

BOOKS



1 RODERIC O'CONNOR
Breton Woman
c1896-7
oil on canvas
125.5 x 91cm

2 Maiolica Drug Jar
workshop or style of
Domenico da
Venezia c1550-80
Tinglazed
earthenware
29 x 13cm

3 Court of Benin,
Edo 15th-19th
century, Ivory with
lead inlay
18.5 x 10 x 4.4cm

The Hunt Museum Essential Guide

Editor: Helen Armitage

Scala Publishers in Association with
The Hunt Museum 2002. 176 pp
s/b €12.95/ Stg£14.95. ills 200 colour
ISBN 1 85759 287 5

Erin Gibbons

This is a useful and welcome publication describing one hundred and fifty of the 2000 or so objects in the collection of the Hunt Museum, Limerick. In the foreword the chairman of the Hunt Museum, George Stacpoole, describes the collection as an eclectic mix, based on a knowledge of art that was legendary. The various categories of objects, time-span, diversity and expertise represented in the collection succeed in making this publication a significant contribution to our knowledge of the collection. In the painting section, the works of painters such as Picasso, Gauguin, Yeats, O' Connor, Moore and Mulvany are included and discussed. In the section dealing with ceramics, a 16th-century Majolica drug jar is discussed side by side with an Irish Bowl Food

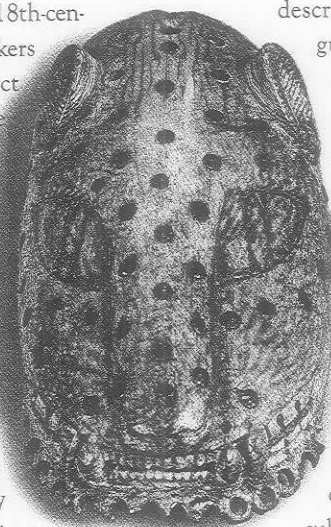


Vessel and a Vase Food Vessel from the Early Bronze Age. *The Leopard's Head* mask from the famous court of Benin in Nigeria sits opposite two 18th-century Zwischengoldglas beakers from Germany. In fact many of the objects in the collection appear to be German in origin. This thematic layout of information, though quite traditional in form lends itself well to the publication and it departs from the more chronological approach of many contemporary museum catalogues. Despite the many contributors, the narrative is clear, very readable and appealing both to the specialist and to those with a less scholarly interest. Most of the 200 photographic images are by Davison and Associates Ltd and these are beautifully reproduced.

The introduction to the book is essentially an uncritical eulogy of the assemblers of this collection, John and Gertrude Hunt. Neither the method of

acquisition of the Hunt Museum collection nor a critical evaluation of the authenticity of some of its pieces is referred to in the forward, introduction or in the fifty-one individual contributions. This is disappointing given the information that is available and known about aspects of the collection. The professional activities of the Hunts in the world of antiques have cast a long and uncomfortable shadow over this collection, but this is never referred to. Their involvement with the illegal dispersal of the famous Pit Rivers Collection is well known. Their involvement in the illegal export of the famous Emly shrine from Ireland to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, their Nazi associations, the friendship of John Hunt (senior) with the Arm dealer John Ball whose collection is also represented here, and with the much discredited Peter Wilson of Sotheby's. Are these objects and the people who handle them to remain without a past?

What is most lacking in this and previous Hunt Museum catalogues is information on the provenance of the objects described. What generally distinguishes museum collector from the bric-a-brac of an antique dealer's store (no matter how impressive the store contents) is the issue of provenance. Museum objects are not just evaluated in terms of their monetary or art historical value. Each object has a place at a purpose in time at space, and knowledge of the details of this enhances our overall understanding of the culture and society from which the object derives. Despite the fact that the book does not fulfill the aim of the title it is definitely worth a read for anyone with an interest in museums and museum collections.



Erin Gibbons (Archaeologist and Museum Consultant) is currently co-researching a book on John Hunt (senior) and Gertrude Hunt with Jackie McDermott