



## A new lease of life for art Painting restoration in Tipperary

Since 1995, the Heritage Council Grants Programme has assisted hundreds of projects of varying scales from diverse fields, each contributing to Irish heritage at local or national level. South Tipperary County Museum in Clonmel was successful under the 2008 Museums and Archives Scheme with a project based around the restoration of three paintings, which make up part of the museums collection.

The paintings in question are modern pieces, with the oldest one, a glass reverse painting, *Charles Stewart Parnell* by an unknown artist, probably dating to late 19th or early 20th Century. The second is an oil canvas painting *Perry's house at Newcastle*, also executed by an unknown artist in mid 20th Century. The scene shows a big house, thought to be in Newcastle, Co. Tipperary. Both of these paintings are complimented with ornamental frames decorated with leaf details. The third one is an oil canvas painting with frame entitled *Return of the Potato Diggers*, attributed to Grace Henry and executed in 20th Century. Its frame has very simple design with no decorative motives.

The work on the three paintings was carried out over a ten-month period in the County Museum's conservation laboratory. As well as presenting different production styles and techniques, the three paintings presented a number of different conservation issues associated with their damage. While the paintings had been in the possession of the

museum for many years, they could not be displayed due to their poor condition.

The painting in the worst condition was the glass reverse *Charles Stewart Parnell*. The glass support was broken in three parts and previous attempts to reinforce the reverse of the broken glass had resulted in further damages such as delamination and flaking of the painting layer over large areas of the image. The painting's frame was also in a poor condition, with an unstable structure, visible marks of previous non-professional reparations and over-gildings. Deterioration of the decoration was very advanced and the overall loss was estimated at around 30%.

The second painting *Perry's house at Newcastle* had damages to the painting layer with cracks, flaking paint, dirt and advanced varnish degradation. The painting's frame was over-gilded and had lost most of its moulded decoration.

*Return of the Potato Diggers* showed similar problems to the piece described above. The main issues were canvas deformations caused by a loose stretcher and loss of saturation of the painting layer due to ingrained dirt. The frame required minor surface repairs.

As with all conservation projects, the most significant part of the work is research and in the case of treated paintings and frames, which have complex surface



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**Opposite page:** Glass reverse painting *Charles Stewart Parnell* with frame before and after conservation.

**Above:** The paintings with exhibition panels showing the conservation process were displayed in the South Tipperary County Museum between Oct 2009 & Jan 2010.

**Below:** An oil canvas painting *Perry's house at Newcastle* before, during and after conservation.

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## Glass Reverse Painting

Contrary to painting on a canvas or similar support, the reverse painting technique requires an artist to paint in reverse, or 'back to front'. Normally when an artwork is created on a support such as canvas, wood, or even on a wall, it is painted from the same angle and direction that it will ultimately be viewed from when completed. However, in the case of a reverse painting the painted side of the artwork (applied on one side of the glass) and the viewing side (perceived from the other side of the glass) means that the painted side of the artwork and the viewing side are opposed to one another.

decoration, the examination of the surface layers provides considerable amounts of valuable technical information. Thanks to different examination techniques one can establish the history and causes of damage to the objects, which are vital for selecting the most appropriate treatment methods. Initially the objects were examined using different types of light ranging from visible (VIS), ultraviolet (UV) to infrared (IR) light spectrum. This non-destructive process reveals information about surface structure, range and type of over-gildings on the frames. Additional penetration of IR waves exposed the presence of the preparatory drawing executed by artist in the painting *Perry's house at Newcastle*. In the next stages it was necessary to use more invasive methods - light microscopy and microchemical tests were carried out to identify pigments, binding mediums, gilding materials, natural fibres and wood species. The complex research work made up a core part of work on the objects allowing preparation of a list of necessary treatments.

The primary aim of the treatments was to halt further degradation to the paintings with frames by eliminating the causes of damages. The next was to preserve the original material and to reinstate the splendour of the objects in respect for the original material.

In the initial stages of work it was difficult to anticipate all conservation issues and the entire process was a learning experience, with vital information emerging throughout the process. The conservation of these objects highlighted a very important point. Conservation of glass reverse painting is always challenging due to its unique nature, but also due to the fact that there is very little information available on treatment options. However, there has recently been an increase in interest about these type of paintings that perhaps reflects a growing awareness of their complex conservation issues. Treatment to the frames returned their original decorative function to the paintings and now they can fully complement them. The paintings after conservation regained their original splendour and freshness. Through this work the museum hopes to raise awareness of science in the conservation of art and perhaps offer a different way of experiencing art for people.

**The author Damian Lizun is paintings and polychromy sculpture conservator and works for South Tipperary County Museum.**

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