The Irish Museums Association: 32 years on

Dr Marie Bourke, Chairperson

The aim of this article is to provide an update on the development of the Irish Museums Association since its major review in 2000–02. In addition, information is being appended on key officers and some publications associated with the IMA since inception. This is by way of continuing the memory base of the Association, with every effort made to ensure the data is accurate (the records are patchy on occasion).

Background

The Association’s stated mission is: the promotion and development of museums and of the museum profession, and standards of excellence in museum practice, so that everyone, visitors and practitioners, can enjoy the maximum cultural, social and educational benefit. While, the Constitution (1981), declares IMA objectives are to:

- Establish, support and reinforce the museum profession in Ireland.
- Encourage mutual assistance and co-operation between museums in Ireland.
- Promote awareness of the role of museums within the community.
- Maintain international contact through the International Council of Museums.

Founded in 1977, as a 32-county voluntary body to service the needs of the Irish museums community, the Association aspires to encourage the improvement of museums and galleries, and museum practice, so that those working in and visiting museums will enjoy the maximum cultural, social and educational benefit. The Association is managed as a limited company headed by a Board of Directors (made up of experienced museum professionals elected by the members), who seek to identify and address issues facing the museum sector. Open to museum professionals in the full-time, part-time and voluntary museum sector, institutions and the corporate sector, it includes those who are interested in museums and the wider Irish museum diaspora. The IMA actively promotes the interests of all museums and museum professionals throughout Ireland. As the voice of the sector, it is a forum to initiate debate, challenge issues and provide advice that will underpin the work of everyone working museums in protecting, conserving and promoting Ireland’s heritage.

IMA Review 2002

In 2002, Aideen Ireland contributed an excellent article, ‘The Irish Museums Association: The first 25 Years’ to the Association’s journal, Museum Ireland. In her own inimitable way, Aideen found the time in a busy career to chart the evo-
lution of the Association from its foundation in 1977 up to 2002. She pointed out that under the chairmanship of Robert Heslip, in 2000 and 2001, the IMA had carried out two internal reviews, augmented by a Consultation Day with members of the Irish museums community in 2001. In 2002, the IMA commissioned CHL Consulting to undertake further work, culminating in a report on a Strategic Review of the Irish Museums Association, presented at a Consultation Day at the National Gallery in 2002. Arising from this process, new targets were identified for the Association including: a new corporate image; fresh sub-committees; increase in membership fee coupled with a membership drive; appointment of a part-time administrator; increase in annual events; and an improvement of international contacts. Ambitious targets for a voluntary organisation!

That same year, the incoming Chairman, Pat Cooke, highlighted some of the strengths and dilemmas of the IMA as he saw it, ‘An Association that has been immensely successful at creating and sustaining a network of communication between those working in museums in Ireland...an organization constantly concerned with and striving towards high ethical and professional standards in the running of Irish museums, but suffering from the resource constrains and discontinuities of effort that are often characteristic of wholly voluntary bodies.’

His comments put in context many of the issues surrounding the problematic development of the Association.

More recently

Since then, the Association has come through a major process of growth and development, catalysed by CHL’s Review of 2002, driven by a reformed and energetic Board of Directors and fresh sub-committees, to the point where it is now operating a regular service as a professional organization. Chief among these developments is the evolution of IMA administration. The funding base of the organization has progressed from an improved membership, augmented by assistance from the Heritage Council, the Department of Arts Sport and Tourism and independent sponsorship – all gratefully acknowledged. This culminated in 2008 with the receipt of the first grant from the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism to be put towards the appointment of a full-time administrator and an office. A part-time (two-thirds of a week) administrator was appointed in 2004-2006 (Karin Stierle), followed by a part-time half-week administrator in

1. Ireland, A.M. ‘Irish Museums Association: The first 25 Years,’ in Museum Ireland, 12, 2002. pp.71-87
2006-07 (Mary Dowling), to the appointment of a full-time administrator in 2008 (Niamh Nic Ghabhann), who has since been succeeded by Carla Marrinan. The office was temporarily housed at the Pearse Museum in Rathfarnham in 2004-06 (courtesy of the OPW), and at 89 Merrion Square in 2006-08 (courtesy of the Director of the National Gallery of Ireland), with the process of sourcing a separate base ongoing.

The finances of the Association became a major issue when it became incorporated in 2004, (resulting in devolution of responsibility to the Board of Directors) and this has necessitated production of a set of annual audited accounts, together with a monthly balance sheet. The membership fee was increased to €50 per person (with concessions), in tandem with a drive to recruit institutional members from the national museums etc, and it is currently at 290 members in 2008.

Since 2004, the Association has been establishing a pattern of events that has led to an Annual Calendar and now revolves around a series of regular activities in 2008:

- **Field Trip** – (early summer) to historic venues countrywide, including Northern Ireland with an accompanying brochure, (fee paying).
- **Museum Practitioner’s Forum** – (mid-summer) for younger members to blow their own trumpet about their work, ideas, publications (held at the National Museum, National Library, Irish Architectural Archive) (fee paying)

‘Museum Visits’ (year-round) tours of new museums, facilities and exhibitions conducted by a museum practitioner, educator, curator or guide. (free).

The work of the Association is also carried out under the following headings:

Training is pursued under the ‘Museums Basics’ course run in association with the Heritage Council’s Museums Standards Scheme for Irish Museums. In addition, one-day training courses are held on topics such as ‘volunteering in museums’.

Communication is an essential part of the IMA operation and this is effected through the email ‘IMA News’ office@irishmuseums.ie, together with the website www.irishmuseums.org, which is constantly updated. A Newsletter is published twice a year with a rotating editor reporting from different areas of the country, providing information on current exhibitions, events and developments in the Irish museums world. Museum Ireland, the IMA journal in print since 1991, covers critical and contentious issues, case studies and the views of leading national and international museum experts and professionals.

Policy is informed by topical issues, such as social inclusion and repatriation, and reviews, such as the 2005 Survey of Museums in Ireland, which raised important issues currently challenging the Irish museums community, such as the lack of use new technologies, poor budgets in county museums, the need for staff, enlarged buildings and acquisition funds. One comment summed up several issues: “The improvement of education facilities and the need for education and outreach staff appears to be highest on the agenda of most museums together with the lack of materials to make collections more relevant to schools.”(4)

The Corporate Image and presentation of the Association was overhauled with the assistance of designers, resulting in a new improved masthead, a greater professionalism in publications and events, and a new PR brochure (supported by Event Communications Ireland) promoting the

interests of the Association in a smartly designed format. While the Association issues regular press releases about its events, it has had some success in targeting its annual conference and annual lecture as the subject of media interviews and profiles.

Underpinning all this work is the IMA Board, who are keenly aware of the rapidly changing nature of the cultural sector and the growing importance of heritage tourism to museums. IMA publications and activities highlight issues such as the growth of cultural heritage and its tourism potential, which is particularly significant because of its importance to the history and tradition of Irish people, and how it helps to inform a vision for their future. It is important that museums play a part in this vision, as some of the best places to evoke ideas and concepts about Irish life and history. The Government’s awareness of heritage resources such as museums was noted by the former Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern TD, when he spoke at the 2007 IMA Conference (held in Dublin to mark the 30th birthday of the Association and 150th anniversary of the Natural History Museum), “The world of Irish museums and galleries has progressed a great deal from the 1950s, when a Dáil debate recognised that ‘museums should be in the forefront of our tourist agenda’. This was an era that saw the foundation of an Irish section of the International Council of Museums in 1957, and the establishment of the Irish Museums Association in 1977, spearheaded by figures such as James White. The catalyst for progress in the cultural heritage sector came as a result of the placing of the cultural institutions under the Department of the Taoiseach in 1984, and then under a Department of Arts in 1993, in recognition of their important contribution to ‘the quality of Irish life, distinctive language and Irish cultural traditions in all their forms.’ The growing awareness of the significance of tourism to this country has caused a reassessment of the importance of culture and heritage to the economy, and the value of museums in that context. This has seen museums create maximum access to their collections, enhanced by first class museum services that are addressing the needs of Irish and overseas visitors and our new multi-cultural population.”

Philippe De Montebello, Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York gave the Annual Lecture in 2008. (Photo © Wild Bill Melton Images, Wild Bill Studios)

5. Quote from the speech by An Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern TD, at the launch of the Association’s Annual Conference, ‘Science, Technology and Society – the role for Museums’, at the National Gallery of Ireland, 3 March 2007.
position to engage with visitors of all ages and make their own contribution to the local economy.

'Museums Matter' Touring Exhibition
The Board is aware that the importance of museums to Irish society has never been as evident as it is today, and yet the sector is constantly trying to find a vehicle to promote museums and articulate concerns. It is partly for this reason that the Board has taken the decision to mount its first touring exhibition on the theme ‘Museums Matter: Accessing Ireland’s Heritage’. ‘Museums Matter’, jointly funded by the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism, and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (National Museums Northern Ireland) that will tour libraries, museums, folk parks, historic houses, theatres and arts centres across Ireland, north and south over a 4-year period 2008-2012. The exhibition was launched by Martin Cullen TD, Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism at the National Library of Ireland on 28 May, followed by its unveiling by the Lord Mayor of Belfast, Councillor Tom Hartley, at the Linen Hall Library, Belfast, on 11 June 2008.

A significant dimension of ‘Museums Matter’ is the support materials that will enable the public to interact and engage with the exhibition. It includes an illustrated book that promotes the shared heritage of this island reflected in the diversity of our collections, and this has been disseminated to every school in Ireland, north and south. In addition, there is an a/v presentation, display case of high-quality replica objects, four handling collections (for adults and young people), and activity sheets for young people with teacher’s notes (downloadable from the IMA website). The project is supported by a programme of talks demonstrations and workshops organized in conjunction with the IMA Administrator.

In conclusion, the Irish Museums Association has never been in such a strong position to represent the interests of the Irish museums sector. This position has been a hard won and it behoves the Association to be vigilant about capitalising on its strengths to ensure the organisation takes into account the changing needs of our members. These needs might include policies and ethical issues, monitoring staffing (posts, grades and salaries) in museums, collections care and management, and the use of new technologies (in documentation, website, interactives). The author acknowledges the hard-working and dedicated Board of Directors, which has set the pace to lead, inspire and develop the Association in protecting, conserving and promoting Ireland’s heritage.

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