

Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann

Royal Irish Academy

Statement by the Royal Irish Academy on Safeguarding Ireland's Cultural Heritage

17 June 2015

The Royal Irish Academy has a proud tradition of active participation in the preservation and conservation of Ireland's cultural heritage. Throughout the nineteenth century, subscriptions by Members of the Royal Irish Academy enabled it to purchase priceless cultural treasures on behalf of the Irish public, most notably the Ardagh Chalice and the Tara Brooch. These treasures subsequently formed part of the core of the National Museum of Ireland's collections. Today, through the work of its Library and projects, the Academy continues the tradition of collecting and preserving Ireland's written and digital heritage.

The Academy, operating as a neutral and independent forum on an all-island basis, has significant expertise in the cultural and heritage sector by virtue of its Membership, its network of multidisciplinary committees, participation in networks of international scholarship and its high-level links with stakeholders.

It is in the spirit of this tradition that the Academy looks to engage with the current debate on preserving our culture and heritage occasioned by the Alfred Beit Foundation's decision to sell a number of paintings. It considers three issues to be particularly worthy of further exploration:

- Safeguarding Ireland's cultural heritage
- Supporting good governance
- Growing cultural philanthropy.

Safeguarding Ireland's cultural heritage

Current public discussion regarding the sale of the Russborough paintings raises important questions regarding the role of the state in this respect. The Academy supports strengthening the existing legislation to ensure that patrimony, whether produced in Ireland or collected by its institutions and residents, remains in Ireland whenever possible.

A dialogue between interested parties should focus on the potential role of mechanisms such as the Cultural Register and the Irish Heritage Trust as well as international evidence in respect of best practice for long-term planning. For example, an expanded role for the Cultural Register to allow it to identify cultural assets in private ownership should be considered, especially if the criteria were developed in consultation with recognised national and international authorities in the relevant fields. The capacity for, and role of, long-term planning and public funding in supporting the preservation of cultural assets, including heritage properties of national importance, should also be explored.

Significant differences are evident in the level of scrutiny and processes followed in the granting of export licenses in Ireland and those in operation in other countries such as the UK, France and Italy. The processes and systems in place in Ireland should be reviewed to ensure best international practice is followed.



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Supporting good governance

Dialogue should be initiated for the purpose of growing awareness among Irish collecting institutions of applicable international standards for the management of collections. For example, the

International Council of Museums code of ethics - the world standard for custodians of collections, including those held in historic houses - states:

“The removal of an object or specimen from a museum collection must only be undertaken with a full understanding of the significance of the item, its character (whether renewable or non-renewable), legal standing, and any loss of public trust that might result from such action...”

It further states:

“Each museum should have a policy defining authorised methods for permanently removing an object from the collections through donation, transfer, exchange, sale, repatriation, or destruction, and that allows the transfer of unrestricted title to any receiving agency. Complete records must be kept of all de-accessioning decisions, the objects involved, and the disposal of the object. There will be a strong presumption that a de-accessioned item should first be offered to another museum.”

The Heritage Council has an excellent Museum Standards Programme for collecting institutions. To receive accreditation, institutions must have a variety of appropriate policies in place for the care, documentation and exhibition of the collections they hold, including one regarding de-accessioning. Participation in this programme is entirely voluntary at present.

Growing cultural philanthropy

There is concern that private sales of cultural assets donated by philanthropists for the benefit of the Irish public such as the Russborough paintings will impede future philanthropic endeavour across the island. In particular, such sales are likely to have a very discouraging effect on potential future donors of works of art who hope their gifts will be enjoyed by the Irish public in perpetuity. Further dialogue should consider the role of financial instruments, including tax supports, and other measures in encouraging private support for culture and heritage.

