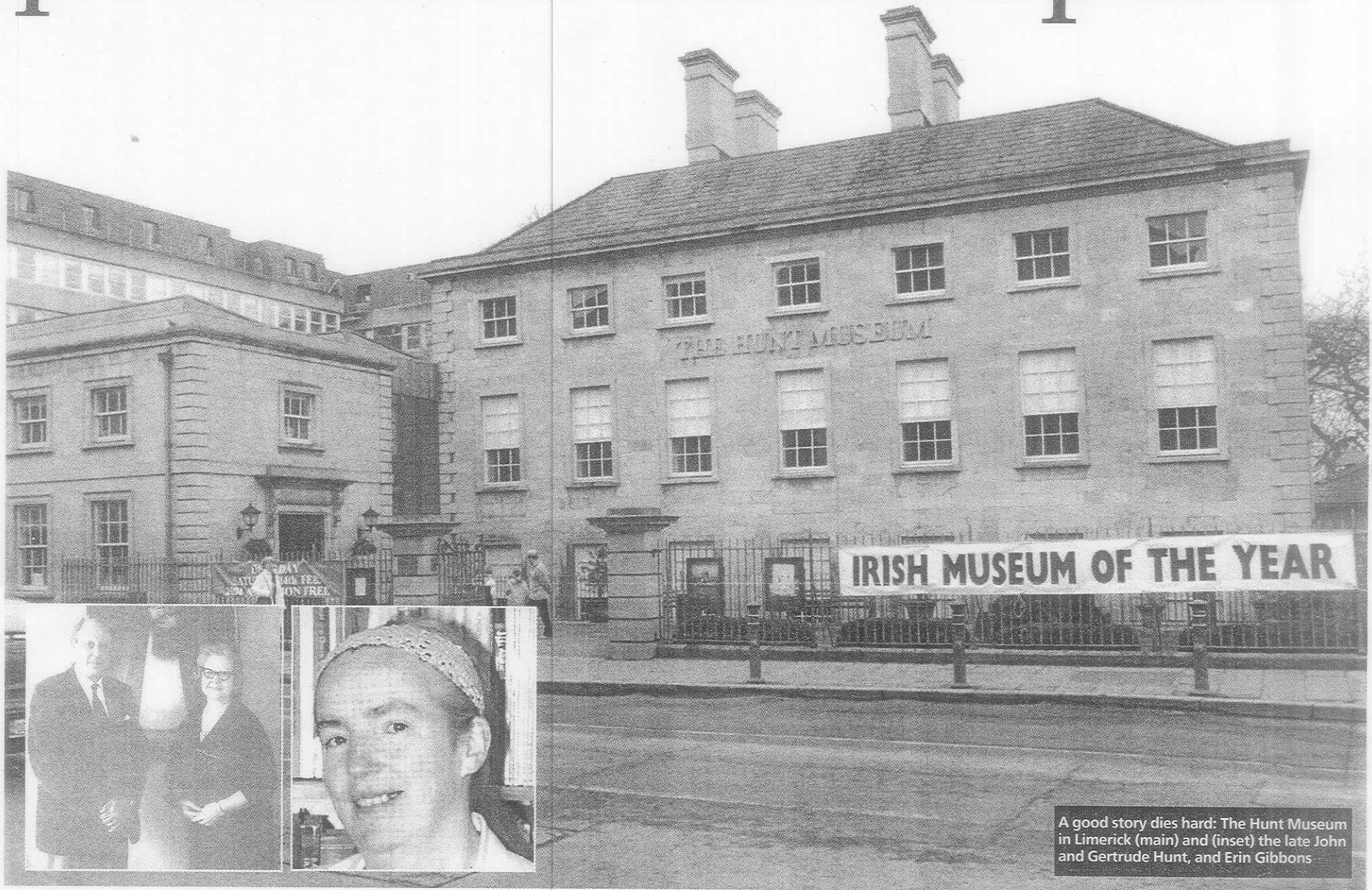


Hunting the Hunts a perennial blood sport



A good story dies hard: The Hunt Museum in Limerick (main) and (inset) the late John and Gertrude Hunt, and Erin Gibbons

He was an old gentleman of Limerick who bequeathed his art collection to the museum in that city named after him. John Hunt is long since dead but the controversy that surrounds his name and collection is still very much alive.

It began in the summer of 2003 when Erin Gibbons, an archaeologist who had done some work connected with the National Museum, reviewed *The Hunt Museum Essential Guide* in the *Irish Arts Review*, and criticised it for the absence of biographical material about John and Gertrude Hunt — stating that “the professional activities of the Hunts in the world of antiques had cast a long uncomfortable shadow over the collection” because of what she refers to as the Hunts’ “known Nazi associations”.

Dr Shimon Samuels, international liaison director of the Wiesenthal Centre in Paris — a quite different organisation from the one founded by the great Simon Wiesenthal, who tracked down many of the fugitive Nazis who had master-

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minded the Holocaust — took up the cudgel offered him by Erin Gibbons’ very slight review.

He wrote on January 26, 2004 to President Mary McAleese, who had just announced the Hunt Museum was to be ‘Museum of the Year’. He wanted this award withdrawn and asked that the museum’s Nazi associations — implicitly of both the Hunts themselves and what they had collected — be investigated.

Mary McAleese backed off. John O’Donoghue, who was Arts Minister, funded an inquiry in 2005, administered by the Royal Irish Academy (RIA). The RIA made a succession of mistakes, such as excluding evaluation of charges of Nazi associations or espionage by the Hunts from the terms of reference.

The RIA then merely focused on the Hunt collection, not following its own terms of reference by only partly evaluating these charges, though not com-

prehensively doing so.

Finally, the academy made the error of not inviting Shimon Samuels to their seminar in June 2006, which they should have done even though he had not responded to their requests for information.

What they seemed to have settled, by 2006, was revisited following a seminar at which the RIA report was released. This seminar, on international professional practices and Holocaust-related losses, had to refocus its energies on the existence of an intelligence file on the Hunts held by the Irish Military Archives. Shimon Samuels then wrote and told the RIA evaluation group that it had not done its job.

Lynn Nicholas, an international expert in Holocaust-related losses, analysed the methodology of the group, and responded intelligently to the criticisms made by the Wiesen-

thal Centre. Her report was published in September 2007.

The Nicholas report established that the Wiesenthal Centre appeared to have based their allegations on a single Army intelligence file held at the Military Archives in Dublin.

Lynn Nicholas established that this file did not provide any evidence for claiming that John and Gertrude Hunt were Nazis or were dealing in objects looted by the Nazis.

A good story dies hard. Erin Gibbons has now produced a book-length article which starts with her own review from 2003, where the controversy itself started, and ends with a repeat of the main charges.

Yet no single item in the Hunt collection in Limerick has been identified as linking John and Gertrude Hunt with material looted from the Jews. This means that Shimon Samuels — who in 2005 said that he planned to make specific allegations “soon”, adding that “we have research about specific pieces and it won’t take long before we go public on that” — has failed to do so, though he has now gone public, relying

on his original source for data, instead of an independent person.

Other accusations also fail. Shimon Samuels refers to extensive pre-war connections with Nazis, yet Erin Gibbons has produced no such evidence of contact by the Hunts with any Nazi in the pre-war years apart from John Hunt’s strictly business contacts as an art dealer with Adolf Mahr, the director of the National Museum.

Erin Gibbons offers as evidence of ‘Nazi associations’ the fact that John Hunt sold art objects for the Pitt Rivers Museum in Dorset. The owner of this museum was a British fascist. This does not mean he was a Nazi.

Nor has she provided evidence of the Hunts’ “precipitate flight from London to neutral Ireland one step ahead of British suspicions of their alleged espionage activity”. Shimon Samuels claimed that “MI5 had suspicions of their espionage activities”. This was extensively researched by the RIA — to which Erin Gibbons makes

no reference — and no links of any kind with MI5 suspicions were found.

Shimon Samuels claimed that an internal Hunt Museum report “stated quite clearly that they were Nazis”. Erin Gibbons does not raise this since it was flatly denied by Judith Hill, the report’s author.

Other issues also fail, including supposed linkages with art dealers known to John Hunt, who, along with most of the art dealing trade in continental Europe (including several Jews), dealt in art looted by the Nazis.

Though Erin Gibbons claims that key documents cannot be interpreted as giving ‘a clean bill of health’ to John and Gertrude Hunt — how does one prove innocence? — her huge document now released by Shimon Samuels is unconvincing, avoids difficult questions, and leaves us all a sorry, mud-bespattered field of hunters still hunting a fox that does not exist.

Even so, a-Hunt-ing we will go, into the future, and the cry will always be, “Tally-ho!”

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