

Captain Posey and Private Kirstein stood inside a cottage nestled in the dark German forest—the hiding place of an SS officer and art expert who had deserted the Nazi army. Though the front line raged mere kilometers away, the cottage was a tranquil contrast to the chaotic final months of the Second World War. The home in the forest was full of flowers, books, and photographs pinned to the walls—black and white prints of French Gothic art and architecture: of Notre Dame de Paris, Cluny, St-Chapelle, Chartres.

Posey and Kirstein were American officers of the Monuments and Fine Arts Division, a group of art historians, architects, and archaeologists assigned to the various Allied Armies, charged with protecting art and monuments in conflict zones. They were war-zone art detectives assigned to General George Patton's Allied Third Army, gathering clues as to the whereabouts of the stolen art.

Since the start of the war, Posey and Kirstein had heard rumors of the wholesale looting of artwork from Nazi-occupied territories. It was clear that thousands of works of art had been seized by Nazi troops, but they did not know whether there was an overall plan or destination for the loot, nor had they recovered any of the major stolen treasures: works by the likes of Titian, Rembrandt, Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Jan van Eyck.

For all its financial and cultural ramifications, the theft and rescue of artistic treasures has a far greater symbolic value to the countries and individuals involved. Since ancient Rome was looted, first by the Goths and then by the Vandals in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the ability to defend art has been seen as an indication of one's strength or failure as a person or nation. When King Genseric and his Vandals approached the city gates in 455 AD, Pope Leo I negotiated the surrender of Rome's treasures with the promise that the city would not be razed. Possessing the artistic treasures that had made Rome the wealthiest city in Europe was sufficient for the Vandals to demonstrate their superiority and conquest. Occupying the city, or knocking it the ground, were unnecessary, provided they stripped Rome of its art and gold. Art and monuments carry a symbolic weight for their owners: the destruction of Westminster Abbey by an enemy would strike more psychological damage to the British than the cost of its stone and glass. The loss of art shatters morale: its theft is like the kidnap of a princess. The story of the theft and recovery of art is a history of the attempt to retain or steal the object that humans value most, both monetarily and symbolically. Since the looting of Rome, great artworks have been

the battle flags of warring factions, captured and recaptured by individuals and armies. And during the Second World War, an unprecedented number of battle flags simply disappeared from the homes, castles, churches, and museums of Europe. It was the job of the Monuments Men to find them.

The man speaking to Posey and Kirstein was the former SS officer, Hermann Bunjes. He had worked as an art advisor to Alfred Rosenberg, chief of the ERR (*Einsatzstab Rosenberg*), the Nazi art looting division—the existence of which, at this point, was still unknown to the Allied Army. Bunjes had also been a personal art consultant to Hitler’s second-in-command, Hermann Göring, who had used the disorder of war to steal thousands of paintings for his private collection. A Harvard-educated scholar of 13<sup>th</sup> century French sculpture, Bunjes had deserted the Nazi cause in disgust. The tipping point had been a dinner at the elite Aeroclub in Berlin, when Bunjes recognized his meal was being served on silver stolen from the Jewish Baron Edmond de Rothschild.

A stroke of good fortune had led Posey and Kirstein to Bunjes.

Captain Posey awoke with a toothache, while the army was camped in Trier, Germany. With the army medics twenty kilometers away, Kirstein found a local dentist to treat his colleague. As the dentist drilled away on Posey, Kirstein struck up a conversation, explaining their role as “Monuments Men.” The dentist said that his son-in-law was a former art advisor to the Nazis. Would Posey and Kirstein like to meet him?

Drinking wine at his cottage, Bunjes shared all he knew about the Nazi art-looting program, and Adolph Hitler’s master plan to steal the world’s art treasures. He seemed to think that the Allies already knew of Hitler’s dream to create a city-wide super museum in his boyhood town of Linz, Austria. He thought that Posey and Kirstein were aware of the lists of masterpieces sought by both the Führer, Göring, and the ERR, which stole on behalf of both of the Nazi leaders. Posey and Kirstein tried to disguise their surprise, as the revelations kept flowing.

Now gaunt and pale, Bunjes was hiding in the forest from three antagonists: the Allies, the Nazi army, and the German people, who feared and hated the SS to such an extent that his gravest fear was falling victim to their vigilante justice. Bunjes sat in his small refuge, surrounded by his young wife, his baby, and his beloved art history books.

Kirstein described his feelings in meeting Bunjes:

It was an odd and somehow symbolic entrance into contemporary German culture. Here, in the cold Spring, far above the murder of the cities, worked a German scholar in love with France, passionately in love, in that hopeless frustrated fatalism described by the German poet, Rilke. When and how did he think he could go back [to France and to his pre-war life]? Yet his one desire was to finish his book [on 13<sup>th</sup> century French sculpture]...It was hard to believe that this man had, for six years, been the confidant of Göring, the intimate of Hitler's closest guards, that he had been in the SS.

Then, Bunjes revealed the secret hiding places of the stolen Nazi art.

The Monuments Men had been given a list of major artworks that had disappeared since the start of the war—a stolen art “Most Wanted” lineup that included the masterpieces from museums such as the Louvre and the Uffizi. The story of each work is integrated into the history of the nation from which it was stolen: Davids from France, Botticellis from Italy, Vermeers from the Netherlands. They were symbols of state, of empire, of patrimony. Their value was incalculable, their destruction irrevocable. Number one on that list was The Ghent Altarpiece, by Jan van Eyck.

Perhaps the most important painting in the history of art, The Ghent Altarpiece is certainly the most frequently stolen. An enormous triptych the size of a barn wall (14.5 by 11.5 feet), and weighing approximately 1500 kilos, it was made for a church in the city of Ghent, by the young Flemish master, Jan van Eyck. Painted between 1426 and 1432, it was the first major oil painting in history, and it inspired centuries of artists to take up oil as their preferred artistic medium. It is also considered the fulcrum between the art of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and the origin of artistic realism.

The Ghent Altarpiece was listed in any art history textbook as one of the most influential works to the history and development of both painting and art collecting. But in addition to its importance to art, it is also the most wanted object in the history of art crime, having been involved in thirteen crimes during its 600 year lifespan.

It was the coveted trophy of both Hitler and Göring. The two fanatical Nazi art hunters sought to outmaneuver one another to capture it for their personal collections. Its fame, importance to the

evolution of art, and its beauty aside, they saw the work as a symbol for their ideal of Aryan supremacy, and idolized the artist who created it as an exemplary figure in Teutonic history. They were undoubtedly aware of its background as a frequently stolen artwork. After having been stolen by a renegade vicar, sold to an unscrupulous art dealer, smuggled to Germany, bought by a British collector, and finally sold to the King of Prussia, some of its panels ended up on display in Berlin, before the First World War. One of the articles of the agreement that ended the First World War, the Treaty of Versailles, insisted on the return of the panels to Ghent—a clause that outraged the German people, who had not been involved in the particular theft that led to the panels' display at the Berlin Gemaldegalerie. If Hitler could recapture it, then he would right a perceived wrong against Germany.

Rumor had it that Hitler was also convinced that the painting contained a coded map to lost Catholic treasures, the so-called *arma christi*, or instruments of Christ's Passion, including the Crown of Thorns and the Spear of Destiny. Hitler believed that the possession of the *arma christi* would grant their owner supernatural powers. Hitler and other Nazi officials were fascinated by the occult, and assembled a research group, the Ahnenerbe, to study and seek out supernatural phenomena and magical objects. Hitler financed expeditions into Tibet to capture a Yeti (the so-called Abominable Snowman) for military use; to Iceland to look for the entrance to Thule, a mythical land of giants and telepathic faeries, which was the real place of origin of the Aryans, according to Hitler's belief; and in search of religious relics whose magical properties could ensure Nazi triumph, including the Holy Grail and the Ark of the Covenant. As the prospect of a Nazi victory looked more precarious, Hitler escalated his efforts to find supernatural means to turn the tide. Perhaps the rumor that the strange symbolism in The Ghent Altarpiece contained a hidden treasure map encouraged Hitler in his pursuit of the painting?

Hermann Göring out-manuevered Hitler's agents, and reached the altarpiece first. Against the Führer's direct orders, one of Göring's henchmen had stolen Van Eyck's masterpiece from a castle in the south of France, and brought it to Paris. Since its theft from the castle, the whereabouts of the Ghent Altarpiece had been unknown to both Allies and most of the Nazi officials. Posey and Kirstein had gathered frustratingly contradictory tidbits of information on the location of Van Eyck's Ghent Altarpiece--until now.

As a formal personal art advisor to Göring and the ERR, Hermann Bunjes had records of what art had been stolen by the Nazis, and where it was hidden. And Posey and Kirstein were determined to find it. For the first time, Bunjes gave the Monuments Men a sense of what they were up against, of Hitler's plans, and of the fate of tens of thousands of the world's most important and beautiful works of art.

Bunjes began to tell Posey and Kirstein about the museum Hitler was planning, with scope enough to house every masterpiece in the world. Aside from a place to view and study art, this museum would function as a gallery of defeated nations, their treasures stripped from them as countries fell before Hitler's storm troopers. In lieu of the severed pike-pierced heads of deposed and decapitated kings, Hitler would fill his super museum with the artistic masterpieces that Europe was unable to defend. This example demonstrates how art theft is about much more than the art itself.

On a map of Europe, Bunjes indicated scores of secret Nazi art depots, in castles, monasteries, and mines throughout Nazi-occupied territory. The biggest cache of all, he said, was in an abandoned salt mine in the Austrian Alps, at a place called Althausee. It had been converted into a high-tech underground storehouse for all of the looted art destined for the super museum at Linz. The stolen collection already numbered over 12,000 works. These included masterpieces by Michelangelo, Raphael, Vermeer, Rembrandt, Titian, Breughel, Veronese, Dürer, Leonardo. Among the works in the mine was, it seemed, the *Mona Lisa*. A mystery remains to this day, as to whether it, or an exact copy, was stolen by the Nazis and stored in the mine. The work that the Nazis prized above all was Jan van Eyck's Ghent Altarpiece.

Bunjes warned that the SS guards at the mine might blow up the art, if they failed to defend it. Hitler had declared that under no circumstances should the art under Nazi control ever return to the Allies. What Bunjes did not know was that the Nazi official in charge of Althausee had received a direct order from Hitler's secretary, Martin Bormann, instructing him to take all measures necessary to prevent the Althausee treasure house from being captured by the Allies.

Gauleiter August Eigruber, an exceptionally ruthless and fanatical Nazi, interpreted this order as an instruction to destroy the art within the mine. This would later prove to have been an intentional misreading on Eigruber's part. Bormann's letter instructed Eigruber to seal the mine shaft, locking the

art inside but not damaging it. Eigruber had secretly determined to blow up the art in the mine, whether or not he was ordered to do so, if his beloved Nazis looked certain to lose the war. If the Allies failed to reach the mine in time, every one of the thousands of artistic masterpieces stored inside would be destroyed.

Posey and Kirstein rushed back to camp and reported Bunjes' information to their superiors. Althausee was out of the way of the strategic Allied advance. To divert towards the mine was a risky move, as the Allies had only one man's word to go on--that of a frightened, former SS art historian.

After tense deliberations, the Allied Third Army made their decision. The army would march through the Alps and try to save the stolen art.

As the Third Army moved towards Althausee, they were unaware that a parallel, secret operation was underway. A courageous Austrian double-agent was about to lead a team of covert operatives on a daring mission: to stall the Althausee mine's destruction by the violent and spiteful Gauleiter Eigruber.

Noah Charney is just finishing **STEALING THE MYSTIC LAMB**. Please check back to this site for more information in the coming months.