

## Chapter 1

# In the Footsteps of Rose Valland

Today, any inquisitive user of the Internet can immediately find numerous references to Rose Valland. But in all of France, even with a navigation system, a driver will be out of luck trying to locate a street, an avenue, a boulevard, a cul-de-sac, or a central square in a large urban area that is named after Valland. However tourists visiting the small town of Saint-Étienne-de-Saint-Geoirs (population about two thousand), in the Isère department<sup>\*</sup>, may come upon the middle school named for Rose Valland. And they may notice a marker, installed in 2003 next to the town hall, naming the central square after her. The marker notes that Valland had been a Resistance fighter who contributed to the rescue of the French cultural heritage during World War II. Wandering through the local cemetery, a tourist may also come upon Valland's gravestone inscribed with the dates 1898–1980.

Rose Valland was the daughter of Francisque Valland (1864–1926), a modest mechanic who became a blacksmith, and of Rose Maria Viardin, his spouse. Rose Valland's given name was Rosa Antonia. As an adult, she rarely mentioned her childhood, and then only in passing. If villagers were asked about her, they may have mentioned that her father patronized the local bar after work. It was her mother who encouraged Rose to study hard even though she started school late due to poor health. Nevertheless, Rose showed surprising ambition and drive. She attended the Côte Saint-André elementary school, the Grenoble Teachers College from 1914 to 1918, and the Lyon Fine Arts Academy from 1919 to 1922. In 1922 she passed the entrance examination at the Paris Fine Arts Academy (École des Beaux-Arts) with flying colors. Thus began an impressive journey for the daughter of a blacksmith: from art historian to Resistance fighter to curator of the Louvre.

Throughout her life, Valland visited her hometown on a regular basis. The villagers remembered her as always being very reserved, which makes her exceptional life perhaps surprising. Valland was interred in the family vault next to her companion, Dr. Joyce Helen Heer (1917–1977). Besides sharing the vault, the only other “official” acknowledgment of the relationship between these two women is Valland’s posthumous publication of Joyce’s doctoral thesis, entitled “*La Personnalité de Pausanias*” (Pausanias’ Persona), which Joyce defended even though she was already retired. It was in 1979 that Valland arranged for a prestigious publisher, Les Belles Lettres, to publish Joyce's thesis. With Valland’s agreement, the preface by Joyce’s doctoral advisor, Fernand Robert, mentioned her name, thus bringing their union into the open. Robert’s preface, which is as touching as it is explicit, revealed in a few simple sentences the tight links that united the two women, and the love that bound them. He knew little about Joyce except that she was born in Liverpool, had been arrested by the Germans during the war, and had even been detained for some time. Valland’s heirs may still own some of

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<sup>\*</sup> A *département* is an administrative division of France

their correspondence, known to be extensive.

How can one explain why no French textbook, historical writing, or art history publication carries any mention of Valland, who, after World War II, became curator of the Louvre and was awarded the following distinctions: Fine Arts officer in the French Armed Forces, non-combatant rank of lieutenant colonel of the U.S. armed forces, officer of the French Legion of Honor, commander of Arts and Letters, and recipient of the French Resistance medal, the U.S. Medal of Freedom, and the German Order of Merit.

Nearly twenty years elapsed following her lonely death in September 1980 before some light was finally shed on this exceptional woman. A need was felt to better document the life of this quiet Resistance fighter whose actions contributed to saving a large part of French cultural heritage. Why did Valland not previously enjoy the public recognition granted to other Resistance fighters? Was it due to her lack of descendants, or to her natural discretion?

Several different reasons could account for Valland's lack of recognition. History tends to focus on "important men." Although Valland directly put her life in danger between 1940 and 1944, her surveillance of the Nazis at the Jeu de Paume Museum in Paris did not, properly speaking, save lives, only works of art. And history values the saving of lives over that of worldly goods.

Furthermore, because of her professional skills and her knowledge of art, Valland may well have been a "troublesome" presence to certain art dealers and a thorn in the side of some museum professionals. Mentioning Valland could have reopened controversies in the art world and called into question the ownership of some valuable pieces kept by the national museums. Even today, some two thousand paintings classified as "MNR" (Musées Nationaux – Récupération) have yet to be reunited with their rightful owners.

Approximately 60,000 works of art from French collections found their way into Germany and Austria as a result of looting or from transactions that may have been illegal. About 45,500 pieces were returned to the owners or their heirs; 15,000 more were sold by the French *Administration des Domaines* (National Assets Management Service). Some two thousand works of art could not be identified for restitution to their owners. These were exhibited at the Compiègne Museum during a four-year period after the war before being distributed to various other museums classified as "MNR", where they are deemed to be at the disposal of their rightful owners or their heirs. Today, the complete catalog of these works may be viewed on the Internet at <http://www.culture.gouv.fr/documentation/mnr/MnR-pres.htm>.

In 1996, the name of Rose Valland was first mentioned during a seminar on restitutions and spoliations held in the Louvre amphitheater in a lecture that summarized her crucial role. In 1999, a local association in her native village borrowed documents from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs archives and organized an exhibit that, although somewhat basic and iconoclastic from a museological standpoint, drew thousands of visitors through word of mouth and with the help of the local press. Roger Humbert, a former Resistance fighter and high-level official who had known Valland in Berlin between 1945 and 1949, and Lucie Aubrac, a famous Resistance fighter, gave two lectures that drew a large audience. In addition, the Matteoli Commission published a report in 2000 on the confiscation of Jewish property during World War II, which paid

homage to Valland's actions and led to her becoming somewhat better known.\*

The need to document Valland's life has been made more compelling by the public's growing interest in the history of the French Resistance while some of its active participants are still alive, and by the numerous archival documents available to historians awaiting more in-depth study. Why did Rose Valland, a quiet Resistance fighter whose actions contributed to saving part of the French cultural heritage, not enjoy the public recognition granted to other Resistance fighters? Is it due to her lack of descendants, to her natural sense of discretion?

As early as 1947, Jean Cassou provided an in-depth description of the "German plundering" of works of art and libraries belonging to French Jews. Valland shared her version of the facts in her 1961 memoir *Le Front de l'art*, which sold briskly and was out of print after only a few months. She described in detail the protection of the public collections from the important national museums (the Louvre among them) and documented precisely the Nazi looting of private collections that transited through the Jeu de Paume Museum. However, Valland devoted only two short chapters to the post-war period.

John Frankenheimer's 1964 movie *The Train* was loosely based on Valland's wartime experience. The French actress Suzanne Flon played Valland. The film was released on DVD in 2005 and was widely promoted by a large U.S. film distributor. This somewhat romanticized version of the numerous incredible ruses used to prevent the August 1944 departure of the last train filled with plundered works of art projected an image of Valland as the "mousy little spinster" of the Jeu de Paume Museum. French television viewers discovered Valland in a televised discussion following the showing of *The Train* on April 9, 1975. As was customary for the popular television program *Les Dossiers de l'écran* (Case File Discussions), a debate among experts, with Valland present, followed the movie. Television viewers were able to call in their questions directly during the debate, an advanced feature for that period. Viewers learned that Valland was a middle-aged woman who appeared to have contributed to the safekeeping of numerous works of art, although the debate itself paid little homage to the courage required for this form of resistance and focused instead on the looting that had been part of warfare throughout the ages. Napoleon was mentioned frequently. Valland shared her fears that many works looted during World War II would emerge on the art markets in the 1970s following a journey that would have been suspicious, to say the least. Valland spoke with eloquence in spite of a recurrent verbal tic, often ending her sentences with "isn't it?" Residents of the Isère department also had a chance to meet Valland through the interview she granted to the *Dauphiné libéré* daily newspaper in 1979.

Since her death in 1980, Valland has been attacked on a regular basis in later publications, such as the *Souvenirs de l'exode du Louvre* (Recollections of the Louvre Exodus), published by Germain Bazin in 1992 with the financial support of the Wildenstein Institute, and the *Souvenirs de Wildenstein, marchand d'art* (Recollections of Wildenstein, Art Dealer) by Daniel Wildenstein and Yves Stavrides (Plon, 1999). She has sometimes been accused of discrepancies in her narratives. Some even alleged that she had an affair with a forger shortly after the war. Without any proof, these and other

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\* This report is available online at <http://www.culture.gouv.fr/documentation/mnr/MnR-matteoli.htm>

attempts were made to cast doubts on her integrity.

In spite of all this slander, an association of volunteers and art lovers is honoring her memory. Could it be that the individuals who are trying to sully Valland's reputation are simply attempting to restore the reputation of a family business whose past is not devoid of blame or criticism? Actually, the hunt for the works of art that disappeared in 1940 or were acquired through various means (forced sales, pure and simple theft, et cetera) is currently in full swing. It has even become a specialized profession, at times lucrative. Trackers of "disappeared" paintings visit museums and attend auctions on behalf of the heirs of important collections.

Our journey in the footsteps of Valland is not designed to create controversy, rather it has a very different objective. Like the arguments of Serge Klarsfeld, among others, we deem it more crucial to honor the victims of Nazism and their history than to dwell on property rights claims. The heirs or beneficiaries of these collections are leading a legitimate fight, but the huge sums that are at stake create a distraction from the brave and disinterested actions of Valland, who risked her life to keep track of the works of art leaving the Jeu de Paume Museum. I simply wish to relate this extraordinary and unique act of resistance while pointing out that the Nazi lootings of the works of art were not random occurrences but were at the core of their lust for domination.