

Taoiseach is urged to reopen Hunt probe

■ Jewish group responds to the official investigation with a 165-page shadow report

By MIKE DWANE

THE Jewish human rights group which first made allegations artefacts in Limerick's Hunt Museum may have been looted by Nazis has asked Taoiseach Brian Cowen to reopen an investigation into the collection and broaden its terms of reference.

Dr Shimon Samuels, international liaison director of the Paris-based Simon Wiesenthal Centre, has sent the Taoiseach a copy of a 165-page shadow report the Wiesenthal Centre has published in response to the report of American art loss expert Dr Lynn Nicholas.

The Nicholas report, which was published last year, found no evidence John and Gertrude Hunt had associations with Nazi art dealers but did recommend further research into the origins of the Hunt Collection.

Provenance research at the Hunt is complicated by the fact that John and Gertrude Hunt dealt mainly in decorative arts and most of the items in the Hunt Collection are not unique.

According to Dr Samuels, the recommendation to carry out further research "vindicates the position" adopted by the Wiesenthal Centre when it wrote to President McAleese over four years ago asking her to suspend the Irish Museum of the Year Award won by the Hunt.

Dr Samuels is demanding the Taoiseach reopen the inquiry as the terms of reference of the initial investigation set up by then Arts Minister John O'Donoghue - the Hunt Museum Evaluation Group - were too restrictive.

The Wiesenthal Centre has also repeated claims it was excluded during that investigation, which was denied by evaluation group.

"The Evaluation Group was incomplete and that the Nicholas Report was erroneously interpreted by some Irish media as giving 'a clean bill of health' to John and Gertrude Hunt," Dr Samuels writes to the Taoiseach.

"On the contrary, our Shadow Report indicates that concerns about their activities are reasonably grounded and warrant proper and exhaustive investigation."

"Taoiseach, we hereby submit the Shadow Report to your attention,



Taoiseach Brian Cowen



Shimon Samuels



President McAleese who visited the Hunt Museum earlier this year with director Virginia Teehan

with the conviction that it provides ample grounds for you to reopen the Hunt Museum enquiry, to broaden its terms of reference and thus to ensure that justice may not only be done but be seen to be done."

Among the issues the Wiesenthal Centre wants examined or re-examined are the Hunts' alleged links to known Nazi art dealer Alexander von Frey, their relationship with Adolf Mahr, who was head of the Nazi Party in Ireland when heading up the National Museum of Ireland and alleged links with British dealer Felix Habord, who the Wiesenthal Centre said "may have been involved in the removal of looted art from Germany".

The shadow report has been written for the Wiesenthal Centre by Dublin archaeologist Erin Gibbons.

It was Ms Gibbons who in a review of the Hunt Museum guide, published in the Irish Arts Review in early 2003, referred obliquely to the Hunts' "Nazi associations".

And it was Ms Gibbons' husband, Dr Eamonn Kelly, keeper of antiquities at the National Museum of Ireland who in June 2006 told a conference hosted by the Royal Irish Academy that the evaluation group had ignored files in the Irish Military archives that would link the Hunts to dealers in looted art.

Later examination of these and other records



Cleared of link to Nazi looting: Limerick's Hunt Museum, but Shimon Samuels, from the Simon Wiesenthal Centre has called for the probe to be reopened and the terms broadened

by Dr Nicholas, however, provided "no proof whatsoever" the Hunts had links with such dealers.

In the aftermath of that report's publication President McAleese condemned the Wiesenthal Centre for "mean-spirited" and "unproven" allegations that had "diminished the name" of Simon Wiesenthal, the famed Nazi hunter who lends the Wiesenthal Centre his name.

The Hunt family denied all allegations, remembering John and Gertrude Hunt as being "deeply anti-Fascist" and people who had tried to help Jews escape from Nazi Germany.

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