



John Hunt

JOHN AND TRUDY HUNT and the board of the Hunt Museums Trust in Limerick have only themselves to blame for the crisis that has now enveloped them. The suggestions, now taken up with characteristic enthusiasm by the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, that there may be some Nazi war loot in the acclaimed collection, have been aired and ignored for several years. And the precise status and ownership of the collection, which was generously donated by Jack and Putzel Hunt, remains as unclear today as the provenance of many items in the collection itself.

The questions concerning the status of the collection were raised as recently as last October by former director, Ciarán MacGonigal, in his contribution to the annual journal of the Irish Museums Association. Maybe sensing that the brown stuff would be hitting the fan soon, MacGonigal went on record with his concerns. Certainly, he is no fan of John Hunt and there was plenty of friction between the two boys during his tenure from 1998-2001, which dated back to MacGonigal's appointment by the then chairman of the Hunt Museum Ltd, moneybags Tony Ryan (see *The Phoenix* 10/4/98).

Hunt was rather nonplussed to find that a heavy-hitter like MacGonigal had been parachuted in by Ryan and as chairman of the Hunt Museums Trust (which is a separate entity to the Hunt Museum Ltd - see box) John Hunt wrote to the board of the Hunt Museum Ltd complaining about the appointment. Not surprisingly, Ryan was having none of this and fired back with a threat to resign, even suggesting a possible conflict of interest, given Hunt's role on both the Trust and Museum boards.

NAZI ISSUE IGNORED

Not long after, Ryan was gone, replaced by antique dealer, George Stacpoole, with whom Hunt has had a far more convivial relationship. Indeed, under Stacpoole's chairmanship of the Museum, the issue of the alleged Nazi links to some of the items in the collection has been quietly ignored despite international developments which suggested that this issue could become a (very) live one at any time.

The subject of looted art has been firmly on the agenda for museums in Europe for a number of years. In October 2002, the British Museum acknowledged as "compelling" a claim that four of its old master drawings - purchased at Sotheby's - had been looted from a private collection by the Nazis during WW II. Interestingly, the woman to the forefront of this episode was Anne Webber, who has just been appointed to the three-person committee put in place by the Hunt Museum to investigate the allegations from the Simon Wiesenthal Centre. Given that historian, Judith Hill, had raised questions about the possibility of material looted by the Nazis in the Hunt Collection in an essay commissioned by the board, Webber may be surprised at the lack of activity by the Museum over the last five years. For example, why hasn't the small collection been posted on the Internet as happened with, for

Strangely, Hill's report didn't cause too many sleepless nights at the Hunt. It landed on Ciarán MacGonigal's desk in 1998, having been commissioned before his arrival, and was promptly faxed to John Hunt who dismissed it out of hand. George Stacpoole subsequently examined it but was not convinced by some of the claims and swept it under the table. Certainly, with John and his sister, Trudy Hunt, sitting on the board of the



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Museum there was little chance that any contentious material about mammy and daddy would make it into any introduction to a catalogue. Despite the media's recent focus on this essay, Hill herself has been far more circumspect and her own statement notes that "the issue of whether the Hunts were directly involved in dealing with illegally acquired objects was one that I did not confront and investigate".

Meanwhile, when Erin Gibbons once again raised questions in her critical review of the *Essential Guide to the Hunt Museum* which she penned in the *Irish Arts Review* a year ago, the Hunt Museum did not even respond. Gibbons had correctly identified the absence of a factual informed account of the Hunt Family history in the *Guide*, which was surprising given that the background of Jack Hunt and his wife Gertrude (Putzel) Hunt née Hartmann, née Krieze had been set out in the 'Centenary Tribute' catalogue published in conjunction with an exhibition of his photographs. Moreover, the fact that both the Hunts had doubtful dealings with Sotheby's supremo, Peter Wilson, amongst others have long been in the public domain, most notably

Chatwin claimed to have resigned from Sotheby's over the sell-off of the Pitt-Rivers collection to America. This was a splendid private collection put together by a Victorian eccentric by the name of Lieutenant-General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers. By the 1960s the collection had passed to the general's grandson, Capt George Pitt-Rivers, a chap of rather fascist sensibilities and a convinced Mosleyite. The collection was broken up and sold off quietly via a select group of pals.

LUCRATIVE DEALS

According to Shakespeare: "Jack Hunt and his wife Putzel were two members of the circle. Because of their political affiliations - conservative in the tradition of Captain George - the couple had to live in Ireland, where they dealt in medieval works of art. Peter Wilson, [John] Hewett and the Hunts formed an association with Wilson, not able to buy for himself, conducting, through Hewett, lucrative deals outside Sotheby's. The Pitt-Rivers collection became such a deal ... The best pieces were diverted out of England through an offshore company based in Ireland, and reshipped to the continent to avoid exchange control".

Shakespeare also notes that "duplicates of the object sold were arranged" - so that it could be pretended that the originals of the Pitt-Rivers collection were still there. "Hewett's partner, Sandy Martin, confirms that Putzel Hunt had a Benin mask copied at this time," he adds. The mask, known as the 'Panther mask' is now part of the Hunt collection - although is it the real or the copy?

The Hunts were also involved in the export of the Emly shrine from Ireland to Boston and, as agents for Randolph Hearst, acquired the Eyrecourt Castle staircase - the only surviving example of that type of 17th century staircase - which was shipped across the Atlantic. It is now in store at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Unfortunately, John and Trudy Hunt appear unable to face up to certain facts concerning their parents. Indeed, John told the *Limerick Leader* that his father was Irish, although Jack Hunt was born in England. Both John and Trudy were adopted by Jack and Putzel Hunt rather late in life, when Jack was 60 and Putzel close behind. Jack was still alive when most of his collection was donated to the State via the Hunt Museum Trust, and by the time Putzel passed away in 1995, the project - driven by John Hunt - to house the collection at the former Custom House in Limerick was well under way.

A number of items from his father's collection, particularly furniture and paintings, are still held personally by John Hunt while there are also 120 items currently on view in the Museum which are actually only 'on loan'. The exact status of these latter items - which include a jewellery collection owned by Trudy Hunt - is unclear. The

Museum (€270,000 this year) told Goldhawk that "the Hunt Museum Trust owns the Collection housed in the Hunt Museum, exclusive of those pieces owned by the Hunts themselves. The position in relation to objects, and any possible return to the donor, is a matter for the owners".

This strange answer goes part of the way towards explaining the problem with the Hunt collection. Just who exactly owns it? Certainly, the letter from the Museum's director, Virginia Teehan, to *The Irish Times* last week made it clear that it wasn't the taxpayer: "the Hunt Collection is legally vested in the Hunt Museums Trust ... None of the collection was acquired by the State". The Department of Arts told Goldhawk that the Hunt Museum is a "private institution".

Originally, in 1974 the collection was transferred by a deed of gift from the Hunt family to the Hunt Museums Trust, which in turn has a formal agreement to make the collection available for display by the Hunt Museum Ltd. According to Shannon Development - which provided a grant of €1.9 million ERDF funding to the Museum - there are "formal arrangements in place concerning the transfer of artefacts on display in the museum".

FASCIST CONNECTIONS

Clearly, Ciarán MacGonigal was as confused as everyone else as to the exact status of the collection and the ownership of it. In his paper for the 2003 Museums Association journal - where he also referred to the Hunts' fascist connections - the former director of the Museum outlined his various concerns, pointing out that there was "no scientific examination of the material or its archives before the Hunt collection was accepted". He also claims that when he arrived in Limerick in 1998 he discovered that "the bulk of the collection had not been vested but was only on loan and that the most valuable parts of the collection could be removed at a stroke".

It is not clear how much of the collection was not vested as MacGonigal claims but certainly the donation does not appear to have been a straightforward one. Nor is there any clear valuation of the collection which is regularly reported by hacks as being worth over €60 million. In 1999, John and Trudy Hunt made a Section 1003 donation of certain items to the Collection (items which were already on show in the Museum) and in return received tax relief to the tune of €762,000. For this to take place it was necessary to have the items in question valued.

The Hunt Collection was originally included in the accounts for the Hunt Museums Trust on the basis of a valuation prepared by Putzel Hunt and Professor Patrick Doran of Limerick University in 1982 at £1.5 million. In 1991 additional items were donated and the valuation of the entire collection was reviewed to £10 million (£12.7 million). Significantly, the auditors, PricewaterhouseCoopers, qualified the 2001 accounts filed for the Hunt Museums Trust noting that the Hunt Collection was included "at an illustrative valuation of €12.7 million. In the circumstances there were no procedures that we could adopt to confirm independently the completeness of the Collection or the

appropriateness or otherwise of the valuation used ... We have not obtained all the information and explanations we consider necessary for the purpose of our audit". Apparently this "illustrative" valuation will be used until the Hunts donate items which are still only on loan.

Meanwhile, the accounts for the operating company, the Hunt Museum Ltd, reveal its tenuous financial position despite ongoing



John, Jack, Gertrude and Trudy Hunt

funding from the Department of Arts and also from both Limerick County Council and City Council. These figures reveal that the Museum recorded an operating loss for 2002 of €62,000, leaving the accumulated deficit here at a hefty €286,000. The investigation about to be undertaken involving two international members and an Irish judge (Donal Barrington) will cause further headaches.

The accounts also contain an interesting note concerning a so-called 'endowment fund' which was meant to be created as part of the 1995 agreement with the State to develop the Museum's new home at the former Custom House. John Hunt *et al* gave a commitment to put in place by 2000 €2.5 million to assist with

the running of the Museum. However, at the end of 2002 this fund was worth just €700,000.

A note in the accounts states that "discussions are underway between the Hunt Museum Ltd ... and the Department of Arts on the ongoing development and funding of the museum, in circumstances whereby the original commitment made in relation to the endowment fund can be varied". Yet, according to the Department of the Arts, it has "not been involved in any discussion regarding any possibility of varying commitments made in relation to the endowment fund and does not anticipate entering into any such discussions in the future".

CONFUSION

The trouble with all this confusion is that it is impossible to state confidently the exact nature of the agreement between the Hunts and the State. Certainly, there have been ongoing problems between the Department and the Museum and MacGonigal's October '03 paper refers to the fact that he had to "bring peace to relations with both the parent Department of Arts and the regional authority, Shannon Development".

But how can anyone receive tax relief as a result of a donation of material which may not actually be owned by the State? The articles of association of the Hunt Museums Trust do not refer to the collection being vested in the State at any point and merely note that upon the winding up or dissolution of the company any assets shall not be distributed among the members of the company, but "shall be given to some other institution or institutions having objects similar to the objects of the company".

The articles of the Hunt Museum Ltd also state that no portion of that company's income shall be paid to the members although a special resolution was passed in 1997 to accommodate John Hunt's stint as acting director. This resolution provided for the payment of "remuneration to one member of the board of directors for executive services to the company as Museum Director".

Apart from this job, it is not clear what sources of income John Hunt has to enable the maximum use to be made of the 1999 tax relief obtained by him and his sister. Before devoting himself to the Hunt Museum project in the 1990s, he had a stint at the Temple Bar Gallery and from 1998 he was mostly involved in freelance editorial work, producing reviews and commentaries for the likes of the *Cork Evening Echo* and Radio One's arts programme, *Rattlebag*. He did explore the establishment of an arts magazine with journalist, Carol Hanlon, at one point but his health problems have stymied that venture. Nevertheless, there is clearly an income being generated somewhere judging by Hunt's fondness for fast motorbikes and powerful cars.

Now Hunt is most focused on protecting the reputations of Jack and Putzel Hunt but this is out of his hands given that a report into the possible existence of looted art will be prepared by Barrington's committee which will be delivered to the Museum board, from which both John Hunt and his sister have stepped aside. However, a no less important investigation should concern the exact status of the whole Hunt Collection and who exactly owns it.

THE HUNT MUSEUMS TRUST AND THE HUNT MUSEUM LTD

The collection itself is owned by the **Hunt Museums Trust** which was established in 1974 with Jack and Putzel Hunt as joint chairpersons. These days the Hon Grania Weir is the chairman and other representatives include directors nominated by: the Hunt Museum Ltd, the Minister for Finance, the Minister for Arts, the University of Limerick, SFADCo, the Bishop of Limerick and Killaloe, Limerick City Council, Limerick County Council, etc, as well as institutions such as the National Museum and National Gallery. The current directors are:

Grania Weir (chairman)
John Hunt
Trudy Hunt
Ed Walsh
Patrick Doran
Pat Wallace
Raymond Keaveney
Bill Finlay

Hugh Weir
John King
Peter Harbison
Frank Prendergast
Bishop Willie Walsh
Roibeard O'Ceallaigh
Bill Moloney
Brendan Keating

The Museum is operated by the **Hunt Museum Ltd** which was incorporated in 1993 and which receives the annual revenue grants. The company has always recorded losses and had an accumulated deficit at the end of 2002 of €286,000. The members of this company must include one member of the Hunt family along with members nominated by the University of Limerick, SFADCo, Limerick City Council, the National Gallery; and up to six members nominated by the Hunt Museums Trust.

The current directors are:
George Stacpoole (chairman)
John Hunt
Trudy Hunt
Tony Brazil

Aidan Brooks
Nial Greene
Cian O'Carroll
Maria O'Gorman Skelly
Rodger Downer