

Hitler Absolutely Plundered Europe

A 2006 documentary shows us not only how Hitler stole great Western artworks, but how a select group of American soldiers recovered it.



by Phyllis Chesler

In these incredibly harrowing times, I try to relax by watching movies late at night. Unfortunately, too many are horror films of one kind or another: Serial killers who torture their victims and stage their murders, or visions of

our world destroyed by a nuclear or climate apocalypse, still peopled by a few, desperate survivors.

Little relaxation there. But even less relaxation exists in the many Holocaust-era films, set in Germany, France, Holland, Poland, Scandinavia, and Russia, on and on, they just keep on coming. I wonder if this is a way of sidestepping the reality of an Islamist invasion of the West and of the Muslim world in general.

When one thinks about the Holocaust or about World War Two, one can barely grasp the number of war-related deaths which are estimated to be one hundred million combatants, civilians, and those afflicted by war. Back then, not even the most avowed pacifists blocked traffic or shut campuses down on behalf of saving the “innocent” civilians of Europe or Japan. Somewhat bitterly, I note that today, only Israel is required to “save” Gazan civilians, feed them, make sure they have power – even as the Israelis themselves are engaged in a fierce and existential fight for their own survival.

But, I digress.

When contemplating the Holocaust, one thinks about lives lost, not about stolen or looted artwork, or about the purposeful destruction of museums, churches, and synagogues. I am doing so now – because I have viewed a most remarkable documentary.

Yesterday, on my go-to platform, ChaiFlicks, I watched a 2006 documentary titled *The Rape of Europa*, (based on Lynn H. Nicholas’s 1995 book on the subject), about Hitler’s systematic, industrial-level plunder of Europe’s art work. You’ve probably seen the 2014 film *The Monument Men*. Well – this documentary is about the real American soldiers, all there in black-and-white footage, who were commissioned to find, save, and restore the art work that Hitler systematically and strategically plundered. I had no idea how extensive this Nazi theft was. The GIs called them the “Venus

fixers" but they came to be known as the Monument Men.

They were American soldiers who were also art experts, (Deane Keller, Robert Posey, Lincoln Kirstein, James Rorimer, who would go on to run the Metropolitan Museum of Art), and they braved death daily in order to recover Hitler's stolen Old Masters, (Botticelli, Boucher, Breughel, Da Vinci, Michaelangelo, Raphael, Rembrandt, Van Eyck, Vermeer), ancient frescoes, church and monastery tiles and paintings, revered statues, and the moderns: Cezanne, Gauguin, Klimt, Monet, Matisse, Renoir, Van Gogh, Seurat, Toulouse-Lautrec.

One must ask: Are lives more precious than culture? Does saving works of genius matter as much, perhaps even more than saving lives?

Hitler and his inner circle, followed by individual Nazi soldiers, plundered everything of value in sight. They first looted all that they could from Jewish art dealers, then from Jewish communities and individual Jewish families, (this included china, silverware, jewelry, invaluable Judaica including Torahs, Torah ornaments, candlesticks, Jewish memorabilia, and furniture). Only then, did the Nazis begin their massive and systematic looting of Western culture. Hitler also "purged" i.e. destroyed, what he viewed as "degenerate" art; this included works by Matisse, Van Gogh, and Picasso.

I learned, for the first time, about a French hero named Rose Valland, described as "not so tall, her hair in a bun, little glasses, really above suspicion." She worked at the Jeu de Paume, where Hitler had temporarily stored his stolen French treasures. "No one knew that she spoke German ... no one suspected this little gray mouse creeping around the building. Nobody knew that every night when she went home with her remarkable memory, she kept a secret diary of what French paintings, owned publicly or privately, were taken by whom, sent where." She managed to stay on, despite the "constant

danger of deportation or execution.”

Based on her notes, these priceless works could be searched for, found, and even restored to their owners or to their heirs.

Hitler also ravaged Russia. He stole all that he could from the famed Hermitage Museum, “violated” and destroyed Pushkin’s and Tolstoy’s homes; looted and blew up palaces and churches that were precious to the Russian people. Nicolai Gubenko, a former Soviet Minister of Culture, described this as “an outrage committed on the memory, on the ashes, of all that is holy in our country.” Given the high body count, (“20 to 30 millions soldiers and civilians dead”), the Russians remained reluctant to return the artwork that, in turn, the Red Army subsequently seized from Germany.

But here’s what made me gasp. In order to find Hitler’s special trove, the Monument Men had to descend 800 meters or (2,624 feet) below ground in the Alt Aussee Salt Mine in Austria.

If you watch this footage you will see the allied soldiers traversing Hitler’s underground tunnel and for a bizarre moment or two you will think that you’re beneath the earth in contemporary Gaza.

Hamas/Iran’s labyrinth of weaponized underground tunnels in Gaza are only 50 meters below ground or 164 feet deep. However, in terms of height and width, Hitler’s tunnels alarmingly resemble those in Gaza which are not as deep but which are 350-450 miles long.

What kind of lizard-people construct, work, live, operate, and hide in such living graves, far below the earth? Remember, like a rat, Saddam Hussein was found cowering in a hole about ten feet deep. I’m sure there is a long military history of tunnels, including those of the Viet Cong, who hid anywhere from six to fifty feet below the earth.

Once, when he was eighteen years-old, [Hitler](#) auditioned for Vienna's Academy of Fine Arts and was rejected. The documentary gently reminds us that Hitler was a failed artist who may have harbored a lifelong grudge towards his superiors, both Jews, politicians, and the artists with whose work he could never compete.

Was this the revenge of the less talented? Hitler actually planned a Fuehrer Museum in Linz, Austria, his hometown. According to American historian, Jonathan Petropolous, in an on-camera interview, Hitler planned an "opera house, a symphony hall, a great library, and a mausoleum with his tomb. At the center of the Linz complex, is gonna be the greatest museum ... in the entire world."

When Hitler knew he had lost the war, he had explosives planted at the mouth of the salt mine, in boxes labelled "precious marble." If he could not own the artwork – he wanted it destroyed. He was a "spoiler" of monumental proportions.

At least the Nazis coveted great art. I fear that their current incarnations – the Taliban, the Iranian Mullahs and their military proxies, (Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis), and ISIS do not. The Taliban simply blew up the Buddhas of Bamiyan, destroyed all proof that Afghanistan was once a Buddhist country. Down with history, let memory cease. ISIS destroyed or looted countless churches, monasteries, non-Salafist mosques and tombs, as well as the prophet Jonah's Tomb and the Armenian Genocide Memorial Church in Iraq, Syria, and Libya. They did not spare Assyrian-era statues that were 3,000 years old.

This documentary allows us to meet another hero, the real Maria Altmann, played by Helen Mirren in the film, "The Woman in Gold." After a torturous legal battle, and sixty, perhaps seventy years after the war, a panel of Austrian judges unexpectedly awarded Altmann and her family five paintings by Gustav Klimt, including the portrait of her aunt, Adele Bloch-

Bauer.

[Ronald Lauder](#) bought the painting of Adele for \$135 million. The work now hangs near my home, in the Neue Gallery in Manhattan. I have visited it more than once and it never fails to impress, even stun, the worshipper with its golden radiance.

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