

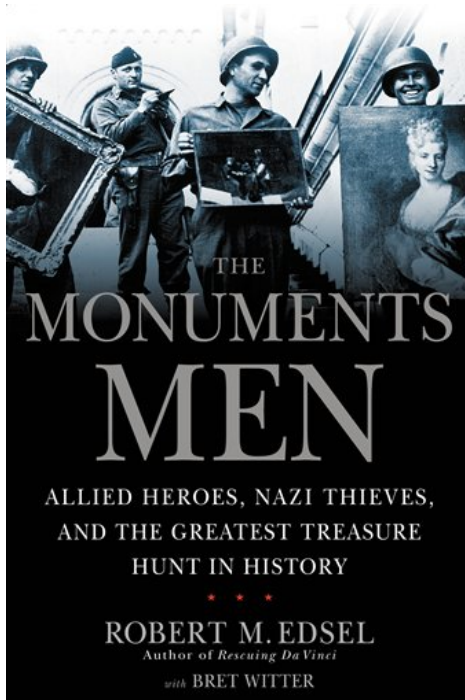


AP Associated Press

Edsel tells of search for art looted in WWII

By CARL HARTMAN, For The Associated Press

Tuesday, September 8, 2009



"The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves, and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History" (Center Street, 473 pages, \$26.99), by Robert M. Edsel with Bret Witter: When Hitler invaded Poland and started World War II, special units went along to seize works of art, says author Robert M. Edsel.

Other Europeans hid masterpieces with limited success. The Germans' booty began what Edsel calls "the greatest treasure hunt in history" — still going on 70 years later.

An American-Israeli organization estimates the Germans may have stolen as many as 1.5 million objects, with 100,000 of museum quality still missing.

Leonardo da Vinci's "Lady With an Ermine" turned up in the house of Hans Frank, who ran Poland for the Nazis, and today's treasure hunters still wonder what happened to Raphael's "Portrait of a Young Man," once held by Frank. Both paintings were treasures of the Czartoryski Museum in Krakow, Poland's art capital.

The hunters' exploits make a fascinating read. Edsel carefully and colorfully backgrounds "The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves, and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History" with vivid accounts of

the war's progress. But statements that recall films "based on a true story" may put some readers off. An author's note says he created dialogue for continuity but not on substance, and always with documentation.

"I have at all times tried not only to understand and communicate the facts," Edsel adds, "but also the personalities and perspectives of the people involved, as well as their perception of events at the very instant they occurred."

That's a tricky undertaking, more than half a century later.

Strictly speaking "monuments men" were a small group — 17 to start — in a British-American undertaking: the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives Subcommittee. It was formed just before D-Day, nearly five years after the assault on Poland. In the interval, Germany and its allies occupied pretty much all of western Europe and a good chunk of North Africa. So the Western allies could do little to protect important artistic and historic buildings — the group's first objective.

In practice, the "monuments men" were from many countries, even Germany. Count Franz von Wolf-Metternich, a professor from Bonn University, headed the official German Kunstschutz "Art Protection Service." He discreetly sabotaged efforts to ship art from France out of the country.

He cooperated with Rose Valland, a heroine of the French resistance. She started as a volunteer at the Jeu de Paume, a small museum near the Louvre in Paris but a major German collecting point for artistic loot. Throughout the war she risked her life keeping track of the art gathered there and their destinations.