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## Obituary of John Hunt (1900-1976)

PETER HARBISON

John Hunt, who died on January 19th, 1976, could well be described as the greatest and most experienced art-historian that Ireland has ever produced and he had indeed been described in *The Connoisseur* as 'one of the best known medievalists in Europe'. It is fitting, therefore, that a special tribute should be paid to him in a Journal affiliated to the Association of Irish Art Historians. However, to label him just as an art-historian is not to do justice to his many-sided qualities and particular genius. His kindness and truly noble nature, his deep sense of Christian religion and his practice of its precepts, his generosity as teacher in passing on his knowledge to others and the unobtrusive way in which he gave valuable advice and information are traits in his character which are so well-known and which made him so well loved by all those who were lucky enough to come in contact with him that it is not necessary to dwell further upon them here. However, in the present context, his passing ought not to be allowed to go unrecorded without drawing attention to the great work which he did in the field of art history and in displaying the culture of Ireland to the world.

Although his original intention was to study medicine, he gave this up to devote himself to the pursuit of knowledge of the visual arts. Going from one museum and art gallery to another as a young man, he garnered an extensive and almost unrivalled knowledge of European art of the early and late Middle Ages, storing in his prodigious memory the vital details of style which his extraordinarily sensitive eye had noticed. His inquisitive mind made him look for the explanation and meaning of everything which he came across, as was the case for instance with the two D-shaped objects in the St Germain Museum which he ingeniously reconstructed as the finials of a portable house-shaped shrine. By thoroughly scrutinizing the objects which came to his attention, he was - with that rare combination of instinct, taste and knowledge - able not only to evaluate the truly remarkable and beautiful, but also to distinguish the genuine from the fake - a characteristic which proved invaluable during the years when he advised Sothebys on medieval European Art. His uncanny knack of placing *objets d'art* in their right context and landscape is possibly best exemplified in his brilliant article attributing a Spanish origin to the splendid ivory representation of the Virgin and Child in the Victoria and Albert Museum, though there are still some who remain unconvinced by his thesis. His reputation as an art connoisseur was so world-wide that he was asked to advise eminent



collectors such as Sir William Burrell in Glasgow and was called upon by Guggenheim and Hearst to catalogue their respective collections in America.

But for all his great expertise and world-wide renown in the field of European art, his one great wish was to do what best he could for his own native country. In his own private collection of antiquities and art objects, Ireland had a very special place. He spent much money in buying Irish antiquities outside Ireland in order to restore them to their country of origin. He helped to put Ireland's cultural name on the European map by lending items from his collection to many temporary exhibitions outside Ireland, of which one in Germany in 1958 and another there in 1973 merit particular attention. But his crowning act in this respect was his gift to the Irish nation (through the Craggaunowen Project) of a tremendous collection of Irish and other antiquities for display at the Plassey campus of the National Institute for Higher Education in Limerick, in the eventual hope that enough money may be made available to have a special museum built to house it at Craggaunowen. Craggaunowen, indeed, will be one of his lasting monuments. With that very practical and pragmatic side to his nature, he organized the building of a crannóg and a ring-fort there in order to educate visitors in the types of dwelling used by Irishmen in an earlier age - in the same way that he had done for a later period in the Folk Park at Bunratty, where he had also advised Lord Gort on the furnishing of the castle, after he had initiated its restoration. It is tragic that he has not lived to experience the completion of the ring-fort which now forms part of the complex at Craggaunowen, but the official opening there of the crannóg and castle by John Kelly, T.D., Parliamentary Secretary to the Taoiseach, in the summer of 1975 must have been one of the proudest moments of his life.

The Middle Ages proved to be the period of his other great achievements. Together with Professor Seán P. Ó Riordáin, he was the first to carry out an excavation on a purely medieval site in Ireland. That was at Caherguillamore in County Limerick. Later, in the same area, he was to dig the interesting site at Ballingarry Down which, alas, remained unpublished at the time of his death, but he also recovered valuable information from the earth at such sites as Bunratty and Clonroad More near Ennis, as well as at Newtown Jerpoint. Much of his energy and activity was concentrated on what was once the medieval kingdom of Thomond, an area for which he had a special affection from his childhood days spent there. Yet a further expression of his dedication to this region was his success in helping to organize and to write the catalogue for the



exhibition of art treasures in Thomond, staged in Limerick in 1952, in conjunction with (among others) his old friend, Monsignor Michael Moloney.

Most of his important publications, too, are concerned with the medieval period. Of his earlier works, one of the greatest gems is his book on the Limerick mitre and crozier. But the greatest of all his academic achievements and what was, alas, practically his swan-song, was his *Irish Medieval Figure Sculpture, 1200-1600* which appeared in two volumes only a year and a half before his death. Into it he poured the work and observations of a lifetime spent studying the subject, thereby creating an invaluable corpus of the tomb-sculpture which survived in Ireland from the medieval period. Here his skill in description, the power and value of his observation of critical detail as well as his knowledge of armour (the subject of his M.A. thesis) find their finest expression. The book is unlikely ever to be surpassed in quality by any other work on medieval Irish art. But while this was his *chef d'oeuvre*, he wrote a surprising number of other, often brief, works on a great variety of subjects which will continue to be of considerable interest to those who tread afterwards in his footsteps. To facilitate those who wish to do so, but also as a tribute to a great friend from whom I have learned and benefited so much, I have tried to list below John Hunt's published works, while at the same time being conscious that the list is incomplete, omitting as it does those valuable but anonymous contributions which he has made to Messrs Sotheby's Sale Catalogues over the years. In the compilation of this list I have been greatly assisted by John Hunt's widow, Putzel, who has been his faithful companion and inspirer throughout the many years of their happy married life and to whom - together with their children - we may extend our sympathy on their, but also on our and Ireland's, great loss.

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