

National Gallery of Art Archives: World War II Research Resources

French Government Loan and Belgian Government Paintings

On the eve of World War II, the French government sent the exhibition *De David à Nos Jours* (French paintings and drawings from David to the present) on a tour of South America. The exhibition, selected by M. René Huyghe, curator of paintings at the Louvre, included 154 paintings and 101 drawings from the Louvre, other French museums, and private collections. The exhibition was sent to the United States from Argentina in 1940 and was shown in several cities before coming to the National Gallery of Art.

On March 11, 1942, officials in the U.S. State Department asked the trustees of the National Gallery to assume temporary custodianship of the works for safekeeping and exhibition. The museum thus became the guardian of French art objects in the United States in which the former French government had an interest. René Batigne joined the staff in 1943 to serve temporarily as curator and advisor for the special French collections. He oversaw the conservation and management of the works of art while they were in the United States.

The evacuation of the National Gallery's major paintings and sculpture to the Biltmore estate in January of 1942 provided space in galleries on the main floor to exhibit the French paintings. The watercolors and drawings also were displayed at various times during the war years.

The board of trustees of the National Gallery returned custody of the French paintings to the ambassador of the Provisional Government of the French Republic on February 1, 1945, although some works of art continued to be displayed at the museum until January 1946.

Paintings on loan from the Belgian government for the Worcester-Philadelphia exhibition of Flemish paintings also were retained in the United States for safekeeping when war broke out. Ten of these were exhibited at the National Gallery with the temporary French collections.

Research Resources

Files concerning the French government loan to the National Gallery of Art are in two boxes of the chief curator's records. These consist of general correspondence between National Gallery officials, including René Batigne, and owners of some of the French collections housed at the Gallery, the Swiss legation's Department of French Interests, the embassy of Argentina, State Department officials, and art restorer Stephen Pichetto on subjects ranging from the National Gallery's acceptance of the works of art and insurance to the return of the collections after the war.

Also included are inventories of the collections, disbursements from a special account set up by the U.S. Treasury Department for the maintenance of the art objects, and a directive license to the National Gallery from the Treasury Department requesting delivery of the works of art to the

French ambassador and the return of the balance of the special maintenance funds provided by the Treasury.

One folder contains files regarding storage at the Manhattan Storage and Warehouse Company in New York of items that had been part of the French participation in the 1939 World's Fair. These records include correspondence between National Gallery officials and the Office of Alien Property Custodian in Washington concerning Renault automobiles that had been exhibited in New York, correspondence with René Batigne regarding the condition of the art in storage, and suggestions for the distribution of works to various museums.

Also included is a postwar inventory of the French collections, receipts, and correspondence relevant to the transfer of works of art to the Provisional Government of the French Republic and to other owners.

In an oral history interview, Wanda Chramiec discusses her role as assistant to René Batigne. She describes activities relating to the custodianship of the French art objects in the United States and their eventual return to France.