

The MFAA (Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives)



In 1942, American cultural groups, including university and museum directors, became increasingly concerned about the welfare of art in war-torn Europe. On behalf of these groups, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Harlan F. Stone asked President Franklin Roosevelt to form an organization for the “the protection and conservation of works of art and of artistic and historic monuments and records in Europe.”

In April 1943, the president created the Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in War Areas, the “Roberts Commission.” This commission, in turn, created the MFAA, a group of art historians, architects, artists, and conservation experts who worked with Allied military units to identify, preserve, and protect cultural property endangered by the war.

In all, over 300 servicemen and civilians from 13 countries served in the MFAA. Some MFAA officers took part in battle preparations, advising military strategists of culturally important sites so troops could avoid these areas. When Allied troops secured an area, MFAA personnel moved in to find known art works and to stabilize cultural property damaged by war. As Allied troops advanced, the MFAA found thousands of displaced works of art in mines, jail cells, and abandoned buildings.



A Monuments Man's Contribution

Walter Huchthausen was the MFAA staff officer for the 9th Army in France. He moved with the 9th as it fought its way into western Germany. The army entered Charlemagne's 1,100 year old capital in the city of Aachen in late October. Both sides had suffered heavy losses in the Battle of Aachen. Much of the city was devastated.

Huchthausen moved quickly, organizing recovery and restoration efforts across the city. Although he found a key repository of the area's art in Aachen's Suermond Museum, many of the most valuable pieces had been moved, some to Dresden, others to an undetermined location. Huchthausen used the museum as a base from which to direct operations. Another MFAA officer, George Stout, reported that he had never seen so many altarpieces in one place as he had under Huchthausen's care in the Suermond museum.

During the last year of the war, the MFAA began discovering hidden repositories of art looted by the Nazis. The Nazis had evacuated some of the art from museums for “safekeeping.” Some they had confiscated from Jewish families. Some enriched the estates of top Nazi commanders like Hermann Goering. Due to the swift Allied advance, the Nazis deposited many of these treasures in castles, mines, and even jail cells as they retreated. The MFAA was not yet in a position to recover this hidden art, except in the area of Aachen, where Huchthausen came across a key find.

In February 1945, Huchthausen received record of a meeting of German officials from the Rhine province. The document contained coded information on 30 repositories identified by the Germans for safeguarding looted artifacts. The location that housed the art stolen from Aachen, however, was initially a mystery. Through his interrogation of German prisoners, Huchthausen discovered that this site was called “Siegen.”

One of the Monuments Men who passed on Huchthausen's interrogation of German prisoners transposed the "ie." Because of the misspelling, the MFAA had difficulty finding the place on their maps of Germany.

While Huchthausen protected altarpieces near Aachen and assembled information about repositories further east, the Supreme Allied Command Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) was planning its advance across the Rhine into Germany. Their goal was to encircle the bulk of the German army in the west in the region directly east of Aachen.

This region, the Ruhr, was the industrial heart of Germany. It supplied coal, oil, chemicals, and power. It also manufactured tanks, aircraft, submarines, and cannons. Allied armies crossed the Rhine on March 24, 1945, in an operation known as Varsity. The 9th Army, including Huchthausen, was assigned to the northern sector. By April 1, Allied armies encircled the entire Ruhr area.

On April 2, Huchthausen and Lieutenant Sheldon Keck, a fellow MFAA officer, traveled north of the Ruhr Pocket by jeep to recover an important cultural artifact. As they were driving, German machine gun fire hit their jeep. A shot to the head killed Huchthausen immediately. His body fell onto Keck, protecting him from injury. American troops found Keck alive in a foxhole later that day.

On April 2, the same day that Huchthausen died, soldiers found six wooden crates in a damp iron pit in a town called Siegen (*"see-gen"*). The crates included a silver bust of Charlemagne, paintings by Dutch masters, and other priceless artifacts from Aachen. They also contained the original manuscript of Beethoven's Sixth Symphony. Because of Huchthausen's tireless efforts to find, recover, and preserve cultural treasures, the MFAA was able to return hundreds of artifacts to their original homes.



Restitution

During the Yalta conference, in February 1945, Stalin demanded that Germany pay \$20 million in reparations at the end of the war. He proposed that this sum be split, with half going to the Soviet Union and the other half to Britain and the United States. The Big Three discussed the use of art and cultural property as reparations, eventually deciding that they would establish a Reparations Committee to decide how and where to bestow displaced art.

Some officials in the United States favored "the use of works of art as a basis for reparations." However, the Roberts Commission declared that "we are sufficiently civilized not to engage in looting ourselves." The U.S. never confiscated art for reparations.

As the war in Europe waned, General Eisenhower directed the MFAA to collect property displaced by the war in order to restore it to the rightful owners. Two primary collecting points were set up in Munich and Wiesbaden, Germany, in which thousands of objects awaited restitution. Soviet troops also collected art as they advanced westward, with a view to using the objects as reparations. Many of these art works were restored to Germany after the war, but a significant number remain in Russia and former Soviet areas today.

The MFAA was disbanded in 1946 when the State Department took over the task of restoring art works to their owners.