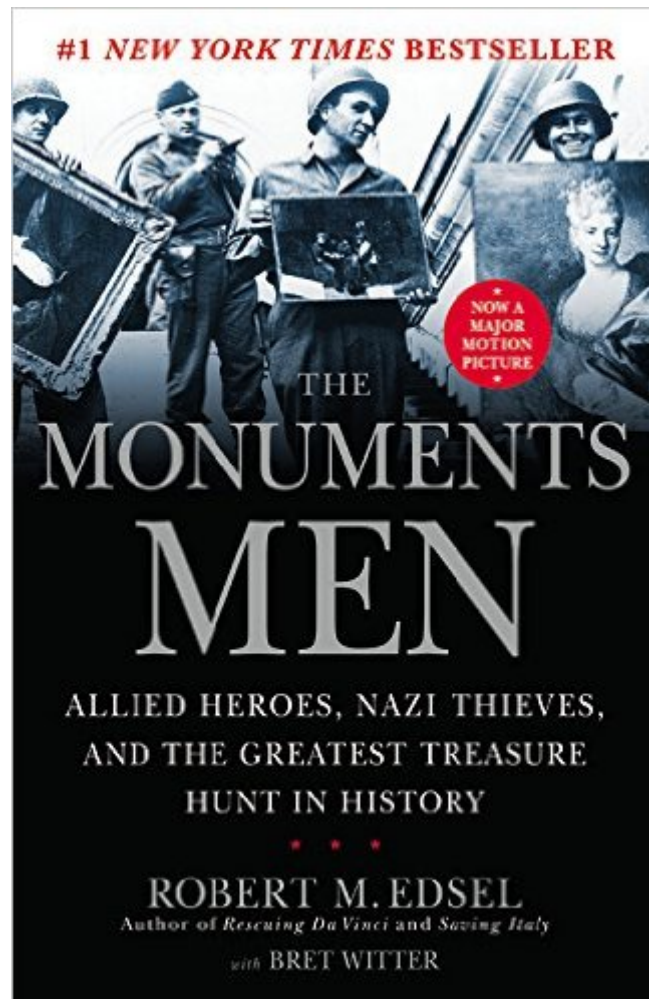


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The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves And The Greatest Treasure Hunt In History



Synopsis

At the same time Adolf Hitler was attempting to take over the western world, his armies were methodically seeking and hoarding the finest art treasures in Europe. The Fuehrer had begun cataloguing the art he planned to collect as well as the art he would destroy: "degenerate" works he despised. In a race against time, behind enemy lines, often unarmed, a special force of American and British museum directors, curators, art historians, and others, called the Monuments Men, risked their lives scouring Europe to prevent the destruction of thousands of years of culture. Focusing on the eleven-month period between D-Day and V-E Day, this fascinating account follows six Monuments Men and their impossible mission to save the world's great art from the Nazis.

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Customer Reviews

The most devastating damage and acts of looting of art objects in the annals of history took place during World War Two. These were perpetrated by the Nazi hordes, carefully directed by the Fuhrer himself. The Nazi army was perpetually pillaging the finest art in Europe. The vain Goering and Alfred Rosenberg were among the main culprits involved in those brutal crimes against the human creative talent. Fortunately, there was a Western Allied effort to mitigate combat damage, primarily to structures—churches, museums, and other various monuments. In the course of those brutal years, particularly during 1943-1944, the Allies paid much more attention to finding and protecting cultural items which were stolen from their owners, many of which were Jews. The bosses of the Third Reich transported more than five million cultural objects to many sites in Germany, where they hid them, hoping that one day they would not only be the masters of the world, but also the masters of

art. More than 350 men and women served as Monuments People. This number was culled from thirteen nations. In the end, only a handful of them were active and this book is their story. It was the responsibility of this group to save as much of the European culture as it could. Mt. Edsel has been living in Florence, Italy, in the 1990s when he wondered how so many of Europe's monuments and other works of art could have survived this unprecedented orgy of destruction. Thus, he set out to conduct a very careful process of extremely meticulous research which led him ultimately to interview those soldiers who have risked and dedicated their lives pursuing this mission. Many of them were art curators, scholars, educators, architects and archivists in their early forties.

Even before the first shots of World War II were fired in September 1939, Adolf Hitler was dreaming of transforming his hometown of Linz into a kind of Nazi cultural capital, and his political aides were helping him earmark works of art from around Europe that could be added to his collection. Unlike today's avid collectors, however, Hitler opted to obtain his works via looting, confiscation or as a kind of trade for the owner's survival, safety or escape from the Nazi regime. The fight to retrieve this art and return it to its former owner goes on to this day; the Amber Room is still missing from the Tsarist palaces of St. Petersburg, while works by Klimt have only recently been returned to the families of their original owners. That's the backdrop against which Robert Edsel (and his writer, Brett Witter) craft their story of the adventures of six very different "Monuments Men", a motley crew of artists, curators and other types who landed on the beaches of Normandy in the wake of D-Day and, hitchhiking from one town to another, battled to protect, rescue and, later, retrieve lost masterpieces. The material in the book is compelling, but the way in which it's delivered and presented falls short, which astonished me given the sheer drama of the quixotic adventures of the monuments men. Part of the problem are the ultra-short chapters (sometimes only three or four pages), which just gave me a chance to immerse myself in what one of the monuments men was up to before it jumped, sometimes both geographically and thematically, to another chapter dealing with something else. I ended up feeling dizzy and distracted. I also struggled with two elements in the writing of the book.

One of the most enjoyable aspects to the study of history is always finding new stories. Even when you think you know a lot about a field you find something new and enjoyable. That one of the many reasons that I enjoyed *Monuments Men* so much. Robert Edsel has provided us with a look at an area of World War II studies that has gone virtually unnoticed for nearly 70 years. The men and women of the MFAA (Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives) Division served an almost unknown, but

incredibly valuable part in the war against the destructive evil of Nazism. When Hitler's forces overran Europe they set about looting the national artistic treasures in a methodical manner. Priceless treasures were pillaged from the museums and galleries of France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland, and other European nations. All property belonging to Jews were taken. Hitler's dream was to create an enormous museum that would be the envy of the entire world. Instead he launched the most destructive war in history. The allies were aware of the cultural heritage in the areas that they would be fighting. This is why the MFAA was created. The original MFAA officers were tasked with traveling into the war zones and identifying historic sites that needed to be preserved. The stories of what these men accomplished is truly amazing. Time after time they were able to save important buildings from being destroyed. As the book progresses we see another dimension of their work. They began to investigate the Nazi looting. Their job shifted from simply protecting buildings from destruction to locating stolen works of art. At times the book resembles an action thriller story. The theft of priceless works of art. The heroic civilians who work undercover to spy on the Nazis.

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