The magnificent Hunt Collection takes up permanent residence next we museum in Limerick. **Brian Fallon** reviews the collection and speaks to Jol director of the new museum and son of the original collecto

Success of the Hunt

John Hun small bro scholars clay mo leopard century.

ON FEBRUARY 14th, the Taoiseach will formally open the Hunt Museum in Limerick, and at last the celebrated Hunt Collection will have its own, permanent building and adequate exhibition space. At the time of writing the converted Custom House, an 18th-century stone building on the quays, is still as busy as an anthill. The conversion work is essentially complete but several more anxious, hectically busy days loom ahead before the collection is finally placed for public display.

John Hunt, who is acting director of the museum, as well as being the son of the late John Hunt and his wife Gertrude ("Putzel"), is both satisfied and anxious. The builders, working under the guidance of the Office of Public Works, have done their work well — and there was a great deal to do, since even the stairs are brand-new. The building, vacated some years ago by civil servants, was sound in structure but run-down inside. The next step after that was the actual display work, as glass-fronted cases were installed and the precious objects began to be placed in them — in many cases, tentatively or provisionally.

Experts had been recruited for the work, including Robin Wade from London, a respected figure in the museum world who has designed the showcases and general display. Meanwhile, the restorer, Mary McGrath, came up to consult Hunt hurriedly about the work she had just completed on a late Gothic panel of the Magdalen — probably German and probably from a long-vanished or dismembered altarpiece. The so-called Beaufort Tapestry is in the hands of another restorer, Cliona Devitt. Other experienced helpers on hand include Ruairí Ó Cúiv, formerly of Temple Bar Gallery and the Douglas Hyde Gallery. Coincidentally, John Hunt himself had been a director of the Temple Bar Gallery but resigned in 1990 to devote himself to being virtual custodian of his parents' life work.

He admits, a little ruefully, that these displays cannot go by the book or the ground-plan. What seems impeccable on paper, so he has found, often simply does not work in practice, does not "look right". And he does not want a historicist, step-by-step approach but wants to create an informal, almost domestic "feel"; the first room you enter is called the Prologue Room, which he says is "about surprise. We wanted just to bounce off different things together." Stands and drawers hold a range of art objects ranging from a small Picasso drawing to a 14th-century alabaster vessel.

In an adjacent room stands a 16th-century carved figure from Augsburg, superb examples of Limoges enamelwork (the late John Hunt, though a wide-ranging connoisseur, was essentially a medievalist) are already on view and the so-called Archer-Butler Luck Stone, actually of glass or crystal, which was used chiefly as an amulet for animals. Hung around the necks of cattle, it was supposed to cure them of the murrain and other diseases.

In another room pottery and china are arranged, but in a deliberately domestic way, not impersonally. Nearby are pieces of silver, mostly 18th century, including the Midleton Mace from Co Cork. Jewellery — brooches, rings, necklets etc. — is everywhere, and majolica ware is prominent, but a special place of honour, in the middle of a small room or cabinet, is reserved for one of the collection's centrepieces — the small bronze of a rearing horse, which scholars suppose to have been cast after a lost clay model by Leonardo da Vinci. This, presumably, was the maquette for the great bronze horse which was to stand in a square in Milan but which for a number of reasons was never cast. According to legend, invading French crossbowmen engaged in a drunken archery contest shot the big clay model to pieces.

Yet another ground-floor room holds "anything not in the primary galleries," says the director, "stuff we can just pull out and show". One drawer contains a piece of tapestry, while laid out on display are a rusty helmet, a medieval chest with the initials EAI on the lid and a clutter of other objects big and small. In a corner, not yet in place, is a Giacometti drawing of a woman, while a Picasso pencil sketch of a woman (an early work, I estimate) bears on the reverse side a donkey and a human head.

THE more antiquarian works are mostly upstairs (from which you have fine views through the large, 18th-century windows across the grey waters of the Shannon), including an early Greek wooden figure (a rarity) of a man, with the face missing which allows the joinery work to be seen. There are magnificent small Cycladic carvings, notable Egyptian pieces, Roman and Etruscan works, including a marble head of an unknown woman showing her carefully arranged coiffure. Bronze-Age artefacts, both from Ireland and continental Europe, crowd together: swords, shields, daggers, cauldrons. Then come Viking axe-heads and monastic bells from early Christian Ireland, ranged in order of size — the biggest is incised with a cross. Another of the collection's highlights, the Antrim Cross, is prized particularly as an early example of enamelwork.

There will be a section entirely given over to religious art, ranging from medieval pieces down to the so-called Penal Crosses which, in fact, were probably pilgrimage souvenirs. (A fine Sheela-na-Gig in another room scarcely qualifies under this heading). Decorative art will also have a space of its own. John Hunt has created ha ing banners of reinforced pape signage for the various areas most of these use as motifs sc detail or piece from the collecti but greatly enlarged. And, added, by the evening of following day, 1,500 labels wer be made and ready for insta tion.

A room has been specially aside for seminars, lectures scholarly get-togethers, since museum is designed to have educational role and to be sti lating visually for young peopl particular. There will even b small "touch it room" for chil

THE Hunt Collection is virtually unique of its kind, and one of the few large private collections which was not dispersed after the death of its creators or sold wholesale either to dealers or some high-powered American institution. Recent estimates of its value have gone as high as £35 million, though the general feeling is that such a figure is too low.

Yet neither John Hunt the Elder (who died in 1976) nor his wife, who died only a few years ago, were wealthy people in the accepted sense. Neither of them inherited money and though in the 1930s they ran a respected antique business in London, temperamentally they were always driven more by buying than to selling. In those days, with knowledge and flair, dedicated people such as they were, could amass fine collections without expending much capital — which they did not have anyway. Where they were almost unique was in keeping what they bought. As their reputations grew, they earned money on commission by advising other, monied collectors, and they were also sought after as evaluators and cataloguers. Yet to the end, they lived relatively simply.

The elder Hunt was at various times a member of the Arts Council of Ireland, a member of the National Monuments Advisory Council and a committee member of the Friends of the National Collections. Though his training in art and antiques was pragmatic rather than academic, he was also a respected archaeologist and he was a good enough art historian in his own area to write a valuable book on medieval Irish sculpture. Towards the end of his life, his reputation as an expert was international and Sothebys, in particular, often called on his knowledge.

The museum that bears his name will have its own staff and director (his son merely acts in that capacity) and, for the initial period, fairly generous funding. But after that it is on its own, apart from a yearly grant of £25 from Limerick Corporation running costs, so it must in e generate its own revenue. To that, it must charge an admis fee of £3 a head and John H admits that he has his fin crossed after the official open to see if and how the public turn up in sufficient numbers.

He will start to find out on morning of Saturday, Febru 15th, when the museum will cially be open to the public for first time. Opening hours will 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Tuesdays to urdays (with the usual Mon closure) and on Sundays from 5 p.m.