



News Release
Thursday, Oct. 15, 2026

Contact:

Karis Erwin, National WWI Museum and Memorial, 816.888.8122, kerwin@theworldwar.org

“What Fit in a Suitcase” Opens Oct. 15 at the National WWI Museum and Memorial

Art made by WWI prisoners of war in Siberia, later carried to America by a family fleeing Nazi-annexed Austria, goes on view in Ellis Gallery.

KANSAS CITY, Mo. – The National WWI Museum and Memorial announced its newest exhibition, [*What Fit in a Suitcase: Art by WWI POWs in Siberia*](#), opening Thursday, Oct. 15. The exhibition features artwork made by Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war held in a Russian camp in southern Siberia. Carried in a suitcase, the collection made it from Siberia to Austria and, eventually, to America.

Between 1915 and the early 1920s, more than 13,000 Austro-Hungarian and German prisoners of war were held captive in the camp. They faced food scarcity and a harsh climate. Even so, the prisoners built a daily life in captivity. They read, organized classes and, in many cases, made art inspired by their hopes, fears, dreams and observations.

Austrian officer Rudolf Ernst collected his fellow prisoners’ work. When he was released in 1921, he brought the collection home. When he died in 1936, he left it to his daughter, Alice.

In 1938, as Nazi Germany annexed Austria, Alice and her husband, both Jewish, fled to the United States. They were only permitted to take a few of their possessions. Seventeen years after her father brought the collection home to Austria in a suitcase, Alice carried it out the same way.

“The story of how these works survived is remarkable, as is the artwork itself, which shows the full range of what these prisoners saw, imagined and remembered,” said Dr. Chris Juergens, Senior Curator of the National WWI Museum and Memorial. “Each piece is a record of how prisoners held on to their humanity in captivity.”

The Rudolf Ernst Collection is currently on loan at the Museum and Memorial, and funds are being raised to acquire these unique works for the permanent collection. Those interested in supporting the acquisition should visit theworldwar.org/suitcase.

What Fit in a Suitcase is on display in Ellis Gallery and runs through spring 2029. Admission is included in a General Admission ticket. Visit theworldwar.org for more information.

About the National WWI Museum and Memorial

The National WWI Museum and Memorial is America's leading institution dedicated to remembering, interpreting and understanding the Great War and its enduring impact on the global community. The Museum and Memorial holds the most comprehensive collection of World War I objects and documents in the world and is the second-oldest public museum dedicated to preserving the objects, history and experiences of the war. The Museum and Memorial takes visitors of all ages on an epic journey through a transformative period and shares deeply personal stories of courage, honor, patriotism and sacrifice. Designated by Congress as America's official World War I Museum and Memorial and located in downtown Kansas City, Mo., the National WWI Museum and Memorial inspires thought, dialogue and learning to make the experiences of the Great War era meaningful and relevant for present and future generations. To learn more, visit theworldwar.org.

###