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Movie Reviews

The Rape of Europa

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Narrated by Joan Allen. Unrated. Opens Sunday, August 26, at the Vancity Theatre

By now it should come as no shock that an elected government can use phony ideology to mask the naked plundering of friends and enemies while raining senseless destruction all around. "Stuff happens," as Donald Rumsfeld famously cracked when informed that the treasures of Mesopotamia had been spirited away after the initial bombing of Baghdad. *The Rape of Europa*, at least, has the advantage of distance from its subject, Nazi Germany's systematic robbery and destruction of western civilization's art history. But if the thesis is familiar (it was handled more philosophically in a German film called *The Architecture of Doom*), this smoothly assembled two-hour documentary encapsulates the material in a thorough and entertaining fashion.

Adapted from the same-named book by Lynn H. Nicholas, who figures prominently among the talking heads, the film was written, produced, and directed by Richard Berge, Bonni Cohen, and Nicole Newnham, who take a panoramic view of the mass looting, building suspense at every turn. In beautifully photographed interviews (and, let's face it, this is usually the biggest drag in historical docs), the filmmakers travel to sites as varied as Paris's Louvre, the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg both of which had their massive collections on the run from advancing Germans and Italy's Monte Cassino, a medieval monastery bombed by the Allies after much hesitation.

Inclusion of that last example raises the question why there's no mention of the incalculable art losses from the firebombing of Dresden, but mostly Rape sticks to the methodical attempts by Adolf Hitler, Hermann Goering, and others to seem like men of culture at the same time as they ordered the murder of art dealers, collectors, and museum staff and tried to get their hands on works by Rembrandt, Da Vinci, Matisse, and Picasso despite public derision of the last two as "degenerate" artists. I could have lived without Joan Allen's brittle, Sunday-school reading of overwritten narration, but the archival footage, stills, and interviews are so interesting, that's a small quibble and the art that survived this particular battle is still magnificent to behold.