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Fleeing the Nazis, how John and Gertude Hunt left a lasting Limerick legacy

The Hunt Museum, which celebrated its 20th anniversary last week.

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THE Hunt Museum celebrated its 20th anniversary last week, on Valentine's Day. It's a timely date, as the stunning collection housed there is the life work of John and Gertrude Hunt, a couple whose love for each other was matched only by their passion for art.

The Hunt family and their collection have been much-researched in recent years, and Brian O'Carroll in particular has delved deep into the couple's history. It is from his book, John Hunt: The Man, The Medievalist, The Connoisseur that much of the following information is drawn.

John Durrell Hunt (known as Jack), was born on May 28 1900 in Hertfordshire, near London. His was a childhood of variable fortunes: his father ran a successful architectural practice in Marylebone, which resulted in a comfortable lifestyle for the family. Jack attended prestigious boarding schools and won a scholarship for The King's School in Canterbury Cathedral, one of the finest examples of Gothic architecture in England.

Brian O'Carroll points to this experience as inspiring a lifelong love of antiquity. Jack's father encouraged his eldest son in this pursuit, and in later years Jack would recall a seminal moment, when he showed him a flinthead arrow he'd found.

He was close to his maternal grandmother, 'Granny Sherry', whose own mother had hailed from Tuam, Co. Galway. Jack Hunt's Irish lineage was a fact he treasured – and gently embellished – throughout his life.

War broke out in 1914, and the Hunts, like many families, found their circumstances greatly changed as a result. Construction came to a

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A visitor examines one of the paintings on display at the Hunt Museum

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halt, and architectural work dried up almost completely. John Hunt, Jack's father, joined the army at the age of 48, and received injuries in Greece before being demobbed in 1919. Jack stayed just one term at the expensive King's School, before carrying out two years' military service and dallying with medicine.

By 1924 he had given up on a career as a doctor, and found himself working for White Allom & Co and Acton Surgey Ltd., both leading suppliers of art and antiquities to the wealthy classes. During what was to become a heady time in the industry, he made extensive connections, amassed a range of technical knowledge and built a reputation as a canny buyer.

He was developing his spiritual side as well – on December 25, 1925 he was baptised into the Roman Catholic faith and for the rest of his life would have an abiding interest in crucifixes and other religious artworks. Sometime after 1929, Jack came across a young, "brown-haired, blue-eyed German" named Gertrude Kreitz (née Hartmann), who was known, affectionately, as Putzel. They met, she later recalled, at an art school in London, sparking a relationship that would result in one of the most formidable partnerships in the 20th century art world.

Putzel was born in Germany in 1903, and spent much of her childhood at Mannheim Castle, where her grandfather worked as a civil servant. Her time there evoked a deep appreciation and love for classical art, as she had unusual access to rare pieces. Her teenage years were coloured with much upheaval, however, as Mannheim was subjected to violent rebellions in the aftermath of the Great War.

The couple married in 1933, and soon realised that by pooling their shared knowledge and buying skills, they could achieve remarkable success in the antiquities trade. They travelled regularly, procuring rare and obscure objects in small towns in Germany, Austria, Switzerland and France. Their personalities dovetailed nicely: she forthright and gregarious, he inclined to gentle charm and relaxed diffidence. Jack, Mr O'Carroll wrote, was "more academic, and Putzel more practical and commercial." It was a dynamite combination, and together they gained a reputation for exceptional "art sleuthing", working closely with renowned collectors such as William Burrell and Dr Philip Nelson.

The Hunts opened a gallery in Bury Street in 1934, which soon became so popular that it was frequently visited by members of the Royal Family. Queen Mary had a habit of dropping by, deftly pocketing whatever item happened to catch her eye. Jack continued his habit of careful academic study, a policy which paid off as he was able to correctly identify items others had dismissed as junk, making a small fortune in the process. He was soon recognised as an expert in the medieval period. It was a particularly challenging specialisation, as authentication proved difficult and wealthy arriviste collectors had little interest in large-scale, religious-focused pieces. During this time, Jack also nurtured a deep passion for archaeology, and he and Putzel regularly participated in digs, sometimes sleeping in caravans on site.

The early 1930s were good to the Hunts: Jack went from living with his mother in a rented home to an eleven-bedroom mansion in Buckinghamshire, known as Poyle Manor. There, he and Putzel displayed their favourite works, an embryonic private collection. By the end of the decade, they were close to having made a "fortune". However, once again, war was to intervene.

Despite living in the UK for ten years, with a British passport, Putzel was conscious of anti-German sentiment and began to plan an escape from London. In 1938 she and Jack rented a flat at 21 Molesworth, Dublin, less than a hundred yards from the National Museum. They brought over some small valuables and Jack applied for – and was granted – Irish citizenship. He then returned to the UK, in an attempt to keep his business afloat as museums closed, collectors ceased buying, and overseas purchasing trips became all but impossible.

John and Gertrude Hunt, together they formed one of the most formidable art partnerships of the 20th Century.

Some 28,000 people – mostly Jewish refugees from Germany - were interned by Britain in the early years of the war. In an uncomfortable parallel with modern times, xenophobic headlines dominated the national press, as those with foreign accents were viewed with intense suspicion. Years later, relatives would recall Putzel telling them about the intimidation she suffered at Poyle Manor. Windows were broken, excrement was dumped on their doorstep, and overly imaginative neighbours reported her to the police.

> *Windows were broken, excrement was dumped on their doorstep*

Putzel was acutely aware of the dangers her family and friends faced back in Germany. Philipp Markus was a Jewish art dealer of great repute, and he and his wife Anna were good friends of the Hunts. Putzel and Jack offered them accommodation and employment in the UK, and sponsored their visas (paying a £100 guarantee for each). Increasingly desperate correspondence from the time paints a tragic picture – the exit papers came through too late for the Markus family and Philipp was murdered by the Gestapo in 1944.

The Hunts departed for Ireland in 1940, gifting the use of Poyle Manor to the war effort, which saw it transformed into a military hospital. Having arrived in Dublin, a fortuitous set of circumstances drew them westward. Indulging in their passion for archaeology, the Hunts travelled to Lough Gur, to observe work being carried out on a medieval settlement. Jack's expert knowledge proved invaluable during the project, and the couple spent four months on site, helping to date and identify items recovered. They enjoyed their reception in the area so much that they bought a ramshackle 19th century farmhouse, using it as a base to continue their archaeological research. It became home to their extraordinary collection of artefacts, ranging from 12th century statues to a collection of royal dog collars. Gothic tapestries and Regency bookcases sat side by side, while drawings by Picasso and Michaelangelo hung on the kitchen wall.

The Hunts became closely involved in their locality, a relationship which would bring great benefits for the Shannon region. Living just twenty miles away from Bunratty Castle, Jack Hunt later recalled "I idly dreamed how wonderful it would be if it were to be restored." The couple threw their energy, knowledge and connections behind this dream, and eventually realised it, together with Lord Gort and number of other key figures and organisations. They even made Bunratty Castle home for a while, renting living quarters within the South Solar. The castle and its folk park would become one of Ireland's greatest tourist destinations, providing employment, revenue and an enhanced understanding of Irish culture.

During the 1950s the Hunts split their time between London (first Chelsea, then Mayfair) and Dublin (Drumleck, Howth). In 1957, they adopted a baby boy from a convent in Limerick, and a little girl a year later. The couple were "very devoted parents" to their children, John and Trudy, limiting their later travel in order to spend time with them. Jack and Putzel became highly involved in Irish society at that time, entertaining many leading members of government, arts and social circles, including the former first lady Jacqueline Kennedy, in 1967. Putzel, a close friend of Sybil Connolly, furthered her passion for antique dress and fine clothing by opening "Ireland's first boutique", called Anna Livia. Aside from his consultancy work, Jack renewed ties with American academics in the post-war period, supplying many of the country's most eminent museums.

As he entered his sixties, Jack became preoccupied with the idea of leaving a legacy, writing that he wished to create a "comprehensive museum illustrative of Irish life and art". He wanted a safe, publicly-accessible place to store and display the thousands of important historical and artistic works he and Putzel had accumulated. To do this, he turned westward once again, to County Clare. He settled on Craggaunowen Castle and after much bureaucratic wrangling and expensive renovations, the Hunts re-opened it as an educational centre, with its own crannog, in 1975. The site wasn't suitable for showcasing all their collection, however, and the National Institute for Higher Education in Limerick (now the University of Limerick) housed a large portion in its Plassey campus.

Jack Hunt passed away on 19th January 1976, after a short illness. Putzel was to outlive him, albeit in poor health, for some nineteen years. During this time she donated valuable pieces to museums all over the world, in memory of her beloved

John Hunt on his first archaeological dig near Lough Gur in 1940

Gertrude Hunt, acutely aware of anti-Jewish sentiment in the lead up to WWII, she organized for herself and her husband leave their British mansion for a rented flat in Dublin.

"Their ramshackle 19th century Lough Derg farmhouse was home to 12th century statues and drawings by Picasso and Michaelangelo

husband. After an energetic public campaign, the Hunt Collection finally found a permanent home in the newly-restored 18th century Custom House, on Limerick's quays. The Hunt Museum was formally opened in 1997, 'as a monument to (the) enthusiasm, curiosity and generosity' of Jack and Putzel Hunt.

Along with a catastrophic loss of lives, World War Two brought about unprecedented displacement of persons, property and personal effects. From this maelstrom emerged many valuable works of art, some of which were forcibly stolen or destroyed (most notoriously, by the Nazis), others sold for a pittance or exchanged by desperate families. As the items were conveyed in post-war years, buyers struggled to establish previous ownership and serious ethical concerns arose. One such case concerned the 'Mary Queen of Scots Triptych', which at various stages belonged to the eponymous queen, Adolf Hitler, the Pope, a junk dealer in Kerry and the Hunts. Jack found himself embroiled in a court case concerning this precious antiquity, but he acquitted himself with honour and integrity during the proceedings.

The issue of provenance reappeared in the early 21st century, long after the passing of Jack and Putzel. Acting on behalf of the Paris Wiesenthal Centre, Dr Shimon Samuels wrote to President Mary McAleese in 2003, alleging that the collection contained items looted by the Nazis during World War Two. The controversy led to numerous investigations, formal reports and column inches, but to this date, none of the allegations have been proven. On the contrary, independent expert Lynn Nicholas concluded her three years of research by pronouncing Dr Samuels' claims "unprofessional in the extreme". President McAleese in 2008 referred to the contents of the infamous letter as a "tissue of lies".

John and Gertrude Hunt came from very different backgrounds but they made their home in Ireland, raising their children, forging friendships and building businesses here. They greatly contributed to the preservation and celebration of Irish culture and history while they lived, and gifted their adopted nation a wealth of treasures when they died. We may take some pride in the fact that they chose to do so in our own rugged, windswept corner of the country.