



The Venus Fixers: The Remarkable Story of the Allied Soldiers Who Saved Italy's Art During World War II

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In 1943, with the world convulsed by war and a Fascist defeat in Europe far from certain, a few visionaries—civilians and soldiers alike—saw past questions of life and death to realize that victory wasn't the only thing at stake. So was the priceless cultural heritage of thousands of years.

In the midst of the conflict, the Allied Forces appointed the monuments officers—a motley group of art historians, curators, architects, and artists—to ensure that the great masterworks of European art and architecture were not looted or bombed into oblivion. The journalist Ilaria Dagnini Brey focuses her spellbinding account on the monuments officers of Italy, quickly dubbed “the Venus Fixers” by bemused troops.

Working on the front lines in conditions of great deprivation and danger, these unlikely soldiers stripped the great galleries of their incomparable holdings and sent them into safety by any means they could; when trucks could not be requisitioned or “borrowed,” a Tiepolo altarpiece might make its midnight journey across the countryside balanced in the front basket of a bicycle. They blocked a Nazi convoy of two hundred stolen paintings—including *Danae*, Titian's voluptuous masterpiece, an intended birthday present for Hermann Göring. They worked with skeptical army strategists to make sure air raids didn't take out the heart of an ancient city, and patched up Renaissance palazzi and ancient churches whose lead roofs were sometimes melted away by the savagery of the attacks, exposing their frescoed interiors to the harsh Tuscan winters and blistering summers. Sometimes they failed. But to an astonishing degree, they succeeded, and anyone who marvels at Italy's artistic riches today is witnessing their handiwork.

In the course of her research, Brey gained unprecedented access to private archives and primary sources, and the result is a book at once thorough and grandly entertaining—a revelatory take on a little-known chapter of World War II history. *The Venus Fixers* is an adventure story with the gorgeous tints of a Botticelli landscape as its backdrop.

The Venus Fixers: The Remarkable Story of the Allied Soldiers Who Saved Italy's Art During World War II Details

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Suzanne says

During World War II, one of the difficulties faced by the allied forces lay in the fact that priceless works of art and ancient architectural structures of cultural importance often became damaged or destroyed due to the fighting. No country had more at stake in this area than Italy. Early on, Italians (regardless of which side they were allied to) strove to remove and safeguard tens of thousands of art pieces, hiding them away in county villas and even in the Vatican. And surprisingly, the US Armed Forces took the danger that an Allied Invasion into Italy would have on Italian art during the planning stages. Ms. Brey told how hundreds of art experts were called upon on the US to put together a master list of buildings and artifacts that needed to be spared if possible. "The Monuments Men" were in charge of making sure bombs were carefully targeted away from such treasures, and teams of restorers were on hand to save any pieces that had become damaged. It was a monumental task.

This is a subject that fascinates me, and although Ms. Brey's book was not as enjoyable and didn't flow as well as Robert Edsel's *The Monument's Men*, I appreciated the focus on Italy and was able to learn something new from this book. 2 1/2 stars.

Camille says

Too much time was spent on the battles and not enough talking about the art or the men themselves. So many other people were mentioned that I got lost in all the names and details. Rarely does this happen, but I enjoyed the movie so much more than the book.

Dustin says

deeply researched, but the narrative disappears for long stretches in a wash of place names, artwork names, and people -- however, good to pair with "The Monuments Men" for a full overview of the European campaign

Jen says

This was much more of a slog than I anticipated. Brey researched this topic thoroughly and seemed to be hell bent on imparting every bit of that knowledge to her readers. Ultimately, what happened was the feeling of reading a very dry history book. Lots of names, dates and facts with a lack of interesting connective tissue to engage the reader. Great topic and what felt like a lot wasted potential.

Dana says

It was hard to get into this book- I felt like it jumped around between dates and cities at first, which made it difficult to keep track of and kept me from getting into the story. Parts of it were interesting, but I preferred *Monuments Men* more than this novel.

George says

Interesting, particularly if you have been to Rome and Florence

LillyBooks says

I got this book because I was beginning to think Goodreads would break if I didn't, seeing as how it was recommending it for me in almost every single category. It's a good book. However, I've read both *The Monuments Men* and *The Rape of Europa* which are, to me, the gold standards for this particular subject matter. Nothing else can compete. Perhaps this book would be interesting to someone who was only or heavily interested in Italian art instead of the broad sweep of all European art.

Michael Gerald says

"Art imitates nature as it can, as a pupil follows his master; this it is a sort of grandchild of God." - Dante Alighieri

A great complement to the book, "The Monuments Men" by Robert Edsel, "The Venus Fixers" reveals how in the conflagration and savagery of the Second World War, the Americans and the British endeavored to salvage damaged works of art, architecture, and archives and prevent the destruction of others, mostly in Europe. Sadly, the destruction was not only due to the depravity of the Nazis and the Japanese, but also to Allied bombing and the chaos of war. Fortunately, the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives Section of the US Army (MFAA) was there. Composed mostly of officers who were art and history professors, architects, and museum curators in civilian life, the unit did a magnificent job of giving first aid to priceless works and undo the damage.

But credit goes not only to the Allied men (and some women). In the case of Italy, several Italian superintendents of art (some, ironically, members of the Fascist regime), priests, and other civilians also performed their jobs well and protected their country's cultural treasures. And their partnership with the MFAA was to prove crucial in the success of the restoration of those works. Through their efforts, given the limited personnel, budget, and limitations in command and control, the outcome of the efforts of MFAA and the Italians can never be understated. That Florence, Pisa, Siena, and other Italian cities and their churches, statues, paintings have been restored is due to those principled men.

I wonder if there were also MFAA officers who worked in the Pacific during the war, considering that Manila was also one of the most devastated cities after the war; restored, albeit not in its original beauty before the war. That's why I don't shed a tear for Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

And now, Syria's cultural treasures - not to mention its people - are being ravaged by a vicious war.

Fernando Flores says

The Venus Fixers is a very interesting book overall. I will say the beginning for me is a bit confusing and dull. He names paintings left and right. If you do not know the paintings you get confused fast. The paintings give meaning to the sentences so you need to look up how the paintings look. Takes time and makes the book tedious. If you know a lot of Italian art this book is for you. It brings you left in right in the action showing you what it too for the Venus fixers to save what they could in World War II. Deane Keller was a big character that grew on me. He was so determined to do what he could. He went around checking off pieces of art that were missing or were needing check up. Hartt also was a great character and know that both characters were real gives you this sense of amazement. These men lived and did what the book says. They helped preserve history and art that if not for them today could be missing or even be destroyed, never to be seen again. For that I honor these men and all who served in the war. The superintendents and the monument soldiers worked hard to save everything from looting to destruction. Together they worked to together, even though they had a rough time with communication, to find peace and safety. The superintendents deserve a big applause for their efforts to save everything when the government just gave them a short period to do so. They stayed strong and they never lost hope. I will read this book again to decipher every word because I feel as if there is a bigger meaning in this text then what you see the first time you read it. I would recommend for those looking to read about history and learn a thing or two of art to read this book.

Julie says

If you liked the Monuments Men (movie) about the WWII art-savers of northern Europe, you will enjoy this nonfiction about efforts to save the massive numbers of artworks throughout Italy. The book does a good job recognizing the importance of the Italian curators, church leaders, art lovers, etc., who did everything they could to get these precious works (paintings, statues, manuscripts, frescoes, etc.) out of the path of war. Without their efforts, there would not have been much for the Allies to save. The American and British "Venus Fixers" were in uniform, but they were older than most soldiers and had backgrounds at major universities and museums. Their dedication to the task of finding and saving thousands of works of art, often following so close to the moving front line that bullets were flying and bombs exploding, is amazing. When you are in Italy savoring the genius of the masters, consider what the world would be like if they had been obliterated by war.

Sheramy Bundrick says

Anyone interested in Italian art should read this book. A real eye-opener.

Kathleen says

I've been doing my own little "unit study" on how art was protected during World War II.

This book covers a lot of the same ground as Robert Edsel's *Saving Italy*. It came out earlier and is better written and researched. What I also appreciate about Ilaria Dagnini Brey's book is that it gives more context regarding the art.

Kevin says

Late last year I read *The Monuments Men*, by Robert Edsel and Brett Witter, that told the story of how the men assigned to the Subcommittee for Monuments, Fine Art and Archives protected and rescued the great art treasures of Europe. *The Monuments Men* focused on the creation of the MFAA and the MFAA activities in France and Germany and was an excellent book that should appeal to anyone with an interest in military history or art. Unfortunately for Ms. Brey, I read *The Monuments Men* before I read *The Venus Fixers*. That is not to say that *The Venus Fixers* is not an excellent book, it is. And in some cases it is better than *The Monuments Men*. But during my reading of *The Venus Fixers*, I kept adversely comparing Ms. Brey's story and style with Messrs. Edsel and Witter. And that was not fair to Ms. Brey who had a different story to tell - and a different way to tell it.

The Venus Fixers tells the story of how a few dedicated American and British officers and Italian government officials were able to prevent the wholesale destruction and/or theft of the Italian art treasures. *The Venus Fixers* concentrates a large portion of the book on the activities in Florence and the general Tuscany area. Prior to reading this book, I knew that Tuscany in general and Florence in particular has a great treasure of paintings and sculpture. I also knew that Florence is a beautiful city with wonderful architecture and neighborhoods to wander in. What I didn't know was that Florence was so thoroughly destroyed during the war. I had no idea that all but one of the Florentine bridges over the Arno were destroyed as the Germans retreated from the city. Had the MFAA not existed or if the *Venus Fixers* had not been as dedicated to saving the art of Italy as they were, who knows what Florence would be today.

Near the end of the book, Ms. Brey relates, in an abbreviated way, the activities at the Altaussee salt mine in Austria. The happenings at the Altaussee mine were not directly involved in the activities of the MFAA officers that Ms. Brey's book chronicled. I suggest that those readers who may want more information about Alaussee to read *The Monuments Men*.

I hope to visit Florence with my wife later this year. I have looked forward to seeing the art and beauty of this city for a long time. After reading the description of what Florence was in 1944 - 45 and the work that went into saving the city's art and architecture in Ms. Brey's *The Venus Fixers* I will have a deeper appreciation for the beauty that awaits us. While we are in Florence, I plan to visit the grave of Frederick Hartt. Mr. Hartt was one of the *Venus Fixers* and for his work and dedication was made an honorary citizen of Florence.

I thoroughly enjoyed *The Venus fixers* and highly recommend it to lovers of art and history.

Lisa says

An illuminating history of a little known aspect of WWII in Italy- the Allied effort to preserve and restore as much as they could of Italy's cultural heritage.

General Clark compared the Allied campaign in Italy to having a war "in a goddamn art museum". With its rich cultural heritage, Italy stood to lose irreplaceable art and buildings as the Allies fought the Germans in Sicily and on the peninsula. Fortunately, the Allies realized this early in the war and began planning on how not to inflict more damage on the art and monuments of Italy than was necessary, and more importantly, how to pick up the pieces after the battles were won. (There were some failures, such as the abbey at Monte Cassino, but on the whole it's more remarkable how successful the effort was.)

The book follows the monument officers' daunting task of finding missing artwork, cataloging damaged and scattered archives, and restoring and rebuilding often appalling damage. This book is not for everyone, but for anyone who has been to Italy or students of art history, it may interest you to know how much effort went into trying to save Italy's art and architecture during a vicious war.

Dan Wilson says

I feel so divided on this book. I found the exploration of the Italian front and the role that the Monument Men played fascinating, but I also found myself desperately wishing for a different publishing treatment. I wanted plates of the artwork in the parts of the book where that art was discussed. I wanted maps when geography was being discussed. I wanted the book to do more than throw a lot of place and painting names at me, but provide more context in places where the layman is likely to be unfamiliar. Is this an unrealistic expectation for a paperback? Perhaps. Is the hardback more fully fleshed out with these elements? I doubt it.

When the book discussed the conflicts between the Venus Fixers, the personality issues, the frustrations with red tape, the heartbreak of the task at hand, and the competing objectives of the military, I loved this book. It introduced me to a different side of World War II that I hadn't even considered before, and shone a light on the differences between the Italian population and the Fascist government that dragged them into the war.

I just wish that the book had either focused on the human side of the story, or provided sufficient art and map resources to support the more academic side.
