Limerick City Gallery of Art
A Short History
Oliver Sheppard, Finnbheal
Bronze sculpture, 147 x 51 x 43 cm
Introduction
Mayor, Cllr. Jim Long

Although Limerick City Gallery of Art opened in 1948, the municipal art collection actually dates back to 1937 when the first works of art were acquired. Accordingly, 2012 is the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Gallery’s wonderful collection and what better way to mark this anniversary than with the official opening of the Phase II Redevelopment of the Limerick City Gallery of Art.

For over a century, since the establishment of the City Library in 1893 Limerick Corporation/City Council has been to the forefront of promoting the cultural life of the City. As a public representative and particularly as Mayor, I welcome this enormous expansion of one of the most iconic cultural institutions in Limerick and indeed the State.

Limerick has a long and distinguished tradition in the visual arts, from the great Georgian streetscapes to the exciting contemporary work of ev+a.

I welcome so much energy towards the artistic and especially welcome the opportunity for people, young and old, to engage with the visual arts as a result of the extension to Limerick City Gallery of Art, which will enable more of the permanent collection to be displayed and workshops to be held in a new designated space, while the provision of a new café will create a focal point around which the artistic life of the city will inevitably revolve.

On behalf of myself and the office of the Mayor, I salute all those involved in enabling Limerick City Gallery of Art write this new and exciting chapter in its distinguished history and thank you for contributing to this important addition to the cultural life of Limerick.
As Director of Service for Community & Enterprise, Culture & Sport I am delighted to have been part of both Phase I and Phase II of the redevelopment of Limerick City Gallery of Art. This important development serves to extend and enhance the City’s cultural infrastructure for the benefit of artists and audiences alike.

The list of people who made this happen must be thanked, the staff of Limerick City Gallery of Art, past and present, Mike Fitzpatrick, Siobhan O’Reilly, Pippa Little, Marian Lovett; The Limerick City Council Arts Officer, Sheila Deegan, the architects, John A. O’Reilly and Hugh Murray, the builders L&M Keating; the cooperation of various Limerick City Council Departments, especially the Parks Department; the Transportation and Infrastructure, and Property Management.

In the realisation of this publication, written by Dr. Matthew Potter, thanks to Limerick City Library and Limerick City Museum for historical information and photographs.

The Department of Arts Heritage and the Gaeltacht believed in this project since its inception in its initial phase in the late 1980’s right through to Phase II in 2012. We would like to sincerely thank them for the funding to make this project a realisation.
A museum may be defined as an institution (generally a building, room or series of rooms) that houses and displays a collection of objects of artistic, cultural, scientific or historical importance. Museums can be privately or publically owned. The word itself is of Greek origin, and refers to a temple or institution under the protection of the Muses, goddesses who were believed to inspire the creation of the arts. The name museum was first coined for the Musaeum or Mouseion at Alexandria, established by the Greek rulers of Egypt in the third century BC (which was however, a research institute rather than a museum in the modern sense) which housed a collection of objects and a famous library.

Among the most important types of museums are art galleries (often known as art museums in the USA) which are used for the exhibition of visual art, particularly paintings and sculpture. Like the museum, the art gallery originated in Ancient Greece where it evolved from the practice of donating paintings and sculpture to temples. As these collections grew, they were housed in special storage areas in or near the temples, of which the most famous was a hall in the Propylaea (the large ceremonial gateway to the Parthenon in Athens), known as the Pinakotheke (from which is derived the word pinacotheca or pinakothek a term used for art galleries in Italy and Germany respectively). Museums and art galleries were widespread in the Roman Empire, but virtually disappeared after its collapse for nearly a thousand years.

They were revived at the time of the Italian Renaissance, as part of the widespread revival of Greek and Roman culture. Wealthy princes, churchmen and merchants amassed ‘cabinets of curiosities’ and art collections which they displayed in their palaces. Originally, the word ‘gallery’ was used to describe long, narrow rooms in Renaissance houses and palaces, which were used,
among other things, to exhibit the owner’s art collection. This is the origin of the modern term ‘art gallery.’ Though privately owned, these collections were often open to visitors, though on a limited scale.

Thus, the public museum/art gallery as we know them is an invention of the Italian Renaissance, though who should get the credit is disputed by scholars. Some think that the Popes were responsible, and that the first public museum/art gallery since the fall of the Roman Empire was the Capitoline Museums, established in Rome by Pope Sixtus IV and opened in 1471, while the second was the Vatican Museums, opened by Pope Julius II in 1506. Others give the credit to the Medici dynasty of Florence, whose Medici Palace (built 1445-60) is sometimes regarded as the proto-type of the modern museum/art gallery.

The first publically-owned museum opened in Basel, Switzerland in 1661 and as it was owned by the city council, it is also the oldest municipal museum or art gallery in the world. Many other museums and art galleries were later established, particularly in the eighteenth century, but opening hours were often limited and access was usually restricted to elites who could afford the admission fees charged. The world’s first purpose-built art gallery (as distinct from existing buildings adapted for use as an art gallery) was that of Dulwich, South London, opened in 1817.

The modern museum and art gallery are more recent institutions. A major change was initiated as a result of the French Revolution when the Louvre Museum was opened in Paris, which allowed free access to all classes. Subsequently, many Royal art collections were transformed into national galleries of art. After 1800, it was widely believed that museums and art galleries should be made freely available to everyone in order to improve public taste, promote the arts and foster a sense of patriotism. Consequently, municipal museums and art galleries (that is owned by the city council) became very widespread in the nineteenth century, particularly in Europe. Indeed, the nineteenth and early twentieth century is sometimes called the ‘museum age.’

Ireland had a rich cultural life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but it was largely the domain of the urban-based elite, and the vast majority of the population had neither sufficient education nor leisure to participate. Irish museums and art galleries evolved from collections formed by Trinity College Dublin, the Royal Irish Academy and (especially) the Royal Dublin Society (RDS). In the mid-eighteenth century, the RDS began to put together an art collection for the students of its Drawing Schools and this was to form the nucleus of the National Gallery, the first public art museum in Ireland, established in 1854. It was followed by the Crawford Gallery in Cork (1885), the Belfast Art Gallery (1890) and the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art in Dublin (1908).

After Independence, the fine arts were somewhat neglected, due in part to their association with the old Anglo-Irish elite, the frequent philistinism and miserliness of the new State, and the economic privations of the 1930s. Municipal authorities played the lead role in bringing the arts to the general populace, particularly in three key areas of libraries, art galleries and museums. The establishment of these flagship institutions put a considerable strain on penurious local authorities and for many years they were short of funding, but they played a significant role in a culture-starved society. As part of this trend, a number of municipal art galleries were founded in the decade 1939-48, starting with Waterford in 1939, and followed by Limerick, Drogheda and Clonmel (all in 1948).
Art and Artists in Limerick

Anonymous, Old Thomond Bridge, oil on linen, 62.5 x 89 cm (1948)
It is not often realised that Limerick city and county has a long artistic tradition. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many of the local landowners and some of the leading merchants amassed significant art collections (in the case of the former often purchased on the Grand Tour of the Continent). In 1821, an art exhibition in the city featured works by Titian, Turner, Van Dyck and others. In 1852, the Limerick School of Art and Design was established and was housed at the Athenaeum Building on Cecil Street from 1855 to 1912. The presence of a school of art was often a catalyst for the establishment of an art gallery, and Cork’s Crawford Gallery was founded in this manner in 1885.

However, although Limerick did not establish an art gallery for almost a century after the School of Art came into existence, two significant art exhibitions were held under the latter’s auspices in the Athenaeum. The first (1866) was opened by the flamboyant Mayor of Limerick, Scottish entrepreneur Peter Tait while the second (1883) was opened by the local political grandee William Monsell, Lord Emly. Both consisted of works lent both by the South Kensington Museum (later renamed the Victoria and Albert Museum) in London and figures from the local elite including the de Veres of Curragh Chase, the Roches of Caherass, Lord Emly, members of the City Council (such as the historian Maurice Lenihan and the wealthy merchant Sir James Spaight) and institutions including the Corporation and Chamber of Commerce. Among the artists represented were Reynolds, Hals, Rembrandt, Poussin, Van Dyck, Turner and Constable. Never before or since were such valuable works of art displayed in Limerick.

Likewise, Limerick has also produced several outstanding artists over the past two centuries. Among the most significant in the nineteenth century were Timothy Collopy (1767-1811), Jeremiah Hodges Mulcahy (1810-89) and St George Hare (1857-1933) while the Cork-born Henry O’Shea (1832-1907) made his home in Limerick and Galway artist Joseph Haverty (1794-1864) did much of his most famous work here.
Establishment of Limerick City Gallery of Art 1936-48

The establishment of the Limerick City Gallery of Art (LCGA) was due to the untiring work and generosity of three enlightened men: Limerick artists Dermod O’Brien and Sean Keating and long-serving District Court Judge Joseph Flood. A native of Foynes, Dermod O’Brien (1865-1945) was a grandson of both Young Ireland leader William Smith O’Brien and prominent Liberal statesman Thomas Spring Rice, first Lord Monteagle. One of the leading artists in the country, he was the longest ever-serving President of the Royal Hibernian Academy (1910-45), the principal Irish institution involved in promoting visual arts. Sean Keating (1889-1977) was born in Limerick City, attended St. Munchin’s College and the Limerick School of Art, and went on to become President of the Royal Hibernian Academy (1948-62) and one of the greatest Irish artists of the twentieth century. A renowned barrister and writer, Joseph Mary Flood (1882-1970) was born in Longford Town and served as District Justice in the Limerick City and North Tipperary district from 1923 to 1947. He took a major part in the cultural life of his adopted city, and had a particular interest in local history and archaeology, evidenced by his membership of the Thomond Archaeological Society and the Old Limerick Society.
On 27 February 1936, Dermod O’Brien was given the honorary freedom of Limerick and this acted as a catalyst for the establishment of an art gallery in the city. On the same night, a dinner was held in O’Brien’s honour in Cruises Hotel and the idea of setting up an art gallery in Limerick was originated by John J. Johnson (manager of the Grand Canal Company in Limerick and thus in charge of the Limerick Canal). There followed a series of meetings between officials of the Corporation and a number of prominent figures in the artistic community which resulted in a public meeting being held in the Town Hall on Rutland Street and a committee (chaired by Justice Flood) established to put the project in motion. Early in 1937, a Limerick Municipal Art Gallery Sub-Committee was set up, whose membership included Dermod O’Brien, Sean Keating, Dr George Furlong, Director of the National Gallery of Ireland, Justice Flood, Mayor Dan Bourke TD (the only Mayor of Limerick to serve five consecutive terms), former Mayor Michael Keyes, TD and a number of other Limerick notables. Two local businessmen were particularly active on the committee, J.J. Johnson, who served as honorary secretary and Paul Bernard (proprietor of the Grand Central Cinema) who was honorary treasurer.

The first paintings were acquired in 1937. Justice Flood’s role in particular was crucial for he played the leading role in amassing the collection of paintings, which formed the nucleus of the municipal collection. Subscriptions were received from the business community and prominent artists including O’Brien and Keating agreed to donate paintings. Also of great significance was the enlightened interest in the project taken by T.C. O’Mahony, Limerick City Manager, at whose prompting Limerick Corporation provided a grant for the purchase of works of art. Exhibitions of the municipal collection were held in different venues, so that in effect there was a municipal art gallery before there was a building to house it. The first exhibition was held in the newly constructed Savoy Cinema in November 1937 at which forty-three paintings were put on display. Later, the collection was housed at the Municipal Technical Institute in O’Connell Avenue, where public access was severely restricted, except for a second and third annual exhibition, held in 1938 and 1939 respectively.
The next question was where the municipal art collection should be housed. In the late 1930s, Limerick Corporation intended to build a new City Hall and it was hoped that the municipal art collection could be housed there. However, the Second World War resulted in the postponement of this project (which was not in fact to be realised for another fifty years) and instead it was decided to house the art collection in an annex to the Carnegie Building in Pery Square, then the home of the City Library and Museum.

In 1901, the Mayor of Limerick, celebrated Fenian John Daly had written to the renowned Scottish-American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie seeking a grant for the building of a proper home for the Limerick City Library (which had been established in Glentworth Street in 1893). Carnegie promised £7,000 on condition that Limerick Corporation provided a free site. After a futile attempt on the part of the Corporation to raise funds from the merchant elite for the purchase of a site, the Earl of Limerick, ground landlord of the city, who owned the People’s Park at this time, offered part of it as a free site for the library. Carnegie was delighted to hear this and when he came to Ireland in 1903, included Limerick in his itinerary. He visited the city on 20 October of that year, was given the Honorary Freedom and laid the foundation stone for the new library.
A competition was held seeking designs for the building of the Carnegie Library, and of the fifty submitted, the second was accepted as it was considered that the resulting building would be 'of a more permanent and suitable character.' This design was by a Dublin architect George P. Sheridan (1865-1950) who went on to design a number of other Carnegie libraries (Lismore, Tallow, Ballyduff and Cappoquin, all in County Waterford) and supervised the building of Dublin’s Parnell Monument. Constructed on a commanding site in the People’s Park on Pery Square, the library took three years to build. The building was of local limestone with Killaloe slates used for the roof, and included a two-story residence for the City Librarian (which was used as such until 1973). It was built in the Hiberno-Romanesque style, which is usually more associated with ecclesiastic buildings and it is thought that the main entrance was inspired by the great doorway of Glenstal Castle (now Glenstal Abbey). The library was opened in 1906 and ten years later, Limerick’s first municipal museum was also opened in the same building.

In the 1940s, Limerick Corporation decided to house the municipal art gallery in the Carnegie Building, and borrowed £7,500 to pay for construction of the necessary extension. The art gallery annex was designed by another Dublin architect named Lucius O’Callaghan (1877-1954) and built between 1945 and 1948. Situated at the back of the Carnegie Building and designed according to the most modern specifications, it was divided into three sections to house local works, eighteenth and nineteenth century paintings and modern works respectively and had special roof lighting.
The Official Opening of
Limerick City Gallery of Art
22 March 1948

Robert Herbert
Librarian and ex officio curator 1948–1957
The new permanent gallery for the Limerick City Art Gallery was officially opened on 22 March 1948, under the official title of Limerick Free Art Gallery. The day began with the conferring of the honorary freedom of Limerick on J. M. Flood and Sean Keating at a splendid ceremony in the Town Hall, Rutland Street, presided over by Mayor Patrick O’Connell. Mention was made in both of their citations that they had been conferred with this honour partially as a result of their major role in establishing an art gallery in Limerick. (They were later to be further honoured when Flood Street and Keating Street in the Killalee area of Limerick city were named after them).

In the afternoon, the art gallery was officially opened by Dr. Patrick O’Neill (1891-1958), the Catholic Bishop of Limerick who described the event as ‘this great step forward in cultural progress’ and declared that ‘the opening of a gallery will result in the opening of people’s minds’. In his address, J. M. Flood described the opening of the gallery as ‘the culmination of years of effort.’

The new gallery was owned and funded by Limerick Corporation (which changed its name to Limerick City Council in 2002). From 1948 to 1985, the City Librarian held the post of Curator of the City Art Gallery ex-officio, so the first Curator was Robert (Bob) Herbert (1911-57), the incumbent City Librarian, who held office until his death.

Official opening ceremony 1948
(l-r) Sean Keating, Matthew Macken (City Manager), Bishop O’Neill, Mayor Patrick O’Connell, Justice Flood, unknown
Limerick City Gallery of Art since 1948

The gallery opened with 164 pieces, but lack of funds in the financially deprived 1950s resulted in only a further twenty-three being added by 1960. Interestingly, all of the works were Irish, with Jack Yeats, John Lavery and William Orpen among those represented, as well as Limerick artists Dermod O’Brien and Sean Keating. In January 1965, the distinguished Limerick writer Kate O’Brien presented the City Art Gallery with a portrait of herself by Irish artist James Sleator, which to this day is one of the most treasured works in the collection. Later in the same year, controversy erupted when ‘five nudes painted in the abstract style’ were included in the Irish winter artists exhibition in the City Art Gallery with the proximity of the children’s section of the library causing particular concern. However, the exhibition selection committee voted to display the nudes on the casting vote of Mayor Frank Glasgow, who stated that ‘an artist should not be confined in expressing himself.’

The Limerick Art Gallery Advisory Committee (established in 1937) continued to meet until it was superseded by the Cultural and Sporting Strategic Policy Committee in 1998. Over the years, it boasted many distinguished members, including the renowned Limerick artists Sean Keating, Dermod O’Brien and Dr. Thomas Ryan; celebrated Dominican priest and artist Fr. Aengus Buckley; long-serving Assistant Curator of the Limerick City Art Gallery Phil Andrews; Jim Kemmy, TD, Mayor of Limerick and member of Limerick City Council; John Hunt, founder of the Hunt Museum and Dr. James White, Director of the National Gallery of Ireland from 1964 to 1980.

From the early 1960s, Ireland began to enjoy periods of economic prosperity and in the 1970s and 1980s, Limerick Corporation came to occupy a position at the very centre of promoting and developing the arts in the city. One of the most striking examples was the financial and other support given to the Exhibition of Visual+ Art (EV+A) since its inception in 1977. With its home-base in the Limerick City Art Gallery, EV+A became the pre-eminent annual Irish exhibition of contemporary art, which brought to Limerick ‘both national and international artists and curators, and their cutting-edge contemporary artwork’.

For over a quarter of a century (1948-75), the Carnegie Building was Limerick’s principal cultural centre, housing the three municipal institutions of City Library, City Museum and City Art Gallery and in consequence became increasingly congested. For much of this period, only a fraction of the municipal art collection could be displayed, with most of it remaining in storage. In 1973, the City Librarian’s residence was turned into the Schools’ Section of Limerick City Library and in 1975 the Museum was moved to its own premises in one of the recently restored Georgian houses in John’s Square (where it remained until 1999 it was relocated to new premises in Castle Lane). However, both of these changes resulted in the expansion of the City Library, not the City Art Gallery.

The turning point in the fortunes of City Art Gallery came in 1985 when the Library moved to the historic Granary building. In the same year, the Carnegie Building was officially named the Limerick City Gallery of Art, the City Librarian ceased to be Curator and Paul O’Reilly was appointed the first fulltime Director/Curator. Subsequently, it was expanded to encompass the whole Carnegie Building resulting in the creation of a large amount of exhibition space and the display of a much larger proportion of the permanent collection. This was augmented by the building of an extension in 1999.
Throughout this period the permanent collection expanded steadily until it amounted to 831 historic and contemporary works from 456 artists by 2005. Two important specialised collections have been acquired in the last twenty-five years. In the late 1980s, the Michael O’Connor Poster Collection was donated to the LCGA. Comprising over 2,800 items, the collection was generously donated by avid collector Michael O’Connor and comprises a huge range of international posters of historical and cultural significance. In 1983 Samuel Walsh founded the Limerick Contemporary Art Society and in 1987, the Society’s committee established the National Collection of Contemporary Drawing, which was given to the LCGA in 1991. The collection currently holds over 200 pieces and has given the impetus to attract exhibitions specifically dedicated to contemporary drawing in Ireland and abroad.

The Arts Council, an Chomhairle Ealaíon, have funded Limerick City Gallery of Art’s programme since the late 1980s and in 2009 and an exhibition ‘Noughties but Nice: 21st Century Irish Art’ surveyed the extensive terrain of art made in Ireland during the first decade of this millennium. The exhibition, consisting some of the most exciting contemporary master-works of the Noughties, including seminal works by leading Irish artists were shown at LCGA before the exhibition toured to other national venues. This exhibition was funded by The Arts Council Touring Grant as a pilot in visual arts programming.

In 2008 the LCGA celebrated its sixtieth birthday and in 2009 work commenced on the largest addition to the Carnegie Building since its opening a century before. The Carnegie Building (a protected structure) was extended on three sides into the People’s Park to house a new storage space for the permanent collection, a café/library social space, a workshop area and additional public facilities. The extension was designed by Hugh Murray of Limerick (project architect) and John A. O’Reilly of County Clare (design architect) and funded by the Department of Arts, Sports and Tourism through the Access II scheme (designed to assist the provision of high standard arts and culture infrastructure) which provided 70 per cent of the cost and Limerick City Council, which provided the other 30 per cent. The scale of the redevelopment necessitated the closure of the LCGA for a long period, during which parts of the collection were exhibited in Istabraq Hall, Limerick City Hall and the Hunt Museum.

Limerick’s municipal art collection is now valued at around five million euro and is one of the finest in the country outside Dublin. Fittingly, the seventy-fifth anniversary of its foundation has been marked by the official opening of the newly extended LCGA on 16 January 2012 by Jimmy Deenihan TD, Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. A sculpture - to be called “The Siege of Limerick” - has been commissioned from internationally renowned, New York-based artist Brian O’Doherty to mark the re-opening. The ‘triangular’ sculpture has been funded by the ‘Per Cent for Art’ programme, which allows pieces of art to be commissioned or purchased as a complement to an architectural development.
**List of Curators and Directors/Curators of the Limerick City Gallery of Art**

**City Librarian ex-officio Curator**
- Robert Herbert 1948–1957
- Maire Lanigan 1958–1973
- Marie Crowe (acting) 1973–1974
- Maurice Flynn 1974–1985

**Fulltime Director/Curator**
- Paul O’Reilly 1985–1999
- Mike Fitzpatrick 2000–2009
- Pippa Little (acting) 2009–2010
- Marion Lovett (acting) 2010–2011
- Pippa Little (acting) 2011–2012
- Helen Carey 2012–present

**Sources**
- Archives of Limerick City Gallery of Art
- Website of Limerick City Library, Local Studies at http://www.limerickcity.ie/Library/LocalStudies

**Colophon**
This booklet is published on the occasion of the official opening of Phase II of the redevelopment of Limerick City Gallery of Art, in the presence of the Mayor, Cllr. Jim Long and officially opened by Jimmy Deenihan T.D., Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht on Monday 16th January 2012

This redevelopment was funded by The Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and Limerick City Council

**Acknowledgements**
First and foremost to all the artists who have exhibited with LCGA and whose works make up the LCGA Permanent Collections

All the various audiences who, in collaboration with the artists, have helped bring the gallery and its exhibitions to life

The City Library staff who, over the years, from 1948 to 1985, attended to the collections’ safety and display, especially the late Phil Andrews

The various members, councillors and citizens of the Art Gallery Advisory Committee who, for almost fifty years, exercised responsibility for the well being of LCGA and its collections, especially in this regard the late Jim Kemmy TD, for over fifteen years the chairman of that committee

During these decades the various mayors, councillors, city managers and Limerick City Council staff and workers whose ongoing responsibilities included the support and upkeep of LCGA, its premises and its collections, especially in recent years Mary Conlon, Sheilla Deegan, Mike Fitzpatrick, Anthony Hickey, Susan Holland, Derek Ivory, Emily Jane Kirwan, Pippa Little, Marian Lovett, Ger Moloney, Anne Murphy, John O’Donnell, Paul O’Reilly, Siobhan O’Reilly and the late Larry Casey and the many dedicated FAS participants

The many benefactors of the Permanent Collection whose generous donations through gifts and bequests made over the years have strengthened the collection and allowed it to expand, and all those artists who generously gave their work to enhance the collection

The organisations: The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon, Committee of the Exhibition of Visual Art (ev+a), Friends of the National Collection, Contemporary Irish Art Society, Limerick Contemporary Art, Failte Ireland, the Heritage Council, Culture Ireland, National Rehabilitation Board (NRB), National Gallery of Ireland who have either financially or otherwise supported LCGA

The rate-paying businesses and citizens of Limerick, and all those who, through taxation, have supported LCGA

The various art galleries, dealers and gallerists whose general business commitments and generous discounts have supported LCGA. These include Art In Progress, Belltable Arts Centre, Crawford Municipal Art Gallery, Dolmen Gallery, Graphic Studios, Green on Red Gallery, Hendriks Gallery, Jorgensen Gallery, Kerlin Gallery, Rubicon Gallery, Solomon Gallery, Taylor Galleries, and The Oliver Dowling Gallery, Limerick Printmakers and Limerick School of Art & Design

John Shinnors for his unfailing support in establishing the MA in Curatorial Practice in partnership with Limerick School of Art and Design, LIT

The various organisations, too numerous to mention, that have over the years helped to make a success of the LCGA Exhibition Programme