

The Story of the Government Art Collection

Drawing on the archives of the Government Art Collection, this exhibition uses the letters of Prime Ministers, diplomats, civil servants and artists to explore the history of the Collection. Their words reveal the changing role that the ownership and display of art has had for the British government over the last 200 years.

It was the cost of decoration that prompted the purchase of art instead of wallpapers to cover the walls of government buildings in 1899. A century later the Government Art Collection is one of the most important collections of British art, with 13,500 works dating from the 16th century to the present day displayed in over 420 government buildings worldwide.

Highlights on show range from a manuscript of c.1827 recording a collection of portraits at Downing Street, to an email from 2011 reporting the vulnerability of paintings in the British Embassy in Tripoli, Libya. The archives demonstrate how significant events in recent history have often had a direct impact on the Collection. Letters, emails, manuscripts, photographs and books, many on display for the first time, illustrate and illuminate the story.

All exhibits are from the Government Art Collection, unless otherwise stated.

