

**Exhibition Proposal for the National Museum of American History:  
Unlikely Heroes: The Quest to Save Europe's Treasures during World War II**

**Introduction to Subject/Historical Context**

The history and stories of the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives division of the Allied forces (MFA & A or MFAA), or the Monuments Men, during the Second World War is rich and relevant in the unique way of many other private and well-known tragic and heroic histories of the World War Two era.

During his rule as leader of Nazi Germany, Adolf Hitler, whom many people know was himself at one point an aspiring artist, cultivated within his government a connoisseurship of art. In his unprecedented efforts to "purify" Germany, not only did Hitler condemn "degenerate art," which included many prominent modern artists, but he also began collecting classical pieces and works thought to be Germanic or rightfully belonging to the country to be brought to Germany's existing cultural institutions. He also planned for the establishment of a museum in his hometown of Linz, Austria, as a shrine to his rule. As Hitler invaded and occupied surrounding countries, his regime systematically and meticulously looted millions of works of art from both state institutions and private collections, including confiscated Jewish property such as that belonging to the Rothschilds.

Toward the end of the war in Europe, in 1944, as Allied forces liberated Paris and pushed further into Germany, it was the responsibility of this small group of specially appointed enlisted professionals to not only protect monuments in the line of fire and secure them but increasingly to document, track down and restitute looted works of art to their owners, a task that proved monumental in itself. For the purpose of this exhibition, activities in Europe will be the focus as the efforts in Italy are also tremendous in scale

and scholars such as Robert Edsel and Ilaria Dagnini Brey have found that activity in both places is more succinctly illustrated within a separate narrative.

### **Description of Project**

The purpose of this exhibition is to tell the story of the tremendous work of the Monuments Men which has never been illustrated within a museum setting, and through that telling cultivate an appreciation of art and cultural objects through their ability to unify peoples even in times of conflict. While “captured” German art toured the United States after the war, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. also held onto exhibitions loaned from France before the war for its safety, and the MFAA itself mounted exhibitions of the art rescued at collection points and repositories.

The history told within this exhibition almost serves as a means of transparency into the museum/art world because it is telling the story of how the world came close to losing some of its greatest treasures, and in some cases did. However, the exhibition mainly serves to highlight and focus on the tremendous work of the individuals involved. It is expected that this exhibition will not only serve as a means of glorifying the efforts of the Monuments Men, mostly humble men and women who saw the task as their duty, but also to shed light on the unifying and universal nature of art and our shared cultures. It is intended that through telling this history, the audience will walk away with a deeper appreciation of the power and worth of art and its ability to unify nations and peoples, especially at a time when war and conflict seems constant and looting in many conflict-ridden places is rife even today.

### **Interactive Elements & Other Educational Materials**

After the introductory section of the exhibition, it is best to choose several Monuments officers and individuals important to their work to follow through the exhibition. We are faced with deciding whether to choose several individuals to highlight throughout the entire exhibition for the sake of continuity and understanding or another

option. We want to highlight individuals while also providing a narrative of general activity without overwhelming the visitor. Visitors could also choose to be given identity cards at the beginning of the exhibition with the name of an MFAA officer to identify throughout the exhibition amidst others. Another option would be to provide visitors with a card on which is an object, such as a major painting or a Jewish family's belonging. Somehow visitors could follow this object through the exhibition and gain an understanding of the journey of art and how it is possible for so much of it to have gone missing and still be missing, or learn how it was rescued. Providing this interactivity will allow visitors to feel connected to the material.

The material for this exhibition is very dense and it is of the utmost importance that visitors are able to interact with this exhibition without becoming over-saturated. In order to allow visitors of various ages and demographics to absorb as much information as possible and to connect with the content, the exhibition will integrate interactive elements to complement the material and attempt to engage visitors rather than provide too much text beside panels and objects as a rule. A large-scale project would be to build a replica of a portion of an actual salt mine repository to allow visitors to immerse themselves into the life of a Monuments person, what it felt like to uncover a mine repository like Alt Aussee or Merkers, as well as the challenges faced in protecting or moving objects found in these locations. While the mine replica may be small, the overall ambience of the mine can be replicated and provide information about why salt mines were widely used (stable humidity levels), what were some of the finds and how large the mines were (a large-scale photograph depicting the depth of a mine such as Alt Aussee can at least provide depth to a small replica). Allowing visitors of all ages to explore and open installations such as crates containing photographs of objects (or replicas of objects) along with interpretive material, such as photographs of actual

findings or objects in cases, will surely provide a quality experience that creates the thrill and evokes the magnitude of the jobs of the MFAA people.

Certainly, interactive touch-screen maps will also be used as this material covers many different geographic areas. It may be helpful to allow visitors to choose a Monuments officer on a screen and a map will provide the location of their work and a short description of their work in that location when selected. Maps will also be used to show the progress of the MFAA officers from invasion onward. Oral histories and first-hand experiences are also important to show, and can be done in a number of ways. Rather than put information on labels that we learned from oral histories, there should be a video section of the exhibition with interviews or voiceovers from the script of actual diaries and interviews in relevant areas of the exhibition, such as the mine. While it is not expected that most visitors will sit for more than several minutes to see a full-length program, a continuous video loop can show various clips from documentaries and interviews.