

Podcast Transcript: Caravaggio's The Taking of Christ at the National Gallery of Ireland

With Fr Noel Barber SJ, Raymond Keaveney, and Marian Finucane in conversation

Note to reader:

This is a recording of a live event that was held in the Gallery's lecture theatre on 15 November 2018.

Introduction 0:04

Welcome to the National Gallery of Ireland podcast.

Marian Finucane 0:08

I think this is a wonderful night. I really do. And I do remember, because I was in attendance 25 years ago and the place was buzzing. But, I mean, apart from the joy of having the Caravaggio, the story behind all of this is just magnificent. And people have written about it and made films about it, and so on.

And, want to start with you Fr Noel Barber, because really you're the hero of the piece here. Tell me how it started.

Fr Noel Barber 0:40

But, I must challenge you on the word hero; the hero of the piece is Sergio Benedetti. My part is quite small in all this. But it came to us in Leeson Street in the 1930s, through Dr Lea-Wilson, who gave it to Professor Tom Finlay as a type of thanks for being her friend, philosopher and guide over rather turbulent years for her. So that's how it came.

Marian Finucane 1:08

Right. And I'll come back to her later, because I think her story is very, very interesting too. But hadn't somebody looked at the painting at one stage and said, you know, "We should do something with that" and was told "No, the frame is worth more than the picture."?

Fr Noel Barber 1:26

I don't think anyone had put it that crudely.

Marian Finucane 1:32

I read it. [laughing]

Fr Noel Barber 1:34

Definitely was probably false.

Marian Finucane 1:36

Possibly so, yes.

Fr Noel Barber 1:38

In fact, no, but there was no enthusiasm to have much done with it. And I moved, because I was appointed as superior of Leeson Street at the time, and I had to renovate the house, and also change its purpose to an extent. So I set painting walls and all that type of stuff. I should certainly do something about this magnificent painting, which was bearing the dirt of the years, if you'd like to say, but which obviously was magnificent. And also, we believed that it was a Honthorst. So we believed that we are dealing with a painting by an outstanding painter, but that needed cleaning and renovation.

Marian Finucane 2:17

Right. So did you automatically think the Gallery or thought of going to somebody else?

Fr Noel Barber 2:24

I thought initially of going to someone else. That wasn't a brainwave, it was a brainstorm, in fact. And I was wisely counselled, "No, go to the Gallery".

And I knew Brian Kennedy. And I went to him about it. I said "I think we're in possession of a Honthorst, would you be interested in restoring it? It's really, it's rather grimy." And he said, "Well, we certainly would be interested in doing it provided it is a Honthorst." And the only thing we would ask in return would be that it be available for exhibitions, which I thought was a very, very good deal.

And so he said "I'll come around with the curator and have a look at it. And we'll decide whether we should renovate it and clean it up or not". And so he came one morning with Sergio Benedetti. And we brought him into the room, showed him it. And Benedetti said, he said absolutely nothing. Except -

Marian Finucane 3:17

Was there tension in the room?

Fr Noel Barber 3:18

Not really tension, no, no. But he said "No, we should restore it". That was it. And then we arranged to have it moved to the Gallery, and thereby the whole thing got underway. And I used to come down here from time to time, and one had a marvelous experience of seeing colour standing out that you hadn't seen, details standing out that you hadn't seen and the thing gradually formed this beautiful object that you see now.

And then one day, Brian Kennedy said he was pass, he would be passing by the house. He said he would like to pop in and see me. So I said, "You're going to come in and tell me that it's not a Honthorst; it's a Victorian copy". So he came in, and I got up to welcome him in my office, and he said to me, "Sit down, Noel, you can't take what I'm going to tell you standing up". That confirmed my dark suspicion. So he said, "It's not a Honthorst - it's a Caravaggio".

But I knew sufficiently, sufficient about painting as to know it was a huge thing. And I was more or less, to use the term of an old sound, bewitched, bothered and bewildered, my initial reaction, how the, how we happened to be in possession of something so valuable culturally and materially and financially in every way. Right. And then the next thing that came to my mind that its home should certainly be in the National Gallery of Ireland.

Marian Finucane 4:44

Right. Well, when did you hear about it, Raymond?

Raymond Keaveney 4:50

I heard about it the afternoon Brian and Sergio came back from Leeson Street. They didn't quite tell me to sit down. But they said, "We have something very interesting and if it turns out to be what we think it is, it could be a long lost masterpiece".

So Sergio then filled me in, and he had chapter and verse, even on the afternoon he came in, because it was talk about the right person in the right place at the right time. Because, you know, Sergio had studied in Rome and had taken a particular interest of the artists of the Baroque period in Rome of which Caravaggio is one of the standout artists. And he had a small library, you know, devoted to this. And he knew all the experts, so Denis Mahon and people like that. And I think he always had in the back of his mind wouldn't it be nice someday, even in the wilderness of Dublin, on the edge of Europe, that I might find a masterpiece. And he was very excited.

Marian Finucane 5:56

And he said the C word?

Raymond Keaveney 5:59

He did, yes. He knew he knew. He knew Longhi he, as I said, he had chapter and verse, we kind of have to figure out what do we do? You know? Well, it's one thing having an idea that we believe this is Caravaggio, but we can't go out and say, we think we have a Caravaggio. That could lead to all sorts of problems. Not that the other course didn't lead to its own problems.

So we said, well, what we would need to do, then is to research the painting. And ideally, bring it into the Gallery because it'd be difficult to research it at a distance. And that we need to go back to Father Barber and have a chat, to be up front and say we think we have a long lost masterpiece. And would it be possible to bring the painting into the Gallery to allow us to check out its credentials, and progress the matter. The critical

element there, of course, was, we didn't want to let the cat out of the bag. So all of this had to be quite confidential.

Marian Finucane 7:08

But why didn't you?

Raymond Keaveney 7:09

Because then you would have the situation whereby we were trying to research the painting in full view, without the ability to do it at our own pace. Because the Gallery was a three-ring circus then. The refurbishment was going on of the Beit wing. We were sending exhibitions to the United States and Japan; there was just so much going on. It was going to take time, and we didn't want to be under the microscope, we were under the microscope enough as it was this would have been just maybe too much.

And Noel very generously agreed to let the painting come in. And over a period of some three years on stolen time, Sergio would go off to Rome, and dig a little deeper, find out a bit more. And all of that. Because, it didn't, the Gallery was except, we had a skeleton staff then I think 40 people in all, most of whom were security attendants. And yet we were, you know, planning all sorts of things. So Sergio was deeply involved in preparing the exhibition for the States and doing other work. It wasn't the only thing on his desk.

Marian Finucane 8:15

Was there a mad excitement about the whole thing or anxiety? Did you? When did you tell your fellow Jesuits?

Fr Noel Barber 8:24

Very soon after I heard from Brian Kennedy that morning, but it has to be absolutely secret. So we imposed on ourselves a Trappist vow of silence for a full year until it actually broke the news. But we, we didn't even discuss it among ourselves. It was just an absolute silence about it.

Marian Finucane 8:50

And when, it actually wasn't, it didn't become known publicly through any Irish media. It was Italian.

Raymond Keaveney 9:00

Yes. And the Irish media, were very upset, as you can appreciate, and we were upset for the Irish media, because that was not how it was meant to happen. We were looking forward to it at last going to the Irish media, with a good news story.

Yeah. I mean, in 1992, Anne Crookshank wrote an extensive article in the Apollo magazine about how bad things were at the Gallery but was not that bad this year. We have something very special coming up. And we just had to live with the negatives while, you know, until we were in the right place.

But there was an Italian journalist who worked for the Messaggero in Rome. And of course, Sergio couldn't do his research without talking to people, if you follow, including Sir Denis Mahon and others. And it leaked out from Rome and fair dues to Fabio Isman, he did his homework. And then without telling anybody he published it, and it was a very well researched -

Marian Finucane 9:53

He didn't double check with you first?

Raymond Keaveney 9:55

No, because then if we knew it was breaking, we might have told the Irish media. So, and he has continued being a kind of, doing a lot of reporting on Caravaggio issues, because there always are Caravaggio issues. It's an industry. And so he's a very noted journalist in the art world in Italy.

Marian Finucane 10:18

When you find something like that, and all sorts of people have wild dreams, does it then become contentious?

Raymond Keaveney 10:28

It can become contentious, of course. I mean, there were -

Marian Finucane 10:31

Was Sergio's word accepted universally?

Raymond Keaveney 10:36

It's never universally. There's a painting in Rome, owned by a dealer called Pighetti. And it was a painting that was exhibited in Milan in 1951, an exhibition organised by Roberto Longhi, who was the great champion of Caravaggio, who rediscovered him, brought him into the public space. And he was an extraordinary man, Longhi, a highly respected scholar connoisseur.

And he had the Sannini painting because, of course, our painting was not known. And that was exhibited at that exhibition. And it was his view that it can't be the original; it just isn't good enough. You know, come back 50, 40 years, and Pighetti, the Sannini painting is the original and starts to argue that. And there is a whole debate about Caravaggio, about the authenticity of paintings, and particularly around the issue of copies or replicas.

And I think Richard Spear will talk eloquently on this subject later this afternoon, he's got a wonderful article in the Burlington Magazine, which has just been published. And I think he's been involved with the two paintings, which are at the Musée Jacquemart-André, you've seen them, the two Magdalenes, which is also up for debate, one is considered authentic, the other is considered a copy.

Raymond Keaveney 12:03

So there's no end to these discussions, arguments on the authenticity. And can you have two authentic paintings? Or can you only have one? And all of that.

And we know from the records that a copy was made in 1626 by Giovanni Attilio on commission from the Mattei to paint the copy. So, you know, and it was common, when paintings were sold out of collections that a copy will be kept, if you follow, so that was not unusual. But the problem is, if the copy is a superb copy, then you really enter difficult territory, is it or isn't it?

The best case I can remember is Rembrandt. Wonderful Rembrandt self-portrait. I think it was in the Hague. And there was a copy, an inverted copy, in Frankfurt. And when they did the Rembrandt exhibition of self-portraiture, 7 or 8 years ago, the Frankfurt painting was elevated to be the original. And the Mauritshaus painting was demoted to being a copy.

Marian Finucane 13:09

And pardon me for being so crass. But I presume money comes into it if it's the original or a copy?

Raymond Keaveney 13:18

Yes. [laughing]

Marian Finucane 13:23

Give me an idea.

Raymond Keaveney 13:24

Well, that's the debate in Rome and the fact that the painting that Pighetti had purchased from Florence is requested by the Italian authorities at the moment, because there's the whole issue of what's going on here. Is this dishonest dealing, you know, it's a very murky world where people can lose a lot of money. And there are fakes and all sorts of things going around. So there's a lot of money in the art world. And that's a very sensitive issue.

Marian Finucane 13:56

Yeah. And at this level, with the Caravaggio, just a ballpark figure about what kinds of money would you be talking about?

Raymond Keaveney 14:04

You're talking billions of course, we're talking, but we try not to talk about that and Noel doesn't want to talk about that. Although it's interesting you mentioned the, the frame was worth more than the painting. If you go upstairs to look at the little exhibition around the painting. We know it sold in Edinburgh for 8 guineas, and then we think it resold for 5 guineas. And the little receipt from Hicks here in Dublin, who restored the frame for Mary Lea-Wilson in 1924, it's 20 pounds. So the frame was doubled the price of the painting, just restore it, not to buy it.

Marian Finucane 14:44

Right. There you go. And this was a big decision for the Jesuits, wasn't it? What to do?

Fr Noel Barber 14:52

Yes, it was a decision of some size.

Marian Finucane 14:55

To refer back to the millions, you know.

Fr Noel Barber 14:59

It was a really a very important, an obviously very important decision. Because if it hadn't been put on permanent loan to the Gallery here, indefinite loan, very important point that a man in the audience made to me in the, in the past, it would have gone to the Getty or some Japanese. So it would have been lost to the country, and that would have been an appalling loss. So therefore, although it was money, in that sense, yes, at the same time to the higher value, the cultural value and the value to the nation.

Marian Finucane 15:36

And was it, was it hotly argued, or was it an instinctive thing?

Fr Noel Barber 15:41

Well, with me it was instinctive and I think the Superior at the time. Superior is here this evening; I think with him it was the same. But it doesn't go with the territory of provincial Superiors, that attitude. So we were fortunate to have a person who had the right attitude at the time. And so I would, from the moment I heard it, and from the moment I knew we had a Honthorst, I had no doubt that that was for Ireland. And what's more, we had it on charitable trust. It wasn't something that we could alienate.

Marian Finucane 16:15

How do you mean, can you explain that?

Fr Noel Barber 16:16

Yes, that we didn't, we didn't get it to pass on as a good. We got it as a gift to be cherished as a gift. And so we've had, we were more or less, you might say, forced to do what we ought to do. [laughing]

Marian Finucane 16:33

Sometimes can to be useful. Come back to the gift, and how all that came about, and the story of Marie Lea-Wilson.

Fr Noel Barber 16:42

Well, she was a member of a Cork family, a very well-known Catholic family in Cork, no Cork County, and she married the captain Lea-Wilson of the Dublin RIC. And he went off, they married in 1915. And he was in the war, but came back, and was in Dublin in 1916. And he was responsible for looking after a set number of prisoners, and is

alleged, the allegation has now been more hotly contested, to maltreated and to humiliated prisoners of war, after some who had surrendered. And as it was, he became a marked man, that the IRA were going to get him. And it figures in one film. But anyway -

Marian Finucane 17:36

Because there was a film made about it all. Yeah.

Fr Noel Barber 17:38

And so he was murdered down in Gorey, where he was the chief of police for Wexford, in 1920, I think. And then, after that, Lea-Wilson, was never really her full self insofar that she was convinced that he was not, he did not maltreat prisoners. Now, to a certain extent nowadays, there's some backing for that. But in that time, there was no backing. And this really worried her, and she seemingly went to Father Finlay for consolation, for advice, for concern, and for spiritual health in her troubles. And then one day, she must have turned up in a truck. And gave him this painting, as thanks for all the help she got.

Marian Finucane 18:30

But what was interesting, I thought, apart from so many other things, he persuaded her. I mean, this was 1924. Was it 1924? That he persuaded her to go to Trinity to study medicine.

Fr Noel Barber 18:47

After he died that she went to college and became a consultant in the Children's Hospital.

Marian Finucane 18:55

Yeah, because she went to Trinity. I thought was all Catholics were not allowed to go Trinity.

Fr Noel Barber 19:00

Well, there is always ways around things. [laughing]

Raymond Keaveney 19:04

Especially if you have a Jesuit father advising you, and that name being father Tom Finlay.

Marian Finucane 19:09

It's called Jesuitical thinking.

Fr Noel Barber 19:13

Then how you define Jesuitical involuntary or a hostile way.

Marian Finucane 19:19

Well, obviously, it was wonderful that she did. And she became a very, very distinguished child paediatrician.

Fr Noel Barber 19:26

Yes. Yeah. She was a formidable lady. And I believe I was only talking this morning to the archivist here. And she has very interesting information from the College of Physicians on Lea-Wilson. So it's worth looking up that.

Marian Finucane 19:43

So in other words you're not going to tell us?

Fr Noel Barber 19:47

Exactly.

Marian Finucane 19:51

So, how did you go about this delicate business? I mean, presumably, you people in the Gallery, were saying, "We'd like to keep this". But clearly you were dealing, you were pushing an open door and one sense, but how did it come about?

Raymond Keaveney 20:10

Oh gosh, I think it was, in a sense, a process was of osmosis. It didn't happen kind of overnight or whatever, it was a progressive, because the relationship over the period, the toing and froing, the progression of the situation, or the development of situation. I mean, obviously at the end of it all, if it walked out and we had confirmed it was a Caravaggio, the next issue would be what would happen, it could be, put it on exhibition, as Noel said earlier, but would that be a permanent exhibition? Or whatever? Of course, our wish would always be could we have it for loan. Because the Gallery do take paintings on long term loan. But there's a difference between long term and indefinite. Permanent. Yes. Yeah.

Marian Finucane 20:53

Would you, would you clarify that?

Fr Noel Barber 20:54

Yes. Permanent is giving it over permanently, which is the same as alienating it. Indefinite loan means that theoretically, we, not theoretically, but actually, we are the owners one and two, theoretically, we could take it back. That'd be a rather dangerous thing to do.

Marian Finucane 21:14

Don't think this gentleman here would be overly... But there was something about it. It's probably because of the story and that it was like a little bit of detective work and secrecy and cloak and dagger and all that. It really caught the imagination of Irish people, didn't it?

Raymond Keaveney 21:31

Well, it was an extraordinary story. I mean, a bestselling novel came out of it, there is a movie script, there is actually a movie script. And it became world news. It was an

international event in the art world, which was wonderful for the Gallery because a lot of the galleries profiled internationally and putting it on another level. And, you know, the Gallery has benefited of that ever since.

But it also promoted a kind of, the issue of it's not just a collection, but there's scholarship, expertise, competencies. And that was important for us, as well as an institution for us to show that the National Gallery of Ireland wasn't just a dumb show, that it had this capacity to work at the same level as its international peers. And that it could, you know, authenticate paintings and so on, although you never really do it in isolation. That's always a teamwork. And you talk to the peer colleagues internationally, whose opinions you would respect and seek. You seek that they share that opinion about it, and then be prepared if they don't, you know, then you've got to kind of consider what your options are after that.

Raymond Keaveney 22:43

We were very fortunate in this instance. So Denis Mahon had been a friend of the Gallery since the 1940s. And probably since before. There's correspondence where he already indicates he will leave some of his paintings, and he would like to leave his library. And he was among the most pre-eminent scholars on Caravaggio, so we had a direct line to him.

And, quite coincidentally, as we were researching the painting, we also put on the exhibition *Caravaggio and his Followers* at the National Gallery, where we had gotten the *Supper at Emmaus* by Caravaggio on loan. So when we brought Denis in to have a look at the painting and see what his opinion was, we had the two paintings side by side, painted for the same patron within a year with each other. So you're not looking at an early Caravaggio and a late, you're looking at, you know, are these by the same hand, it's much easier if you got two co equal paintings rather than, whatever. And virtually in milliseconds he said it, that was a very important moment, because that meant now that we had the support of one of the preeminent scholars on the issue of authentication.

Marian Finucane 23:47

He spoke that night and I'll come to that.

Raymond Keaveney 23:50

He did speak that night.

Marian Finucane 23:54

He spoke a lot, really. But, so, I mean, I got the impression at the time that people that had never darkened the door of the Gallery were hugely enthused, and it brought all sorts of people in.

Raymond Keaveney 24:10

Well, reputedly, at that time, we did finish up with visitor figures of a million, but maybe the equipment was amiss, it wasn't as sophisticated as we have today.

Marian Finucane 24:19

There's precedent, well, no, there's, for the Gardaí.

Raymond Keaveney 24:22

Yeah, no, there's other international institutions which have also got the question there, checking, the visitor checking. Yes, it did. It brought a lot of people in and there was great excitement among them and still is, I mean, it is still the go-to picture when people come in. They have to see the Caravaggio and the story because they've heard about it, read about it. And it's mythical.

Marian Finucane 24:45

Right. And on the night it was such a coincidence that it was Michael D. who was the minister, wasn't it?

Raymond Keaveney 24:54

And he nearly missed the boat because there was a debate going on in the House and he had to stay as Minister. And we were there - we had 2,000 people in the building, 1,000 people downstairs in the Shaw Room and 1,000 people upstairs in the Baroque gallery. And we couldn't wait any longer. Denis Mahon was going to fall asleep. So we were ready to press the button. And just as we, we had said "We can't wait any longer", Michael D. comes racing up the stairs, breathless, because he desperately wanted to be there, just as he was very happy to be here this morning. But the problem on the evening was having that huge number was - so Denis decided not to make opening remarks. But to give a lecture. Nobody was seated. He went on for an hour. Downstairs were fine because they didn't have to behave. And that all that drinking and singing and talking came up from downstairs. And upstairs, we're all trying to sit - how long would this go on? He had 10 pages, it should have been done the next day at the symposium.

Marian Finucane 25:54

There was a symposium?

Raymond Keaveney 25:56

There was, yes, with scholars from all over the world talking about Caravaggio.

Marian Finucane 25:59

Oh, tell us a bit about that.

Raymond Keaveney 26:02

It was wonderful. We had Mina Gregori and we had Francesca Cappelletti, who was also involved with the story. And Herbert Robkin. And many, many other scholars. The only problem was, I mentioned that there was a lot going on at the Gallery. And we didn't

have the lecture theatre available. So we had to have the symposium in the Shaw Room. The problem was it was a temporary arrangement, and the slide projector would not function properly. After every second slide, the slide projector jammed. And yours truly used to have to jump up on the stage, try and find an anecdote to pass the time while we could fish the slide out of the projector or whatever. And get back at it again. And yeah, it was an anxious kind of day, holding our breath, the people who rented the slide projectors said that was only because they were using cheap slides. So, but we survived.

Marian Finucane 26:59

Talk about passing the buck.

Raymond Keaveney 27:01

But yeah, Claudio Strinati from Rome was there - he was the head of the Soprintendenza in Rome. It's always critical when you're dealing Caravaggio, you can't get away from Rome.

Marian Finucane 27:12

Did they share the excitement? Or were they delighted for you? Where were they -

Raymond Keaveney 27:17

Well, the art world loves these kinds of things. Why wouldn't they? It's an event, and people come because they're excited but also curious. They want to see it in the flesh. A lot of people only see photographs who will have given views but the may not have had the opportunity to see it in the flesh. This was the moment right, you know, when the acid test, and that's the function of exhibitions that, like with the two Magdalenes in Paris at the moment, is to have things actually there together, just as when we had Sir Denis, with the *Super at Emmaus* and *The Taking of Christ* together for that - it created a basis on which to really, you know, check it by the same hand.

Marian Finucane 27:59

At there was another kind of coincidence in the whole thing. Because that priest, Fr Finlay, that was so kind to her. His great, great -

Fr Noel Barber 28:14

Grandnephew was Chair of the Board of the Gallery, and I, on behalf of the society, gave the painting to him on indefinite loan. So it was a lovely circle,. That it came through with me and it was given to the Gallery through the Finlay men.

Marian Finucane 28:31

And did you, did you know of those connections at the time?

Fr Noel Barber 28:34

Oh yes. Oh, very much so.

Marian Finucane 28:35

Oh, you did. Yeah. But that was something that gradually dawned on you.

Fr Noel Barber 28:39

Oh no, well once I knew that Bill Finlay was the Chair, I knew that he was the grandnephew of - so I knew this lovely arrangement from the beginning.

Marian Finucane 28:51

And that must have been very, very nice for him.

Fr Noel Barber 28:54

Oh, yes, it was lovely for him really indeed, rightly. The other thing you mentioned that Denis Mahon. And remember, Brian Kennedy himself very strongly with me that no matter evidence came up, unless Mahon said it's a Caravaggio, nothing would occur. All bets are off. Of course, all bets were off,

Marian Finucane 29:17

They wouldn't have done, would they?

Raymond Keaveney 29:18

You'd have to think long and hard about it. You know, that's the whole issue of getting enough people whose opinions are respected to concur.

Fr Noel Barber 29:30

He also brought me around on the evening of the exhibition of that, connected with unveiling. And he had a copy of the painting in Odessa, which generally had been claiming to be, he had the original, that this was the original. And Mahon said to me, "You know, that man was a marvellous painter but he had one great weakness". And it was a great strength of Caravaggio's fingers. And he said to me, "Look at those figures, they're just like sausages". It passed over my head, I didn't see them as sausages.

Marian Finucane 30:02

Well, for you personally, and for your fellow priests, for example, were you somebody that was immersed in art before all this, or did that bring you into a world?

Fr Noel Barber 30:15

Well it brought me very much a step further but we were very fortunate, I think, our generation of Jesuits that we had Donal O'Sullivan, as our master novices, who became chairperson of the Arts Council. And he, I think, instilled in all of us a knowledge and appreciation of art. And he was in Leeson Street, of course, and was sitting under the Caravaggio, but didn't notice it. But the explanation of that was actually quite clear. He was a man who had a terrific understanding and a great appreciation of medieval art. And he didn't have much time for in between up to the modern era, and then he had a great interest in the modern era and appreciation. So had he been told it was a Caravaggio, he wouldn't have, it wouldn't have moved him very much. Amazing.

Marian Finucane 31:02

Well it might have, you know, under the circumstances. Now, tell me about the beetles. Not the singing Beatles.

Fr Noel Barber 31:10

No, I think Raymond would be better on that.

Raymond Keaveney 31:13

Yeah, no, no. As you say, be careful what you ask for, because you might get it. So we got this. Thanks to Sergio's research and all of that we were able to authenticate that the painting was by Caravaggio. But the story doesn't end there. And it was put on public display, but we had, with the generous agreement of Noel, lent it to London, to Rome, Washington and so on. And somewhere along the line, it had picked up this, this infection, in inverted commas. And in 1997, one of my colleagues, Tina Roche, who was head of fundraising, was going around the Gallery bringing up a prospective benefactor to help fund the Millennium Wing. And an elderly lady approached her and says, "Excuse me, ma'am, but I've just seen an insect crawl out of that painting". And Tina just said, "Thank you very much", and continued.

Raymond Keaveney 32:11

But Tina was very conscientious. And she went to Mairead McParland, who was our head of paper conservation – and Mairead I think is with us this evening – and reported the matter to her. Now, if she had come to my office, I would almost certainly have ignored it. Insects on paintings, you know, flies, and so on you get them, you get fly spots on paintings. That's one of the things restorers have to deal with. But Mairead came down and got the hanging crew to take the painting down to inspect it properly. And when they turned it around, lo and behold, there was this infestation of biscuit beetles on the back of the canvas, biscuit beetle. Yes. And they were chewing away at it. The larvae of the biscuit beetle, eat, adult biscuit beetles do not, they just fly around and procreate, whereas the beetles, the larvae are the issue. So Mairead gave the painting, first aid, and arrested, you know, any further deterioration.

Marian Finucane 33:14

And what had happened?

Raymond Keaveney 33:16

We don't know where it picked it up. It could have been in the Gallery, but our Conservation Department checked all the paintings in the vicinity, and none of them had it. So it may have been picked up outside. It wasn't shared by any of the other paintings. And then it was dealt with ultimately by nitrogen narcosis, which meant putting it in a big plastic balloon, filling the balloon with nitrogen, extracting all the oxygen and leaving it there for three months. Because it couldn't survive without oxygen for three months. And that was the ultimate coup de grâce.

Marian Finucane 33:47

What a story.

Raymond Keaveney 33:48

Yeah, I know.

Marian Finucane 33:51

The notion of beetles eating away at it. I mean, did you have a heart attack when you heard this?

Fr Noel Barber 33:58

More of a surprise, shall we say.

Raymond Keaveney 34:00

Yes. But they didn't go too hard on us. I have to say. We weren't abused.

Marian Finucane 34:07

And did they damage the painting?

Raymond Keaveney 34:08

No, they didn't. With old master paintings, very frequently, they're relined; the painting dries out and it starts to kind of weaken its attachment to the canvas. And the way to arrest that is get another canvas and put it on the back and then you put the glue between them and you press them together. And the glue permeates the old and the new canvas and adheres to the pain- to reattach the paint to the surface. And that's simply - so you, you get rid of the old relining, you know, you will try to avoid that. Yeah, because it's a stressful - Mairead wants to say ..

Mairead [speaking from audience] 34:12

[inaudible] in the Natural History Museum who identified it.

Raymond Keaveney 35:00

He was very excited. We weren't excited. But he loved the little blighters. He thought that was great. And he had all the facts and figures about it, it can eat through lead. Thank you, anything else you've got to say? And he thought the story was charming. No, it wasn't, it was a horror story.

Marian Finucane 35:17

Well, I mean, it was an adventure in both of your lives, wasn't it?

Raymond Keaveney 35:22

It was, no, of course. I mean, it was something you never expected, never anticipated. You always thought like it was somebody else, you know, but for once the spotlight shone on the Gallery.

Marian Finucane 35:35

For you in the community.

Raymond Keaveney 35:38

Yes.

Fr Noel Barber 35:39

Yes, it was a marvellous thing to become involved in. And terrific, looking back over his 25 years. You know, it's, it was a great thing for the Jesuits, to be able to have the capacity to hand this over to the Gallery and to be Irish people. That's my lingering feeling about the whole thing. It was a great, great thing to be involved in, for the nation, for the gallery, and hence for ourselves.

Marian Finucane 36:05

Indeed, and another very exciting journey. I mean, really - movies, books, more to come.

Raymond Keaveney 36:14

You never know that painting just has an endless list of surprises that it can present you with.

Marian Finucane 36:20

Okay, well, that's the scéal, folks. That's the story of what happened. So thank you very much indeed.