

Museum Projects in Northern Ireland

A U3A Shared Learning Project

Part of my job as Learning Support Officer for Northern Ireland is to promote cooperation between U3As and public bodies and to encourage new ways of learning. What better way than to start a shared learning museum project?

Joyce Gibson
North Down
and Ards U3A



So it was, encouraged by Jenny Clark, Keith Richards and Belfast's Ann Hayes, that I approached our fine Ulster Museum to see what could be done. The helpful staff came up with three suggestions.

The first reiterated the usual 'Object of desire' theme but with a twist. The second was scientific, an area to be encouraged, and the third looked at contemporary local artists.

After a joint meeting, amazingly attended by 40 members from Belfast U3A and North Down & Ards U3A with two museum staff, we had enough supporters to start work on all three.

Some, who as children or young adults had coveted oranges, bananas or a family car, produced memoirs to be displayed as part of a WW2 Exhibition in May 2005 or on the museum website.

A second group looked at a long-forgotten meteorite collection, found gathering dust in a geology department drawer. It needed sorting out with some research into the origins of the meteorites from many parts of the world.

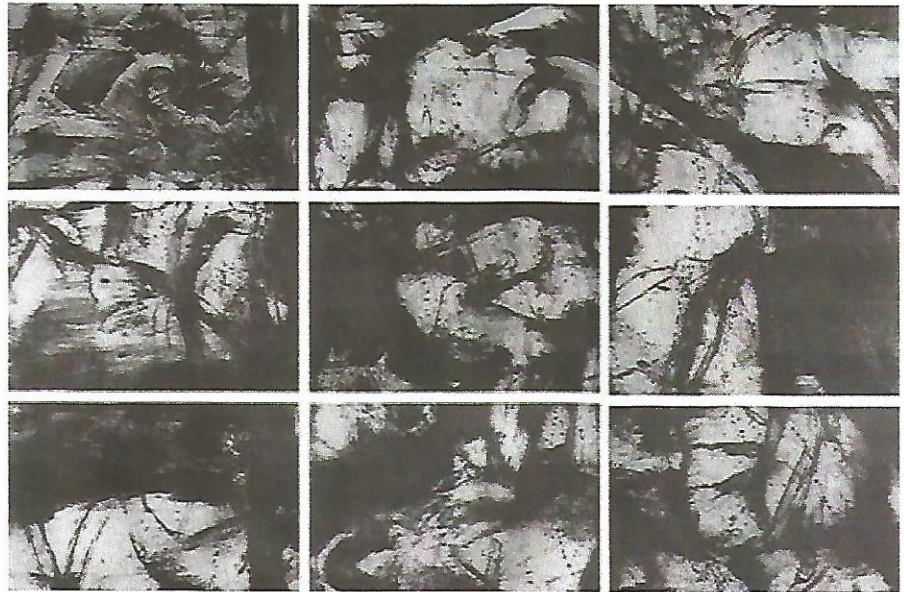
Those found in Ireland, surprisingly numerous, were naturally of interest. The two keen geologists took on the project with the help of staff, working together to produce a report which was acclaimed, accepted and filed by the museum for future reference.

A third U3A geologist, together with a lay assistant, started work on a valuable Blue John vase. Although the report was not completed owing to illness, thanks to U3A interest the museum geologist was persuaded to repair the beautiful vase that is now on display.

Our third venture, taking a look at Contemporary Ulster Artists, was the longest running and achieved a most satisfactory outcome.

Twelve members from both U3As interviewed in pairs the chosen artists, meeting in the museum to review results and plan the way forward.

The Wrestlers: Hughie O'Donoghue - Purdy Hicks Gallery



Colleen, the enthusiastic Art Historian chaired the meetings. Targeted artists included Neil Shawcross, currently exhibiting there, Carol Graham, John Breakey, Hector McDonnell, Hughie O'Donoghue, Rita Duffey, Anthony Green and Clement McAleer.

We sent a letter usually resulting in an invitation to the recipient's home or studio for a chat. Questions, mainly concentrating on the pictures targeted, included why the artist had chosen that particular subject. How was it executed? What were his feelings about it?

Each pair wrote a short information sheet on each picture answering queries from A-level students or interested members of the public. Reports will be made available on the museum website or displayed beside the picture when exhibited. A presentation format will include information at the head of each piece about the U3A in Northern Ireland, a fitting reward for our hard work.

For me, the project has had a most interesting spin-off. Having spent time and effort writing up my piece on Hughie

O'Donoghue's *The Wrestlers*, I was delighted to find his pictures on display in the Victoria Art Gallery in Bath. In my excitement and pride, I dragged members of my family there to share my discovery. Hughie O'Donoghue now has a special place in my psyche.

Sadly, work on the project must be put on hold. Next summer the museum will close for two years for renovations and access to the gallery stores is no longer possible. We hope to continue later, but even if we don't, our project will leave a lasting legacy, be appreciated by many art lovers and, during its closure, help to keep the museum in the public eye via the Internet.

It should help the public to understand that we are not just 'a wee pensioners club' as one prospective member put it, but are still fit and able to make a contribution to the common good.

Meantime we have contacted the Municipal Museum in Lisburn, the centre of the Linen Industry and full of interesting aspects of life in this Province. Every cloud has a silver lining!