

Release Date: December 20, 2013

Monuments Men and the National Gallery of Art: The Inside Story



David Finley in his office at the National Gallery of Art. Finley was director of the Gallery from 1938-1956, and vice chairman of the Roberts Commission.

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Gallery Archives

Washington, DC—The officers who served in the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives (MFAA) program rescued masterpieces from Nazi thieves during the chaos of liberation. Prior to the war, six of these officers were associated with the National Gallery of Art in Washington, and in later years three held important positions at the museum. Perhaps more important, even before the MFAA operation was established, the Gallery was the center of lobbying efforts to create such a program and later, in association with the Roberts Commission, worked tirelessly to support MFAA activities in the field.

"The Gallery is proud to have played such an integral role in the story of these real-life Monuments Men," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "These men—and women—worked to protect Europe's cultural heritage at the height of World War II, ensuring its safety in the aftermath and returning works, when possible, to their rightful owners once peace and security were restored."

From February 11 to September 1, 2014, the Gallery will showcase *The Monuments Men and the National Gallery of Art: Behind the History*, an archival display featuring World War II-era photographs, documents, and memorabilia, many never before exhibited. On view in the West Building Art Information Room, the display will demonstrate the seminal role the National Gallery of Art played in the creation of the MFAA, the Roberts Commission, and the experiences of real-life MFAA officers.

On March 16 at 2:00 p.m., the Gallery will host the lecture *The Inside Story: The Monuments Men and the National Gallery of Art* detailing its relationship with the Monuments Men of the MFAA. Speakers will include Maygene Daniels, chief of Gallery Archives; Gregory Most, the Gallery's chief of library image collections; and Lynn H. Nicholas, author of *The Rape of Europa: The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War*. Faya Causey, head of the academic programs department, will moderate. The event is free and open to the

AVAILABLE PRESS IMAGES

[Order Press Images](#)

To order publicity images: Click on the link above and designate your desired images using the checkbox below each thumbnail. Please include your name and contact information, press affiliation, deadline for receiving images, the date of publication, and a brief description of the kind of press coverage planned.

PRESS KIT

[Press Release](#)

ONLINE RESOURCES

[Monuments Officers at the NGA: Introduction](#)

[List of Officers](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Related Links](#)

PRESS CONTACTS

Emily Bond
(202) 842-6598
e-bond@nga.gov

Chief Press Officer
Deborah Ziska
ds-ziska@nga.gov
(202) 842-6353

public and the audience is invited to participate in an open discussion afterwards.

The Monuments Men Film: A Story about Real-Life Heroes

The film *The Monuments Men*, based on Robert M. Edsel's book *The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History*, dramatizes the efforts and successes of an unlikely group of aesthetes in uniform. In peacetime, many were art historians, curators, archivists, and librarians who staffed cultural institutions such as National Gallery of Art, which was in its infancy when the war broke out.

The Gallery sent its most fragile and irreplaceable objects to Biltmore House in Asheville, North Carolina less than a year after it opened. They remained there until 1944. Meanwhile, the National Gallery in London had long since stripped its walls and secured its most important works in Welsh coal mines. An exhibition of late 18th and 19th century French masterpieces organized by the Louvre was left stranded in South America; through the efforts of Walter Heil, director of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, the show was resuscitated for a tour of museums in the United States, including the National Gallery of Art, where the collection remained from 1942 until the end of the war.

Troubles in Europe left the cultural communities in both the United States and abroad disquieted at best, panicked at worst. Amid the air of uncertainty and uproar that engulfed academics, artists, historians, and museum professionals alike, the American Defense—Harvard Group—established by university faculty and personnel—began working with the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) to devise plans for protecting cultural property in Europe. Gallery Director David Finley and Chief Justice and Gallery Chairman Harlan F. Stone became the groups' spokesmen in Washington, an advocacy that ultimately led to the formation of a government organization to protect and conserve works of art and other cultural treasures during the war.

In December 1942, Stone took their proposition to President Franklin D. Roosevelt who, in turn, created the American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in Europe. Later the Commission's scope was expanded to include all war areas. He appointed Supreme Court Justice Owen J. Roberts as chairman; hence, the new group became known as the Roberts Commission.

Behind the Scenes: The Roberts Commission at the National Gallery of Art

Throughout the war, the Gallery provided offices and staff for the Roberts Commission and was deeply involved in its activities: Finley served as vice-chairman and de facto head; the Gallery's Secretary and General Counsel Huntington Cairns was secretary; Chief Curator (and Finley's eventual successor as director) John Walker was a special advisor.

In its nascent days, the Commission sought to formalize the MFAA program within the War Department and to recommend would-be Monuments Men. Later the Commission sought to feed information to military strategists, including the locations of churches with spires tall enough to imperil Allied bombers and targets that should be spared because of their cultural importance.

True stories from the Frontline: Lieutenant Charles P. Parkhurst and WAC Captain Edith Standen

The MFAA's officers bravely followed frontline troops into war zones. Among them were Lt. Charles P. Parkhurst, Jr., the Gallery's former registrar and eventual assistant director, and Women's Army Corps (WAC) Capt. Edith Standen, secretary to the Widener Collection, the great gift of donor Joseph P. Widener that had only recently been installed in the museum's galleries.

"The finding [of looted art] was either easy or accidental," Parkhurst told a Gallery oral historian 45 years after his service in the MFAA. "Usually we had clues from shippers, from local residents who said, 'well, there's something funny about that castle.'"

Chasing one such rumor, Parkhurst happened upon a full-sized cast of Rodin's *Burghers of Calais* (1884–95), which German soldiers en route to Baden had been forced to abandon on a

mountainside. Parkhurst continued up the mountain to the castle at its peak and found room upon room of plundered art. "The owner of the castle gave me a cup of tea and a list of the objects. [He] said 'I've been wondering how long it would take you guys to get here!'"

For her part, Edith Standen dug up an antique bronze cannon with her own bare hands. The Nazis had taken the priceless mortar from Paris—where it had been since Napoleon captured it more than a century before—and buried it in Stuttgart shortly before the Allies arrived. "I was delighted to [have been] able to give the cannon back," she later said, though the gesture was tinged with controversy. Some felt that the cannon should remain in Stuttgart because that was where it had been cast in the late 16th century. "Of course [the idea] was rubbish," she said. "It had been taken from the Musée de l'Armée. It went back to the Musée de l'Armée."

Similar disputes followed, particularly in the wake of the War Department's decision to send 202 masterpieces from Berlin museums to the National Gallery of Art for safekeeping. The paintings included works by Rembrandt, Rubens, Tintoretto, El Greco, Daumier, and Botticelli. Amid murmurings that the Gallery was claiming these masterpieces as the spoils of war, Finley conferred with Stone, who approved the measure. "If the government asks us to take care of these paintings," he said. "We must do it. It is a duty."

The 202—as the Berlin paintings were popularly called—arrived in Washington in 1945 under military escort and remained there until 1948. The Gallery put the 202 on view with very little ceremony, but within hours, visitors flooded in. For 40 days, the line often wrapped around the block. The exhibition drew in 964,970 people, an unprecedented number at the time. Everyone, it seemed, was talking about these works or trying to catch a glimpse, from President Harry S. Truman, who dropped in twice, to Clara Bryant Ford (the wife of Henry Ford) and John D. Rockefeller. All 202 works were returned to Germany: the most fragile paintings went directly back, while the others were sent on a tour of a dozen cities first.

A Continuing Legacy

The Roberts Commission also worked with the Office of Strategic Services to create a special unit to investigate and document Nazi art appropriation. Just as Hitler's officers took meticulous pains to record their own wartime activities, MFAA officers and the Roberts Commission collected archival records of Nazi acts of aggression and Allied efforts to protect and return stolen art.

From its first meeting in August 1943 to its last in June 1946, the Roberts Commission upheld the spirit of the National Gallery of Art's mission and its founding benefactor, Andrew W. Mellon, who had funded construction of the West Building, donated his personal collection, and created a sizeable endowment to secure the Gallery's future. As Roosevelt so eloquently said upon accepting Mellon's gift to the nation:

"Great works of art...belong so obviously to all who love them—they are so clearly the property not of their single owners but of all men everywhere. The true collectors are the collectors who understand this—the collectors of great paintings who feel that they can never truly own, but only gather and preserve for all who love them, the treasures that they have found."

General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets at Constitution Avenue NW, and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. With the exception of the atrium and library, the galleries in the East Building will remain closed for approximately three years for Master Facilities Plan and renovations. For specific updates on gallery closings, visit <http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/modern-art-during-renovation.html>.

For information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the Gallery's Web site at www.nga.gov. Follow the Gallery on Facebook at www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt and on Twitter at www.twitter.com/ngadc.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

For additional press information please call or send inquiries to:

Press Office
National Gallery of Art
2000B South Club Drive
Landover, MD 20785
phone: (202) 842-6353
e-mail: pressinfo@nga.gov

Deborah Ziska
Chief of Press and Public Information
(202) 842-6353
ds-ziska@nga.gov

If you are a member of the press and would like to be added to our press list, [click here](#).

Subscribe to Our Free E-mail Newsletters

Stay up to date with the National Gallery of Art by [subscribing to our free e-mail newsletters](#): Web, educators, family programs, fellowships/internships, films, lectures, music programs, and teen programs. Select as many updates as you wish to receive. To edit your subscriber information, please go to our [subscription management page](#).

[About](#) | [Opportunities](#) | [Press](#) | [NGA Images](#) | [Newsletters](#) | [Notices](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Audio/Video](#)