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Scandals and Vandals
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Saving Italy Book Review

The Book

Without sparing any details Robert M. Edsel in the book *Saving Italy* tells the story of Axis and Allie troupes who dedicated their World War II careers to protecting Italian artworks. The book focuses on the adventurous stories of the *Monuments Men*, a small group of retired art history professors, conservationists and painters employed by the United States army with the mission of protecting artworks from theft and destruction.

The anecdotes are written with excruciating detail due to the abundance of military records however, thanks to personal letters from soldiers sent to their families, the stories are made pleasant to read enriched by the emotional outline contained in personal experiences of WWI soldiers who risked their lives in the name of art.

In writing a book which glorifies the efforts of art conservationists during war time Edsel is tasked to justify why these works of art deserve the expensive protection steering potential efforts from saving lives on the battlefield. The explanation is in part done by reminding the readers many that of the monuments officers were previously rejected from service due their age and wouldn't be on the ground for any other purpose. Another explanation, which I deemed more effective, is the cultural value perpetually enclosed inside the art objects which bears a lot of value to the people of Italy. Italian paintings, sculptures and architecture serve as immortal records of the lives, likeness and culture

from previous generations. The historic potential of these objects goes beyond individual lives therefore deserving of conservation efforts. However convincing the previous justification seems to be, Robert Edsel still offers his readers a third and more unexpected explanation to why these artworks needed to be preserved: war strategy.

The book favors the conservation efforts of Allies and offers a large number of examples of art theft performed by the Nazi party, however, the book is explicitly addresses its favoring of the Allies' perspective and it offers good evidence that the Nazi Party in deed committed more systematic theft of art than the Allies.

Mussolini and the Pope

In July of 1943 Hitler paid his last visit to Mussolini controlled Italy with the intention on discussing the future of the fascist country. At the time Italy had been bankrupt by their war efforts and the country's military forces were extremely underfunded. Mussolini intended to take advantage of Hitler's visit in order to ask him to deploy German troops in Italy and help fight the incoming Allies. Hitler on the other hand didn't want to displace soldiers outside of Germany, he feared however, the Allies could conquer Italy which would make it significantly easier to later attack Germany.

During a speech given by Hitler, news arrived from Rome that the city had been bombed by Allied airstrikes. The attack was devastating, civilians were killed and for the first time in three years the Pope Pius XII left the Vatican walls to pray to the dying. The fascist party immediately started to broadcast anti-Allied propaganda, telling the Italian

population the Americans didn't care about Italian lives and Italy's Cultural Heritage, by attacking the city of Rome which had little military activity at the time. The Pope however was in direct contact with president Franklin D. Roosevelt who urged the Vatican to publicly denounce Mussolini. First Pope Pius XII criticized the Nazi party for the devastating bombing of London, which had similarly low military advantage, then he announced the end of the Vatican's support for Mussolini. Italians sided with the Pope and soon Mussolini resigned, though Italy remained on the German side of the war.

The story of Mussolini's resignation eloquently informs the reader about the Catholic church's control over the Italian population during WWII. The event also informs how both sides of the war later attempted to gain the undecided Italian's trust by criticizing the other team's destruction of their heritage and supplying the population evidence of conservation efforts through groups such as the monuments men and the Kunstschutz (German squad responsible for the protection and displacement of artworks).

Monte Cassino

Robert Edsel describes the battle of Monte Cassino as "one of the most gruesome campaigns of the war." Under German control, the 529 AD abbey that sits on the top of a mountain, housed historic paintings and sculptures. The beautiful architecture of the abbey of Monte Cassino gave the German army the high ground which prompted Allie forces to bring extra artillery as well as airstrikes. The battle lasted over six weeks and, against the recommendation of monuments officers, in an attempt to gain moral among Allie soldiers US bombers dropped 1,400 tons of explosives destroying the abbey.

According to Edsel, the most devastating part of the bombing was that it had failed its objective and it didn't give Allies any advantage in the battlefield.

The way in which Edsel describes the beauty of the abbey of Monte Cassino prior to its destruction truly intensifies the feeling of wastefulness when reading this chapter, it also raises the importance of the monuments men's successful conservation stories Edsel later describes.

General Wolf

At the end of the book, Robert Edsel unveils the newly discovered story of General Karl Wolf, the supreme leader of all SS troops and police in Italy. At the end of the war Italy was both destroyed and bankrupt, the population had no reason to support the Nazi party and could easily be convinced to switch sides. General Wolf, foreseeing Hitler's downfall started planning the surrender of the northern part of Italy as a way to ensure his own well-being. However, as he opened communications with Allie commanders a personal letter from Hitler demanded Wolf's return to Germany, the visit could entirely jeopardize his surrender plans.

According to Edsel, newly found documents shows that General Wolf knew the whereabouts of a warehouse containing hundreds of Italian artworks taken from museums for safekeeping by the Kunstschutz. Wolf planned on using his information about the warehouse as bargaining power for the Allies arrival in Nazi controlled Italy. Wolf's fear was that Hitler wanted the paintings to be sent to Germany, compromising his

plan to bargain for his own safety in contribution to the return of the Italian artworks. After much negotiation, Wolf was able to return to Italy where he surrendered the state to Allie forces before the artworks were relocated to Germany, possibly saving hundreds of artworks and a good amount of Italian history.

The last chapters of the book's focus on General Wolf's acts are often thought provoking, on one side I was compelled to celebrate his actions but on the other side Wolf was a General who fought on the side that committed the holocaust.

Conclusion

Saving Italy offers its readers an extensive collection of adventurous stories from the efforts of the monuments men, these stories, according to a book review at *The Week*, "reads like a good spy thriller" and can easily be taken as an over romanticized glimpse on a horrific time in history. The focus on the destruction of artworks on battles where many lives were lost often lends itself uncomfortable however, Edsel begins the book addressing this issue and the book's subject suggests this is a story for art lovers. Though the writing sometimes come across insensitive, the stories themselves are extremely captivating and truly brings to light the amazing stories of the conservation of Italy's historical heritage.

Bibliography

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