

News

Wiesenthal Centre yet to produce Hunt report

Mike Dwane

ARTS minister Martin Cullen has yet to receive a report from the Jewish human rights organisation that claimed items housed in the Hunt Museum may have been looted by Nazis.

Allegations that the collection founders, John and Gertrude Hunt, had links with "notorious dealers in art looted by the Nazis" were first aired by the Simon Wiesenthal Centre in a letter to President Mary McAleese in 2004. The centre's Paris-based director Dr Shimon Samuels called on the President to suspend the Irish Museum of the Year award granted to the Hunt while the matter was investigated.

But allegations by Dr Samuels that the Hunts had arrived in Ireland "one step ahead of MI5", and an assertion by Cathal McCoille on RTE radio that the Hunts were themselves Nazis, caused deep distress to their children, Trudy and John junior, who died before his parents names were cleared by international art loss expert Dr Lynn Nicholas last year.

John and Gertrude Hunt, they said, were on the German-Jewish Relief Committee to help people escape from Nazi Germany while a terminally-ill John Hunt Junior told this newspaper in 2004 that his parents had been "deeply anti-fascist".

Dr Nicholas' report in 2007 found "no proof whatsoever" of any connection between the Hunts and dealers in looted art and described Dr Samuels as "unprofessional in the extreme", "confrontational" and "personally abusive". Dr Nicholas did recommend, however, that further research be carried out into the origins of items in the collection with uncertain provenance.

On a visit to Limerick earlier this year, President McAleese caused an international row by calling the Wiesenthal Centre's claims baseless.

Its conduct had "diminished the name" of Simon Wiesenthal, the renowned Nazi hunter who gives the centre its name, the president said.

Dr Samuels hit back by telling this newspaper President McAleese's remarks were "uncalled for" and "unbefitting".

A report on the matter was to be published by the Wiesenthal Centre in the spring.

When contacted by this newspaper in May, Dr Samuels said that a lengthy report, which would deal with the Hunt collection, would be published imminently.

"It is currently being



The Hunt Museum: the Minister for Arts, Martin Cullen, is still waiting on a promised report that the Hunts were Nazi art looters six months after that promise was made



Dr Shimon Samuels: told the Limerick Leader last May that the report was 'being finalised by our legal counsel'

finalised by our legal counsel and I look forward to discussing it with you [the press] although it will first be sent to the Minister for the Arts.

"It is a 160-page report and it is currently being checked for accuracy and potential libels as we want it to be spot on. It should be ready at the end of the month [May]."

Six months on, however, and the Minister has yet to receive a copy of the report, nor have the various groups and committees set up at taxpayers expense to investigate the claims.

"Neither the Hunt Museum, the Ryan Committee, the Royal Irish Academy or the Minister have ever received evidentiary material or a report on this matter from Dr Samuels," a Department spokesperson told the Limerick Leader this week.

Dr Samuels was not available for comment this week but he has been challenged by Limerick Civic

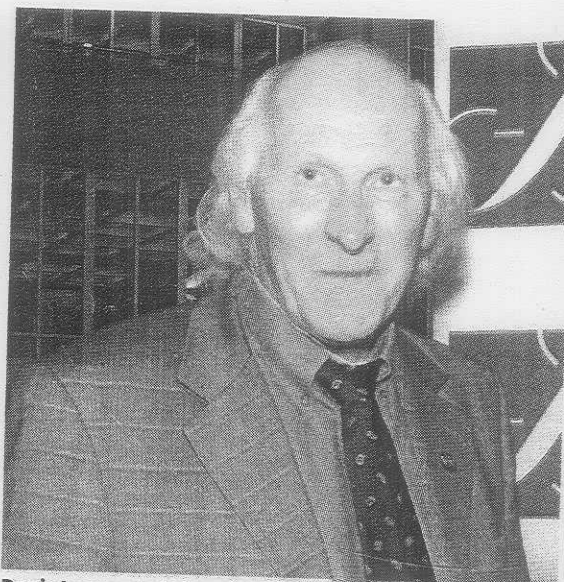
Trust director Denis Leonard to either produce evidence of issue an apology to the Hunt family.

Mr Leonard this month sent a letter to the Irish Times about a report on the recent visit to Aras an Uachtaran by the Friends of the Hunt Museum and a remark in the report that "the controversy is all in the past".

It was through The Irish Times that Dr Samuels' allegations were first publicly aired over four years ago.

"Either his claim to be preparing a report was merely a smokescreen to deflect the rebuke by President McAleese or else his lawyers have agreed with the President's view that his allegations were 'a tissue of lies.'"

- Denis Leonard, Limerick Civic Trust



Denis Leonard of Limerick Civic Trust: 'He has produced nothing to substantiate his claims'

Mr Leonard said he failed to see how the controversy could be consigned to history given the Wiesenthal Centre "has never withdrawn its claims or apologised to the Hunt family".

"Last January, in response to a strongly worded statement from President McAleese, Dr Samuels promised to publish a detailed report on his allegations by mid-April but failed to meet this deadline.

"In May he said he had

finished the report, which ran to 150 pages, and which, after vetting by his lawyers, would be sent to the Minister for Arts imminently," Mr Leonard continued.

"No such report has appeared - perhaps not surprisingly, since in the almost five years since Dr Samuels first wrote to President McAleese he has produced nothing to substantiate his claims nor dared to challenge the authoritative report by the expert on Nazi-looted art, Lynn Nicholas, who dismissed his efforts as 'unprofessional in the extreme'."

"Could it be that there are only two conclusions one can draw from Dr Samuels's conduct?

"Either his claim to be preparing a report was merely a smokescreen to deflect the rebuke by President McAleese or else his lawyers have agreed with the President's view that his allegations were 'a tissue of lies.'"

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