

# Newsday.com

## 'The Rape of Europa'

Rating: ★★★★★

BY ARIELLA BUDICK

[ariella.budick@newsday.com](mailto:ariella.budick@newsday.com)

September 14, 2007



That the Nazis revered art even as they systematically exterminated people is one of the imponderables at the heart of their darkness. How could people who venerated the products of civilization behave in such horrifically uncivilized ways? Yet the Nazis went to great lengths to control, destroy, shelter and accumulate art. They stole it from Jews and plundered it from conquered nations in a bizarre quest to enhance the prestige of Germany.

"The Rape of Europa," a fascinating account of art's fate during the rise of the Third Reich and the Second World War, describes Hitler's fixation on acquiring cultural artifacts. The documentary details the vast resources he diverted from the war to steal and transport paintings, sculpture, furniture and anything else that fell under his officers' connoisseurial glance. The film also traces the efforts of those who tried to foil the Nazis' state-sponsored larceny.

This sweeping, exhaustively researched, moving film weaves individual stories into the panoramic account, allowing such unsung heroes as Rose Valland to emerge out of a historical void. Valland, a bespectacled curator at the Louvre, was left in charge of the Jeu de Paume, the gallery where objects confiscated from Jewish art dealers rested briefly before traveling to points east. Valland's frumpy appearance seems to have shielded her from suspicion, and her secret knowledge of German enabled her to operate as a spy, keeping track of every shipment. After the war, her meticulousness enabled the stolen hoards to be returned.

The film also describes the monumental feats involved in emptying the Louvre and the Hermitage before the Germans arrived. As the Nazis marched into Paris, the "Mona Lisa" was sneaked out of the city toward the south of France in a sealed ambulance. When the doors were opened, its escort had fainted for lack of air. The daughter of the masterpiece's wartime caretakers recalls seeing Leonardo's mysterious muse smiling out of a red, satin-lined box.

Much of the film concerns the mostly well-meaning, sometimes disastrous, Allied treatment of Europe's artistic heritage. Here, the film gets selective in its assessments. The directors linger over the destruction of the ancient abbey at Monte Cassino, Italy, but don't even mention the German cathedrals razed by aerial bombardment. The U.S. military gets a lot of credit for deploying "Monuments Men": curators and art historians who accompanied the Army to protect, and later to

recover and return, Europe's scattered patrimony.

The story still is unfolding. In the 1990s, Russia acknowledged that toward the end of the war, Soviet experts ransacked German troves of art; much of that loot remains in the Hermitage. The film begins and ends with the odyssey of the portrait that Gustav Klimt painted of the Jewish arts patron Adele Bloch-Bauer. It passed from her husband to the Nazis to a museum in Vienna, where it stayed until an Austrian court returned it to the family, who promptly sold it to Ronald Lauder for \$135 million. Last year, it went on display at New York's Neue Galerie, a museum of German and Austrian art.

It's hard to say whether the painting is finally home.

### **THE RAPE OF EUROPA**

(unrated). Written, produced and directed by Richard Berge, Bonni Cohen and Nicole Newnham. A riveting documentary about the Nazis' relentless looting of Europe's artistic treasures and about those who struggled to protect them. 1:57. At the Angelika Film Center and Paris Theater, Manhattan.

Copyright © 2007, [Newsday Inc.](#)