

# **The Hunt Museum**

## **Limerick**

### **Centre for European Decorative Art**

The Hunt Collection of European decorative art, fine art and archaeology is acknowledged as one of the foremost private medieval art collections made in this century. The Hunt family have magnanimously presented this unique collection to the people of Ireland.

The collection was made by John (1900 - 76) and Gertrude (1903-) Hunt, people who were respected internationally as leading experts in medieval art. They advised Sir William Burrell in forming his collection and gave advice to such other important collectors as William Randolph Hearst and the Aga Khan. They also worked in an advisory capacity on medieval works with Sotheby's, London.

The nucleus of the collection has been on display in the University of Limerick since 1976. In preparation for the return of Hunt Museum items from the British Museum, Victoria & Albert Museum and the National Gallery of Ireland, and the presentation of a further collection of medieval items by John Hunt Jr. and Trudy Hunt, the children of John and Gertrude Hunt, it is planned to transfer the Hunt Museum headquarters to the Old Custom House Limerick. Built between 1765 and 1769 this Baroque Palladian style building will provide a larger museum space and a perfect historic setting for such a quality collection. Planning permission has been granted for the change of use of the building and structural work will begin, hopefully, within the next few months.

The Hunt Museum display, planned by the museum and Office of Public Works architects, concentrates on the decorative art quality of the object - form, function, craftsmanship and design. The Museums and Galleries Commission London and the Head of Conservation, The National Museum of Wales have given guidance so as to attain a high standard in security matters and museum environment.



## THE HUNT FAMILY

*"A nation's past is part of its soul. Its history is the basis of its present culture, the root which nourishes not only the spiritual life of the people, but is inextricably interwoven with all its cultural and artistic and economic well-being.*

*In the written word, in legend, song and story, we have preserved and treasured a literary heritage said by many scholars to be older and richer than any other in Europe. But for historical reasons this country has suffered more than any other in Europe in its physical links with its historic past. With its churches, abbeys and great castles in the hands of strangers, the nation turned in defence from its plundered treasures of the mind, and in so doing it developed a sort of contempt for physical beauty and culture, which colours even yet the approach of many Irishmen to the visual arts."*

So wrote John Hunt in **The Irish Times** in May 1962. In pioneering spirit, he asked Irish people to review their approach to the nation's past and to realise that the standard and beauty of our native craftsmanship could stand on comparable footing with the works of art of other nations.

Born in 1900, John Hunt was reared in England, his parents having come from Co. Limerick and Co. Clare respectively. In his youth he studied both medicine and architecture before dedicating his life to the study of antiques.

His wife, Gertrude, was born in Mannheim, West Germany, in 1903. Their mutual love of art brought them together in London in the early 1930s, where they opened their own antique shop. That was a good time for antique collectors as European museums were preoccupied with restoring their own buildings and American museums had not yet entered the market. Acknowledged even then as leading experts in medieval art, they assisted in the formation and recording of such internationally important collections, as that of Sir William Burrell in Glasgow, the Hearst Collection in San Simeon, California, and that of the Aga Khan. They both also worked in an advisory capacity for Sotheby's, London.

With their love for, and appreciation of craftsmanship and design, it was in the 1930s and 40s that they set about the formation of their own collection. This was a period in which many fine collections were dispersed. Through their knowledge, they recognised intuitively, quality pieces often missed by others. By selecting the best John and Gertrude Hunt formed a great personal collection.



About 1939 the couple moved to Lough Gur in Co. Limerick, where an excavation programme was begun by Prof. Sean P. O Riordain of University College Cork on the concentration of archaeological sites there. During the 40s and 50s John Hunt indulged his abiding interest in archaeology, working on numerous excavations there. At Lough Gur he made the first reconstruction of a Neolithic house, which was featured on a B.B.C. documentary. This prototype helped in the later reconstruction of such a house at his own experimental archaeology centre at Craggaunowen, Co. Clare.

John Hunt encouraged Lord Gort to restore Bunratty Castle and suggested the construction of the Folk Park there. In advising Lord Gort in the refurbishment of the Castle, John Hunt shared his great knowledge of the medieval period to ensure the historical accuracy of the project.

A regular contributor of research papers to **The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland**, **The North Munster Antiquarian Journal** and **The Connoisseur**, his magnum opus was his two-volume publication, **Irish Medieval Figure Sculpture, 1200-1600**, published in Dublin in 1974.

A visionary, idealist and a scholar, John Hunt, encouraged by Gertrude, began the Craggaunowen project in 1973. The tower house at Craggaunowen was restored, and a crannog and ring-fort reconstructed in the grounds, so as to allow the visitor to experience first hand the life-style of our ancestors. After his death, his wife continued to encourage the further attractions which have been added, such as the fulacht fiadh, the Iron Age road and the Brendan Boat - donated to the project by Tim Severin after his voyage in it to America.

Conscious of the need to improve decorative art education in Ireland, a small segment of the Hunt Collection was put on display in Craggaunowen Castle. The Hunt family had hoped to build a museum on site to display the collection in its entirety, but economic factors prevented this from becoming a reality. But, owing to the generosity of Dr. Edward Walsh, President of what is now the University of Limerick, space was allocated within the University to display many of the archaeological and medieval items. The Hunt Museum at Plassey was officially opened in 1978.

John Hunt died in 1976, survived by his wife Gertrude, and two children, John Jnr. and Trudy. The proposed refurbishment of the Old Custom House in Limerick City, to be known as the Hunt Museum, will celebrate this family, who are numbered amongst the most generous benefactors of this nation.



# THE HUNT COLLECTION

The Hunt Collection is an internationally important collection of original works of art and antiquities. It is a personal one, formed by a couple who judged each piece which they collected according to the standard of its design, craftsmanship and artistic merit. This criteriae they applied to objects of all ages - from the Neolithic to the twentieth century.

One of the strengths of the Hunt Collection is its medieval material. Its range covers objects commissioned and used by both ecclesiastical and lay patrons, and includes statues in stone, bronze and wood, crucifixes, panel paintings, metalwork, jewellery, enamels, ceramics and crystal. The importance of the collection is such that some items are currently on loan to the British Museum and the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, while others have been shown in international exhibitions. The links between the Hunt collection and other museums can be illustrated by the fact that one fragment of the Beaufort, late 14th century armorial tapestry, is on display in The Hunt Museum in Limerick, while other fragments of the same tapestry are in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and The Burrell Collection, Glasgow.

Besides the medieval, there is a wealth of other material ranging from Egyptian, Greek and Roman items through to 19th century metalwork and ceramics. There is also an important collection of Irish archaeological material ranging from Neolithic flints, through Bronze Age gold, the unique 8th century Antrim Cross, hand-pins, penannular brooches, down to penal crucifixes of the 18th and 19th century. Irish decorative arts are represented too in a range of items including Irish delft, Belleek porcelain, 18th century Dublin tapestries as well as ecclesiastical and domestic silver.

In 1991 the Hunt Family generously presented another large segment of the Collection to the nation. Among the many important items included in this gift are works by Picasso and Gauguin, a bronze horse considered to be from the hand of Leonardo de Vinci, a Greek silver coin revered since the Middle Ages as one of the biblical "30 pieces of silver", and a personal seal of Charles 1st of England.

These art and archaeological items were collected with the intention of displaying them together to illustrate the progression of craftsmanship and the decorative arts through the ages, and to illustrate that Irish material can stand on an equal footing with its European counterparts.



To make the collection more understandable to a modern community, multi-media, CD Rom and audio-visual presentations are planned as are regular guided tours by trained Hunt Museum docents (volunteers). For relaxation and enjoyment there will be a restaurant and shop. The education department planned will include a "touch it" room in which the tactile quality of certain objects (such as flat axes) can be experienced under supervision. Historic enactments and play in the understanding of the past will be encouraged.

The Friends of the Hunt Museum is an active body which raises awareness of museum interests within the community and supports the museum financially. A Friends Room / suite is included in the plans.

Since his father's death John Hunt Jr. has been closely associated with the Hunt Museums Trust. Through his encouragement the Hunt Museum Ltd. was established under the Chairmanship of Dr. T.A. Ryan, Chairman of the Executive Board of GE Capital Aviation Services Inc.. The Executive includes the President of the University of Limerick, Dr. E. Walsh, Limerick city's manager, J. Higgins and leaders of business in the region as well as members of the Hunt family. The director of the Hunt Museum is Mairead Dunlevy, MA. Her publications include 'A Classification of Early Irish Combs', Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy, 1988, and Dress in Ireland, Batsford 1989. It is envisaged that other people employed in the museum will have qualifications in the new museum professions - registrar, education officer, marketing officer etc.

It is intended that to complement the museum's activities and education programme, the University of Limerick will introduce an undergraduate and a post-graduate course in decorative arts which will train people for work in museums, historic houses, the antiques fields, auction houses and in design work.

The Hunt Museum is supported by the Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht and it has a fund-raising committee in place.

## **MISSION STATEMENT**

**The purpose of The Hunt Museum is to present, interpret and safeguard the Hunt Collection so as to maximise its cultural, educational and tourism potential for the city, the region, the nation and the international community.**

The Hunt Museum will serve the community by:

- \* becoming an active centre of excellence with exhibitions, research facilities, library, lecture theatre and other public services.
- \* becoming a national resource centre for designers.
- \* developing cultural programmes and engaging in adult education.
- \* promoting interest in and encouraging research on art, design, craftsmanship and decorative arts generally.
- \* engaging in relevant curriculum support and development with The University of Limerick and with other educational institutes of all levels nationally and internationally.
- \* acting as a prestige centre for the cultural tourism of the region aimed at Irish and international markets.
- \* developing pride in the region, in the nation and in our place in the new Europe.



## **PROPOSED VISITOR EXPERIENCE AT THE HUNT MUSEUM**

The design intention is to create in the Hunt Museum, exhibitions which are exciting, understandable, relevant, entertaining and educational, while at the same time satisfying the museological and security standards required to safeguard the collection.

To achieve this each gallery will be designed with appropriate exhibition cases, lighting, floor coverings, graphics and labels. In many galleries the material will be made more immediately understandable through showing objects in their contemporary economic, artistic and social context on CD-Rom/CD I/video or multi-media presentations.

The museum's activities will include exhibitions, lectures, guided tours, enactments of the past, restaurant and a shop specialising in museum souvenirs and artistic craft-work.

The exhibition galleries include

### **Primary Galleries**

There has been a revolution in the museum profession over the past few decades in attitudes to museum display. Communication, understanding and attractiveness to a modern viewing public with sophisticated communication standards, as well as an art-historically sensibly display fashion, are now the key elements. The Hunt Museum will utilise the most modern professional approach to the display of its original works of art.

Art, design, craftsmanship as well as the social and economic background of the material will all be addressed. Small video or multi-media screens will enrich the experience through explaining more about comparative material and their background - for example short accounts on Limoges enamel, Egyptian pre-dynastic sculpture, Berlin ironwork jewellery, Flemish interiors showing comparable pieces in everyday use.

### **Visible Storage Gallery**

The modern professional approach to "demystify" museums through providing an open-storage facility for material not in use in the primary or temporary exhibitions, will be on view on the top floor exhibition gallery. In the style of The Henry R. Luce Centre for the Study of American Art in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, material will be placed in secure glass cases. So that each object will be easily visible the cases will be of no higher than six feet. They will satisfy the criteria of the museum's professional conservator.

Through computer terminals nearby, the tourist, researcher and student can access information on each object. These will be arranged by material, date, style and method of manufacture.