

**Priceless Art, Personal Objects, Countless Lives**

The film *The Monuments Men* enters the historical events of World War II through an emphasis on objects with artistic and/or cultural significance. The war's ravages were felt on many fronts, and the Monuments Men response to safeguard cultural heritage was, by necessity, multipronged. In addition to creating protections for monuments, churches, bridges, and other culturally important sites, the Monuments Men also responded to the Nazi campaign to steal public and private property. As country after country succumbed to German aggression, the Nazi seizure of objects in those territories was carried out on an immense scale. This lesson introduces students to one component of Nazi plundering activities—objects stolen from Jewish families living primarily in occupied France—and considers those objects within the wider framework of the war's human casualties.

Teachers may use this lesson to introduce students to the war's impact on people and society. It may be used as a stand-alone lesson or serve as scaffolding for extended learning about the war. If the goals of the class allow, partnering this lesson with broader learning that examines more of the war's social, political, and economic factors is recommended.

**OBJECTIVE:** Beginning with the analysis of a primary text, students will scrutinize the justifications made by Nazi leaders for the seizure of property – from priceless works of art and antiques to people's everyday possessions – from Jewish families living primarily in occupied France. Students will learn about the activities at one storehouse for Nazi art looting, the Jeu de Paume Museum in Paris. Students will develop an understanding of the value afforded to art and objects as these items served the goals of the Reich. Students will then consider the losses suffered by people deemed to be enemies of the regime, and begin to comprehend the larger magnitude of what was stolen as the Nazis carried out their vision of a racially homogenous Europe.

**GRADE LEVEL:** 7-12

**COMMON CORE STANDARDS:**

*ELA Anchor Standards for Reading:*

*CCRA.R.1 Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.*

*CCRA.R.4 Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.*

*Literacy in History/Social Studies:*

*This lesson is aimed at meeting the Craft & Structure component and is accessible for students in grades 7-12.*

**TIME REQUIREMENT:** Following a pre-lesson reading assigned as homework, one class period for discussion partnered with viewing two short film clips and one historic newsreel. Extra time for enrichment activities.

**DIRECTIONS:**

1. Prior to the lesson, assign the excerpted document, *Special Staff for Pictorial Art Report of Work during the Period from October 1940 to July 1944*, as homework.

Begin the discussion with some background information about the Jeu de Paume and the reading assignment.

The Jeu de Paume, a small museum in Paris, became the headquarters of the Special Staff for Pictorial Art (Sonderstab Bildende Kunst) of the ERR (Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg). From 1940 to 1944, the Jeu de Paume was a warehouse and sorting depot for over 22,000 confiscated works of art. The ERR seized over 200 private Jewish collections in France and Belgium and subsequently sent many of the objects to hidden art repositories in Germany and Austria; the Monuments Men pursued this art towards the end of the war. (See Monuments Men Overview handout for more details.)

Many of the art pieces that entered the Jeu de Pomme have their own unique war stories. At the same time the Nazi leadership plotted its deadly campaign of destruction, Nazi leaders also supported an ideology which drew from Hitler's personal notions about art. Hitler hired art experts to fulfill his dream of the Führermuseum, a museum that, once built in Linz, Austria, would house the greatest of the world's art. Coveted works of art from public and private collections were earmarked long before Germany invaded Poland, Belgium, France and other European countries. The private art collections of Jews in Western Europe were to help fill the walls of the future museum. Many of those sought after paintings entered the Jeu de Paume, including Jan Vermeer's *The Astronomer*, a painting deeply desired by Hitler. A discussion of the painting and what happened to it during the war appears later in this lesson.

In addition to paintings selected for Hitler's Führermuseum, hundreds of other paintings at the Jeu de Paume went to enrich the private collection of Nazi leader Hermann Goering. In the film *The Monuments Men*, Goering makes one of his many "shopping" visits to the Jeu de Paume.

No story about activities at the Jeu de Paume during the war would be complete without Rose Valland, a French art historian who was an employee of the museum. Valland kept secret records of the stolen art that entered and left the building. At great risk to herself, Valland's spying efforts resulted in the eventual rescue of thousands of priceless objects. (A biography of Valland can be read on The Monuments Men Education Website.) In the film *The Monuments Men*, events at the Jeu de Paume swirl around Cate Blanchett's character, Claire Simone, a French woman inspired by the courageous Valland.

The primary source assigned as reading is an excerpt of a 1944 report written by Robert Scholz, Chief of the Special Staff for Pictorial Art. It summarizes the results of the seizure of "ownerless works of art formerly possessed by the Jews in the occupied Western territories." Because the most valuable objects from these Jewish collections were brought to the Jeu de Paume, Valland would have seen many of these items firsthand.

Scholz's report was later used as evidence at the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg in 1946. It was registered as PS 1015-B. The translation students read is from the U.S. Office of Strategic Services. Both the translation and the original documents are on file at the National Archives, Washington, D.C.

2. Discuss the document with students and ask them the following questions:  
How would you describe the tone of this document?  
Who seems to be at fault that the Jewish art collections were abandoned?

From the point of view of Scholz, who has made great efforts in the name of protecting art? How?

What else strikes you about the tone or content of this document?

Direct student attention to the first sentence in the document. Scholz writes that art was “abandoned” by the “internationally known Jewish Rothschild family.” Was this art really abandoned? Point out the use of the word “international” and connect it to the centuries-old anti-Semitic charge about international Jewish conspiracy theories for world domination. Discuss the hate speech connotations of the term “international Jew.” As support, note the collection of propaganda essays, *The International Jew*, penned by Henry Ford during the early 1920s. Volume 1 of the 4 volume set contains the expanded title, *The International Jew, The World’s Foremost Problem*. (Hitler greatly admired Ford; he mentioned him in his autobiographical and political treatise, *Mein Kampf*. In 1938, just before the beginning of World War II, Ford was awarded the Grand Cross of the German Eagle, the highest medal Nazi Germany could give to a foreigner.) As further support, a brief Internet search will result in many current anti-Jewish sites that use this language.

Devote a portion of the conversation to stereotypes and scapegoats. Monitor for respectful language.

- Following initial student reaction to the Scholz document, show the brief clip “People’s Lives,” from the film *The Monuments Men*. It is in the video section of the Monuments Men Education website.

The characters played by Cate Blanchett and Matt Damon are walking through a train station outside of Paris. The massive station contains vast amounts of organized crates full of household objects. Lamps, dishes, and some other objects are carefully arranged among the crates.

Damon: “What is all this?”

Blanchett: “People’s lives.”

Damon: “What people?”

Blanchett: “Jews.”

The collected household objects are the result of a Nazi operation, Möbel-Aktion (“Furniture Operation”) that began in the spring of 1942. The operation directed the ERR to strip furnishings from the homes of Jews who were deported to camps or who were able to flee ahead of time. Nearly everything was collected: furniture, musical instruments, kitchen objects, family photos, religious heirlooms, knickknacks, linen, clothing, dolls, toys, books. Approximately 38,000 homes in France were seized; a 1944 report claims that the contents of over 68,000 Jewish homes in Western Europe were taken. Most of the contents of these homes were shipped to war-damaged areas of Germany.

Create a conversation about student reaction to this scene in the film. As was the case in the Scholz document, there’s an emphasis on things, not people. Where are the people who owned these objects? Ask students to consider what the Nazis stole beyond people’s objects.

Show the second clip, “Gold Teeth” from the film. In this scene, the Monuments Men come across a large barrel in a dimly-lit Nazi repository concealing objects they stole. George Clooney’s character determines that the barrel contains teeth with gold fillings.

Emphasize the enormity of the devastation to people. The Nazis stole everything from their victims. In addition to taking a person’s possessions, the Nazis stole lives, families, histories, and futures. In a very powerful sense, the Nazis revised normal, day-to-day life: people lost value, but their objects, belongings, and possessions took on new value according to the needs and interests of Nazi leaders.

Share the brief overview about the Monuments Men.

The newsreel, *Berlin, Berchtesgaden, Buchenwald* includes the Monuments Men discovery of stolen Jewish possessions. It is available on the main page of The Monuments Men Education Site. You can also link to it here, via youTube. <http://youtu.be/2T2jTZzqaB4>

Note: Three additional newsreels are available on the main page of the website.

*Goering, Art, & Neuschwanstein* <http://youtu.be/koA4a5TyDPw>

*Merkers Salt Mine (British)* <http://youtu.be/9hISLhZyzWg>

*James Rorimer Receives a Medal* <http://youtu.be/-rJlq1lKUz0>

Ask students how the war, provoked by the actions of Hitler and the Nazis, was an attack on culture and heritage.

4. Widen the discussion of the attack on Jews to include other targeted groups. The destruction of so many people was a result of the Nazi campaign conducted against groups of people identified as undesirable. The Nazis and their collaborators pinpointed a variety of enemy groups. These included both Jews and non-Jews. Nazi ideology about race and religion called for the persecution and destruction of not only Jews, but also Roma (Gypsies), Slavic peoples, and Jehovah's Witnesses, among others. Groups with perceived mental or social disabilities were methodically exterminated. In addition, some groups were under attack for their nonconformance to perceived societal norms, such as Freemasons and male homosexuals. By defining enemies at the group level, the Nazis struck at entire communities.

For an overview of Nazi targets, see *Mosaic of Victims: In Depth*, found at the website of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007329>  
Methodological guidelines for teaching about the war and, in particular, the Holocaust, also appear on the museum website.

Ask these summarizing questions:

Why is it necessary to protect culture and heritage?

Does including an emphasis on a painting, building, ritual object, or some other object stolen or destroyed during the war somehow diminish the millions of deaths, the annihilation of communities, the loss of families, and the destruction of towns and cities? Why or why not? Explain.

How can we understand the disparity between the deaths caused by the Nazis during World War II and their appreciation of art?

Does an event that is almost 70 years old remain important today? How and why? As one way to answer this question, discuss the recent discovery of nearly 1500 paintings unaccounted for since World War II and found in an apartment building in Munich. To whom do these paintings belong?

## Extensions

Explore the use of propaganda and hate speech during WWII.

Create small groups and assign research on the following groups: Jews, Freemasons, Slavic peoples, Roma/Sinti, Jehovah's Witnesses, male homosexuals, mentally and physically disabled Germans, and political opponents of the Nazis.

Alone or in small groups, students could research the history of a painting and what happened to it during the war. Recommended paintings include *Lady with an Ermine* by da Vinci, *Portrait of a Young Man* by Raphael, *Head of a Woman* (1922) by Picasso, *Self-Portrait* (1888) by Van Gogh, and *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer* (1907) by Klimt.

A discussion of Vermeer's *The Astronomer* and what happened to it during the war begins below. It can be used as its own lesson or to introduce the extension assignment above.

### ***The Astronomer* by Jan Vermeer (1632-1675)**

At the top of the list of masterpieces most sought after by the Nazis was Jan Vermeer's *The Astronomer*. It was painted around 1668 in Vermeer's studio in Delft, a town in the Netherlands.

This painting of an astronomer studying texts while examining a celestial globe, is a companion painting to Vermeer's *The Geographer*, which is today held in the Steadelsches Kunstinstitut in Frankfurt, Germany. The works together show the same figure (considered by some experts to be Antonie van Leeuwenhoek) in the guise of a scholar; one studies the heavens, the other studies the earth. The room they inhabit is filled with soft light filtered by a window on the left.

Vermeer is recognized today as one of the great painters in the history of art due to the subtle effects he achieves with paint. One of things most prized about Vermeer's paintings is the way he renders objects in soft focus and the way he creates highlights with the application of tiny daubs of paint.

While less known in his own time, Vermeer became popular only in the last 150 years. A French art critic revived interest in Vermeer's work in the 1860s when he published a series of articles on the artist. The interest in works by the Dutch master increased in the early twentieth century, and by World War II the scarce number of his works (around 35 works by the artists are known today) made him all the more desirable for Nazi art collectors.

At the time of the war, *The Astronomer* was owned by Édouard de Rothschild. The Rothschild family had owned the painting since the 1880s. In 1940, the painting was seized from Rothschild as were more than 5,000 other works of art in his collection. A small swastika was stamped in black ink on the back of the painting.

In addition to *The Astronomer*, Hitler was also especially interested in the artist's painting, *Art of Painting* (also known as *The Allegory of Painting*). Hitler's art historian, Hans Posse, succeeded in acquiring the *Art of Painting* from its then owner, Count Jaomir Czernin in November, 1940. Although the painting was bought, the heirs of Count Czernin have challenged the transaction and want the painting returned to the family.

Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering was also eager to acquire works by Vermeer for his private collection. Following the war, it was discovered his collection included a modern Vermeer forgery by the Dutch painter Han van Meegeren.

What about this work made it so valuable to Hitler?

### **The Story of One Painting During WWII**



Source: <http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/v/vermeer/03d/28astro.html>

(It's been proposed that Hitler viewed the painting as a testament to German scientific thinking and he therefore wanted to give it a position of honor at the Führermuseum.)

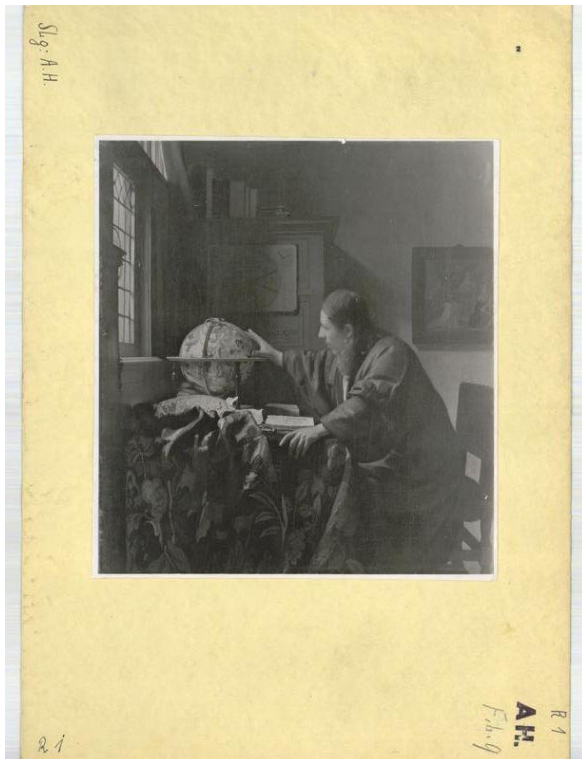
What do you notice first as you look at this painting?

What does the man in this painting appear to be looking at?

(While it may appear to be a traditional globe of the world, it is actually a celestial globe—a map of the constellations in the night sky.)

Describe the mood of the painting? If you were in this room what would it be like?

How can we understand today the disparity between the deaths caused by the Nazis during World War II and their appreciation of art?



Source: [Bundesarchiv B323-924-fol.002\\_r#R1.jpg](http://www.bundesarchiv.de/B323-924-fol.002_r#R1.jpg)

[http://www.errproject.org/jeudepaume/card\\_view.php?CardId=6287](http://www.errproject.org/jeudepaume/card_view.php?CardId=6287)

This black and white image of Vermeer's *Astronomer*, is mounted to a larger sheet with markings around it. What do the markings read?

Based on your readings up this point, what do you think the marking R 1 seen twice on the page might refer to?

What do you think the initials A.H. might refer to?

This is a page from one of the "Hitler Albums." These albums—there were 31 in total—were presented to Hitler as catalogues of paintings the Nazis had acquired for the Führer's museum and for Hitler's personal collection.

This page is just one of many pages that were compiled by the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR). This special unit was organized in the summer of 1940 under Reich Leader Alfred Rosenberg. On November 5 the ERR was assigned the responsibility for the confiscation of "ownerless" Jewish art collections. On November 18 of that year,

Hitler ordered that all confiscated works of art be brought to Germany and placed at his personal disposal. During the next several years, the ERR would engage in an extensive and elaborate art looting operation that was part of Hitler’s much larger premeditated scheme to steal art treasures from conquered nations.

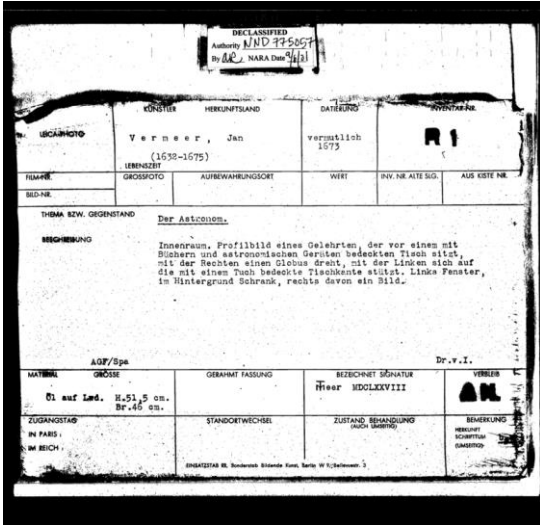


Figure 1. Source: NARA 6287-21248

Figure 1 is an image of the ERR card for the same painting.

Although it is written in German, what do you notice about this record?

(The card corresponds to the image from the Hitler Album showing the number R 1, along with the name of the painting and a description of the work.)

What does the fact that this work is marked as R1?

(The R1 marking—R for Rothschild—makes clear this was the prize of the Rothschild collection.)

Figure 2 shows the record created by the Nazis of the provenance (or history) of the *The Astronomer*.

What can you tell by looking at this list?

Why do you think the Nazis were so concerned with the history of this particular object?

If you were stealing a valuable object, what sense does it make to have a full record of ownership for a work of art? (The Nazis, although unscrupulous in their looting, were very concerned with the authenticity of these objects which only the provenance information provides.)

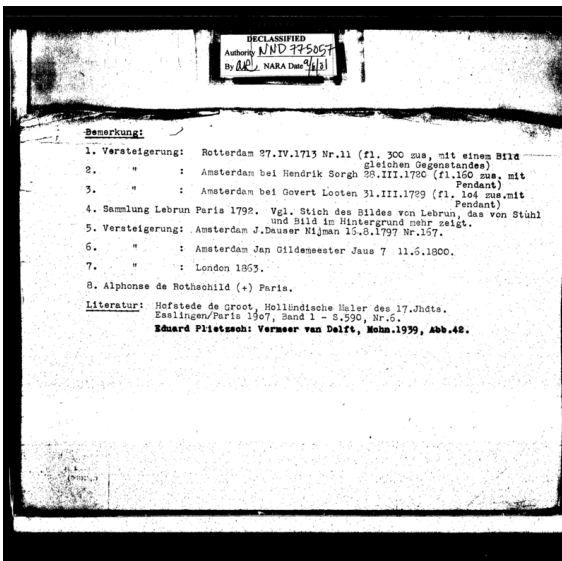


Figure 2. Source: NARA 6287-6654

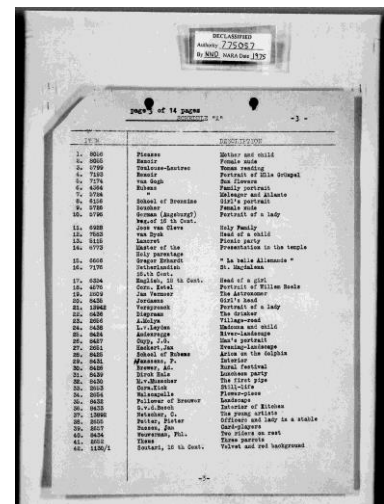
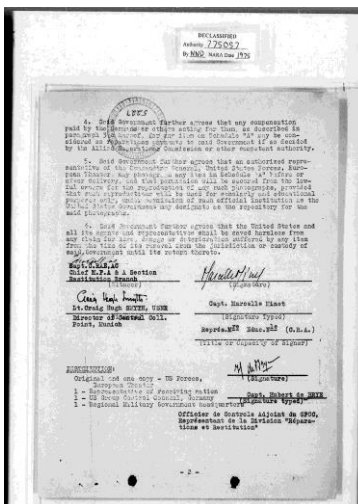
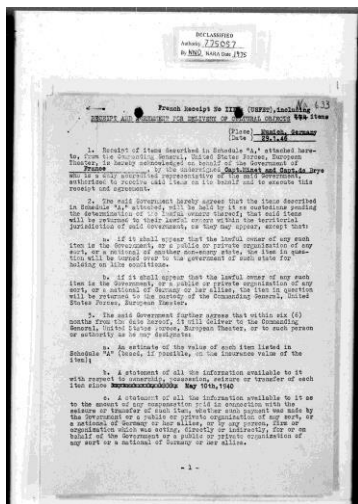
While the Nazis were both ruthless in their killing and in their stealing both personal and cultural property, they were also systematic in the way they went about it. Cards such as the one above clearly document where the painting came from and that the work was processed through the Jeu de Paume Museum. This system, along with the documented works in the Hitler Albums made it easier (in some instances) to match works of art with their owners and return them. In some cases objects were returned to the country of origin's government on the good faith that they would be restituted to the proper owners, although that did not always happen. In the case of Vermeer's *Astronomer*, the work was found at the end of the war stored along with the Ghent Altarpiece and Bruges Madonna.

*The Astronomer* was found by the Monuments Men. It was hidden with thousands of other objects deep in a salt mine at Altaussee, Austria. After its discovery it was taken to the Munich collecting point and later returned to Édouard de Rothschild. In 1983 Rothschild transferred *The Astronomer* to the French Government, and today it hangs in the Louvre Museum in Paris.



Figure 3. Source: Monuments Men Foundation

Posey Papers, permission from the Monuments Men Foundation



Munich Collecting Point. Source: Monuments Men Foundation.



### Assessments

Assessment draws from an evaluation of student demonstration of knowledge during class discussion. If written reflection or research is assigned, assess for student ability to fulfill the assignments and to present the information in the appropriate formats.



Figure 4. Source: NARA: RG 111-SC-204899

The Monuments Men encountered repositories such as this one all across Europe. Here, piles of boxes, records, and clothing are guarded by an American GI inside a church in Ellingen, Germany. The church had been used by the Nazis as a secret depot for clothing requisitioned from France and Holland. (National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD)

This lesson was prepared by the Monuments Men Foundation educators. <http://www.monumentsmenfoundation.org>

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SPECIAL STAFF FOR PICTORIAL ART

Report of work during the period from October 1940 to July 1944

On the basis of the decree of the Führer of 17 September 1940 relative to the seizure of ownerless works of art formerly possessed by Jews in the occupied WESTERN territories, the special staff for pictorial art commenced at the beginning of October 1940 in PARIS with the seizure of the works of art abandoned by the internationally known Jewish ROTHSCHILD family, which was also famous as the possessor of great art collections. It was not possible for the various members of the Jewish ROTHSCHILD family, nor for many other rich French Jews, to take any considerable part of their art possessions to England and America in their precipitous flight before the German occupation. The staff has not only seized very great parts of the art treasures abandoned in the Paris City Palaces of the ROTHSCHILDS, but it also systematically searched the country-seats of the individual members of the ROTHSCHILD family, such as the famous LOIRE castles, for art treasures and thereby safeguarded for the Reich very important parts of the world-famous ROTHSCHILD art collections. The art possessions of the ROTHSCHILDS were traced not only to cleverly hidden places in the individual castles but also to depots and warehouses, as for example in BORDEAUX and other coastal cities, where these art treasures had already been packed for transport to America. In this same manner the art possessions of other French Jews famous as art collectors, such as KAMN, DAVID-WILL, Levy de BENZION and SELLIGMAN, were traced by the staff and seized in their entirety.

After the seizure of the most famous Jewish art collections in PARIS, all abandoned dwellings of the wealthy Parisian Jews, as well as the warehouses of all shipping firms and many other art depots of emigrated Jews, which were very often camouflaged by French gentiles, were systematically searched by the special staff for pictorial art and very considerable art treasures found in this manner. These seizures were carried out on the basis of preliminary exhaustive investigations into the address lists of the French police authorities, on the basis of Jewish handbooks, warehouse inventories and order books of French shipping firms, as well as on the basis of French art and collection catalogs. The clearly established Jewish origin of the individual owners was proved in each case in cooperation with the French police authorities and the Sicherheitsdienst (Security Service), as well as on the basis of the political source material of the staff itself.

According to the same system, the seizure of ownerless Jewish works of art was gradually extended over the whole French territory. The investigations of the special staff for pictorial art were often made extraordinarily difficult by proven sabotage by French authorities, as well as by camouflaging of Jewish possessions by trusteeship of French Gentiles covering up for the Jews. In spite of this, Jewish art possessions in the occupied

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French territories was seized to such an extent as to justify the assumption that, in spite of all opposition and camouflaging, the most important part of the art possessions which had been in the hands of Jews in France, insofar as these had not already been removed before the occupation, was safeguarded by the staff. The wholesale removal of irreplaceable European art values was thereby prevented and the highest artistic products of all European nations assured for Europe.

In the course of this art seizure by the staff in the occupied WESTERN territories, the following were seized from 203 locations (collections):

21903 art objects of all types, as counted and inventoried up to now.

A seizure record was made for each location, recording the origin of the objects with exact individual data. All seized art treasures were first taken to a collection warehouse at the former Jeu de Paume Museum and then to rooms of the LOUVRE which had been placed at their disposal. They were scientifically inventoried and photographed by scientific art workers of the special staff for pictorial art and carefully packed there by experts for transport to the Reich. These jobs were especially difficult, since the majority of the collections and individual art objects were taken over without any inventories or indications of origin, and the scientific cataloguing had to be carried out by the scientific art workers of the staff.

Since the beginning of 1943, art seizures of the staff have been extended to include also furniture seizures of the EAST Ministry, whereby a great number of individual valuable art works could be seized from individual dwellings and warehouses.

During the period from March 1941 to July 1944, the special staff for pictorial art brought into the Reich:

29 large shipments including  
137 freight-cars with  
4174 cases of art works.

These shipments were taken to 6 shelters in the Reich, unpacked and stored with observation of all conservation, air raid and fire protection precautions. At the shelters the inventories, which had served in PARIS only for identification, were supplemented according to scientific view-points, and the results of the scientific cataloguing were recorded on inventory lists and thoroughly indexed. With this scientific inventory of a material unique in its scope and importance and of a value hitherto unknown to art research, the special staff for pictorial art has conducted a work important to the entire field of art. This inventory work will form the basis of an all-inclusive scientific catalog, in which should be recorded history, scope and scientific and political significance of this historically unique art seizure.

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A restoration work shop equipped with all technical aids was established by the special staff at one of the shelters, and has been occupied with the care and restoration of seized articles of artistic value, as well as with their permanent observation at the shelters. Several hundreds of the works of art that had been neglected by their Jewish owners or had earlier been inexpertly restored were restored in this workshop and their preservation assured.

In addition, all seized articles of artistic value were photographed by the photography workshop of the special staff and included in a film library. Thereby not only the identity of each individual art work was recorded, but also material of permanent value for study and publication in the field of art was created.

Up to 15 July 1944 the following had been scientifically inventoried:

21 903 art works

- 5 281 paintings, pastels, water-colors, drawings
- 684 miniatures, glass and enamel paintings, books and manuscripts
- 583 plastics, terra-cottas, medallions and plaques
- 2 477 articles of furniture of value to art history
- 583 textiles (Gobelins, rugs, embroideries, Coptic materials)
- 5 825 hand-made art works (porcelains, bronzes, faïences, majolica, ceramics, jewelry, coins, art objects made with precious stones)
- 1 286 East Asiatic art works (bronzes, plastics, porcelains, paintings, folding screens, weapons)
- 259 art works of antiquity (sculptures, bronzes, vases, jewelry, bowls, cut stones, terra-cottas).

These figures will be increased, since seizures in the WEST are not yet completed, and it has not been possible to make a scientific inventory of part of the seized objects because of the lack of experts.

The extraordinary artistic and material value of the seized art works cannot be expressed in figures. The paintings, period furniture of the 17th and 18th centuries, the Gobelins, the antiques and renaissance jewelry of the ROTHSCHILD's are objects of such a unique character that their evaluation is impossible, since no comparable values have so far appeared on the art market.

A short report, moreover, can only hint at the artistic worth of the collections. Among the seized paintings, pastels and drawings there are several hundred works of the first quality, masterpieces of European art, which could take first place in any museum. Included therein are absolutely authenticated signed works of REMBRANDT van RIJN, RUBENS, Frans HALS, Vermeer van DELFT, VELASQUEZ, MURILLO, Goya, Sebastiano del PICOMBO, Palma VECCHIO, etc.

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Of first importance among the seized paintings are the works of the famous French painters of the 18th century, with masterpieces of BOUCHER, MATTEAU, ALGAUD, LARGILLIERE, KATTEER, FRAGONARD, PATER, DANLOUX and de TRCY.

This collection can compare with those of the best European museums. It includes many works of the foremost French masters, who up to now have been only inadequately represented in the best German museums. Very important also is the representation of masterpieces of the Dutch painters of the 17th and 18th centuries. First of all should be mentioned the works of van DYCK, Salomon and Jacob RUISDAEL, COUVERAINT, TERBORCH, Jan WENIA, Gabriel METSU, Adrian van OSTADE, David TENNERS, Pieter de HOOCH, Willem van der VELDE, etc.

Of foremost importance also are the represented works of English painting of the 18th and early 19th centuries, with masterpieces of RAYNOLDS, ROMNEY and GAINSBOROUGH. CANNACH and AMBERGER, among the German masters, should be mentioned.

The collection of French furniture of the 17th and 18th centuries is perhaps even more highly to be evaluated. This contains hundreds of the best preserved and, for the most part, signed works of the best known cabinet-makers from the period between LOUIS XIV to LOUIS XVI. Since German cabinet-makers played an important part in this golden age of French cabinetry, now recognized for the first time in the field of art, this collection is of paramount importance.

The collection of Gobelins and Persian tapestries contains numerous world-famous objects. The collection of handicraft works and the ROTHSCHILD collection of renaissance jewelry is valuable beyond comparison.

Very many works of art were seized by the staff from the luggage of Jewish emigrants in Holland as well as in the occupied territories of France and Belgium.

#### Work in the EASTERN territories

The activity of the special staff for pictorial art was limited in the occupied EASTERN territories to a scientific and photographic recording of public collections and their safeguarding and care in cooperation with the military and civil services. In the course of the evacuation of the territory several hundred most valuable Russian ikons, several hundred Russian paintings of the 18th and 19th centuries, individual articles of furniture and furniture from castles were saved in cooperation with the individual army groups, and brought to a shelter in the Reich.

A collection of degenerate Bolshevik art, as well as a collection of degenerate WESTERN art, was also made for political study purposes. In addition, a rich collection of material concerning Soviet art culture, museum policies, art publications and picture material concerning Soviet architecture was made.

## Brief Overview of the Monuments Men

At the outbreak of WWII in Europe, museum curators and scholars on both sides of the Atlantic began to take steps to safeguard their most prized collections. In addition to potential danger from air raids and ground combat, these significant cultural landmarks and artworks were also threatened by Adolf Hitler's aggressive looting policy. Hitler coveted many of Europe's greatest masterpieces for his future Führermuseum in Linz, Austria. It was to be the largest and most magnificent art museum in the world, filled with what Hitler believed to be the finest art of Europe. Hermann Goering, the pompous and ostentatious military leader who was Hitler's second-in-command for most of the war, was also on the hunt to amass treasures for his private art collection.



Through the duration of the war, Rembrandts, Raphaels, Vermeers, Da Vincis and millions of other valuable pieces were plundered and hidden, as they awaited their eventual arrival at the Führermuseum. Other stolen pieces were on display at Goering's residences, and in holdings earmarked for his massive personal cache.

Responding to this impending crisis, the American Council of Learned Societies drew up lists and prepared maps displaying the most culturally significant and important monuments and artifacts across Europe. These pieces were priorities to be protected from destruction, if military necessity allowed, and safeguarded from looters.

**U.S. GIs recover stolen art hidden in Neuschwanstein Castle in Schwangau, Germany. Monuments Man Captain James Rorimer supervises. In addition to art, furniture, and other valuable objects, the Monuments Men also found Nazi card catalogues and documents detailing the items they seized from prominent French Jewish collectors such as the Rothschild family. Nazi records helped the MFAA officers in their efforts to return stolen works to their rightful owners. Source: NARA: RG 239-RC-14-5**

The Council, along with a group of Harvard professors and faculty, began to devise protection plans as the United States military planned an invasion of Europe. The proposal received approval from President Roosevelt in June of 1943, and the American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in War Areas (aka the Roberts Commission) was officially established in August.

The commission was charged to work as closely as possible with the US military, and special Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives (MFAA) officers – a new kind of military personnel -- began training for the front lines. Well over the age of most military men and women, these primarily American and British art experts were eager to begin their work, keenly aware that each passing day brought further destruction to the world's cultural heritage.

As the Monuments Men arrived in Italy and France, understaffed and with minimal budgets, they began to survey the damage to monuments and historic buildings. Their goal, as MFAA officer Frederick Hartt outlined, was "to reach all important artistic objects as rapidly as the progress of military options permitted, make a complete survey of the condition of the monuments and collections...and report at once on their findings."<sup>1</sup> Monuments Men needed to be resourceful and quick-thinking. Upon arriving at

their various destinations, Monuments Men officers coordinated initial repairs to ensure no further damage would occur to these culturally important structures and to prevent complete destruction.

MFAA officers also embarked upon an extraordinary treasure hunt to recover countless stolen works of art. The Nazi plunder of art was a meticulous and organized endeavor. The Monuments Men were set with the task of retracing Nazi footsteps in order to recover prized and priceless collections. In Paris, the Nazis used the Jeu de Paume, a small museum adjacent to the Louvre as the primary clearinghouse for art stolen from French private collections owned by Jewish families. Rose Valland, a quiet Jeu de Paume employee, was allowed to stay at her post after the museum was taken over. Throughout the French occupation, she secretly documented stolen works of art as they were processed and shipped out to the Reich. She later supplied these lists and her intimate knowledge of Nazi looting to MFAA officers after they arrived in Paris.



**MFAA officers discuss how to remove the large Ghent Altarpiece from the mine at Altaussee. Source: the National Archives and Records Administration.**

These lists aided the Monuments Men in tracking down the stolen art. As they moved with the advancing Allied forces across Germany, the Monuments Men discovered much of this cultural material carefully hidden in remote repositories, such as castles, countryside villas, and salt mines. One of the largest caches was discovered deep underground in a mine in Altaussee, Austria, where over 6,000 works were concealed until the end of the war. Upon their arrival, Monuments Men officers discovered the entrances to the mine had been blasted, and they feared the works secreted there might have been destroyed. They later found that only the entryways were damaged. Artwork and other objects stored deep below the ground were unharmed, but destruction from the blasts greatly hindered the process of removing objects from the mine. Maneuvering these rescued pieces through narrow passageways and out the mine shaft without sustaining additional damage proved to be one of the most daunting and challenging tasks faced by the MFAA.

Under the supervision of the MFAA officers, many of these artworks were returned to their rightful homes in the years following the war's end, both to museums and still-living private collectors. Damaged cultural landmarks, including Monte Cassino, the Campo Santo, and the Aachen Cathedral, were rebuilt. Thousands of artifacts were never claimed, however, and thousands of pieces could not be traced back to their original owners. Many Jewish art patrons and other collectors perished in the Holocaust, and the task of locating rightful heirs became – and remains – a complicated challenge.

Today, nearly seventy years later, many pieces with unclear provenance due to the events of WWII are in museum collections around the world. Although some museums and other organizations are taking steps to investigate rightful ownership and provide an open-access database of these materials to the public, more work needs to be done. And there are still missing artworks. Some great artistic treasures remain unaccounted for, and are perhaps still hidden in secret locations. The story of art during World War II is not yet over.

The heroic role the Monuments Men played during WWII also has great value for understanding the importance of taking protective actions during present and future armed conflicts around the world. For

more information about the Monuments Men and their efforts to safeguard cultural heritage, visit [www.monumentsmen.org](http://www.monumentsmen.org).

1 Hartt, Frederick. *Florentine Art Under Fire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949, page 6