

Second World War Official War Art

About the collection:

During the Second World War, at the instigation of Sir Kenneth Clark the then Director of the National Gallery, the Ministry of Information established the War Artists Advisory Committee (WAAC) – the Government's official war art programme. Over half of the original artworks from this collection, consisting of over 3250 oil paintings, drawings and a number of sculptures are now in IWM's care and it is the most complete and representative example of WAAC material worldwide.

It is a unique visual collection of great significance; not only is it a record of the war effort of the nation and allied countries, but the artworks resonate with personal experiences and stories.

History of the collection:

Much like its predecessor in the First World War, the WAAC's role was *'to draw up a list of artists qualified to record the war at home and abroad...and to advise on the selection of artists on this list for war purposes and on the arrangements for their employment'*.

The artworks produced were overtly for propaganda purposes and throughout the war art exhibitions were organised in Britain and America both to raise morale and promote Britain's image abroad. After 1942, artists were sent to the theatres of war in North Africa, Europe and the Far East, giving the Second World War collection an unparalleled range and variety.



Battle of Britain, Paul Nash © IWM (Art.IWM ART LD 1550)

Another strand of the WAAC was the private desire held by some of those involved in its formation, to keep artists usefully employed during the Second World War and prevent a generation of British artists from being killed.

By the end of the war the collection consisted of 5,570 works produced by more than 400 artists.

Who were the artists employed by the WAAC?

The WAAC accommodated a wide range of artists and embraced great stylistic diversity. Sir Kenneth Clark, who was a strong supporter of Neo-Romantic artists such as Graham Sutherland

gave his personal support to an eclectic range of modern painters and the Committee approached the best and most progressive artists of the period.

- The treasury approved four full-time salaried artists for the War Office, two for the RAF and one for the Admiralty
- In addition to the full-time artists specific commissions were awarded and works sent in 'on spec' were purchased from a significant number of artists
- Three artists, Eric Ravilious, Thomas Hennell and Albert Richards, were killed in the course of their work

How did the collection come into IWM's care?

- After the demise of the WAAC in 1945, IWM took over administration of the scheme (particularly as portraits were still being produced in the post-war years)
- 1947 the scheme ended and an Allocations Committee dispersed the collection to public art galleries and ministries in Britain and abroad
- The Allocations Committee divided the collection roughly into 'art' and 'record' giving institutions like the Tate and British Council first and second choice
- The IWM also received a representative selection from the Art collection and had first choice of those works designated 'record' with the only exception of naval material the majority of which was allocated to the NMM in Greenwich

Where you can see the collection at IWM:

- Works from the collection have been displayed in a wide range of art and historical exhibitions at the IWM since the museum reopened after the Second World War.
- Material from the collection is often requested for loan both in the UK and abroad.
- The collection has been researched for a number of publications (most notably by Susie & Meirion Harries and Brian Foss). As IWM holds the WAAC correspondence and information of all allocations, it is an invaluable source for external and internal researchers.
- IWM also holds significant material in other collections which connect to and augment the art collection (War Artist archive, photographic, film and sound records).

How to search the collection?

- Search the collection using [Collections Online](#)
- For more information please see the [art collection](#) pages on the website or contact our [Explore History Centre](#)