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National Gallery of Art

In part, Washingtonians have Catherine the Great and Joseph Stalin to thank for the treasures housed here. Andrew Mellon, the industrialist and financier who founded the gallery, owned only the finest and most historically important works, and his philosophy continues to this day. The displays form one of the world's largest and most impressive collections of European and American art. Mellon's original gift of 121 artworks formed the core collection, many of which came from Russia's Hermitage, works originally collected by Catherine the Great and sold to Mellon in the 1930s by cash-hungry Stalinists.

In addition to his fabulous art collection, Andrew Mellon also gave Washington a spectacular building to put it in. Designed by John Russell Pope (who also designed the Jefferson Memorial), the National Gallery of Art building is itself a work of art. A broad sweep of marble stairs leads through heavy bronze doors into the dramatically beautiful rotunda. Here, massive black marble pillars rise to the domed roof, defining a spacious open area with a cascading fountain at its centre. Two

The Adoration of the Magi, by Sandro Botticelli, dates from 1481

The serene *Alba Madonna* by Raphael



great halls run east and west from the central rotunda. They do double duty, serving as a display area for some of the galleries' sculptures and also offering rows of open doorways that beckon you into a veritable labyrinth of gallery rooms.

The size and scope of the collection are truly mind-boggling. The **West Building** is the oldest and largest part of the museum and contains all but the 20th-century works. With more than 100 gallery rooms on the main floor and more on the lower level, it is impossible to see the entire collection in a single day. In room after room, masterpieces hang in profusion. The names of the artists roll off the tongue like a Who's Who of great masters: Botticelli, El Greco and Raphael; Rubens, Rembrandt and Gainsborough. Then there are the Impressionists – Monet, Renoir, Van Gogh and Cassatt – and the Post-Impressionist Cézanne, to name just a few.

In the 1940s, the gallery was running out of space for its collection. It also desperately needed room to begin displaying a growing collection of 20th-century artists. The Chinese-American architect I M Pei – known for designing famous buildings in Dallas, London and Hong Kong, the JFK Library in Boston, and the extraordinary steel-and-glass pyramid entrance to the Louvre in Paris – was contracted to design a new wing for the museum that would be built on the irregularly shaped plot of land just east of the gallery. The resulting building is a dramatic departure from the Federalist architecture that dominates the Mall. Its open, airy spaces and complex geometric shapes both contrast with and complement the museum's West Building, and offer a stunning environment in which to display