

The Wallace Collection at War

15 April – 25 October 2026



In 1939, as Britain prepared for the impact of war, Hertford House – home of the Wallace Collection – underwent a transformation unlike any other in its history.

Its world-renowned artworks were evacuated for safekeeping, its galleries emptied, and the building was briefly repurposed as a stage for exhibitions designed to galvanise public opinion and strengthen Britain's relationships with its wartime allies. *The Wallace Collection at War*, a free display opening in April 2026, brings this extraordinary moment to life.

Drawing extensively on newly revisited archival material, surviving catalogues, wartime records and artworks actually shown in 1942, the display will trace how Hertford House became an unlikely forum for cultural diplomacy. The display focuses on two key exhibitions held in 1942 that championed the Soviet Union after its entry into the war: *Artists Aid Russia* and *Twenty-Five Years of Progress*. Examined together, they reveal how art, information and propaganda were mobilised to promote Anglo-Soviet friendship at a defining turning point in the conflict.

When Second World War was declared in September 1939, the Wallace Collection's treasures were swiftly removed from London. Large-scale works, including monumental canvases by Boucher (seen in the image above), were transported to the relative safety of Hall Barn in Buckinghamshire, while others went to Balls Park in Hertford and later to West Wycombe Park. Staff under Director James Mann (1897-1962) spent the war years safeguarding the dispersed collection, overseeing rolling relocations and managing the risk of bomb damage at Hertford House. This

will be presented in the display through striking photographs of the Blitz and of the collection in its improvised country-house storage.

With the building empty, the Ministry of Works claimed the galleries for wartime exhibitions. The first, *Artists Aid Russia*, opened on 1 July 1942 and represented an immense collaborative effort across Britain's artistic community. Organised under the auspices of the Central Institute of Art and Design and supported by 23 societies ranging from academicians to modernists, it brought together 904 works by living artists, from Augustus John (1878-1961) and Jacob Epstein (1880-1959) to refugee painters and members of the Artists International Association. Sculptures clustered in the centres of the galleries while paintings were hung densely across walls and even the grand staircase. Half of all proceeds from sales were directed to Clementine Churchill's Red Cross Aid to Russia Fund, reflecting her central role in humanitarian efforts. The exhibition was launched by Agniya Maisky, wife of the Soviet Ambassador Ivan Maisky, whom Clementine Churchill saluted as "*the complete Soviet woman*" in her opening address.

The Wallace Collection at War will bring together a small selection of works shown in the 1942 exhibition, illuminating the breadth and urgency of the artistic response. They include Carel Weight's (1908-1997) unsettling depiction of an air raid in London (Royal Airforce Museum London, 1941), Charles Murray's (1894-1954) spectral *Russian Soldiers* (Tate, 1941), Ethel Gabain's (1883-1950) lithograph documenting women's salvage work (Imperial War Museum, 1941), Arthur Shearsby's (1881-1960) images of bomb damage at the Palace of Westminster (Parliamentary Art Collection, 1941) and Jacob Epstein's striking bronze portrait of Ambassador Ivan Maisky (Imperial War Museum, 1941). Posters and catalogues designed by refugee artist Henri Kay Henrion (1914-1990) will demonstrate the power of graphic design in wartime mobilisation (University of Brighton Design Archives, 1942).

In stark visual contrast to *Artists Aid Russia*, *Twenty-Five Years of Progress* opened in November 1942 as a bold Soviet-style 'agitprop' installation. Designed by modernist architect Ernö Goldfinger (1902-1987), the exhibition transformed the empty Wallace Collection galleries into information halls filled with banners, diagrams, maps and dramatic photomontages. Screens and wall displays celebrated Soviet achievements since 1917, documented Nazi atrocities and emphasised the shared sacrifices of British and Soviet citizens. Oversized images of Joseph Stalin dominated the central space, flanked by Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt, creating a symbolic tableau of Allied unity. Launched by Ivan Maisky, the exhibition marked one of the most radical departures in the museum's history, underscoring how cultural institutions were enlisted in the service of solidarity and soft power.

The Wallace Collection at War invites visitors to step into this charged moment, when a museum empty of art became a site of international diplomacy. Together, artworks, photographs and ephemera will reconstruct how Hertford House functioned during World War II and how the Wallace Collection's staff and building contributed quietly - but significantly - to Britain's wartime cultural front.

Dr Alison Smith, Director of Collections and Research and curator of the display, says: "*Even stripped of its treasures, Hertford House remained a place where ideas were exchanged and alliances reinforced. These remarkable exhibitions remind us that museums are not only custodians of art, they are civic spaces capable of shaping public understanding, especially at moments of profound national uncertainty.*"

Dr Xavier Bray, Director of the Wallace Collection, says: "*Hertford House underwent a profound transformation during World War II. With our collection evacuated for safekeeping, the museum's empty galleries became a stage for exhibitions that supported Britain's wartime allies. And while museums like the National Gallery sent their paintings to the Welsh slate mines and kept public morale alive with daily concerts, the Wallace Collection's story shows another side of how cultural institutions adapted, stepping into a vital role shaped by the political demands of the time.*"

This display also offers essential historical context for the Wallace Collection's major 2026 exhibition, *Winston Churchill: The Painter* (23 May–29 November 2026), which explores Churchill's artistic life.

NOTES FOR EDITORS

IMAGE:

Evacuation of Boucher's *The Rising of the Sun*, late August or early September 1939 © The Wallace Collection

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About the Wallace Collection

As one of Britain's preeminent cultural institutions, the Wallace Collection is home to one of the most significant ensembles of fine and decorative arts in the world. Highlights include oil paintings from the 14th to the late 19th centuries by artists such as Titian, Velázquez, Rubens and Van Dyck; princely arms and armour; and one of the finest collections of 18th-century French paintings and decorative arts. Visitors can also enjoy superb medieval and Renaissance objects, including Limoges enamel, maiolica, glass and bronzes. Displayed at Hertford House, former home to Sir Richard and Lady Wallace, this outstanding collection is displayed in a manner designed to evoke the lives and tastes of its founders, creating a special ambiance that remains an essential part of its charm.

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