



Sharp Image: Adolf Hitler presents Hermann Goering with "The Falconer" (1880) by Austrian painter Hans Makart.



The Hitler Collection

The Rape of Europa: a heroic story of art stolen, art rescued

Aug 30, 2007

By Robert Sward

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My parents came home from Friday night services in Chicago whispering about a man who had been tortured by the Nazis. He had been invited to speak at the synagogue, to show his scars and to tell what had happened. They spoke in whispers "to protect the children..." And what was it they spoke about? The death camps, and relatives who had perished. We were not sophisticated; we cared about our family. If we knew the great treasures of European civilization had been pillaged, that was no concern of ours.

Now, more than 60 years later, I view *The Rape of Europa* and it opens me to the very painful understanding that in addition to the human cost of Nazi Germany, there was also a cultural loss, beyond anything I could have imagined. And that it mattered, enormously.

Narrated by three-time Oscar nominee Joan Allen, profoundly moving and informative, *The Rape of Europa* has something of the miraculous about it. Richard Berge and Bonnie Cohen are the film's San Francisco-based producer-directors. They and documentary filmmaker Nicole Newnham spent five years conducting interviews, obtaining archival footage and producing the 90-minute documentary. It explores how it is possible to reconcile, within one man, both the capacity to appreciate the great art of the world and the willingness to destroy cities, museums and architectural wonders, and to exterminate millions upon millions of people.

We see Adolph Hitler, 18 years old, a watercolorist of mediocre talent, applying to the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. Two Jewish artists are accepted. Hitler is rejected. The film suggests Hitler's anti-Semitism may have had its origin in this early rejection.

Before bringing the Nazi Party to power in Germany, Hitler struggled to establish himself as an artist. *Europa* shows examples of Hitler's drawings. Their very delicacy and sentimentalism is horrifying as a glimpse into the psyche of one of the monsters of human history.

We know something of the cost of World War II in lives — more than 50 million people perished. *Europa* is the story of a lesser-known devastation: the Nazis' systematic and ruthless rounding up of the treasure of European civilization.

While the gas chambers did their grisly work, Hitler worked on plans for a great art museum in his hometown of Linz, Austria, that was intended to house tens of thousands of masterpieces. For 12 years Nazis looted and purged Europe's great museums and private collections to feed his obsession. Members of his inner circle curried favor by seizing masterpieces by Matisse, Klimt and others. Herman Goering alone amassed 1,700 paintings. At the same time, art by Picasso, Van Gogh and Chagall, among many others, were auctioned off: more than 16,000 modern works deemed "unpure" were simply destroyed.

In 1943, President Roosevelt approved the formation of a commission to salvage artistic and historic monuments—and the US military cooperated. The "Venus Fixers" were mostly young museum directors, curators, professors and architects who volunteered for service, often in the combat zone, to inspect, repair, and report on monuments needing protection. More than 6,000 were recovered by Allied Forces at the end of the war. Many were returned to their rightful owners.

These men and women are the heroes of *The Rape of Europa*. The creators of this film belong in their number.

The Rape of Europa plays 5pm daily at Osio Cinemas. Robert Sward's The Collected Poems (Black Moss Press / Literary Press Group), is now in its second printing. Sward lives in Santa Cruz.

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