

Gerri Chanel



# SAVING MONA LISA

The Battle to Protect the  
Louvre and its Treasures  
from the Nazis



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*Saving Mona Lisa: The Battle to Protect the Louvre and its Treasures from the Nazis*

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Corpses of machine-gunned hostages lie beside a derailed train. Alongside are packing crates printed with names: Braque, Cezanne, Degas, Renoir. Black-and-white film footage shifts from the abandoned treasures to the dead bodies. Are people and paintings of equal value? That question runs throughout *The Train* – right up to the film’s bloody conclusion. Its imaginative retelling of the wartime fight to save France’s art received its cinematic release in 1964, exactly fifty years before *Saving Mona Lisa* was first published. I thought a lot about the film while reading the book. Is devoting so much attention to inanimate objects justified given the untold death and human suffering of the Second World War? Gerri Chanel thinks so. Firstly, because her book is really about the individuals who protected the art (p. xviii). Secondly, because the fate of the Louvre’s collection was a cultural frontline: the murderous Nazi regime that ‘massacred’ paintings by so-called ‘degenerates’ did the same to people (p. 224).

Another reason for considering art at a time of war is because conflict and the Louvre have always gone together. The opening chapter starts with 12<sup>th</sup> century wars and the Louvre’s first appearance as a fortress (p. 5). Many years later it would host objects that came to Paris on the tide of ‘Napoleon’s river of plunder’ (p. 8). In the shadow of the Second World War, the Italians (pp. 126-8), Spanish (pp. 150-3) and Germans sought the return of this loot. In order to prevent loss or destruction, the cream of France’s national collections was transported to the country’s many chateaux. Some property owners agreed, not out of altruism, but to stop their homes from being occupied by the Germans (p. 196).

Gerri Chanel opts to focus on this story’s heroes, especially Jacques Jaujard. The director of the Musées Nationaux deservedly has an entrance named after him at the Louvre, ensuring that his memory lives on to inspire his successors (p. 324). Jaujard used clever ruses and bravery to safeguard the museum and its staff (pp. 318-9). It took all his ingenuity to delay Hermann Göring getting his pudgy fingers on Gregor Erhart’s statue of Mary Magdalene. Intriguingly, this 16<sup>th</sup> century sculpture – known as the *Belle Allemande* – was left behind in Paris (p. 142). It was, therefore, not deemed as important as the other artworks moved from the capital. Those items had been given a series of one or two coloured dots in red, green and yellow according to priority (p. 43). This casts interesting light on the formation of cultural canons. Only one object was accorded three red dots: *Mona Lisa*. Her movements during the war are listed like a person’s travel itinerary (p. xi). This evacuee was transported on an ambulance stretcher (p. 71) and checked ‘for signs of some secret illness’ by anxious curators who nursed her in their beds at night (p. 149).

Three years after the war, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed in Paris. Article 27 states that ‘everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community’. *Saving Mona Lisa* was, therefore, imperative. But is this history relevant today? Well, earlier this year, Donald Trump threatened reprisal attacks against sites ‘important to Iran and Iranian culture’. The resultant outcry led an incredulous Trump to tweet that Iran could ‘torture and maim our people... [yet] we’re not allowed to touch their cultural sites? It doesn’t work that way.’ Sadly, for him, it does. The US is a signatory to the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, the origins of which date back to 1899 and 1907 (p. 109). Someone should thrust a copy of *Saving Mona Lisa* into Donald Trump’s tiny hands should he ever give the order to bomb a museum.

Stuart Burch

Reviewed for [Museums Journal](#)