

Press Information

MASTER STUCCADORE SEAMUS O hEOCHA RESTORES GEORGIAN PLASTERWORK AT THE MERRION, DUBLIN

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Four magnificent Georgian townhouses lie at the heart of Dublin's most luxurious 5-star hotel, The Merrion. Inside, the elegant 18th century decorative and architectural features have been expertly restored. No feature is more striking than the spectacular plasterwork on the ceilings of some of the larger rooms, used as drawing rooms, private dining rooms and meeting rooms. This breathtakingly intricate rococo plasterwork was restored by Seamus O hEocha, a master stuccadore known throughout Ireland for the skilled and ancient art of hand modelling lime-based plaster in situ.

Dublin is famous for the richness and variety of its stuccowork, the earliest surviving examples of which is in Ormond Castle and date back to 1565. Plasterwork enjoyed a resurgence in 1739 when the Lafranchini brothers arrived from Italy to decorate the saloon of Carton House in County Kildare. They found ready patronage in Ireland and their thirty-year span of activity and relationship with the architect Richard Castle made them a dominant force in Irish stuccowork. Under the influence of the Lafranchini brothers, the work of Dublin stuccadores was greatly enriched, reaching a singular perfection in the second half of the 18th century.

One Irish craftsman of particular renown was Robert West, whose work is evident in The Merrion. This plasterwork, which has been dexterously restored by Seamus O hEocha, is a fine example of Dublin plasterwork of the period, with typical like-like images of flowers, intricate baskets teeming with fruit, pea pods bursting open and birds in flight. The stuccadores worked freehand in the rococo style, with plaster made from lime and crushed marble. Astonishingly, on close examination of the stuccowork on the ceilings at The Merrion, these centuries old twigs can still be seen.

The importance of the stuccowork on The Merrion's ceilings, particularly in the former Mornington House (birthplace of the first Duke of Wellington), meant that Seamus' conservation work took almost six months. The first stage of the restoration was to remove the many layers of paint to reveal the crisp plaster detail underneath, having first surveyed the original paint colours on the plasterwork. Consolidation of the ceilings followed - in some cases it was necessary to apply plaster and hession to the rear of the ceilings where the mortar has lost its bond with the overhead laths.

Missing repetitive cornice details were then precast and fixed in place. Damaged, intricate details such as birds, flowers, acanthus leaves, fruit, baskets, shells and vases, were remodelled by hand - using the same skills and techniques that would have been used by Seamus' predecessors over 200 years ago. Where necessary, blackthorn twigs were replaced, to join those that had survived over the centuries.

Seamus O hEocha served an apprenticeship in the art of plastering in Ireland, with a scholarship to Paris with a master craftsman, where French plastering techniques were learnt. He also won a scholarship to The European Centre for Training Craftsmen in the Conservation of Architectural Heritage, in Venice. Here he was taught the history of architecture, conservation principles and in-situ modelling techniques. On completing his apprenticeship in 1983, Seamus was employed by several renowned companies in Dublin and London.

In 1987 Seamus set up his own business and the company is responsible for the conservation and restoration work of many great ceilings in Ireland and England. In Ireland, examples of his work can be seen in Castletown Cox, Birr Castle, the James Joyce Centre in Dublin, and houses in St. Stephen's Green and Merrion Square, close to The Merrion. In England, Seamus' expertise has been called upon by numerous companies and he was proud to be involved - in an advisory capacity - in the restoration of Uppark House, the National Trust property was destroyed by fire.

Of his work at The Merrion, Seamus says:

"Even though the ceilings at The Merrion had fallen into such poor repair, it was an extraordinary challenge to work on such quality plasterwork, and satisfying to think we were restoring it so that people from all over the world can enjoy it - perhaps for another 200 years or more."

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