

## **Arte Liberata 1937-1947. Capolavori Salvati dalla Guerra, Scuderie del Quirinale, Rome, Italy, 16 December 2022 – 10 April 2023**

During the Second World War, Italian cultural heritage was at great risk of destruction, damage, and looting. Thanks to the role played by several Italian museum curators and Superintendents, those artistic treasures have been spared from irreparable loss. The temporary exhibition *Arte Liberata 1937-1947. Capolavori Salvati dalla Guerra* (*Liberated Art 1937-1947. Masterpieces Saved from the War*) aims to tell the story of the men and women who had been instrumental in the protection and salvage of Italian cultural heritage in wartime.

The exhibition is housed in the magnificent rooms of Scuderie del Quirinale, Rome, one of the most important exhibition spaces in Italy. It explores the events that affected Italian artistic heritage during the Second World War: from the art looting activities conducted by the Nazis, through the cultural property protection measures adopted by Superintendents and museum directors for museums and monuments, to the recovery of dispersed artworks. These topics are investigated through three big narrative threads: *Esportazioni forzate e mercato dell'arte* ('Forced displacement and the art market'); *Operazione salvataggio* ('Operation rescue'); *Fuori dalla guerra: le restituzioni* ('Out of the war: restitutions').

The first section, *Esportazioni forzate e mercato dell'arte*, explores the topic of Nazi art looting campaigns in Italy. Before and during the Second World War, the Nazis stripped Europe of its art treasures to enrich Nazi elites' private collections – with Adolf Hitler and Hermann Göring acting as the most prolific collectors – under the assumption that they were 'saving' European art (Flanner 1957: 235-6). This section is opened by the unfortunate history of *Discobolo* Lancellotti (see illustration 1), which, despite the restrictions imposed on its transfer, in 1938 was moved to Munich and entered the Glyptothek's collections. It returned to Italy in 1948 and is now on display at Museo Nazionale Romano in Rome.

Another stunning piece on display in this introductory section is a bronze deer from Ercolano's Villa dei Papiri (now at Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Naples), illegally transferred to Göring's private residence at Carinhall, Germany, where it had been displayed in the gardens together with other ancient bronze deer.

The second section of the exhibition, *Operazione salvataggio*, opens with the personalities of Pasquale Rotondi and Emilio Lavagnino (see illustration 2). In wartime, Rotondi – the Superintendent of Museums and Galleries for Marche – was able to save around 10,000 Italian artworks by moving them to safe locations. And Lavagnino was responsible for the transfer to the Vatican of approximately 700 boxes, full of thousands of works of art from the entire Lazio region.



*Illustration 1. Discobolo Lancellotti, displayed in the exhibition's first section dedicated to Nazi art looting campaigns. Source: picture taken by the author.*

The section then investigates the heritage safekeeping measures adopted in the largest Italian cities (Milan, Venice, Turin, Rome, Florence, Bologna, Genoa, Naples, and Palermo). Each city is associated with a key figure who had been instrumental in saving art from destruction and looting, among them: Fernanda Wittgens (Pinacoteca di Brera's director), Rodolfo Pallucchini (Superintendent of Galleries for Venice), Giovanni Poggi (Superintendent of Monuments for Florence and Gallerie degli Uffizi's director), Bruno Molajoli (Superintendent of Galleries for Campania), and Palma Bucarelli (director of Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome).

The section closes with an overview of Italian libraries and archives during the Second World War, focusing in particular on events surrounding the Library of Rome's Jewish community, plundered in its entirety by Nazi soldiers. Only a small number of the looted books and historical documents were recovered after the war.

The third section, *Fuori dalla guerra: le restituzioni*, is centred around post-war restitution efforts (see illustration 3). One of the key figures



*Illustration 2. Overview of the exhibition's section dedicated to Pasquale Rotondi. Source: picture taken by the author.*



*Illustration 3. Part of the exhibition's section dedicated to Rodolfo Siviero. Source: picture taken by the author.*

here is Rodolfo Siviero, who was known as the 'secret agent of art' for his tireless activities in returning most of the Italian cultural properties looted in wartime. The work of the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives Sub-commission is touched upon in this section of the exhibition too. The Sub-commission was created in 1943 by the British and American governments with the aim of: safeguarding art in theatres of war from damage and looting; providing a first-aid assistance to historical buildings damaged by the passage of war; and investigating Nazi art looting activities. It comprised curators, academics, art historians, archivists, and architects, most of them deployed actively in the war field (American Commission 1946: 2-3).

*Arte Liberata* constitutes the first-ever exhibition organized in Italy to explore the topics of cultural property protection during the Second World War in such a comprehensive way. This moment in Italy's twentieth century history is magnificently recounted through the juxtaposition of artworks, artefacts, pictures, videos, and documents, which speak in dialogue with each other. The archival material encompassing the history of heritage safekeeping in Second World War Italy is prolific, but curators have been



*Illustration 4. The Monument of Petro Sahaidachny during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, 2022. Source: Kyivcity.gov.ua, CC BY 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons.*

and Archives Sub-commission (hereafter, MFAA) officers in the last section of the exhibition. The first point concerns the role that they had in wartime. I believe for reasons associated mainly with space in the exhibition, MFAA activities have been confined exclusively to the post-war restitution efforts, when, in fact, MFAA officers also vastly contributed to the prevention of damage to Italian cultural heritage during bombardments and ground combat operations, and to limiting art looting activities by both Nazi and Allied troops.

Secondly, another weakness regarding the narrative constructed around the officers of the MFAA is in relation to their definition as 'monuments men'. The use of the term 'monuments men' is anachronistic. It derives from popular non-fiction books, movies, and documentary films – above all George Clooney's *The Monuments Men* (2014) – and was never employed in the official documents from wartime and post-war periods, where they were named 'monuments officers' or 'officers of the Sub-commission for Monuments, Fine Art and Archives'.

Moreover, the term 'monuments men' excludes from the narrative the central role that women had in MFAA activities. As recounted by the historian Elizabeth Campbell (2021: 413-4), there were many women who joined the MFAA cause, particularly in the later phases of recovering and returning looted art – among them, Capt.

able to select the most remarkable historical documents, creating a powerful narrative of these events. These approaches have also informed and acted as foundational principles of many cultural property protection measures adopted in modern and contemporary conflicts. Examples include the preventive procedures employed for monuments in Ukraine following the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022 (see illustration 4).

In the exhibition the use of images and their relationships with the displayed objects is especially remarkable. Frequently, works of art are displayed close to an image that offers a glimpse of what happened to them during wartime, producing a constant dialogue between the present (the displayed object) and the past (the historical image). For example, the previously mentioned bronze deer from Ercolano's Villa dei Papiri is displayed in front of a reproduction of a picture of it in Carinhall, close to Göring and Hitler (see illustration 5).

Despite the exhibition being powerful in addressing those hidden histories, there were some shortcomings in terms of the representation of the Monuments, Fine Arts



*Illustration 5. The bronze deer from Ercolano's Villa dei Papiri, close to a reproduction of a picture of it at Carinhall together with Hermann Göring and Adolf Hitler. Source: picture taken by the author.*

Edith Standen (1905-1998), Capt. Rose Valland (1898-1980), and Maj. Anne Olivier Popham (1916-2018).

The merit of this exhibition is that it shines a light on the complex history of cultural property protection during the Second World War in Italy. This is a topic that, up until now, has been tackled exclusively by heritage practitioners and historians. By exhibiting this period of Italian history in a major exhibition organized at one of the most important and recognizable exhibition spaces in Italy, curators have finally been able to attract the attention of a general audience to such an important topic.

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## References

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