



BOSTON ATHENÆUM

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Boston Athenæum Acquires Important WWII Poster Collection

The **Richard W. Cheek World War II Graphic Arts Collection** Reinforces the Athenæum's Reputation as a Vital Center for the Study of U.S. Printed Wartime Materials

Boston, MA – January 16, 2017 – Elizabeth E. Barker, Ph.D., Stanford Calderwood Director of the Boston Athenæum, announced today the donation to the Athenæum of the collection of WWII visual materials of architectural photographer, author, and Athenæum Proprietor Richard W. Cheek. The Richard W. Cheek World War II Graphic Arts Collection contains over 2,000 posters and war maps, 189 linear feet of books, 4,000 magazines, and approximately 6,500 pieces of WWII ephemera, including patriotic envelopes, board games, playing cards, and pin-ups.



“We couldn’t feel more grateful—or more honored—to become the repository of such a discerning collector’s lifelong passion,” stated Barker. “Richard Cheek’s gift provides fresh insight into a critical moment in world history. The value of this archive for scholars—and, indeed, for any curious person—is incalculable. The collection elevates the Athenæum’s ability to serve as an essential research center for three of our nation’s greatest conflicts.”

The Cheek collection complements the Athenæum’s existing [Civil War](#) and [WWI-related holdings](#); together, these visual records provide a valuable resource for the study of 19th- and 20th-century American society and culture. The acquisition reflects the [institution’s mission](#) to serve its members, the broader community, and

scholars throughout the world by preserving and augmenting its collections, providing library services and cultural programming, and preserving and enhancing the unique atmosphere of its landmark building.

Of the collection's remarkable breadth, Catharina Slutterback, the Athenæum's Curator of Prints and Photographs, explains that "part of its value lies in its sheer numbers," adding that the collection "conveys, in a way that a smaller collection could not, the pervasiveness of propaganda in American society during the war." Both Slutterback and collector Richard Cheek emphasize the role of the collection's graphic and visual elements in communicating persuasive wartime narratives. "To understand why Americans were willing to engage in another global conflict while still suffering from the consequences of the Great War," Cheek says, "we need to know the pictures and symbols that motivated them." He adds, "In a society that was becoming increasingly visual in its orientation, images were more important than words in persuading people to fight again."

The son of a WWII veteran and the grandson of a renowned Civil War historian, Richard Cheek began collecting WWII ephemera as a young boy. Fascinated by the "panoply of war," he received an early gift of several signal flags, rescued from a U.S. destroyer that sunk off the coast of Okinawa. "Torn, dirty, and redolent of desperate action," as he describes them, these symbolic objects were the first of what was to become a vast collection.

Cheek, a longtime member and Proprietor of the Boston Athenæum, was inspired to donate his graphic arts collection to the Athenæum after viewing its 2014-2015 exhibition, [Over Here: World War I Posters from Around the World](#) and attending a gallery talk led by Slutterback, the exhibition's curator. An exhibition featuring selections from the Cheek collection is planned for 2020, the 75th anniversary of the war's conclusion, to be curated jointly by Cheek and Slutterback. A fully illustrated catalog will accompany the exhibition.



About the Boston Athenæum:

The Boston Athenæum, a membership library and fine art museum, first opened its doors in 1807 as a sanctuary of arts and letters for Boston intellectuals. Today, it continues to serve its members and the community with a vast circulating collection, rich and varied special collections, extensive archives, comprehensive electronic resources, handsome reading spaces, and a dynamic programming schedule. The exhibition gallery and many events are open to the public. Membership is open to all. For more information, visit bostonathenaeum.org.

Image credits: 1. Artist Unknown, [*Hitler and Mussolini Patching Together Nazi Soldier*], ca. 1943. Silkscreen poster. Richard W. Cheek WWII Graphic Arts Collection. Gift, December 2016 2. Henry Koerner (1914-1991), *Save Waste Fats for Explosives*, 1943. Color lithographic poster. Richard W. Cheek WWII Graphic Arts Collection, Gift, December 2016