

GENERAL SCIENCE

Shield To Guard Treasures

Priceless cultural treasures will be protected in the United States and elsewhere by a blue-and-white shield painted on roofs of museums, art galleries and historic shrines.

By MARJORIE VAN DE WATER

► IN CASE the world is once again plunged into war, no matter how terrible may be the conflict, man's dearest treasures, priceless works of art and irreplaceable historic, scientific and cultural objects may be protected from harm or destruction.

The protection will not be alone in the form of bomb-proof underground shelters, massive concrete walls or steel vaults. It will be through a symbol—a painted shield of royal blue and white conspicuously placed on the building, bomb-proof art refuge or object for which protection is desired.

With the exception of England, all the great nations of the world, half a hundred of them, including Soviet Russia and her satellite countries, at a meeting in The Hague, have signed a solemn pledge to respect this blue and white symbol and to avoid bombing or shelling or otherwise harming the property it guards.

National Shrines Protected

In the United States, such national shrines as Mt. Vernon, home of George Washington, and Independence Hall in Philadelphia, will be protected against war depredations by the new shield.

Also protected in the same manner would be buildings housing our great works of art such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York or the National Gallery of Art in Washington, or those in which revered treasures of our cultural past are enshrined such as the Smithsonian Institution, the Library of Congress and the Folger Shakespeare Library.

Certain objects, museums or cultural monuments may later be designated by a special commission for special protection, provided they are located at a distance from any target of military significance. These will be marked with a grouping of three of the blue and white shields. The objects will be described carefully in international documents and will be marked plainly on international maps.

Although England and a few other nations represented at the meeting during which the treaty, or "convention," guaranteeing protection for the property guarded by the blue and white shield was drawn failed to sign the completed treaty, it is expected that they will do so later.

Dr. Leonard Carmichael, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, signed the treaty as plenipotentiary for the United States. It

will not become binding, however, until it has been ratified by the United States Senate.

At the last moment, Dr. Carmichael reports, delegates from Soviet Russia and six satellite Soviet states appeared at the conference. They did not announce their intention to attend or ask the Netherlands for permission to enter that country until their plane was in the air en route from Moscow.

Yet the delegates had evidently made no hasty departure from Russia. They had obviously given months of careful study to the preliminary draft of the treaty and were well prepared with a knowledge of the art treasures and cultural property of other nations as well as their own.

At this meeting, the famous Russian

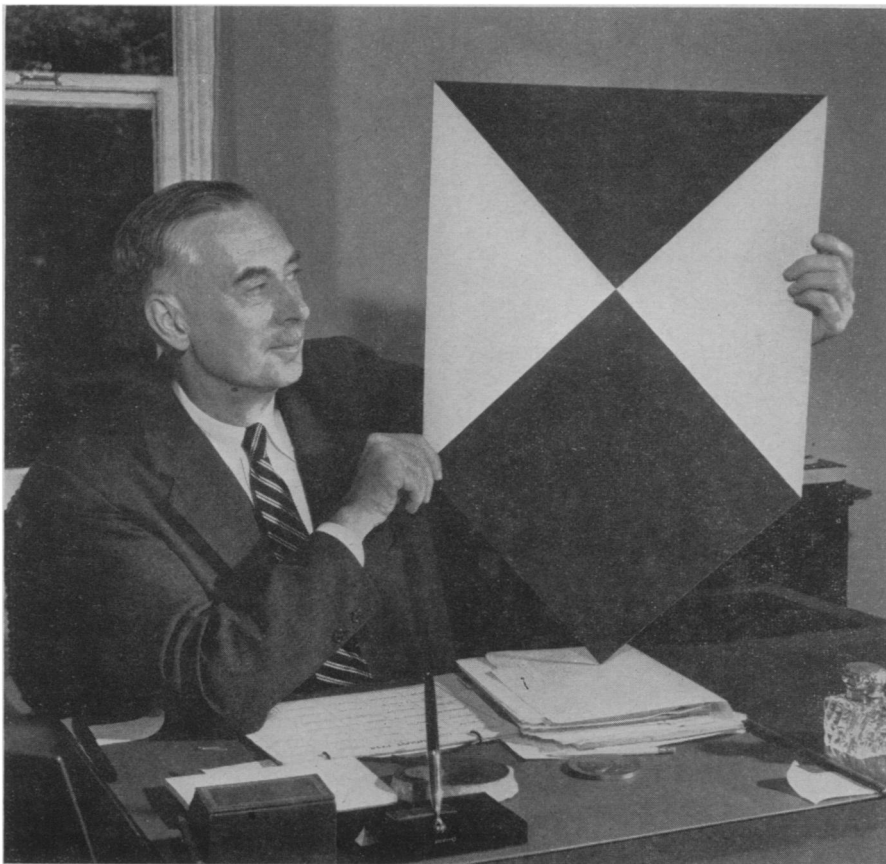
"nyet," or "no," was not so much in evidence as at other international gatherings. In fact, the Russians went to the other extreme and insisted that no exceptions be made on the ground of military necessity or for any other practical reason.

When an English delegate suggested that they realized they could not properly ask protection for Westminster Abbey, situated as it is adjoining military targets, a Russian delegate was quick to pop up.

"You British may not appreciate the value of Westminster Abbey," he said, "but we Russians regard it very highly."

This idealistic Russian point of view, considered unrealistic by many other delegates, may have been expressed for propaganda purposes. Nevertheless, the Russians have put themselves on record in this regard.

"It may in future be important to remember," Dr. Carmichael points out, "that the official spokesmen of the USSR and of their satellites over and over again asserted at this conference that no possible consideration of



BLUE AND WHITE SHIELD—Dr. Leonard Carmichael, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, examines the blue and white shield that has been agreed upon internationally as a "hands-off" symbol to enemy bombers. Painted on museums, art galleries and historic shrines, it will protect priceless cultural objects from the depredations of war.

military necessity would ever, under any circumstances, allow their armed forces to damage in any way cultural property of any other power that has signed this treaty."

Although it is considered a great forward step for so many of the world's leading powers to come to an agreement about just what should be done to protect man's cultural heritage, thus marking a forward step toward taking some of the barbarity out of war, such a concern is not new. The United States for many years has taken the leadership in measures toward this end.

Civil War Plan

Our concern for the protection of cultural monuments and rare and beautiful objects dates back to the Civil War, when Dr. Francis Lieber worked out a plan that resulted in General Order 100 to govern the action of Federal forces in the field. The forces were not charged with the active protection of cultural treasures, but they were prohibited from wanton destruction of them.

The United States took part in international discussion of the problem in 1899 and again in 1907. These meetings, as this year's, were held at The Hague. Before World War II, the United States joined in the signing of the Roerich Pact for the same purpose.

In 1943, by presidential order, the American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic Monuments in Europe was established. This commission came to be known, from its chairman, the Hon. Owen J. Roberts, Justice of the Supreme Court, as the Roberts Commission. The Roberts Commission aided the military in starting a specialist branch of expert monuments, fine arts and archives officers.

There were a total of 200 such officers, known in the field as the "Venus Fixers." The effective work of these officers and the Roberts Commission created much lasting good will for the United States in Europe. They accomplished a great deal in returning to their rightful owners, works of art that had been removed in the course of military action.

European Nations Exposed

The European nations, particularly France, Italy and Holland, because of their peculiarly exposed geographical position and their wealth of the world's artistic and historic treasures, have had particular concern with this problem of cultural protection.

Holland has made a magnificent effort on her own part and in a very practical way to provide refuges for her own cultural treasures, including a so-called atomic-bomb-proof shelter for great works of art.

It was through the initiative of Italy and France, and particularly UNESCO, and at the special invitation of the Netherlands that the recent meeting was held at The Hague.

Significant provision of this year's treaty is the pledge made by each nation signing it to respect not only the cultural treasures of other nations, but also their own. This means that each nation signing has promised not to make use of museums, art galleries, cathedrals or similar buildings or their environs either to house troops, or to serve as lookout stations or for any other military purpose.

In the past, where such cultural objects have been destroyed, it has sometimes been due to the action of the military forces under attack in misusing a cultural shrine as a military post.

Science News Letter, August 14, 1954

PUBLIC HEALTH

Handshake Spreads Germs

➤ HANDS AND fingers can have disease germs on them and can therefore spread disease from one person to another. If you have wondered whether you could get or give some disease by shaking hands with another person, here, in part, are answers given in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (July 31) to a doctor who inquired about it:

"In contagious disease hospitals especially but also in children's hospitals, the hands can be an extremely important factor in transmitting infection from one patient to another. But such accidents can be prevented by adhering to the principles of medical asepsis. This includes of course the washing of hands whenever contaminated.

"Outside of hospitals and similar institutions, mere handshaking probably plays an insignificant part in transmission of disease under ordinary circumstances. Even persons with fungus infections of the hands might not transmit the disease by a momentary clasp of one's hand, nor would apparently

healthy typhoid carriers, who would be a hazard in contacting foods, be likely to transmit typhoid by a handshake with a friend on the street.

"However, in the event of an epidemic disease prevailing in a community it would be proper to warn against unnecessary handshaking. But the true danger might come from being drawn into close proximity to one who harbored pathogenic organisms (disease germs) in the respiratory passages."

The second answer also points to the danger of hands and fingers carrying germs. This answer stresses the importance, therefore, of washing the hands before eating and of making it a habit to keep the hands away from the mouth and nose as much as possible.

"The brighter side of the picture," the journal says, "is that many bacteria are destroyed by drying and exposure to the air."

Science News Letter, August 14, 1954

To people who want to write but can't get started

Do you have the constant urge to write but fear that a beginner hasn't a chance? Then listen to what the former editor of Liberty said on this subject:

"There is more room for newcomers in the writing field today than ever before. Some of the greatest of writing men and women have passed from the scene. Who will take their places? Fame, riches and the happiness of achievement await the new men and women of power."



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