

## Film Review: The Rape of Europa

### A first-hand, hard-hitting account of Nazi looting

*The impact of spoliation—then and now—is assessed in a documentary based on the landmark book*

In "The Rape of Europa", a documentary that examines the history of Nazi looting, historian Rolf Rossmeisl is filmed going into a vault near Nuremberg to examine a collection of silver rimonim, Jewish Torah crowns. He is trying to track



James Rorimer (second from left), later the director of the Metropolitan Museum, supervises the recovery of art from a castle in southern Bavaria in 1945

down the families who originally owned these objects. He finds clues through Holocaust records and Jewish cemeteries. Eventually, Mr Rossmeisl locates the family to whose ancestors these items belonged and travels to New York to return the artefacts. During the ceremony where the crowns are put back on the Torah, Mr Rossmeisl comments that "[this is] not about research or art history...it's that life is created from it again".

This is one of many personal stories sprinkled throughout the documentary inspired by the award-winning book *The Rape of Europa* (1995) by Lynn H. Nicholas. When the producers at San Francisco-based Actual Films read the book, they thought it had the pace of a thriller which would work well visually. Most of the information available about Nazi looting is limited to books and websites, and surprisingly, a factual film on the

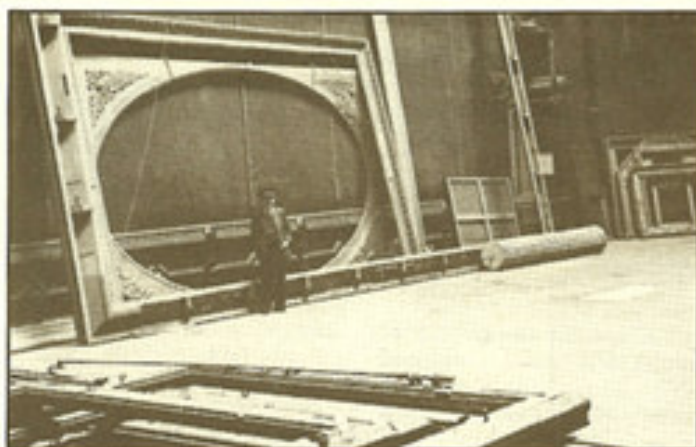
subject has not been made—until now.

"The Rape of Europa" provides a thorough account of the systematic Nazi plundering of cultural objects throughout Europe. The film charts the chronology of Nazi looting during the war, from Hitler's rise to power to the Allies returning looted treasures back to their countries of origin. There is an impressive amount of dramatic wartime footage including workers at the Louvre packing up paintings for safe-keeping and an Allied clip of an officer telling his bombardiers to avoid hitting any of Florence's cultural monuments.

There is even colour footage from a home movie of a doctor who visited Austria after annexation which reveals chilling shots of vandalised Jewish shops.

The piece includes first-hand accounts of Nazi looting through interviews with elderly witnesses, former soldiers and Holocaust survivors, which are the heart of the film. It is imperative that their testimonies were documented. Unfortunately, some of the people whom the producers wanted to interview, such as Marianne Feilchenfeldt, the wife of German dealer Walter Feilchenfeldt who witnessed an infamous auction of what the Nazis declared "Degenerate Art", died before their testimonies were documented.

An important message of this film is that with a bit of foresight and proper planning, cultural treasures can be saved during times of war and importantly, the documentary does not shy away from controversial aspects of saving cultural treasures. Shortly after General Eisenhower ordered all field commanders not to destroy cultural monuments, an intense battle raged at the Monte Cassino monastery in Italy in early 1944. American and British parents protested that they didn't want their sons dying to protect a building. Allied Colonel Young Oak Kim recalled how he was not permitted to fire on the monastery. "In



A picture frame for a Veronese work stands empty after the evacuation of the Louvre in 1939

hindsight, I know the Allied command wanted to appear like the good guys in the eyes of the public and the world, but as an infantryman when your life is at stake, it doesn't make sense." We are then shown footage of the Allies bombing the monastery but it emerged that there was not a single enemy soldier in the monument at the time of the bombardment. Ironically, this battle turned out to be a victory for the Italian Fascist government's propaganda department, who touted the Allies as destroyers of culture.

There are also interviews with former Allied Monuments

Fine Art and Archives (MFA&A) officers who were responsible for protecting historical monuments and returning looted art. A range of emotions crosses their faces as they remember the shock at discovering famous works hidden in mine shafts, for instance. What is most apparent is the respect they have for the objects they recovered. Former Monuments Officer Bernard Taper, who worked for the MFA&A in Germany, recalls his favourite Degas painting in an office at the Allied Central Collection Point. "Just that office alone was worth the price of admission to World War II," he says.

The film launched last month at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts as part of the Boston Jewish Film Festival, where it won the Audience Award for Best Documentary Feature.

#### Shauna Isaac

□ The writer is managing director of Sage Recovery which helps to trace and recover looted objects. [www.sagerecovery.com](http://www.sagerecovery.com)

"The Rape of Europa" will be shown on 7 December, MASS MoCA, North Adams, Massachusetts ([www.massmoca.org/index.html](http://www.massmoca.org/index.html)); 8 December, Jewish Film Festival, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC ([www.wjff.org](http://www.wjff.org)); 10-25 January, New York, Jewish Film Festival, Lincoln Center ([www.thejewishmuseum.org](http://www.thejewishmuseum.org)); 18-28 January, Miami Jewish Film Festival ([www.caje-miami.org](http://www.caje-miami.org)); 22-28 January, Atlanta Jewish Film Festival.