

News

Hunt chairman refutes new Nazi claims

■ Former UL president Dr Roger Downer says further allegations of the Hunt family dealing in Nazi-looted art remain unproven

Mike Dwane

ALLEGATIONS that John and Gertrude Hunt, who amassed the collection housed in the Hunt Museum, were intimately linked with notorious dealers in Nazi looted art remain "unproven", according to the chairman of the museum.

Dr Roger Downer, a former president of the university of Limerick, was reacting to the publication of a report on the Hunts by the Paris-based Simon Wiesenthal Centre, the international Jewish human rights organisation.

The delayed 165-page report was published last week in response to an earlier examination of the controversy by American academic Dr Lynn Nicholas, a recognised international art loss expert, which said there was "no proof whatsoever" that John and Gertrude Hunt - who donated their collection to the State - were involved in Nazi-looted art trades.

But Dr Shimon Samuels, Simon Wiesenthal Centre, has called on Taoiseach Brian Cowen to reopen the investigation of the Hunts and broaden its terms of reference to include all business dealings of the Hunts.

The Wiesenthal Centre's report outlines a number of

allegations and draws a number of definite and potential links between the Hunts and Nazi art dealers, collaborators and sympathisers.

But the initial reaction to the report in Limerick has been to maintain the Wiesenthal Centre's claims are short on evidence and long on innuendo.

"The allegations made by Dr Samuels against the Hunts are most serious and, although the Hunt Museum does not have a mandate to comment on behalf of the Hunt family or to conduct the investigation proposed by Dr Samuels, it regrets greatly that the reputation of such generous and public spirited philanthropists should be tarnished by unproven innuendo and conjecture," said Dr Downer.

The controversy erupted when Dr Samuels sent a letter to President McAleese five years ago asking her to suspend an award given to the museum. This was on the basis of information received by the Wiesenthal Centre on John and Gertrude Hunt.

Archaeologist Erin Gibbons had written a review of the Hunt Museum guide, published in the Irish Arts Review in early 2003, which referred to the Hunts' "Nazi associations". And it is Ms Gibbons who is the author of the report pub-



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lished by the Simon Wiesenthal Centre last week.

Among the findings and allegations in the report - some new, other repeated - are:

■ The Hunts corresponded with Swiss-based Alexander von Frey, who wartime records show traded in Nazi-looted art. There is no evidence from files in the Irish Military Archives that the Hunts were involved in any such transaction but further research is recom-

mended by Dr Nicholas and Ms Gibbons.

■ The Hunts were friendly with Dr Adolf Mahr, director of the National Museum before the war and the head of the Nazi Party in Ireland. It is suggested that Mahr may have been involved in helping the Hunts set up in Ireland after leaving the UK in 1940.

■ The restoration of crannogs at Cragganowen, in which John Hunt was involved, was championed by Mahr as he

believed they were inspired by Germanic lake dwellings

■ That John Hunt may have known the anti-Semite Russian aristocrat Prince Turka Galitzine, a member of the London-based Fascist group the Right Club.

Earlier allegations appear to have been dropped however. In a submission to an inquiry team set up to investigate the claims, former Hunt Museum director Ciaran MacGonigal said he had been told by Ms

Gibbons that John Hunt had been briefly interned in the Curragh because of suspicions held by Irish authorities. This allegation is not repeated in the Wiesenthal report.

Ms Gibbons interviewed a friend of the Hunts, Yvonne Hackenbrock, in London who said there had been suspicions the Hunts were engaged in espionage but that this centred on their ownership of a radio transmitter and certain maps. Ms Hackenbrock did not believe the Hunts were spies, despite the Wiesenthal Centre's claims the Hunts made their "precipitate flight" to Ireland in the 1940s because of British security suspicions.

While the controversy has been rumbling on, the Hunt Museum has been acting on the allegations, retaining international expert Marina Mixon to conduct provenance research.

The Wiesenthal Centre had pointed to alleged links between the Hunts and a British decorator Felix Harbord, who the Wiesenthal Centre said was involved in rifling artefacts from an art collection point near Hanover after the war.

But research on behalf of the museum shows none of the art that went missing was related to the Holocaust and, in any case, Harbord had gone

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back to the UK when the alleged thefts occurred.

Publicly-funded research will continue into the provenance of the Hunt Collection, with Christie's auction house records next on the list. Since the controversy erupted, the Hunt Museum has placed images and available information on all its artefacts online. There have since been half a million visits to the website in the intervening three years and, despite worldwide publicity, not a single claimant has come forward.

The museum had taken these steps in recognition of its responsibility to ensure the integrity of the Hunt Collection.

"Our appointed research experts are currently engaged in the next stage of research and we hope to have further findings available online early in the New Year," said Hunt director Virginia Teehan

"It must be acknowledged that the Hunt Museum recognises its responsibility to maintain its professional integrity and has implemented appropriate structures not only financially but in terms of opportunity and development, we will continue our commitment to this aspect of our work within the context of the limited resources at our disposal".

"It must be acknowledged that The Hunt Museum has been extremely pro-active, constructive and methodical in its approach to dealing with the allegations made by the Simon Wiesenthal Centre and in ascertaining the provenance of the Hunt Collection. I think the time has come to allow us continue our quest for truth and perhaps the time has also come to respect the fact that we have employed the assistance of world-class, objective, experts, whose international reputations rest on the validity of their research findings," Ms Teehan said.

Tycoons' golf course to close

John Hogan

A GOLF course owned by leading Limerick businessmen Aidan Brooks and JP McManus, is to close at the end of 2009 after it was found to no longer be viable as a business.

Members and staff at Aidan Brooks, above, and

