

## **National Gallery of Art Archives: World War II Research Resources**

### **Wartime Security and the Biltmore Evacuation**

With the onset of World War II, the trustees and administrators of the National Gallery of Art became concerned about the possibility of air raids on Washington. They were determined that the National Gallery should remain open to the public to the greatest extent possible, but they also recognized the need for a contingency plan that would outline emergency procedures to be followed in a crisis. Anticipating possible hostilities, they also established an “evacuation center” at Biltmore House near Asheville, North Carolina. Following the outbreak of war, the museum’s most valuable works of art were transferred there in January 1942.

National Gallery employees, including curators Craig Hugh Smyth, Charles Parkhurst, and Lamont Moore, supervised the storage and monitored the condition of the group of masterpieces evacuated to Biltmore. The paintings were housed in the music room of the mansion, and sculpture was placed in the servants’ dining room. Chief curator John Walker and consultant restorer Stephen Pichetto made periodic inspections to ascertain that storage conditions were acceptable. The works of art were returned to the museum in October 1944 as the war was ending.

### **Research Resources**

Records of the National Gallery’s air raid preparations are in the central files. These include a copy of the museum’s air raid procedures and drills, a map of the District of Columbia Civilian Defense Control Center Districts, and Federal Works Agency booklets entitled *The Air Raid Protection Code* and *The Protection of Federal Buildings and Their Contents from Subversive Hostile Acts*. The central files also contain material covering emergency defense planning at the National Gallery during the 1950s.

The chief curator’s files include minutes and memoranda of staff meetings in 1941 and 1942 regarding air raid precautions considered by the museum; procedures for the removal of works of art from areas of the National Gallery that may become damaged or endangered because of bombing; and reports on the plans for police protection, firefighting, health service, and maintenance service in emergency situations. These records also include an original pamphlet of air raid instructions as well as other emergency brochures provided by the office of civilian defense, a gas mask brochure, and information sheets describing how to deal with incendiary bombs and chemical agents.

Director David Finley’s files contain correspondence and memoranda about the storage of National Gallery paintings at Biltmore, and news clippings and memoranda concerning emergency storage in general. The central files also include records relating to Biltmore including curatorial reports; communications between curators-in-residence and officials (1942-1944); memoranda

describing the preparation of storage rooms; Biltmore security procedures; and correspondence among National Gallery officials, Judge Junius Adams (president of the Biltmore Company), and representatives of the Gamewell Company (makers of public alarm systems) concerning fire protection systems.

The chief curator's records include evacuation plans, lists of duties of National Gallery employees (especially Parkhurst and Smyth), lists of Biltmore shipment groups, a sample of "puffed" mica used as packaging material for sculpture, reports on packing and shipment, and documentation of sculpture evacuation. Also available is correspondence between John Walker and curators-in-residence Erwin O. Christensen and Charles Richards, as well as Charles Parkhurst, Stephen Pichetto, John Skilton, and other staff members involved in the maintenance of the works in storage, especially concerning the regulation of temperature and humidity. An article from the Montreal Daily Star about the evacuation of British art to an underground vault in England is included in these files.

In oral history interviews Craig Hugh Smyth, National Gallery photographer Henry Beville, and John Walker discuss the Biltmore evacuation.