables, cabinets and consoles have transcended the relatively small Irish furniture-making scene to make a splash with private collectors across the Atlantic, where he is represented by two leading galleries.

In short, Walsh has done what was once unthinkable for an Irish craftsman: he has "made it" in America.

When the Mint Museum of Art in North Carolina was selecting 10 artists to create a piece for the opening of its new museum in 2010, Walsh was the only Irishman and also the sole furniture-maker to be chosen.

His work has been lauded in Architectural Digest and several other respected design publications, and he was invited to exhibit a large art installation at Sofa

(the Sculptural Objects and Functional Arts fair) in Chicago in 2007.

Last year, he presented his first solo US exhibition at the American Irish Historical Society, in New York, and these days nobody balks when his importance on the Irish art and design spectrum is compared to that of Eileen Gray's. That's not bad for a self-taught furniture-maker from Co Cork.

"I started young and had no formal education in it, so I sort of grew into what I'm doing today," says Walsh, who describes his work as falling "between the different worlds of furniture design and sculptural design".

He is as obsessive about what a piece says as about what it does. "The past 10 years have been about defining my own path," he says. "I've worked in a number of styles, but my work has become more consistent and defined. I can see a more distinctive expression in it now. My work is more sophisticated in form and in structure."

Last month, Walsh had his work exhibited at Design Miami/Basel, in Switzerland, by Cristina Grajales, a New York Gallery. He has just been accepted to show at Grassimessa, an international forum for applied art and product design in Leipzig, Germany. "Where I'm taking my work is an area that not many people participate in," he says. "The design art market involves pieces collected for their expressive value, and the market for it is small."

Walsh's newest piece, the San Martin (the one allegedly sold at the RDS), is a sculptural table consisting of

two interlocking forms made of walnut and bronze, but it is entirely functional.

Walsh is averse to the buzz about his success, particularly when it is measured in monetary terms. He admits that he did sell a table at the fair but won't reveal the amount. His Prism series, meanwhile, is a further step away from traditional wooden furniture. The Prism console, cabinet and suite are all loosely based on the human form — geometric and yet delicate.

Walsh is a realist about the Irish furniture design scene: it's healthy and it oozes talent, but it is restrictively small. There is no sophisticated furniture-manufacturing industry in Ireland; it revolves around studios.

Walsh is proof that larger-scale success on an international platform is possible. He cites John Lee and Laura Mays as furniture-makers who "stand tall internationally". Lee's Carrigeen, for example, was bought by the National Museum of Ireland, and Farraige, his sculptural chest of drawers, was selected to be shown at Sofa.

The Cream of Irish Design exhibition at the RDS Interior Design and Art Fair showcased the best of the country's designers, many of whom have garnered reputations abroad.

Featured were 21 of what Shane Holland, its curator, considered to be the best Irish designers who are running full-time workshops. They included Stevan Hartung, the McGonigle sisters, Zelouf & Bell, Garvan de Bruir, Liz Nilsson and Ceadogan rugs.

All are creating high-quality, designed furniture, sculpture and glass, and all aim to make work that will

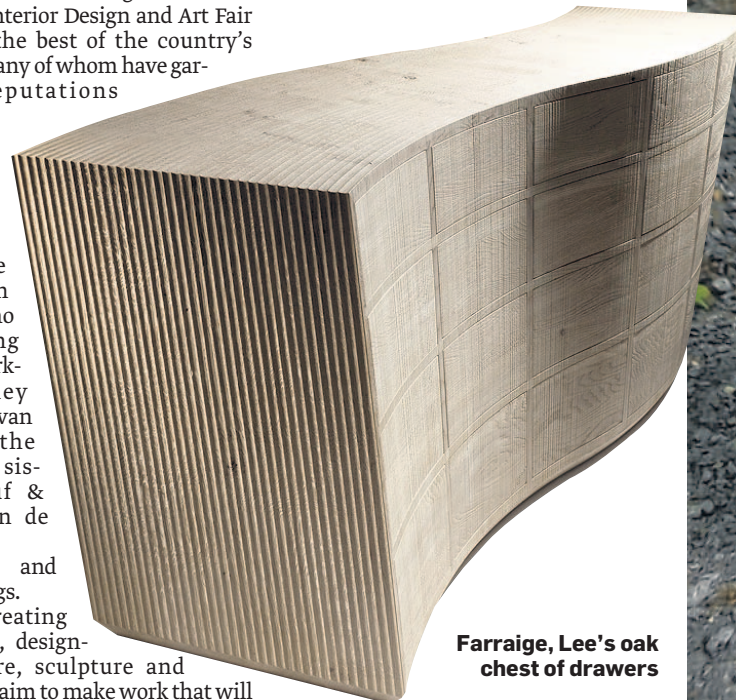
hold its own internationally.

Holland has also had the international spotlight shone on his own business, Shane Holland Design Workshops, since he designed lighting for the new Jurys hotel in Kensington, London, as well as a bar in Paris. When Swarovski, the luxury crystal glassbrand, pulled out of a lighting installation at a London design fair last year, Holland was asked to step into the breach.

Last year he travelled to Dubai with fellow Irish designers Michelle O'Donnell and Klimmek Henderson to meet some of the biggest developers working in the Middle East.

"People aren't concerned with where a work is from; they're interested in its quality," says Holland. "You have to be able to work with the best. People simply won't buy something just because it is Irish. The only way to achieve in this field is by being good enough."

www.josephwalshstudio.com;
www.shanehollanddesign.com;
www.johnleefurniture.com;
www.klimmek-henderson.com



Farraige, Lee's oak chest of drawers

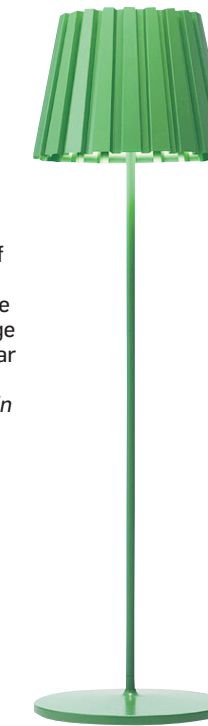
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Bright and breezy from €1,074

The Mini OM is a smaller version of Elica's extractor hood, and comes in a range of colours. The silk-screen painted glass front makes it possible to change the colour when you want, by simply changing the glass. It is ideal for compact kitchens. It costs €1,074 for the black or white version and €1,245 in colour. KAL, 01 413 6400, www.kal.ie



Tank goodness €980

The Tall Tank lamp in bright green is the brainchild of the young British designer Alexander Taylor for Established & Sons, the contemporary-quirky furniture retailer. It is a floor-standing addition to Taylor's range of Tank lamps, with a cast-aluminium base and tubular steel stem. It measures 1.8m high and also comes in black or white. Stocked in Ireland at Terry Furniture in Portadown, 048 3833 3215, www.terryfurniture.co.uk



Retro returns €75

Dublin is finally getting a retro and antiques fair, to take place on the first Sunday of every month. The first one takes place today at the D4 hotel (formerly Jury's Inn) in Ballsbridge from 11am to 6pm. Entry costs €3 and this Beswick Zebrette vase from the 1950s (€75) is just one of the retro finds on offer. www.antiquesfairireland.com

Steal of the week Lotus-print chair Was €175 Now €129

Floral prints are in bloom again this summer. These bold lotus print chairs from Diamond Living are formal enough for the dining room, but retain a contemporary casual feel. Available in red and beige, the lotus chairs have been reduced to €129 and are available to purchase online, with delivery within seven days. The furniture supplier also has outlets at Airside retail park in Swords, at the EP Mooney retail centre on Longmile Road and at Beacon South Quarter in Sandyford. www.diamonddesign.ie, 1850 454443

