

Anne Olivier Bell: The last of the 'Monuments Men'

After the second world war, a team of art experts tried to rescue the thousands of artworks stolen by the Nazis. Now Anne Olivier Bell, the last of the 'Monuments Men', is to be the subject of a George Clooney film



Anne Olivier Bell at the Charleston Farmhouse, the country meeting place for the Bloomsbury Group near Lewes, Sussex.
Photograph: Eamonn McCabe for the Guardian

This summer Anne Olivier Bell turned 97. Her name may not mean much to readers, except for those who are familiar with the five volumes of Virginia Woolf's diary, which she edited with meticulous thoroughness, or those who attend the annual Charleston literary festival, where she sits in the front row, making sotto voce comments on the quality of the talks.

Her work on the diaries took 25 years – transcribing, writing footnotes and fact checking in the London Library – and she was awarded honorary degrees by both York and Sussex Universities. But I most admire, and want to celebrate, the fact that she is the last surviving member of the so-called Monuments Men, who were responsible for the protection of historic buildings and for the return of the huge number of works of art that had been seized by the Nazis in the early stages of the second world war.

When we visit Europe's museums nowadays, I don't think many of us are aware of the devastation that was wrought on museums, galleries, churches, castles and private collections of art during the second world war. The Nazis moved through Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Belgium, France and Italy, commandeering works from their owners to enrich the private collections of art-loving military leaders such as Hermann Goering, and to form the collection of the great museum that Hitler planned to establish in his birthplace of Linz.

Ceramicist and writer Edmund de Waal has described how his family's possessions were stripped from their palace in Vienna in 1938, but this was only the beginning of at least two years of systematic seizure of property or semi-compulsory purchase instigated by Hans Posse, Hitler's adviser in establishing his museum. In Poland, the three great paintings from the Czartoryski collection were seized, including Raphael's *Portrait of a Young Man*, which has only recently been located in a bank vault, and Leonardo's *Lady with an Ermine*, so much admired in the National Gallery's recent Leonardo exhibition, which was taken from Krakow to Berlin by Kajetan Mühlmann, whom Goering had appointed as special commissioner for the protection of works of art in the occupied territories. The Ghent altarpiece was removed in 1942 and stored in Altaussee in Austria. In France, between April 1941 and July 1944, 4,174 cases of works of art were shipped to Germany, full to overflowing with paintings and furniture that had been removed from private collections. It has been estimated that over five million works of art were taken from their owners.

As it became clear that America was likely to join the war, American art historians and museum directors established committees, including the American Defense Harvard Group, to lobby government to ensure that works of art and historic buildings received as much protection as possible in the event of an invasion. "Frick maps" were prepared, based on research in New York's Frick Art reference library, showing the location of the most important works of art, experts were consulted, and a handbook was prepared by George Stout, head of conservation at the Fogg Museum at Harvard University. Thus was born the American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments and War Areas, commonly called the Roberts Commission. This in turn led to the establishment of the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives section of the allied armies – the Monuments Men, who accompanied troops into Sicily and up through Italy, trying to ensure that the greatest works of art and buildings were protected from bombing and were, so far as possible, returned to the care of their owners or the appropriate local authorities.

The British were initially sceptical of this idea. When first approached to support the effort to appoint art historians to accompany the military, Kenneth Clark wrote to WG Constable, the British curator of paintings at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, that he could not believe "that any machinery could be set up which would carry out the suggestions contained in your petition eg, even supposing it were possible for an archaeologist to accompany each invading force, I cannot help feeling that he would have great difficulty in restraining a commanding officer from shelling an important military objective simply because it contained some fine historical monuments". But, in November 1943, the archaeologist Sir Leonard Woolley was appointed adviser to the War Office. As Lynn Nicholas comments in her book, *The Rape of Europa* (1994), "The evolution of this post took some years, and was in the best British tradition of muddling through."

As the war drew to a close, and allied forces began to discover vast collections of works of art stored in castles, monasteries and salt mines across Germany, it became clear that attempting to return these treasures to their rightful owners was a task of unimaginable proportions. Woolley needed knowledgeable recruits to help carry it out. In November 1945, Anne Popham, as Anne Olivier Bell then was (her fiancé, the South African painter Graham Bell, had been killed in a training flight in Northamptonshire in 1943 and she only married the art historian, Quentin Bell, unrelated to Graham, in 1952), was approached by "a foppish young man" at a party and asked if she would be interested in working for the Museums, Fine Arts and Archives branch of the allies' control commission. She recalls, "I was concerned about all the bombing and the destruction and the horror and the moving about of pictures and so forth. And I knew I had something of use and value to offer." She was given the civilian rank of major, serving under Lieutenant Colonel Geoffrey Webb, the Slade professor at Cambridge and great expert on Vanbrugh.

The daughter of AE Popham, the then recently appointed keeper of prints and drawings at the British Museum, who had spent the war years in Aberystwyth cataloguing drawings from the Royal Collection, Bell was well qualified for the work. Educated at St Paul's School for Girls, she had been one of the first students of the Courtauld Institute, where she attended lectures by Anthony Blunt and worked in its Conway Library. She was based at Bünde in Westphalia, and was responsible for the task of co-ordinating the work of other officers in the British zone. One evening Bell brought Franz Wolff-Metternich, the provincial curator of historic monuments for the Rhine and a professor at Bonn University, to dine at her officers' mess. He had been invited to discuss how best to return works of art to museums. Her fellow officers refused to eat with him. Bell recognised that the Germans were human when they did not.

The co-ordinating work may have been sometimes dull, but it was absolutely necessary. Bell underplays its significance, as did the other people involved. This may have reflected the low esteem in which the work of the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives section was held by the military, who were wary of civilian involvement in the task of postwar reconstruction. But this should not lead us to underestimate its importance nearly 70 years later.

The British side of this story has never been properly told, although in the last two decades attempts have once again been made to try to establish the location of lost works of art. Neither Bell's work nor the work of her colleagues has been acknowledged by the British government – perhaps there is a sense of embarrassment that the efforts made to preserve historic buildings and works of art were feeble in light of the extraordinary levels of destruction allied bombers brought to German cities. But in recent years the US has begun to recognise the work of the Monuments Men. Robert Edsel, a businessman based in Texas, set up the Monuments Men Foundation, and in 2007 arranged for Bell to be presented by the American ambassador in London with a citation signed by Eisenhower's daughter and a copy of the flag flown over the US Capitol. In December, the Monuments Men will be the subject of a feature film starring George Clooney as George Stout and Cate Blanchett as Rose Valland, a member of the French resistance who tracked down thousands of stolen works of art.

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