

The Met Celebrates the Real Monuments Men

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by Hamptons Art Hub Staff

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A new gallery itinerary, display, blog post, and *Sunday at the Met* lecture event at The Metropolitan Museum of Art focus on the heroic work of the Monuments Men during World War II and their lasting impact on the Museum and its collection.

These activities have been created to coincide with last month's release of the feature film *The Monuments Men*. After seeing the movie, or maybe only the trailer, curiosity could strike about the real story and the art history ramifications of this true tale. Or which treasures were stolen and from which collectors and museums. Then, there is the real-life stories of the men portrayed by Hollywood stars in the movie who made up the team and became a very different kind of heroes.

Anticipating these types of questions, the museum has rolled out a series of programs to allow for the exploration of the lives, roles and implications of the Monuments Men and their actions. The role of James J. Rorimer, a Monuments Man who became the Met's director after the war, is highlighted in the Met's programs.



First Lieutenant James J. Rorimer, at left, and Sergeant Antonio T. Valin examine recovered objects. Neuschwanstein, Germany, May 1945. Photograph by U.S. Signal Corps

The group popularly known as the “Monuments Men” was established in 1943 under the Civil Affairs and Military Government Sections of the Allied armies, as part of a concerted effort to protect artworks, archives, and monuments of historical and cultural significance as the Allies advanced across Europe. These 345 men and women, representing 13 nations, volunteered for service in the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives program (MFAA).

Among their ranks were museum curators, art historians, and others with specialized training or professional expertise that enabled them to identify and care for works of art subject to forced relocation or harm under the difficult wartime conditions. With limited resources and authority, they were ultimately able to track, locate, and return more than five million looted cultural items by the Nazis.

Several individuals on the staff of the Metropolitan Museum—some of whom joined the Museum after the war—served as Monuments Men. It is these individuals that the Met will highlight in their multiple programs.

The *Sunday at the Met* lecture event, “[Monuments Men: Fact and Fiction](#),” held on Sunday (March 9) from 3 to 4:30 p.m., will explore how the actions of Monuments Men James J. Rorimer, George Stout, and others protected and recovered stolen art during World War II. Speakers will include Lynn Nicholas, author of *The Rape of Europa*, and Rachel Mustalish, Conservator in the Metropolitan Museum’s Department of Paper Conservation. The program will be in the museum’s Grace Rainey

Rogers Auditorium and will be free with museum admission. Updated information about the program will be posted at www.metmuseum.org.

The display “In the Footsteps of the Monuments Men: Traces from the Metropolitan Museum’s Archives” remains on view in the Museum’s Thomas J. Watson Library through March 13. The display focuses on the wartime contributions of James J. Rorimer and the work of the Monuments Men.

Included are documents, letters, and other correspondence. It also includes wartime photographs of Mr. Rorimer; a pocket notebook that he carried during his service in Europe; index cards and photographs he compiled that document damaged European monuments; the first edition of his war memoir *Survival*; a copy of a May 1944 order by General Dwight D. Eisenhower authorizing the Monuments Men; a photograph and speech from a 1946 event at the Metropolitan Museum honoring General Eisenhower for his role in protecting works of art; and promotional materials issued by the Met about post-war exhibitions of restituted paintings.

The installation was curated by the Metropolitan Museum’s Associate Archivist Melissa Bowling.

Through a new “itinerary”—“[The Monuments Men at the Met: Treasures Saved During World War II](#)”—visitors to the Metropolitan Museum both online and in person can discover 11 selected paintings that were saved and restored to their rightful owners by the Monuments Men. These works of art are now part of the Met’s collection and are currently on view in the Museum’s European Paintings Galleries and Nineteenth-Century European Paintings and Sculpture Galleries.

The itinerary includes images and gallery locations of the 11 paintings, along with excerpts of writings by James J. Rorimer and Monuments Men historians. It can be found online at www.metmuseum.org/visit/itineraries/monuments-men. An abridged, printed version of the itinerary is also available at the information desks within the museum.

A blog [posting](#) on the Metropolitan Museum’s *Now at the Met* provides an overview of James J. Rorimer’s wartime career and his professional life at the Museum. Also included are details on postwar exhibitions held at the Metropolitan Museum that explored the impact of the war on cultural objects and historic monuments. The *Now at the Met* post is written by the Metropolitan Museum’s Associate Archivist Melissa Bowling and Managing Archivist James Moske. To read the post, click [here](#).

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James J. Rorimer (1905-1966), a Harvard-educated medieval art specialist who joined the Met in 1927 and was appointed curator of medieval art in 1934, played a central role in the development of the Met’s Cloisters branch museum in upper Manhattan before enlisting in the United States Army in 1943. He was eventually promoted to lead the MFAA, with responsibility for discovering and preserving art treasures confiscated and hidden by the Nazis.

He pursued this mission until 1946, covering a broad territory across Normandy, France, and Germany, and received several military decorations including the Bronze Star and Croix de Guerre.

After returning to the Metropolitan Museum in 1946, he served as director of the Cloisters (1949-1955) and then director of the Museum (1955-1966). During his tenure as director, he was responsible for such major acquisitions as Rembrandt's *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer* and Robert Campin's *Merode Altarpiece*. Mr. Rorimer's memoir, *Survival: The Salvage and Protection of Art in War* (Abelard Press, Inc., 1950), provides a vivid account of his war years.

Other Monuments Men at the Metropolitan Museum included: **Harry D. M. Grier** (1914-1972), who served as lecturer and assistant to the Museum's dean of education from 1938 to 1946, and later as director of the Frick Collection; **Theodore Heinrich** (1910-1981), who was Associate Curator of Paintings and Curator in Charge of drawings from 1953 to 1955 before leaving to become director of the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto.

Also, **Theodore Rousseau** (1912-1973), who began working at the Met in 1946 and eventually became Vice Director and chief curator of European art; and **Edith Standen** (1905-1998), a distinguished curator, lecturer, and author on textiles, who rose through the curatorial ranks from her arrival in 1949 until her retirement in 1970, after which she devoted herself to full-time scholarship, working daily in the Museum's Thomas J. Watson Library until her death in 1998 at the age of 93.

BASIC FACTS: For details on the multiple programs at the Metropolitan Museum of Art highlighting "The Monuments Men", visit Updated information about the program will be posted at www.metmuseum.org. The museum is located at 1000 5th Ave, New York, NY 10028.

Further information on the Monuments Men and current efforts can be found through the Monuments Men Foundation. www.monumentsmenfoundation.org.