

National Gallery of Art: Research Resources Relating to World War II Gallery Contributions to the War Effort

When the United States entered the war, the National Gallery of Art directed its efforts to supporting the war effort on the home front. By 1944, Gallery officials estimated that men and women in the armed services made up thirty-five percent of those visiting the museum. Almost all daily activities at the museum were organized and executed with the comfort and entertainment of military personnel in mind.

Gallery administrators furnished service personnel with a lounge for refuge and relaxation. Reading materials and writing paper were provided for their use, and visitors were invited to enter their comments in guest registers.

A free Sunday concert series was launched on June 7, 1942 primarily for the benefit of service men and women and war workers in Washington. In addition to funded concerts, some performances were donated by individual artists as well as musicians in the armed forces attached to the Navy School of Music, the Army Music School, and the Army Air Forces Band. The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo contributed a performance especially for wounded servicemen from area hospitals.

Before each Sunday concert, a number of servicemen visiting the museum were invited to a complimentary supper in the cafeteria. Gallery staff and friends made regular contributions to defray the costs of the suppers. Special patriotic exhibitions were presented to showcase works of art produced by members of the armed forces and on war-related subjects. These displays, which included such topics as naval medicine, depictions of battles, war production, and war posters, were well attended by the public.

The Gallery provided framed reproductions of National Gallery paintings to military libraries, hospitals, and day rooms. This program was organized with the assistance of the American Red Cross and was funded through contributions from Gallery trustees and private donors.

Research Resources

Good general sources for all of these subjects are scrapbooks of newspaper articles and press releases, calendars of events, and annual reports.

The records of Director David Finley contain files on Gallery activities such as Sunday concerts, including performances by the Army Band, the Navy School of Music, a concert called "This Is the Army" by Bolling Field Servicemen, and the performance by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. These folders contain correspondence with musicians and organizers, press releases, and news clippings.

Sunday concert programs from 1942 to 1945 are filed with the records of the Gallery's Music Department. Files on the Sunday evening suppers are located in Finley's records as director. These include correspondence concerning contributions to cover costs of the program (1943-1945), a list of contributors, and accounting records for the suppers (1942-1945). War exhibitions are documented in a number of record groups. Director David Finley's files include Life magazine publicity materials for the exhibition Men of the Armed Forces. Chief curator John Walker's records contain correspondence and memoranda regarding a variety of World War II exhibitions. The Gallery's central files include a folder of photographs of contemporary triptychs designed for Army and Navy chapels. These works were exhibited at the Gallery for a short time.

Publications records include catalogues, brochures, postcards, and other items related to temporary exhibitions.

The chief curator's exhibition files contain correspondence concerning the development of the exhibitions as well as press releases.

The registrar's exhibition records contain checklists, catalogues, correspondence, memoranda, and receipts for works of art exhibited.

The use of the servicemen's lounge is recorded in the guest registers that were provided in the room. One bound register and two groups of loose pages date from July 1942 to May 1946 and total approximately 210 leaves. These pages contain signatures and comments that range from the humorous to the poignant. A few cartoons are scattered through the pages.