

RIGHT OF REPLY

Erin Gibbons' review of *The Hunt Museum: Essential Guide* in the Spring edition of the *Irish Arts Review* was brief, yet while she acknowledged the quality photography and research, she devotes about half of her piece to a thinly disguised attack on the reputations of the late John and Gertrude Hunt.

It is unfortunate that an archaeologist was asked to review this work as the couple who assembled the collection enjoyed international respect for their knowledge of the medieval period and of Western European decorative arts. In Ireland the relationship between the Hunts and, for example, the University of Limerick, the National Gallery of Ireland and the Art and Industrial Division of the National Museum was cordial, based on an appreciation of their scholarship. Their relationship with Irish and antique dealers worldwide was business-like and in the mode of the foremost international antique dealers of the first half of the 20th century.

It is indisputable that the Hunts had an

outstanding reputation for their expertise in locating, identifying and interpreting objects of international importance. Their approach was in tune with that of decorative arts museums generally and of the early National Museum of Ireland. Through the 1950s-70s the Hunts taught those interested in objects how to analyse a piece so as to understand the techniques used in production; the purpose of its manufacture; how it was used and hence its historical and artistic importance. The collection that they donated to the State reflected this as it was selected so that the history of each item contributes to the whole and to an understanding of our common social, economic, design and industrial European history.

The attitude of the Hunts was in tune with the main thrust of the report of the Committee of Inquiry into the National Museum, 1927. It was at variance, however, with the tenor of the associated minority report by Professor Nils Lithberg, which advocated the study of 'the principal characteristics of the native race'. Those who supported that minority report developed a certain approach to Irish archaeology and folklife and for many decades subsequently, decorative arts or antiques were considered as 'British' in influence and, at best, ignored.

An uneasy relationship developed between the Hunts and the Irish Antiquities Division of the National Museum, which was due somewhat to this fundamental difference in approach. It has to be remembered that at that time archaeology was regarded as the domain of the public servant and of universities, and so people such as the Hunts were considered as upstarts. The antagonism to them that developed evolved into folklore, which is reflected in the files of the Irish Antiquities Division.

Ms Gibbons would seem to have approached her review of the Hunt Museum guide from that antagonistic viewpoint and thus makes suggestions of guilt by association. Her innuendoes about 'illegal' activities refer to matters that remain unproven. She alleges that the Emly shrine was exported illegally. That raises the ques-

tion as to why no one was prosecuted for the export of that family heirloom. If an offence took place, then the Minister for Education, advised by his officials in the National Museum would not have failed in his statutory duty to prosecute as directed by the National Monuments Act, 1930. That the Hunts were not involved is clear to those who read the relevant file in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The allegation that the Hunts were involved in, as your reviewer says, 'the illegal dispersal of the famous Pit (sic) River Collection' has to be proven, as the Hunt believed that they purchased those items at their full monetary value when they were on the market by that museum's representatives. The Hunts objective was to return at their own expense, important archaeological objects to Ireland. With a similar magnanimity they facilitated the conservation of the O' Dea mitre and crozier, and published research on them in 1953, a time that few archaeologists were interested in early 15th century Irish metalwork.

Ms. Gibbons' criticism regarding insufficient information on the provenance of objects shows a lack of understanding of decorative arts museums. Items for such are usually found in auction rooms and antique shops rather than on archaeological excavations. Reliable information on their find places or history is therefore usually difficult to establish.

As Ms. Gibbons and her co-author are intent on writing a book on John and Gertrude Hunt, they need to develop an understanding of decorative arts, including the difference between maiolica and majolica. They should also read the file of all divisions in the National Museum critically and with equal discernment examine files in museums such as the British Museum, Victoria and Albert, Leeds Castle, the Burrell, Boston, Baltimore, New York etc. As an Irish person I trust that she will, sometime, thank the Hunts for trying to re-introduce the study of decorative arts to this country and for their generosity to this State. ■

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ERIN GIBBONS COMMENTS:

I am attempting to evaluate the relevance of the Nazi associations of John and Gertrude Hunt in the context of their business dealings. The provenance and authenticity of certain objects handled by the Hunts is also being examined as part of this research. Not only did Ms Dunleavy fail to address these issues but she now seeks to sidestep the issues entirely, while serving up as a smoke screen a skewed version of the history and internal politics of the National Museum of Ireland.

Ms. Dunleavy's views and actions contrast markedly with those of Ciáran MacGonigal, another former curator of the Hunt Museum, who forthrightly addressed many of the relevant issues in a paper read at a recent conference of the Irish Museums Association. In seeking to separate what is true from the endless spin and rumour that surrounds John and Gertrude Hunt and their collection I consulted two professional archivists when I began this research for my forthcoming book. Their advice led me to a variety of important sources, none of which are referred to by Ms. Dunleavy. Archaeological methodology is a valid process. It does not rely upon not hide behind the creative writing of an antique dealers catalogue. If the basic research principles of archaeology were to be applied to the field of decorative arts and the antiques trade generally it would not be as easy for the forger to thrive or the shady dealer to participate in the trade and exchange of looted and stolen antiquities. ■