

The V&A during wartime - research resources in the V&A Archive



Photograph of workmen sandbagging immovable objects during the Wartime dismantling of the V&A, 1939-45. V&A Archive, A0046

The onset of both World Wars forced a range of changes upon the Victoria and Albert Museum and its collections. Plans were put in place to protect the collections from the possibility of damage by enemy action during World War 1 and military recruitment had a major impact on staffing.

At the outbreak of World War 2, the main body of the collections was placed in safe storage in an underground quarry in Wiltshire (archive ref. MA/2/W5 and ED84/269), or at Montacute House, Somerset (ED84/267). Important library collections, such as the Dyce collection, were moved to the Bodleian Library in Oxford, while more locally, remaining items were temporarily re-housed in a disused tube tunnel in Aldwych. Items that were too large for storage, such as the Raphael Cartoons (MA/2/R2), stayed in the Museum by necessity, but were sand bagged and bricked up as protection from fire and debris.

The role of the Museum buildings themselves was forced to change. Between 1941 and 1944 galleries were used as a school for child-evacuees from Gibraltar. The South Court became a canteen for both the RAF and later for Bomb Damage Repair Squads despite official anxiety about potential damage to the rooms and their remaining contents.

After the war, between September and November 1946, the V&A held the 'Britain Can Make It' exhibition, which attracted around a million and a half visitors. Organised and under the auspices of the Council of Industrial Design with the central government aim "to promote by all practicable means the improvement of design in the products of British industry", the exhibition led to the planning of the Festival of Britain. By 1948 most of the collections had been returned to the Museum.

The surreal reality and bureaucratic complications of World War 1 are brought home by reports and personnel records in the V&A Archive. Members of staff who served, and lost their lives, were recorded in photographs and writing, and commemorated with a war

memorial added to the Aston Webb façade, designed by Eric Gill (MA/2/W2 and ED84/250). The Archive also contains information about the exhibition of Allied war photos in 1917, and information on the evacuation and emergency plans of 1914 onwards. These files extend to air-raid precautions in World War 2, as well as some alterations to the buildings connected to the fighting (A0046, A0359, A0441, and A0057).

A further narrative guide entitled 'V&A at War 1939-45' is available on the V&A website at <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/t/v-and-a-at-war-1939-45/>

Photographs

The availability of photographic source material for World War 2 is much greater than for World War 1. Images exist in the V&A Archive of the packing and removal of objects, damage sustained from enemy bombings, eerily empty Museum galleries, and the use of the building by the RAF and other services. Images from both World Wars exist in photographic guardbooks (MA/32) and in accessions held in the V&A Archive.



Photograph of the Aston Webb facade of the V&A Museum. Exhibition Road. Bomb damage during World War 2. V&A Archive, MA/32/123, neg. 41656

Press cuttings

The Museum has collected general press cuttings from 1837 onwards (MA/49). These provide an insight into the V&A's position during wartime and are a valuable source of information on the progress of the war and the damage done worldwide.

Exhibitions

Despite the relative lack of objects, shipping and funds, various exhibitions were staged during both world wars. In 1917, the Central Office of Information requested that the Sheepshanks Gallery be opened for exhibitions of V&A photographs (MA/1/C849/1). Efforts were made to sustain a programme of public exhibitions during World War 2. In 1941, the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) suggested an exhibition of 'Art for the People'. This was to be exhibited by the V&A and funded by CEMA; subsequently it toured around Britain (see MA/1/A922).

As well as providing a means of consolidating the sparser collections in the Museum itself, due to storage and protection of exhibits, the exhibitions aimed to raise morale, and provide entertainment and a distraction for servicemen on leave. The content of some exhibitions was naturally linked to the international events, such as the 1914 Photographs of war damage in France and Belgium exhibition (MA/28/19) and the 1919 War memorials exhibition (MA/28/25), while 'Britain Can Make It' offered a representation of successful post-war recovery, both for the Museum and the nation (MA/28/75).

Policy, administration and opening

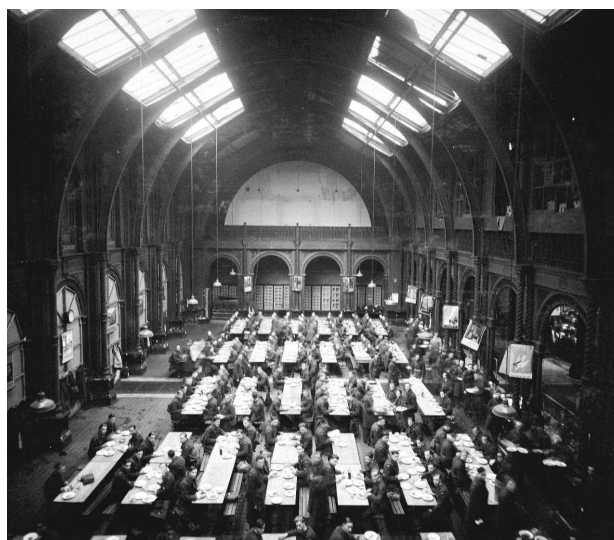


Photograph of men loading a van during the wartime dismantling of the V&A, 1939-1945, V&A Archive, A0046

The ED84 series of files charts the administration and opening of the V&A and the Bethnal Green Museum during the wars, air raid precautions and damage, and correspondence about the protection of the objects. They also contain correspondence with provincial museums offering advice during World War 1. Significant records include air raid precautions to the V&A, 1936-1944 (ED 84/264 to ED 84/270) and to Bethnal Green, 1944-1954 (ED 84/305 to ED 84/310). The Archive also contains a Report on Museums during World War 2 (accession reference A0158), Library air raid precautions (A0003 and A0359) and Museum reorganisation and reconstruction papers, 1944 (MA/46/4/12).

Personnel and staffing

The V&A Archive holds some information on the actions and activities of personnel during both World Wars. While these records are not comprehensive, they provide valuable insight into the effects on staffing, and personal histories where available. The Archive holds Personnel War & ARP papers (see A0441), a register of the Imperial service order &



Photograph of RAF staff using the South Court as a canteen during the World War 2, 1940s. V&A Archive, MA/32/264, neg. A54

medal (see A0304), a file on Sir Leigh Ashton and his activities in the Middle East during World War 2, including the issue of transporting purchases back to London in wartime (MA/1/A985).

Access to the V&A Archive

The Blythe House Reading Room, which serves the Archive of Art and Design, the V&A Archive, the V&A Theatre and Performance Collections and the Beatrix Potter Collections, is open Tuesdays to Fridays, from 10.00 to 16.30, by appointment only. Further information on how to make enquiries and access the archives can be found on our homepage at <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/t/the-v-and-a-archive/>

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