

## The Frick Art Reference Library in World War II Helping Save Europe's Art

During the tumultuous years after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Frick Art Reference Library, like many American institutions, strove to carry on as usual, despite the devastating events occurring overseas and the threat of another attack on American soil. Helen Clay Frick, the Library's founder, assured her staff that—barring calamity—she intended to keep the Library open and that they need not fear layoffs or decreases in compensation. The staff planned for blackouts and even made preparations to move the Library's irreplaceable materials off-site in the event of a New York bombing. (Miss Frick gave specific instructions *not* to move any of the Library's German books to safety.) It is unlikely, however, that Miss Frick or her staff would have predicted that they would eventually become involved in the war effort in a very meaningful way. With its unique collections of photographs and art publications, including detailed European guidebooks containing maps and descriptions of historical monuments, the Library proved to be instrumental in preserving the cultural and artistic heritage

RIGHT  
Dinsmoor Committee members Bill Burke, Jane Mull, and Gladys Hamlin with a map of Paris, c. 1943–45.

OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT TO RIGHT  
Maps like this one of Pisa were prepared by members of the Dinsmoor Committee, who marked the locations of important art historical and cultural monuments to be spared during Allied bombing raids.

William B. Dinsmoor compares a photograph taken after a 1943 bombing attack on the railway yards at Pisa with the keyed city map of principal cultural monuments.

of various European countries, both friend and foe. With the upcoming release of the feature film *The Monuments Men*, directed by and starring George Clooney, this little-known chapter in the Library's history is receiving new attention.

Less than three weeks after the Pearl Harbor attack, a meeting was convened at the New York Public Library to discuss ways to protect "material of cultural, scientific, and historical importance" from wartime destruction. Francis Henry Taylor, the director of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, sent a telegram to Miss Frick inviting her to attend. In the fall of the following year, Taylor—



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Gallery of Art—proposed to Harlan F. Stone, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, that a governmental commission be established to protect important art historical sites in war zones. Stone gained the support of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and, in August 1943, the Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in Europe was formed with Justice Owen J. Roberts as its chairman. (Following the escalation of the war in the Pacific, the commission's reach was expanded beyond Europe to include all war zones.) It became informally known as the Roberts Commission.

Several months earlier, in January 1943, William B. Dinsmoor, a Harvard professor and Chairman of the American Council of

Learned Societies, had established a similar group, the Committee on the Protection of Cultural Treasures in War Areas. Made up of thirty volunteer American and European scholars, the committee was charged with creating and distributing to the Allied armed forces maps and lists that located important monuments to be spared during bombing raids. Ultimately, the committee became part of the larger Roberts Commission.

Headquartered principally at the Frick Art Reference Library, the Dinsmoor Committee was responsible for coordinating information gathered from myriad sources and compiling it into a master index that listed the historic buildings and important works of art in each occupied country. To supplement the facts that were gleaned from the Frick's extensive collection of guidebooks, Library staff sent questionnaires to museum officials, art historians, and academics who had carried out research abroad during the pre-war years. Among these individuals were several renowned Italian art historians who had fled their homeland for the United States, refusing to swear allegiance to Mussolini's Fascist regime. The committee also gathered information from institutions such as the Smithsonian, the Library of Congress, the National Archives, and the American Library Association.

The Army Map Service, the American Geographical Society, and the Library of Congress supplied hundreds of regional maps to Dinsmoor and his team at the Frick, where they were marked to reflect the indexed works. The Library's two photographers, Ira Martin and Thurman Rotan, played a vital role in the process: First they



overlaid tracing paper with a grid over each map; on the grid they marked and numbered cultural sites to correspond with the master index; finally, they made a photostat of the map with the grid attached. The positives that were printed from the photostats were then forwarded to the Army Air Corps for distribution to the bomber pilots in war zones. More than seven hundred maps were produced. During the height of the committee's activities, from July 15, 1943, until January 4, 1944, the Library closed to the public so that its staff could focus entirely on the preparation of maps.

By October 1943 the maps were widely in use, especially by the band of more than fifty art historians later dubbed "the Monuments Men," who had taken leave from their posts at universities and museums to advise the army commanders in Europe as they took up "the fight for art," as Ilaria Dagnini Brey describes it in her book on the subject, *The Venus Fixers* (2009).

As the war raged, the Library's staff members—and the entire scholarly community—became aware of the disastrous looting that was taking place in Europe. A second

goal of the Roberts Commission quickly emerged: "To assist in the salvage of stolen works of art and restitution to their rightful owners." The Library lent its many resources to these efforts as well, and in October 1944 Dinsmoor wrote to Miss Frick that "The Frick Library has been and will continue to be . . . indispensable for this kind of detective work, which is increasingly important as the war in Europe draws toward an end and as the details of the restitution of looted property becomes paramount."

Dinsmoor's prediction proved correct. More than six decades after the war's conclusion, the Frick Art Reference Library continues to aid curators, private collectors, and art historians charged with tracking down works stolen by the Nazis. With the aid of the Library's resources—particularly its Photoarchive, vast collection of auction house and art gallery catalogues dating from the war era, and recently created sales and art patrimony databases—researchers are able to piece together information to help reunite works of art and their rightful owners.—Inge Reist, Director of the Center for the History of Collecting