

# The Monuments Men:



## On the Trail of Hitler's Stolen Art

An unsung section of the Allied forces entered the European theater with a mission to safeguard endangered historic sites and repatriate millions of masterpieces looted by the Nazis.

by JASON EDWARD KAUFMAN

When the Nazis began invading neighboring countries, they set about looting cultural property on a scale unprecedented in the history of war. Specially assigned task forces pillaged conquered territory in a campaign bent on annihilating non-Aryan culture, dispossessing Jews and amassing artworks for the grandiose museum that Hitler planned to build in his hometown of Linz in northern Austria. Millions of paintings, sculptures, drawings, prints, pieces of furniture, decorative items, books and archives were displaced, damaged or destroyed, including many celebrated masterpieces.

Even before the United States entered the war, members of the museum community recognized the need to protect cultural monuments. In 1941, soon after the attack on Pearl Harbor, museum directors gathered at the Metropolitan Museum to discuss “concrete proposals for [the] emergency.” Despite efforts urging President Roosevelt to take action, it was not until June 1943—the day after a British bomb destroyed the Milan church housing Leonardo’s “Last Supper” (which had been encased in sandbags and survived)—that the President established the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives Program (MFAA) section of the Allied Military Government for Occupied Territories.

Dubbed the “Monuments Men,” this small group of soldiers—mainly American and British art experts, museum curators, architects and conservators—worked near the front lines to minimize collateral damage to churches, museums and other cultural sites as the Allies swept from Italy and France towards Berlin. “The lives of our men are paramount,” stated General Eisenhower on the eve of D-Day, but “it is the responsibility of commanders to protect and respect [the] historical monuments and cultural centers which symbolize to the world all that we are fighting to preserve.”

The MFAA section provided commanders with maps and lists to steer bombers and battles away from cultural landmarks when possible. They oversaw temporary repairs to damaged structures, relocated troops billeting in historic buildings and posted notices to bar access to sensitive areas. They also sought to revive Europe’s shattered cultural life by re-employing local museum officials and staging concerts or temporary exhibitions that reassured the population that the Allies were not absconding with artworks. ▷

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Monuments Man Lt. James Rorimer (second from left) oversees GIs recovering stolen paintings from a Nazi cache in Neuschwanstein Castle in Bavaria, May 1945. A curator at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, Rorimer enlisted in the infantry, was made an officer in the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives Program, and worked in Normandy and Paris before leading the art rescue effort in Germany. After the war, he would become director of the Metropolitan.

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Photo: National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.





Above: A chamber of the Altaussee salt mine in Upper Austria, a vast underground complex, where in 1945 the Allies discovered thousands of artworks looted by the Nazis from European museums and private collections and intended to stock Hitler's planned Führermuseum in his hometown of Linz. The Monuments Men recovered the stolen artworks and returned the majority to their countries of origin. For a sense of scale, note that the ladder is 9 feet tall.

Top, right: Lt. Generals Omar Bradley and George Patton Jr. with Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower (front, right) getting a firsthand look at German museum collections stockpiled in the Merkers salt mine in central Germany, a Nazi cache for gold and looted art recovered by the Monuments Men in April 1945. In the background is Major Irving Moscowitz.

Right: Monuments Men Dale Ford (left) and Harry Ettlinger examine a valuable 1645 self-portrait by Rembrandt at the Heilbronn salt mine in Germany. The Nazis filled the mine with tens of thousands of stolen artworks and material sent for safekeeping by German museums. The Rembrandt came from the museum in Karlsruhe, hometown of Private Ettlinger, whose Jewish family had fled to New Jersey in 1938. Six years later, he enlisted to fight the Nazis.



Photos: Getty Images/Life Pictures by William Vandivert; National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD (facing, top left and below, right); Archives des Musées Nationaux (facing, top right).

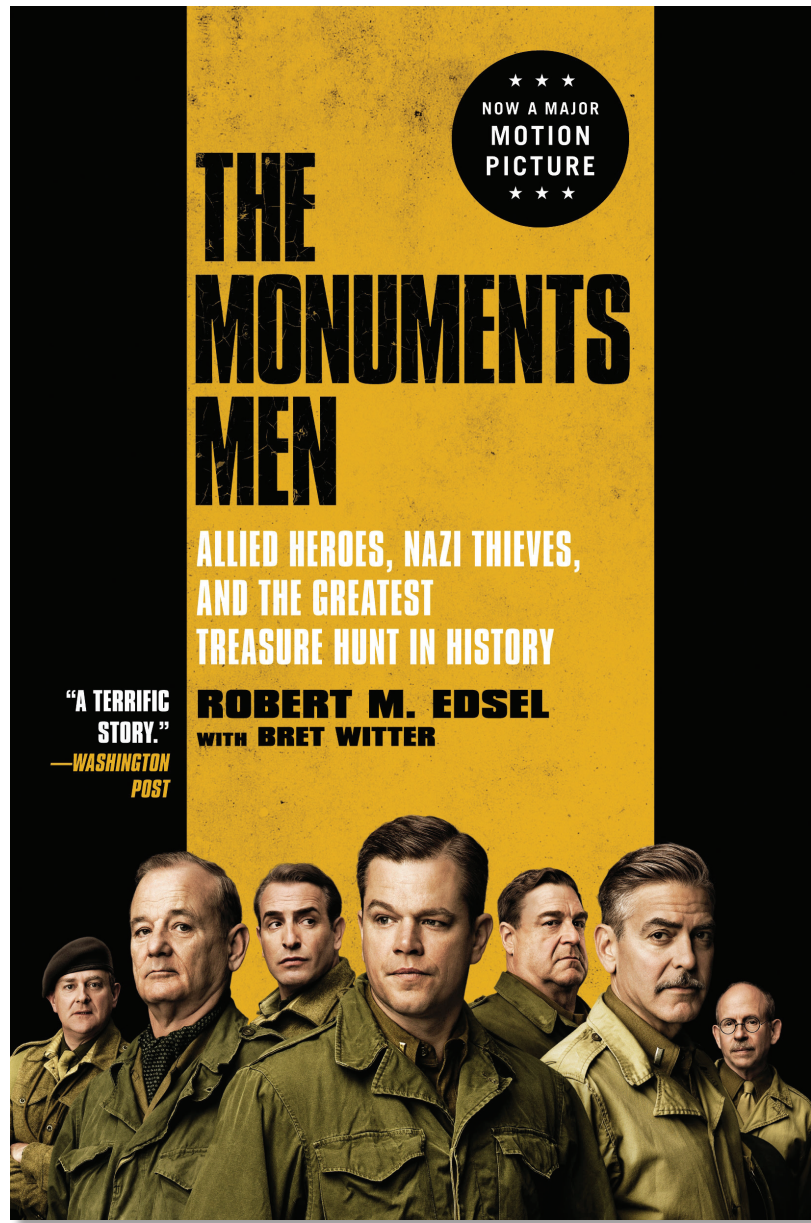


American soldiers load a truck with a painting of Adam and Eve by 16th-century Flemish artist Frans Floris and various sculptures. The works were part of a hoard discovered in 1945 in a Bavarian cave that contained stolen artwork, including the private collection of notorious Nazi field marshal Hermann Göring.

By 1944 the Monuments Men realized that the Nazis had stolen massive quantities of artworks and shipped them to Germany and Austria. Their task became locating and consolidating these materials and after the war returning them to the countries from which they were taken. They tracked down more than 1,000 repositories containing the holdings of museums and Nazi plunder, gathered the objects at collecting points in Munich, Wiesbaden, Offenbach and Marburg, and brought experts from liberated countries to help identify objects and make claims for restitution. Items were released to the claimant countries, which assumed responsibility for returning them to their owners.

As this process commenced, President Eisenhower ordered that key masterpieces be immediately returned to ease concern that the Allies would confiscate the art for themselves. “The Ghent Altarpiece” and Michelangelo’s “Bruges Madonna” were sent back to Belgium, Impressionist paintings were returned to Paris, and within months hoards of treasure were flowing from Germany back to Europe’s ravaged capitals. By the time the last Monuments Man returned home in 1951, they had inventoried, crated and shipped more than five million items, restoring the collections that define European civilization. After the war, when they returned to their civilian jobs, their achievement was largely forgotten. ▸





They were rescued from oblivion largely by Robert M. Edsel, a Texas oil executive who moved to Florence, Italy, in the late 1990s and devoted himself to researching the fate of art during the devastating war. He read Lynn Nicholas' 1994 book *The Rape of Europa*, a pioneering study of the Nazi looting enterprise. But Edsel felt that the MFAA members had not gotten their due. "My focus was on the good guys—middle-aged family men in established positions who put on uniforms and went to save these things," he says. A decade ago, he interviewed the 17 surviving Monuments Men (of the 345 men and women from 13 nations who served, only five are alive today) and recounted their exploits in several books, the latest of which is *The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves, and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History*. The story is so compelling that it is getting the Hollywood treatment in a current movie directed by and starring George Clooney.

The MFAA project could not reverse the effect

of Nazi depredations. Hundreds of thousands of pieces had been destroyed or remained missing, and many more had been sold to private and museum collections, often with fake documents to conceal their illicit pasts. Many previous owners had died during the Holocaust, and their descendants, if any, were not easily located. France, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Austria did little to resolve these issues, opting instead to absorb the stolen property into national collections. Various organizations continue to pursue looted works and reunite them with their rightful owners, but despite avowals to cooperate, museums, including some in the United States, have only reluctantly turned over works to the families from whom they were stolen. Yet, the majority of treasures did find their way home, and today, visiting Europe's museums, we would do well to remember that had it not been for the efforts of the Monuments Men, the riches of Western civilization might have been dispersed or destroyed.

### "The Ghent Altarpiece" by Hubert and Jan van Eyck

"The Ghent Altarpiece," by the Flemish brothers van Eyck, is considered the greatest masterpiece of Northern European art. It was painted for a merchant and civic official in the Belgian town of Ghent, and installed in his family chapel in Saint Bavo's Cathedral in 1432. The 12-foot-by-16-foot altarpiece consists of 12 panels, eight of them hinged shutters painted on both sides, to offer different views when the altar is open or folded shut. The main subject is a lamb, symbol of Christ's sacrifice, ceremoniously adored by various ecclesiastical figures, with Christ or God the Father above, flanked by the Virgin and John the Baptist. The back displays other scenes, including portraits of the donor and his wife.

As the Nazis approached in 1940, Belgian authorities shipped the altarpiece to the Vatican for safekeeping. But when Italy declared war on Europe, the transport was diverted to Pau in southwest France, where works from the Louvre were stored. The French, Belgian and German armies agreed that all three must consent before the painting could be moved. But in 1942 Hitler ordered the director of the Bavarian Museums, Ernst Büchner, to bring "The Ghent Altarpiece" to Neuschwanstein, the Alpine castle where the Nazis stockpiled art for the Führer. Büchner arrived in Pau with a truck, gave the curator a receipt and left with the coveted masterpiece.

Monuments Men Captain Robert K. Posey and Private First Class Lincoln Kirstein discovered it in May 1945 when they entered the Altaussee salt mine in northern Austria, to which the Nazis had transferred their cache when Allied air raids had rendered Neuschwanstein too dangerous. Deep within the miles of tunnels and chambers, they came across the disassembled panels of "The Ghent Altarpiece" leaning against a wall. The work was taken with thousands of others, including Michelangelo's "Bruges Madonna" and Vermeer's "The Astronomer," to the Allied collecting point in Munich, and became the first piece returned to its country of origin, where it continues to awe visitors to Saint Bavo's Cathedral.



Photos: Wikimedia Commons.



### "The Astronomer" by Johannes Vermeer

Painted around 1668 by Johannes Vermeer, "The Astronomer" portrays the pursuit of science with exquisite realism and dignity. A scholar, dressed in a blue silk robe and a skullcap, sits at a carpet-covered desk and reaches towards a celestial globe bathed in light from a nearby window. A book lies before him, open to a passage advising that he "seek inspiration from God." Though a mere 20 by 18 inches, the canvas, one of only 36 known works by the Dutch Golden Age master, has long been regarded as one of the world's greatest oil paintings. Hitler lusted after it for his planned Führermuseum in Linz.

After the Nazis occupied France in 1940 and issued decrees depriving Jews of property rights, a task force headed by the influential party ideologue Alfred Rosenberg seized the painting from the Paris mansion of Édouard James de Rothschild. The Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg systematically looted libraries, archives, churches, synagogues, Masonic lodges, museums and private collections in Nazi-occupied territories, including more than 5,000 items from the Rothschilds. The plunder was stockpiled in the Jeu de Paume Museum, where exhibitions allowed Field Marshall Hermann Göring to select works for his personal collection. But Hitler ordered that artworks stolen from Jews be placed at his disposal, and "The Astronomer"—its back stamped with a black swastika—was sent to Neuschwanstein Castle in the Bavarian Alps.

It was subsequently moved to the Altaussee mine in Austria, where it was recovered by Lieutenant Commander George Stout—a Harvard conservator who before the war raised awareness of the need to protect art in Europe—and fellow Monuments Men just days before the territory was turned over to the Soviets, who would have taken it as reparation for war losses. The Allies brought "The Astronomer" to the Munich collecting point and after the war returned it to France. The Rothschilds conveyed the painting to the French state in lieu of inheritance taxes in 1983, and since then it has been on display at the Louvre. ▷



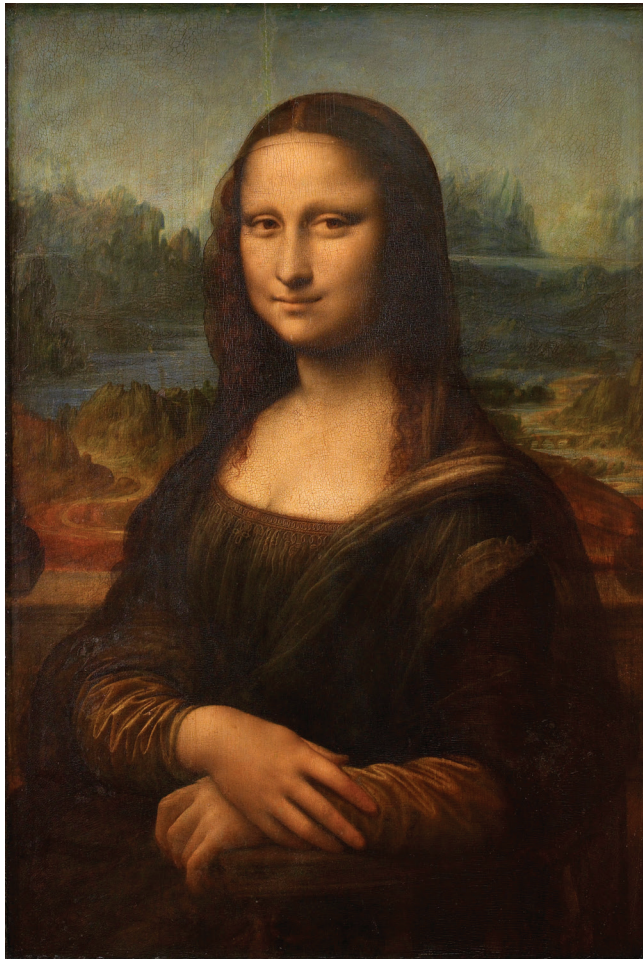


### “The Bruges Madonna” by Michelangelo

The Nazis had their own organization dedicated to protecting cultural material, but the Kunstschutz, as it was called, was actually part of the looting campaign, shipping the contents of Italian and French museums to Germany, ostensibly for safekeeping. Even when it was clear that Germany would be defeated, they continued to plunder. In 1944, just days before the arrival of British troops, Hitler’s agents confiscated Michelangelo’s renowned “Madonna” from the Cathedral of Our Lady in Bruges, Belgium.

Carved between 1501 and 1504, around the same time as his Vatican “Pietà,” the 50-inch marble depicts the Madonna seated with the Christ child nestled in her dress between her legs. It had been in Bruges since Michelangelo himself sold it to cloth merchants in the city, then one of Europe’s most important marketplaces. It is the only Michelangelo statue to leave Italy in his lifetime. The Nazis smuggled it out of Belgium sandwiched between mattresses in a Red Cross truck. Major Ronald E. Balfour, a British art historian, arrived at the church around a week after the theft and began the search to recover it. (The following year he would die in an explosion in Clèves, one of two Monuments Men killed in action.)

Two years later, the “Madonna” was recovered in the Altaussee mine in Austria, among more than 6,600 paintings, 2,300 drawings and watercolors, nearly 1,000 prints, and hundreds of sculptures, tapestries and crates of books. The “Madonna” was subsequently returned to the Bruges cathedral, where today it is displayed behind bulletproof glass.



### “Mona Lisa” by Leonardo da Vinci

The “Mona Lisa” needs no introduction. Leonardo painted the half-length portrait—believed to depict the wife of Florentine cloth merchant Francesco del Giocondo—between 1503 and 1506, and brought it with him to France where it became part of the collection of King Francis I and has been on view at the Louvre since 1797. Precisely what happened to her during the war, and whether or not the Monuments Men played a role, remains unclear.

In 1939, with the war approaching, curators evacuated hundreds of thousands of artworks from the Louvre and sent them to a series of chateaus, abbeys and museums in southern France. “Mona Lisa,” already the most famous artwork in the world, received special care, traveling on an ambulance stretcher in a van equipped with enhanced shock absorbers. Curators used the BBC to broadcast coded messages as to her well-being: “‘La Jaconde’ a le sourire” (“The ‘Mona Lisa’ is smiling”) assured that the painting had arrived safely at its covert destination.

The Nazis kept track of national collections in occupied France, but focused their looting on Jewish holdings, eventually confiscating more than one-third of all private art held in the country. There were reports that as the war came to a close in 1945, the Nazis stole the “Mona Lisa.” The Louvre has denied the theft, claiming that the Germans confiscated a copy sent as a decoy while the original remained secreted in Paris. One thing is certain: The painting left the Louvre and later was returned. A wartime photograph of the emptied museum shows the spot where the “Mona Lisa” had been removed, and a later image documents a curator unwrapping the iconic portrait upon its homecoming. ♦

Photos: Wikimedia Commons (top, left); Getty Images/Fine Art Images (top, right);

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