FOCUS

FELIKS TOPOLSKI’S WAR-TIME DRAWINGS

BORN IN WARSAW IN 1907,
FELIKS TOPOLSKI MOVED TO
ENGLAND IN 1935. TOPOLSKI
IS REMEMBERED AS A
TALENTED DRAUGHTSMAN,
MURALIST, AND CHRONICLER.

He painted the 1959 Coronation murals
of Buckingham Palace and ran a
serialized publication, Topolski’s
Chronicle, for several decades toward
the end of his life. From 1940–1945, he
served as an Official War Artist for Great
Britain.

Government-commissioned war artists
were a longstanding tradition by World
War II. Artists had been depicting war
for centuries, and many nations, Great
Britain and the United States among
them, had institutional programs in place
to transport and fund this kind of war
reporting. In the 20th century, even as
photography became more common,
many governments still retained war
artists who worked in other mediums.
Their work, in conjunction with official
photographs, provided a more
comprehensive, textured, and nuanced
portrayal of war.

At the outset of World War II, the British
Ministry of Information formed the War
Artists’ Advisory Committee. It was
headed by Sir Kenneth Clark, the
Director of the National Gallery, and
comprised of government officials,
military officers, and representatives of
various artistic institutions. Throughout
the next six years, the Committee hired
over 400 artists, ranging from sculptors
like Henry Moore to painters like
Topolski, to produce art at home and
abroad. Much of this art was
commissioned propaganda for
exhibitions that toured the United
Kingdom to boost morale. But some
artists, like Topolski, were sent into the
field to catalog the experience of war.

For five years, Topolski sketched his way
across the frontlines of Russia, the
Middle East, Myanmar, China, and Italy.
He didn’t limit himself to depicting
soldiers and martial landscapes—many of
his drawings portrayed opposing forces
and embattled civilians as well.

Several of those sketches recently came
to CCAHA for treatment from the
Wolfsonian–Florida International
University. The majority appear to be
from Topolski’s time in Moscow in 1941.
Topolski’s energetic pen strokes and
fluid watercolors depict a Moscow in
suspended animation; somber soldiers
and beleaguered Muscovites moving
against a backdrop of imperial
architecture. CCAHA Paper & Photograph
Conservator Jessica Keister treated the
sketches, most of which required surface
cleaning, flattening, and mending.

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