



Mairead Dunleavy with a 19th century copy of the Ardagh chalice at the Hunt Museum.

Picture: DERMOT LYNCH

New dawn for Celtic twilight

By PATRICIA FEEHILY

LIMERICK'S old custom house will breathe new life again in a little over a year from now, when it admits visitors to one of the most exciting and internationally important collections of art and artefacts from the distant and near past of the Celtic tribes, their descendants and many of their contemporaries.

Many years after it first went on display, the Hunt Collection will have at last found a suitable and accessible home in Limerick, the place beloved of art historian, archaeologist and collector, John Hunt, one of the world's leading experts on medieval art.

And no-one is more thrilled at the prospects it opens up than Mairead Dunleavy, the museum's newly-appointed director.

Mairead, a quietly spoken Donegal archaeologist, who comes to Limerick from the National Museum, has a most impressive list of professional involvements herself, and has published important works and articles dealing particularly with historic design and creativity.

One of her most important publications was *Dress in Ireland* published by B.T. Batsford Ltd, London, in 1989, and her articles range from Irish lace to lighting in 18th century Dublin.

She knew the late John Hunt and his wife, Gertrude, and said: "He had a enormous affection for Limerick. This collection belongs to the people of Limerick."

Mairead believes that not only will the collection enhance in an unprecedented way the culture of the city, but will also give that culture an international standing.

"We also hope that it will prove a source of inspiration for today's designers and that the local art college will become involved." "You have a tremendous collection," she says.

The collection's status can be gauged from the fact that some items are currently on loan to the British Museum, and might have remained there if a home hadn't been found for them in Limerick.

The new director is quick to pay tribute to the University of Limerick and Dr Ed Walsh, who provided a temporary home for the collection, and to Limerick Corporation, GPA and Shannon Development, who have now embarked on the project which will give Limerick one of the best museums in the world.

The collection is obviously priceless, but if some value has to be put on it, Mairead estimates about £50m.

Her own empathy with the items in the collection on display at the university is obvious.

"Isn't he marvellous?" she enthuses as she introduces Apollo in his role as "genius of the arts" a unique piece of German sculpture dating from about 1600. It is a coloured wooden statue of a god-like figure festooned with the tools and symbols of many arts and crafts, from music to carpentry.

In an atmosphere that could only be described as awesome, Mairead introduces you to the enthralling craftsmanship of Bronze Age Ireland, fascinating Stone Age flint daggers, jewellery of almost indescribable beauty, endearing statues of the Madonna and Child, and examples of rare 18th century Irish glass.

Of particular interest to Limerick people is a replica, approximately 100 years old, of the magnificent Ardagh

Chalice.

Mairead was anxious to point out that the Hunt Collection will remain essentially that. "We will not be competing with other local museums, all of whom have an important role to play," she explained.

The Hunt Museum executive committee, comprises Dr Tony Ryan of GPA, Jack Higgins and Jim

Barrett of Limerick Corporation, Paul Sheane and Michael Roberts of Shannon Development, Dr Edward Walsh of UL, Paddy Doran, curator of the UL display, and Eamon Cregan. An association Friends of the Hunt Museum, is being formed.

Work on the new museum is on-going and according to Mairead, "we

are keeping our fingers crossed that it will open in 1994."

When it does, it will be something to proclaim to the world, as well as a window through which we can view the progress of our civilisation. It will be as a tribute to one man's generosity, and a testament of his regard for Limerick.