



Art collector Robert Edsel has written two books about Monuments Men, which played a major role in finding looted art treasures during World War II.
ROSS HAILEY

Man With a Mission

BY GAILE ROBINSON

Robert Edsel's passion for art has led to a stunning private collection and books honoring the heroic people who rescued works plundered by the Nazis.

Robert Edsel was the perfect profile of Texas-style success. He went to St. Mark's, Dallas' prestigious preparatory school, and then on to SMU, nabbing a spot on the tennis team and becoming a nationally ranked player. After graduating with a degree in finance he moved easily into the oil and gas business and eventually started his own company, Gemini Exploration. Through the early '90s he pioneered horizontal drilling technology and, in 1995, sold his company for \$37.9 million. A year later he decamped to Europe.

Details
"From the Private Collections of Texas, European Art, Ancient to Modern"
Nov. 22-March 21
Kimbell Art Museum
3333 Camp Bowie Blvd., Fort Worth
\$10-\$14
817-332-8451,
www.kimbellart.org
Monuments Men Foundation for the Preservation of Art
www.MonumentsMenFoundation.org

There, his life took a 180-degree turn. The former oilman became fascinated with art. In Florence, he was so enamored of the spectacular histories that surrounded him that he hired tutors to teach him about the city's art and architecture. He became a voracious reader about the Old Masters, then a buyer. He traveled to the big European art fairs and began acquiring pristine

16th-, 17th- and 18th-century works.

Today, Edsel's collection, which spans a 600-year period of 1350-1915, fills his Dallas home. His eye for quality has become so attuned that six of his pieces will be exhibited in "From the Private Collections of Texas: European Art, Ancient to Modern" later this month at the Kimbell Art Museum. The most remarkable is *Madonna of the Cherries* by Giampietrino, c. 1515, an absolutely pristine painting by a student of Leonard da Vinci's who was copying the work of the master. Da Vinci's original is lost, and most art critics think this is the most faithful copy of the original.

Even here Edsel's story could end, but one day, while crossing Florence's famous Ponte Vecchio, something occurred to him that set him on a new trajectory. "It had never occurred to me before, but how," he wondered, "did all the great art

treasures of Europe survive the destructiveness of WWII?

"I spent months buying books. I found the Nazis committed a 7-year-long robbery," he says. Some of Adolf Hitler's sycophants had provided the Führer with catalogs of all the great artworks of Europe. They presented the leather-bound books to him as a birthday present and he spent many hours choosing what he wanted looted for his personal collection and for the museum that he planned to build in his hometown of Linz.

During the course of the war, the Nazis stole Michelangelo's *Bruges Madonna* and Jan Vermeer's *The Artist's Studio*. They stole works by Rembrandt. They looted Leonardo da Vinci's *Lady With an Ermine* in Poland. When Edsel would ask the art historians and museum curators "Who saved the art?," no one knew. The most specific answer that he would hear was, "Allied forces."

After much sleuthing and with the help of Lynn Nichols' book *The Rape of Europa*, he discovered a small cadre of art historians, artists, architects and educators who were charged with finding and returning the looted treasures. There were only a few dozen at first, men and women from 13 nations, primarily the U.S., who were called the Monuments Men. By D-Day there were about 60 of them. They advanced across Europe attached to the units on the front lines. During the last year of the war and for several years thereafter, they tracked and returned more than 5 million cultural items stolen by the Nazis.

Their heroics had become a footnote of the war. By the time Edsel learned about them, there were few still alive; he estimates there are fewer than 10 today. "They were the greatest untold story of WWII," he says.

"I've lectured to about 10,000 people and in all the lectures I've given never yet has anyone said, 'I know about these guys.'" Not even the curators and crowds that gathered for Edsel's lecture at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans knew who had saved the cultural patrimony of Europe.

Edsel has written two books about the Monuments Men. The first one was self-published in 2006. *Rescuing Da Vinci: Hitler and the Nazis Stole Europe's Great Art — America and Her Allies Recovered It* is primarily photographs of Monuments Men and the treasures that they found buried in salt mines, bunkers and basements throughout Europe. Once this book was published, stories began to emerge and, in September, Edsel's second book, *The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves, and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History* was released by Center Street, a division of Hachette Book Group. The first print run was 80,000 copies in 18 languages, including Chinese.

This book is the personal story of six Monuments Men told Ken Burns-style, with many of their letters and historical documents from both sides. The story follows them as they land during D-Day and race across Europe to find the treasures before they either are destroyed or fall into the hands of the Russians, who are advancing from the east.



COLLECTION OF ROBERT M. EDEL

Landscape With Tobias's Return (1601) by Paul Brill, oil on copper

Their mission was to return all the looted cultural treasures to their home countries. "It was a dramatic change in the course of civilization to say, 'To the victors do *not* belong the spoils of war,'" says Edsel. "We were not going to take these things back and enrich our museums; we're going to make sure these things go back to where they were taken, even in Germany."

When the Monuments Men returned to the United States, they became directors and curators at the Met, MoMA and the National Gallery of Art. The New York City Ballet was founded by a member of the Monuments Men. Despite their professional successes, they left their personal heroics in Europe and were content to let their stories fade.

Edsel, though, is adamant that they not be forgotten and that their sacrifices not be subsumed by the larger story. Why?

"Because I'm deeply embarrassed about what happened in Iraq," he says.

"In the aftermath of what took place in Iraq, we get a sad but marvelous snippet of what Europe would have looked like had there not been the Monuments Men. And it begs the question, how could 60 guys have such an impact over a broad continent during a truly world war and we couldn't do better in a small regional conflict?"

"This isn't a case of forgetting history, it's a case of not knowing it. So

that in my telling of the story, popularizing the excitement of story, I'm trying to make sure that there won't be any more blunders like that. So that governments will want to do better."

He says that as the Greatest Generation dies, treasures that they found in Europe during the war will come on the market and he wants to help facilitate their return. In the past month, two of the leather-bound catalogs presented to Hitler were found in an attic by the heirs of a WWII soldier who had picked them up off the floor of Hitler's home during the war. They are now in the care of the National Archives because they document the looted artworks and are instrumental in ascertaining the original owners.

Edsel continues to compile the stories of Monuments Men, seeing that they are recognized by the United States government for their services and helping restore looted works of art. There are still more than 100,000 pieces missing, he says, and he wants to help restore them to the rightful owners. He has been funding the work of the Monuments Men Foundation out of his own pocket and has had to sell off some of his art collection to do so. He says it is worth it.

"Meaningfulness is what I want my life defined by. It's not money or success that's important to me. I've had that," he says. "That's why this work with the Monuments Men is so important. It's meaningful."



Madonna of the Cherries (c. 1508-10), by Giampietrino, oil on panel

COLLECTION OF ROBERT M. EDEL

ENJOY LIFE'S SIMPLE PLEASURES

massages | body wraps | medi facials | airbrush tanning | hydro bath treatments
3d ultraviolet skin imaging | laser treatments | hair removal/waxing
botox/juvederm/restylane | manicures/pedicures | vichy showers | hair salon

Schedule Your Appointment Today

The Havens
SPA

817.341.4772
109 otto drive, weatherford, tx 76087
www.TheHavensSpa.com

VIETRI
Inspiring Life, Italian Style

DOMAIN
X C I V

3100 W. 7th Street, Suite 112 (Next to Eddie V's) Additional Parking in Garage
817-336-1994 • www.domainxciv.com

Custom Upholstery • Bridal Registry • Scent Boutique