



The Rape of Europa: The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War

Lynn H. Nicholas

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The story told in this superbly researched and suspenseful book is that of the Third Reich's war on European culture and the Allies' desperate effort to preserve it. From the Nazi purges of 'degenerate art' and Goering's shopping sprees in occupied Paris to the perilous journey of the 'Mona Lisa' from Paris and the painstaking reclamation of the priceless treasures of liberated Italy, *The Rape of Europa* is a sweeping narrative of greed, philistinism, and heroism that combines superlative scholarship with a compelling drama.

The cast of characters includes Hitler and Goering, Gertrude Stein and Marc Chagall--not to mention works by artists from Leonardo da Vinci to Pablo Picasso.

The Rape of Europa: The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War Details

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From Reader Review The Rape of Europa: The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War for online ebook

Patrick Baty says

A stunning piece of research.

Tara says

i almost forgot that historical non-fiction can be a total tear-jerker. i got a little misty-eyed here and there when the author accounted for both allied and axis measures to protect art during the cultural holocaust of the 2nd ww. emotions aside, i admire how well-researched this book is, so hats off to lynn nicholas. if you have any interest or inclination toward this subject/era, its a good way to learn more about the 2nd ww esp. if you prefer an art history/cultural approach to the subject. this history takes the reader away from the war fronts, instead depicting the secondary battlefield of the arts, which nevertheless played a critical role in the battle strategies of the nazis in their attempt to reform european culture.

Patty says

Mixed feelings here. It is a topic I love but there is just SO VERY much detail that it is too much to process. Many of the threads and stories are fascinating, but the reader is swamped in detail. An editor, perhaps? It is a common problem amongst academics- I found all this information and, by George, you are going to read it! Whew.

Jesse says

I finished reading this book almost exactly a year ago. And in the year that has since passed, I have attempted to wrap my head around everything meticulously laid out in the 450 pages of tiny black print that make up this book. I find that I grapple with the knowledge I gained here more often than I could have possibly imagined. You know how people use solar eclipses to glance directly at the sun? Well, I have found that it is through this book that I have started to honestly fathom the horrific nature of the Second World War, in all of its crippling, incomprehensible intensity. It has become, quite simply, the loophole upon which I can relate to things I previously only *knew* but had never actually *felt*.

The Louvre, post evacuation

Confiscated Jewish art and property in Paris

Considering the sprawling nature of the subject matter—Hitler and Goering's insatiable art collecting addiction, the stunning evacuations of the Louvre and the Hermitage collections, the "legal" seizure of Jewish art collections and property, the marginalization of "degenerate" modern art and artists, the meticulous destruction of the cultural heritages of Poland and other Slavic countries, the Nazi occupation and plunder of Italy, the tireless work of the American Monument Men, etc, etc—Lynn H. Nicholas does an admirable job with her cobwebby material that constantly threatens to spin in countless directions, organizing it into dense but generally cohesive chapters. And along the way, she packs in shocking anecdotes that could inspire countless novels and films of their own: the boot print left on Da Vinci's *Lady with an Ermine* after German soldiers found its hiding spot and unaware of the priceless art, ransacked the accompanying gold objects, two British reporters entering an occupied castle to interview some soldiers and coming face to face with Botticelli's gigantic *Primavera*, American soldiers discovering Hitler's personal art collection in a rural salt mine, and then staring at the Ghent Altarpiece and the Bruges Madonna by Michelangelo in the darkness a full quarter of a mile underground.

What remained of the frescos at the Campo Santo

Original Tchaikovsky manuscripts tossed into the snow

Hitler, Herr Art-Collector-in-Chief himself

But more than anything, it's the stories of people that shine through. As just a single example (and one I found most moving): the description of the group of people who lived in the basement of the Hermitage during the Siege of Leningrad, in conditions so cold that frozen corpses could be stored unattended for months, subsisting on "jellied soup made of carpenter's glue." And then I nearly cried over the accompanying page describing the group of starving "not-so-young" women working every day in the building itself, chipping away with crowbars at the ice building up on the walls and floors after the windows had been shattered by bombs and gunfire. I honestly had to start confronting the "big" questions: how valuable *is* art? Is it *ever* worth more than human life? And *what* is it about it that inspired countless people to accomplish reality-defying feats to try and preserve it for future generations?

The images included above are from the really excellent documentary adapted from this book that was released in 2006, and I can totally see the temptation in skipping this labyrinthine book in favor of a concise two hour film. But inevitably, the film only skates on the surface of most issues, and doesn't even mention many others, including some of what I thought were the most moving parts of the book. But it does have its own set of advantages, namely the sheer impact of visual confirmation of the information. Needless to say, it's an excellent supplement to Nicholas's massive tome, if not really an adequate replacement.

Just after finishing this book, I read an amazing collection of poetry called *In Praise of the Unfinished: Selected Poems* by Julia Hartwig, a previously untranslated Polish poet who also tapped into something deeply emotional that I never really quite came to grips with either (which is why I never reviewed it here on GR). One reoccurring theme throughout the collection is regarding art itself in all of its multifaceted forms. And these few lines, I thought, got closest to articulating the inexpressible thoughts and feelings this book evoked for me, its precise eloquence doing more justice to this topic than I ever could, so I'll just end this rambling review with it:

"Art casts a spell summoning life

*so it can continue
but its space extends to the invisible
It is also an intelligence reconciling
discordant elements with similarities
It is brave
because it seeks immortality
by being—just like everything else—mortal”*

-Julia Hartwig, “It is Also This”

Indeed.

Suzanne says

“Art was very fashionable in the new regime. In October 1933, only months after becoming Chancellor, Hitler laid the cornerstone of the Haus der Deutschen Kunst in Munich, his first major public building project. Only later did the fact that the ceremonial hammer broke in his hands assume significance.”

The Rape of Europa is a culmination of years worth of research about the systematic theft of Europe's greatest art treasures during World War II. The author, Lynn H. Nicholas, successfully takes on the mammoth task of tracing the Nazi's activities of collecting works of art deemed appropriate, and destroying or selling for profit those deemed degenerate.

Despite the daunting challenge, Nicholas does a wonderful job of weaving the stories of stolen art and their owners - from the forced sales and confiscations, their movement across borders, storage, recovery and restitution. Despite its detail, Nicholas manages to capture the intrigue and adventure of the subject matter. To this day, many great works of art have never been recovered since their disappearance during the war. The Rape of Europa is an important book for its history and for its relevance in the art and political world today.

Darla says

Another rating quandary...LH's research is astounding, her attention to detail unparalleled.; unfortunately it made my brain go into overload and I couldn't keep track of everything (anything?). I found the post WW2 debates on what to do with everything most interesting. It is fascinating to think of art still to be found. Bottom line, my rating is more to do with my attention span and less to do with the quality of writing.

Michelle says

Dear Lynn Nichols,

I'm very sorry that I have had to give up on your informative, well-researched, and extensively annotated book. I'm sure that if I'd finished it, it would have been awesome, so I'm going to go ahead and give it five

stars anyway.

You see, Netflix has this great new feature where you can download movies and watch them immediately. I'm going to watch the documentary instead. Yes, I normally prefer to read the book, but in this case I'm going to make an exception.

Oh, and another reason why I'm going to stop reading your book is because every time you put in an endnote, which is often, by the way, I am compelled to look it up in the back of the book. Most of the time I needn't have looked them up, but I *can't not* look them up. Needless to say, this is quite time consuming.

You can be assured that if I ever find myself with a lot of time on my hands, I will pick your book up again.

With warmest regards,
Michelle

Erik says

Although it does often read like a laundry list of people, events, and places in art world of war-torn Europe during the late 30's and 40's, I will say I was in awe of Nicholas's research into this often-ignored area of WWII history. His ability to explain human motivation and exploitation of artistic works of art in extreme minutiae is second to none. The description of the great mass of refugees from Belgium and the Netherlands who descended into France before the latter's fall – along with massive truckloads of their artistic patrimony – stands as one the most unforgettable images that I will take away from this detailed exposé. The Nazis as usual – and Himmler and Goering, in particular – walk away as a despicable coterie of power-control freaks and manipulators. If they weren't bombing the hell out of Europe east and west, not to mention exterminating whole populations of ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities – not to mention anyone with a mental handicap – the Nazis were looting Europe of its masterpieces like kids at a candy store. Luckily for us today, just enough people throughout Europe had the prescience to inventory and hide away as much artwork as they could before the coming barbarian hordes of the Third Reich. Of course, it remains to be said that some works have been lost, forgotten, or even destroyed. Let's just hope history doesn't try and repeat itself.

Andy says

World War II was, for a few, a historic opportunity to loot and pillage. And the theft of artwork, along with other forms of national treasure, was perfected and institutionalized on the grandest scale by the Nazis. Hitler was of course involved, but Goering was considerably more preoccupied. He stole, traded, and hoarded an enormous quantity of valuables (paintings, sculptures, tapestries, precious metals, gems, ceremonial objects, rare books, furniture, you name it) to fill his cavernous estate at Carinhall.

I'm not an art devotee, but many episodes in this book were absolutely maddening. Here's the pattern in country after country: Germany invades, the Nazis pick over every public and private art collection they can find, packing off the best to the Reich (first choice goes to Hitler for his Linz museum, second choice to Goering, and so on). And then the remaining "degenerate" artwork is used for barter or burned. Nearly as frustrating: priceless artwork used as tabletops, left to disintegrate in wet caverns, hacked apart by infantrymen bent on revenge.

The recovery effort was considerably more intricate than the thefts, and all of this is covered in rich detail by Nicholas. At points, not being familiar with many of the works discussed, I longed for a visual reference. I haven't seen the PBS documentary based on *The Rape of Europa*, but for visuals, it might be a good complement to the book. Even without the tour guide, though, it was a very enjoyable read.

Susanna - Censored by GoodReads says

This one has some interesting choices in structure, and reads a little as if Nicholas were suffering from "I did all this research, so you're going to read about it!" syndrome. But very, very interesting.

All about the passions aroused by art in wartime. How to protect? How to find (by thief or otherwise)? To whom to return it?

Also I love the factoid learned here that Hitler was reading a biography of Ghengis Khan during the sack of Warsaw.

Lobstergirl says

It seems like a lot of readers found this unattractively dense and fact-packed, but I thoroughly enjoyed it - as much as one can enjoy a book largely about the looting of art treasures from Jews and other war victims. Nicholas meticulously researched her subject for years, combing through institutional archives and privately held papers and interviewing various surviving owners of the looted collections. It's a fascinating story, full of villains and heroes, one that hasn't ended yet; there are still some masterpieces which have never been found.

G Hodges says

Good grief. For those of you who don't like or understand Art, you may want to read this to learn about the absolute passion it engenders. I was disgusted by the greed and art-lust of the Nazis and Allies before and during the war. And then I was stunned by the complications of 'repatriating' the art works. The greed and art-lust reared it's ugly head in new and profound ways.

As to the book itself, it was very dense. Well written, but dense. You have to have a real interest in the topic. If you do, I also recommend *Monument Men* and *The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves, and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History* by Robert M. Edsel.

I am still awed by the loss of such beautiful objects and uncomprehending of the need to keep these things for oneself, rather than sharing with the world.

Melinda says

I have read "Rescuing Da Vinci" and also seen the DVD "The Rape of Europa", so I am now reading the

original book that was the catalyst for the book and DVD. Lynn Nicholas is interviewed in the DVD and I decided to read her book and learn more.

***** after reading the book *****

Having read "Rescuing Da Vinci" and having watched the DVD "The Rape of Europa", I thought I would read the book that started it all. Lynn Nicholas, who is interviewed extensively on the DVD, wrote this book to document the stunning history around the purchase / acquisition / theft of Europe's treasured works of art during WWII by the Nazis.

The book is dense, thick with details, heavy with names of dozens if not hundreds of art dealers and collectors along with museum curators from every nation in Europe. In some places, it is overwhelming in the detail and thoroughness. The path of art acquisition by Nazis in Holland, France, Austria, Italy is followed from the early years of Hitler's rise to power in Germany in the 1930's on into the early 1950's. Knowing what will happen, the book then begins to read like an adventure novel. Will the Monuments Men be organized in time to save SOME of the art objects? You know that they do, but the harrowing stories of rescue of treasures from barns, cow sheds, abandoned railway cars and more, simply emphasizes the hard work carried out by the men who were there.

What struck me in reading this book was that none of the Monuments men involved knew that they would be successful. They merely did the hard work of locating, listing, securing, packing, and preserving the art objects they worked hard to find and preserve. They fought for the art to be returned to original owners, from the countries where it had been stolen from. This flew in the face of many military opinions that thought the art objects obtained should go to "the victor". So while the process of stealing the art seemed like a well-oiled machine, the saving and restoration of these art objects seemed so difficult and full of conflict. It made me think of the section from "The Two Towers", when Frodo and Sam are discussing old tales and songs (chapter "The Stairs of Cirith Ungol").

Sam tells Frodo, " 'The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of a sport, as you might say. But that's not the way it is with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually -- their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn't. And if they had, we shouldn't know, because they'd have been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on -- and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end. You know, coming home, and finding things all right, though not quite the same -- like old Mr. Bilbo. But those aren't always the best tales to hear, though they may be the best tales to get landed in! I wonder what sort of tale we've fallen into?'"

The Monuments Men fell into a story that mattered, and they went on even when they had the chance to turn back. What an example for us all, to do the hard work in front of us because it is the right thing to do.

Kent says

An incredible history of the Nazi's extreme efforts to destroy any art they deemed degenerate and accompanied by the efforts of Hitler and Goering's minions to obtain by whatever means they could priceless

art they deemed Germanic for their own collections as well as for the greater glory of Nazi Germany. The book documents the extraordinary efforts, successful and futile to save the cultural artifacts of the countries overrun by the Nazi, including the obliteration of the Polish culture as well as anything that was Jewish. The latter portion of the history discusses the roles of the Monument Men, detailing their efforts to battle not only the efforts of those attempting to destroy cultural works, but also the disregard the US Army exhibited towards the efforts of the Monuments Men to save those cultural works. Finally, the history documents the vast efforts that went on for years after the war to return works of art to their 'true' owners. The book can be dense and overwhelming at times in regard to the artists and works of art discussed, if (like me) you do not have a background in art history. I'm looking forward to seeing the 2-hr movie 'The Rape of Europa' which is based on the book. The current movie concerning the Monuments Men only touches on a small portion of the history covered by this book.

Leila says

This is a fascinating book about the looting of art in Europe during WWII. I enjoyed reading this book because the subject matter is very interesting. However, it is very dense and filled with hundreds of names, places, dates, and details. If you're interested in art history and conservation, then this book is perfect for you!

Cori North says

Favorite bit, page 194-5: [in Leningrad]

"The guardians and their families would live for two long years in the basement below. Despite the cold and the terrible food, being museum people, they soon organized exhibitions from their holdings to maintain morale and to pass the long months of waiting."

Excellent history, and the documentary film made from this is So different, people should both read and watch!

Mary says

Very informative, though it does tend to drag. All in all it's written very well and researched comprehensively; in my opinion this is the definitive work on WWII art plunder. If the topic is of interest to you, you're likely to enjoy reading the book.

Liz De Coster says

Really, really enjoyed this book. I found the chapters on illicit art trading in Holland, art dealing in the Vichy government, and the last three chapters on the resolution of the war and after to be especially engrossing.

Bettie? says

to hunt down with a double barreled book seeker lens

Tony says

Nicholas, Lynn. THE RAPE OF EUROPA: The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War. (1994). ****. This is a meticulously researched and documented study of the less-than-legal and outright theft of art works by members of the German Third Reich before and during the period its dominance of conquered countries. These include such diverse works as the treasures of Quedlinburg, the Trojan Gold, and the Amber Room at Catherine's Palace. This is a dense book that attempts to trace most of the transfers of European art that occurred during the period by individuals of the Nazi regime – including Hitler – from 1933 up to 1945. It also tells of the trials of recovery of these lost masterworks by the Allied countries after the war was over. From the day Hitler came to power, art was a matter of highest priority to the Reich. He and other Nazis (especially Hermann Goering) were ravenous collectors, stopping at nothing to acquire paintings and sculpture, as well as coins, books, tapestries, jewels, furniture – everything. Every means at their disposal was used. In the early days, art was purchased – though at severe discounts of their actual worth. Later, art was commandeered and transferred to Nazi control. When the war was winding down, these collections were hidden in ways that were difficult for subsequent detection. It was the job of various Allied forces – especially the Monuments Division of the American forces – to find and catalog these collections to catalog and ultimately to restore them to their rightful owners. This was no easy job. Determining the provenance and ownership of these various works of art was a daunting project. The author manages to recount the activities involved in a clear and unbiased way that showed the magnitude of the job involved and the politics involved. As I said before, this is a dense book. It is less than a popular history; more of a critical study that will be used as a reference work that will be on the shelf of every art historian for years to come. Recommended.
