

March 18, 1948

NEWS RELEASE

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART  
WASHINGTON, D. C.

FOR RELEASE: IMMEDIATELY

WASHINGTON, March 18: Yesterday, 8,390 people visited the National Gallery of Art to see the opening of the exhibition of paintings from the Berlin museums, on display at the request of the Department of the Army, it was announced by David E. Finley, Director. The pictures were also viewed in advance by several members of the Cabinet and military officials.

The widespread public interest in these pictures was evidenced in the crowds that filed past them from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., the Gallery's regular exhibition hours. The paintings, which were shipped to the United States for safekeeping, will remain on exhibition at the National Gallery through April 18th, after which they will be returned to Germany.

Special attention was directed to the good condition of the paintings after their adventurous war career. First-aid for their preservation was given by Stephen S. Pichetto, Consultant Restorer of the Gallery.

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"The paintings have also benefitted considerably during their period of 'convalescence' under controlled conditions of humidity and temperature," said John Walker, Chief Curator of the Gallery. "They are in better condition than when they arrived in this country, as comparative photographs show.

"Never before in history," he said, "have such efforts been made to care for works of art belonging to an enemy country."

All but two of the paintings came from the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin, founded by Frederick Wilhelm III in 1830 and one of the four or five greatest art galleries in the world. Though the Kaiser Friedrich building is today a wreck, the Nazis were convinced that Berlin could never be bombed, and consequently did not evacuate the collections of their principal museum until the heavy raids began. By that time transportation was difficult and only the most precious paintings could be moved to a nearby mine, while the larger and less valuable pictures were deposited in a "Flak" tower in the Tiergarten. These were destroyed by fire, but the smaller paintings were found in relatively good condition.

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The American army exercised the greatest care in moving the depository to Frankfort and Wiesbaden, and when it was decided that storage conditions in Germany were not satisfactory, two hundred of the pictures were transported to this country. They were shipped to Le Havre in specially heated cars, and crossed the ocean in the air-conditioned dining room of an army transport. The pictures were packed in boxes lined with a newly invented paper developed by the Germans as a precaution against chemical warfare. This paper minimized changes of temperature and humidity which might otherwise have harmed the paintings, particularly those on wood. Except in three cases, where water in the mine dripped on the panels and salt incrustation did some damage, the pictures have suffered surprisingly little.

The Italian pictures are of superlative quality, and among them is Giotto's "Death of the Virgin", the most important panel by Giotto outside of Italy. Also well represented are the great Italian masters Fra Filippo Lippi, Botticelli, Raphael, Giorgione, Titian, Caravaggio and Tiepolo.

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Among the pictures that drew the special interest of visitors was Bronzino's "Ugolino Martelli", painted about 1535, a portrait of a famous Italian humanist of the period. The background shows the courtyard of the Palazzo Martelli in Florence, with Donatello's marble statue "David", which long afterwards was brought to the United States and, as part of the Widener Collection, is now one of the great treasures of the National Gallery of Art.

Another painting of special interest was Filippo Lippi's "The Madonna Adoring the Christ Child", which was formerly in the collection of the Medici. It was described in an inventory of 1492 as hanging in the chapel of the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi, and was also mentioned by Vasari.

Correggio's "Leda and the Swan", painted about 1530, is one of his greatest masterpieces, though it has suffered considerable damage. In 1722 it was in the collection of the Regent Philip of Orleans, whose son Louis cut up the picture and destroyed the head of Leda. The court painter, Charles Coypel, director of the Duke's collection, patched the painting and repainted the head of Leda. Later a new head of Leda was done by the painter Schlesinger. The picture was formerly in the collections of Queen Christine of Sweden and Frederick the Great of Prussia.

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Throughout the exhibition particular interest will be centered in the Flemish and German pictures, which are not so well represented in America as the work of Italian, Dutch, English and French artists. A notable galaxy is a group of panels by Jan van Eyck, van der Weyden, Petrus Christus, Altdorfer, Dürer, Cranach and Holbein, a group unsurpassed today in any European museum.

Among the five paintings by Jan van Eyck is his portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini, probably painted about the same time as the picture of Arnolfini with his bride in the National Gallery, London (1434). Van Eyck's "The Man with the Pink" wears the cross of the Brotherhood of Saint Anthony, founded in 1382 by Albert of Bavaria and restricted to officials of the royal house.

Cranach's "Rest on the Flight into Egypt" (1504) is the earliest signed and dated painting by this master. The exhibition also includes a painting of the same theme by Altdorfer, with the touching inscription in Latin: "Albrecht Altdorfer, painter of Regensburg, with a believing heart presents this gift to you, sublime Mary, for the salvation of his soul."

Another feature of the exhibition is an illustrious collection of Dutch art. The exhibit includes no less than fifteen Rembrandts, two Vermeers, six Frans Hals and superb landscape and genre paintings by other Dutch artists.

French painting, too, is well represented. One of the greatest of all French portraits is Fouquet's "Étienne Chevalier and Saint Stephen", the left half of a diptych that until the end of the eighteenth century was in the church at Melun. The right half, "Madonna and Child with Angels", is now in the museum at Antwerp. Fouquet was court painter under Charles VII and Louis XI of France, and Étienne Chevalier, treasurer of France and favorite of Agnes Sorel, was his patron.

There are also in the exhibition fine examples of seventeenth-century painting by Poussin and Claude Lorrain. Among the eighteenth-century group are Chardin and Watteau, and among the nineteenth-century artists Daumier and Manet.

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