



**Libera Università Internazionale degli  
Studi Sociali Guido Carli**

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**History of the Protection of Cultural Heritage  
during the Second World War**

Prof. Federico Niglia

Francesca Persichetti  
099652

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Supervisor

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Candidate

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## Sommario

<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Chapter 1 – The Historical Roots behind Nazi Plunders .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1.1 Mein Kampf and Degenerate Art as Corrupter of Morality .....</b>	<b>6</b>
1.1.1 Education’s responsibilities for the moral decay of Germans .....	6
1.1.2 <i>Kunststätte</i> as Celebrators of <i>Entartete Kunst</i> .....	8
1.1.3 Arno Breker: Nazi Germany’s most favored artist.....	9
<b>1.2 The Difference between Nazi <i>Kunst Politik</i> and Fascism.....</b>	<b>10</b>
1.2.1 German Institutions Coordinating Cultural Politics .....	11
1.2.2 Art and Fascism.....	12
<b>1.3 Nazi Plunders.....</b>	<b>15</b>
1.3.1 Bücherverbrennungen: Nazi book burnings .....	15
1.3.2 Nazi Plunders in Eastern Europe .....	16
<b>2.1 Introduction.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>2.2 The true relationship between Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini.....</b>	<b>22</b>
2.2.1 Hitler’s second trip to Italy, and the “discovery” of Italy’s artistic heritage .....	25
<b>2.3 Artistic “exchange”, the first tactic of the Nazi plunders in Italy.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>2.4 The inner workings of Siviero’s organization.....</b>	<b>28</b>
2.4.1 Collaborators of Rodolfo Siviero’s restitution activity during World War 2 .....	29
2.4.2 Rodolfo Siviero’s description of the tactics adopted by the officials of Kunstschutz following 1942 .....	31
<b>2.5 Conclusion.....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Chapter 3 – The Monuments Men and the Creation of UNESCO .....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>3.1 Introduction.....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>3.2 The Rise of the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives .....</b>	<b>37</b>
3.2.1 Members of the MFAA and the secret operation of Rose Valland .....	39
<b>3.3 The Main Restitution Operations and the Discovery of the Altaussee Salt Mine .....</b>	<b>43</b>
3.3.1 The Discovery of the Altaussee Salt Mine .....	44

3.3.2 Juridic attempts to condemn Nazi plunders and the Problematics in the Restitution of Looted Art.....	46
3.4 The Foundation of UNESCO to ensure the Protection Cultural Heritage .....	49
3.4.1 The United Nations .....	49
3.4.2 The Foundation of UNESCO .....	50
3.4.3 The Hague Convention of 1954.....	51
3.5 Conclusion.....	52
4.0 CONCLUSION.....	53
5.0 BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	55





## INTRODUCTION

Within the masterpiece *War and Peace*, Lev Tolstoy sustained that, to study the laws of history, we must completely change the object of our investigation, leave kings, ministers, and generals aside, and study those homogenous and infinitesimal elements that determine the behavior of the masses.

As suggested by the Russian author, this thesis aims to investigate a branch of World War II that has often been left aside by history books: the Nazi Plunders and the threats that cultural property was a victim of.

Overshadowed by the atrocities of the concentration camps and the Jewish persecutions, the Nazi plunders are the final product of Hitler's somewhat philosophical theory of Degenerate Art and antisemitism, becoming Nazi Germany's most underrated arm against the Jewish community.

Many were the art historians, critics, and gallerists who had devoted their talent and knowledge by pledging their loyalty to the Führer, actively collaborating towards the burial of countless artistic movements, whether Impressionism, Cubism, Abstract Art, but mostly the artistic expression of an entire culture.

Thus, the first chapter of this thesis will provide an analysis of *Mein Kampf* and the concept of *entartete Kunst* ("degenerate art") to clarify the initial reasons behind the widest collection of looted art that history has ever witnessed. To fully understand the Nazi plunders, a historical background on Nazism and Fascism's relationship with art will be introduced. Indeed, art revealed to be of fundamental importance for the indoctrination of both German and Italian people. Art was both propaganda for the citizens of the Axis forces and a weapon against those populations that the Führer intended to eliminate from the face of the Earth.

Subsequently, the last two chapters will delve into the efforts of those men and women who had devoted their lives in honor of their passion and love for art. The second chapter will predominantly focus on the actions of Rodolfo Siviero, Italian art historian and antifascist spy, who engaged on a self-founded mission to restore the looted oeuvres by the Nazis from Italy. Attention will also be given to the two tactics employed by Germany to seize the masterpieces property of its major ally, Italy. Fascinated by Siviero's personality, this thesis will include excerpts of an interview I was able to entertain with expert Attilio Tori, ex-curator of the Museo Casa Rodolfo Siviero, with whom I was kindly put in contact through Gabriele Mazzi, current director of the museum.

As it will be explained in the second chapter, during the Second World War, an existential question was often brought up by art enthusiasts and heads of State: "*Is an artistic masterpiece more worthy than human lives?*". This thesis will not attempt to pretentiously answer such a complex matter, but will praise the actions of the Roberts Commission, Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives group (MFAA), and Rose Valland, who truly believed the correct answer to be: "yes, it is." Hence, the third chapter will revolve around the missions of the members of the MFAA, as well as on how their work sensibilized the international community on the importance of safeguarding cultural heritage, encouraging the creation of UNESCO.

# Chapter 1 – The Historical Roots behind Nazi Plunders

## 1.1 Mein Kampf and Degenerate Art as Corrupter of Morality

### 1.1.1 Education's responsibilities for the moral decay of Germans

Born in Braunau am Inn in 1889, Adolf Hitler showed great passion and attraction for art from a very young age.

Despite his financial difficulties, he found the opportunity to regularly attend opera concerts and to pursue painting, dreaming to become a professional artist.<sup>1</sup>

A dream that quickly faded once he was denied admission by the *Academy of Fine Arts* of Vienna.

Unsurprisingly, Hitler's interest for art was highly manifested in his policies as well. The first time the subject was politically introduced by him was in the autobiographical manifesto *Mein Kampf*, published on July 18, 1925.

Particularly relevant is chapter X, *Causes of the Collapse*, where the author delves into the causes of what he considered to be a severe collapse of virtuous morality. In this chapter, Adolf Hitler expressed his condemnation towards modern art, the assassin of what used to be a glorious and noble practice.

In order to introduce such concept, the chapter begins with a rather brute attribution of fault to the Jewish community for having sedimented in the Germans' mind the idea that the loss witnessed on November 11, 1918, was due to Germany's military collapse, when instead, he was convinced that an ill morality was the main problem.

*"The defeat was the first catastrophic visible result of a moral poisoning, a weakening of the will for self-preservation, and of the doctrines that, many years earlier, had begun to undermine the very foundations of the nation and the Reich".<sup>2</sup>*

Hence, Hitler's analysis of Germany's failure during the previous world conflict was very metaphysical and less empirical. Stressing the importance of a clean morality, sober and immune to the influences of the most primitive human senses, he argued that strict educational and institutional reforms were required. Indeed, the reason for such poisoning, he explained to

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<sup>1</sup> Hitler, Adolf - *Enciclopedia - Treccani*. (n.d.). Treccani. <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/adolf-hitler/>

<sup>2</sup> Hitler, A. H. (1926). *Mein Kampf* (2014th ed.). <https://annamariavolpi.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/mein-kampf.pdf> pages 70,71

be *“the great number of weaknesses in German education”*<sup>3</sup>, suing the foundation that led Germans to be *“liked because useful men, but little respected because of the weakness of their willpower”*.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the future Führer truly believed that education played a major role in the formation of just and uncorrupted men but failed to do so.

*“German education placed less value on character development, very little on encouraging joy and responsibility, and no value at all on the cultivation of willpower and decisiveness”*.<sup>5</sup>

Finding the efforts of the scholastic system insufficient and deranged, Adolf Hitler marked that the results of German education failed to produce strong men, who became professors of much knowledge but held their Motherland in lower regard than almost any other nation. Thus, additional passages intended to demonstrate the pressing need for a “new man” to be founded, a man who would be the complete opposite of what the monarchy desired its subjects to be: condescending.

*“The way in which the monarchy was approached consisted of not giving any answer, but simply agreeing with whatever His Majesty decided to order. And it was in this direction that the dignity of a free man was most necessary. Every decent man - and the best men of the state still are - will feel only repulsion when such nonsense is defended”*.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Hitler, A. H. (1926). *Mein Kampf* (2014th ed.). <https://annamariavolpi.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/mein-kampf.pdf> page 73

<sup>4</sup> Hitler, A. H. (1926). *Mein Kampf* (2014th ed.). <https://annamariavolpi.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/mein-kampf.pdf> Page 73

<sup>5</sup> Hitler, A. H. (1926). *Mein Kampf* (2014th ed.). <https://annamariavolpi.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/mein-kampf.pdf> Page 73

<sup>6</sup> Hitler, A. H. (1926). *Mein Kampf* (2014th ed.). <https://annamariavolpi.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/mein-kampf.pdf> pages 73

### 1. 1. 2 *Kunststätte* as Celebrators of *Entartete Kunst*

In the spirit of transmitting the ideals that would form new and strong men, Hitler appealed to the latin motto *mens sana in corpore sano*, promoting the teaching of the importance of sports, an element that is, ironically, shared by Eastern European communist countries.

*"The entire education should be designed to occupy a boy's free time in the productive cultivation of his own body. It must free itself from the notion that the management of the body is an individual matter. No one should be free to transgress at the expense of future generations, that is, of the race. The fight against the poisoning of the soul must be undertaken alongside the cultivation of the body".<sup>7</sup>*

Returning to the mens side of the phrase, Hitler despised any form of simple entertainment, thought as a means to alleviate the audience from the burdens of life, and thus condemned almost all the domains of *Art und Kultur* of his time.

Indeed, at the time, it was very common to forbid access to the younger population to the so called *Kunststätte*, art museums, as the oeuvres portrayed were commonly for adults only, a situation that Hitler defined as a sad sign of our internal decay that, rather than offering materials and sources to increase the educational interest of children and young adults, turned out to be attractions for their *blasés parents*.

Hitler's criticism of the modern arts was extremely appalled by the normalization and celebration of erotic thirst.

*"Today, all public life is a kind of forced bed for ideas and sexual attractions. Look at the fare offered by cinemas, theaters, and variety shows, and you can hardly deny that it is the most suitable food, especially for the young. Billboards and advertising kiosks unite to draw public attention in the most vulgar ways. Anyone who has not lost the ability to understand the souls of the young, will realize that this leads to serious harm. The life of the people must be freed from the suffocating scent of our modern eroticism, just as it must be from the vile, moralistic refusal to face facts".<sup>8</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup> Hitler, A. H. (1926). *Mein Kampf* (2014th ed.). <https://annamariavolpi.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/mein-kampf.pdf> pages 75

<sup>8</sup> Hitler, A. H. (1926). *Mein Kampf* (2014th ed.). <https://annamariavolpi.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/mein-kampf.pdf> page 75

Amused by the “*specter of antiquity*”<sup>9</sup>, Hitler understood that to create the basis for a new man, a new art, deprived of all the sick elements introduced in the last centuries, had to be founded.

During the Cultural Conference of the Nazi Party of 1933, held in Nuremberg, and attached to the Greco-Roman aesthetic, Hitler’s speech stated:

*“It is... no wonder that every politically heroic age immediately sets out to build a bridge through its art to a no less heroic past. The Greeks and Romans then suddenly seem very dear to the Germans, because their roots can be found in a common race, and therefore their racial offspring must also seek to repeat the immortal feats of the ancient peoples”*.<sup>10</sup>

To further diffuse a sense of disgust towards degenerate art, in 1937, Hitler organized two exhibitions in Munich: The Degenerate Art exhibition, featuring works and artists blacklisted by the Nazis (among which pillars of modern art as Marc Chagall, Kandinsky, and Picasso were included), and The Great German Art Exhibition, which the Führer supervised personally.<sup>11</sup>

### **1.1.3 Arno Breker: Nazi Germany’s most favored artist**

The *Größe Deutsche Kunstausstellung*, mostly featured the oeuvres of Arno Breker, the favorite sculptor of the Nazi regime, as, in his works, he truly captured the essence of the Aryan as the Prometheus of mankind. Features of the *Neuer Mensch*, symbol of health, beauty, and strength, were always present in his sculptures.

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<sup>9</sup> As explained in the book written by Jonathan Chapoutot, *Greeks, Romans, Germans*, when archeologist Winkelmann was commissioned by Cardinal Alessandro Albani the realization of a catalogue of his antiques collection, published in 1764, Germany’s bourgeoisie of the 18<sup>th</sup> century began to newly appreciate the ancient Greco-Roman style.

<sup>10</sup> Chapoutot, J. C. (2016). *Greeks, Romans, Germans*.

Jstor. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1f5g5m8>

<sup>11</sup> Poli, C. P. (Director). (2018). *Hitler contro Picasso*. (Documentary) Sky Italia .



Arno Breker, *Prometheus steals fire*, 1934, Bonn, Breker Museum<sup>12</sup>

The two exhibitions symbolized the beginning of a grand obsession for classical art, which led the two main characters of Nazi Germany, Adolf Hitler and Hermann Göring, to compete over personal art collections, escalating in the biggest art plunder of history.

## 1.2 The Difference between Nazi *Kunst Politik* and Fascism

It is undeniable that the Fascist and Nazi regimes presented shared values. From the tiniest elements, such as the black and brown shirts, to more relevant ones, such as the desire to transform their nations into great empires, Hitler and Mussolini were very alike.

However, art and architecture had two distinct roles for the two dictators. As described previously, what I've managed to notice in Hitler's writings and speeches is that Hitler truly believed that an appropriate artistic education would make his people worthy of the name Aryan, which he saw as the founders of culture and of everything we admire on Earth. His strictness in respect to Degenerate Art was not, as usually implied, simply founded on a

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<sup>12</sup> contributori di Wikipedia. (n.d.). *File:Arno Breker, Prometheus(1934).jpg* -

Wikipedia. [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Arno\\_Breker,\\_Prometheus\(1934\).jpg](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Arno_Breker,_Prometheus(1934).jpg)

symptom of vengeance towards a field that had been cruel to the Führer during his early adulthood.

On the other hand, Mussolini saw in art and architecture the tools to inculcate into Italians' minds the idea that the return of the Empire, thanks to his leadership, not only was possible but imminent.

### **1.2.1 German Institutions Coordinating Cultural Politics**

Historical evidence has proven that in Germany art was a serious matter, a subject so relevant that needed to be governed by the appropriate institutions. Thus, when appointed chancellor by Paul von Hindenburg in 1933, Hitler made it very clear during the first public meeting of the Stuttgart section of the Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur that institutional reforms for artistic domains were bound to happen.<sup>13</sup>

In 1934, on February 13, two important government agencies were introduced to the public by German composer Richard Strauss: the *Reichskulturkammer* (RKK, the Cultural Chamber of the Third Reich) and the *Reichsmusikkammer* (the Music Chamber of the Third Reich).

Operating as statutory corporations (regulating the music industry, museums, theaters and literature), the two institutions were created to promote Aryan culture. To achieve the elimination of cultural movements and the influence of populations despised by the Nazi regime, bans were published, listing the artists considered enemies or threats to Aryans. Among the many musicians banned from Germany, notorious composers such as Mahler, Mendelssohn, Schoenberg, and Debussy were included.

Indifferent to the dark side of the politics of the regime, Strauss praised the *Reichsmusikkammer* (RMK), stating that it was an institution German musicians had been waiting for for a long time.<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, Richard Strauss was nominated president of the RMK, and orchestra director Wilhem Furtwängler was appointed its vice president.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Solaro, L.S. *Il Saccheggio Nazista dell'Arte Europea*. Page 7

<sup>14</sup> *Reichskulturkammer e Reichsmusikkammer*. (n.d.). <https://holocaustmusic.org/it/politics-and-propaganda/third-reich/reichskulturkammer/>

<sup>15</sup> *Reichskulturkammer e Reichsmusikkammer*. (n.d.-b). <https://holocaustmusic.org/it/politics-and-propaganda/third-reich/reichskulturkammer/>

Nazis' administration of art and culture presented a paradox: on one side, its administration led to the tragic elimination of Jewish artists and of those who had manifested left-wing tendencies, while on the other hand, it can be seen that the Nazi's interest for the prosperity of art was real, as definite and substantial improvements in the standards of living and of investments for the field had been made, a concept that Paul Graener reiterated:

*"The great work of the RKK surpasses artistic professions... therefore, this tool was created to apply the superb design of corporate restructuring for the benefit of art and artists. This involves the renewal of the organization, as it constitutes the RKK, and specifically the RMK, for the safeguarding of the nation's intellectual and artistic life".<sup>16</sup>*

The importance attributed by Adolf Hitler to a pure morality, exclusively nourished by erudite influences, through the abolishment of genres perceived as fun or devoted to make the minds escape from the seriousness of reality, such as jazz, began to make Germans proud.

Alfred Rosenberg, the ideologue of the Nazi Party along with Adolf Hitler, explained:

*"Every great culture is identified with some philosophy that gives man the power to mold the world, which means to create culture... All political formations express a new life-feeling and come to an end only when the life-feeling no longer serves the general good of the people or the group. Thus every great period and every great national conception take their departure from the same source that gives rise to cultural creations".<sup>17</sup>* A sentiment that was largely shared by Mussolini as well.

### **1.2.2 Art and Fascism**

Discipline, obedience to authority, devotion to the Nation, Catholic values, and realism, were all principles promoted by the Fascist regime and qualities of the "new man" envisaged by Adolf Hitler.

An additional similarity is definitely represented by the will to promote the study of art history to enhance students' passion and reverence for the subject, through the idolization of classical studies.

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<sup>16</sup> Reichskulturkammer e Reichsmusikkammer. (n.d.-c). <https://holocaustmusic.ort.org/it/politics-and-propaganda/third-reich/reichskulturkammer/>

<sup>17</sup> Dorothy Thompson. 1940. *Culture under the Nazis*. [https://www.jstor.org/stable/20030741?read-now=1&seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/20030741?read-now=1&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)



However, Mussolini's attachment to Ancient Rome and the Greco-Roman aesthetic was more about politics than art, which was merely envisaged as an instrument to demonstrate the grandness and immortality of the Empire. In support of this comment, a fragment of Mussolini's speech before the March on Rome, in Udine, should be read.

*"In Rome, among those seven hills laden with history, one of the greatest spiritual marvels ever recorded in history has taken place: a universal religion has transformed itself, taking up again, in a different form, that empire which the Roman legions once extended to the ends of the earth. And we intend to make Rome the city of our spirit, a city that, purified and cleansed of all elements that corrupt and defile it, will become the beating heart, the vigorous spirit of the imperial Italy we dream of".<sup>18</sup>*

Rome, the eternal city, is the embodiment of the memories of the Roman Empire and main character of Mussolini's architectural propagandistic projects. During the Fascist regime, Rome became clay to be molded in the hands of architects as Marcello Piacentini, charged to remove any influence of trends far from the Romanic style and to emphasize the return of neoclassical architectures.

Slowly, white marble managed to sneak its way into the Roman scene, roads began to spread, and new areas, such as EUR, came to life. Visibly, the capital became symbol of the return of the imperialist era, and Mussolini the means to achieve it.

Architecture became propaganda, an instrument to annihilate the real Rome and to create the Fascist Rome, transforming it into the embodiment of Mussolini. This sensitive subject has created a fracture among today's art critics. Vittorio Sgarbi, famously known for his controversies and politically incorrect comments but ultimately for his immense knowledge of art history, has challenged the idea of Fascist art on various occasions.

While he recognizes that Mussolini commissioned the establishment of buildings and monuments, such as *il Colosseo Quadrato*, providing specific guidelines on the architectural elements required, Sgarbi argues that political regimes can never exercise enough influence

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<sup>18</sup> La Penna, A. L. P. (n.d.). Il culto della romanità nel periodo fascista. *La Rivista "Roma" E L'Istituto Di Studi Romani*. [https://www.reteparri.it/wp-content/uploads/ic/IC\\_217\\_1999\\_1\\_r.pdf](https://www.reteparri.it/wp-content/uploads/ic/IC_217_1999_1_r.pdf)

over art to establish a new artistic wave. According to him, artists' ideas and intentions will always emerge and prevail.

*"Art is a collective of individuals and artists who may or may not have aligned with the ruling power of their time. However, their work transcends the limits of that power. An artist may have created whatever the ruling authority demanded, but their identity will always prevail over that power".<sup>19</sup>*

Despite Professor Sgarbi's perplexities and opposition, the binomial between art and Fascism existed, though a distinction between the severity of Mussolini and Hitler's attitude on the matter is evident.

The Italian dictator never officially proclaimed to be against certain artistic movements, on the contrary, antifascist artists such as Pirandello and Morandi were never censored.

At the inauguration of the *Novecento* exhibition at Lino Pesaro's gallery in Milan on March 26, 1923, the Duce stated:

*"One cannot build a great nation with small people. One cannot govern while ignoring art and artists; art is an essential manifestation of the human spirit; it begins with the history of humanity and will follow humanity until its last days. And in a country like Italy, a government that disregarded art and artists would be deficient. I declare that I am far from the idea of encouraging anything that might resemble State art. Art belongs to the sphere of the individual. The state has only one duty: not to sabotage it, to ensure humane conditions for artists, and to encourage them from both an artistic and national perspective. I wish to state that the government I have the honor to lead is a sincere friend of art and artists".<sup>20</sup>*

Notably, Mussolini had not formally recognized an explicit artistic movement as that of the State, yet his favor and support for the group of painters baptized *Il Novecento* (founded in 1922 by Margherita Sarfatti, which merged elements of the Classical Roman heritage and of the Renaissance in a fusion with modernity) is undeniable.

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<sup>19</sup> Sgarbi, V. (2024). *Arte e fascismo*. Page 23

<sup>20</sup> Sgarbi, V. (2024). *Arte e fascismo*. Page 38

## 1.3 Nazi Plunders

### 1.3.1 Bücherverbrennungen: Nazi book burnings

During the Second World War, Nazi Germany became a thief and disrupter of over one fifth of Western art, a phenomenon that is now known as the Nazi plunder. In fact, at the end of the war, the government of the United States estimated that German forces and other Nazi agents had seized or forced the sale of approximately 250,000 pieces of art, but further research has demonstrated that the actual amount, including destroyed books and paintings is around five million.

Before the escalation of the Second World War, the disruption of Jewish culture, had already begun through the destruction of their artistic heritage. Believing that the Jewish community, “guided by egoism” and “with no culture of its own”, was the exact opposite of the Aryan race, Hitler exploited his power to eliminate, together with degenerate art, all Jewish literature.

*“Whenever Aryan blood mixes with that of inferior populations, the result is the end of the race that upholds culture”.<sup>21</sup>*

These are the words with which Adolf Hitler decided to open the eleventh chapter of *Mein Kampf, Nation and Race*. Convinced that the human race could be divided into three categories: founders, maintainers, and destroyers of culture, he proceeded to explain that only the Aryan race is the founder of “everything we admire on the Earth”.<sup>22</sup> Thus, he elucidated that the fruits of the creative processes led by Aryans shall not be ruined and warned his readers of the risk they would be in if contaminated by the “inferior” categories, which exist only as “substitutes of technical tools without whom a superior development wouldn’t have been possible”.<sup>23</sup>

To support his thesis, Hitler provided as an example the American continent:

*“North America, whose populations consist mostly of German elements that mixed very little with inferior colored nations, shows a humanity and culture very different from that of Central and*

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<sup>21</sup> Hitler, A. H. (1906). *Mein Kampf* (2014th ed.). <https://annamariavolpi.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/mein-kampf.pdf> Page 81

<sup>22</sup> Hitler, A. H. (1906). *Mein Kampf* (2014th ed.). <https://annamariavolpi.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/mein-kampf.pdf> page 81

<sup>23</sup> Hitler, A. H. (1906). *Mein Kampf* (2014th ed.). <https://annamariavolpi.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/mein-kampf.pdf> page 82

*South America, where the colonizers, primarily of Latin origin, freely mixed their blood with that of the indigenous people. If we take the above as an example, we clearly recognize the effects of racial mixing. The German man on the American continent, having remained pure and not mixed, has risen to be its master, as long as he does not fall into the shame of mixing blood".*<sup>24</sup>

Hitler's racist philosophy incredibly shaped the thinking of the younger generations, leading to the emergence of a series of student organizations, among which a particularly notorious example is the Deutsche Studentenschaft (Association of German Students).

The Deutsche Studentenschaft is known for its propagandistic strategy of burning books conflicting with the Nazi thought, signing the beginning of many Bücherverbrennungen (Nazi book burnings).

As reported in *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, "May 10, 1933, when the first Nazi book burnings took place, it was one of the darkest dates in the history of European culture", "symbol of a petrifying act of psychological violence, as it aims to give the idea and to demonstrate the annihilation of the Jewish population and of its culture".<sup>25</sup>

The same day, Joseph Goebbels, Minister of the Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda, stated: "the evil spirit of the past will be eliminated by the flames".

### **1.3.2 Nazi Plunders in Eastern Europe**

Hitler's racism was vast, it was not limited to the Jewish community only, it was limitless. The idea of *Lebensraum* (vital space), a term coined by Friedrich Ratzel in 1897 referring to a geographic area within which a particular species develops, was transformed by Hitler into a concept referring to the German need to expand towards east to conquer new lands and resources. In his vision, the Slavic community was inferior to Aryans and was meant to be exploited by the founders of culture. Russians and Poles were maintainers of culture, thus people to be exploited in the labor force controlled by Aryans, undeserving of human rights.

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<sup>24</sup> Hitler, A. H. (1906). *Mein Kampf* (2014th ed.). <https://annamariavolpi.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/mein-kampf.pdf> page 81

<sup>25</sup> Dondi, M. (2013, May 9). Nazismo, il gigantesco rogo di libri del maggio 1933. *Il Fatto Quotidiano*. <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2013/05/09/nazismo-gigantesco-rogo-di-libri-del-maggio-1933/588174/>

One of first steps of the Nazis' expansion towards Eastern Europe was a result of Britain's appeasement politics, in hope to avoid a possible future conflict with Nazi Germany.<sup>26</sup> In fact, accepting Hitler's territorial requests, Neville Chamberlain and Édouard Daladier agreed to the German annexation of part of Czechoslovakia, during the Munich Agreement.<sup>27</sup>

The Treaty of Munich was signed on September 30, 1938, by Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Neville Chamberlain, and Édouard Daladier. Particularly disturbing is the absence of any representative of Czechoslovakia, not only as the agreement deals with a piece of its territory, but also as Czechoslovakia was an ally of both France and the UK. This absence is the reason behind the Treaty of Munich being also known as the Munich Betrayal.

Threatened by Czechoslovakia's territorial proximity to Germany as an ally of both France and the UK, it was of extreme importance for the Nazis to conquer it. On March 15, 1939, the Germans succeeded in their intent. Despite Czechoslovakia's well developed military industry, its army was relatively small, permitting Hitler to conquer the country without employing excessive gun forces. Taken by the Nazis, Emil Hácha, president of Czechoslovakia, was forced to pledge his loyalty to Nazi Germany and to Konstantin von Neurath, Reich Protector of Bohemia and Moravia.<sup>28</sup>

Once occupied, Göring and other state officials exploited their power to confiscate artworks from private and public collections in Czechoslovakia. Particularly touched was the art collection of Rudolf II and his Wunderkammer, filled with unique pieces such as ostrich eggs, rhino horns, tortoiseshells, mother of pearls, and corals. The Holy Roman Emperor between 1576 and 1612, then King of Hungary and Croatia between 1572 and 1608, was evidently also devoted to the paintings of the Renaissance, owning some of the works of Tiziano, Veronese, Albrecht Dürer, and Pieter Brueghel. Many of the oeuvres he possessed were commissioned by

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<sup>26</sup> *Appeasement - enciclopedia - Treccani*. (n.d.).

Treccani. <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/appeasement/>

<sup>27</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. (1998, July 20). *Munich Agreement | Definition, Summary, & Significance*. Encyclopedia

Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Munich-Agreement>

<sup>28</sup> L'occupazione nazista della Cecoslovacchia. (2019, March 15). *Il*

*Post*. <https://www.ilpost.it/2019/03/15/loccupazione-nazista-della-cecoslovacchia/>

him through the ambassadors of the Italian courts residing in Prague, thus creating a precious and notably valuable collection.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, as remembered by Richard J. Evans, Czechoslovakia experienced the loss of many treasures exhibited in the Czech National Museum and in the library of Charles University in Prague to Nazi Germany, while Czech oeuvres inspired by Cubism and Surrealism were instantaneously destroyed as degenerate.

Czechoslovakia's experience was tolerable if compared to the occupation of Poland, as Hitler vowed to wipe Polish culture and identity off the face of the Earth.<sup>30</sup>

Invaded on September 1, 1939, the Nazis justified this action by stating that the Polish government had the intent to persecute the Germans residing in their country.

Suddenly, following the attack of 2000 tanks, 900 bombers, 400 fighter planes, and 1.5 million men, large quantities of cultural heritage, whether books, paintings, or sculptures were taken from Poland.<sup>31</sup> Polish aristocrats were threatened, in order to hand over their most valuable possessions to German authorities. Among the notable victims of the Nazi plunders was the aristocratic family Czartoryski, owner of an enviable and priceless art collection, which included *La Dama con l'Ermellino*, by Leonardo da Vinci.<sup>32</sup>

Jewels, musical instruments, furniture and ancient books were looted and meticulously registered together with the artworks and religious objects stolen by the Nazis.

A scripture that was then again copied in the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. The exception was that, under the communist regime, the Soviets had already removed many cultural treasures, as

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<sup>29</sup> Blackwoodv. (2020, May 8). *ArtShaker #51: Rodolfo II d'Asburgo e la sua collezione d'arte e curiosità*. LO SPAZIO DI

BEHEMOTH. <https://lospaziodibehemoth.wordpress.com/2020/05/08/artshaker-51-rodolfo-ii-dasburgo-e-la-sua-collezione-darte-e-curiosita/>

<sup>30</sup> Richard J. Evans. *Art in Time of War*. 2011. Page 21

<sup>31</sup> Enciclopedia dell'Olocausto (n.d.) <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/it/article/invasion-of-poland-fall->

<sup>32</sup> Documentari Arte e Cultura. (2017, January 8). *I predatori dell'arte perduta - Monuments Men* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6V12nDzJbRY>



the Bolsheviks had already confiscated numerous private properties, alongside with the goods found inside.<sup>33</sup>

However, the Nazis did manage to take away the furniture contained in the famous Amber Room, given to Peter the Great by King Friedrich Wilhelm I of Prussia. Ultimately, 279 paintings were stolen from Kharkov.

These cases marked the beginning of the biggest and most terrifying plunders in history. Hermann Göring, skilled fighter pilot of the German Air Force during World War I, then politician, general, and trusted right-hand man of Hitler during World War II, was the most guilty figure and brain behind the Nazi plunder.

Known to be fond of an eccentric and luxurious lifestyle, owner of ten houses, castles, and hunting lodges (maintained at taxpayers' expense), Göring is also author of a great paradox: over 1800 prohibited oeuvres (1300 paintings, 250 sculptures, 108 tapestries and 175 assorted *objets d'art*), mostly taken from Jewish families of the upper class, were found exhibited in the privacy of his residence, Karinhall, outside of Berlin, contrarily to Hitler's wishes to avoid ostentatious displays of personal wealth.<sup>34</sup>



An interior of Göring's castel Karinhall<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Richard J. Evans. *Art in Time of War*. 2011. Page 22

<sup>34</sup> Richard J. Evans. *Art in Time of War*. 2011. Page 20

<sup>35</sup> *DHM - Kunstsammlung Hermann Göring*.

(n.d.). [https://www.dhm.de/datenbank/goering/dhm\\_goering.php?seite=16](https://www.dhm.de/datenbank/goering/dhm_goering.php?seite=16)

As reported in *Art in the Time of War* by Richard J. Evans, it was more than common during the war for German soldiers to “*break into the homes of Jews, stealing whatever they wanted, or to stop Jewish women on the streets and to divest them on the spot of their fur coats and jewelry or for the SS and Gestapo to deprive Vienna’s most prominent Jewish families with orders to confiscate the contents*”.<sup>36</sup>

The Nazi plunderer’s aim was not just to eliminate degenerate art or to deprive Jewish families of their goods, but also to make Germany the possessor of the most famous and precious masterpieces. Chasing the belief that Germans were superior in all senses than any other race or population, the Nazis used it as an excuse to appropriate for themselves and their country the products of other cultures, stating that only Germany could be capable and worthy of their protection and valorization.

This led to an impressive art collection, as previous plunders enacted by emperors such as Napoleon cannot be compared to the vastness of the oeuvres taken by the Nazis, and also to a huge market of looted art. Indeed, it was quite common for art dealers to collaborate with Germany’s regime.

As reported in *Art Dealer Networks in the Third Reich and in the Postwar Period* by Jonathan Petropoulos, art dealer Karl Haberstock explained to Hitler during a meeting the importance of introducing a law permitting the sale of oeuvres considered degenerate from German state collections.<sup>37</sup>

Slowly, art dealing became a phenomenon developing hand in hand with the administration of the Nazi regime, slipping beyond the control of the Third Reich. As noted in Jonathan Petropoulos’ studies, it almost became a competing economic asset for anyone possessing the status of Reichsminister. Key figures of Germany’s political scene as Minister Joseph Goebbels, Reichsjugendführer Baldur von Schirach and Heinrich Himmler (the *Reichsführer-SS*), managed to create their own cultural organizations and cultural policies, while proceeding to enrich their private art collections, corrupting Hitler’s “moral” philosophy.

In conclusion, this chapter, whose aim was to introduce and to inspect Hitler’s initial philosophy concerning art, has shown the truth of Plato’s words: no man is incorruptible, the luxuries of life will always tempt and attract humankind. Thus, plunders and the atrocities they entailed,

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<sup>36</sup> Richard J. Evans. *Art in Time of War*. 2011. Page 21

<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Petropoulos. *Art Dealer Networks in the Third Reich and in The Post War Period*.



originally carried out in search of a morality pure and free from degenerate elements, evolved into an economic competition over who possessed more. The oeuvres that have been rescued are now displayed as immortal testimonies of the most dreadful artistic seizure, whose historical background is the Holocaust.

## Chapter 2 – Nazi Plunders in Italy: Context, Techniques, and the Role of Rodolfo Siviero

### 2.1 Introduction

UNESCO defines cultural heritage as *“the legacy of the past that we benefit from today and pass on to future generations”*.<sup>38</sup> In addition, it asserts that *“our cultural and natural heritage is an irreplaceable source of life and inspiration”*.

During the Second World War, an existential question was often brought up by art critics and heads of state: *“Is an artistic masterpiece more worthy than human lives?”* This chapter will not attempt to pretentiously answer such a complex matter but will delve into the lives and efforts of those art devotees who thought it did, during a war that provoked over 65 million deaths.

This chapter will predominantly focus on the actions of an independent organization, born from Rodolfo Siviero’s efforts to return and safeguard Italy’s artistic patrimony from Nazi plunders. These efforts often involved collaboration with partisans and members of the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives program.<sup>39</sup> To properly reveal the true tactics of such robberies and to achieve an elaborate description of the Nazi plunders in Italy and of the efforts to impede them, a detailed scientific analysis of the relationship between the Nazi occupation of Italy and the two European dictators of the Axis powers, filled with sentiments of jealousy, tension, and fear, must be underlined.

### 2.2 The true relationship between Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini

Despite appearances, the Nazi plunders were not performed only in enemy countries, as Italy was a tremendous victim of art stolen by Nazi Germany. As previously stated, to provide a

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<sup>38</sup> Unesco Commissione Nazionale Italiana per l’Unesco. (2024b, August 2). *Patrimonio Mondiale - Unesco Commissione Nazionale Italiana per l’Unesco*. Unesco Commissione Nazionale Italiana per L’Unesco. <https://www.unesco.it/it/iniziative-dellunesco/patrimonio-mondiale/>

<sup>39</sup> The MFAA program was an organization created by the US in collaboration with the Allied forces to reclaim the stolen art pieces by Germany during the Second World War.

detailed outline of the plunders in Italy, the relationship between Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler ought to be introduced.

In 1926, Adolf Hitler was relatively new to politics, he had just begun to abandon the idea of becoming an artist but was very intrigued by the figure of Benito Mussolini. Hoping to establish a contact with the Italian dictator, he wrote him a letter asking for an autographed picture. However, the letter was sent to the Italian embassy in Berlin, which declined the request. It was only after his nomination as Germany's chancellor that Mussolini dignified his political admirer of attention.

In 1934, Adolf Hitler was invited by Benito Mussolini in Venice. Historians as Emilio Gentile describe Hitler as particularly intimidated by the grandness of the Duce's uniform, as well as by the luxurious chambers he was given in the Grand Hotel of Venice, facing the Grand Canal<sup>40</sup>. Indeed, during Hitler's first visit to Italy, which was also his first time outside Austria and Germany, Mussolini's political figure was highly established in Italy, given his ten years of ruling. The Italian dictator showed off *la Gioventù Fascista* in an organized parade and gave a speech in the astonishingly beautiful Piazza San Marco in front of seventy thousand enthusiastic Italians, making the German chancellor feel increasingly uncomfortable in his simple clothing. But behind that evident discomfort, Hitler felt that he could do better and began to plan Germany's preparations for the incoming war.

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<sup>40</sup> *Passato e Presente 2017/18 - 1938: Hitler in Italia - Video - RaiPlay*. (n.d.).

RaiPlay. <https://www.raiplay.it/video/2018/04/Passato-e-presente---1938-HITLER-IN-ITALIA-8c5b15d4-4dd8-4e06-b91b-ecd18528c54d.html>



Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, Venice June, 1934<sup>41</sup>

Unlike general beliefs, in the early 1930s, the relationship between the two main antagonists of World War II wasn't solidified. Mussolini was very untrustworthy when it came to the German Führer, as he knew his plans to annex Austria to Germany, a plan that he had expressed he was not in favor of. In fact, the Duce and Austria's chancellor, Engelbert Dollfuß, shared a dear friendship, which made Mussolini doubt Hitler when he had promised him to abandon his plans for annexation. Fairly enough, Mussolini's fears proved to be right, given that on the 25th of July, 1934, Dollfuß was murdered by the Austrian National Socialists<sup>42</sup>.

At this point of the relationship, it is understandable to attain the possibility that the Duce began to fear Hitler, as it would explain his reaction to the German invasion of Austria, held between the 11th and 12th of March, 1938. Mussolini was not given any anticipation of the invasion, and yet when the Prince of Cassia, commander of the Nazi assault units and son-in-law of the King

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<sup>41</sup> *Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, Venice June* by Alfred Eisenstaedt on artnet.

(n.d.). <https://www.artnet.com/artists/alfred-eisenstaedt/adolf-hitler-and-benito-mussolini-venice-june-MpQOiHy-GRqIsf3XijcMw2>

<sup>42</sup> Jean. (2021, September 5). *Dollfuss, il piccolo Millimetternich*. Nati per La

Storia. <https://natiperlastoria.home.blog/2021/09/05/dollfuss-il-piccolo-millimetternich/#~:text=Engelbert%20Dollfuss%2C%20un%20cattolico%20di,%E2%80%999inizio%20dell%E2%80%99era%20nazista>

of Italy, was sent to Rome to report the event, he then found himself calling the German Führer to tell him that the news was well accepted.

Pleased with the feedback, Hitler told his Italian ally that he wouldn't forget his positive reaction and promised to stand by him for better or for worse<sup>43</sup>.

### **2.2.1 Hitler's second trip to Italy, and the "discovery" of Italy's artistic heritage**

Hitler's second trip to Italy is very important in the context of the Nazi plunders. In fact, in 1938, he demanded a second trip to Italy, more specifically to Florence, in the capacity of archeologist and art expert. Mussolini accepted, finding it a chance to demonstrate Italy's military capacity, he organized a detailed tour whose first stop was Rome, followed by Naples, and Florence. Coincidentally, accompanied by high-ranking Nazi officials such as Joseph Goebbels and Joachim von Ribbentrop, Hitler's first stop, in a trip whose official aim was to inspect the power of the Italian army, turned out to be Galleria Borghese, known for its majestic collection of artistic pieces of pillars of the Renaissance such as Lorenzo Bernini, Caravaggio, Tiziano, and Raffaello. The trip did include military exhibitions, for example, on May 5<sup>th</sup>, Mussolini organized for his German guests a demonstration of the capacities of the Italian Navy, but the real gem, in the eyes of the Führer, turned out to be Florence<sup>44</sup>. Indeed, Mussolini ordered the visit to the Tuscan capital to be accompanied by Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli.<sup>45</sup> In only one day, the most important figures of the Nazi regime received a detailed lecture on the masterpieces present in Palazzo Pitti, the Uffizi, and Palazzo Vecchio.

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<sup>43</sup> *Passato e Presente 2017/18 - 1938: Hitler in Italia - Video - RaiPlay*. (n.d.-b).

RaiPlay. <https://www.raipplay.it/video/2018/04/Passato-e-presente---1938-HITLER-IN-ITALIA-8c5b15d4-4dd8-4e06-b91b-ecd18528c54d.html>

<sup>44</sup> "3 maggio 1938 - Viaggio di Hitler in Italia." (2004, May 3). Portale Storico Della Presidenza

Della Repubblica. <https://archivio.quirinale.it/aspr/gianni-bisiach/AV-002-000139/3-maggio-1938-viaggio-hitler-italia#:~:text=Il%203%20maggio%201938%2C%20Benito,von%20Ribbentrop%20e%20Rudolf%20Hess.>

<sup>45</sup> Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli was an Italian archeologist and art historian.

This visit is believed to be among the most influential sources of inspiration behind the Nazi plunders in Italy, as it contributed to the Germans' knowledge about the masterpieces safeguarded in the various Italian museums.



Hitler's visit to Galleria Borghese<sup>46</sup>

## 2.3 Artistic “exchange”, the first tactic of the Nazi plunders in Italy

In 1937, Rodolfo Siviero, a notorious art critic of Florence specialized in the Renaissance, was contacted by the *Servizio Informazioni Militari* (SIM)<sup>47</sup> to collaborate on a secret mission.

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<sup>46</sup> *IL VIAGGIO DEL FUHRER IN ITALIA – V GIORNATA – ROMA – Visite: al Museo delle Terme, alla Galleria Borghese, a Palazzo Venezia. Dimostrazione popolare in Piazza Venezia.* (2019b, April 24). LUCE PER LA

DIDATTICA. <https://luceperladidattica.com/2019/04/29/ranuccio-bianchi-bandinelli-accompagnatore-ufficiale-ad-alcuni-monumenti-e-musei-di-adolf-hitler-in-occasione-del-viaggio-in-italia-1938/il-viaggio-del-fuhrer-in-italia-v-giornata-roma-visite-al-museo-delle-terme-alla-galleria-borghese-a-palazzo-venezia-dimostrazione-popolare-in-piazza-venezia-2/>

<sup>47</sup> The Servizio Informazioni Military, founded on October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1925, sanctioned by Royal Decree No. 1809/25, became a particularly active body in 1934 under the direction of Colonel Mario Roatta.

Pinto, F. P. (2020). *L'UOMO CHE SALVÒ LA BELLEZZA*. Harper Collins.

The expert was sent to Erfurt, a German town located in the southern part of the Thuringia Basin, by Alberto Pariani, Undersecretary of War and Coordinator of Covert Operations, tasked with gathering intelligence on the annexation of Austria by Germany. Unfortunately, little is known about Siviero's secret tasks in Germany, as the diaries historians have found of that period present numerous ambiguities, presumably purposely written.<sup>48</sup> The most shared hypothesis, deduced from his interviews and statements, concerns his involvement in the operation to also oversee the vast exchanges of artistic heritage between the highest officials of the Fascist and Nazi regime, which resulted in a huge gain for Germany and a wide loss for Italians. In fact, within the documentary *Rodolfo Siviero, Il Recupero dell'Arte Trafugata*, which includes direct excerpts of interviews made to Rodolfo Siviero, the art critic explained that before the Armistice of Cassibile, signed by Major-General Walter Bedell Smith and Brigade-General Giuseppe Castellano, the "technique" used by the elites of the Nazi regime to obtain a vast share of Italy's artistic heritage was that of illicit exchanges.

*"In the love that existed between Nazism and Fascism, a desire for possession of this spiritual representation of Italian love, anomaly works of art, was developing. This led to incredible acquisitions, which were based on a certain friendly relationship among the various leaders. Those involved were not insignificant figures but high-ranking personalities of Nazism, accompanied by top experts who were skilled in selecting well from those Italian families in which even antique dealers could not gain access. Thus began this work of plundering, which was essentially a form of collecting and fostering closer spiritual and cultural ties between Italy and Germany."*<sup>49</sup>

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SIUSA - Servizio informazioni militari - SIM. (n.d.). <https://siusa-archivi.cultura.gov.it/cgi-bin/siusa/pagina.pl?TipoPag=prodente&Chiave=53534>

<sup>48</sup> *Sistema di informazione per la sicurezza della Repubblica - a protezione degli interessi politici, militari, economici, scientifici ed industriali dell'Italia.*

(n.d.b). <https://www.sicurezzanazionale.gov.it/contenuti/rodolfo-siviero-il-monument-man-italiano>

<sup>49</sup> arte&pittura. (2016, February 29). *Rodolfo Siviero Il recupero dell'arte trafugata* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Wk9PGUvibo> (Segment 3:42-6:00)



Conspicuously, despite the consent of high exponents of fascism, nothing was legal about these transactions: the oeuvres in question were under the jurisdiction of the *Supreme Council of Fine Arts of Italy* and couldn't be removed from Italian soil, let alone become a private possession of some German official.

Evidence of the illegality of the act lies in the means used to effectuate the transport of such masterpieces, as secret trains were employed, and the oeuvres were meticulously covered.

Once Siviero faced the expulsion from Germany as *persona non grata* in 1938, thus ending the mission assigned to him by SIM, the art critic decided to take matters into his own hands.

## 2.4 The inner workings of Siviero's organization

Siviero's interest in the safeguard of Italian art from Nazi Germany was first driven by his dear friendship with colleague Giorgio Castelfranco, a fellow art historian of Jewish heritage and director of Palazzo Pitti, who was a victim of the Fascist racial laws.<sup>50</sup> Once he had returned to Florence, Siviero began an independent and clandestine operation, whose aim was to return the Italian artistic legacy stolen by Germany.

Castelfranco agreed to put his residence at the service of the operation, which, as Rodolfo Siviero shared during a future interview, was actioned by the most diverse group of people<sup>51</sup>.

*"The participants were not exactly particularly qualified in the field of art history, nor were they of high social rank. I had chosen them from a variety of professions, whether they were university*

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<sup>50</sup> *Giorgio Castelfranco: un monument man poco conosciuto - Regione Toscana.* (n.d.-

b). <https://www.regione.toscana.it/-/giorgio-castelfranco-un-monument-man-poco-conosciu->

<sup>1</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Regione Toscana. (2014). *Giorgio Castelfranco: Da Leonardo a De Chirico. Le carte di un intellettuale ebreo nell'Italia del Fascismo* [Catalogo della mostra]. Museo Casa Siviero.



*professors, workers, or had completely opposing political tendencies. For me, the important thing was that they all intended to fight the Germans and free Italy from the Nazi occupation.”*<sup>52</sup>

#### **2.4.1 Collaborators of Rodolfo Siviero’s restitution activity during World War 2**

Veritably, Siviero’s description of the members attached to his mission is quite accurate. Luigi Sacconi was a university professor of general chemistry, Cesare Toccacfondi worked in a café, and then there was Sergeant Major Rino Cioni. Among the people cooperating in his mission, particularly relevant was Giuseppe Sardelli, an art critic and museum guide of Florence, in charge of monitoring the Nazi’s movements on behalf of the *Kunstschutz*, a service of the Wehrmacht established in 1943 to safeguard Italian works of art<sup>53</sup>. Driven by his strong antifascist values and passion for art, which he stated to be for Florence “*a reason of life, rather than a mere general interest in his subject of expertise.*”<sup>54</sup> Sardelli acted as a sort of pathfinder, guiding Siviero to the locations in Northern Italy where the artworks stolen from Tuscany were taken, to then be dispatched among SS officials and Nazi politicians.

Ever since 1933, the Catholic Church witnessed contrasting opinions on Nazism, Pope Pius XI never hid his aversion for the third Reich. In fact, following his refuge at Castel Gandolfo, during Hitler’s visit to Italy, the Pope publicly demonstrated how alarming he thought Hitler’s incoming closeness to Mussolini was<sup>55</sup>. This brief digression aims to introduce the collaboration of Padre

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<sup>52</sup> arte&pittura. (2016, February 29). *Rodolfo Siviero Il recupero dell’arte trafugata* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Wk9PGUvibo> (Segment 13:50-14:09)

<sup>53</sup> Chiesurin, A. (2022, August 8). *Rodolfo Siviero #4 | 8 settembre 1943: una data cruciale per i piani tedeschi*. ZirArtmag. <https://www.zirartmag.com/2022/01/03/rodolfo-siviero-8-settembre-1943-una-data-cruciale-per-i-piani-tedeschi/>

<sup>54</sup> arte&pittura. (2016, February 29). *Rodolfo Siviero Il recupero dell’arte trafugata* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Wk9PGUvibo> (Segment 15:28-15:58)

<sup>55</sup> *Dossier - Castelgandolfo e i Papi*. (n.d.). Famiglia Cristiana. <https://www.famigliacristiana.it/articolo/dossier-castelgandolfo.aspx>

Alfonso Turchetti in Siviero's mission. Indeed, Catholic churches are known to be embellished with priceless masterpieces and Göring was particularly interested in the seizure of *L'Annunciazione del Beato Angelico*.

To impede such confiscation, Rodolfo Siviero suggested to Giovanni Poggi, Superintendent of Fine Arts in Florence, to rush over to the convent of Montecarlo before the Germans. As reported in Chiara Calcagno's article *L'Annunciazione del Beato Angelico e quel "No" ai nazisti*, Poggi, together with two construction workers and Padre Alfonso Turchetti, removed the masterpiece from the wall and transported it to the secret cellars of the Uffizi, where it would be safe<sup>56</sup>.

It was only following the end of World War Two that Padre Alfonso felt free to share the dynamics of what happened once Captain Wolf burst inside the church to request the painting, accompanied by two additional Nazi soldiers and an architect.

*"Göring was a lover of art and knew the painting well; he intended to retrieve it to include it, along with other paintings stolen from the area, in a gallery dedicated to Hitler. When the soldiers asked me why the painting was not inside the Church, I explained that it had been taken away on orders from the Vatican and I showed them a fake document, that we had made, to prove it"*<sup>57</sup>.

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<sup>56</sup> Calcagno, C., & Calcagno, C. (2021, August 4). *L'Annunciazione del Beato Angelico e quel*

*"No" ai nazisti* | UP Magazine Arezzo. UP Magazine

Arezzo. <https://www.upmagazinearezzo.it/lannunciazione-del-beato-angelico-e-quel-no-ai-nazisti/>

<sup>57</sup> arte&pittura. (2016, February 29). *Rodolfo Siviero Il recupero dell'arte trafugata* [Video].

YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Wk9PGUvibo> (Segment 21:03-23:00)



Annunciazione del Beato Angelico<sup>58</sup>

#### 2.4.2 Rodolfo Siviero's description of the tactics adopted by the officials of Kunstschutz following 1942

In Italy, the first form of plunders, supervised by Hans Gerhard Evers, was masked in the name of "friendship", a tactic that radically evolved into a transparent and unbridled robbery on behalf of the *Kunstschutz* following the Armistice of Cassibile and the occupation of the Allies.

In fact, Bernhard Rust, the Minister of Culture of the Reich, ordered to archeologist Martin Schede to assist SS soldiers based in Italy in the fulfillment of their new primary task: to steal as many artifacts as possible and to burn what couldn't be transported. Victims of the aforementioned order, were for example the Nemi ships, preserved in Naples, and the deposit

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<sup>58</sup> Rodolfo Siviero. (2023, January 21). I Moti Dell'Arte. <https://imotidellarte.it/storia-dellarte-le-mie-lezioni/tutela-del-patrimonio-artistico/le-opere-trafugate-nella-storia-e-il-destino-delle-citta-durante-i-conflitti-armati/rodolfo-siviero/>

of the Archive of the State in Naples on September 30, 1943<sup>59</sup>. The custodian of the Nemi ships explained that these events were rather unstoppable, indeed, he reported that despite him being well aware of the intentions of the SS troops to ignite them there was no authority to call.

*“The fire was deliberately set. Twenty days before the blaze, some German officers came and said they would burn the ships, which in my opinion was a product of mere vandalism, but I couldn’t do anything to stop it. There was no group of partisans that could impede it”<sup>60</sup>.*



Nemi ships following the fire enacted by the Nazi<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Fondazioneterradotranto. (2018, August 29). *L’incendio del deposito dell’Archivio di Stato di Napoli*. Il Delfino E La Mezzaluna - Fondazione Terra D’Otranto. <https://www.fondazioneterradotranto.it/2015/03/10/lincendio-del-deposito-dellarchivio-di-stato-di-napoli/>

<sup>60</sup> arte&pittura. (2016, February 29). *Rodolfo Siviero Il recupero dell’arte trafugata* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Wk9PGUvibo> (Segment 10:23-11:37)

<sup>61</sup> Maraina. (2023, April 5). *31 maggio 1944: bruciano per sempre le navi di Nemi*. Generazione Di Archeologi. <https://generazionediarcheologi.com/2018/07/16/31-maggio-1944-bruciano-per-sempre-le-navi-di-nemi/>

This second phase of the Nazi plunders in Italy, caused by the dissolution of the alliance, is described by Rodolfo Siviero as an organization of the German arts service under the authority of SS Colonel Hans Wilhelm Langsdorff, who responded to Hitler, Himmler, and Goebbels. He then shared the difficulty to face the parade presented by the Germans and how, in order to succeed, he had an arrangement with two officers of the *Carabinieri*, who provided for the defensive aspects of the artworks he took back.

In this second phase of Nazi plunders in Italy, Siviero's organization was completely self-founded, however, despite the limited economic assets, he managed to restore works of high caliber, such as *Leda e il Cigno* (which belonged to Göring's personal collection in Carinhall), *Discobolo di Mirone*, *Madonna con Bambino*, and *Madonna dell'Umiltà*<sup>62</sup>.

A year before Siviero's arrest, in 1944, vans filled with artworks stolen by Hermann Göring's Division from the museums of Naples that had been hidden in the Abbey of Montecassino during the war, were tasked to reach the Vatican. Among the various vans, two were lost and later found in 1948 by Anglo-American spies together with the Italian art historian.

Northern Italy, more specifically Trentino-Alto Adige, was known to be the location where most of the stolen Italian treasures were first taken, it was where the oeuvres were routed among Nazi officials and politicians to then be expropriated to Germany, which led Rodolfo Siviero to explore the premises in 1945, while researching private acquisitions.

Following the end of World War Two, Rodolfo Siviero's spy work proved to be supremely impactful, which made him enjoy the favor of the Allied Command and the support of institutional authorities. Naturally, these ties led him to be entrusted with the first inter-ministerial office for recovery, accredited to the collecting points established in Munich and Wiesbaden by the American occupation authorities, where repositories for looted assets from across Europe resided. As head of the Italian delegation, Siviero was responsible for examining

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<sup>62</sup> Quirici, C. (2022, December 21). *Siviero, lo 007 che ritrovò le opere trafugate dai nazisti*. Il Buongiorno. <https://ilbuongiorno.com/siviero-lo-007-che-ritrovo-le-opere-trafugate-dai-nazisti/>

*SIVIERO, Rodolfo - Enciclopedia - Treccani*. (n.d.).

Treccani. [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/rodolfo-siviero\\_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/rodolfo-siviero_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/)



each case and initiating the process of requesting restitution.<sup>63</sup> His diplomatic abilities revealed to be as persuasive and efficient as his spy operations and enabled the restitution of masterpieces stolen from the capitals of the Italian regions. In light of Siviero's rising popularity, in 1948, the art historian managed to secure a modification of Article 77 of the Peace Treaty signed by the European powers, which allowed Italy to negotiate the return of assets acquired by the Nazi before 1943.

The first occasion to officially recognize and pay tribute to the lives of those collaborators who had fallen in the name of their passion and desire for justice, such as Rino Cioni, was in 1947, when on November 9, Rodolfo Siviero organized the first of what would then become five exhibitions of restored art<sup>64</sup>. The exhibition, portraying oeuvres found in Alt Aussee, with the help of the MFAA, taken between 1943 and 1945, was held in Villa Farnesina and was attended by the most illustrious political figures of the Italian State, as well as by the ambassador of the US.

Relentlessly working in his office in Via degli Astalli 3, the Italian ex-spy managed to obtain the signature of German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and of Italian Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi in an agreement attesting for the restitution of the Italian masterpieces still residing in Germany to Italy, which resulted in the repatriation of over fifty art works, while tracking the treasures taken by the Communists. Hence, the end of the Second World War did not sign the end of Rodolfo Siviero's mission. Despite the enemies and antipathies nourished towards him by several officials of the Italian State, he pursued his research while engaging in threatening diplomatic exchanges to restore almost completely the entire artistic heritage possessed by the Italian regions prior to the conflict.

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<sup>63</sup> *SIVIERO, Rodolfo - Enciclopedia - Treccani*. (n.d.-b).

Treccani. [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/rodolfo-siviero\\_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/rodolfo-siviero_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/)

<sup>64</sup> Museo Casa Siviero. (2017). *Arte e fotografie negli archivi di Giorgio Castelfranco e Rodolfo Siviero*. Regione Toscana..

## 2.5 Conclusion

This chapter aimed to clarify doubts that may naturally arise regarding the Nazi plunders in Italy, given the alliance between the two countries. Undoubtedly, Mussolini overestimated the relevance of his position in the relationship with the Führer, which quickly escalated into a rapport of dominance and subordination, leading Italy to become clay to be molded and put in service of the Nazi, a demonstration of which are most certainly the “gifted” oeuvres acquired by Germany during the first half of the conflict. Throughout the war countless were the episodes causing resentment between the two dictators. Hitler was evidently displeased when Mussolini announced Italy’s stance of non-belligerence, as well as by the failed attempt to conquer Greece, which provoked a delay of the Operation Barbarossa, causing an outstanding defeat for Germany. On the other hand, Mussolini indulged more than ever in anxiolytics and drugs, which according to experts Beppino Disertori and Marcella Piazza, were particularly used by the Italian dictator following military defeats and humiliation. It is now well known that Mussolini suffered from Episodic depressive dysthymia, which was a dominant factor in his drug abuse, but theories also mention the sense of inadequacy with respect to Hitler’s military capabilities<sup>65</sup>.

Reading this chapter, one may notice that Tuscany was among, if not the greatest region victim of the Nazi spoliation. Indeed, the official website of the region<sup>66</sup> reports that, especially between April and August 1944, Tuscany was one of the hardest hit regions in Italy, 280 massacres had been conducted, resulting in 4500 civilian deaths, spread among 83 municipalities.

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<sup>65</sup> Cornelio Galas. (n.d.). *MA MUSSOLINI ERA PAZZO? – 2* |

*TELEVIGNOLE*. <https://www.televignole.it/ma-mussolini-era-pazzo-2/>

<sup>66</sup> *Stragi ed eccidi nazifascisti - Regione Toscana*.

(n.d.). <https://www.regione.toscana.it/storiaememoriadel1900/stragi-ed-eccidi-nazifascisti#:~:text=La%20Toscana%20%C3%A8%20stata%20uno,i%20civili%20furono%20circa%204.500>

Though understandably attractive from an artistic point of view given its centrality in the Renaissance, a cultural phenomenon particularly praised by Hitler as the opposite of degenerate art, the reason behind the Nazi concentration in Tuscany was also of strategic nature.

Elena Franchi, professor at the University of Trento, reminded in her research *Arte in assetto di Guerra, Protezione e distruzione del patrimonio artistico a Pisa durante la seconda guerra mondiale*, that Pisa was the main railway and road hub of western Tuscany, which was for the Nazi in Italy an extremely important asset<sup>67</sup>, a fact of which I have had direct testimony from my grandmother, whose father, Ottone Manghesi, was the director of Tuscany's train stations and, unfortunately, was often approached by Nazi soldiers demanding special passes.

Remaining on the topic of regions chosen by Germany as strategic for their assets and positions, Trentino Alto Adige, bordering with Austria, was chosen by the Wehrmacht in 1944 as the gatekeeper of the secret deposits of stolen art, later found by Rodolfo Siviero and the MFAA movement, also thanks to the collaboration of Karl Wolff, SS general proconsul in Italy, who had decided to collaborate with the Allied forces<sup>68</sup>.

Luckily, despite Italy's darkest and most atrocious phase in contemporary history, this chapter allowed me to give voice to brave and untameable Italian men who chose not to bow to the fascist dictatorship, devoting their life to a noble cause that political exponents of both the Allied and Axis forces have sometimes left aside, in spirit of a diverging perspective to the question "*Is an artistic masterpiece more worthy than human lives?*"

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<sup>67</sup> Franchi, E. (2006). *Arte in assetto di guerra: Protezione e distruzione del patrimonio artistico a Pisa durante la Seconda Guerra Mondiale*. Pisa: Edizioni ETS

<sup>68</sup> *I capolavori nascosti qui dai nazisti*. (n.d.-b). Alto

Adige. <https://www.altoadige.it/cronaca/bolzano/i-capolavori-nascosti-qui-dai-nazisti-1.18025>



## Chapter 3 – The Monuments Men and the Creation of UNESCO

### 3.1 Introduction

Eliel Saarinen, a notorious Finnish architect of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, declared that the purpose of architecture is to protect and enhance man's life on earth, to satisfy his belief in the nobility of existence.

Much like in the political framework depicted by this thesis, the resurgence of Fascist and Nazi values isn't just a fear but a truly threatening possibility. Today's society is immensely preoccupied by wars, terrorism, authoritarianism, and climate changes due to intensive consumerism, depicting, once again, the results of the brutality of man.

Unwilling to accept a reality resembling Hobbes' theory on the very nature of us humans, where *Homo homini lupus* isn't just a hypothesis but a fact, this chapter will focus on the actions of the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives group, which underlined the importance of preserving the cultural heritage humankind was able to gift through art. While striving to raise awareness among army officials and capturing the attention of the whole world, by the end of the war, the Monuments Men had indirectly led to the creation of a specialized agency of the United Nations, whose primary focus is the safeguard of cultural property through international law: UNESCO.

### 3.2 The Rise of the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives

As stated in the previous chapter, by 1944, Rodolfo Siviero began to cooperate with the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives group, most commonly known as the Monuments Men. The MFAA was an organization first envisaged by museum directors and art history professors who were severely concerned about the future of monuments situated in war areas, as well as for the oeuvres considered degenerate by the Nazi regime.

Researching the origins of what would soon become a meticulously organized group comprising 345 operators (both men and women) and involving the collaboration of 14 nations<sup>69</sup>, Harvard,

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<sup>69</sup> Malloryk. (2020b, May 27). *Monuments Men: Preserving cultural heritage during a period of great turmoil*. The National WWII Museum | New Orleans. <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/monuments-men#:~:text=Article->

the renowned Ivy League University, appears to be the epicenter of this extraordinary movement. In fact, the pressures that managed to reach the attention of President Roosevelt on the crisis of looted art were led by Paul J. Sachs, professor at the aforementioned university and art collector<sup>70</sup>.

The official report of the National Archives and Records Administration, titled *Records of the American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in War Areas*, reports how crucial the support of Harlan F. Stone was to reach the interest of the President, who formally approved the creation of a Federal Commission to assist the US Army in protecting cultural property in Allied-occupied areas on June 23, 1943.

During its missions, the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives was always guided and supported by the American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in War Areas, an organization tasked to provide the members of the MFAA with the strategies and information necessary to protect assets of artistic value. Headed by Owen J. Roberts, it became known as the Roberts Commission. Here, an important distinction between the two organizations ought to be explained. Both organizations were established by Roosevelt in 1943 and composed of art devotees, the latter acted as a research group, supporting the Monuments Men from a safe distance, while the MFAA was a more specialized and militarily active organization. Indeed, given its presence in the field and the necessity to collaborate with the War Department and the US army in areas of military operations, the Monuments Men were selected on the basis of their previous experiences in the armed forces.<sup>71</sup>

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[.Monuments%20Men%3A%20Preserving%20Cultural%20Heritage%20During%20a%20Period%20of%20Great,by%20the%20Nazis%20was%20found.](#)

<sup>70</sup> Paul J. Sachs is described by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan as a professor whose object-based teaching profoundly influenced curatorial practices and museum studies in the United States.

*Paul Joseph Sachs - The Metropolitan Museum of Art.*

(n.d.). <https://www.metmuseum.org/it/research-centers/leonard-a-lauder-research-center/research-resources/modern-art-index-project/sachs>

<sup>71</sup> *RECORDS OF THE AMERICAN COMMISSION FOR THE PROTECTION AND SALVAGE OF ARTISTIC AND HISTORIC MONUMENTS IN WAR AREAS (THE ROBERTS*

Unfortunately, the MFAA was formally recognized as a part of the Operations Branch of G-5 CAD of Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force only in 1944, inevitably delaying its engagement in the war.

Despite the absence from the military field, the works of the Roberts Commission should not be undervalued. In fact, not only did it play a vital informative role by sending to the U.S. army detailed lists of the monuments and artistic treasures in the occupied European countries, but enhanced Britain to partake in the cultural mission, despite its initial hesitance. Indeed in 1943, following the American example, British exponents of the artistic sector pressured Churchill and the British War Cabinet to create an organ entrusted with the protection of European cultural heritage, but the first responses were reluctant to say the least. It was only in 1944 that the Macmillan Committee was created.<sup>72</sup> Nonetheless, even if the nature of the Macmillan Committee was inspired by the Roberts Commission, the organizations operated differently. While the American commission focused on the salvage of cultural heritage during wartime, providing its soldiers with the areas to avoid, the British replica began its operations during the restitution phase.

### **3.2.1 Members of the MFAA and the secret operation of Rose Valland**

Unlike Siviero's inclusive approach, which allowed him to collaborate with individuals from diverse backgrounds as long as they shared an antifascist commitment and were driven by the desire to counter Nazi plunders, the Monuments Men were recruited exclusively from art scholars. Demonstrably, among the heroes of the US group, figures of high caliber emerge, such as Manson Hammond, professor of the Latin language and literature at Harvard University; Walther J. Huchthausen, architecture professor at the University of Minnesota; and Charles L.

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*COMMISSION), 1943–1946.* (2007). National Archives and Records

Administration. <https://www.archives.gov/files/research/microfilm/m1944.pdf>

<sup>72</sup> Ranieri, R. (2024). La tutela del patrimonio culturale in Italia durante la Seconda guerra mondiale. *www.academia.edu*. [https://www.academia.edu/28787476/La\\_tutela\\_del\\_patrimonio\\_culturale\\_in\\_Italia\\_durante\\_la\\_Seconda\\_guerra\\_mondiale](https://www.academia.edu/28787476/La_tutela_del_patrimonio_culturale_in_Italia_durante_la_Seconda_guerra_mondiale)

Kuhn, director of the Busch-Reisinger Museum.<sup>73</sup> Throughout an extensive list of erudite male volunteers for the MFAA, in the summer of 1944 negotiations to finally gain the trust of a future surprising member began. Depicted as a petite woman, so pure and modest to go unnoticed, the great and brave Rose Valland represented a turning point for the operations of the Monuments Men.

Much like Rodolfo Siviero, deeply concerned by the propaganda conducted by Alfred Rosenberg against degenerate art, Rose Valland took it upon herself to fight against the Nazi plunders. However, while both pursued the same mission, we may notice a divergence in the strategies adopted by the two art historians due to Siviero's immensely self-aggrandizing personality. The strong desire for recognition is what made Siviero abandon his initial cover in Erfurt, leading Germany to mark him as *persona non grata*. On the other hand, Valland's modesty and extraordinary sense of civic duty overshadowed any will for recognition, allowing her to maintain her cover for three years while closely working with Nazi soldiers and Göring. Her role as protector of France's artistic heritage formally began in 1940, when Nazi officials occupied the museum *Jeu de Paume*, for which she had worked as an unpaid volunteer ever since 1932. Known for her immense knowledge in the field of art history, gained after years dedicated to her studies within the Paris Fine Arts Academy, Rose Valland was also blessed with an impressive memory and proceeded to record any Nazi visit, document name, and painting part of the looted collections.<sup>74</sup> Monitoring Göring's frequent visits, Rose Valland captured the attention of Jacques Jaujard, director of the *Musées Nationaux de France* and member of the French Resistance, entrusted with the transportation of important oeuvres displayed in the Louvre to the castle of Chambord. Due to his influence, Jaujard became in charge of a vast

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<sup>73</sup> *Harvard Monuments Men in World War II*. (2014b, March 3). Harvard Magazine. <https://www.harvardmagazine.com/2010/01/harvard-monuments-men-in-world-war-two>

<sup>74</sup> Schwartz, C. Z. (n.d.). Saving a Bit of Beauty for the World Retelling the Story of Rose Valland. *Dominican University of California*. [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57dc0961f5e231de185340bc/t/57feb27329687fc9bd51ba/1476309619726/XXII\\_1\\_CM3.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57dc0961f5e231de185340bc/t/57feb27329687fc9bd51ba/1476309619726/XXII_1_CM3.pdf)

network of spies among the employees of various museums across France, including Rose Valland<sup>75</sup>, the only French allowed within the *Jeu de Paume*.<sup>76</sup>



Looted oeuvres taken from Jeu de Paume to Germany<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> “Rose Valland alerted Jaujard about a train, scheduled to leave for Germany, containing 148 crates of impressionist paintings from the Jeu de Paume. Because of simulated mechanical failures, the train was delayed in leaving Paris and consequently seized by the 2<sup>nd</sup> French Armored Division”.

Schwartz, C. Z. (n.d.). Saving a Bit of Beauty for the World Retelling the Story of Rose Valland.

(p.16) *Dominican University of*

*California*. [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57dc0961f5e231de185340bc/t/57feb27329687fc9bdfa51ba/1476309619726/XXII\\_1\\_CM3.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57dc0961f5e231de185340bc/t/57feb27329687fc9bdfa51ba/1476309619726/XXII_1_CM3.pdf)

<sup>76</sup> Tatarella, M. (2024, June 3). *Jacques Jaujard: l'uomo che salvò le collezioni di Francia - Artonauti, il primo album di figurine dell'arte*. Artonauti, Il Primo Album Di Figurine Dell'arte. <https://www.artonauti.it/jaujard-collezioni-di-francia/>

<sup>77</sup> *ROSE VALLAND ET LA SAUVEGARDE DES ŒUVRES JUIVES*. (n.d.). Résister Par L'Art Et La Littérature (CNRD). <https://resister-art-litterature.jimdofree.com/resister-en-france-occupee/rose-valland-et-la-sauvegarde-des-oeuvres-juives/>

As previously anticipated, in 1944 the Monuments Men landed in France, another victim of the Nazi plunders held across Europe. Alfred Rosenberg was the brains responsible for Germany's looting of the French artistic heritage. Reenacting the measures adopted in Czechoslovakia and Poland, the first phase consisted in the appropriation of the oeuvres collected by Jewish families. Particularly known is the case of Paul Rosenberg<sup>78</sup>, the Jewish art dealer, whose majestic art collection was looted by namesake Alfred Rosenberg. The arrival of the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives section coincided with the second phase, which was focused on the confiscations of oeuvres displayed in the most prestigious and renowned museums of Paris. Every stolen artwork was first stored by German soldiers in the Jeu de Paume, thus leading to the encounter of Lieutenant James Rorimer, curator of the Metropolitan Museum and member of the MFAA, with Rose Valland.

Seeking information on the movements of the Germans, the Lieutenant had to gain the trust of the French spy, who was described to be highly protective of her knowledge. Finally, the two managed to establish a relationship based on mutual trust, officially making of Rose Valland a Monument Woman. That same year, Valland's accumulated proofs of receipts, documents, train tickets, and images of Göring with stolen pieces, allowed the MFAA to learn what to look for and where.<sup>79</sup> The most rewarding result of the cooperation between Valland and Rorimer was achieved when the Monument Man sneaked inside the castle of Neuschwanstein, finding the official notes of the *Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg* (ERR). The ERR, was SS official Rosenberg's Special Task Force, responsible for the confiscation of elements of Jewish affiliation and of France's artistic properties. Inside the castle James Rorimer was able to extort thirty-one documents from *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Gerhard Schiedlausky, reporting Hitler's instructions,

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<sup>78</sup> Paul Rosenberg, was among the greatest art dealers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Befriended by Picasso and Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, he not only contributed to the success of Cubism but also possessed an extensive art collection, which was then looted on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, 1940. The collection had been left behind in his residence on *rue de La Boétie* after he fled to New York with his family.

De Melis, F., & De Melis, F. (2017, June 30). Paul Rosenberg, avanguardia e terrore | il manifesto. *Il Manifesto*. <https://ilmanifesto.it/paul-rosenberg-avanguardia-e-terrore>

<sup>79</sup> Schwartz, C. Z. (n.d.). Saving a Bit of Beauty for the World Retelling the Story of Rose

Valland. *Dominican University of*

*California*. [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57dc0961f5e231de185340bc/t/57feb27329687fc9bdfa51ba/1476309619726/XXII\\_1\\_CM3.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57dc0961f5e231de185340bc/t/57feb27329687fc9bdfa51ba/1476309619726/XXII_1_CM3.pdf)



acquisitions, and location of 21,903 artistic items, 10,890 paintings, 5,825 handmade objects, 259 antiquities, and 1,286 East Asiatic items.<sup>80</sup>

### 3.3 The Main Restitution Operations and the Discovery of the Altaussee Salt Mine

The Monuments Men pledged to:

*Record and assess war damage suffered by historic monuments prior to the US occupation; take or advise the steps necessary to prevent further deterioration; supervise and pass estimates for repairs. Prevent damage by troops; affix notices, close buildings or procure guards; check billeting; interest the troops by lectures or otherwise; and investigate charges of wanton damage brought against the Allied troops and report proved cases. Prevent the looting; sale or removal of objects of art. Establish the fact of looting by enemy troops.*<sup>81</sup>

Loyal to the aim of their operation, the Monuments Men fled across the countries that had been targeted by Nazi plunders, successfully restoring important masterpieces as *Litzlberg am Attersee*, painted by Gustav Klimt and seized by the Nazis from the apartment of Amelie Redlich in Vienna; *Christ Carrying the Cross*, painted by Girolamo Romanino, owned by Jewish Italian Federico Gentili di Giuseppe and later sold by Nazi-controlled French authorities in 1941; *Ghent Altarpiece*, by Hubert; and *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I*, considered as one of Klimt's most notorious masterpiece.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Kunzelman, C. J. (1988). Some trials, tribulations, and successes of the monuments, fine arts and archives teams in the European theatre during WWII. *Military Affairs*, 52(2), 56–60. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1988039><https://www.jstor.org/stable/1988039>

<sup>81</sup> Coles, H. L. C., & Weinberg, A. K. W. (1964). *Civil Affairs: Soldiers become governors*. U.S. Army Center of Military History. [https://history.army.mil/html/books/011/11-3/CMH\\_Pub\\_11-3.pdf](https://history.army.mil/html/books/011/11-3/CMH_Pub_11-3.pdf)

<sup>82</sup> *Monuments Men and Women Foundation I Resources I Art Restitution Cases | Resolving Cases of Nazi-Confiscated Art from World War II*. (n.d.). MonumentsMenWomenFnd. <https://www.monumentsmenandwomenfnd.org/resources/art->

### 3.3.1 The Discovery of the Altaussee Salt Mine

By the time Germany's imminent defeat became evident, certain exponents of the Nazi regime focused their efforts on negotiations in hope to redeem themselves. In 1945, SS General Karl Wolff cooperated with the Allies, informing the Monuments Men that looted masterpieces were stored in San Leonardo and Campo Tures, allowing the MFAA to recover them.<sup>83</sup> The same year, Nazi art historian Hermann Bunjes revealed that the Altaussee salt mines served as one of the secret deposits for plundered art.<sup>84</sup> Subsequent interviews to members of the MFAA reported that the mines hid around eight thousand oeuvres and that the means they had to adopt to reach them included changing the structure of their jeeps, for them to fit into the lifts built inside the mines, and the use of explosives to enter a vault sealed by a steel safe door.<sup>85</sup>

The use of salt mines as caches for art pieces was truly ingenious, not only was it innovative, it also presented excellent environmental properties for their conservations. Indeed, given the thermal insulation of salt mines, humidity never exceeded 40%, and the temperature always remained below 22°C, making the 137 tunnels, keepers of the artistic treasures, resemble museum-like conditions.<sup>86</sup> Found in perfect conditions was for example the altarpiece

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[restitution-](#)

[cases?srsId=AfmBOoolXCafaZSqXpWZzgJ4LVwPcOU91tylx7uLJJ\\_EtMvU4FAyMr\\_6](#)

<sup>83</sup> *I capolavori nascosti qui dai nazisti*. (n.d.). Alto

Adige. <https://www.altoadige.it/cronaca/bolzano/i-capolavori-nascosti-qui-dai-nazisti-1.18025>

<sup>84</sup> Ugc. (2025b, February 8). Altaussee salt mines. *Atlas*

*Obscura*. <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/altaussee-salt-mine>

<sup>85</sup> Ueno, R. (2014, March 7). *Monuments men inside the*

*mines*. <https://www.aaa.si.edu/blog/2014/03/monuments-men-inside-the-mines>

<sup>86</sup> The use of mines as secret deposits had been vastly exploited by the Nazis. Along with the

Altaussee mines, the Allies also discovered Bernterode, Merkers-Kieselbach, and Ransbach, which served as keepers of gold bars and weapon supplies.

Ueno, R. (2014, March 7). *Monuments men inside the*

*mines*. <https://www.aaa.si.edu/blog/2014/03/monuments-men-inside-the-mines>



*Adoration of the Lamb*, by Van Eyck, which belonged to Belgium and was stolen by Germany in Gand.

While the finding of the Altaussee salt mines represented a major accomplishment of the MFAA for the extraordinary quantity of looted artifacts found within its caves, thanks to the arrival of George Stout, Thomas Carr Howe, Karl Sieber, Stephen Kovalyak, and Daniel J. Kern, the restitution of the altarpiece marked the beginning of the Monuments Men's operations for the recovery and return of stolen artworks to their rightful owners, following the formal request of Belgian Ambassador, Charles Sawyer, to general Eisenhower on August 13<sup>th</sup> 1945.<sup>87</sup>



MFAA inside the Altaussee mines<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Kunzelman, C. J. (1988). Some trials, tribulations, and successes of the monuments, fine arts and archives teams in the European theatre during WWII. *Military Affairs*, 52(2), 56–60. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1988039><https://www.jstor.org/stable/1988039>

<sup>88</sup> Ugc. (2025c, February 8). Altaussee salt mines. *Atlas Obscura*. <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/altaussee-salt-mine>

### 3.3.2 Juridic attempts to condemn Nazi plunders and the Problematics in the Restitution of Looted Art

The plunders conducted by the Wehrmacht, the Kunstschutz, and the *Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg* were unprecedented. 1943 was the year in which significant discoveries on the vastness of the plunders enacted by Germany were made, urging the Allies to condemn such actions. That same year, the Inter-Allied Declaration Against Acts of Dispossession Committed in Territories Under Enemy Occupation or Control (the London Declaration of 1943) was made.

Issued by the Governments of the Union of South Africa, the United States of America, Australia, Belgium, Canada, China, the Czechoslovak Republic, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Greece, India, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Yugoslavia, and the French National Committee, the London Declaration of 1943 proclaimed that any transfer of property, rights, and interests that have taken place in territories under the occupation or control of Governments with which they are at war to be considered invalid.<sup>89</sup> To avoid any miscomprehension, the text added:

*"This warning applies whether such transfers of dealings have taken the form of open looting or plunder, or of transactions apparently legal in form, even when they purport to be voluntarily effected".*<sup>90</sup>

This first juridical attempt to ensure the return of all looted items and to put an end to the Nazi plunders, had to be reinforced by subsequent international agreements and organizations, which will be analyzed later, as this paragraph aims to introduce the difficulties the MFAA and Rodolfo Siviero had to face in their works of restitution.

During the research for this thesis, I was lucky enough to receive the attention and time of two experts of the Italian spy, Attilio Tori, official of the Tuscany Region and former Director of the Casa Museo Rodolfo Siviero, and Gabriele Mazzi, current curator of the museum.

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<sup>89</sup> Looted Art Commission. (n.d.). *Looted Art Commission - Inter-Allied declaration against acts of dispossession committed in territories under enemy occupation or control*. <https://www.lootedartcommission.com/inter-allied-declaration>

<sup>90</sup> Looted Art Commission. (n.d.). *Looted Art Commission - Inter-Allied declaration against acts of dispossession committed in territories under enemy occupation or control*. <https://www.lootedartcommission.com/inter-allied-declaration>

Attilio Tori shared that Rodolfo Siviero's efforts to guarantee the return of looted art can be categorized into three phases.

The first phase concerns his work as head of the office of art recoveries, in 1945. Particularly known is the case Göring-Ventura, which allowed Siviero's investigations to find Nazi hideout in the *Convento di San Marco*. As explained in the previous chapters, it was significantly common for Nazi officials to engage in exchanges with art collectors to increase their personal artistic wealth, the Göring-Ventura partnership was one of them. Donating paintings of Matisse, Picasso, and Henri Manguin in exchange for oeuvres of the Renaissance detained by Eugenio Ventura. The two worked together for two years, ever since 1941, which translated into the establishment of a strong relationship between the Italian antiques dealer and Hitler's right hand.

Rose Valland's position at the Jeu de Paume, allowed her to find out about these trades and proceeded to inform her Italian colleague about the nature of this cooperation in the illicit export of artworks from Italy to Germany. The tip turned out to be highly rewarding, as the interrogation forced Ventura to reveal everything he knew about Göring and his collaborator Walter Andreas Hofer<sup>91</sup>. Naturally, in this case Rodolfo Siviero collected all looted items, thus also the paintings Ventura received from Göring, among which 6 French masterpieces<sup>92</sup> were found and later delivered to the *Commission Récupération Artistique de Paris*.

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<sup>91</sup> Walter Andreas Hofer was a central character in the context of Nazi plunders. He was Göring's most trusted art dealer and his wife, Berta Fritsch, was the official art restorer of Göring's collection. *People: Berta Fritsch | JDCRP Pilot Project*. (n.d.). <https://pilot-demo.jdcrp.org/people/fritsch-bertha/>

<sup>92</sup> The paintings found were: *Femme se coiffant*, by Edgar Degas; *Nu assis*, by Pierre-Auguste Renoir; *Les glaçon, Parc Monceau*, and *Route de Vétheuil*, by Claude Monet; *La Seine à Argenteuil* and *La Tamise à Hampton Court*, by Alfred Sisley; *Mont Saint-Victoire*, by Paul Cézanne; and *Paysage à Saint-Remy*, by Vincent van Gogh.

Zaru, C. (2017, September 23). An Italian antiquarian complicit with the Nazis: the Ventura affair. *Finestre Sull'Arte*. <https://www.finestresullarte.info/opere-e-artisti/affare-ventura-antiquari-italiani-e-nazisti>

The second phase concerns the early fifties, when in 1953, thanks to Siviero's diplomatic abilities, and Roberto Longhi<sup>93</sup>'s support, an agreement between Italy and the Federal Republic of Germany for the restitution of seized opus was signed. The agreement was founded on three negotiations, the first one, held in Bonn, achieved the return of fifty productions; the second, which took place in Perugia, saw the return of works created by Sebastiano del Piombo, Paolo Veronese, and Sebastiano Ricci; and the third one, which was widely disputed, as Germany sustained that the oeuvres in their possess had been regularly bought, hence of their property. Unfortunately, Siviero had to renounce to nine paintings; nonetheless, the agreement for the restitution to Italy of cultural and artistic materials, removed from its national heritage, signed by Alcide De Gasperi and Konrad Adenauer, was immensely successful.<sup>94</sup>

The third phase introduced by Attilio Tori, concerned Siviero's involvement in the restitution of *Ercole e Anteo* and *Ercole e l'Idra*, two works by Renaissance artist Antonio del Pollaiuolo. The affair traces back to the finding of Nazis' hidden storages in Alto Adige and Campo Tures. MFAA, Rodolfo Siviero, Giorgio Catelfranco, and Emilio Lavagnino contributed to the resurfacing of all pieces, however when in Florence, Catelfranco noticed that 12 paintings listed by the kunstschutz were missing, among which *Ercole e Anteo* and *Ercole e l'Idra*. 1962 was the year in which the two paintings were finally located. Given their small sizes, 16cm x 9cm, German soldier, Johann Meindl, managed to sneak away with them and escaped to the Unites States, where he was found, along with the oeuvres, in Pasadena. During the interview, Tori mentioned Siviero's shrewdness in choosing to complement the legal action with a massive media campaign to reinforce the pressure for the restitution of the artworks. This strategy not only thwarted Meindl's attempts to negotiate with Italy by insisting on selling the artwork instead of returning it, but it also gave him the time to conclude the legal battle by appealing to the last

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<sup>93</sup> Roberto Longhi was a fellow art historian from Florance.

<sup>94</sup> Chiesurin, A. (2022b, August 8). *Rodolfo Siviero #6 | La seconda fase dei recuperi e l'investitura dei titoli ufficiali*. ZirArtmag. <https://www.zirartmag.com/2022/01/29/rodolfo-siviero-6-la-seconda-fase-dei-recuperi-e-linvestitura-dei-titoli-ufficiali/>

heir of the Medici family, whose will stated that her art collection was to be inherited by the city of Florence, thus rendering the two paintings property of the State.<sup>95</sup>

### 3.4 The Foundation of UNESCO to ensure the Protection Cultural Heritage

#### 3.4.1 The United Nations

It is undeniable that during the course of history, most likely ever since its beginning, no war raised such traumatism among people, in other words, *il faut être absolument antifasciste*. By the end of the war, the world began to learn more about the reality behind the Shoah and the six million victims of racial laws. A factor particularly significant in the fear that would haunt the East and the West for almost a century was the employment of the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which made everyone question the importance of human rights and preservation. Between November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1945, and October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1946, six Nazi organizations and twenty-four high ranking dignitaries of the regime were accused of conspiracy, crimes against peace, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, at the Nuremberg trials.<sup>96</sup>

In 1945 Heads of States of the Allied forces began to feel the emergence of the foundation of new international principles, leading to the creation of the United Nations at the conference of San Francisco. Three years later, in 1948, the United Nations General Assembly held in Paris, drafted a milestone document for the history of human rights: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Latpc. (2023, January 23). *Il recupero dei Pollaiuolo*. La Tutela Del Patrimonio Culturale -

Blog. <https://latpc.altervista.org/il-recupero-dei->

[pollaiuolo/?doing\\_wp\\_cron=1739795528.3175780773162841796875#google\\_vignette](https://latpc.altervista.org/il-recupero-dei-pollaiuolo/?doing_wp_cron=1739795528.3175780773162841796875#google_vignette)

<sup>96</sup> A similar trial was held in Tokyo in 1946, by the Military Tribunal for the Far East.

*BiblioToscana - Processo di Tokyo*.

(n.d.). <https://biblio.toscana.it/argomento/Processo%20di%20Tokyo>

Lambin, J. M. L. (2008). *EsaBAC. Histoire terminales. per le scuole superiori vol.3*. Hachette Education - France.

<sup>97</sup> United Nations. (n.d.). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights | United*

*Nations*. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

Translated into 500 languages, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reaffirmed the rights established by the Declaration of 1789, adding the right to education, to social security, to work, to healthcare, and the right of cultural heritage.

As this thesis aimed to enlighten the risks Art faced during World War II, in an attempt to spread awareness on the importance of preserving humanity's cultural heritage, so did the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in article 27.

*"Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits".*

Art.27 UDHR

### 3.4.2 The Foundation of UNESCO

UNESCO is a specialized agency of the United Nations. Founded during the conference of San Francisco in 1945 and entered into force on the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 1946, when the Constitution of UNESCO was formally recognized and ratified by 57 States, UNESCO initiated its path towards the construction of a peace based on education, science, culture, and collaboration among nations to ensure universal respect for justice, the rule of law, human rights, and fundamental freedoms.<sup>98</sup>

Its Member States have agreed that *"Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed"*.<sup>99</sup> Believing in the importance of equal educational opportunities for all, in the pursuit of objective truth, and in the free exchange of ideas, UNESCO vowed to relentlessly contribute to peace and security, while defending and promoting cultural heritage, so that the atrocities of the Nazi plunders, aiming to destroy all despised cultural identities, will never be a threat again.

Today UNESCO actively protects cultural sites during armed conflicts by following measures adopted internationally ever since 1945, reportedly the Hague Convention of 1954 and the

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<sup>98</sup> Unesco Commissione Nazionale Italiana per l'Unesco. (n.d.). *UNESCO*

<https://www.unesco.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/LUNESCOsulsito1.pdf>

<sup>99</sup> *Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*. (n.d.).

UNESCO.org. <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/constitution>



General Conference of the United Nations, Scientific and Cultural Organization meeting in Paris of 1972.

### 3.4.3 The Hague Convention of 1954

In the context of cultural heritage, the Hague Convention ought to be mentioned as it was the first to expressly aim at its protection. Inspired by the first Hague Convention, held in 1899, to discuss international humanitarian law<sup>100</sup>, and that of 1907, it laid down the laws to protect cultural sites in case of armed conflict, convinced that a damage to cultural property represents an inestimable damage to the cultural heritage of all mankind.

Ratifying forty articles, divided into five chapters, the first article of the Hague Convention of 1954 provided the earliest official definition of cultural property:

*For the purposes of the present Convention, the term “cultural property” shall cover, irrespective of origin or ownership:*

- a. movable or immovable property of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people, such as monuments of architecture, art or history, whether religious or secular; archeological sites; groups of buildings which, as a whole, are of historical or artistic interest; works of art; manuscripts, books and other objects of artistic, historical or archeological interest; as well as scientific collections and important collections of books or archives or of reproductions of the property defined above;*
- b. buildings whose main and effective purpose is to preserve or exhibit the movable cultural property defined in sub-paragraph (a) such as museum, large libraries and depositories of archives, and refuges intended to shelter, in the event of armed conflict, the movable cultural property defined in sub-paragraph (a);*
- c. centers containing a large amount of cultural property as defined in sub-paragraphs (a) and (b), to be known as centers containing monuments.<sup>101</sup>*

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<sup>100</sup> *II Convenzione internazionale dell' Hague del 1899 su leggi ed usi della guerra terrestre: Studi per la pace.*

(n.d.). [https://www.studiperlapace.it/view\\_news\\_html?news\\_id=20041031201007](https://www.studiperlapace.it/view_news_html?news_id=20041031201007)

<sup>101</sup> UNESCO (n.d) *Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict with Regulations for the Execution of the Convention* <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal->



### 3.5 Conclusion

Luckily, UNESCO continues to be fully immersed in the salvaging of cultural heritage to prevent the resurgence of such a dramatic historical period, rightfully honoring the memories of the heroes of World War II.

On the other hand, as reported on the official website of UNESCO “during wars, the cultural property of the States involved continues to be particularly at risk due to its immense identity value, as it represents a sense of belonging and strengthens the social cohesion of the communities that share it. The destruction of cultural heritage by aggressors is therefore not pursued for its strategic or military value, but rather for its powerful symbolic significance.” Much as Hitler tried to do with the Jewish community, targeting cultural heritage is an extremely dangerous psychological weapon.<sup>102</sup>

Thankfully, these last two chapters allowed this thesis to celebrate extraordinary personalities such as Rose Valland, Rodolfo Siviero, and James Rorimer, who never hesitated to risk their lives for the preservation of art and culture.

Regardless of their eccentric, modest, or unwaveringly loyal personalities, they are true heroes, as they have ensured that we, the people of the twenty-first century, can still appreciate the artistic masterpieces that define our collective heritage. For this, the world owes them a forever enduring gratitude.

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[affairs/convention-protection-cultural-property-event-armed-conflict-regulations-execution-convention](#)

<sup>102</sup> Unesco Commissione Nazionale Italiana per l’Unesco. (2024, March 15). *La protezione del patrimonio culturale in caso di conflitto armato: dalla Convenzione del 1954 alla Guerra in Ucraina - Unesco Commissione Nazionale Italiana per l’Unesco*. Unesco Commissione Nazionale Italiana per L’Unesco. <https://www.unesco.it/it/temi-in-evidenza/cultura/la-protezione-del-patrimonio-culturale-in-caso-di-conflitto-armato-dalla-convenzione-del-1954-alla-guerra-in-ucraina/>

## 4.0 CONCLUSION

Oriana Fallaci sustained that culture means to create a civic consciousness, ensuring that those who study are aware of their dignity. A cultured person must react to anything that offends their dignity and conscience, otherwise culture is useless.

Choosing a subject so close to the roots of Nazism, which left an immeasurable scar to humanity, raises its share of moral and psychological challenges. Nazism as an ideology is almost considered a taboo, rightfully so, however, to prevent history from repeating itself, erasing and denying the past will not be of any help. Thus, for this thesis I decided to embark on a journey to provide a scientific analysis of the Nazi plunders. Much like in Dante Alighieri's metaphysical path in *La Divina Commedia*, the journey for the realization of this thesis travelled through the *inferno*, represented by the reading of *Mein Kampf*; a purgatory, represented by Rodolfo Siviero's missions, whose braveness and untamable ego-driven personality allowed him to create an independent antifascist secret organization, which may have felt like a limbo, given the lack of institutional support; and finally paradise, embodied by the arrival of the MFAA and the end of Second World War.

To summarize, in order to analyze the protection of cultural heritage during the Second World War, the roots of Nazism's relationship with art had to be explored. The beginning of the first chapter aimed to clarify Hitler's attachment to Neo-classical art and his strictness against those artistic movements that he labeled as degenerate, because truly convinced that they were the reason behind the moral decay of his population. However, as explained by Plato, once men raise to power, inevitably, their moralities and values set aside, attracted by the temptations of power and economic wealth, which in this case, ultimately translated into the widest artistic plunders of all time.

The second chapter begins by introducing the relationship of Mussolini and Hitler, which is extremely important to understand the reasons behind the Nazi plunders in Italy, which were fiercely battled by Rodolfo Siviero, Italian art historian and antifascist spy.

Lastly but not least, the third chapter described the missions of the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives group, which closely collaborated with Rose Valland, an extraordinary woman driven by a profound civic sense, who managed to work with Göring and additional pillars of the Nazi regime for four years, while maintaining her cover as member of the French Resistance.

Inevitably, this thesis on the protection of cultural heritage during the Second World War could not have ended if not by mentioning how the atrocious actions of Nazis and Fascists have led

the Allied forces to establish the United Nations, as to guarantee an enduring peace, and UNESCO, so that no cultural identity and heritage could ever be threatened again without severe international consequences.

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