

National Gallery of Art News Release



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EXHIBITION FOCUSES ON WEST BUILDING & ITS ARCHITECT

Washington, D.C., January 23, 1991 - The design and construction of the West Building in the context of Washington, and the career of its architect, John Russell Pope, in the context of twentieth-century architecture are the subjects of a two-part exhibition opening March 17, 1991 in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the National Gallery of Art. John Russell Pope and the Building of the National Gallery of Art will contain approximately 75 original drawings and related contemporary materials about the Gallery's original, or West Building. It will also contain an extensive audiovisual program exploring the significance of Pope. The show will be on view in the West Building through July 7, 1991.

J. R. Pope was at the pinnacle of his career when Andrew Mellon selected him as the architect of the "national gallery" that he offered as a gift to the nation in December, 1936. They had worked together on the Federal Triangle project, which Mellon had overseen as Secretary of the Treasury, a post he held from 1921 to 1932. Pope served on the Board of Architectural Consultants for the Federal Triangle and designed the National Archives Building, the most significant single building in the triangle. Pope also had served on the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts from 1917 to 1922, and among Pope's other credits were The

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Baltimore Museum of Art, and portions of the Frick Collection, The Tate Gallery, and The British Museum. He was also at work on the Jefferson Memorial. The National Gallery, which was at the time one of the largest marble buildings in the world, would be his last major design.

J. Carter Brown, director of the National Gallery said, "Of the various ways we are celebrating our fiftieth anniversary, I anticipate that the architectural and historical insights of this show and the window it provides on the Gallery's beginnings in a larger context will be especially interesting for many -- from first-time visitors to old friends of the National Gallery."

Although his architecture is of great importance to Washington, interest in Pope's work is just beginning to reemerge after a long period in which it was denounced in comparison to the modernism of the so-called international style. Born in 1874 in New York City, he studied architecture at Columbia University and in the 1890s he continued his studies at the American Academy in Rome and the influential Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Returning to New York, he established his own firm after a three-year apprenticeship. During a noteworthy career, he produced buildings evidencing a broad knowledge of historical styles.

The Gallery's rich archival resources of the West Building's overall plans and detail sketches are believed to be more inclusive than sources related to any other Pope structure. The three-part installation about the West Building will explore its creation and its relation to the great buildings and other museums in Washington using drawings and photographs. The entire

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scheme of the architect's life work is the subject of the installation's accompanying audiovisual program produced for the National Gallery by Rusty Russell Projections with assistance from Steven Bedford, architectural historian and Pope scholar. The program will feature vintage and recent photographs of many of Pope's residential, museum, and public building commissions, including the Washington, D.C. residence of U.S. ambassador to France, Henry White, reminiscent of a mansion of Georgian England, and The Waves, Pope's own summer home in Newport, Rhode Island.

The exhibition and much of the source material for the audiovisual section has been selected from Gallery resources and many other collections by Maygene Daniels and Dick Saito of the National Gallery Archives in conjunction with Christopher Thomas, a Samuel H. Kress Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Gallery's Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts.

The installation's first section will feature archival materials illuminating the Gallery's institutional and architectural origins. Proposals and design studies for the building, including some ideas that were rejected, will make up the second section. As an adjunct to this section, a group of Pope's original drawings from his student days at the American Academy in Rome will be seen for the first time in 50 years. The final section will use photographs from a series taken at one-month intervals to dramatically illustrate construction of the National Gallery -- a 522,500 square foot building that was accomplished in an astonishing three and one-half years.