

National Gallery of Art: Research Resources Relating to World War II Paintings from the Berlin Museums and Hohenzollern Silver

In April, 1945, American forces advancing through the German town of Merkers discovered a collection of paintings in a nearby salt mine. The paintings had been evacuated from Berlin museums to the mine the previous month as the city was targeted by Allied bombing. Since the situation in Germany was still precarious, American army officials proposed that the 202 paintings (200 from the Kaiser-Friedrich Museum and two from the Nationalgalerie) should be sent under the protection of the U.S. Army to the National Gallery of Art in Washington for safekeeping. This decision caused strong opposition by the MFAA officers and others in the United States. The paintings remained in storage in Washington until 1948, when the Gallery was asked to exhibit the paintings. Later a selection of the paintings was sent on a rapid tour of twelve other American museums. All the paintings had been returned to Germany by the summer of 1949.

In 1947 U.S. War Department officials asked the National Gallery to store a silver banquet service from Germany. The service was owned by the royal Hohenzollern family before it passed into the possession of the German government when Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated after World War I. The 175th Infantry Regiment had received the silver in 1945 when the regiment accepted the surrender of a German rocket division. On 11 April 1947, the service, which filled 44 teakwood cases and consisted of silverware, glassware, and table ornaments, was moved to the Gallery. On 7 January 1949, the U.S. government retrieved the German silver from storage at the National Gallery in order to return it to Germany.

Research Resources

Two boxes of central files contain information regarding the Berlin paintings and their storage at the Gallery. These include memoranda among Gallery staff and correspondence with members of the public wishing to see the paintings, communications between Gallery officials and conservators responsible for the paintings, reports and other correspondence about packing and shipping the paintings, and press releases. Also in the files are a copy of the January 1946 issue of *College Art Journal* with printed statements and protests about the shipment of the German paintings to the United States, and three articles on the protection of cultural materials and monuments in Europe.

The chief curator's records contain 5 1/2 linear feet of records concerning the Berlin paintings, including a copy of the executive order from the War Department transferring custody of the works to the Gallery, receipts for the delivery and return of the paintings, lists of paintings, installation records, condition reports, packing and shipping lists, and correspondence (dated 1945 to 1948) between Gallery staff, staff of other museums, and conservators monitoring the paintings in the Gallery and on tour. Many letters are from people wanting to see the paintings in storage and urging an exhibition. Letters from people requesting information about the circumstances surrounding the storage and the traveling exhibition date from 1949 to 1967. Object files contain photographs and condition reports of the German paintings in Gallery custody. Also included are photographs of the packing and transportation of the Berlin paintings and other photographs. Director David Finley's files [2A1 Subject Files] contain correspondence with individuals interested in the shipment of paintings to the United States, protesters, and those advocating an exhibition; Finley's invitations to VIPs and their responses; a statement by Finley regarding the Berlin paintings and comparing their quality with that of paintings in the Gallery's collection; an article from *Life* magazine (29 March 1948) about the exhibition and preparations for the return of the works to Germany; drafts of the *Life* article with correspondence between Finley and the journalist; and 3 x 5 cards recording visitors to the paintings before the exhibition. Also included in these records is a copy of the congressional bill providing for the temporary retention of the paintings in the United

States and a copy of the agreement governing the loan of the paintings to other museums for the tour. Folders of press releases and news clippings are also included.

Records of the Public Information Office include press releases pertaining to the storage and exhibition of the German paintings and numerous newspaper articles in scrapbooks.

Photographs of the packing, storage, and shipment of the paintings, and of crowds at the 1948 exhibition, are located in audiovisual records.

Oral history interviews of Lamont Moore, Charles Parkhurst, Craig Hugh Smyth, Edith Standen, and Carolyn Wells concern the transfer of the Berlin paintings to the Gallery.

Some records in the Gallery Archives pertain to the U.S. Army's acquisition of the Hohenzollern silver service and its subsequent storage at the National Gallery.

The central files contain a folder of correspondence relating to the silver service, including a copy of the letter from the Secretary of War requesting storage space at the Gallery.

The chief curator's files include the terms of agreement with the army for Gallery storage, packing and shipping lists, results of an army inventory, and a copy of the receipt for the release of the silver and glassware to the army for its return to Germany.

Public Information Office scrapbooks contain articles on the German silver and its storage at the Gallery.