

Christopher P. Monkhouse (1947-2021): a tribute

WILLIAM LAFFAN



photograph courtesy Art Institute of Chicago

A LEADING HISTORIAN OF THE DECORATIVE ARTS WHO HELD POSITIONS IN SEVERAL major American museums, Christopher Monkhouse was involved with the Irish Georgian Society for more than half a century. Arguably the crowning event of his busy and varied career, the exhibition *Ireland Crossroads of Art and Design, 1690-1840*, held at the Art Institute of Chicago in 2015, triumphantly put the visual arts of eighteenth-century Ireland onto the world stage. In the catalogue for the Chicago show, Christopher acknowledged the vital role that *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies* – at the ‘forefront of research into the material world of Ireland’ – played in the planning of the exhibition. It is pleasing and appropriate then that this volume of the journal is dedicated to his memory.

Born in Portland, Maine, in 1947, a graduate of Deerfield Academy and the University of Pennsylvania, and early alumnus (1966) of the Attingham Summer School, Christopher’s earliest passion was for the architectural heritage of his native New England. His first publication was a 1969 pamphlet for the Bostonian Society on the eighteenth-century Faneuil Hall market, then under threat. By this date Christopher was already visiting Ireland regularly – he first came in 1966 – in time specifically to study the eighteenth-century hotels on the Grand Canal, as part of his research for a thesis at the Courtauld Institute supervised by Nikolaus Pevsner (and never quite completed). This interest in Ireland’s significant contribution to hotel architecture inevitably led him into the circle of Desmond and Mariga Guinness and the early Irish Georgian Society, and friends made at Leixlip and Castletown – the late Rolf Loeber for example – would go on to contribute in one way or another to the 2015 show.

Back in London when working at the Victoria & Albert Museum (including on the early stages of the seminal exhibition *The Destruction of the Country House*), Christopher formed a lasting friendship with Desmond FitzGerald, Knight of Glin, which would bear fruit spectacularly many decades later. From the V&A, he returned home to the United States where he would spend the rest of his career, serving for some fifteen years as curator of decorative arts at the Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design. As comfortable in the fields of European and American decorative arts, he also moved easily between the study of furniture and architectural history, with his exhibitions at RISD including *Buildings on Paper: Rhode Island Architectural Drawings, 1825-1945* (1982) and *American Furniture in Pendleton House* (1986). After serving as the founding curator of the Heinz Architectural Center at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, where he was instrumental in forming its important collection of architectural drawings, in 1995 he was appointed curator in the department of architecture, design, decorative arts and sculpture at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (where his *Currents of Change: Art and Life along the Mississippi River, 1850-1861* (2004) won plaudits) and finally, in 2007, Eloise W. Martin curator and chair of the department of European decorative arts at the Art Institute of Chicago. Among major acquisitions which he made for Chicago were the remarkable cabinet that Horace Walpole designed for his friend Thomas Brand, based on his own at Strawberry Hill, and a Chinese fretwork library steps commissioned in 1782 for the Library at Badminton. The Knight and Christopher stayed in touch over the years and often when they met discussed the possibility of staging an exhibition on Irish art. Christopher’s move to Chicago, with its strong Irish connections, inspired him to put this

long-held aspiration into action and an immediate catalyst – a good omen – for the show was the discovery of the signature of the Dublin cabinetmaker John Kirkhoffer on a bookcase of 1732 in the Art Institute’s own collection.

Without doubt, one of Christopher’s best early decisions – as he would frequently acknowledge – was to hire Leslie Fitzpatrick (also ex-V&A) to work with him on the exhibition. Together, Christopher and Leslie travelled thousands of miles in Ireland researching houses and landscapes, looking at objects and visiting archives. They also criss-crossed the United States, and loans were drawn from collections all over North America. In total, the research for the exhibition took more than six years, and some four hundred objects were selected, including paintings, prints, furniture, bookbindings, silver, glass, ceramics, textiles, miniatures and musical instruments, with not just all the great Irish artists represented but also masterpieces by European painters – David, Hogarth, Claude, Hobbema – that had once graced Irish collections.

Christopher’s belief in the ‘Irish exhibition’, as it became known, was total, and, for a very mild-mannered man, he could certainly fight his corner, seeing off attempts to scale back his, it must be said, enormously ambitious plans when the recession hit museum finances. When it counted most, he enjoyed the unwavering and immensely generous support of some great friends of Ireland, and the Art Institute, who were as determined as he that the exhibition should take place. The exhibition finally opened to the public on St Patrick’s Day 2015 after a gala dinner for more than four hundred guests. Very appropriately it was dedicated to the memory of the Knight of Glin, who was represented at the launch by Olda and their daughters. Anyone who was in Chicago that day will recall how Irish art seemed to take over the entire city with blanket advertising on the city’s buses and the show’s banners running the length of Michigan Avenue. Perhaps not all of those partying on the streets – as the Chicago River flowed green – were there to celebrate Thomas Roberts’ exquisite landscapes or Mrs Delany’s flower collages, but it seemed to us that they were; the Irish Georgian aesthetic had found its moment.

A week later, a major conference on the Irish visual, landscape and decorative arts was convened at the Art Institute in association with the Irish Georgian Society (organised by Christopher’s close colleague Veronika Lorenser), with distinguished speakers including Stella Tillyard and Finola O’Kane, and, indeed, with the actor Julian Sands talking about his passion for Irish silver. That evening in the gothic grandeur of Chicago’s University Club – in a happy collaborative event organised by Christopher’s great friend Michael Kerrigan – volume XVII of this journal was launched, published to coincide with the exhibition, and edited by Conor Lucey to feature research derived from the show. In all these festivities the ever-courteous, slightly diffident – and permanently bow-tied – figure of Christopher Monkhouse was to the fore. In total, the exhibition attracted 170,000 visitors and its run had to be extended to meet public demand. Sadly, no serious interest was expressed by our national cultural institutions in bringing the show to Ireland.

As the genesis of the exhibition suggests, Christopher had a talent for friendship, and nurtured an international network of like-minded scholars, collectors, art dealers and historians in settings such as the notably convivial Club of Odd Volumes on Beacon Hill in Boston. He was actively involved with many learned and conservation societies, including Historic New England, Maine Historical Society, the Decorative Arts Trust and

the (American) Walpole Society, and just a few years ago was delighted to be elected a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in London. Extremely generous with his time, Christopher was always quick to help with any request from the Irish Georgian Society. During the course of the 2015 exhibition when he and Leslie were hard-pressed with dozens of daily commitments to fulfil, Christopher travelled to Dublin to give the keynote address at an IGS conference held in Dublin Castle on art and the Irish country house. Straight off the overnight flight, he spoke eloquently and without notes for almost an hour to a hugely appreciative audience. In November 2019 he travelled to Ireland, for the last time, to speak on James Wyatt's famous hall chairs, at a study day organised by the IGS at Castle Coole.

Christopher was a kind, thoughtful man with the very correct manners of a bygone age. Scrupulously fastidious, he declined absolutely to engage with modern technology and, to the occasional frustration of colleagues, the mobile phone and email were alien to his unashamedly 'old school' way of doing things. He curated almost fifty exhibitions over the course of his career, and although most closely associated with the arts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, he was deeply knowledgeable across a wide spectrum of architecture and design. American folk art was a favourite, but he also had a passionate interest in modern architecture (acquiring, for example Frank Lloyd Wright's San Francisco office for Pittsburgh) and particularly the work of Bauhaus *émigrés* in North America, which his move to Chicago gave him great scope to explore; events for the Irish exhibition were held in significant buildings associated with Mies van der Rohe, including the Langham hotel in the former IBM building and the remodelled Arts Club of Chicago. Earlier, when working in Minneapolis, he had purchased the 1962 Modernist villa designed by Marcel Breuer for the ecclesiastical architect Frank Kacmarcik overlooking the Mississippi in nearby St Paul: 'As soon as I walked in the door, I just knew it was my house ... I've never had a piece of architecture speak to me so quickly.' Christopher's delight in living in the Breuer house, where he frequently entertained, nicely illustrated how his connoisseurship was never an end in itself but was always informed by a profound sense of how objects interact with human life and the stories that buildings and things can tell.

For all his travels, Maine remained home. Having long kept a summer home in the historic coastal town of Machiasport, Christopher retired from the Art Institute to a beautiful former sea-captain's house in Brunswick which was filled with the fruits of decades of his own collecting – Americana, architectural drawings, ephemera and thousands of books. It is sad indeed that the many retirement projects he had planned (a study of *plein air* painting in Maine was one) will not now be completed. There were so many cultural fields, often distinctly unfashionable, about which Christopher felt passionately – the architecture of Newport, Rhode Island, for example, or the poetry of Longfellow – but Ireland is fortunate that, many years ago and really quite fortuitously, he came here to explore that overlooked architectural typology of canal hotels and, thanks to the example of the two Desmonds, was inspired by our architectural heritage and visual culture to organise an exhibition that is unlikely to be repeated in its scope, scale or the breadth of its vision and humanity.