

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART  
WASHINGTON, D. C.

FOR RELEASE  
MORNING PAPERS  
JULY 14, 1941.

"THE GREAT FIRE OF LONDON, 1940"

On Friday, July 18th, and continuing to August 11th, the National Gallery of Art will place on exhibition a most unusual collection of paintings and drawings by British artists who have been or are now serving in the London Auxiliary Fire Service. This exhibition, sponsored by the British Government, has just arrived in this country and will have its first showing in Washington.

The paintings are all illustrative, in one way or another, of the "Great Fire of London, 1940". They present, perhaps for the first time in the history of civilization, scenes painted or drawn by artists under blitzkrieg conditions. Before coming here, they were exhibited in London. Now, through the eyes of British artists, Americans will be given an opportunity of seeing for themselves what the bombing of civilians can be.

These paintings are not the result of weeks of studio work in the peace and quiet of a pre-war era. Rather are they the result of experiences undergone, horrors and trials bravely faced by sensitive men and women, capable not only of hard, physical labor in defense of their country, but of instant, creative effort,

which will record for posterity actual scenes as the artists saw them.

The artists who painted these pictures fought the fires under most appalling conditions. One might expect, perhaps with excuse, to find in the paintings a feeling of exaggeration or excess emotion. They are, instead, restrained and deeply sincere. In fact, they are documentary - surely one function of the war artist. For in every case where an action picture has been painted, the particular artist was there on duty with his or her comrades, fighting fire and helping in the end to save London.

The paintings are interesting, not only as documents, but as works of art. They were chosen by Sir Kenneth Clark, Director of the National Gallery, London; Sir Walter W. Russell, R.A., Keeper of the Royal Academy; and Mr. J. B. Manson, former Curator of the Tate Gallery, London. Six of the paintings have been acquired by the British Government for the nation and will be hung, eventually, in the Tate Gallery. Among the artists represented are Reginald Mills, Matvyn Wright, Rudolf Haybrook, Norman Hepple, and Paul Dessau.

The exhibition, quite apart from its artistic merit, will have a strong appeal for all engaged in civic defense, particularly fire fighters, in this country. It is accompanied by three London firemen who have been through all the raids from September 1940 to May 1941. One visiting fireman, whose paintings are represented in the collection, will be in attendance to answer questions about the exhibition.

The visit of these London firemen is sponsored by the British Government for the purpose of giving technical instruction to public officials and fire fighters in American cities. It is also sponsored by Mayor F. H. LaGuardia of New York, President of The United States Conference of Mayors and United States Director of Civilian Defense, who expects to be present at the opening of the exhibition in Washington.

The following letter has been received from Mayor LaGuardia with reference to the exhibition:

OFFICE OF CIVILIAN DEFENSE  
Washington, D. C.

June 30, 1941

Hon. David E. Finley  
Director, National Gallery of Art  
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Director:

It is with great pleasure that I learn today the National Gallery of Art is exhibiting,

beginning on July 18th, a collection of paintings and drawings executed by British artists serving in the London Auxiliary Fire Service. Since these pictures show the effects of modern-day aerial warfare on cities and civilian population, they are bound to be highly valuable to the people of our country in indicating the necessity for adequate Civil Defense. I feel that the officers of the National Gallery are deserving of the highest praise in making it possible for our people to see these works.

Sincerely yours,

F. H. LaGuardia  
U. S. Director of Civilian Defense