



Showcase



SAVING FACES: Capt. James Rorimer and troops retrieve stolen works stored in Neuschwanstein Castle.

Looting Europe

Filmmakers track Nazi art thefts. **by Marguerite Rigoglioso**

Jacques Altman tells his story quietly for the camera. As a young Parisian Jew in 1942, he was about to be deported to a death camp in Poland when the Nazis instead transferred him to a new slave-labor camp at one of the city's train stations. There he had to sort plunder arriving by the truckload from apartments vacated by fleeing or captured Jews—a job he carried out under the weight of grief over the death of his parents and five brothers. Panned shots of old still photos taken at the station illustrate his narrative: mountains of dishes, paintings, toys, books.

“One day I recognized my family's things,” Altman, now in his late 80s, recalls. “I saw photos, I saw our furniture. I was in shock. There were suitcases, too, so I grabbed a suitcase and filled it with photos. . . . When I was deported to Birkenau we had to leave everything behind. It was all destroyed. I lost all my family memories.”

Altman's experiences and those of other survivors are told in *The Rape of Europa*, a documentary made by a group of Stanford film graduates—producers Richard Berge, '84, Bonni Cohen and Nicole Newnham (all MA '94) and director of photography Jon Shenk, MA '95. Soon to be released in theaters and film festivals and shown on PBS in 2007, the film trains a new and harsh searchlight on the Hitler regime's looting of personal treasures and the cultural patrimony of nations.

The documentary, five years in the making, takes its name and basic outline from an award-winning 1994 book by Lynn H. Nicholas. Her revelations of the Nazis' large-scale theft of European art, and efforts by the Allies to preserve it, gripped the four filmmakers. The book “was filled with one amazing story after another, and it was so intrinsically *visual*,” Newnham says.

The four had worked together on other projects since graduation (some more intimately than others—Cohen and Shenk are married) and came together to produce this project at Actual Films,

Cohen and Shenk's San Francisco-based company. Mindful of the advanced ages of the eyewitnesses, they got to work quickly with interviewing and raising money. The film cost more than \$1 million to make, and was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, and Agon Arts & Entertainment, among others. “We hope it has a long life,” Cohen says.

Almost from the start, they got lucky with opportunities to bring Nicholas's chronicle to life. One backer alerted them to an impending Christie's auction of Picasso's *Buste de femme à la chemise*, a recently re-emerged painting that had been torn from a German museum wall in 1937 as part of an effort to cleanse the country of what Hitler deemed “degenerate” modern art. The crew scurried to New York to film the portrait's sale for more than \$6 million—an event that serves as *The Rape of Europa's* opening sequence.

Another episode that coincided with filming was the legal battle between the Austrian government and Maria Altmann over Gustav Klimt's portrait of her aunt, Adele Bloch-Bauer. That painting, appropriated when the Nazis commandeered the Bloch-Bauer home while occupying Austria, was one of hundreds of thousands of artworks, including furniture, sculpture and religious objects, that Hitler's people stole from private collections and state museums from France to Russia. Hanging in the Austrian National Gallery in Vienna since the war, the *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I*, along with four other Klimt paintings, was awarded to Altmann and her family in January 2006. (The portrait made headlines again in June when the heirs sold it to cosmetics mogul Ronald Lauder, reportedly for \$135 million, the most ever paid for a painting.)

After the verdict, the production team visited Maria Altmann in Los Angeles, where the paintings were on temporary display at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. For the first time, Maria could see

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