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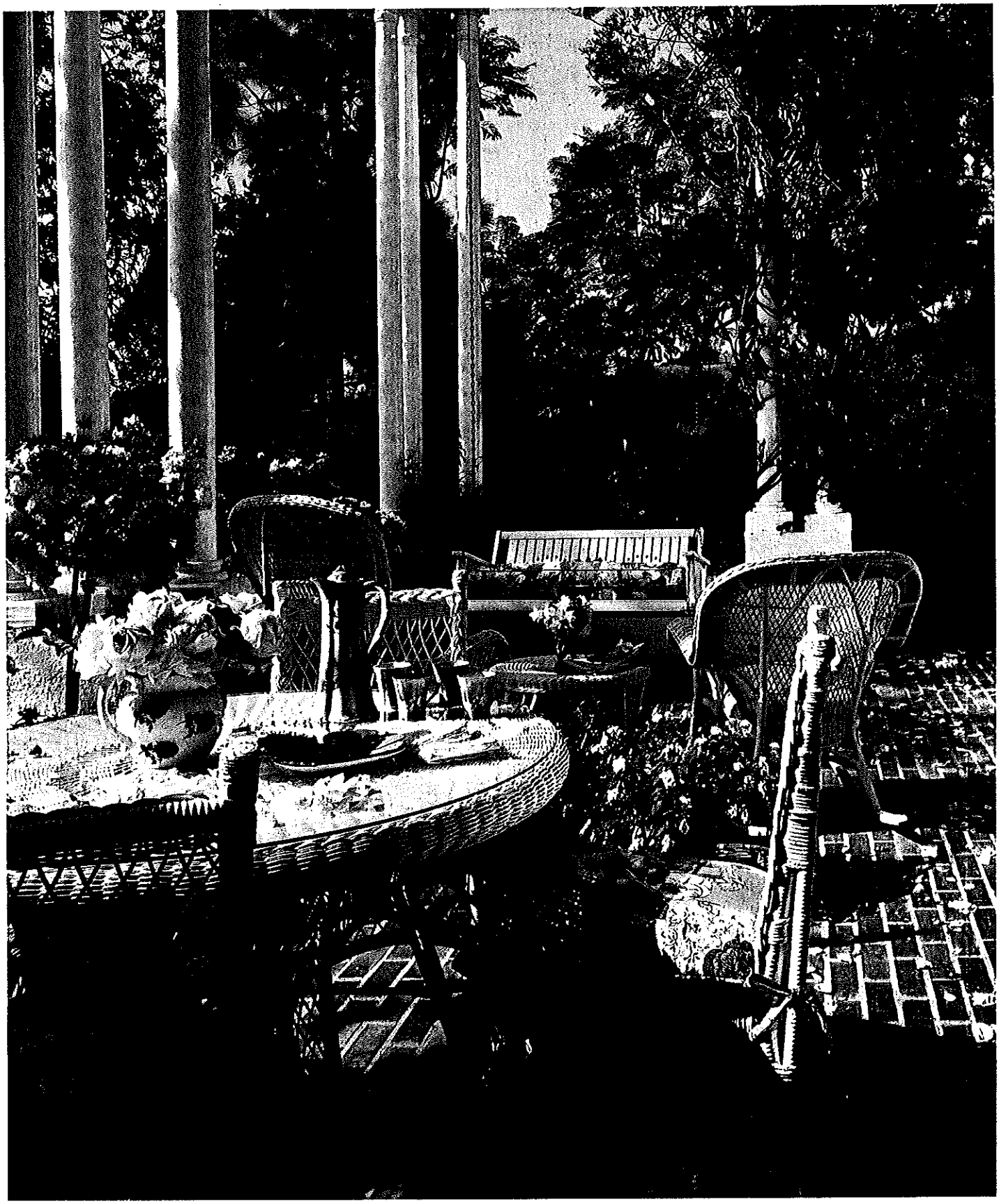
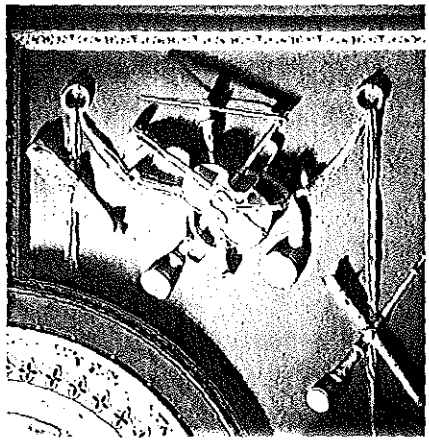


HEIGHTS OF ROCOCO

The Legacy of Ireland's Stuccodores

By Nicholas Fox Weber

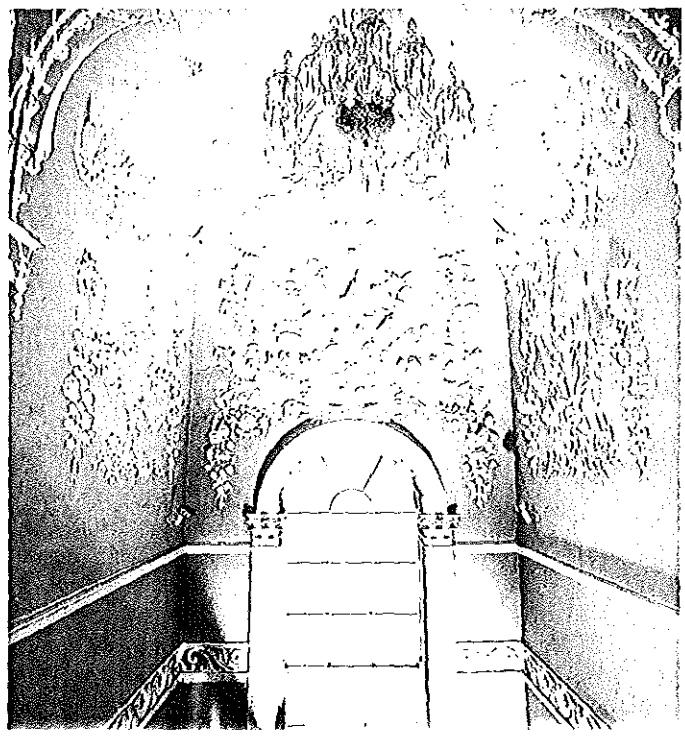
PHOTOGRAPHY: SIMON BROWN



THE ST. STEPHEN'S Green area in Dublin is rich with history. Its eighteenth-century houses are suitably grand and imposing. From the outside these edifices are thoroughly correct Georgian affairs: rigid and formal, their stony façades paeans to rules and regulations. But walk through the door and these buildings are like proper gentlemen and ladies who have cast off their waistcoats and bonnets and are partying merrily. The style is carefully honed, but the mood is one of sheer abandon. The atmosphere is not just euphoric—it's outrageous.

Consider the great somber-exteriored house that is No. 86 St. Stephen's Green. The imposing house—which has long been part of University College—was where the renowned Victorian John Henry Newman was rector between 1853 and 1859, Gerard Manley Hopkins was professor of Greek between 1884 and 1889, and James Joyce was a student between 1899 and 1902. Its staircase walls and ceiling are covered with horns and fiddles, birds and flowers, all crafted in white stucco that renders them astoundingly real. Set against a rich mélange of blue, green and peach, these soaring forms are linked by a frenzy of scrollwork and garlands.

There is symmetry, and the reliefs artfully match one another. The artist's object was clearly neither to intimidate nor to calm, but to offer the viewer as much variety and amusement as possible. If there is any dynamic pattern with which leaves can hang from a rosette, he has thought of it. In the



The artistry of 18th-century Irish plasterwork is evident in the imposing buildings in St. Stephen's Green in Dublin. TOP LEFT: Michael Stapleton created the Sphinxes and ribbons in the ladies' drawing room at the University Club around 1777. TOP CENTER AND RIGHT: In 1765–6, Robert West decorated the walls of the Newman House at University College.

ABOVE: At the Georgian mansion that serves as part of the headquarters of the Irish Permanent Building Society, the vaulted ceiling is covered with cherubs, scrolls and garlands done by Robert and John West in 1760.

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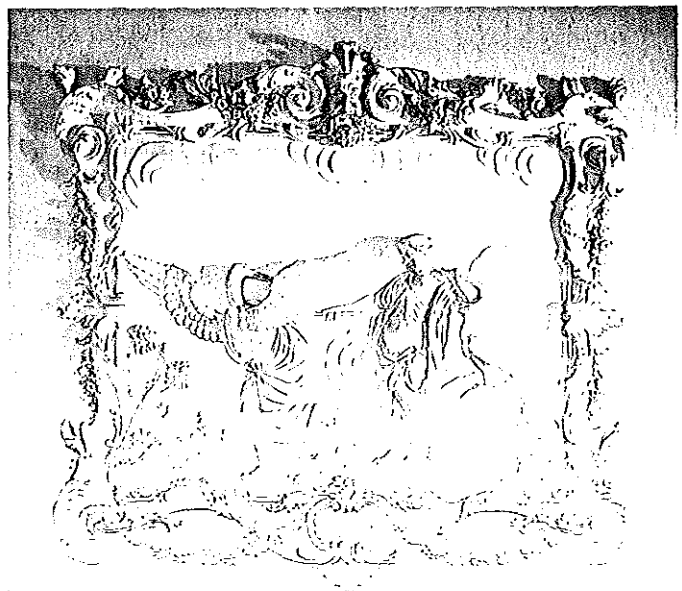
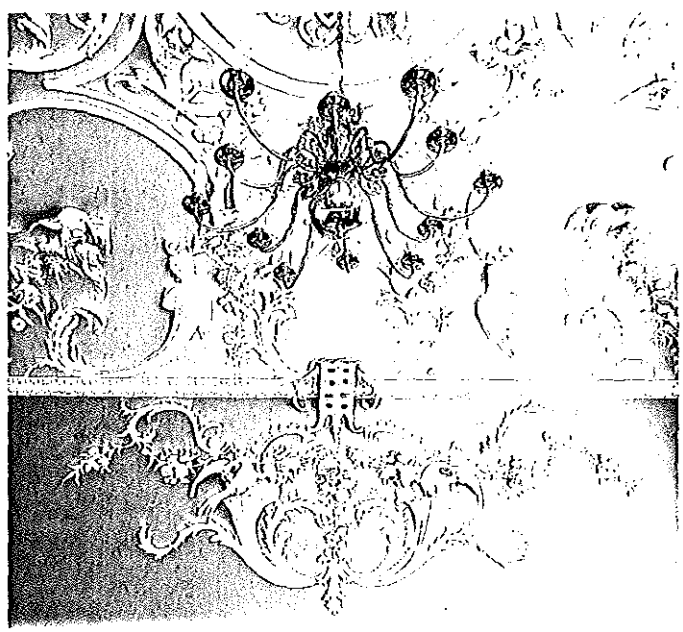
wall reliefs, large birds peck playfully at their chirping babies. Where a French horn, trumpet, fiddle, bow, and a bit of sheet music all cross one another in perfect clarity, one expects to hear Handel in the air.

The artist was a man named Robert West, Ireland's best-known native stuccodore. He worked at No. 86 in 1765–6. Before his time, the masters of his profession were mostly Italians who had been trained in their homeland. Working in stucco, they were practicing a building trade that goes back to the ancient world. Vitruvius gave recipes for stucco—basically a blend of lime, sand, water, marble dust and gypsum—and it was used throughout medieval times, as a protective coating for the building structure and as a base for wall painting.

In the early eighteenth century stucco had come to have a new role in the embellishment of interiors. Working mostly on scaffoldings, a new breed of stuccodores had refined their craft through the development of wooden and metal armatures around which they modeled their material, and of molds that they pressed onto the wall. These molds—cast from plaster models—were soaped within so that they could easily be removed. Timing was of the essence; the material had to remain wet and pliant while it was being worked, and then harden soon after. So to the usual paste the eighteenth-century stuccodores added their own ingredients—milk, curd, beer, wine or marshmallow-root powder—to retard the binding just long enough. No matter what, they had to be quick.





LEFT: In a relief at the Stephen's Green Club that was probably executed by the Francini brothers circa 1756, a frame sets off figures based on Ovid's story of Juno's transformation of Antigone. BELOW LEFT AND BOTTOM: No. 20 Lower Dominick Street was Robert West's own residence. Ireland's greatest native stuccodore created the busts emerging from swirling scrollwork and the detailed birds in 1758.

Robert West had brought to their craft what Irish culture offers at its best: warmth, lightness and humor. His stucco comes in part from the plasterwork tradition established in London and on the Continent, but there is also something very Irish about it.

West's reliefs have the intensity and animation of the *Book of Kells*, the vibrant illuminated manuscript housed at Trinity College Library, only a short walk from St. Stephen's Green. The sort of intertwining that was tensely knotted in those pages painstakingly labored over by medieval monks was given a light touch by Robert West. His designs are still intricate, but here they are more open, with large empty spaces as well as areas of complexity.

If you turn left rather than go upstairs at No. 86, you enter a drawing room with a ceiling by West as light and graceful as a summer garden. One of its motifs, a vinelike form with buds, is so modern in tone that it resembles designs that Georg Jensen put into silver over a century later.

Upstairs at No. 86 there are three more West ceilings, related yet distinct. One is blue and white, with

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birds kissing and fruit cascading from bulging cornucopias. White floral wreaths and vine leaves weave gracefully against the pale sky blue. In answer to that color system, the molding from which this ceiling seems to rise is an ornate white design dotted with blue roses. In the field of the ceiling, horns of plenty alternate with Grecian urns full of flowers, and more fantastic birds soar.

Stucco overhead connects tellingly to the life that takes place underneath. Not far from No. 86 is Iveagh House, which was constructed in 1736 as an Episcopal bishop's mansion and rebuilt in 1866 by a scion of the Guinness family. The wispy branches of the 1766 stucco ceiling of its music room have the flow and grace of chamber music; the adjacent friezes suggest a fuller orchestra at play. Today, Iveagh House is the headquarters of the Irish government's Department of Foreign Affairs, and key treaties are periodically signed on a splendid inlaid Louis XV writing table below that ceiling.

The setting could not better fit the nuances of high diplomacy. The asymmetrical yet balanced ceiling is full of give and take, delicacy and the alternation of complexity with space. The result is a room that imparts the necessary dignity to the ceremony, and that echoes the mental process that takes place in preparation for it.

If you cross St. Stephen's Green, you might land at the Stephen's Green Club. Built circa 1725, it is filled with plasterwork thought to have been later done by the two Francini brothers, who were born in Mendrisio (near Lugano) and apprenticed in England in the 1720s before moving to Ireland, where they worked for decades. The Francini brothers based many of their designs on Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, on paintings by Antonio Tempesta and Poussin, and other historical sources.

A panel on the staircase landing of the Stephen's Green Club shows an astoundingly surreal image of a creature with muscular human legs beneath the gigantic body of a bird looking back at the godlike creature transforming it. Especially when seen in combination with the mask faces in the ornament that frames it, this image—based on Juno's transformation of Antigone as described by Ovid—would have given Freud plenty to wonder about.

Just a few houses away, at No. 17, is the University Club, where Michael Stapleton did the stucco work around 1777. Stapleton was another native Irishman whose highly ornamental work has tremendous grace and lightness. The ceilings' ovals and shell-like forms perfectly balance one another. The billiard room is crowned with a ceiling characterized by precise and refined angles, and the ladies' drawing room has the motif of ribbons added to the unusual decorative filigree, and alcoves roofed with fan forms that are the essence of ladies (as defined in the eighteenth century) gracefully reclining.

On its east side, No. 56 St. Stephen's Green has plasterwork done in 1760 by Robert West and his brother John. In the grand "saloon" that overlooks the park, the cornucopias spill forth with flowers as well as fruit. The stucco flower arrangements that come out of Grecian urn forms are complex still lifes; the frieze is charged with birds. Today, this Georgian mansion is part of the headquarters of the Irish Permanent Building Society. It's a little bit as if the Frick had been taken over by a savings and loan company, but fortunately they respect what they have.

The saloon is now the managing director's office, and to get there, one mounts a staircase that shows just how much sheer joy can be packed into a modest-scale barrel vault. Some of the birds stand on rigid legs, their talons steady on wonderfully meaningless Rococo swirls.

The sheer bravura of such birds reaches its apogee above the staircase that Robert West made in 1758 for his own residence at No. 20 Lower Dominick Street. Whether they sit atop elaborate pediments or swoop from grape arbors, their lifelikeness, and the quality of their rendering, takes them out of the tradition of decorative plasterwork and into the arena of great sculpture. Here, cornucopias overflow; musical instruments abound beneath arrangements of fruit and flowers; and human figure busts emerge from swirling scrollwork. Purely decorative motifs have been lifted off of their normal position flat against the wall so that now they spill out over cornices with the sheer abandon of a Frank Stella relief. But this reckless unraveling is in a highly ordered, refined and exquisitely crafted eighteenth-century form.

If you think of all the different cadenzas you have ever heard to Beethoven's violin concerto, here is the ultimate cadenza to Rococo ornament. Robert West has taken the known elements of eighteenth-century stucco decoration to their furthest, wildest extremes. Within the confines of craft and the rules of delicacy, he has achieved incomparable freedom. As such he has transformed the stuff of gravity into the essence of levity. Having done so for stucco, he does the same for people who pass underneath his achievement.

Robert West brought what Irish culture offers at its best: warmth, lightness and humor. His stucco comes in part from the tradition born in London, but there is also something very Irish about it.