

This Day in History... March 17, 1941

National Gallery of Art Opens

On March 17, 1941, Franklin D. Roosevelt presided over the opening of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. The museum, created from the art collection and generosity of financier Andrew Mellon, gave the United States a national gallery comparable to those long established in Europe.

Andrew Mellon built his fortune in banking, oil, steel, shipbuilding, and construction, becoming one of the wealthiest Americans of his time. During the early 20th century—especially during World War I—Mellon used part of that wealth to assemble an impressive private collection of paintings and sculptures by European masters.

In 1921 Mellon was appointed Secretary of the Treasury and moved to Washington, DC. While living there, he became convinced that the United States should have a national art museum similar to the great galleries of Europe. Nations such as Britain and France already maintained large public collections that displayed artistic achievements for their citizens. Mellon believed the United States should do the same.

After years of collecting art and considering how to present it, Mellon wrote to President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936. In the letter he formally offered to donate his art collection along with funds to construct a museum building. Roosevelt supported the proposal and encouraged Congress to accept it. On Mellon's birthday, March 24, 1937, Congress approved the plan and officially created the National Gallery of Art.

Mellon selected architect John Russell Pope to design the museum. Pope chose a grand neoclassical style inspired by ancient Greek and Roman architecture. The building was placed on the site of the former Baltimore and Potomac Railroad Station in Washington. The location carried historical significance. In 1881 the station had been the site where Charles Guiteau shot James A. Garfield, the 20th president of the United States.

Mellon insisted that the museum should not bear his name. He hoped this decision would encourage other collectors to donate their own works of art. His idea worked. Several donors contributed important collections even before the museum opened, and many more followed in later years.

Sadly, Mellon and Pope would not live to see the completed building. Both men died within a day of each other in August 1937, only two months after excavation began for construction.

Work continued, and the building was completed in December 1940. Built of pink Tennessee marble, it was one of the largest marble structures in the United States at the time. Three months later, on March 17, 1941, the National Gallery of Art opened to the public. More than 8,000 visitors attended the dedication ceremony. Mellon's son, Paul Mellon, presented the museum to the nation on behalf of his father. President Roosevelt formally accepted the gift for the American people.

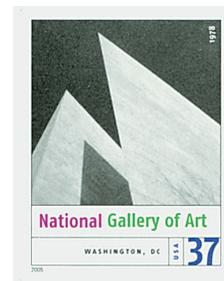
During the ceremony Roosevelt emphasized the importance of public access to art. He noted that the museum symbolized a connection between Americans and the artistic traditions of Europe while also representing a growing cultural life in the United States.

From the beginning, Mellon expected the gallery would eventually outgrow its original building. He therefore asked Congress to reserve nearby land for future expansion. By the 1960s the museum's growing collections had indeed filled the original structure.

Paul Mellon and his sister, Ailsa Mellon Bruce, helped fund the construction of a second building. The project was designed by renowned architect I. M. Pei, who created the striking modern East Building using triangular shapes and sharp angles. Construction began in 1971 and required complex engineering to complete the unusual design. The building was finally dedicated on June 1, 1978, by President Jimmy Carter.

In 1999 the National Gallery opened another major addition, the National Gallery of Art Sculpture Garden. Located across the street from the main complex, the garden displays large sculptures and includes a fountain that becomes an ice-skating rink in winter.

Today the National Gallery of Art contains one of the most important art collections in the United States. Its holdings include thousands of paintings and sculptures, as well as prints, drawings, photographs, and decorative arts. Among its most famous works is *Ginevra de' Benci* by Leonardo da Vinci, the only painting by the Renaissance master currently displayed in the Americas.



From the Modern American Architecture Sheet



Mellon's initial gift to the museum included 126 paintings and 26 sculptures.



President Roosevelt delivered a stirring speech at the museum's dedication.



Since 1965, US Christmas stamps have pictured works from the National Gallery of Art.



John Sloane's work was displayed in the gallery in 1971.



Martin Johnson Heade's work was displayed in the gallery for three months in 2000.

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