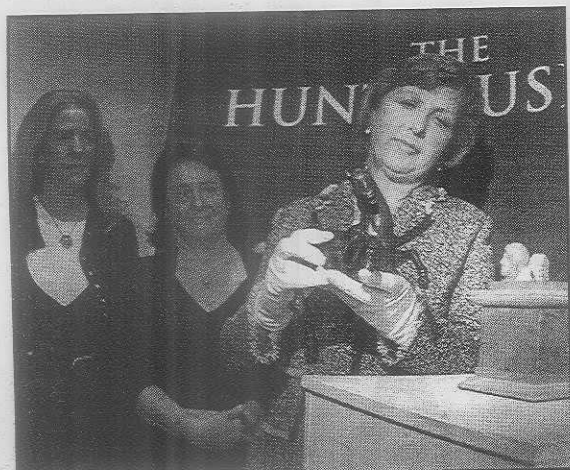


Today's weather

MOSTLY cloudy today, with outbreaks of rain and drizzle. Breezy at times but becoming mild and humid as the day goes on. Continuing humid and cloudy

tonight, with further rain at times and becoming windy. Temperatures reaching 10 to 13 degrees by the end of the day, dropping to between eight and 12 tonight.



President McAleese holds at horse by Leonardo DaVinci at the Hunt Museum with Virginia Teehan, curator and Trudy Hunt (LL)

Wiesenthal name was diminished by slur on Hunts, says President

By MIKE DWANE

THE Jewish lobby group which made baseless claims that John and Gertrude Hunt - who collected over 2,000 artefacts housed in Limerick's Hunt Museum - were involved in trafficking looted Nazi art has been subjected to a stinging attack by President Mary McAleese.

On a visit to the museum this Monday, President McAleese accused the human rights organisation, the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, of damaging the reputation of the renowned Nazi hunter who gives the centre its name.

The president's criticisms of the Wiesenthal Centre come almost exactly four years after she was sent a letter from that organisation's Paris-based director Dr Shimon Samuels in which it was alleged that John and Gertrude Hunt had links with "notorious dealers in art looted by the Nazis". It was also suggested that John and Gertrude, who was German, were involved in espionage and had arrived in Ireland "one step ahead of MI5". Dr Samuels requested that the president suspend the Irish Museum of the Year award she had just granted to the Hunt.

These allegations were eventually dismissed by one of the world's leading

expert in the field of Nazi era art loss and restitution, the American academic Dr Lynn Nicholas. In a report published last September, Dr Nicholas variously describes the claims and conduct of Dr Samuels as "offensive", "confrontational", "unprofessional" and "personally abusive". She went on to conclude that research conducted on the Hunt collection to date provided "no proof whatsoever that the Hunts were involved in any kind of espionage or they were traffickers in looted art". Further provenance research is recommended, however.

Speaking in public for the first time on the affair, President McAleese told an audience at the museum yesterday that Dr Samuels' allegations were "mean-spirited".

"Growing up, the name of Simon Wiesenthal was a name and is a name I deeply respected as a person. I cannot say they same about the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, who have diminished his name in the way in which they have dealt with this museum," the president said.

But this morning, Dr Samuels hit back, describing the president's remarks as "uncalled-for" and pledged the Simon Wiesenthal Centre would have research of its own completed within three months.