

Why culture jobs should come with health warning

International norms and procedures have not been followed by the Wiesenthal centre in its allegations against the Hunt Museum, writes Pat Donlon

Working at the higher levels of culture in Ireland is not for the faint hearted. Recently we have witnessed less than ordinary happenings in the arts and heritage community. We have seen resignations of board members and staff from organisations such as the Irish Museum of Modern Art, the Heritage Council, the Arts Council, with controversy becoming the norm rather than the exception.

The 1990s saw the directors of the National Museum, Gallery and Library battle with leaking roofs, dwindling grants and, in the case of the library, asbestos. Now the Hunt Museum is currently in the eye of the storm with allegations of holding Nazi-looted artefacts.

While we wait for the dust to settle on the present controversy and for the independent review group to reach its conclusions we can count the casualties - truth, fairness, reputations, respect and standards - I could go on.

No right-thinking person condones what Nazism stands for, nor the mindless and barbaric sufferings inflicted on victims and survivors of the Holocaust. Equally, no right-thinking person could fail to support the mission and zeal of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre.

It is alarming, however, to witness this mission being contorted, exploited and twisted in a sensationalist and unprofessional manner, through unsubstantiated claims and allegations rather than following well-established international norms and procedures followed in cases of spoliation.

These norms and procedures have been developed by such high-level groups as the European Centre

for Looted Art, ICOM and UNESCO.

It is troubling that the centre did not contact The Hunt Museum directly to request their support and co-operation - a support and co-operation, which it is now abundantly clear, would have been given willingly. Instead, the first time this serious allegation emerged was through newspaper reports of a letter sent by the centre to the President, Mrs McAleese, containing unsubstantiated claims and citing anonymous sources.

While the fact that the Hunt Museum, its director, board, together with the Hunt family have acted quickly, honourably and in a very professional and mature manner should have encouraged co-operation with them at all levels and especially from anyone in possession of proof. But the reality has been the opposite.

The centre has become more strident in its demands and reactions while continuing to refuse to co-operate. The reply from Dr Shimon Samuels as reported in this paper was that he would come forward with his documentation when he was "ready".

Why come forward without being ready? Why light the fuse if by your own admission you have not prepared your proof and therefore are uncertain exactly who is responsible for wrongdoing? Given the seriousness of the allegations, one would have hoped that the honourable thing would have been done, namely, full co-operation and delivery of all information held.

The Wiesenthal centre appears from reports to have based its allegations on an article in *Irish Arts Re-*



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view by Erin Gibbons, a museum consultant, who confirmed that she spoke to the Wiesenthal centre as she felt "a moral imperative" to take up the matter. Should this "moral imperative" not have driven her to the door of the Hunt Museum or the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism?

Spoliation is not just a museums issue but a human-rights issue arising from deliberate looting by the Nazis during the period of the Holocaust, or indeed the most recent looting of Iraq's museums. It arises from horrific acts and claims must be taken very seriously by governments and society, by human-rights bodies, by museums and professional associations internationally.

It is not a criminal issue such as the theft of material from the Chester Beatty Library by one of its curators some years ago. Neither is it an issue of straightforward repatriation whereby one nation makes a claim for return of objects such as the ongoing battle between the British Museum and the Greek government for the Elgin marbles.

Despite the fact that museums are in the business of collecting and

preserving artefacts and maintaining records, there are currently 46 major museums in Britain - including the British Museum, the Tate Gallery and the Burrell collection in Glasgow - that are facing claims of having unknowingly acquired or harboured looted goods acquired during the period 1933-1945.

Private collectors collect - some for investment, some through a love of beautiful objects. The objects they buy often hang on walls, or lie on floors or shelves and if they have purchased wisely, the objects increase in value. They do not always keep accession records and if these items are donated in good faith to a museum then their uncertain provenance goes with them.

Many of our great libraries and museums today are great because of the foresight and generosity of the private collector.

For those working in the sector in Ireland, when faced with such allegations there is little support in terms of policy. We have no professionally recognised qualification for entry into museums nor is there independent accreditation.

The Heritage Council's *Towards*

a *Policy Framework for the Irish Museum Sector* (2003) is an innovative and praiseworthy step forward. However, as yet there has been no indication from Government as to whether its recommendations will be implemented.

It is heartening in the midst of the current controversy to witness an institution whose whole approach is mature and defined by the requirements of international best practice. Given that this issue is perceived by the world media as a national rather than institutional concern - as is the case in other countries - the response by the Hunt Museum is to be welcomed and supported.

In the past, I have been critical of issues of governance within the sector. Those entrusted with the management of museums and cultural institutions in Ireland have evolved a long way from the traditional academic associations of the past, and now resemble other leaders in the public and private sector.

They manage large organisations, budgets, human resource issues and the overseeing of complex buildings with very specific technical requirements. They need to demonstrate

skills in diplomacy and PR while keeping abreast of developments in their fields by research and publication and are often called upon to be fund-raisers.

All of this is conducted in an environment of limited resources. All in all, working at the higher levels of culture in Ireland is not for the faint hearted and perhaps such positions when advertised should henceforth carry a Government health warning.

Pat Donlon is former director of the National Library

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS

The correct title of the RTÉ *Prime Time* programme on clerical sexual abuse broadcast in October 2002, referred to in reports on Cardinal Connell's resignation yesterday, was *Cardinal Secrets*.