

The Hunt Collection - A Review Article

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The Hunt Museum, at present housed in the University of Limerick, is rapidly becoming one of the places for students of art, design, archaeology and related subjects to visit, while it also provides a major attraction for the artistically and culturally minded tourist. North Munster owes an enormous debt to John and Gertrude Hunt for presenting to it their marvellous and invaluable collection, and the debt is beginning to be repaid by the expert professional exhibiting of the objects and by the publication of the two books reviewed here. The two books complement and supplement one another, but such is the magnificence of the Collection that even the selected objects illustrated and commented on can do no more than hint at all the Museum has to offer. However

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Patrick F. Doran, *50 TREASURES FROM THE HUNT COLLECTION*, The Hunt Museum Executives, Limerick 1993; pp. 120; ISBN 0-9520922-4. Price: £35.00.

The City of Limerick is most fortunate in having acquired the Hunt Collection, soon to be housed in the two hundred years old refurbished Custom House, which is to be its permanent home. The existence of this collection of very valuable objects is due entirely to the zeal and enthusiasm of John Hunt and of his wife Gertrude, both of whom latterly made their home in Co. Limerick at Lough Gur, which gave them local status. The Hunts, together with their four Pekinese dogs, were much loved figures locally and at nearby Patrickswell, where they attended 9 a.m. Mass on Sundays. When John Hunt and his wife Gertrude - Pudzil to her friends - first came to Lough Gur they were welcomed not only on account of their friendliness but because of John's easy manner and Pudzil's good looks and vivacity. Limerick, by housing this Collection, has complimented John's acquisitive instincts.

Professor Patrick Doran, Dean of Humanities at the University of Limerick and long-time honorary Curator of the Hunt Museum, has written the Introduction, outlining the history of the Collection, and also the commentaries on the fifty selected treasures illustrated in this large-format book which the Treaty Press has beautifully printed. Altogether, it is a very able production, clearly a labour of love.

The Hunts' interest in visual education must have influenced them greatly in the range of their acquisitions. John had a good eye for the unusual and for objects of rarity, and Patrick Doran has presented a fine appreciation of John's abilities in this respect. John and Gertrude had other fine qualities too, which made of them two remarkable people. As a friend of and admirer of John's single mindedness, this reviewer regrets the absence of a short biography.

Acquisitions range in date from the Stone Age to comparatively modern times. John's tastes were catholic, and in consequence I find that the New World has not been overlooked. This book contains illustrations of fifty objects chosen from the Collection as a whole. The Knight of Glin has contributed the Foreword, really a short article on the Limerick Custom House, where the Collection will soon be permanently housed. An architectural drawing of

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the Custom House dated 1766 accompanies this article, while a more recent one is on the dust-jacket (unfortunately not reproduced in the book, given the ephemeral nature of dust-jackets).

These fifty objects chosen for our delectation are shown in this book in full colour, the oldest being an embossed circular bronze shield (No. 38) of the Yetholme type of about 700 B.C. and which is more or less contemporary with a well preserved bronze bucket (No. 44), remarkable for having rows of raised bosses on the shoulder. Both objects date from the Late Bronze Age and they were formerly in the Pitt-Rivers Collection in Dorset, England: both are said to have been found in Co. Antrim, the bucket certainly, in Cape Castle Bog, near Armoy, the shield probably but less certainly so.

A pre-Columbian statuette in polished green serpentine (No. 32) attracts attention for the boldness and firmness with which the sculptor has fashioned the excellent features of the face, most delightfully moulded.

Item 23 is an enamelled escutcheon taken from a Celtic bronze hanging-bowl, which is claimed to be of Irish provenance, though found in England, and is of seventh century date. There is a crudely made hole near the circumference, suggesting that the escutcheon had been worn as a pendant. To wear it as such was a Saxon habit, as suggested by the discovery of an escutcheon in the Saxon village of Charlton, Hants. Though definitely Celtic, this item is unlikely to have been of Irish provenance, but is more likely to have come from somewhere in the Bucks./Oxon. area of England.

I smell treason and plot because of the stance of the figures depicted in the English 12th-century ivory object shown in plate number 18. The figures are well-carved; one holds a long-handled axe with well-sharpened cutting-edge, held out of sight behind a figure which is (now) appropriately headless! This object, perhaps depicting an event in the murder of Thomas à Becket, was included in *The Year 1200* exhibition, held in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 1970.

Because of considerations of space, I must be selective. But here one must mention the Leonardo da Vinci prancing horse (No. 16) said, with only three others like it, to have been cast from a lost da Vinci wax or terracotta sculpture: a da Vinci drawing of a very similar rearing horse is preserved in Windsor Castle.

For me, an object of unusual interest is the stained glass panel in white, blue and pale green, dated to c.1300, depicting an angel blowing a trumpet, which has come from the choir east window of Bristol Cathedral. In the late 1920s the Victoria and Albert Museum held an exhibition of stained glass of this glorious period in stained glass-making, and, barring a faulty memory, this panel could have been one of the exhibits. The curator of the day drew attention to the uniqueness of the blue dyes, which he claimed could not be produced today. This panel (No. 9) was included in the Council of Europe exhibition of *Gothic Art in Europe*, held in the Louvre in 1968, and in the Royal Academy in 1988 in the exhibition, *Age of Chivalry: Art in Plantagenet England, 1200-1400*. That such a rare and attractive panel should have been included in the Hunt Collection is indeed fortunate for Ireland.

The reliquary cross (No. 1) had a distinguished owner in Mary, Queen of Scots. Spare a tear for this charming lady; politics decreed that she should be betrothed to the Dauphin of France; politics decreed (engineered by Mary's mortal enemy, the notorious Queen Elizabeth I) that they should part company. She married Darnley, who fathered James I of England. Darnley was blown up when he took refuge in the tower of the church of Our Ladye Kirk o' Field (where Edinburgh University now stands) while Mary was taken to Loch Leven castle, shut up for several years and finally executed by her cousin, the ugly Elizabeth. One likes to think of Mary, a Catholic, deriving comfort from her daily prayers, this reliquary cross in hand.

Mary's descendant, Charles I, was no less lucky in retaining his head, in spite of possessing the 'King's Evil', the ability to heal all those who touched his cloak. Here, in the Hunt Collection, is his seal (No. 2) in the form of an oval-shaped emerald engraved with the letters C and R, flanking a royal crown and set in a gold frame.

Erotica has not been overlooked. Here, expressed in a 16th-century South German pendant, made of gold, ivory, emeralds, ruby and enamel, is shown a pair of lovers disporting themselves on an ivory ground which had been painted green (No. 4).

No. 8 is a vellum leaf taken from a German 12th-century Book of Pericopes, the text taken from John, chapter 8, verses 52-55. The Book of Pericopes was a volume of public readings from the Scriptures and used on major feasts of the Christian Church. The Cross is represented here by a green tree trunk with lopped off branches. Beside the crucified Christ are the usual figures of Mary, St. John the Evangelist, Ecclesia and others; but for me the main interest is in the symbols which appear left and right of the upper part of the cross, depicting a mourning sun and moon. The association of sun and moon with, at first, the symbol of Christ, the Chi-Rho, goes back to the beginning of Christianity in the eastern Mediterranean area, and later, in the sixth century, with the figure of Christ shown in majesty. Sun, the symbol of Helios the sun god, and the moon were both pagan symbols adopted by the Christians, who regarded the sun as the symbol of the *Son* who casts His light over the world, whereas the moon, waxing and waning, represents His *Being*. Here both, shown within circles, representing Life, as with the high crosses of Ireland, are depicted as mourning the death of Christ on the Cross.

The Beverley Crozier (No. 13), 11th-century Anglo-Norman in date, is carved in relief out of walrus ivory, and shows a foliage scroll. Within the volute there is a scene showing the curing of the dumb boy by Beverley, Bishop of Hexham, 686-705, a story related by Bede in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*. This crozier was included in two London Exhibitions in 1984: *The Golden Age of Anglo-Saxon Art 966-1066*, in the British Museum, and *English Romanesque Art 1066-1200*, in the Hayward Gallery.

The most important Irish object in the Collection is the Antrim Cross (No. 25), found in Co. Antrim some time in the last century. This is an equal-armed cross, formerly attached to some other object as the rivet-holes indicate. The square, pyramidal-shaped bosses are unusual and are unlike most Celtic work. There is nothing with which it can be readily compared, though there are affinities in eighth-century Irish metalwork as discussed in detail by Dr. Peter Harbison in *Studia in Memoriam John Hunt*, volume 20(1978) of our *Journal*.

No. 47 is another reliquary-cross, carved out of walrus ivory and dating from the early 12th century. It shows a youthful Christ under the hand of God, standing against rather than suspended from the Cross. On the reverse side is an Agnus Dei in quatrefoil. This reliquary-cross was also included in the *English Romanesque Art 1066-1200* exhibition in 1984, held in the Hayward Gallery, London.

In the course of this review it might be thought that there has been an over-emphasis on religious art. But then, in early Christian and medieval times, artists working in ivory, stone, wood or metal were primarily concerned with religious art, for within that field lay their living. In later times art became less religious and more domestic, so that as representatives of their age there are included here works by Gauguin, Renoir and Jack B. Yeats. The Gauguin is a water-colour monotype painted on Japanese paper; the Renoir is an unfinished water-colour, whilst the Yeats is an oil on canvas and is entitled 'The Master of Ceremonies'.

And for those who need an antidote to reading about so many aspects of religious art, this review must end on a bacchic note. No. 48 in the collection is a delft spirit-barrel, decorated with landscapes in manganese and having moulded ribbed ends. This barrel is one of the

more important items made by Henry Delamain in Dublin about 1755. Henry Delamain was Ireland's best known producer of delftware, and this barrel had the distinction of being chosen by the Post Office for a 9p postage stamp in 1976.

This is an ideal 'coffee table book' which I find difficult to put down. Lucky citizens of Limerick, you have an exceptional collection of very valuable objects.

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Patricia McKenna, *ARTISTIC DESIGNS IN THE HUNT MUSEUM*, Iarsmalann Hunt/The Hunt Museum, Limerick 1994; pp. 40; ISBN 0-9520922-1-2. Price: £5.95.

The Hunt Museum is full of treasures, not only of prehistoric and Early Christian artifacts but also of wonderful Medieval objects too. All tend to be designed with a sense of the beautiful as well as the practical, and they combine to present us with a wonderful, indeed unique, collection of objects of an extraordinary variety, of great interest, and of academic and tasteful, yet also of monetary, value. But it is primarily a personal collection, well illustrating the diversity yet unity of the wide and all-embracing knowledge and appreciation of John and Gertrude Hunt for what one might rather tritely term "all things bright and beautiful".

This little booklet by Patricia McKenna allows us a quick brief glance at a handful of only fifteen of the Museum's exhibits, concentrating on a few of those which are among the best-designed, their form not necessarily, but often, enriched by beautiful decoration. This is only right, for the Hunts believed that a study of their outstanding collection, accumulated over many, many years, or even the superficial glance of a rushed visitor, should be aimed at influencing attitudes towards the necessity for combining art with function - a theory William Morris and others expounded strongly, and successfully practised, in late Victorian England, and which was later espoused by the Dún Emer Guild, the Cuala Press, and others in early twentieth-century Ireland. Most of the fifteen objects beautifully illustrated and intelligently commented upon in this booklet readily fulfil the criterion that practical everyday articles need not be ugly and merely basically functional, but that with attractive decoration and, above all, good design, they can also be pleasant to the eye and often be rightly appreciated as true works of art. Nor, indeed, should the Hunt Museum be regarded as merely showing a fascinating display of unusual and valuable exhibits, but it should be visited as a place of instruction where one can usefully learn about the past and also the social life and artistic 'bent' of people, particularly those who lived in Medieval, Post-Medieval, Renaissance and, even, Industrial Europe.

Two North Munster items in the Collection are thought suitable for inclusion in the selection presented here, fit to rank alongside a magnificent small statuette of a rearing horse, probably modelled by the great Leonardo da Vinci, and other Irish and foreign exotic splendours. These are the large decorated, cast-bronze, ninth-century handbell from Cashel (almost identical with one from Lough Lene, Co. Westmeath, now in the National Museum of Ireland) and a small silver, appropriately plain but well-designed, pap-boat (used for feeding liquids to infants and invalids) dated to c.1760 from Limerick - note, with regret, that in the latter case the illustration does not do the object justice.

The Hunt Museum contains many prehistoric artifacts, some of major importance such as the Cape Castle, Co. Antrim, sheet-bronze bucket of Late Bronze Age date which is illustrated and commented on in this little booklet. Others are of lesser importance, though not necessarily without interest, and three such are also included. Firstly there is a simple Early Bronze Age open stone mould for casting axeheads, secondly, a flat bronze axehead such as the mould would produce (but not from this mould), and thirdly a fine long leaf-shaped bronze spearhead - regrettably erroneously dated to the Early rather than to the Late Bronze Age. Explaining the not very attractive mould and axehead in a publication with "Artistic Designs" in its title, we are told that they provide "a useful starting-point for the study of design. Together they illustrate how a simple mould was used in the production of a tool and they demonstrate the interdependence of tools, technology, materials and design". *Verb sap.* Fortunately the spearhead with its slender tapering outline is elegant enough to be legitimately treated as a well-designed object, but this is hardly shown to full effect - the illustration would have been better designed had it been a bit longer and arranged diagonally across the page. The comments made about this spearhead regrettably miss the point entirely regarding its purpose. Emphasis is put on the alleged fact "that it was once the head of a lethal thrusting weapon, designed to be wielded by hand or hurled as a missile", and we are then told that "To limit oneself to a military interpretation would be to miss out on the strength of its design" - yes indeed, but its very length (45cm. or 1ft.6ins.) and graceful design clearly indicate that it was never usable as a military weapon but was made for ceremonial purposes. Brand new and shining brightly, wouldn't it have looked magnificent on parade?

Beleek pottery can often be of really poor taste, but the last item illustrated and described in this booklet is of an extraordinarily beautiful Beleek candelabrum, the three candle-holders being in the form of sea-urchins held in the antlers of a white hart. It was made about 1895 and looking at it one can readily understand how the Co. Fermanagh porcelain factory rapidly gained its international reputation.

One could continue at some length about all the other items selected for illustration and comment, ranging from an openwork bronze twelfth-century hand-warmer to a Berlin-made nineteenth-century openwork cast-iron tiara, but let the above few words suffice to encourage visitors to acquire this publication - it will serve as a thing of beauty which is a pleasure to behold and also as a most useful *aide memoire* to the type of objects collected by the Hunts and presented by them to the Nation, thus in its own way fulfilling their aspirations regarding beauty and function.

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