

**PRESERVING THE PAST:
WHAT WILL BE OUR LEGACY?**

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World War II, the most destructive conflict in history, proved an unprecedented test of mankind's desire to preserve its most venerated artistic and cultural treasures for future generations. What then will be said seventy years from now about how we responded to the challenge of protecting our artistic and cultural inheritance today? Will future generations reflect on our efforts with pride, as we do those who preserved civilization's cultural heritage during World War II, or will they wonder what we were thinking as we watched ISIS, Al Qaeda, and others systematically loot and pulverize treasures of our ancient world?

Let's begin by opening the report card on preservation efforts of the past. The first leader to make the wartime protection of works of art a priority was President Lincoln. Precisely eighty years later, another American president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, went even further by approving plans that lead to the creation of the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives section and a group of soldier-scholars known as the Monuments Men. But no leader demonstrated greater concern and respect for cultural treasures during war, and after, than General Dwight D. Eisenhower.

In December 1943, when the effort of a handful of Monuments officers to protect the enumerable cultural treasures of Sicily and southern Italy was failing, Eisenhower issued an order that would change the face of war. Consider the words of this soldier, schooled in the science of destruction:

“Today we are fighting in a country which has contributed a great deal to our cultural inheritance, a country rich in monuments which by their creation helped and now in their old age illustrate the growth of civilization which is ours. We are bound to respect those monuments so far as war allows.”

Eisenhower’s order not only endorsed the Monuments Men and their mission, it created a shared burden for the protection of cultural treasures among his commanders and troops. Eisenhower issued a similar order in England two weeks before the D-Day landings at Normandy.

At war’s end, in a break with conquerors past, the policy of the Western Allied nations stated that all looted objects would be returned to the countries from which they had been taken. The discovery of thousands of mines and castles filled with works of art and other cultural treasures underscored the magnitude of the challenge that lay ahead. Having inspected one of these mines, Eisenhower knew that the Monuments Men would need time to sort through the hundreds of thousands of items. He began by ordering the immediate restitution of the most high profile object taken from each of the lead alliance nations. Delivery of the Ghent Altarpiece to Belgium began what would be an ongoing rotation of returned masterpieces. Eisenhower’s order bought much needed time for the Monuments Men to identify and return what in the end totaled nearly four million stolen objects. Less well known is their custodial role safeguarding almost one million works of art that belonged to German museums and individuals, all of which was returned or turned over to the newly formed Federal Republic of Germany in 1951.

In the years that followed the end of the war, General Eisenhower received many awards including an Honorary Fellowship from the trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Eisenhower gave a remarkable speech on that 2nd day of April in 1946, stating, *“It is our privilege to pass on to the coming*

centuries treasures of past ages.” He could have used the word “duty,” or “obligation,” and while those words certainly describe one reason for Eisenhower’s attention to cultural treasures during World War II, they fall short of capturing the fullness of his feelings. Eisenhower instead chose the word “privilege,” which is commonly defined as “a special opportunity to do something that makes you proud.”

390,000 American men and women lost their lives during World War II. 8,301 are buried at the Netherlands-American Cemetery in Margraten, Holland. I want to focus on just one: Monuments Man Walter Huchthausen. W.H. Auden once wrote, “To save your world, you asked this man to die. Would this man, could he see you now, ask why?” Does Huchthausen rest in peace, or would he be, given the lip service that has been paid to the preservation of cultural treasures since the end of World War II, the poetic figure in Auden’s speech, asking, “Why?”

Walter Huchthausen enlisted for military service in 1942 at the age of 37. His career as an architect made him an ideal candidate to serve Allied Military Government as a Monuments Man. But severe injuries he suffered during a V-1 bombing attack on London delayed his initial assignment. In late 1944 Captain Huchthausen reported for duty as Monuments officer for U.S. Ninth Army in Aachen, Germany, repairing its world-famous Gothic cathedral. Interviewed about his work several months later, he told a reporter that “Aachen Cathedral belongs to the world and if we can prevent it from falling in ruins...we are doing a service to the world.” The article appeared in print on April 4th, but Huchthausen wasn’t alive to see it. Two days earlier, he had been killed in action by German machine-gunners while in transit to check out a report of a looted altarpiece.

The death of Huchthausen, like that of British Monuments officer Ronald Balfour, underscores the ultimate cost of protecting

works of art and other cultural treasures during war. Is art worth a life? It is a question that not only goes to the very soul of the work of the Monuments Men during World War II, but also frames the debate about how we as a society today respond to the protection of monuments and works of art in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Mali, and other conflict areas, and the even greater concern of making our homeland as safe as possible from those who use works of art and antiquities to generate revenue to finance terrorism operations, or any other nefarious purpose.

Eisenhower believed that the answer must be “no,” stating that a human life counts “infinitely” more. Monuments Man Captain Deane Keller, a 42 year-old professor of art at Yale University and an artist himself, agreed. Keller, whose three-year long military service in Italy included a year and a half in or near combat, once wrote, “no work of art is worth the life of a single American boy.” But Keller made a critical distinction between risking one’s life to save a work of art versus risking one’s life fighting for a cause. Like his fellow Monuments Men, Keller considered it a privilege to represent his country to preserve the freedom of creative expression by artists just as he did preserving the greatest examples of what artists before him had created. General Eisenhower spoke of this during a 1946 speech when he referred to the “ideals for which [war] is fought.” The Monuments Men’s service, like Huchthausen’s death, reminds us that freedom was not then, nor will it ever be, free. Preservation of cultural treasures, like our freedom, also comes at a cost. Walter Huchthausen and his fellow Monuments Men knew that all too well before volunteering; still, they wanted to serve.

Our history defines us. Works of art, monuments, and other cultural treasures belong to all of us, regardless of the country or museum in which they reside. They are a gift to us from previous generations that serve as a source of learning, enjoyment, and inspiration. These gifts come with an inherent responsibility to do

everything prudently possible to preserve them for future generations. No one person had a better understanding of that responsibility than the founder of the Monuments Men, Lt. Commander George Stout. In making his case for cultural preservation officers to President Roosevelt in 1943, Stout said it clearly and dispassionately: “To safeguard these things will show respect for the beliefs and customs of all men and will bear witness that these things belong not only to a particular people but also to the heritage of mankind. To safeguard these things is part of the responsibility that lies on the governments of the United Nations.”

As recently as 1981, Monuments Man Mason Hammond, the only Monuments Officer to see duty in Italy and Germany, and an important advisor to General Eisenhower’s staff, urged all those willing to listen: “Planners for future hostilities tend to think in terms of the last conflict, but any consideration of the different ways in which the First and Second World Wars were fought demonstrates the fallacy of such an approach...If this generation wishes to leave to its children the cultural treasures that it has enjoyed, such planning should be encouraged.” Hammond’s warning went unheeded, but as events in Iraq in 2003, and more recently in Syria, have painfully demonstrated, he was right.

We must acknowledge certain truths. In a war as complex, uncongealed, and ideologically driven as that in Syria, reason and appeal are unlikely to find a welcome audience among those in power. We will not defeat the Islamic State and its followers with “expressions of outrage.” Only advance planning of the sort mentioned by Monuments Man Mason Hammond 36 years ago could have prevented some of the destruction we have witnessed these past few years. Because that did not happen, organizations charged with preserving our shared cultural heritage are instead bearing witness to its destruction. The name of Khaled al-Assad, an 83-year-old retired Syrian archaeologist known admirably as “Mr. Palmyra” for his extraordinary knowledge of that revered

2,000 year-old Roman era city, has joined that of Monuments Men Huchthausen and Balfour, killed in service to the arts.

The Monuments Men saw firsthand that the destruction of cherished artistic and religious treasures is the starter gun that precedes genocide and the human suffering that follows. It proved true in Nazi Germany, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in Al Qaeda controlled areas of Afghanistan and Mali, and now in ISIS administered portions of Syria and Iraq. Ignoring this early warning sign denies our nation the chance to act; we can only react.

Now comes evidence that ISIS is sanctioning the looting and sale of antiquities to generate revenue for terrorism. This is a game changer that compels us to think about the ownership of art, the responsibility of the art trade and collectors, and the role of the federal government differently than ever before.

Steps we as a nation have taken to protect our homeland following September 11 have not kept pace with developments in the art world; nowhere near. Today art is synonymous with money. The global explosion of wealth these past thirty years has created more buyers with greater resources chasing prized objects. Prices have skyrocketed. Consider that a painting by Picasso that sold for less than \$200,000 in 1956 recently sold for \$180 million; a sculpture by Giacometti for \$141 million; a drawing by Raphael for \$50 million. The sums are staggering, and yet regulatory authorities have not created and applied the same level of control procedures in the art market as we have in other areas of commerce involving similar sums of money. This creates a weakness that ISIS and others---tax cheats, those in possession of looted paintings and objects, and smugglers---can exploit.

The very portability of art and antiquities and oftentimes their relatively small size facilitates movement, sometimes into hiding

places out of view by tax authorities, Nazi-looted claimants, and other victims of theft. For example, just last week the Panama Papers leak revealed that a Nazi-looted painting by Modigliani worth upwards of \$25 million was among thousands of works of art stored in special tax zones known as free ports. While this art netherworld does provide privacy for the honest, the lack of transparency also cloaks tax cheats, thieves, and those aiding ISIS' business operation of converting cultural treasures to cash to fund terrorism.

The art trade is a largely self-regulated antiquated business model operating in a digitized near-invisible world. Until the advent of the Internet in the late 1990's, few in the art world paid much attention to provenance---a fancy word for who owned something in the past---unless it enhanced the value of the object. Looted art traded hands, on occasion openly. Although there has been improvement in the scrutiny of objects sold at public auction and among some dealers, more progress is needed. There also remains a high degree of willful ignorance about the prior ownership of an object by some collectors eager to add to their collections. Worse still is their lack of knowledge about the history of what they already own. Some don't want to know. This must change.

After all, who can be against infusing the opaque system of the art world with increased transparency? Tax cheats? Those who possess stolen works of art? Smugglers? Because privacy alone cannot be an argument for doing nothing when the stakes for common good are so high.

During the greatest conflict in history the United States set the standard for the respect and protection of the world's shared cultural heritage. We as a nation have inherited a rich and hard fought legacy. We are now at a crossroads that will determine

whether we uphold this great tradition, or allow it to become part of our past.