

Collins Barracks, National Museum of Ireland, Dublin  
Claudia Kinmonth's talk was followed by a short walk to the austere granite buildings of Collins Barracks. Home to 1500 troops for almost three centuries the complex is now part of the National Museum of Ireland. The Irish Country Furniture Gallery displays examples of traditional furniture made and used throughout Ireland during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We had encountered similar items to those in the gallery on the farms and in the houses at the Ulster Folk Museum and would see many more in the days to come.

One of the museum displays included a rather striking 'dowry' chest which is mentioned and illustrated by both Bill Cotton<sup>2</sup> and Claudia Kinmonth.<sup>3</sup> This pine chest is unusual in that it retains its original decorative scheme. It is from a house in Carrigbeg, Co. Limerick where the rest of the woodwork was grained to match. Dowry chests differ from much of Irish country furniture in that they are usually very well made. Most are pine, though hardwood examples do exist. They are the only items of Irish vernacular furniture to have dovetailed drawers<sup>4</sup> and dovetailing is frequently found in other parts of their construction. Claudia Kinmonth quotes from a source which describes them as 'very well made by certain carpenters and no nail was used in their construction, the sides being dovetailed into one another.'

They are almost always made in two parts, presumably for ease of transport to the bride's new home, the chest itself as well as the contents being a part of the dowry. No other heavy items of Irish furniture can be separated in this way. The upper part is almost always a simple chest with hinged lid which is most commonly flat though sloped and curved lids have been found. The lower half has one or more drawers. Surviving examples, mostly from the southern counties, are highly decorated with both carving and elaborate painted and grained finishes reflecting the importance of the item and the ceremony of which it was a part.

The one in the museum has a bold carved rope motif applied to the edges of the lid and around the top of the lower part, the upper chest sitting within the rope

<sup>2</sup> Bill Cotton, 'Irish Vernacular Furniture', *Regional Furniture*, vol. III (1989), pp. 1-26.

<sup>3</sup> Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Country Furniture 1700-1950* (1993), pp. 146-149.

<sup>4</sup> Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (2006), pp. 40-41.



Pine dowry chest from a house in Carrigbeg, Co. Limerick. Collection National Museum of Ireland. *Photo Keith Robinson*

moulding. There is also a carved chevron pattern between the upper drawers. Rope and chevron themes are often found on these marriage chests. The painted decoration includes simulated reeding bordering the drawers and dividing the front of the chest into two 'panels' each containing stylised painted foliage. At one time the drawers of this chest had white porcelain knobs. Other surviving examples are grained to imitate mahogany and satinwood.

Along with the dresser, a piece of furniture which is also commonly embellished and ornamented, the dowry chest would have been an important item in the family home.