


This document contains a series of letters written in the 1940s by Caitríona Mac Leod, the then curator of the National Museum of Ireland, requesting permission for the loan of the statue of Our Lady of Bethlehem for an exhibition. The letters also outline the preservation work which was carried out on the statue while it was in the keeping of the National Museum.

TEL. 84118.  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION,  
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF IRELAND,  
KILDARE STREET,  
DUBLIN, C. 17.



AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS,  
ÁRD-MHÚSAEUM NA HEIREANN,  
SRAID CHILL DARA,  
BAILE ÁTHA CLIATH, C. 17.

7th April, 1948.

The Reverend Mother,  
The Poor Clare Convent,  
Nun's Island, Galway.

Dear Reverend Mother,

I write to ask you a great favour.

We are preparing an exhibition of wood sculptures and wonder if you would be so very kind as to consider lending us your 'Bethlehem Madonna'. It is such an important figure in the history of Irish wood sculptures that we feel the public should have an opportunity to see it - and indeed the exhibition would be sadly lacking without it.

At the same time we would like to make sure that the 'dry rot' is no longer active in the wood - if it is, we with your permission would like to arrest this disease and treat the figure scientifically as we are treating all the other sculptures in our care in order to ensure their safety for posterity.

If you do consent to render the museum, and therefore those interested in their country's treasures, this great service we shall be very pleased to send a box and make arrangements for packing so that you may have no anxiety about the safety of the statue.

I am dear Reverend Mother with very warm remembrances of your former kindness

Sincerely yours,  
*Caitríona Mac Leod.*



ARD-MHÚSAEUM NA hÉIREANN.  
ROINN EALADHAN AGUS TIONNSCAIL.

Clár-Uimh.....

FUARTHAS AR IASACHT Ó..... *Sister Mary Paul, Abbess*

SEOLADH..... *Poor Clare Convent, Nuns' Island, Galway*

An t-iasacht seo leanas :..... *Enthroned Madonna, carved wood 3½' high*

..... *(wood decayed by dry rot - needs treatment)*

CLÁRUIGHTE..... *Cathiona MacLeod* 31...adh lá de... *May*... 1948...19.....

*fa* Coimeádaidhe, Roinn na hEaladhan.

Do tugadh thar n-ais an t-iasacht luaidhte thús 'san chruth chéadna in ar tugadh ar iasacht.

The above loan has been returned in the same condition as when lent.

.....Iasachtaidhe.

.....adh lá de.....19.....

Ní mór do'n iasachtaidhe an chuid seo de'n pháipéar do shigní tar éis an t-iasacht d'fhágáil thar n-ais agus an páipéar ar fad do chur go dtí an Músaem.  
The lender must sign this portion when this loan has been returned and forward the entire paper to the Museum.

VEL. 87170.  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION,  
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF IRELAND,  
KILDARE STREET,  
DUBLIN, C. 17.



AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS,  
ARD-MHÚSAEUM NA hÉIREANN,  
SRAID CHILL DARA,  
BAILE ÁTHA CLIATH, C. 17.

7th May, 1948.

Sister Paul,  
Poor Clare Convent,  
Nun's Island,  
Galway.

Dear Sister Paul,

At last a little note to say that the statue of Our Lady of Bethlehem has just arrived safely in the Museum and is now in my office. It is indeed in ~~very~~ bad condition, but we will do the best we can with it so as to preserve whatever is left.

I will write you about it a little later, as soon as I have had time to examine it properly.

In haste for post and many thanks, dear Sister Paul,

I am,

Sincerely yours,

*Cathiona MacLeod*

*I pray Our Lady of Bethlehem will bring a blessing on us all while she is here: we will certainly take every care of the statue. Am writing Fr. Brendan shortly, hoping he will come & see us when next in Dublin: he will then give you all news!!!*



TEL. 84138.  
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DUBLIN, C.17.



AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS,  
ÁRD-MHUSAEM NA HEIREANN,  
SRAID CHILL DARA,  
BAILE ÁTHA CLIATH, C.17.

31st May, 1948.

Dear Sister Mary Paul,

I hope you will excuse my not sending sooner a loan receipt for the Madonna - I was really waiting until we had cleaned it a bit so that I should be able to tell you something about it. Well, we had to take off the paint as the wood is in a bad state of dry rot underneath. There was no trace of the original paint at all - only several modern coats of bad quality. The very fibrous streaky nature of the wood shows that the statue suffered exposure before the repainting, and in fact, corroborates the oral tradition that "the statue was in the lake." We will now treat it to preserve the wood and perhaps build up the broken wrist and the Child's hair, but I will tell you later about this as we go along.

I am dear Sister Abbess,

Yours very sincerely,

*Catharina MacLeod.*

Telephone: 63138  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION,  
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF IRELAND,  
KILDARE STREET,  
DUBLIN, C.17.



AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS,  
ÁRD MHUSAEM NA HEIREANN,  
SRAID CHILLDARA,  
ÁTH CLIATH

13th July, 1949.

Sister Mary Paul,  
Poor Clare Convent,  
Nuns' Island,  
Galway.

My dear Sister Mary Paul,

At last I have the pleasure to tell you that "Our Lady of Bethlehem" is now on display with her medieval associates and, needless to say, has been very much admired.

I am pleased myself because I feel that we have certainly prolonged the life of the statue for many more years to come. The dry rot went much deeper than I at first thought so we treated it for this very thoroughly and continually. In certain places I did restoration, for instance, to the Madonna's hand and crown, to some of the drapery folds and to some spots on the body of the figure where the wood was particularly decayed.

I am having some photographs made and these I shall forward by separate cover. Meanwhile, would you please let Father Jennings know, so that when in Dublin he will come and see it and so give you a full and first hand account.

I hope that you and all the dear sisters are very well.

With very many thanks for all your kindness in lending your precious Madonna.

I am,

dear Sister,

Sincerely yours,

*Catharina MacLeod.*

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NATIONAL MUSEUM OF IRELAND,  
KILDARE STREET,  
DUBLIN, C 17.



AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS,  
ÁRD MHÚSAEM NA h-ÉIREANN,  
SRÁID CHILLDARA,  
ÁTH CLIATH

6th December, 1949.

Sister Mary Paul,  
Poor Clare Convent,  
Nuns' Island,  
Galway.

Dear Sister Mary Paul,

I hope you will excuse my not answering your letter of the 25th November sooner. I was hoping to be in a position to let you know the exact date on which to expect the statue. It will I hope be one day next week but I shall write again confirming it.

Now, I do not know if you will be altogether pleased with the appearance of the figure. We did not attempt to give it a "new look" face but purposely left it to look worn in keeping with the condition of the rest of the wood. The texture of the wood has however been made sound; the dry rot is arrested, and I may safely say that we have prolonged the life of the statue for many years.

We are all grateful to you for lending us the figure and thank you again very much.

I did not know that Fr. Jennings had an accident. I do hope he is quite well again.

Again thanking you very much, and especially for your promise of prayers,

I am, dear Reverend Mother,  
Yours sincerely,

*Cathiona MacLeod*

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DUBLIN, C 17.



AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS,  
ÁRD MHÚSAEM NA h-ÉIREANN,  
SRÁID CHILLDARA,  
ÁTH CLIATH

16th December, 1949.

Sister Mary Paul,  
Abbess,  
Poor Clare Convent,  
Nun's Island,  
Galway.

Dear Sister Mary Paul,

You will be glad to hear that the Madonna has been packed and awaits collecting this afternoon. It will probably reach you on Monday ~~at latest.~~ or Tuesday.

I feel that one of the good Sisters could make a much better job of the face painting. The Artists' oil paint used to cover up basic repairs on the face can easily be rubbed off with a little turpentine and a rag. Otherwise, I should be glad to know if you are satisfied with the restoration done to the figure. The shine on the wood is due to the preparation used to cure the dry rot.

Wishing you all, dear Sister Abbess, a very joyous Christmas.

Yours sincerely,

*Cathiona MacLeod*