

The Monuments Men: Taking Stock and Preparing to Move Forward, December 1944

By Dr. Greg Bradsher

The Monuments Men, the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives (MFA&A) specialists, assigned to General Dwight D. Eisenhower's Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF), had begun operations in France in June 1944 and by December had moved into Germany. Their mission: to protect and salvage cultural property, whether Allied or German.

In mid-December 1944 there were 16 MFA&A officers operating in the field under SHAEF direction, overseen by British Lt. Col. Geoffrey Webb and Capt. Marvin C. Ross (USMCR). They were Lt. George L. Stout, USNR with the 12th Army Group; Capt. David K. Young with the 6th Army Group; Maj. R. E. Balfour (Br.) with the First Canadian Army; S/Ldr J. E. Dixon-Spain (Br.) with the Second British Army; Capt. Walker K. Hancock; Capt. Everett P. Lesley and Capt. Asa M. Thornton (Archivist) with the First US Army; Capt. Robert K. Posey with the Third US Army; Capt. William C. Bryant (Part-time); Capt. Walter J. Huchthausen and 2nd Lt. Martin Rogin (Archivist) with the Ninth US Army; and, Capt. Ralph W. Hammett, 1st Lt. Roger A. Clark, 1st Lt. Daniel Kern, 2nd Lt James J. Rorimer, and, Maj. Lord Methuen (Br) with the Zone of Communications. There was no officer then with the Seventh Army, though Capt. Young with 6th Army Group also handled some of the Seventh Army MFA&A duties.¹

Colonel Henry C. Newton reported on December 20, that "The MFA&A officers in the field...are most zealous in carrying out their mission-they work constantly in the forward areas, regardless of weather or the hazards of combat operations." The assignment of Stout to 12th Army Group [had been with the First US Army], Newton observed, would put him in position where he can implement the directives and policies of SHAEF, coordinate all MFA&A activities over the broad front in which these armies are operating and properly coordinate the activities of MFA&A officers within the Armies forming that Group.²

Based on the first month and half of operations in Germany, the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives Section, G-5 Operations Branch, SHAEF, on December 16, 1944, issued a report entitled "The Problem of Movable Art Objects in Germany." It began by noting that "the new importance of the problem of movable works of art, finding them, housing them safely, etc.,

¹ Report, Col. Henry C. Newton, MFA&A, G-5 Operations Branch, Report on Status of Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives in the North Europe Theater of Operations, December 20, 1944, SHAEF, File: AMG 216 (Col Newton) MFA&A: Correspondence-Col. H.C. Newton, Subject File Aug 1943-1945 (Entry UD-55, NAID 612714), Monuments, Fine Arts & Archives Section, Operations Branch, G-5 Division, General Staff, Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF), Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, World War II, Record Group 331 (hereafter cited as RG 331).

² Report, Col. Henry C. Newton, MFA&A, G-5 Operations Branch, Report on Status of Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives in the North Europe Theater of Operations, December 20, 1944, SHAEF, File: AMG 216 (Col Newton) MFA&A: Correspondence-Col. H.C. Newton, Subject File Aug 1943-1945 (Entry UD-55, NAID 612714), Monuments, Fine Arts & Archives Section, Operations Branch, G-5 Division, General Staff, Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF), Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, World War II, RG 331.

seems likely to be the main difference between the tasks of the MFA&A Officers in Germany and in the liberated countries.” It indicated that up to mid-December that MFA&A was more involved with damaged buildings and billeting problems than with the care of pictures, furniture, and other cultural property.

The problem facing the MFA&A officers, it reported, was not exclusively one of loot though that aspect of it would certainly increase in importance as time went on. Such experience as they had of conditions in Germany showed that the enemy had dispersed the contents of their local museums in a series of small depots, many of them far from ideally chosen either from the point of view of safe guarding or as storage accommodation. It reported that such information as it had suggested that Aachen was in no way exceptional and that similar small deposits may well be found round any town large enough to possess a museum, as the advance penetrates further into the country. It reported that bank vaults were also said to have been used extensively for storage of the more precious objects both from public and private collections. In addition to the Aachen caches, MFA&A officers in the field had already encountered the problem of the safeguarding and disposal of art objects and other valuable found in large country houses in the battle area. These objects include pictures, sculpture, furniture, rare books, jewelry, and coin collections of some value and importance.

The movable art objects that had fallen into Allied hands up to mid-December in Germany, according to the MFA&A Section, were not works of international importance. They were the less important possessions of provincial museums or the select contents of a large country house. Nevertheless, it reported, they were of very considerable historical and educational importance and of more than very considerable monetary value.

The MFA&A Section noted that none of the objects thus far encountered came under suspicion as loot—they were the possession of enemy public authorities or private nationals. Very large proportion of the objects with which the MFA&A Officer would have to deal would undoubtedly be of similar character. Yet, it was among such collections of objects that much of the loot from Allied countries had probably been dispersed, for it is known that apart from the actual bulk seizure and shipment of objects, e.g., from France, “such was acquired for museums all over Germany, either by buying in a rigged market or by exchange for looted objects or works seized from Jewish collectors within the Reich.” Such objects were therefore to be given all protection possible, not only in accordance with policy of preserving objects of cultural interest and historical value in general, but as an essentially preliminary stage of the process of securing and preserving looted objects for eventual restitution.

The MFA&A Section reported that the first and most obvious problem raised by the uncovering of such small caches of objects in considerable numbers was that of safeguarding against both theft and physical deterioration. It noted that in forward areas, it was very difficult, generally impossible, to arrange transport to bring bulky objects such as furniture into places suitable for safekeeping. They most often were left to be handled at a later and more stable phase of operations. It was clear, the report noted, that occasions of exceptional importance may arise

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where every effort would have to be made to get transport, but usually such precautions as are practicable would have to be arranged on the spot. The problem was further complicated by the frequent movement and relief of such units as divisional military police and command posts which may on occasion be charged with the responsibility for safeguarding a cache. The report noted that arrangements made with such units were liable on short notice to be cancelled, and movement may occur without the knowledge of Military Government officers.

The MFA&A Section opined that, in part, the problems belonged also to Property Control Officers, who under Military Government Law 52³, were charged with taking into custody works of educational and cultural importance. This was a point, it believed, which should not be lost sight of. It believed that Property Control custody may help considerably in the solution of some of the difficulties. The conditions whereby a large part of the civil population had been evacuated from the battle area, and where there was therefore no owner or responsible custodian available—as had been the case with most of the caches uncovered—brought this matter of the cooperation of Property Control and MFA&A into special prominence.

It was also reported that one part of the problem of the discovery of looted art objects was the proper use of intelligence/information. The correspondence and the accession lists of museums since 1939, it believed, would be of very great importance in determining concealed loot. Intelligence from Allied Governments and other sources may, according to the MFA&A Section, reasonably be expected to yield not only information about the destination of large scale consignments of confiscated works, but the report noted, individual addresses of private persons who had acquired works of art in occupied territory. Such information came in irregularly, and may not be available at the first arrival of the Allied forces in any given area, so that in the first instance, the general policy which applied to all objects applied equally to articles which may have been looted.

³ During September 1944, soon after United States troops had crossed the German border, SHAEF promulgated Military Government Law No. 52, Blocking and Control of Property, enabling the Allies to take the action envisaged in the London Declaration of January 5, 1943 regarding restitution. Law 52 made all property in Germany subject to seizure and management by military government. Among other things the law prohibited transactions in cultural materials of value or importance regardless of ownership, and in property owned or controlled by religious, educational, cultural, and scientific institutions. Custodians of property covered by the law were ordered to hold it, subject to the direction of military government, and to accept certain responsibilities for custody, preservation, and keeping of records. In the latter part of November Eisenhower had issued a memorandum regarding Law 52, Article II, para 3 (d) that forbade the sale, transfer, and export of works of art and other cultural material. Its purpose was to make possible the restoration to their rightful owners of loot taken from other countries. In furtherance of this purpose personnel of the Allied Expeditionary forces in occupied German territory were not to purchase or otherwise traffic in such objects. Memorandum, Brig. Gen. T. J. Davis, Adjutant General, SHAEF to All Concerned, Subject: Prohibition of Sale and Export of Works of Art in Germany, November 21, 1944, Enclosure No. 5 to Report, Col. Henry C. Newton, MFA&A, G-5 Operations Branch, Report on Status of Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives in the North Europe Theater of Operations, December 20, 1944, SHAEF, File: AMG 216 (Col Newton) MFA&A: Correspondence-Col. H.C. Newton, Subject File Aug 1943-1945 (Entry UD-55, NAID 612714), Monuments, Fine Arts & Archives Section, Operations Branch, G-5 Division, General Staff, Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF), Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, World War II, RG 331.

The MFA&A Section reported that up to mid-December the greater part of movable works in enemy areas had been found by chance and reported by combat personnel to Military Government officers. It also noted that the active cooperation between Civil Affairs/MFA&A with other units would depend to a large degree on the success of the search for loot. All finds will not be of great value, but in all cases, careful inspections will have to be carried out and personnel who reported the finds should realize that they had done a valuable service.⁴

The revised *Handbook for Military Government in Germany Prior to Defeat or Surrender* was issued in December 1944. It contained in Part III, Chapter XVI (Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives) information regarding MFA&A activities. The handbook pointed out (para. 1175) that “Germany is rich in monuments of worldwide significance and possess, in addition, an accumulated wealth of public and private picture galleries, museums and similar institutions, which are to be found as often in her smaller towns as in her cities. In recent years these collections have been much augmented property stolen from occupied territory.” It noted (para. 1184) that the German authorities had undoubtedly maintained air raid and other precautions to protect monuments and works of art. Valuable collections had been evacuated to depots remote from danger, and therefore remote also from the cities, with the result that extremely valuable caches of works of art may be found in relatively remote parts of Germany. In the event of a breakdown of administrative control such isolated depots would be exposed to theft and damage by fire and weather.

Regarding policy matters, it stated (para. 1186a) “It is the policy of the Supreme Commander to take measures to facilitate the eventual restitution of works of art and objects of scientific or historical importance which may have been looted from United Nations Governments or nationals. Military government legislation forbids sale, movement, concealment, or destruction of any work of art or object of scientific or historical importance” and (para. 1186c) that it was “the policy of the Supreme Commander to maintain or re-activate the civilian agencies charged with the care of monuments and fine arts in Germany and to eliminate active Nazis and ardent Nazi sympathizers therefrom.”

The handbook instructed (para. 1189) Military Government Officers to take steps to prohibit the sale, transfer or movement of all movable works of art and that (para. 1192) they would immediately take steps to secure by guards all large accumulation of art objects from clandestine removal and would require regular inspections to insure the material security of such accumulation from deterioration by exposure to weather, dampness, fire, etc. The Military

⁴ Report, MFA&A, G-5 Operations Branch, SHAEF, The Problem of Movable Art Objects in Germany, December 16, 1945, File: AMG 290, (REP) MFA&A: Reports-Special, Subject File Aug 1943-1945 (Entry UD-55, NAID 612714), Monuments, Fine Arts & Archives Section, Operations Branch, G-5 Division, General Staff, Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF), Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, World War II, RG 331. On December 18 and 19 copies of paper on “The Problem of Movable Works of Art in Germany” were dispatched to Army Groups. Memorandum, Lt. Col. Geoffrey Webb, Adviser, MFA&A, G-5 Operations Branch, SHAEF to G-5 Operations Branch, SHAEF, Subject: War Diary, n.d., File: AMG 208, (ADM)/3 MFA&A Administration: War Diary, *ibid*.

Government Officers were informed (para. 1194) that where the preservation of movable works of art from deterioration necessitated their removal, a list should be made of all such works and a note made of the location of the new storage place. Such removal, they were informed, should whenever possible be carried out with the advice of MFA&A specialist officer. Further, “no works of art to be removed unless absolute necessary to prevent damage or looting.” The Military Government Officers were (para. 1195) to report as soon as possible any information about caches of works of art to the appropriate higher echelon or the near MFA&A Specialist Officer.⁵

Just before Christmas, Colonel Webb wrote a series of personal letters to many of MFA&A officers. “You will, no doubt,” he wrote Posey at Third US Army, “be gratified to hear I no longer have fleas and have managed to make the gas-water heater work if only at half pressure and so the worst has been averted.”⁶ Webb informed Bryant at Ninth Army that there was little news other than Ross had been to Strasbourg and found it exciting enough, with prisoners and unexpected finds of paintings, “and Goodness knows what.” He noted that “Marvin contrived to get himself arrested by some overzealous Frenchmen the other night who could not fathom the difference between a Marine and a soldier... fortunately it was not of long duration.” He wrote Huchthausen, at Ninth Army, that he must have settled down at his new station, and “I hope you have not met any more than the usual run of headaches.” He informed him that Stout, at 12th Army Group “should be a tower of strength to you all if any picture puzzles crop up as they almost certainly will.” Webb wrote Lesley at First Army he was writing Hancock and that as he may suppose, “you have been much in our minds these last few days.”⁷ This was a reference to the German Ardennes Counteroffensive (Battle of the Bulge) that had begun on December 16.

⁵ Lt. Gen. W. B. Smith, Chief of Staff, SHAEF, Handbook for Military Government in Germany Prior to Defeat or Surrender, December 1944, File: AGAR-S 2085, Record and Non-Record Material Accumulated for a Conference on Captured German and Related Records at the National Archives in 1968 (Pomrenze Collection), (Entry UD-282-BB, NAID 6922180), National Archives Collection of Foreign Records Seized, Record Group 242; The General Board, United States Forces, European Theater, Civil Affairs and Military Government Activities in Connection with Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives, G-5 Section, Study No. 36, prepared by Brig. Gen. C. E. Ryan, Chief, G-5 Section, Col. Walker R. Goodrich, G-5 Section, Capt. Everett P. Lesley, Jr., G-5, Section, n.d., ca. January 1946, p. 13, File: AGAR-S 3019, *ibid.*

⁶ Letter, Geoffrey Webb, MFA&A, G-5 Operations Branch, SHAEF to Capt. Robert K. Posey, Third U.S. Army, G-5 Section, December 21, 1944, File: AMG 217, (12AGp) MFA: Correspondence: 12 Army Group, Subject File Aug 1943-1945 (Entry UD-55, NAID 612714), Monuments, Fine Arts & Archives Section, Operations Branch, G-5 Division, General Staff, Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF), Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, World War II, RG 331.

⁷ Letter, Geoffrey Webb, MFA&A, G-5 Operations Branch, SHAEF to Capt. Bryant, Ninth U.S. Army, G-5 Section, MFA&A, December 23, 1944, File: AMG 217, (12AGp) MFA: Correspondence: 12 Army Group, Subject File Aug 1943-1945 (Entry UD-55, NAID 612714), Monuments, Fine Arts & Archives Section, Operations Branch, G-5 Division, General Staff, Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF), Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, World War II, RG 331; Letter, Geoffrey Webb, MFA&A, G-5 Operations Branch, SHAEF to Capt. Walter J. Huchthausen, Ninth U.S. Army, G-5 Section, December 23, 1944, *ibid.*; Letter, Geoffrey Webb, MFA&A, G-5 Operations Branch, SHAEF to Capt. Lesley, First U.S. Army, G-5 Section, MFA&A, December 23, 1944, *ibid.*

By December 29 Hancock, somewhat depressed, wrote Webb that little had been accomplished. “My estimate, he wrote, “is: 97% of effort goes toward coping with Army procedure 3% left for doing the job. Despite this I think our 3% has amounted to something. But, as you know, our wings have been clipped in the last few days.” In concluding Hancock wrote “When you can do let us have a line direct from you. I’ve never felt so much like an orphan as I do now.”⁸

The year 1944 ended, finding the MFA&A officers facing the same problems as they had in the summer, including lack of personnel and transportation, and Allied forces ignoring “Off Limits” signs that had been posted to protect cultural monuments. In January 1945 Posey wrote Ross that he was still facing handicaps to accomplishing his mission, but “after having gone through one entire campaign with them they are so much a part of the job that I am sure I should miss them if they were to no longer be problems.”⁹

The year 1945 would bring with it new challenges and difficulties to the Monuments Men. But, as will be seen in future posts, much was accomplished in terms of protecting cultural property and recovering and restituting looted cultural property.

⁸ Personal Letter, Walker [Hancock] to Mon Colonel [Webb], December 29, 1944, File: AMG 217, (12AGp) MFA: Correspondence: 12 Army Group, Subject File Aug 1943-1945 (Entry UD-55, NAID 612714), Monuments, Fine Arts & Archives Section, Operations Branch, G-5 Division, General Staff, Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF), Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, World War II, RG 331.

⁹ Personal Letter, Posey, Third U.S. Army to Marvin [Ross], January 22, 1945, File: AMG 217, (12AGp) MFA: Correspondence: 12 Army Group, Subject File Aug 1943-1945, Monuments, Fine Arts & Archives Section, Operations Branch, G-5 Division, General Staff, Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF), Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, World War II, RG 331.