

THE HUNT MUSEUM

Limerick's Treasure supported by Aughinish



The purpose of the Hunt Museum is to exhibit, preserve, document and promote the Hunt Collection in a secure environment, so as to maximize its cultural and educational potential for the people of Ireland and for the International Community.

The collection itself has more than three thousand artifacts ranging from the Neolithic and Bronze Ages to mediaeval sculptures. In addition to works by Leonardo Da Vinci, Picasso, Renoir, Gauguin and Henry Moore. These priceless items were collected over a lifetime of fifty years by two internationally renowned art experts, John and Gertrude Hunt, who settled in Ireland in 1939 at the outbreak of the Second World War. They made their home at Lough Gur in County Limerick, an area steeped in pre-history and archaeology.

While the Hunt Collection is particularly well known for its religious works of art there is also a wealth of other material from the ancient civilization of Egypt, Greece and Rome.

Among the many important pieces in the Collection are the personal seal of Charles 1 of England, the Mary Queen of Scots Cross, a coin revered since the Middle Ages as being one of 'the 30 pieces of Silver' and a bronze horse by Leonardo da Vinci. There are also paintings by Renoir, Picasso, O'Connor and Yeats.

The Hunt Family felt passionately that the Collection should remain intact and that it should be housed in the Limerick region. With this in mind they generously donated their Collection to the people of Ireland so that the interest and pleasure they derived from it might be shared by as many people as possible.

John Hunt was born in London, on 28th May 1900 into a family of Architects. His wife, three years younger was brought up by her grandfather the curator of the collection owned by the Ruling Prince of Mannheim in Germany. She had as a consequence a wide experience of the world of taste and collecting.

Having turned away from Medical and Architectural studies possibly because of the declining health of his father and grandfather, John Hunt opened his own antique premises in Bury Street, adjacent to the prominent auction houses of Christies and Sothebys in London. By the time he had married Gertrud Franziska Charlotte Paula Hartman ne Kreiz on June 21st 1933 he was to describe himself on his marriage certificate as an Art Expert. Their marriage was to endure until separated by death, his in 1976 hers in 1995. Both near their home in Howth, north of Dublin.

From their earliest times together they were involved in advising many private collectors and major museums. Of the former, William Randolph Hearst, Robert von Hirsch, Philip Nelson, William Burrell and the Aga Khan were all clients.

The outbreak of the war made life difficult for Gertrud as a German in London and they moved to Ireland and settled into life at Lough Gur, Co. Limerick

They both became involved in the excavation of a megalithic tomb near Galbally and of houses near Caherguillamore, believed to be the first medieval site in Ireland. His report on the excavations at Caherguillamore was made in 1942.

He was awarded an M.A. for his work on Medieval Irish Armour, and this was to form the basis of his two-volume work on Medieval Irish Figure Sculpture. Lough Gur so moved him that he reconstructed a bronze age dwelling and this was to be the precursor of a much later project, that of Craggaunowen.

The work, which they jointly undertook with Lord Gort in the restoration of Bunratty Castle, is outstanding then and now. They also became friends with Sybil Connolly and acted as advisors to her in her collecting mode

John Hunt also persuaded the then Bishop of Limerick, Dr. Henry Murphy, to send the O'Dea Mitre and Crozier to the British Museum for conservation. The British Museum was enthralled to find such outstanding pieces of High Gothic Art in such a good condition.

The Crozier was conserved at the British Museum and the Mitre at the Victoria and Albert Museum before being returned to Limerick. The Craggaunowen development illustrating the story of the life of man as seen in, and from Ireland based on the Hunt Collection gave a new impetus to the collection and its appeal to the public. The later developments which saw the collection housed in the specially created spaces at the University of Limerick and subsequently to the present location at the Old Custom House brings almost to a full circle the history of the collection and the family.

The display in the Museum adds to the glories of Limerick, the region and the Nation.

The Old Custom House, Limerick

Described by the Knight of Glin as "Limerick's most distinguished piece of 18th century architecture" the Old Custom House was designed by Davis Duckart in 1765 and built under the supervision of Christopher Colles, a Kilkenny man. Both men understood the difficulties of building on waterfronts. Duckart's training was as a canal engineer and as such he worked on the Newry canal. Colles worked with the Nore Navigation board and after completing the Custom House became a specialist in hydraulics and canal building in Pennsylvania. The Custom House took four years (1765-69) and £8,000 to build. An administrative centre of the Revenue, it was also the home of the Collector. In 1769 the Collector was a local landlord, Caleb Powell. At that time sixty-seven men were employed from this centre - Surveyors, Tide-Waiters, Land Carriage Officers, Riding Surveyors, Coast Officers and boatmen some of who lived on Scattery Island and at Killrush and Tarbert. The aim was to keep an eye on the Shannon and to ensure that Revenue was collected!

The introduction of a new postal system in the 1840's, whereby post was prepaid using stamps, meant that an office was needed in Limerick. Therefore, the Controller was encouraged to move his residence and a Penny Post Office was opened in the Custom House with its entrance onto Rutland Street.

Over the years, the Office of Public Works ensured the survival of the building. In 1968 they undertook a major restoration programme that has left the building with strong floors. The current building, restoration and refurbishment works completed on 5 July, 1996 was the materialization of a dream for John Hunt Jr. and his sister Trudy, who have single-mindedly worked to achieve their goal. Against many adversities - and in spite of many temptations to make life easier by selling the collection - John Hunt Jr. has achieved his parent's wish of having their collection on display in Limerick. He was fully supported in this by a strong team of Limerick individuals and organisations.

Aughinish Alumina is a member of that support group. You too can be a supporter of this amazing and unique resource by simply visiting the Hunt. You won't be disappointed.

