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National Museum of Ireland
Ard-Mhúsaem na hÉireann

Collections Acquisitions Strategy
Irish Folklife Division

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Collections Acquisition Strategy of the Irish Folklife Division

1. INTRODUCTION

The Irish Folklife collection amounts to *c.* 40,000 objects and is the ethnographic collection that reflects Irish culture. It is complemented by documentation, which includes a specialist library and archive both of which incorporate object histories, field recordings and image collections. The role of the Irish Folklife Division is to collect, interpret and preserve objects that tell the stories of the traditional and everyday way of life of Ireland.

The Irish Folklife Division manages this collection of objects understanding that traditions change and evolve, and seeks to reflect that in our collecting. The Division continues to work with all communities, at home and internationally, and explore themes for contemporary collecting. People's stories and the provenance of their objects continue to be the essence of the Irish Folklife collection.

The origins of the collecting of Irish Folklife by the National Museum of Ireland dates to the Nils Lithberg Report of 1927. In May of that year a Committee of Enquiry was set up by the Ministry of Education. It consisted of, amongst others the director of the National Gallery of Ireland, the President of the Royal Hibernian Academy and Professor Nils Lithberg, advisor to the Northern Museum, Stockholm. In his recommendation, Lithberg stressed that Irish archaeological and ethnological collections should form the main focus of collecting and display. Irish Folklife was interpreted as an extension of archaeology in which the material culture of rural life over the previous two hundred years was held to have connections with the material culture of the Irish people from prehistory onwards.

The period of time covered by this strategy is from the middle of the 19th-century to the present day. Initially the Irish Folklife Collections were tied into efforts to collect the Folklore of Ireland. These endeavours were seen in the contemporary context as attempts to decolonise Ireland by way of collecting and preserving the country's own material culture. Part of this work resulted in objects being collected, then and subsequently, that reflected the vernacular and it was feared, disappearing national portable heritage. Such efforts were emblematic post-Independence of protecting and preserving the tangible and intangible expression of this identity. The Ireland of the latter half of the twentieth century was impacted by significant forces of change, including for example, mechanisation, electrification, mass transport, communication and consumerism amongst many others. This document seeks to update the rationale behind the Irish Folklife acquisitions strategy whilst acknowledging its inheritance from past collecting efforts. This strategy seeks to address the changes in people's everyday lives up to the present day.

The Irish Folklife Collection to date has largely been focused on acquiring objects from between the period 1850 to 1950. Whilst there was substantial change – and continuity - in the country during these 100 years, it is arguable that the years since 1950 have seen accelerated change, not least in our material culture. A strength of the Irish Folklife Collection is how it can tell the stories behind continuity and change. The challenge now is to collect to indicate this change. The work in drafting this acquisition policy sought to identify these changes and what would be desirable to acquire in order to reflect this. This policy will provide guidelines for the Irish Folklife Division over the next five years, and will be reviewed after this period.

2. CRITERIA

As outlined in the NMI's Contemporary Acquisitions Strategy the Museum has developed criteria for collecting in a contemporary context (across all four curatorial divisions, including the Art and Industrial Division) that are included within this strategy, so as to reflect a framework for decision making relating to the acquisition of contemporary material for the Irish Folklife collection. They are objects that are:

1. In danger of being irreparably lost.
2. Represent and record important social, cultural and historical events.
3. Have multiple meanings for different segments of Irish society.
4. Are judged to be of unusually high quality.
5. Fill important gaps in existing collections.
6. Illustrate important expressions of human creativity and spirituality.

Furthermore, the National Museum's categories of contemporary collecting encompass much by way of the material culture of the everyday life of all Irish citizens. Especially relevant categories to acquisitions within the context of the Irish Folklife collection are outlined below:

- ***Expanding the voices in collecting***
Expanding the voices in collecting involves response to the considerable discussion within the museum community about the representation of diverse national populations in collections, and about whether the people who typically make acquisition decisions adequately speak for all of society. Three factors have prompted this interest: concerns that collections do not adequately reflect all socioeconomic groups; underrepresentation of particular ethnic groups; and the desire to increase engagement with NMI and its collections by those groups who may not have felt included in museums in the past.
- ***Community-based collecting***
To promote preservation and documentation of artefacts by community members, organisations, and businesses, which reduce the burden on collecting institutions to gather everything of interest themselves. Such a system might involve establishing a database to track collections held elsewhere; conducting oral histories that can be digitised and training the community on how to preserve artefacts (e.g. NMI's iCAN and LGBTI+ projects). NMI will endeavour to liaise with other organisations who are also collecting in this area, such as the National Library of Ireland.
- ***Alternatives to three-dimensional collecting***
Collect a variety of sources in addition to objects in order to provide a more comprehensive record. These include photographs, videos, laboratory and industrial records, trade literature,

personal statements by participants, *etc.* The most frequently cited examples in this area of collecting pertain primarily to the vernacular, *i.e.* Folklife.

The Irish Folklife Division Acquisitions Strategy will facilitate a national appeal, once every five years, in which the Irish people (at home and internationally) will be asked to nominate what they believe to be the most representative object or group of objects of everyday Irish life from that five-year period. The most favoured object or group of objects will be acquired by the National Museum.

The Irish Folklife Division, therefore, seeks to collect objects from the island of Ireland and its diaspora abroad, and with this strategy aims to focus in particular on the acquisition of material culture dating from the 1950s onwards unless otherwise stated. The Division also collects with a regard for county museums and other institutions collecting in the same subject areas.

These subject areas are divided broadly as follows:

1. The Home and Daily Routine

As the centre of all daily activity of the household, and of much of the social activity as well, the dwelling house acquired its own collection of objects, beliefs and practices. Cooking utensils, furniture and furnishings, and the objects associated with industry in the home including spinning and weaving, making and repairing clothing and making and repairing objects used in and around the household are all represented.

The home means different things to people but is still the focus of the family unit, which has changed. It is still the focus for food, family celebrations and traditions. Increasingly people spend less time there due to working farther away. The home, like in the past, keeps up with fashions and trends in terms of fittings and furnishings and sometimes now incorporates office work. The types of homes have changed in terms of building and architecture and the traditional fireside is nearing an end. Homelessness and poverty are still part of Irish life. Daily routine continues although sometimes limited to mornings and evenings for food, relaxation and sleep. We aim to collect objects, which reflect these changes.

This theme will incorporate collections known on the Museum's collections management database as **Clothing and Textiles, Furniture, Fittings and Architecture**, Domestic Metalwork and Household Objects, Glass and Ceramics, and Architecture.

The acquisitions policy is to collect a representative sample of traditional **clothing**. With the widespread availability and affordability of mass-produced clothing we can no longer refer to traditional clothing in an acquisitions policy and must adopt a separate collecting strategy for these objects. The starting point for this alternative approach is the 1950s.

These items will be acquired as they become available. In relation to post-1950 material the aim is to collect typical clothing for men, women, boys, girls and infants in each decade (often this will not be possible and items like sewing patterns will be collected instead). The aim is to continue to collect representative examples of homemade and Irish-produced textiles of everyday use, but also reflect some mass-produced clothing sold and worn in Ireland. Popular jewellery and accessories will be collected and a representative sample of body ornamentation.

The acquisitions policy for **furniture and furnishings** is to continue to collect pieces of 18th- and early 19th-century date, which have tended to fall outside the general date range of 1850-1950 as seen elsewhere in the Irish Folklife collections. Post-1920s everyday furniture will also be collected reflecting rural, urban, nomadic and disability furniture. This policy will prioritise collecting examples of Irish-manufactured furniture, furnishings and carpets.

The acquisitions policy in relation to **domestic metalwork and household objects** is to collect electrical, gas and battery-operated household objects and to obtain representative examples of the decades from the 1950s to the present. This collection needs to be updated so as to include many mass-produced items and objects that changed households and the lives of their inhabitants. Future collecting of **glass and ceramics** will concentrate on Irish-produced ware as much as possible, but will also include mass-produced ware made in France and England.

The acquisitions policy for **architecture** is to continue to collect objects illustrative of traditional building practice in towns and throughout the countryside. Collecting will also encompass the architecture of modern buildings inclusive of practices influenced by state and EU regulations changing our homes. Attention will also be given to initiating collections relating to the changed role of gardens in daily life.

2. Farming, Fishing and Transport

Farming was Ireland's principal economic activity up until the latter half of the twentieth century, and this fact has been reflected in the Division's collections. Because farming and fishing in Ireland were on a small scale in many regions, this led to the late survival of many traditional agricultural hand implements and fishing gear, a wide range of which has been collected. A representative sample of horse-drawn farm machinery, which was made in factories and foundries has also been collected. The Division seeks to collect representations of the farming sector as it evolved to incorporate modern agricultural practices such as mechanisation, organic, collective and joint farming ventures as well as practices associated with Ireland's membership of the EU. The Division also seeks to collect objects associated with non-traditional land use such as energy generation, recreation and sustainable tourism.

The Division aims to continue recording the story of Ireland's fishing industry by collecting objects that mark the change in fishing practices that began in the early 20th century and continue up to contemporary times. These changes include the formation of lobbying and collective representation organisations and other adaptations that occurred due largely to Irish, EU and UK fishing policies. The acquisitions policy also aims to fill the gaps in the vernacular boat collection, while also collecting and recording boat types and machinery that were introduced to make the Irish fishing industry more productive. The increasingly diverse use of Ireland's maritime waters and inland waterways, as they pertain to fishing and boats will also be recorded.

This theme will incorporate collections known on the Museum's collections management database as **Agriculture and Boats, Fishing & Hunting and Transport**.

The acquisitions policy for **agriculture** will be to collect examples of regional variations of agricultural hand tools and horse-drawn machinery not already represented in the collections. Certain key examples of small farm machines may be acquired in order to illustrate economic change subject to adequate storage space being available. Consideration will be given to the disposal or deaccessioning of certain agricultural machines, which are in very poor condition.

In this policy, we will try to acquire objects that reflect farms progressing from individual units to their role in co-ops and major creameries, marts and slaughter-houses and representative objects of EU involvement in farming.

We would like to have a full representation of all of Ireland's traditional **boats** and ensure geographic representation for the whole country. These will be acquired subject to availability and the availability of suitable storage space. When completed, the Irish vernacular boat collection in the National Museum of Ireland should prove to be the most important of its type.

The acquisitions policy also encompasses the collecting of fishing traps, artisan fishing rods, fly-fishing tackle, children's fishing gear, and modern pots in order to fill gaps in the collection. We would like to reflect the EU changes to traditional fishing rights and examine the lives of fishing communities. Also the leisure aspects of fishing, and changes in relation to safety.

The acquisitions policy for **transport** is to address the typical examples of 20th century transport, which have become part of the vernacular since the middle of that century. In this regard, consideration will be given to acquiring representative objects of transport infrastructure, which had a major influence on popular life in the city and countryside.

3. Trades and Business

Traditional crafts have always been important in the Irish Folklife collection. From those based in the home to the artisan workshops in urban areas. Trades and crafts people were part of the fabric of every community, supplying all needs. The onset of modernisation, mechanisation and commercialisation changed this bringing with it the need for new trades and professions. The objects they made and the tools used sometimes were no longer needed, and the crafts needed to adapt to the use of new materials in the community. As crafts disappeared, the museum reflected this in its collecting. Although small-scale craft industries became a means to a livelihood, some traditional crafts are now executed for leisure or as an art practice, and the museum needs to collect to illustrate this development. Many professions also expanded with modernisation and access to further education.

The acquisitions policy for **crafts, trades and occupations** is to collect a representative range of materials produced by contemporary trades-and crafts-people, particularly where there has been a significant technological development. There will also be an emphasis on artisan and craft tools as well as those that use work tools on new materials, for example acrylics. The move from handcraft to commercial/mass-manufacturing must also be collected, with consideration given to new crafts, e.g. welder, mechanic, electrician, plumber which came with modernisation, and the need to reflect the introduction of new materials. This collection will now include objects associated with factory work, professions and occupations, e.g. Garda, Bank Clerk and Solicitor. The existing collections will also be expanded upon reflecting commerce and retail. A priority area of collecting for this policy will be in the areas of food product innovation and entrepreneurs, as well as new and practicing businesses in the craft/artisan sector, thereby reflecting local/natural products in food, health and cosmetics, whilst also reflecting other nationalities through the collection.

4. Social Life and Pastimes

The social activities associated with traditional life, calendar customs and festivals reveal a wide panorama of popular tradition including religious practices, belief in divination, aspects of amusement and entertainment and the marker points of peoples' lives. Some are of great antiquity, others are Christianised pagan festivals, while more are recent introductions from medieval and post-medieval times. Nowadays with reduced connection to the land and the seasons, for many the calendar year is punctuated less by traditional communal events. These once marked the passing of a year, but sport and commercial events also mark the calendar. Personal fitness and wellbeing have resulted in community events for charity and a move away from the traditional religious calendar.

Our collection is rich where material culture exists, but now needs to reflect the change from formal to secular practices. The stages of life connected with the traditional Christian sacraments are still marked, but often in a different way. The human connections we make and the traditional family unit are continuing to change. Childhoods although similar to the past in many respects have also evolved both in positive and potentially negative ways. Safety has become an integral part of childhood and all pastimes.

Our animals and domestic pets are still part of our lives, but now often with an elevated status. We are now constantly on the move, travelling more by vehicle and holidaying abroad. The technology of the mobile phone and computers has resulted in a decline in the need for many objects. Social communication and day-to-day activities can often be virtual. The way older age is viewed in society is shifting, as is the role and lifestyles of older people. For example, until the Covid-19 pandemic, funerals and wakes had changed very little except for funeral directors and parlours. The pandemic may have irrevocably changed all social aspects of our lives and we need to reflect what evolves.

Ireland is now home to numerous communities of people of various national origin. We need to reflect migration and diversity, and incorporate the cultural items of these communities into our collections. This theme will incorporate collections known on the Museum's collections management database as **Sport & Leisure, Children, Religion, and Calendar Customs & Festivals**.

The sports & leisure acquisitions policy is to augment the small number of traditional musical instruments, sports equipment and school-related items and toys. The travel poster collection will be added to as opportunities arise. This collection needs to reflect our social life and free time, and the changes that have taken place since 1950. The stages of life connected with the traditional Christian sacraments are still marked, but often in a different way. The human connections we make and the traditional family unit are continuing to change.

We need to reflect the pulse of the nation, which is in our social connections to each other – how we celebrate, how we play, the enjoyment that we get from life. Our celebrations in life of achievements, birthdays, anniversaries and death needs to be recorded in the collection.

Our deep connection to sport in a local and national way must also be collected. Objects illustrating how we travel on holiday need to be collected, for holidaying at home and abroad. How we spend leisure time has changed in the last seventy years. So too has cooking as a hobby, our love of pets and their importance in the family, pastimes and health. Self-care has become a requisite for good health (gym, swimming, cycling, running, walking) and marathons/mini-marathons form part of many people's lives often combining fundraising for charities.

Childhoods although similar to the past in many respects have also evolved both in positive and potentially negative ways. We need to connect more with children and collect objects that are associated with their childhoods and adolescences.

The acquisitions policy is to address the imbalance in representation of religions and the celebration of festivals by religious groups other than those of the Roman Catholic faith (Evangelical, Islam, Christian Fellowship and Anglican). The faiths of all communities living in Ireland need to be considered. We also need to reflect the change in the way people engage with religion and the current move away from formal religion.

Calendar custom revolved around the land, nature, and the seasons and the festivals continue to punctuate the year, but sometimes with a different emphasis. We need to revisit the fixed markers of the year that have increased in importance and record these in our Collection.

3. INDIVIDUAL COLLECTIONS AND ACQUISITIONS POLICIES

The collection, however, is quite complex and many objects can be categorised under a number of different headings and there are, naturally, areas of overlap. We have identified and listed where we have gaps in the collections. The means to follow through on this strategy will be managed, mindful of available resources, especially storage. We intend that new acquisitions will tell multiple stories. We also hope that opportunities will arise to broaden the voices in the community, who can contribute to the collections and the stories associated with them.

We continue to collect objects with personal connection that hold meaning and memory and will rely mainly on donations rather than purchases. Imagery and art that reflect traditional life are already part of the collection, and will continue to be considered where appropriate.

Through a proactive, focused, collaborative process it is hoped that the coming five years will do much to keep the Irish Folklife Collection relevant to the everyday stories of the people of Ireland.