

In the Footsteps of those who Rescued Looted Art

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Photo: Sarah Rorimer on the steps of the Neuschwanstein Castle – in the same location where her grandfather, the U.S. soldier James J. Rorimer, stood with stolen artworks. In her Internet blog “Monuments Girl” she shares her impressions.

James Rorimer led the U.S. mission in the “fairy tale castle.” His granddaughter is tracing his path.

Schweingau The photograph on the castle steps was sent around the world – American soldiers standing in front of the main entrance of Neuschwanstein Castle, holding up valuable oil paintings for the photographer. It is the beginning of May, 1945. The picture shows the so-called “Monuments Men” – a special U.S. troop which secured stolen art and returned it to its rightful owners at the end of the Second World War.

At Neuschwanstein the GIs had discovered the biggest treasure horde on German soil. The castle was filled from top to bottom with extremely valuable paintings, furniture, tapestries and manuscripts. Some of the art treasures stored there were moved from museums in Munich because of the threat of bombing raids, and some were snatched in the looting that went on throughout Western Europe (as we reported earlier).

“Like a journey through time”

Almost 70 years later a young American woman is standing on those same steps. The thirty-three year old teacher from New York is holding the photograph from back then in her hand and is struggling for words: “It is an unbelievable journey through time,” says Sarah Rorimer, visibly moved. She is the granddaughter of James J. Rorimer, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the U.S. officer who was responsible for the security of the works of art in Neuschwanstein in May of 1945.

Sarah Rorimer had already spent two weeks in Europe following the footsteps of her grandfather who died in 1966 – from Utah beach in Normandy where the Allied troops landed in the invasion, all the way to the storage locations of the stolen art works in southern Germany. The Hollywood film “Monuments Men” by George Clooney, in which Matt Damon portrays James Rorimer, provided the final impetus for her extraordinary trip.

“I am very proud of what he did back then,” says the 33-year old, and quotes her grandfather, an impassioned art historian, who was also fluent in German. “The value of works of art to civilization is not limited by national boundaries.” That is a sentence that is just as true today as it was in the Second World War.

What is exciting to Sarah Rorimer is the interest shown by the people she has met on her journey through France and Germany. In Paris she was the guest of the nearly 100

year old owner of the apartment where her grandfather lived during his time of duty there. She is also impressed by the openness and support of many Germans. "I felt no distrust or ill will left from the war times, even among the older people." And Neuschwanstein? Her grandfather had raved about it in his book on his time in Europe, writing that it was the "prototype of all story-book castles." As commander in charge, he explored the old castle loaded with art "as in a trance." In addition to the 1300 or so paintings from the museums in Munich, there had reportedly been over 50 wagon loads of stolen art works from France, all of them carefully stored and catalogued. Sarah Rorimer is also taken with the fairy tale castle of King Ludwig II. "The castle is incredible by itself, but the whole area around it makes it absolutely one of a kind. Neuschwanstein is the most impressive location of my trip!"