



STOLEN BEAUTY: THE NAZI OBSESSION FOR ART

"What happened to the art treasure stolen by the Nazis? From the confiscation of masterpieces in museums to the looting of private collectors' homes, this investigative series delves into the largest theft of the 20th century, also narrated through four exhibitions that — 80 years later — take stock of the fate of those people and their artworks. The three-episode series reconstructs Hitler and Goering's obsession with art, while also recalling the dramatic stories of the Jewish families, and others, who were involved, along with the difficult recovery of the works that has been ongoing in the last few decades."

Cast and credits

Directed by Claudio Poli

Produced by 3D Produzioni

Technical info

Year: 2019

Runtime: 3×45'

Episodes:

- 1. Hitler and Goering : the Great Theft**
- 2. Artists and Merchants of the regime**
- 3. Monuments men and their legacy**

EPISODE 1

HITLER AND GOERING: THE GREAT THEFT

The first episode opens with the Gurlitt Case, an extraordinary discovery of masterpieces that reignites attention on a long-forgotten story—the Nazi art thefts—perceived as resolved, yet far from over. To this day, tens of thousands of missing artworks remain unaccounted for. What began as a simple news story revealed just how much remains hidden and needs to be brought to light.

On September 22, 2010, an elderly man, Cornelius Gurlitt, was stopped on a train at the Swiss-German border by German customs officers. They found €9,000 in cash in his pocket, sparking an investigation. In 2012, authorities discovered 1,500 artworks in his Munich apartment, some of which were thought to have been destroyed in the 1945 Dresden bombings. This treasure was the inheritance from Cornelius's father, Hildebrand Gurlitt, dubbed by the press and a book as "Hitler's art dealer." Hildebrand, an art historian and modern art enthusiast, collected works by Klee, Kandinsky, Dix, and other artists rejected by Nazi ideology. The rest of his collection—from Rodin to Monet and Matisse—was obtained through appropriations at the expense of Jews and regime opponents. He had also amassed a fortune that included "classical" Germanic works, intended for the unrealized Hitlerian project of the Linz Museum. After the war, Hildebrand quietly resumed his business.

Two exhibitions, one in Bern and one in Bonn, began investigating these rediscovered works. The Gurlitt story had an unusual start: initially, the discovery of the artworks in Cornelius's home was kept secret by the German state. It was revealed by the magazine FOCUS. As a result, several heirs were able to recognize their paintings in the published photographs. This was the case for the family of Paul Rosenberg, the renowned Parisian gallery owner and friend of Picasso: one of the paintings found in Gurlitt's home was his "Femme Assise" by Henri Matisse. The request for restitution followed a long and complex process—reconstructed with the help of lawyer Marinello, who handled the case—but ended successfully. The painting was returned to its rightful owners. Likewise, Max Liebermann's painting "Two Riders on the Beach," once owned by the Friedmann family, was returned. David Toren, one of the heirs, had gone blind by the time he regained possession of the painting, but he was the only one who remembered it hanging on the wall of his uncle's house during his childhood. "Two Riders on the Beach" was recently auctioned by Sotheby's.

Munich—the city of the Gurlitt Case—was also central to the rise of Nazism. It was from here that Adolf Hitler and Hermann Goering together attempted the failed putsch of 1923. Hitler, not yet chancellor, lived at Prinzregentenplatz; as the party grew, Nazi squads would stop in front of the building to salute their leader. Observing the unfolding events was a young Jewish boy living nearby: Edgar Feuchtwanger, who still lives in England today. He arrived there in 1939, at the age of 14, traveling alone before his family could join him. He recounts his memories of being Hitler’s neighbor and shows the remnants of that period, like school notebooks filled with swastikas he was forced to draw.

Munich, however, was also the center of Nazi propaganda on artistic policy. On July 18-19, 1937, two manifesto exhibitions were opened just meters apart: one displaying the Germanic art favored by the regime, the other showcasing “degenerate” art, condemned and despised. The “degenerates” were the masters of modern painting.

When it came to art, the Reich’s number one and number two became rivals. Historical documents help us understand the motives that drove them to collect—and steal—masterpieces: their reasons were as different as their personalities. Hitler, a failed painter, claimed in his private will that he had acted only for the people, for whom he envisioned a monumental project: the Führermuseum in Linz, which was never realized. Goering, on the other hand, made his residence—Carinhall, 60 km from Berlin—the stage for his illusions of grandeur. A testament to this private obsession is the Goering Catalogue, which recorded all the works in his immense collection. The stories behind these individual pieces have been reconstructed by Jean Marc Dreyfus, a Holocaust scholar and professor at the University of Manchester. Goering pretended to be an upright, enlightened collector; we will discover that he employed dealers ready to loot to satisfy his insatiable appetite for art.

EPISODE 2

ARTISTS AND MERCHANTS OF THE REGIME

This episode explores the complicity of art dealers and the Nazi system of art theft, highlighting both failed and successful restitution efforts by the victims' families.

It opens in Paris on June 14, 1940. For Hitler, the city that symbolized culture and the good life more than any other was now occupied by the Nazis. A few days later, the Führer

visited as a luxury tourist, strolling through the deserted streets and squares, pausing in front of the Eiffel Tower. With him were architect Albert Speer and sculptor Arno Breker. Breker's story, closely tied to the Third Reich, is emblematic: it tells the fate of a regime artist. During the years of Nazi ascendancy, Breker's sculptures decorated places of power and propaganda. The bodies of his statues became monuments to Nazi ideals of strength and invincibility. His works, such as *The Decathlete* and *The Victorious*, created for the Olympic grounds of the 1936 Berlin Games (where they can still be seen today), embodied the Aryan man prototype. From that point on, Breker's career was marked by a series of favors and recognitions, until the inevitable downfall came. Despite managing to classify himself as a mere follower during the post-war trials—and even claiming that he saved Picasso from deportation—his glory was over. More than 90% of his public sculptures were destroyed by the Allies, and today, Breker is largely forgotten. Only at the castle of Nörvenich, amidst the overgrown weeds of a moat, does a pale memory of him and his art survive.

In France, as in Eastern Europe, the plundering of cultural heritage was managed by the ERR, the intelligence and conquest organization directed by Alfred Rosenberg, a Nazi ideologue. The men of the commando unit seized books, political materials, furniture, and works of art. Leather albums containing photographs of the stolen items—many of which belonged to the Rothschild family—were regularly sent to Hitler. These albums would be presented as evidence of the ERR's lootings at the Nuremberg Trials.

Complicit in the system were compliant art dealers like Walter Hofer, Alois Miedl, Julius Böhler Jr., and Karl Haberstock. These ambiguous figures, under a facade of legality, extorted and seized the pieces desired by their powerful clients. They promised safe passage or simply took advantage of those who could no longer resist. In an archival photo, we see Walter Hofer offering a selection of paintings to Goering at the occupied Jeu de Paume, as if in a supermarket for art.

Art became a commodity, even for bartering: degenerate works were often sold to fill the coffers of the German state. In 1939, many buyers from the United States attended a major auction organized by Fischer in Lucerne, revealing that the Nazi methods were more well-known—and perhaps the fate of the Jews more understood—than many wanted to admit.

One consequence of this exodus of artworks—and often the dealers themselves, like Paul Rosenberg, who managed to flee to New York—was the shift of the art world's center of gravity from Europe to America.

Above all, the Nazi system of art theft—with its violence and hypocrisies—has made it very difficult for victims and their families to claim restitution and justice. The documentary covers stories of both failed and successful restitutions.

Lionel Salem is still waiting to recover works belonging to his family, stolen and sold at auction in Paris, bought by Goering, and later ending up at the Louvre. Tom Selldorff, heir of Richard Neumann who was forced to flee, managed to prove the forced sales thanks to customs receipts that remained.

Sadly, not all escapes were successful. Jacques Goudstikker, an important Jewish Dutch art dealer, waited until the last moment to leave his gallery. Eventually, he boarded a ship with his wife and infant son, headed for England and then America. However, he never made it; during the crossing, he died in an accident that seemed like a cruel twist of fate. All that remains is a small black book: the register of his paintings, many of which were already in the hands of Hitler and Goering. Years later, this book and the labels on the back of the paintings would be used by his daughter-in-law Marei and his granddaughter Charlene von Sacher to claim their property.

Simon Goodman also had to piece together the story of his grandparents, Fritz and Louise Gutmann, who belonged to a banking family and owned a magnificent collection of Renaissance gold and silver. Today, three exceptional Gutmann clocks are held at the Landesmuseum Württemberg in Stuttgart. Naturally, Goering quickly set his sights on the gold, and despite all attempts to protect themselves and their collection, Fritz and Louise Gutmann were eventually deported to Theresienstadt concentration camp. They died in the camps. Many artworks that passed through Nazi hands are stained with blood.

EPIISODE 3

MONUMENTS MEN AND THEIR LEGACY

The third episode focuses on the key figures in the fight against the large-scale Nazi art theft: those who fought against it during World War II and those who continue to seek justice today. Alongside journalists like Pierre Assouline and professors like Jean-Marc Dreyfus, who investigate historical truths, many others continue to work on restitutions. We've briefly encountered some of them in previous episodes, but now we delve deeper into their stories. They include lawyers like Christopher Marinello, art experts like gallery owner Elizabeth Royer, and institution promoters like Anne Webber, co-founder of the Commission for Looted Art in Europe, based in London. All of them dedicate

themselves to researching provenance and tracing the ownership of stolen artworks. They advocate for the heirs and negotiate with governments and museums.

This immense effort to support the victims and protect art began during the war when the American army created a special unit of art historians tasked with safeguarding cultural heritage: the Monuments Men. On one side of the Atlantic, at the Frick Art Reference Library in New York, maps were drawn for bombers showing locations to avoid hitting, such as churches, museums, historical buildings, and archaeological sites. Meanwhile, in Europe, the Monuments Men searched for artworks looted by the Nazis. Many were found in salt mines: in the Austrian mountains of Altaussee and Berchtesgaden, where Hitler and Goering had hidden their treasure from the advancing Allies.

At Merkers, north of Frankfurt, American soldiers didn't just find paintings. Alongside the canvases was the gold of the Reichsbank and the valuables stolen by the SS from deportees in concentration camps. Period footage shows bags containing gold teeth torn from prisoners. These items document the corruption of the Nazis and their system of theft and annihilation. One example of Goering's coercive methods is the fate of the Bernheimer family, antique dealers from Munich. The men of the family were imprisoned in Dachau and, in exchange for their freedom, were forced not only to give Goering all their valuable goods but also to purchase a failing coffee plantation in Venezuela from a relative of the Reich's second-in-command. In South America, the Bernheimer family started anew. The grandfather made every effort to return to Germany to pursue his passion for antiquities, which he managed to do after the war, bringing his young grandson Konrad with him. Today, the Bernheimers continue to run art galleries in Lucerne, Berlin, and London. What began as oppression turned into a story of redemption.

For the hundreds of recovered artworks, a new journey began. They were gathered by the Allies in collecting centers, one of the largest located in Munich, the cradle of Nazism. Here, the provenance of the pieces was painstakingly reconstructed with the aim of returning them to their rightful owners. It was a monumental task, not just due to the sheer number of works but also because of the difficulties involved and the urgency to move past the war and rebuild.

Among the stolen works were many masterpieces that belonged to Italy, a country long considered a beacon of art. In 1938, Hitler had embarked on a tour of Italy, visiting Rome, Naples, and Florence, where he was particularly struck and envious of the Uffizi. He began dreaming of his museum in Linz. From the salt mines, paintings by Raphael, Titian, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, and Parmigianino were recovered, and today they can be admired at

the Capodimonte Museum. German troops had stolen them from the Abbey of Montecassino, where they had been safeguarded, to present them to Goering; some were even part of his 51st birthday gift.

However, many cases remain unresolved or are only now reaching closure. After years of silence and attempted extortion, on July 19, 2019, Jan van Huysum's *Vase of Flowers* was returned to Palazzo Pitti in Florence. This valuable still life had been stolen by a German soldier, likely taken from the crate that, along with many other works from Palazzo Pitti, was being transported to Germany. Another story that concludes with a happy ending, 75 years later.

The fight against Nazi art theft is far from over. Exhibitions, such as one held in Deventer analyzing the situation in the Netherlands, shed light on the issue, but the true voice belongs to those who continue to battle for recovery and restitution. They tell us about the ongoing challenges, unresolved questions, and the battles that still need to be fought.