

Is Art Worth a Life?

OBJECTIVE: The key question “Is art worth a life?” is a major theme in the film *The Monuments Men*. The men and women serving as Monuments Men Officers put themselves at risk to protect cultural buildings and artifacts throughout the war. The idea of giving up one’s life to save a work of art is thought-provoking and can be the catalyst for debate.

GRADE LEVEL: 7-12

COMMON CORE STANDARDS:

ELA Anchor Standards for Reading:

CCRA.R.7 Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

CCRA.R.9 Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Anchor Standards in Speaking and Listening:

CCRA.SL.1 Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCRA.SL.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

ELA Anchor Standards for Writing:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

ELA Anchor Standards for History/Social Studies

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

TIME REQUIREMENT: Classroom activity: 30 minutes.
Out of class time for research and a short period in class the following day for follow-up discussion of findings.

DIRECTIONS: The two main works of art that are followed throughout the film, the Ghent Altarpiece by Hubert and Jan Van Eyck and the Bruges Madonna by Michelangelo, are masterworks by two of the greatest artists of the Renaissance. The Monuments Men saved famous cultural treasures, including the great cathedrals of France, and works of art by Da Vinci, Raphael, and Rembrandt. In addition, they rescued countless archives of books, records, and manuscripts, as well as works by lesser and unknown artists, religious objects from churches and synagogues, and even people's household furnishings. Equal measure was given to all things cultural and personal.

1. Explain to students that they will take on the role of a Monuments Man or Woman and have to make a life or death decision based on a set of given circumstances. The scenario is one that was faced repeatedly by Monuments Men officers.
2. Divide the class into three or four groups and pass out the following scenario. Ask each group to read and discuss the handout, and to answer the accompanying questions.

Scenario:

It is early March 1945 and Allied forces are finally making headway – crossing over the Dutch border and taking German territories. You are assigned to an army unit moving into Cleves (Kleve), Germany, just across the border. Your unit enters the city following heavy aerial bombardment by Allied forces. As a Monuments Officer, you arrive on the heels of ground forces to inspect buildings and museums and to take an inventory of what has happened to cultural monuments. Once in the city, you find the roof of the 12th century cathedral is gone and historic works of art, including paintings, altarpiece sculptures and tapestries are still housed inside. The works run the risk of damage from the elements and possible destruction from the crumbling walls of the church. There are also still German soldiers around the city, in particular a number who are entrenched near the cathedral. Would you risk your life being shot or killed in a building's collapse to save and secure these treasures? Why or why not?

3. Give each group an opportunity to discuss and debate.
Then have each group report back to the class and discuss.

- Was there agreement in the decisions made by each group? If so, what were the reasons for the consensus?
- If decisions differed, what were the reasons for supporting their differing ideas?
- Is there a difference in the historical value of a work of art and its value to human culture? Are some works of art expendable while others have more value? How do we determine what is culturally valuable?
- What qualifying questions arose in the conversations? For example, did anyone want to know the value of the objects before making a decision about what risks they would take? Does an object's value determine whether it is worth a risk or not? Discuss points of view.
(Keep in mind that Monuments Officers gave equal value to all objects in their efforts to recover looted and damaged properties during the war.)

4. Next as a class, view the interview with real-life Monuments Man Bernard Taper. In this clip, Taper recounts a conversation he had with fellow Monuments Officer Stewart Leonard.

<http://youtu.be/l4foh3Qu-t4>

- What did you think of the argument Stewart Leonard made to Bernard Taper?
- Leonard's job as a bomb-disposal expert required him to put himself at risk each time he did that task. Was he specifically risking himself to save the Chartres Cathedral, or was he just doing his job?
- Do you agree with Leonard that in certain circumstances that it is worth the risk of a human life to save cultural treasures for the world and for future generations? Discuss why or why not.

5. Next divide the class roughly into three groups and assign each group one of the following Monuments Men to look up and research for discussion the following day. They will be required to write a half-page paper summary of the biography of their assigned officer and to include content relevant to the classroom discussion.

Ronald Edmund Balfour

<http://www.monumentsmenfoundation.org/the-heroes/the-monuments-men/balfour-maj.-ronald-edmund>

Walter J. "Hutch" Huchthausen

<http://www.monumentsmenfoundation.org/the-heroes/the-monuments-men/huchthausen-capt.-walter-j.>

Stewart Leonard

<http://www.monumentsmenfoundation.org/the-heroes/the-monuments-men/leonard-stewart>

Introductory discussion the following day:

6. Allow the students to begin by meeting as a group around each Monuments Man assigned. Have them discuss their findings and elect a spokesperson to report back to the class. Each of the three groups report back and discuss. (The scenario that everyone discussed was based on the events surrounding the death of Ronald Balfour who was actually removing a sculpture from Cleves Cathedral when he was killed by a shell. Huchthausen was killed in a battlefield. Shortly before he had been working to remove an altarpiece from a church in a German town. While Balfour and Huchthausen died in the line of duty, Leonard put himself at great risk to make safe again one of the world's great architectural landmarks, Chartres Cathedral in France.)

Chartres Cathedral <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/81>

- What are the circumstances surrounding the situations each of the three men found themselves in?
- Did they specifically set out to die or risk their lives to save works of art and artistic monuments?
- Based on the initial discussion and the information they gleaned about the Monuments Man they looked up, are there qualifying circumstances where an officer might find that they are suddenly faced with the decision to risk themselves to save an object that has greater meaning to society?

ASSESSMENT: Participation in group discussion and written homework assignment.

ENRICHMENT: Four Corner Debate

Another way of engaging students in conversation is using a four corner debate about the subject, "Is art worth a life?"

Divide the class into four groups. Each corner of the room will represent a different response to the question about the importance of protecting a country's art.

Corner 1: Fighting for Art is worth risking one's life.

Corner 2: I would fight for art if I had to.

Corner 3: I would fight passionately for other things, but not art. Art is important—but not worth risking a life.

Corner 4: No lofty idea is ever as important as a human life.

To help guide students, tape signs to the room's corners. Each sign will state one of the above positions. Direct students to stand in the one corner that reflects their individual opinions about the importance of protecting a country's art. Once students have chosen their stance, have them discuss as a group their arguments for their position. Have each group report back to the class and record the results. Conclude with a conversation based on the results.

This lesson was prepared by the Monuments Men Foundation educators.

<http://www.monumentsmenfoundation.org>

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



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 .

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.

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." ¹ 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. Image courtesy of 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.

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