



For the Love of Art

How the Nazis Stole Europe's Art and What the United States Had to Say about It.

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During the Second World War, Nazi Germany took it upon themselves to loot and steal items of artistic, historic and cultural importance of the countries they occupied. In 1940, the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg für die Besetzten Gebiete (The Reichsleiter Rosenberg Institute for the Occupied Territories), abbreviated to ERR was formed and headed by Reichsleiter Alfred Rosenberg. The group was assigned to steal artistic and religious items that they deemed were Jewish. Most of these items were then sold at auction to raise money for the Third Reich, while others were burned. Meanwhile, Adolf Hitler created plans to build the Führer Museum as part of his larger Linz Project. By first purging the country of what he felt were degenerate works of art, Hitler would “cleanse” Germany, and replace the unworthy works with that of great artists such as Da Vinci and Raphael, which were systematically stolen by the ERR.

In 1942, Chief Justice Harlan F. Stone decided to do something about this artistic and cultural injustice. On December 8, Stone wrote a letter to President Franklin D. Roosevelt not as the Chief Justice, but instead as the Chairman Ex-officio of the Board of Trustees of the National Gallery of Art. Stone asked the President for his support in creating an organization functioning under the auspices of the Government, for the protection and conservation of works of art and of artistic or historic monuments and records in Europe, and to aid in salvaging and returning to, or compensating in kind, the lawful owners of such objects which have been appropriated by the Axis powers or by individuals acting with their authority or consent.

In this letter, Stone submitted a memorandum to President Roosevelt for his consideration and said that he “earnestly hope[d] that some measures may be taken for the formation of the Joint British and American Committee” (FRUS 1943, v.1, 469). The memorandum suggested that the President appoint a “Committee to be known as the American Committee for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in Europe”. The purpose of the committee would be to “aid in the conservation of artistic and historic monuments in Europe and the establishment of machinery to return to the rightful owners works of art and historic documents appropriated by the Axis Powers” (FRUS 1943, v.1, 470). The suggested functions of the committee, as deemed by Stone, were that during the war, the committee would work with branches of the military (including all of the Allied forces) and “compile, through the assistance of refugee historians of art and librarians, lists of property appropriated by the Axis”. During the time of Armistice, the committee should “urge that the Armistice terms include the restitution of the public property appropriated by the Axis Powers” and that restitution be paid for

unreturned, unfound, destroyed or damaged objects (FRUS 1943, v.1, 471-471).

In spring of 1943, the President showed interest in Stone's proposal, but requested that it be given "further study", however, he felt that the adoption of the proposal "might have a moral effect of positive advantage to the Allied cause" (FRUS 1943, v.1, 472). Additionally, the governments of the Allies had to be informed, interested and willing to participate in the project.

On the military side of things, Admiral William D. Leahy, the Chief of Staff to the Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy had reservations and made no promises, desiring that the process to recover these artifacts have no interference with military operations (FRUS 1943, v.1, 475).

The committee was officially approved by President Roosevelt in the spring of 1943 and announced that August. In October, the official members for the newly created American Commission for the Preservation and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in Europe (also known as the Roberts Commission) were selected. Named Chairman, was Associate Justice Owen J. Roberts of the United States Supreme Court. Vice-Chairman was David E. Finley, the Director of the National Gallery of Art. Secretary-Treasurer was Huntington Cairns, the Secretary-Treasurer and General Council of the National Gallery of Art. Other members included Herbert H. Lehman, Archibald MacLeish, the librarian of Congress, and Dr. William Bell Dinsmoor, the President of the Archeological Institute of America. The offices for the Commission were located at the National Gallery of Art at Washington and functioned in "close contact with the War Department and the State Department as well as civilian agencies" (FRUS 1943, v.1, 482).

The Roberts Commission created guidelines for the process of deeming what "works of art" were exactly. This was to include objects of cultural value, and included the following: churches, palaces, chateaux, houses, monuments (including the remains of ancient structures, and "open-air works of art, such as fountains, et cetera"), cultural institutions "which include museums, university buildings, libraries, archives, and the like", sculptures, paintings and miniatures, furniture, arms and armor, glass, pottery, porcelain, jewelry and metal work, textiles, prints, drawings, water colors, pastels, manuscripts, and rare books (FRUS 1944, v.2, 1033). Secondly, steps were taken to enforce the "freezing" of the items in question; this involved the forbidding of "sale, movement, concealment or destruction of any work of art or object of scientific or historical importance" (FRUS 1944, v.2, 1046). After an extensive list was made, each item suspected of being or known to be in the hands of the Nazis required a report on the subject. These reports were assigned the grade of "Secret" and included specific details

about the piece, including the title, date or period, medium, size, known photographs as well as known provenance.

Under the guidelines created, special aerial maps were created for bombers as to best avoid destroying buildings of importance. One successful mission was that of the bombings of the Florence rail yards. Not one building pertaining to historical or artistic importance was damaged by Allied bombings. The same was not true however for the Camposanto monastery in Pisa, which was all but destroyed. The Camposanto suffered so much damaged that to this day cleaning and restoration is still on going.

Additionally, a special section was formed at the School of Military Government with the notion of training select officers in the Special Branch of service to be attached to army staffs to give information regarding the objects to the commanding officers. This special branch was called the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives organization. The men of this organization were sent into the field to help locate the stolen works and return them to their rightful owners and were given the nickname of the Monument Men. One member, Kenneth Lindsay, recalled the experience as being “exhilarating” and was pleased that “finally we can do something positive”. Many of the paintings were stored in salt mines across Germany. Dr. Leonard Malmut of the 11th Armed Division said going through the salt mines reminded him of “Alice following the rabbit down the rabbit hole into Wonderland”. For many of the paintings that were recovered, they were stored in one of the few buildings that remained standing after heavy bombing in Munich, this building was ironically, the Nazi Headquarters. This building became the central collecting point, and at one point stored 27 Rembrandts.

In 1945, the Commission determined that Germany would face “unlimited obligation...to restore identifiable looting works of art, books, archives, and other cultural treasures” and that “looted property should be returned in the condition in which it was found” if not, Germany would pay restitution (FRUS 1945, v.2, 935). If items were not returned or recovered, Germany had “an obligation...to replace such articles by a comparable work of art or cultural treasure from their own public or private collections” (FRUS 1945, v.2, 934), however, “works of art and objects of artistic and historic value used in connection with religious ceremonies or edifices of any faith which have proved ecclesiastical ownership prior to 1938” would not be accepted (FRUS 1945, v.2, 944).

By September of 1945, the United States announced its holdings of “certain art objects not readily identifiable as looted property with the sole intention of keeping such treasures safe and in trust [and] the [U.S. Government] will retain these objects of art in its possession only as long as will be necessary to insure their physical

safety or until such time as it may be possible to determine the rightful owners” (FRUS 1945, v.2, 948). The first pieces returned were ones of religious significance, such as the Holy Right Hand of St. Stephen, which was returned to Budapest in late summer. It was also mentioned that “imperial regalia” should not be returned to Hungary or Austria (FRUS 1945, v.2, 950).

The United States expressed anticipation that “persons having in their possession enemy-owned and stolen art objects [would] attempt to conceal them for a number of years in the hope that public and official interest and alertness will subside with the lapse of time (FRUS 1945, v.2, 952). This was an accurate anticipation because even today, over sixty years later, pieces are still missing, the most famous of which is Raphael’s “Portrait of a Young Man” and Jewish families still long to find their stolen treasures, and efforts are still underway have them returned.