

The MFAA in World War II

by Amanda Romero

World War II is considered to be one of the largest and bloodiest conflicts in the history of mankind. With wartime casualties hitting approximately 80 million people, it's easy to see why it is rightly considered so.¹ However when tallying up the human cost of war, it is easy to forget the cultural and historical losses as well as the sacrifices certain men took in order to preserve artifacts and buildings important to a nation's cultural heritage. This group, the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives (MFAA) men also faced many challenges throughout the war, but their quick and decisive action as well as prewar experience, was often the saving grace for many of the cultural properties they encountered. As members of the MFAA section, four men, George L. Stout, James Rorimer, Robert Posey, and Frederick Hartt were able to find, protect and preserve works of art, historical documents and buildings from wartime damages and looting in any way they could, having an immense impact on the cultural heritage of many European Nations for years to come.

The Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives (MFAA) section was established in 1943 under the Civil Affairs and Military Government Divisions of the Allied Armies.² The American run organization recruited 185 men and women from more than nineteen different countries, but only had about thirty-five members on duty at the height of operations.³ Only two members of the MFAA were killed in the line of duty during the entirety of the war, Major Ronald Balfour (British) and Captain Walter J. Hutchthausen (American). The MFAA spent a majority of the war searching Europe for cultural treasures looted by the Nazi government, and assessing damage

¹ "Estimated War Dead World War II," n.d, *War Chronicle*, March 18 2014.

² Molly Bompane, "The Art of War and the War of Art," U.S. Army Military History Institute, June 16, 2010, accessed April 17, 2014, http://www.army.mil/article/40945/The_Art_of_War_and_the_War_of_Art/

³ Charles J. Kunzleman, "Some Trials, Tribulations, and Successes of the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives Teams in the European Theatre During WWII," *Military Affairs* 52, no. 2 (April 1988): 56-60.

done to cultural properties that could not be moved, such as churches and other buildings. ⁴

According to the Army's Historical Archives, the duty of a MFAA member included but was not limited to:

Record(ing) and assess(ing) war damage suffered by historic monuments prior to our occupation; take or advise the steps necessary to prevent further deterioration; supervise and pass estimates for repairs. Prevent damage by troops; affix notices, close buildings or procure guards; check billeting; interest the troops by lectures or otherwise; and investigate charges of wanton damage brought against the Allied troops and report proved cases. Prevent the looting, sale or removal of objects of art. Establish the fact of looting by enemy troops.⁵

Even though the position required the MFAA members to spend a vast majority of time in the field, attending to buildings, statues or artwork, a large part of the job was basic bureaucracy, education of Allied troops, and trust building with the citizens of a belligerent nation. George L. Stout, a co-founder of the MFAA once wrote:

In areas torn by bombardment and by fire, are monuments cherished by the people of those countryside's or towns: churches, shrines, statues, pictures, many kinds of works. Some may be destroyed; some damaged. All risk further injury, looting or destruction. In areas of operation also, monuments now unknown may be accidentally revealed.⁶

A World War I veteran and an art conservationist at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum, George L. Stout was highly important to the founding of the MFAA. Stout also researched several different methods of chemical conservation, thus initiating a long line of studies of art conservation

⁴ Treasures included but were not limited to; books, furniture, paintings, jewelry, sketches, watercolors, historical archives, photographs, sculptures, tapestries and even items like silverware and china.

⁵ "Civil Affairs : Soldiers Become Governors," *The Protection of Historical Monuments and Art Treasures*, Center of Military History, February 18, 2004.

⁶ George L. Stout to William George Constable, December 1942, American Art Research Collections, Smithsonian Institution, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/images/detail/george-stout-draft-protection-monuments-16208>.

revolving around rudiments, degradation, and reparations.⁷ During the beginning of the Second World War, Stout became informed that many European museums were evacuating and storing their collections, preparing for an immediate attack from Nazi armies. This, doubled with the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 caused a great deal of paranoia among museum officials and American's in general. Stout began giving seminars and passing out informative leaflets to American Museum officials, on proper safeguarding techniques for their art collections.⁸ He also encouraged them to safely store more valuable pieces, while displaying those of lesser importance.

Stout also understood the importance of diplomatic relations during and post wartime, and the damage that propaganda can cause. He states in a proposal written to the United States Government, over the importance of the Preservation of Monuments, "To safeguard these things [cultural properties] will not affect the course of battles, but it will affect the relations of invading armies with the peoples whose lands they occupy and it will effect to the relationship between those peoples and the governments of the United Nations."⁹

An obvious beginning for the MFAA, as well as one of the greatest challenges faced was of course, finding the items that were carefully 'relocated' by the Nazis. One specific group appointed by Nazi leaders to head up the confiscation of artistic property was called the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (referred to as the ERR), and was known to target civilians and museums alike.¹⁰ The ERR looted books, artwork, archives, as well as furniture, silverware and anything of value owned in German occupied countries.¹¹ Luckily, throughout their operation which lasted until 1944, they took very tedious records, which were of great help to the MFAA when once German occupied territories were reclaimed by the Allied

⁷ "The Monuments Men: Rescuing art from the Nazis," *Harvard Magazine*, January - February 2010, accessed April 2, 2014, <http://harvardmagazine.com/2010/01/monuments-men-rescuing-art-stolen-by-nazis>.

⁸ "George Stout," Monuments Men Foundation, 18 March 2014, <<http://www.monumentsmenfoundation.org/the-heroes/the-monuments-men/stout-lt.-cdr.-george-l.-usnr>>.

⁹ George L. Stout, *George L. Stout to William George Constable*, December 1942.

¹⁰ Transcript of Hitler's orders to the Rosenberg Taskforce to seize cultural goods of value, translated from German to English, 1940 and 1942, James J. Roimer papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹¹ *Cultural Plunder by the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg: Database of Art Objects at the Jeu de Paume*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 10 May 2015, <<http://www.errproject.org/jeudepaume/about/err.php>>.

Armies.¹² It is estimated that the ERR collected roughly 40,000 pieces of assorted goods and scattered them throughout salt mines in Germany.¹³ The stolen treasures were often thrown into crates, rolled up without the frames, and hastily taken to the depositories. The mines used for storage maintained a consistent temperature and humidity that was idyllic for the time worn masterpieces. The mines were also safe from American bombers, being deep underground and concealed within the area's mountains.¹⁴ The largest mine used was the Altaussee salt mine, and was stumbled upon by the American MFAA officer, Robert Posey. The mine contained approximately 12,000 pieces of artwork that had been looted for the sole purpose of being placed in a Nazi heritage museum, which would have been the German equivalent of the Louvre.¹⁵

Robert Kelly Posey originally enlisted in 1942, and worked in Northern Canada building airstrips. He eventually ended up in Normandy, right after D-day and traveled to the front line of Patton's Third Army. He was assigned an assistant, Pfc. Lincoln Kirstein, in early 1945. Kirstein was a writer and founder of the School of American Ballet, and worked diligently with Posey to expand the knowledge of those men stationed alongside them.

Education of the allied troops was exceedingly important part of the Monuments Fine Arts, and Archives men. Posey and Kirstein worked together and published a series of army pamphlets discussing basic information on cultural pieces located in the towns of Nancy, Luxembourg, Metz and Trier, as well as a short tidbit on the historical significance and short interesting facts about the town. The pamphlets were extremely popular and helped in the conservations efforts greatly, because allied infantrymen were more likely to be more cautious with their actions when they understood the importance of the area around them.¹⁶

The Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives also produced a series of maps for the Army Air force, which designated historical as well as artistic monuments that were important to a region and might be threatened by

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Kunzelman, "Some Trials, Tribulations, and Successes," 56-60.

¹⁴ "Military Government Weekly Information Bulletin No. 15," November 3, 1945, Thomas Carr Howe papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹⁵ Jim Morrison, "The True Story of the Monuments Men," *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 7, 2014, accessed April 21, 2014, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/true-story-monuments-men-180949569/>.

¹⁶ "Robert Kelley Posey," The Monuments Men Foundation, March 18, 2014,

<www.monumentsmenfoundation.org/the-heros/the-monuments-men/posey-capt.-robert>.

military operations.¹⁷ All of these efforts combined allowed for the damages done to artwork or cultural properties by American hands to be severely lessened and subsequently lightened the load of the understaffed Monuments Men as well.

Posey was also known for another significant discovery, while he was the leading MFAA officer in the Third Army. On the border of Luxembourg and France, he was surveying an eleventh century church when he stumbled upon the *Annunciation*, a twelfth century painting, which had been hidden away for centuries.¹⁸

One of the better known facts about many of the men and women recruited for the MFAA was that they were not from a military background but rather from a cultural one. Due to this many of the MFAA members had trouble adjusting to the Military lifestyle, adding more to their daily struggles. Ralph W. Hammett, wrote about dealing with other military men as a MFAA member during wartime. He stated:

Occasionally officers [non MFAA members] were found who were unwilling to take the responsibility for protection of valuable works of art; these were forced to move on. Sometimes our soldiers were not warned of the value of their surroundings in time; and in spite of directives and orders, they often installed themselves first and consulted afterwards.¹⁹

Although they were a section of the United States Army, many of the MFAA members had issues getting other military members to assist in their operations. This was mainly due to a lack of ranking and rare promotions to higher positions within the military.²⁰

Captain James J. Rorimer an extremely prominent man in the art world and made a huge impact on the restitution of artworks after the war. Rorimer was responsible for the creation of the Cloisters, a collection belonging to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which focuses on art and architecture in Medieval Europe. He was drafted in 1943 as a private into the United States Army and was selected to become a member of the MFAA in 1944. His first deployment was to Normandy to help assess damage on French monuments there, before he was sent to Paris to continue his work.

¹⁷ Ronald Schaffer, *Wings of Judgement: American Bombing in World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 48-53.

¹⁸ Martin Duberman, *The Worlds of Lincoln Kirstein* (New York: Random House, 2007).

¹⁹ Ralph W. Hammett, "Comzone and the Protection of Monuments in Northwest Europe," *College Art Journal* 5, no. 2 (Jan 1946): 123-126.

²⁰ Kunzelman, "Some Trials, Tribulations, and Successes," 56-60.

In Paris, he focused largely on relocating artworks looted previously from the Louvre and from private citizens by the ERR. He was sent to the western front, with the Seventh Army in 1945 and was able to discover, with the help of a member of the French resistance, Rose Valland. A “rugged, enthusiastic, painstaking, deliberate scholar was an assistant at the Jeu de Paume when the Germans arrived and turned the building into the central clearing house for the finest of the confiscated works of art... [She] had risked her life working with the French Resistance. She had not confided her most valued information to anyone, including the French.”²¹ She worked at the Jeu De Paume in Paris during the war and took down secret records of artwork being removed from the museum. By using her notes and records, Rorimer was able to track down art depositories all throughout Germany and Austria. Immediately after the war he also helped establish the Munich Collecting point, which was responsible for processing, preserving and restituting thousands upon thousands of pieces artwork.²²

Some examples of pieces that were found in one of the salt mines discovered by Rorimer is *The Bruges Madonna*, a piece that holds the distinction of being the only piece of art created by Michelangelo having left Italy during his lifetime (1475 – 1564), and the *Ghent Altarpiece*, a religious piece of artwork that is immensely detailed and is often considered the first oil paint masterpiece.²³ The MFAA would look past the monetary value of an item and see the historical and cultural significance that it held to a nation. These artworks also allow for communities and nations to have a sense of unity as well as national pride. Stout points out, “[t]hese monuments are not merely pretty things, not merely valued sign of man’s creative power. They are expressions of faith and they stand for man’s struggle to relate himself to his past and his God.”²⁴ It is key to draw attention to these records of ‘man’s struggle’ for they are, significant and “bear witness that these things belong not only to a particular people but also to the heritage of mankind.”²⁵

Propaganda was also fairly large problem that arose while working in the field. In a letter written to his wife, Margaret Stout, Stout describes encountering German citizens who were hidden within the Siegen mines.²⁶

²¹ James Rorimer's pre-1950 draft of his memoir *Survival: The Salvage and Protection of Art in War*, James J. Rorimer papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

²² “James J. Rorimer,” The Monuments Men Foundation, March 20, 2014.

<www.monumentsmenfoundation.org/the-heroes/the-monuments-men/torimer-lt-cdr>.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ George L. Stout, *George L. Stout to William George Constable*, December 1942.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.* A salt mine used as a German art depository.

He writes:

We were the first American's they had seen. They had no doubt been told that we were savages. The pale grimy faces caught up in flashlights were full of fear and hate... ahead of us was the fearful word halfway [whispered] – "Amerikaner". That was the strange part of this occurrence, the impact of hate and fear in hundreds of hearts close about us and we were the targets of it all.²⁷

The Italian government, for example, had a fairly efficient propaganda machine, which pointedly accused the Allies of not respecting the rich cultural ruins of ancient Rome, and defacing museum properties. Italian citizens were also told that the Allies were looting Italian artwork and offering the best and most valuable pieces to Generals for their personal collections.²⁸

This all created a large amount of uneasiness, trust issues, and fear geared towards the American soldiers, which in turn caused a steady resistance from the civilian population. One MFAA man compared the Northern and Southern Italian civilians in a letter home to his wife, "The people look different.... up north they have not been starved, but they have been so filled with propaganda.....that it takes several days before they will be friendly and smile."²⁹ Sumner Mck. Crosby, an art professor at Yale and an expert on medieval art and architecture, knew that the MFAA would be able to disprove the propaganda and wrote in response to all the publicity, "It will, nevertheless, be counteracted to a large degree by the action of the American Commission, in supplying the Army and Navy with factual information that will assist in the preservation of cultural monuments during the actual fighting and in their restoration or restitution in the post war world."³⁰

It is crucial to remember that a MFAA's member duties in handling the cultural property of a region would often be on the frontlines or in a war

²⁷ George L. Stout to Margaret Hayes Stout, April 4, 1945, Archives of American Art Research Collections, Smithsonian Institution, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/images/detail/george-stout-letter-to-his-wife-margaret-stout-16217>.

²⁸ Laurie W. Rush, "Cultural Property Protection as a Force Multiplier in Stability Operations," *Military Review* (March- April 2012): 36-43.

²⁹ Ilaria Dagnini Brey, *The Venus Fixers: The Remarkable Story of the Allied Soldiers Who Saved Italy's Art during World War II* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009).

³⁰ Sumner Mck. Crosby, "The Protection of Artistic Monuments in Europe," *College Art Journal* 3, no. 3 (March 1944): 109 - 113.

zone. Amongst a stream of shells and artillery blasts, is where you often found these men quickly and effectively trying to save a monument. Frederick Hartt was a Lieutenant in the Fifth Army, who was a gentleman scholar, with his expertise being mostly in Italian Renaissance art. He worked for the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives Men that was deployed to Italy, focusing a majority of his time in Florence.³¹ He was later transferred to Austria and “like all MFAA personnel. He worked tirelessly to locate and salvage cultural monuments at every location he visited.”³²

In his 1949 war memoir, *Florentine Art Under Fire*, Hartt discusses his stationing in Florence as a MFAA member. He describes a particularly rough day in August 1944 saying that, “The city was caught between two opposing armies, and for all we knew might be ground to bits before the deadlock was broken. All day long over Florence the Allied shells whistled from guns situated just outside the city, bombarding the German positions around Fiesole and the city shook to the rumble of the Long Toms.”³³ The report of the American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in War Areas sums up the MFAA war experience stating, “The successful activities of these few men is out of all proportion to their number and their position within the military machine. The task was nothing less than to preserve as much as they could of man’s creative past.”³⁴ The MFAA worked everywhere from private museums in France, to war ravaged Florence, relying on their prewar experiences in the art world and their quick and decisive actions in order to preserve and protect many of Europe’s cultural treasures, which had an immense impact of the cultural heritage of many European Nations for years to come.

³¹ The branch stationed in Italy is often referred to as the Venus Fixers

³² “Frederick Hartt,” The Monuments Men Foundation, March 14, 2014.

<www.monumentsmenfoundation.org/the-heroes/the-monuments-men/frederick-hartt>.

³³ Frederick Hartt, *Florentine Art Under Fire* (Princeton, New Jersey: University Press at Princeton, 1949).

³⁴ “The Monuments Men and the National Gallery of Art,” National Gallery of Art, September 1, 2014, accessed May 19, 2015, <<http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/features/monuments-men.html>>.