



The Future of Collecting in Ireland *our shared legacy – a new dialogue*

Workshop 2014 – An Abstract

Friday 12th September 2014
The meeting room at
the Royal Irish Academy,
Dawson Street, Dublin 2.

FNCI
The Friends of the National Collections of Ireland

Introduction

Arthur Duff, President, The Friends of the National Collections of Ireland

The Friends of the National Collections of Ireland is a charity that exists to promote the development of public collections throughout the island of Ireland by way of gifts, donations and bequests. Established 90 years ago by a group of concerned individuals and led by the indomitable Sarah Purser the work continues to this day. Much has changed since then and there are now significant State support structures in place to further the aims of the National institutions. However the FNCI is able to play a valuable role as a non-aligned group making its resources and contacts available to all.

While the primary work carries on we felt that a 90th birthday was an opportunity for reflection and so the idea of this workshop was formed. As the title suggests the purpose is to offer a platform to professionals and stakeholders to share thoughts on what the future holds for them, beyond the amassing of more objects. Clearly the role of many of these public institutions has changed as access to information has grown exponentially and expectations have increased enormously. Visitors are no longer passive and mute in the presence of the collections rather they now expect to be able to engage and “own” what they have come to experience. The idea of what is “precious” and worth collecting has also changed and needs to be reflected upon.

We are very lucky to be supported today by such a diverse range of enthusiastic and committed professionals and welcome you to joining in the discussions that will follow on from the presentations.

As the first public meeting of the FNCI was held in the Royal Irish Academy in 1924 we are delighted to be able to return to this inspiring place and are most grateful to the Academy for receiving us again - 90 years later. In particular, the Librarian, Ms Siobhan Fitzpatrick, and her staff have been so supportive of our activities.

Opening Address

Michael Starrett, CEO of the Heritage Council and Chairman of the Council of National Cultural Institutions (CNCI)

Michael Starrett's opening address considered the discussion as timely in relation to the CNCI's initiative 'Developing a Cultural Policy for Ireland'. As a result of this initiative the government announced in June 2014 that it had approved plans to begin drafting a national cultural policy: '...something which is sorely lacking.' Starrett noted that Culture 2025 plans to set out aims and policies of government in this area up to 2025 and that the CNCI recommends a high level steering group, composed of individuals in some way independent of government, to oversee this complex project.

He observed that, in order to derive the maximum social, environmental and economic benefits, any cultural programme must promote cultural diversity as well as enhancing our international reputation: 'We have to strive to show in our development of policy that culture has intrinsic value and is inextricably linked to all aspects of day-to-day life.' This was seen in the light of a recent government press release, in which government recognised the major contribution of culture to our economy and to sustaining and creating jobs. In this context, Starrett suggested that the time had come for the government to move forward on the wide-scale and sustained consultation that it had promised for Culture 2025.

Starrett then moved on to commend the Museum Standards Programme of Ireland (MSPI) which he described as crucial for any organisation involved in collecting or befriending collections. Having developed initially as a response to the poor standards of the past, it has flourished and expanded over the last decade: 'The fifty members bring benefits in sharing and working in partnership that are beyond any funding or cost benefits.' Just as the work of CNCI 'fits seamlessly' into the MSPI, Starrett anticipated the development of a relationship between not only the Heritage Council and the Friends of the National Collections of Ireland (FNCI), but also between the CNCI and the FNCI which would be both productive and fruitful.

Session One:

Collecting in the Modern World – the Learning Experience

Chair: Dr John Maiben Gilmartin, Art Historian and Collector

**Richard Blurton, Curator, South Asian Section,
British Museum**

**'Here and Now: Collecting and Understanding the
Modern World'**

Abstract

Richard Blurton began by underlining the importance of knowledge of Indian cultural life, saying 'Anyone who wants to engage internationally needs to know about India.'

In the course of ethnographic work in the Eastern Himalayas, Blurton created a photographic record which revealed both the function and method of production of several objects in the collection. The objects, some of which came to the British Museum's collection without background information, had been 'reenergised' and made interesting for an international public through looking at the context from which they had come. Targeted collecting, which he pointed out could be both possible and inexpensive, could be used to great benefit in public display and understanding.

Blurton concluded by describing the British Museum's recent acquisitions of contemporary art. One of these is a conceptual art work by Naeem Mohaiemen. The piece relates to the poet Kazi Nazrul Islam, who is claimed by three countries as their own, and is a comment on the way that cultural life is contested by different political groups. The acquisition of this, and several other contemporary pieces, exemplifies the museum's commitment to represent the culture of the local highly varied community.

Dr Marie Bourke, Keeper, Head of Education, National Gallery of Ireland

'How to make Collections Matter'

Abstract

Two national treasures, described by Dr Burke as 'fragile, very precious objects', were presented for consideration. Firstly, The Cross of Cong (1123), donated to the Royal Irish Academy by James McCullough in 1839 and secondly, Frederick William Burton's The Meeting on the Turret Stairs (1864), donated by Margaret Stokes in 1900.

Dr. Bourke recounted some of the ways in which the collections had been translated over the years. The Cross of Cong was exhibited in the United States in the late 1970s, opening in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. This 'extraordinary tour' was, she observed: 'very, very important for Irish prestige'. The 2009 celebration of James McCullough's life included visits and talks around the collection. In the case of Burton's masterpiece The Meeting on the Turret Stairs, the 1997 exhibition was highlighted with a re-enactment, complete with costuming designed by the Grafton Academy of Dress Design. In 2013 a public vote gave Burton's work the title of Ireland's Favourite Painting; an example of how collections are being promoted and young people encouraged to interact.

Collections could be 'brought to life', Dr Bourke stated, 'through research, interpretation, publications, exhibitions, conferences, lectures, tours, enactments, plays, activity sheets, through plays, drawing classes, digital media and workshops...' Bourke concluded by saying: 'My only point is...collections really matter, both for the present and for the future.'

Peter Murray, Director, Crawford Museum, Cork

'Collecting or Accumulating? How to Distinguish Between the Two'

Abstract

Peter Murray commenced by pointing out that, despite a unanimous desire to see Bantry House and its collection preserved, the crisis continued. The treasures acquired by Richard White, the second Earl of Bantry - and his father before him - from all over Europe, led to the house becoming what Murray termed 'a *wunderkammer*'. 'It is an accumulation,' he acknowledged, collected at speed, possibly not catalogued properly, but, he added: 'Bantry house becomes, with the passing of the decades, more than the sum of its parts.'

Although it has enjoyed enormous public support over the six decades it has been open, the house is not supported by public subscription. Instead it has been sustained by what Murray termed 'a gradual self-immolation; the selling of its assets. The narratives of the grand tour, the story of Ireland in Europe, and Europe in Ireland, which are bound up with an Irish peer bringing treasures to Bantry are all 'ebbing away' with this depletion.

Murray shared some examples of how collections had been saved by individuals who had purchased and then donated them, such as the Cooper Penrose collection. Under *section 1003* of the Finance Act (payment of tax by means of donation of heritage items) a wealthy individual could save the Bantry house collection in a similar fashion. He ended with an appeal to save what he called 'One of the most romantic houses in Ireland'.

**Kim Mawhinney, Head of Art, National Museum,
Northern Ireland**

**'Continuing to Collect: An Object's Working Life
in a Museum'**

Abstract

Kim Mawhinney stated her commitment to collecting, quoting David Wilson: 'A museum that doesn't collect is a dead museum'. This extends to international work and to supplementing existing collections with contemporary work. Within this remit, she observed that museum curators, when going forward for an acquisition, had to take into consideration aspects that predecessors would neither have to consider nor justify: 'Every five years we look at how we are collecting, what we should be collecting and revising it to reflect modern times.'

In the context of the lack of resources, funding and staff, combined with diminished donations and bequests, Mawhinney highlighted the value of joint purchase and the commissioning of contemporary work. Of the latter, an ambitious way to create new specific work for the museum which offered multiple benefits, she concluded by saying: 'What I am saying now to funding bodies is be brave, allow the curators to have their way, and be part of the wonderful process that is actually commissioning work.'

Session Two:

Technology and the Role of New Media

Chair: Dr John Turpin, Former Head of NCAD

Dr Natalie Harrower, Digital Repository of Ireland

'Collecting in the Age of Digital Preservation'

Abstract

The 1936 essay by Walter Benjamin was the starting point for Natalie Harrower's presentation. Benjamin posits that reproduction lacks what could be called 'the aura'; that draws us to art. Harrower contrasted this idea of the 'withering' of the object with the new possibilities that digital reproduction offers. With high quality reproductions, as she illustrated with Google reproductions of Van Gogh and Breughel, studies of the formal elements are possible, and hitherto unseen levels of detail emerge. Other benefits, beyond the vastly expanded reach of the work, include: viewing works which may be normally kept in deep storage; allowing museum visitors to explore on their terms; and enhancing the experience through games.

Harrower emphasised that alongside the sharing of digital objects visits to galleries, libraries and museums have actually grown, 'People still want to see the original – even if they have access to surrogates'.

Harrower defined digital preservation as 'the active management of digital collections over time to ensure its ongoing access'. She went on to explain that this required planning, a place to put the collections, and the provision of tools for users. She concluded by stating that 'Inspiring Ireland' plans to assemble the digital collections of eight national cultural institutions in one space.

**Christina Kennedy, Senior Curator, Head of Collections,
IMMA, Dublin**

**'Installation Art in Contemporary Visual Culture:
Collecting and Preserving the Artist's Intention'**

Abstract

Christina Kennedy summarised some of the complexities around this particular category of collecting. The key question to be asked, Kennedy explained, was how to preserve the installation work in terms of both its material form and its meaning for future generations? And, as many of the materials artists work with may be ephemeral, such as older technologies, this presented a challenge. With this in mind, Kennedy stressed the need to be interpretive in order to manage the mutability of time-based works, in tandem with carrying out extensive research: 'in order to understand what was important to preserve, to maintain the fidelity of the work.'

Documentation has a crucial role in creating reusable procedures and this rests upon close collaboration with the artist: 'implicit in the consideration and reading of all installation art works is the artist's wish or intention and this resides in the relationship between the material elements and the ephemeral elements.'

Kennedy explained that there was a need for an interdisciplinary approach which could bring a wide range of experience to all aspects of installation art - conservation, production, installation, exhibition, loan and storage. She concluded by emphasising the need to be interpretive in order to manage mutability: 'One has to work intelligently in order to provide for the inevitable changes in an environment where different installation and different conditions prevail.'

Dr Michael John Gorman, Director, The Science Gallery International

'The Ablative Museum'

Abstract

Whereas dative institutions focus on presenting people with high quality information, ablative institutions, Gorman pointed out, are designed to extract from the community around them. Gorman explained: 'we see our approach as a sort of giant extractor fan, extracting ideas from the community around a particular theme - from artists, from scientists, from designers - and those then manifest in different ways in the gallery.'

In the six years that the Science Gallery has been operating, it has drawn from the community everything from their earliest memories through to their blood and DNA. These have been used to provide direct experience of biochemical phenomena. Gorman outlined several examples, one of which was the collaboration with artist Maria Phelan on the project *Infectious: Stay Away* (2009). In this, bacteria from the public's kisses was grown and turned into a visual display. Like other ablative experiments, it involved bringing others to the Science Gallery to see the results of their contributions.

Gorman ended by saying: 'Think not about what you can give to your audience, but think about what you can extract and draw from them, and I'd be very interested in your experiments in ablative museums.'

Rosemary Ryan, Waterford Treasures, Three Museums in the Viking Triangle

'Best of Both Worlds: Technology to Enhance the Visitor Experience'

Abstract

Rosemary Ryan described the extensive restoration work that has been done on the walls and towers of Waterford: 'A huge amount is being done in Waterford to enhance the built environment and make for a good experience for visitors.' Ryan pointed out that the interactive re-enactments and walking tours allowed for the use of the whole triangle including the outside space. The interlinked outcomes of a hunger for heritage and learning, economic regeneration and tourism were related to the commitment to high standards of design and maintenance in the museum building and the surrounds.

Ryan highlighted the importance of partnerships at every step: 'Local authorities can and do make very good museums, they have the authority in partnership with traders, they can make good built environments, for living, for doing business and leisure.' And also: 'obviously partnerships with Fáilte Ireland, the Heritage Council, FNCI and individuals are crucial.'

In the context of the history of the Waterford Treasures collection, Ryan said that vision was 'vital', and further: 'Sometimes you just have to be brave.' In the matter of adding to collections, she stated that it was important to aim high: 'You are only as strong as your collection.'

Session Three:

Public Vs. Private Ownership - Whose is it Anyway?

Chair: Dr. Hilary Pyle, Curator and Art Critic

Siobhán Fitzpatrick, Head Librarian, Royal Irish Academy

'Future-Proofing the past: Ensuring Long-Term Access to Collections'

Abstract

Siobhan Fitzpatrick acknowledged the commitment to future-proofing the object, but noted that, while correct storage, environmental conditions and security could be provided with the best of current knowledge, there was no guarantee that this was enough in the long-term.

Digitising ancient manuscripts in the collection has led to an expansion in the reach of the work previously unforeseeable. In addition, the deeper scrutiny allowed by digitising has revealed new information; as illustrated with the example of the late eighth-century book, *The Stone Whistle*. Fitzpatrick pointed out that the necessity for digital upgrades and reformatting meant that resources, funding and staffing were obstacles to meeting the challenges of the Academy's remit to ensure preservation and continued accessibility of the collections.

Fitzpatrick said that collectors had a responsibility to the past, the present and the future. There was a need to lobby for real investment in collections in the here and now, in tandem with the awareness that we may not know how they will be used in future: 'There may, after all, be many more dimensions than our accepted three or four.'

Dr Hugh Maguire, Director, Hunt Museum, Limerick

'The Public Purse and the Private Passion'

Abstract

Dr Maguire, while considering the cry for private collections be taken into public care and ownership, stated: 'There can be a poetic appeal to the heritage value of a site, a house, a collection, rather than an objective assessment of the long-term worth, the long-term care needed and the management of such collections.'

Another aspect to the push for public ownership which Maguire focused on was the arbitrary nature in which certain collections were favoured above others. The example that he used to illustrate this was the auction (July 2014) of the portraits of All Hallows alumni including cardinals, archbishops and bishops. Maguire pointed out that despite embodying important aspects of social history - the narrative of emigration and religious practice - they were '... scattered', as he said: 'without any call for their protection.'

Maguire asked that before calling for collections to be taken on board by public ownership there should be a stock taking: '...on what we are collecting, why we are collecting, and what stories we are willing to address.'

Simon O'Connor, Curator, The Little Museum of Dublin
'The Scramble for 1916! Exploring the Separate Goals of the State and the Citizen in Commemorating the Centenary of the Easter Rising'

Abstract

Simon O'Connor began by suggesting that anniversaries of events could be seen as either a 'Pandora's box' or 'a sweet jar' as people sought to use it for their own aims. Within the multiplicity of ways that commemoration might be celebrated, on a sliding scale from the explosive to the dull, he noted: '...it is from the latter I think that we are most at risk.'

O'Connor explained that the Little Museum has recently launched their 2016 arts commissioning programme inviting artists to propose small scale public interventions within and outside the museum over the course of 2016. He pointed out: 'Art can reimagine that which has been forgotten in a very engaging way.'

O'Connor emphasised the importance of avoiding reductionist narratives, which could be both dangerous and unhelpful. This could be best accomplished by a more inclusive response, such as by looking outside of Ireland to connect with the war narrative more broadly. In addition, institutions could come together, as O'Connor suggested '...to create joint programmes under a larger independent auspice than simply of that to augment the auspices of the state.'

Dr Jennifer Goff, Senior Curator, National Museum of Ireland

'Gray Matters: the Public and Private Collecting of Eileen Gray'

Abstract

Dr Jennifer Goff described Enniscorthy-born artist Eileen Gray's varied design output, with which Gray had 'introduced modernism - long before the bells of modernism were ringing.' Gray's name has disappeared and resurfaced in the history of design repeatedly, partly due to her own destruction of her work. Due to the efforts of her neice, Prunella Kluff, interest in her work was revived after 1972. Goff recounted how Dorothy Walker had successfully persuaded the National Museum of Ireland and the Department of Arts, Heritage, and the Gaelteach to buy Gray collections. As a result within eight years (after 2000 1,835 objects came to the national museum) it had become one of the most important Gray collections worldwide.

Goff explained that one of the problems associated with purchasing Gray's work for museums was the record prices her work now makes. In 2009 Gray's chair, which Goff described as representing: 'the designer who made it; eccentric and unique.' sold for €21.9 million in Christie's of Paris. The solution to the problem, Goff proffered, was for institutions to join forces in order to purchase her work.

Gray's profile is soon to be raised further by a Hollywood film, a documentary and Goff's own new publication. Goff concluded: 'We are stating that Gray matters, but the question is ...are we being heard?'

Session Four:

Group discussions: Broad headings were the framework for participants to engage and share their own views. The following points are a summary of the responses

Facilitated by

Lesley-Ann Hayden, The Heritage Council

Geraldine Walshe, The Dublin Civic Trust

Aidan O'Boyle, Architectural Historian

Graham Hickey, The Dublin Civic Trust

Bantry House

- Is there an EU fund that might help; urgent application to EU?
- What is being sold in October? Is there a comprehensive catalogue? How important are the items listed?
- Long term plans for maintenance of the site as an attraction:
 - Newbridge House given as an example where the farms, attracting a wider demographic, helped to pay for the upkeep of the house and its collections.
- General comments:
 - Off tour bus route
 - Gardens: unique
 - 'Big Houses' a magnet to tourists
 - The collection and the house of value together

Why collect?

- Preserve the past to support present and the future
- Support emerging artists
- Power of the object: the spirit, the aura
- Emotional connection to the object and its maker – especially if handmade in today’s age of mass production
- Ability to make connections between a large number of similar objects – ie. A collection of pottery: support learning; the undiscovered...
- General: grabs you! It is a disease! Beauty

What collect?

- Plea for gardens to be seen as collections and head gardener as curators – e.g. Kilmacurragh
- Collections ‘under threat’ – country house furniture leaving the country in container loads
- ‘Stuff available’ – when interest is less or prices are lower try to anticipate what might become important to either the taste or understanding of the past (our present) for future generations

Philanthropy

- Engage families: link inheritance tax relief to donation of important collections

Cover Illustration Maud Gonne (1898) by Sarah Purser (1848-1943)
donated to the Dublin City Gallery Hugh Lane by The Friends of the
National Collections of Ireland in 1944

