

# Bits of Old Ireland W Just His Cup of Tea

By RITA REIF

**I**N THE ART TRADE OF THE 1930's, John Hunt's eye became legendary when he bought medieval ivories, bronzes and enamels for Sir William Burrell, a Glasgow shipowner. After World War II, the dealer sold other ancient, Romanesque and Gothic treasures to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore.

But the vast bulk of Hunt's personal collection and the most compelling Irish discoveries he made are now exhibited here at the University of Limerick in, appropriately enough, the Hunt Museum. The museum, a private trust established by the Hunt family, is operated in part by the Government of Ireland. A repository for items assembled

over 50 years by John and Gertrude Hunt, the gallery has on display roughly half of the 2,000 pieces that remained at his death in 1976, at age 75. The rest are on loan to the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert in London or are in storage until the Hunt Museum moves to its new home next year.

"We'll be in before Christmas," says Mairead Dunlevy, the director of the Hunt Museum, who is also a curator at the National Museum. The new premises will be the Old Custom House, an 18th-century structure in downtown Limerick overlooking the River Shannon. Once there, Ms. Dunlevy plans to exhibit some items in the manner the couple had displayed them in their home.

"The Hunts had a secret room in their Dublin house where they kept all their crucifixes," Ms. Dunlevy says. "It was a dark, quiet space. The walls were covered with cupboards filled with crucifixes — about 150 or so." Some of these artifacts are currently on view here, but more will be shown in the

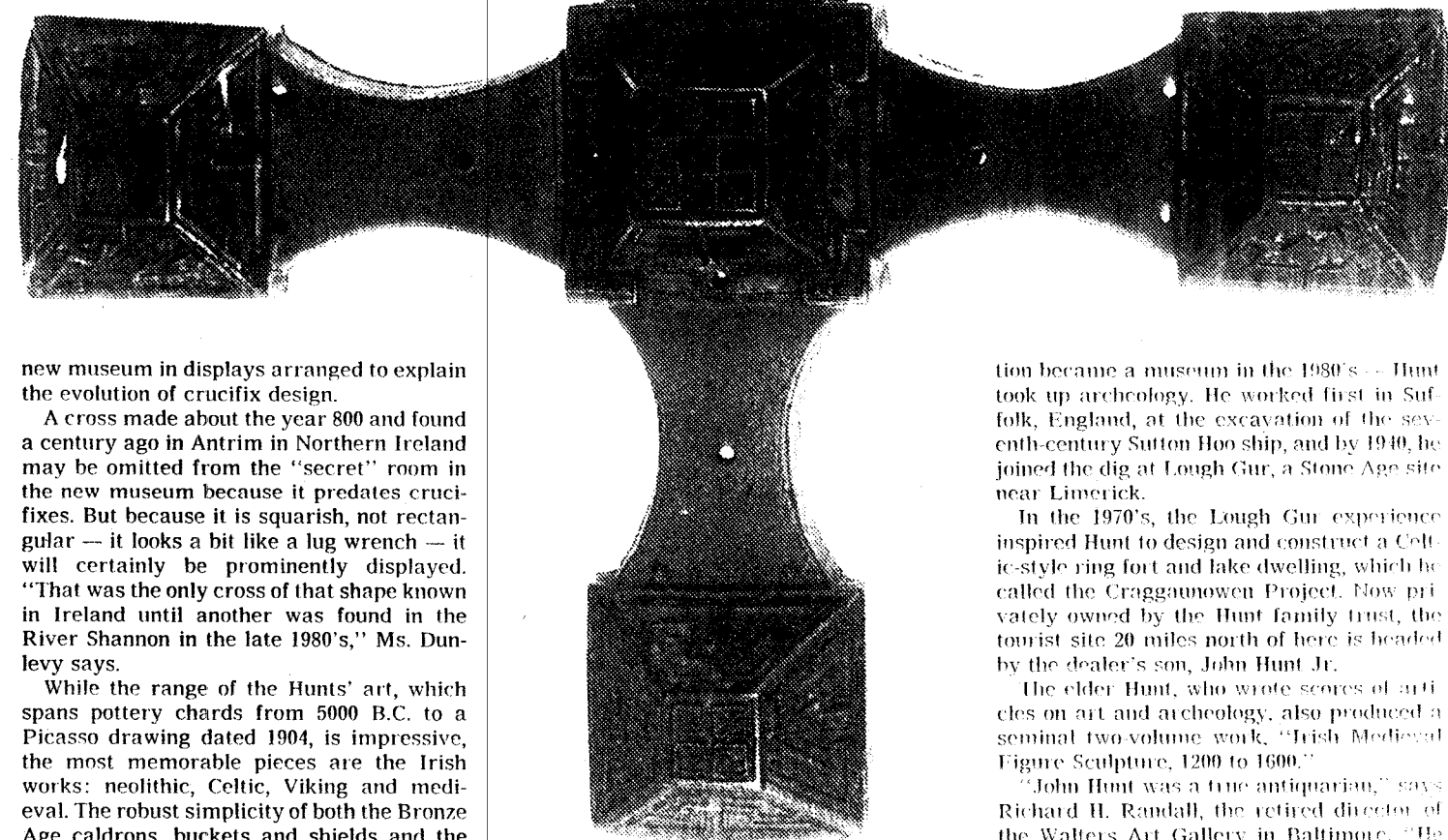


*A bronze caldron from about 600-500 B.C. is part of the Hunt collection exhibited at the museum named for him—Robust simplicity that is as Irish as the shamrock.*

Photographs from the Hunt Museum, the University of Limerick

## Vere

*A cross, circa A.D. 800, was found a century ago in Northern Ireland. Its squarish shape is especially distinctive.*



new museum in displays arranged to explain the evolution of crucifix design.

A cross made about the year 800 and found a century ago in Antrim in Northern Ireland may be omitted from the "secret" room in the new museum because it predates crucifixes. But because it is squarish, not rectangular — it looks a bit like a lug wrench — it will certainly be prominently displayed. "That was the only cross of that shape known in Ireland until another was found in the River Shannon in the late 1980's," Ms. Dunlevy says.

While the range of the Hunts' art, which spans pottery shards from 5000 B.C. to a Picasso drawing dated 1904, is impressive, the most memorable pieces are the Irish works: neolithic, Celtic, Viking and medieval. The robust simplicity of both the Bronze Age caldrons, buckets and shields and the medieval crosses and bells is as Irish as the shamrock: bold forms invariably dominate and surface decorations are either restrained or nonexistent. The Hunts' archeological and early ecclesiastical pieces are, for the most part, equal in quality to those in the National Museum in Dublin.

John Hunt, London born of parents from Limerick, demonstrated an interest in antiquities that went well beyond what he needed to make a living selling them. A collector since childhood, he studied medicine but became an antiques dealer in London in 1925 to earn money to help support his family. A decade later, after he was buying for Sir William Burrell — whose renowned collec-

tion became a museum in the 1980's — Hunt took up archeology. He worked first in Suffolk, England, at the excavation of the seventh-century Sutton Hoo ship, and by 1940, he joined the dig at Lough Gur, a Stone Age site near Limerick.

In the 1970's, the Lough Gur experience inspired Hunt to design and construct a Celtic-style ring fort and lake dwelling, which he called the Craggaunowen Project. Now privately owned by the Hunt family trust, the tourist site 20 miles north of here is headed by the dealer's son, John Hunt Jr.

The elder Hunt, who wrote scores of articles on art and archeology, also produced a seminal two-volume work, "Irish Medieval Figure Sculpture, 1200 to 1600."

"John Hunt was a true antiquarian," says Richard H. Randall, the retired director of the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore. "He was intensely interested in the history of things. And anything that was a puzzle, he absolutely adored and would spend years trying to solve its mystery."

But Hunt also enjoyed doing business. In the 1960's, he made what at first seemed an outrageous suggestion to Lord Gort, a client who collected medieval furniture. Once while driving past Bunnally, a 15th-century castle in County Clare that had seen better days, Lord Gort was complaining about having no place to show his holdings.

"Why not buy that castle for your medieval furniture?" Hunt said. When Lord Gort eventually agreed, he hired Hunt to help restore and furnish it.

**John Hunt's  
collection of Irish  
antiquities, on view  
at the University of  
Limerick, includes  
150 crucifixes.**