

Irish Study Day, Cork

Friday 19 May

The Crawford Gallery is in the middle of Cork, the 2005 European City of Culture. It was the setting for a very well attended study day jointly run by the Society of Folk Life Studies and the Regional Furniture Society. The day was built around Claudia Kinmonth's new book, *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (see review, page 18) and the exhibition, *Whipping the Herring: Survival and Celebration in 19th Century Irish Art*, for which Claudia was a guest curator.

The exhibition drew together nearly 80 works from galleries and private collections all over Ireland and elsewhere, to explore the way that everyday life at the time was depicted. In doing so, it examined themes relating to the concept of realism in Irish art and the representation of Irish landscape and national character. The title of the exhibition comes from a picture and is explained in the beautifully produced catalogue: it was the custom of the butchers of Cork to whip a herring out of the city on the last day of Lent, to mark a return to meat eating and their prosperity.

The study day started with a talk by Christiana Payne who drew parallels between Dutch, English and Irish agricultural landscape paintings, the messages they give and the way they are adapted to convey a political message. Linda Ballard spoke on wedding traditions. She helped us to read the narrative in the pictures in the exhibition and to appreciate the sophisticated symbolism displayed in them.

Women's household work featured largely in the exhibition and Dr Caitriona Clear explained that though women worked hard in the 19th century, within the meagre budget of the family they had appreciable financial and social power.

In her gallery talk Claudia described her excitement as Charles Henry Cook's canvas was gradually cleaned of more than a century of turf and tobacco smoke and the symbolism was gradually revealed. Our understanding was enhanced as she explained the detail in Howard Helmick's *Bringing Home the Bride*. We realised that the mother-in-law was drying her hands because she was able to hand over her duties to her new daughter-in-law; the bride's father was carrying the bed roll as part of the bride's dowry, while the dowry cow at the door brought a smile to the face of her young sister-in-law who now had substance for her own dowry. The apprehensive look on the face of the bride needed no explanation.

Mairead Dunlevy spoke about the emerging Irish appreciation of material culture, such as the furniture, wallpaper and textiles that furnished houses of the Irish merchant and professional classes. These things were made in Ireland by Irish people for Irish people. She reminded us that the poverty and distress apparent in many of the genre pictures in the exhibition reflected just one part of the story of the times.

Professor Tom Dunne described the message that many artists wished to convey to their patrons. They often avoided depicting the rural poor, or did so in a very stylised manner, and instead showed the wild landscape and scenes of cattle herding to reinforce the image of a country to be tamed and colonised.

Overall the exhibition and the study day brought home the importance of context for furniture and pictures alike, helping us to understand the politics and economy of the time and how these influenced the artists' work. Our thanks go to Claudia, for her organisation, and to our hosts for the day, Anne Bodeart, Colleen O'Sullivan, Dawn Williams and Peter Murray, director of the Crawford Gallery.

Oliver & Amanda Shanks and Roy Brigden