

Saving van Eyck and Leonardo da Vinci: The Power of Art in the Era of World War II

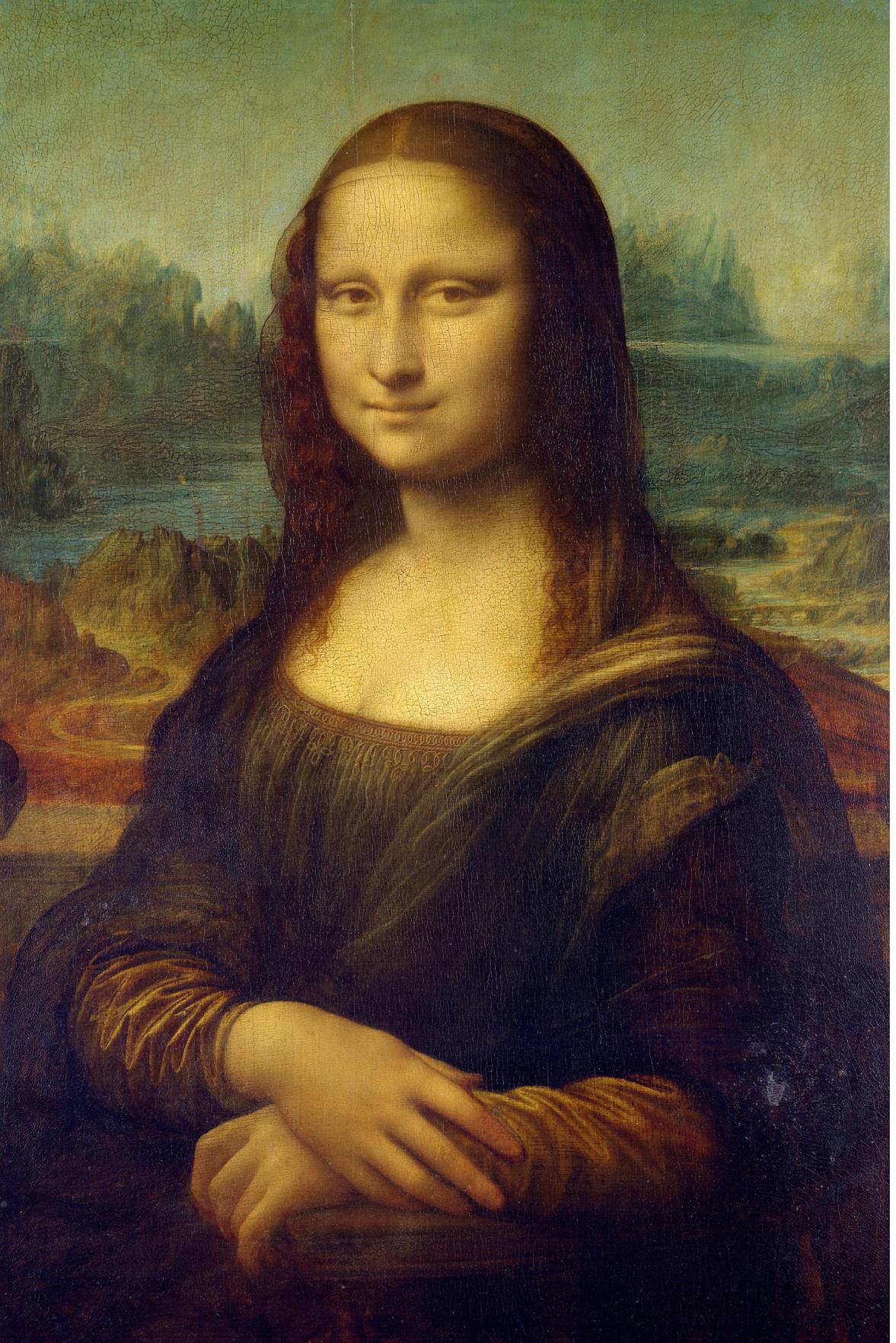
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“The statue rocked onto an inclined wooden ramp. We were all terrified, and the silence was total as the Victory rolled slowly forward, her stone wings trembling slightly. The curator of sculpture sank down on the steps, murmuring, ‘I will not see her return.’”

-In *The Rape of Europa* (2006)¹

What appears at first glance as inanimate objects or structures, works of art have the ability to attain great influence and power. Few events highlight their power better than actions taken in World War II. During World War II, the fate of many artworks became uncertain as Adolf Hitler and Hermann Göring set out to plunder Western Europe of its rich culture and precious art works for Germany's gain. A particular lover of art himself, Hitler saw certain works of art as more desirable than others. He wanted to build the Führer museum in his adopted hometown of Linz, which would house artwork of his choosing from all over Europe. This included a number of early modern pieces such as Hubert and Jan van Eyck's *The Ghent Altarpiece* (fig.5). Hitler saw old master works such as this as representative of the Aryan race. The “Aryan race,” as defined by the Nazis, lived in north-western Europe and represented a racial and cultural ideal for a German-occupied Europe. As such the Nazis favored cultural expressions from these regions. For instance, the van Eycks were from the Netherlands, so Hitler viewed their art as superior to non-German, Jewish,

¹ *The Rape of Europa*, directed by Richard Berge (2006; Venice, CA: Menemsha Films, 2008), DVD.



or Eastern European art, which he called “degenerate.” Even western European abstract works, such as those by Picasso, were defined as “degenerate” partly because they deviated from the artistic tradition of realism. As such, a large number of artworks considered “Modern,” as well as Jewish artworks and works by Communist artists, fell into the of “degenerate” art. Hitler ordered more modern and abstract material objects and artworks be cast into fires, for he saw them as representative of a racial category and political view he despised. Essentially, he may have wanted to destroy the power of art that did not aid his own journey to authority or increase the power of his Reich.

Hitler’s attack discriminate actions on European art in the midst of World War II led to varying reactions for how to protect Europe’s art heritage. Countries around Europe took measures to prevent Nazis from stealing or destroying their art. Many institutions went to great lengths to protect the works for which they were responsible. The Louvre Museum in France hid the Mona Lisa (fig.1) in Château d’Amboise. Employees encased her in fine wood and wrapped the portrait in red satin. Additionally, they kept the Mona Lisa in her own room and moved her several times after that to keep her location a secret. Some art officials managed to save works that were close to the front lines. For example, individuals were able to save Leonardo Da Vinci’s Last Supper (fig.2) while the rest of the Santa Maria delle Grazie crumbled during a bombing. Yet, through the course of the war, the world lost several masterpieces. For example, the frescoes of the Camposanto, the longtime glory of the city of Pisa, are mostly gone. No one tried to protect the building and frescoes thinking that the enemy would avoid them because they were too materially and culturally valuable. As a result, the frescoes were severely damaged in a bombing and are a mere shadow of their original grandeur.

This paper will examine how architecture and artwork in World War II were culturally valued and how perceptions about a work’s importance led to varying degrees of protection. Why were some works saved, or protected, but not others? How did countries, institutions, or communities make such decisions? The result is that the actions taken during the war irrevocably altered numerous works in terms of their material condition. Hundreds of works were involved in the movement of art during World War II. Whereas many studies have focused on the problem of “degenerate” modern art, this paper will focus on more “traditional” works. It will examine four case studies: the Mona Lisa, The Last Supper, the Camposanto, and The Ghent Altarpiece. Many of the works discussed in this paper were created during the Italian late-Medieval period and Renaissance with the exception of

The Ghent Altarpiece. Just as the Renaissance was a rebirth of Rome, Hitler wished to instill a rich culture reminiscent of the Roman Empire in Germany. Thus, there was a particular focus on ancient and Renaissance works in Hitler's collection, in addition to works that represented Aryan culture.

Just as Hitler valued certain pieces of artwork due to his perception of their value, European institutions and communities took their own decisions as to how to preserve certain works of art and architecture based on their perceived significance. The Louvre moved the Mona Lisa along with other priceless objects as a precaution against the invading Germans for fear of losing Leonardo's pensive lady to the Nazis. After locals in Milan heard about the Nazi destruction of artwork, they took last minute precautions and utilized reinforcements to save The Last Supper. Officials in Pisa ultimately decided not to take measures to protect the Camposanto (fig. 3 and 4). They considered it a piece of world heritage, and it was unfathomable that any pilot would willingly damage it. But it was very difficult for World War II era bombers to hit an object precisely. Indeed, an Allied plane accidentally destroyed the monument, leaving fragments for the world to mourn. The influence of these medieval and early modern works on society in turn affected the degree of their protection and their resulting condition after the war. While institutions and individuals protected the Mona Lisa and The Last Supper, others stole works and left them in a horrendous condition. For example, the Monuments Men found The Ghent Altarpiece a foot above a cave floor. Several works hidden in the Neuschwanstein Castle were simply stacked to the ceiling.² Numerous countries threatened by the Nazi regime sought to save cultural heritage and artwork in various ways, leading to efforts before, during, and after the war to preserve the artwork and make sure they continued to influence society for years to come.

“The Power of Images”

The actions taken involving artwork in World War II highlight the power of art to incite strong reactions among individuals and governments. World War II endangered several pieces of artwork as Hitler and Göring attempted to strip cultural identity in the form of images from towns and cities across Europe. With each attack on local art,

² Robert M. Edsel and Bret Witter, *The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves, and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History* (New York: Center Street, 2009), 351 and 383. The Monuments Men were a group who worked under the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives program in the U.S. This program was specifically designed to protect cultural heritage. They were mostly art historians, museum curators, and scholars who worked with the Allied armies to protect and locate stolen artwork.

European communities lost another piece of their culture. During World War II the influence and power embodied in each dried brush-stroke, gold leaf, applied plaster, and edifice of stone instigated the preservation, destruction, and “the greatest treasure hunt in history.”³ This was not the first time images have been targeted for destruction. In his book *The Power of Images* David Freedberg names various iconoclastic movements in the Old Testament, eighth and ninth century Byzantium, the Protestant Reformation in Europe, the French Revolution, and so on.⁴ Over centuries, artworks and images moved people emotionally. Response does not necessarily mean people find works of art aesthetically pleasing, but rather that they are moved by the cultural power within the paintings and structures. Freedberg argues that:

People are sexually aroused by pictures and sculptures; they break pictures and sculptures; they mutilate them, kiss them, cry before them, and go on journeys to them; they are calmed by them, stirred by them, and incited to revolt. They give thanks by means of them, expect to be elevated by them, and are moved to the highest levels of empathy and fear.⁵

The destruction and damage of material objects would not occur if there were not strong meanings associated with them. Numerous scholars such as Robert M. Edsel, Noah Charney, Lynn H. Nicholas, Jonathan Petropoulos, Matila Simon, and Elizabeth Simpson have contributed to our understanding of the actions taken by Hitler and his regime and owners or protectors of art during the World War II period.⁶ However, I am looking to employ David Freedberg’s ideology on the power of art and add to the popular conversation of the role of art during the Second World War.

³ Ibid, xiv.

⁴ David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989), 10.

⁵ Ibid, 1.

⁶ Noah Charney, *Stealing the Mystic Lamb: The True Story of the World’s Most Coveted Masterpiece* (New York: Public Affairs, 2010); Robert M. Edsel, *Saving Italy: The Race to Rescue a Nation’s Treasures from the Nazis* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 2013); Robert M. Edsel and Bret Witter, *The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves, and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History* (New York: Center Street, 2009); Lynn H. Nicholas, *The Rape of Europa: The Fate of Europe’s Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War* (New York: Knopf, 1994); Jonathan Petropoulos, “Art Historians and Nazi Plunder,” *New England Review* 20, no. 1 (2000): 5-30, accessed March 1, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/stable/40244488>; Jonathan Petropoulos, *The Faustian Bargain: The Art World in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Matila Simon, *The Battle of the Louvre: The Struggle to Save French Art in World War II* (New York: Hawthorn, 1971); Elizabeth Simpson, ed. *The Spoils of War: World War II and Its Aftermath: The Loss, Reappearance, and Recovery of Cultural Property* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1997).

Hitler curated and planned his own collection of art for himself and Germany that best represented his political views. He attempted to enforce a certain history and culture on German and Western society by getting rid of works that evoked a message or power he was trying to eradicate. Essentially, he wanted to get rid of all work that he referred to as degenerate, and so the fate of Western Europe's culture rested on Hitler's valuation of the art works. There were many atrocities of World War II and many facets, one of which was Hitler's war on culture.⁷ He was not alone, for his right hand man, Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, also participated heavily in the confiscation of artworks. He himself stated, "It used to be called plundering. But today things have become more humane. In spite of that, I intend to plunder, and to do it thoroughly."⁸ Hitler foresaw a new Rome in Germany. He told his architect "to create monuments that over the centuries would become elegant ruins so that a thousand years into the Reich, humankind would still be looking in awe at the symbols of his power."⁹ Where Berlin was going to serve as the German version of Rome, Linz was going to serve as the culturally rich city of Florence.¹⁰

Hitler wanted to collect works that reflected his idea of a pure, Aryan race and culture. Having famous objects that reflected that notion brought together in one museum would display his political propaganda to the world. The influence of his chosen artwork was meant to encourage others that the Reich was a rebirth of Rome and tradition. Meanwhile, it appears Hitler wanted to get rid of Modern and "degenerate" artwork that would encourage views that opposed Hitler's plans for Germany and Europe. As a result, not only did museums and private collectors fear their works might fall into the hands of the Nazis, but also they feared that their work would qualify as "degenerate" art and the Nazis would destroy them. In the beginning of the war, many people did not understand what rationale Hitler utilized for evaluating artworks' value.¹¹ Hitler allowed for "degenerate" works to be sold abroad in order to fund his empire, but this did not guarantee their survival. One of the more prominent dealers for looted art was the Galerie Fischer in Switzerland. In this case, the works the Galerie did not sell by a specific date burned in a pyre.¹² When the museums

⁷ Edsel and Witter, *The Monuments Men*, 9.

⁸ Robert M. Edsel, *Saving Italy: The Race to Rescue a Nation's Treasures from the Nazis* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 2013), 74.

⁹ Edsel and Witter, *The Monuments Men*, 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 11.

¹¹ *The Rape of Europa*, directed by Richard Berge.

and the private collectors in Western Europe heard of Hitler's actions, it became a conundrum as to how to protect the art. The power of artwork influenced Hitler's actions, while the power also caused other institutions to fight to protect the works.

The Mona Lisa

When the war broke out in 1939, museums were in a mad race to hide their artwork, including Leonardo da Vinci's famous Mona Lisa. To



Figure 1. Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, c. 1500–07. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

describe the rush for the protection of influential artwork across Europe, one scholar explains how the “Venetian collections left the city in trucks precariously balanced on barges. In Amsterdam, Rembrandt’s *The Night Watch* was rolled up and evacuated.”¹³ In France, a similar atmosphere transpired as the Louvre emptied their museum for there was no guarantee any of the artwork was safe. The event included lowering the *Nike of Samothrace* down the grand staircase and packing the *Mona Lisa* safely for transportation by truck to a chateau in France. The fear that the Nazis would discover these hiding places and steal some of the most precious works in France led to the movement of the Louvre’s works several times over the course

of the war.

Over the centuries, the *Mona Lisa* has become a powerful symbol of France and the Italian Renaissance. France acquired the *Mona Lisa* after Leonardo’s death, for he brought the painting with him when he went to work for King Francis I. Additionally, the portrait’s presence in France had become particularly significant as it was less than thirty years after the highly publicized theft of the painting in 1911. Consequently, the *Mona Lisa* was one of the biggest attractions of the Louvre, and it would have been a prized possession for Hitler.¹⁴ The influence of the painting as an example of the Renaissance, a master-

¹² Noah Charney, *Stealing the Mystic Lamb: The True Story of the World’s Most Coveted Masterpiece* (New York: Public Affairs, 2010), 197.

¹³ Simpson, ed. *The Spoils of War*, 40.

¹⁴ “Italians Ask France to Give Up ‘Mona Lisa,’” *New York Times*, July 16, 1940. <http://login.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/docview/105244128?accountid=14826>.

piece by an Italian master, and a development in Renaissance portraiture all combined to make the painting particularly significant in its power. This portrait shows the advancement Leonardo da Vinci made for portraiture in the Renaissance by transforming portraits from a partial, side depiction to a portrait that engaged with the audience. The portrait also exhibits Leonardo's sfumato technique that "blends light and dark and one form with another to enhance the unity of the composition."¹⁵ Sfumato translates from the Italian as blurred or soft, and the technique creates a more realistic image and sense of atmosphere behind the figure. Her subtle smile invites the reader in as well, a scene that was uncommon prior to Leonardo's painting. Leonardo spent years on the Mona Lisa, modifying it so much that "it seems to be a meditation on ideal feminine beauty and an exploration of the sitter's (and perhaps the artist's) psyche."¹⁶ Leonardo arranged this portrait in such a way that it places the figure "as part of a larger universe."¹⁷ France valued the power within this work, and the Louvre sought to save it from interested individuals in Germany and Italy. The popularity of the Mona Lisa increased internationally after thieves stole her in 1911, but the portrait's thought-provoking smile, the intricate arrangement and presentation of the composition by the Italian old master transcends the Renaissance and continues to captivate audiences and individuals on its own.

The story of the Mona Lisa during World War II reflects how many museums and collectors went out of their way to protect significant artwork from the Nazis. Paris feared they would become the next target of the German Luftwaffe air raids. Consequently, the Louvre moved their pieces out in a major operation to save the art and material objects. On August 28, 1939, the Mona Lisa was loaded into a crate and placed into a truck for the chateau of Chambord just days before war broke out on September 3.¹⁸ The Grande Galerie of the Louvre was "a largely empty, hollow grave, for on these walls where millions had once come to view the world's masterpieces, there were nothing but scribbled words in white chalk," notes for the curators to remind them of what once adorned their walls.¹⁹ The Louvre was trying to ensure the protection of their artwork so Hitler or others in the Axis Powers

¹⁵ John T. Paoletti and Gary M. Radke, *Art in Renaissance Italy: Fourth Edition* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2011), 392.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 393.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ "The Louvre During the War: Photographs 1938-1947," Louvre: Press Release, accessed May 5, 2016. http://www.louvre.fr/sites/default/files/medias/medias_fichiers/fichiers/pdf/louvre-press-release-louvre-during.pdf.

¹⁹ Edsel and Witter, *The Monuments Men*, 124.

did not use the influence of looted artworks for their own gain. The Italians stated France should give the Mona Lisa back to them since Leonardo da Vinci was from Florence. They in turn complicated the fight for the painting and its influence.²⁰ The University of Rome even made the statement that the Louvre had already packed the painting up, so the museum would just have to send it their way.²¹ Italy and Hitler's attempt to use the war to take art from France worried the Louvre.²² The Mona Lisa held cultural value to many different people and that value transcended country borders. Hitler may have wanted the Mona Lisa to increase the cultural value of his museum, but France could not fathom losing this cultural icon. The French museum knew that a piece of the Renaissance and Leonardo da Vinci was figuratively embedded within the brushstrokes, and they were desperate to protect Leonardo's lady in order to keep a piece of that history in France.

The Last Supper

One of the most recognizable artworks of the Renaissance rests in Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan, Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper. However, its powerful presence was almost lost. The Last Supper was



Figure 2. Leonardo da Vinci, Last Supper, begun c. 1495. S Maria delle Grazie, Milan.

not transportable like the Mona Lisa, and Hitler could not physically possess it as a piece in his museum. Thus, the protection of this piece varied, though the cultural significance is arguably as strong as the

²⁰ "Italians Ask France to Give Up 'Mona Lisa.'"

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

Mona Lisa is. There had long been a fear of losing The Last Supper before World War II, for Leonardo da Vinci famously experimented with the use of oil paint and tempera on a fresco.²³ Thus, the paint was chipping away before he even finished the work. By 1628, the vast majority of the fresco had worn away.²⁴ The fragility of the Renaissance piece seems to have made it all the more precious.

This painting depicted The Last Supper, a popular scene throughout the history of Western art even before the Renaissance. Leonardo's arrangement of the composition and the tools he used helped infuse it with a certain power to capture people's attention which differs from other attempts to paint The Last Supper. Leonardo specifically chose to depict this scene during the moment Christ revealed someone betrayed him. Thus, he highlighted the rampant emotions and reactions of the apostles by arranging them in four groups. In these groups, they express confusion and differing hand gestures and body movement, as opposed to the lone and emotionless Judas. In the center of all this is Christ behaving in a calm manner. The painting was in itself highly expressive and the experimental technique of using tempera and oil a secco, or on dry plaster, achieved the effects of a detailed oil painting on fresco. Now heavily deteriorated, the materials Leonardo used had achieved such effects as "the glint of light on the wine glasses, the dull sheen of the ceramic bowls, and the crusty goodness of the bread."²⁵ The materials and the expressive nature of The Last Supper radiated tremendous influence on the viewer, affecting how one reads the narrative of the scene.

With the outbreak of war and fear of aerial bombings, individuals took the initiative to brace the wall of The Last Supper with sandbags and scaffolding in 1940. The Last Supper may have been deteriorating, but it appears the locals wanted to protect it for as long as they could.²⁶ A bomb would only speed up the process of losing this work. On August 15, 1943, a bomb "slammed into the center of the Cloister of the Dead," and heavily damaged the building.²⁷ The initiative by the local officials protected the work from crumbling along with the rest of Santa Maria delle Grazie, for the fresco held major cultural and artistic

²³ "Da Vinci's 'Last Supper' Weathered to Faded Blots," *New York Times*, Dec 16, 1946. <http://login.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/docview/107439956?accountid=14826>.

²⁴ *Ibid*.

²⁵ Paoletti and Radke, *Art in Renaissance Italy*, 372.

²⁶ "Last Supper" on View again in Milan Convent," *New York Times*, June 20, 1945. <http://login.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/docview/107265048?accountid=14826>.

²⁷ Edsel, *Saving Italy*, 3.

significance.

After the bombing, the workers did not want to remove the scaffolding and sandbags due to fear of more bombs, but they also feared facing the reality that *The Last Supper* was breaking apart behind the reinforcements. Upon hearing the news that Milan had been bombed, Deane Keller of the Monuments Men traveled there to see the damage. When he got to the site the “devastation to the Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie, and the miracle that had occurred there, took his breath away.”²⁸ With that said, it seems people were hesitant to discover whether *The Last Supper* was intact. Once individuals removed the reinforcements, they would know whether it still remained or if the world had lost a great masterpiece. The threat of rain also posed a danger, for water could ruin the remaining pieces of the work. Thus the scaffolding and sandbags remained until the refectory could be rebuilt and provide shelter for the fragile fresco.²⁹ Until the locals and art officials could remove the sandbags and scaffolding, they could only imagine that *The Last Supper* was still in the condition the community last saw it. However, the reinforcements rested against the fresco for so long that moisture collected in places and created bubbles “of swollen plaster.”³⁰ Art officials attempted to preserve and restore the work after the war, for it was in need of great care.³¹ However, during the war no one wanted to face the possible reality that a bomb could reduce *The Last Supper* to just a name in books with a poor quality image beside it.

Camposanto



Figure 3. Master of the Triumph of Death: Triumph of Death, 1330s. Camposanto, Pisa.

²⁸ Ibid, 283.

²⁹ "Last Supper' on View again in Milan Convent."

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

The Camposanto is a site that locals in Pisa and around the world valued as a heritage site, but the locals did not protect it with any



Figure 4. The Camposanto after bombing, Edsel, Robert M. Saving Italy: The Race to Rescue a Nation's Treasures from the Nazis. W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 2013.

reinforcements because it was so valued. Similar to The Last Supper, the Camposanto was a medieval cemetery with a vast number of unmovable frescoes. In the case of the immovable Camposanto, it appears locals assumed pilots would avoid the structure in order to prevent damaging the revered frescoes. The Camposanto was a part of humanity's culture and history. However, only a few volunteers watched over it; when it caught on fire, there was no water supply to put out the flames.³² Clearly, even significant artworks were not entirely safe from the ravages of war, and taking steps to protect heritage was and is necessary.

Pisa, Italy held a rich culture and history as a maritime republic in the Middle Ages. The most remarkable sites included the Duomo, the Baptistery, the Leaning Tower, and the Camposanto.³³ Pisans built the Camposanto on an ancient cemetery in 1278, and it contained a vast number of medieval frescoes that were added over the next two hundred years. Legend states individuals during the Second Crusade brought the soil of the Camposanto from Golgotha, where Christ died on the cross. As a result, the name of the Camposanto means "holy field." It retained Gothic marble arcades that surrounded the courtyard. A significant remnant of the Middle Ages, the early Renaissance, and the glory of Pisa, one newspaper could not make a simple note of the horror of what happened to the frescoes that burned.³⁴ Rather the history and importance of the frescoes was so great, the newspaper wanted to devote a "separate story" to the bombing of the

³² "The Campo Santo of Pisa Now," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 86, No. 503 (1945): 35, accessed May 5, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/stable/869013>.

³³ A.C. Sedgwick, "A Fourth of Pisa Wrecked by Shells," *New York Times*, September 29, 1944. <http://login.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/docview/106759128?accountid=14826>.

³⁴ Herbert L. Matthews, "Vast Pisa Ruins seen on Tour; Many Noted Structures Blasted," *New York Times*, Jan 22, 1945. <http://login.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/docview/107136451?accountid=14826>.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Camposanto.³⁵

Pisa only received a Group C status from the Allies. Art historians and locals could not argue for the more coveted Group A status for every city or town. The military leaders who made the decision of Group status perhaps noted the vast number of artworks, Renaissance period works in particular, in Florence. Pisa and cities like it had significant cultural heritage, but not the large number of works as Florence. Consequently, while authorities told the pilots to try to avoid monuments, they also told them “any consequent damage was accepted.”³⁶ While locals, art historians, and Monuments Men attempted to save as many pieces of cultural heritage as possible in cities such as Pisa, they were still operating under military leaders. Meanwhile, the Allies listed Florence as a Group A city. The vast amounts of Renaissance art in Florence may have swayed officials into labelling Florence as a Group A city, but the decision not to give Pisa this label aided in the loss of a major remnant of Medieval culture.

While significant Renaissance artworks and architecture in Florence only sustained minor damage from the Allies, no one could say the same for some works in Pisa or the Camposanto. Keller was reported initially relieved when he went to Pisa, for the Baptistery was still standing. Bombs had hit the Duomo and, although damaged, it was ultimately intact, and the Leaning Tower “had maintained its flawed verticality.”³⁷ As his continued surveying the area around these monuments, though, “he stopped in his tracks: the roof of the Camposanto was gone. Only a few stubs of charred timber were visible. In this war, even the cemeteries were dying.”³⁸

The Camposanto and its frescoes were representative of Medieval and early Renaissance culture with frescoes depicting the Last Judgment, Hell, and the Triumph of Death (fig. 5). The Triumph of Death provides detailed imagery that serves as moral allegories to warn against luxury such as music and hunting and laziness. Hunters in this same scene encounter three bodies, and they are forced to face their own mortality just as is the viewer by looking at the work. The frescoes are rife with metaphors and allegories that include numerous meanings. The Camposanto was a place with holy connections, covered in didactic works of art, and it served as the final resting place for powerful figures such as members of the Medici family. All of these elements

³⁶ Edsel, *Saving Italy*, 179.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 180.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

combined to make the Camposanto one of the most influential sites in Italy. This was a major component of Pisa's rich history. For several hundred years, the Camposanto had been the site that travelers came to see, not the Leaning Tower.³⁹ Yet, in one night, "the world of culture [...] suffered one of the greatest losses of the war."⁴⁰ The citizens of Pisa knew that aerial bombardment was a tactic employed by the Allies during the war, yet they did not line the Camposanto with sandbags or other forms of protection. It appears it was inconceivable that anyone would target this sacred site. However, they did not account for the difficulty pilots faced flying at night, who did not always drop their bombs on the right location. While the destruction of the Camposanto on July 27, 1944 was an accident, the war left the city with remnants of frescoes and a fragmented connection to their medieval past.



Figure 5. Hubert van Eyck, completed by Jan van Eyck, The Ghent Altarpiece, c. 1423–32. Ghent, St. Bavo.

The Ghent Altarpiece

Although the Nazis and others revered certain pieces of art, they did not store their pieces of collected art in conditions that attested to their value. Hitler's search for vast numbers of powerful artworks to add to his museum resulted in a lack of space to store them.

When Neuschwanstein castle, five other castles, and a monastery began to overflow, the Nazis then turned to the mines as a storage facility. The mine at Altaussee thus "began to fill from February 1944 on, as Allied air attacks threatened the existing castle storage centers."⁴¹ In May of 1945, the Monuments Men arrived to find numerous art works in poor conditions. The Monuments Men came to the mine and found the passageway blocked by debris. Hitler had demanded that his troops destroy the mines by using bombs to collapse the tunnels. If he and his Third Reich could not have the works, then neither could the rest of the world. The works he stole were pieces of history and culture. When Hitler realized he could not have power over the world, he initially wanted to destroy the power within the artworks as well.

³⁹ Ibid, 181.

⁴⁰ Herbert L. Matthews, "Frescoes in Pisa Virtually Ruined," *New York Times*, Jan 23, 1945, <http://login.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/docview/107172754?accountid=14826>.

⁴¹ Charney, *Stealing the Mystic Lamb*, 269.

It seems important that, although Hitler decided to bomb the mine, he also recanted shortly afterwards. Despite the works he did destroy, perhaps he could not fathom destroying those he deemed the best, especially since pieces such as The Ghent Altarpiece rested in the mine. Nevertheless, he set a precedent of looting and destroying property, art, and books. His failure to surrender and his previous brutal action influenced other Nazi leaders to make violent decisions, and in this case, the tangible pieces of history within the mine, and The Ghent Altarpiece, were almost lost.

The Monuments Men were anxious to get to the artwork to evaluate the damage and begin the long process of restoring European culture and significant remnants of its heritage to its people. The rampage of the Nazis throughout Europe led to near losses of culture and history. Thus returning the objects that helped define a city, town, or culture was one more step to healing from the war. Once they were able to get through the blocked passage, they found van Eyck's Virgin Mary of The Ghent Altarpiece simply sitting there waiting, "silently reading a book" in her panel.⁴² With her were seven other panels of The Ghent Altarpiece.⁴³ The only thing separating the fifteenth century masterpiece from the floor of the salt mine were cardboard boxes. Despite their importance, the Nazis did not have the resources to deal with the large number of looted works during the war.

The Ghent Altarpiece is a polyptych painting that consists of many different panels and sections that help give it its significance. One can view the work as two triptychs (three parts) connected to each other. The van Eycks meant for the piece to move in a variety of ways in order to display multiple views and meaning. For example if one closed the top panels and opened the bottom, the closed top shows the Annunciation of the Lord over the opened central panel that shows the Mystic Lamb. The lamb represents Christ's sacrifice, and his blood in the cup alludes to the Eucharist. Overall, this particular arrangement shows the beginning and the end of Christ's life on Earth. These altarpieces are not pictures that close with wings, but pictures with doors. They were portals that brokered between the earthly, material world and the spiritual world they represented. Viewers could see them as doors to spiritual fulfillment or doors to heaven. They are plainer on the outside when closed as opposed to the inside. This adds to the notion of the Altarpiece as a doorway to other realms. The idea of a doorway is furthered through the subtle colors on the outside followed

⁴² Edsel and Witter, *The Monuments Men*, 383.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

by the spiritual, colorful world on the inside that can transport a viewer. The altarpiece itself is similar to a membered body with parts that work together to form a whole. As the altarpiece opens into colorful panels, it acts as a “Porta Coeli,” the gateway that you have to pass through to get to the kingdom of Heaven. The piece represents the physical presence of Christ; it is the door that you have to go through. Thus, the overall materiality of The Ghent Altarpiece evokes a powerful presence for the viewer. The influence and inspiration the work can have on individuals directly contrasts with the condition the Monuments Men found it in since the Nazis could not properly care for the vast amounts of work they obtained.

It quickly became clear that there were a number of influential pieces of art inside the mine in addition to The Ghent Altarpiece. The Monuments Men came upon Michelangelo’s Bruges Madonna on a dirty mattress, four more panels of The Ghent Altarpiece, pieces by Vermeer, and more. The artwork had survived, and Monuments Man George Stout wasted little time to “press for a war crimes investigation of what had happened in the remote salt mine in the Austrian Alps.”⁴⁴ The attempt to destroy the mine and the horrendous condition in which the Nazis kept works nearly obliterated significant pieces of culture. Hitler and the Nazis wanted to strip the power of cultures away and replace it with a new Germanic culture, but when they could not succeed in holding onto that power, they were going to destroy the tangible pieces of power that they held.

The Monuments Men worked quickly to remove the works from the mine. It had become clear that the boundaries of the countries would fall back to those established by the Yalta Conference, and the Allies would not be able to remain in the territory they conquered. The Monuments Men feared that, if they did not move the artwork out, the Soviet Union would claim the art to increase the stature of their own museums, forcing the previous owners and communities to suffer the loss of their powerful artworks once more. The Monuments Men packed The Ghent Altarpiece into a crate of its own. They lined the truck bed that carried the Altarpiece with waterproof paper, layered over by felt, and additional protective material.⁴⁵

Some members of the Western Allies questioned whether they should hand back the treasures found in Austria and Germany, for they were spoils of war.⁴⁶ The works were a symbol of their defeat over Hitler

⁴⁴ Charney, *Stealing the Mystic Lamb*, 384.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 386.

and his Reich. However, spoils of war have historically been objects taken from their home country or city. The Nazis had already stolen artworks in the mines and castles from their homes in the first place. Eisenhower specifically answered this question by ordering “the immediate return of the most important works of art to each respective country until the more systematic process of returns could be implemented.” The Ghent Altarpiece was one of the first in line. Belgium received The Ghent Altarpiece in a grand ceremony that took place at the Royal Palace, and this is representative of its importance in Belgium’s history.⁴⁷ Large numbers of other works thus followed, for there were numerous other mines and locations that held art works, it was just a matter of sifting through all of them. The Monuments Men spent six years gathering art works and identifying their original locations. Many works are still missing, and some had no owners to go back to, as was the case with art owned by Jews who perished in concentration camps or fled their homes. However, the desire to retrieve The Ghent Altarpiece and other pieces of art during and decades after the war shows the inclination of people to connect with significant pieces of culture again.

After the War



Figure 6. “Rorimer at Neuschwanstein.” Image. Retrieved from Monuments Men Foundation: Photos. Accessed April 24, 2016. <http://www.monumentsmenfoundation.org/archives/photos>.

After the war, some pieces were as they had been before 1939, while others were in need of great care, and some pieces were nearly destroyed. The Mona Lisa went back to France in a similar shape as before the war and the Louvre proudly hung her once more. At the end of the war when individuals removed the sandbags, it became clear that The Last Supper did not survive unscathed. Humidity had greatly weakened the state of the fresco. While the

Monuments Men established a temporary roof over The Last Supper as they did at the Camposanto, water still posed a problem as the

⁴⁶ Tom Mashberg, “Returning the Spoils of World War II, Taken by Americans,” *New York Times: Arts*, May 5, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/06/arts/design/returning-the-spoils-of-world-war-ii-taken-by-our-side.html>.

⁴⁷ Crosby, “Venus Fixers’ Won Their War, Too.”

close contact between the sandbags and the fresco allowed for present moisture to create bubbles of plaster on the painting.⁴⁸ Additionally, a “jumble of faded blots” covered the fresco due to outdoor exposure.⁴⁹ Despite damage, The Last Supper still remains on the wall today. The Refectory and art officials have desperately fought to save this piece of their heritage. Dr. Pinin Brambilla Barcilon worked on The Last Supper for twenty years, trying to restore the fresco and repair war damage.⁵⁰ However, it will never be the same fresco as it was when Leonardo da Vinci set aside his tools and walked out of the building. Yet the world still sees the fresco as a piece of Leonardo da Vinci and Milan’s history. As a highlight of Renaissance, art and history specialists are trying to hold onto this piece as long as possible. Similarly, the conditions of the mine damaged The Ghent Altarpiece, and there is one panel, the Just Judges panel, that is still missing. Yet, individuals restored the overall work, and it remains a popular piece for many to see. A copy of the Just Judges panel was made for the Altarpiece so that people could immerse themselves in this piece of history and culture more fully. These artworks are more than paint on a panel or wall. They have strong cultural significance that continues to draw many people emotionally.

The bombing of the Camposanto is one of the great tragedies in recent art history, but its strong connection to Pisa’s medieval history continues to move art experts to try to save what is left of the piece. Amid the rubble, Deane Keller set about trying to save these remains of Pisa’s culture. Although the bombs did not completely destroy all of the frescoes, the baking sun of Tuscany would do so if they remained exposed without a ceiling.⁵¹ Keller and other local men established temporary shade by utilizing scaffolding. Aided by a team, Keller tried to save what he could and restored some of the few frescoes that remained after the attacks. However, some actions taken after the war appear to have further damaged the frescoes. Shortly after the war, “the paintings were detached from the walls and glued onto canvas, stretched across asbestos frames.”⁵² The bombing did not produce exactly what we see of the frescoes now. Rather the colors were still rather strong and what was left of the frescoes was clear.⁵³ Now the background is

⁴⁸ “‘Last Supper’ on View again in Milan Convent.”

⁴⁹ “Da Vinci’s ‘Last Supper’ Weathered to Faded Blots.”

⁵⁰ Ken Shulman, “Monumental Toil to Restore the Magnificent,” *The New York Times: Arts*, July 2, 1995, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/07/02/arts/art-monumental-toil-to-restore-the-magnificent.html?page-wanted=all>.

⁵¹ Matthews, “Frescoes in Pisa Virtually Ruined.”

⁵² Alasdair Palmer, “The Cleaning Power of Pisa,” *The Telegraph: Art* (United Kingdom, London), May 14, 2002. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3577408/The-cleaning-power-of-Pisa.html>.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

fading away and “the figures are like ghosts emerging from a thick mist.”⁵⁴ There are still fierce debates in Italy and around the world over the proper way to preserve the frescoes and fear of losing more of what remains.⁵⁵ People are desperate to save the frescoes, their link to the Medieval world in Pisa, and there is anguish over its deterioration despite restoration attempts.

Overall, the political, historical, and cultural meaning within many works of art elicited many different reactions as to how to protect them before, during, and after World War II. The Mona Lisa, The Last Supper, the Camposanto, and The Ghent Altarpiece were highly revered for their connection to the past, culture, and the emotion and power embedded within them. Therefore, Hitler and Göring vied for numerous pieces, such as those listed. Others conveyed a message or artistic representation that Hitler did not deem fit for his new empire. Thus, museums, churches, and locals tried to save their precious art works. People could not believe that a structure that survived for hundreds years, such as the Camposanto, could fall. They grieved over what had been, and they desperately worked to save what remained. Today the Mona Lisa and The Ghent Altarpiece sit behind strong bulletproof glass, in manners the original owners or institutions did not mean for visitors to view them. This is an effort to preserve the works for fear of losing them still remains, whether it is through environmental damage or the emotional, violent response of an individual. The Last Supper stands as a miraculous remnant and it emanates a kind of pride in those who know its story. Not even World War II and bombing could obliterate it. In addition, the families of original owners of the artworks the Nazis had taken in World War II continue to fight for their pieces in legal battles between museums and family members, countries, and so on. Artworks and objects involved in the struggle between nations more than seventy years ago still have a powerful influence over individuals and society today.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

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