

# Saving a Bit of Beauty for the World

## Retelling the Story of Rose Valland

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In the United States, the term “WWII Hero” brings to mind images of jaunty, uniformed men in aviator sunglasses, or the iconic black and white photograph *V-J Day in Times Square*, which depicts a sailor dramatically kissing a nurse. A Google image search of the same term yields 13,700,000 results of youthful soldiers saluting from jeeps, loading B-17 bombers, and, unapologetically, a crew-cut Brad Pitt commanding a tank in the 2014 film *Fury*. Conversely, a Google image search of “WWII Heroines” produces 1,230,000 results. One has to comb through ten pages of 1940s nurses, Rosie the Riveters, and Hollywood starlets before finding an unassuming photo of Rose Valland (1898–1980). This lesser known heroine is the French woman who risked her life spying on the Nazis to document names and descriptions of thousands of works of art stolen by the Nazis from 1941 to 1944. As an employee for the Jeu de Paume in Paris, the museum utilized to store artwork that had been looted by the Nazis, Valland was able to secretly record the provenance of artwork and the intended German destinations. Joining the French Military and traveling to Germany at the end of WWII, she tracked down the plundered artwork and assisted in the restitution of these works. When she returned to France, she became the curator of the Louvre and was awarded the following distinctions: Fine Arts officer in the French Armed Forces, non-combatant rank of Lieutenant Colonel of the U.S. Armed Forces, Officer of the French Legion of Honor, Commander of Arts and Letters, the French Resistance Medal, the U.S. Medal of Freedom, and the

German Order of Merit. Although Rose Valland has been portrayed in a handful of films and books, the story of her heroism is still not widely known. Valland was paramount in saving many of the world's most famous works of art, yet she is not a household name. To rectify this inequity, the present discussion will attempt to bestow the visibility and recognition owed to a woman who fought so passionately and tirelessly—not with weapons, but with her love of art and determination to save France's greatest treasures.

### **The Record: Rose Valland in Print and Film**

The trivial amount of literature and documentation of the life and wartime service of Rose Valland hardly reflects her lifelong dedication to the protection and restitution of the artwork looted by Nazis during WWII. In 1961 Valland published her own memoir, entitled *Le Front de l'art*, which sold out quickly and then went out of print. Currently there is no English translation available. The 1964 American war film *The Train*, directed by John Frankenheimer, is loosely based on parts of Valland's memoir and depicts Valland's role in stalling the progress of a train-load of stolen artwork that was bound for Germany. In the film Valland's name is changed to Villard, and there is no extensive coverage of her character or her role in the events depicted. After this film, it would take another thirty years for wider recognition of Valland's work to emerge from the shadows.

Written in 1994, Lynn K. Nicholas's critically acclaimed publication *The Rape of Europa: The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War* exposed the Nazi plunder of art treasures and the repercussions endured by the art world throughout Europe. Yet even in Nicholas's work, historically accurate details of Valland's involvement and record keeping are infrequently depicted, and no insight into Valland's life is disclosed. A documentary film with the same name was released in 2006, which included a three-minute clip discussing Valland's work. Hector Feliciano's 1995 documentary film *The Lost Museum*, which focuses on WWII French Jewish art collectors and gallery owners, offers some scattered mentions of Valland but no real details of who she was. Two novels blending fact and fiction, *Pictures at an Exhibition* (2009) and *Portrait of a Woman in White* (2014), both tell the story of how portraits and art pieces were taken by the Nazis from Jewish families and how women

(representing Valland) assisted in the restitution of the families' stolen artwork.

It wasn't until 2010, with the publication of Robert Edsel's book *The Monuments Men*, that Rose Valland's story would begin to be told in earnest. With his book, Edsel revealed letters and war documents to compose a highly detailed, harrowing, and dramatic account of the "Monuments Men," an American platoon with the mission to rescue the Nazi-burgled artwork. James Rorimer, a member of the platoon, worked closely with Valland to locate the hidden artwork; by revealing actual accounts between Valland and Rorimer, Edsel was able to more fully bring Valland's heroics to life. A sensationalized film by the same name was released in 2014, with Valland's name changed to Claire Simone. Though the depiction of Valland in the film was not entirely accurate, nonetheless more light was shed on her tireless efforts.

The only piece of literature that focuses solely on Valland's life and legacy, *Rose Valland: Resistance at the Museum*, was authored by France's Senator Corinne Bouchoux's in 2006. It was translated with a foreword by Robert Edsel. Bouchoux had access to Valland's memoir, as well as declassified French archives, interviews, and informational reports, all of which she brought to bear in her biography to tell the true story of Rose Valland.

### **Rose Valland: The *Real* Story**

Rose Valland was born in 1898 in the small town of Saint-Etienne-de-Saint-Geoirs. The daughter of a blacksmith, she showed great ambition and had an interest in the arts early on. Her stellar ability to acquire knowledge and retain information led her to the Lyon Fine Arts Academy, and in 1922 she passed the entrance exam at the Paris Fine Arts Academy (Ecole des Beaux-Arts) with exceptionally high marks. In Bouchoux's biography, she praises Valland's accomplishments: "In spite of her humble background, Rose Valland became an art historian after a double curriculum at the Paris Ecole des Beaux-Arts and the Ecole du Louvre—a feat that was far from common at that time" (Bouchoux, 286). Valland traveled extensively and continued her studies at the prestigious College de France. She volunteered at the Jeu de Paume, a museum that showcased contemporary foreign art collections. Although she was an unpaid volunteer, she was responsible for a tremendous amount of work including, but not limited to, setting up exhibits, maintaining in-depth knowledge of

the collections, keeping records, protecting and preserving art, and writing catalogues. The catalogues'

eclecticism and richness clearly demonstrated Valland's thorough knowledge of the foreign collections. Thanks to her education at the Ecole du Louvre and excellent visual memory, she was an expert writer. Her numerous art reviews, published by the press of her native region, revealed a clean, clear, and meticulous writing style. (Bouchoux, 299)

Unlike many other museum volunteers, Valland did not come from an affluent background, and she had to support herself as a teacher. The absence of compensation from the Jeu de Paume attests to her loyal dedication and underlines her true love of art.

In April of 1933, propaganda condemning modern art was beginning to be arranged in numerous German cities, and Valland, a keen observer of the art world, was privy to these developments (Bouchoux). The Nazis were obsessed with international modern art, and this worried Valland. Valland was also aware of the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, which deprived German Jews of many rights. "Nazi Reichsleiter Alfred Rosenberg, an ideologue and author of numerous texts criticizing 'degenerate art,' would later organize the looting campaigns in France, in particular those targeting collections of the Jews and Freemasons" (Bouchoux, 325). The French government was also aware of these developments, and Jacques Jaujard, director of the French National Museums and closely acquainted with Valland, began evacuating cultural treasures (including the *Mona Lisa*, the *Venus de Milo* and the *Winged Victory of Samothrace*) to castles throughout the French countryside. "Valland witnessed this increasingly dangerous situation [constituted by the Nazi position toward art] and took part in the shipment of the first works of art from the Louvre to the Chambord castle at the end of 1938" (Bouchoux, 351). When the Nazis invaded Paris, and with the city under attack, Valland never attempted to escape, choosing instead to continue working for the Jeu de Paume.

Between 1940 and 1944, the Germans took over the Jeu de Paume, using the museum as the primary sorting house for looted artwork. During this time, Valland was the only French citizen who was able to stay at the museum. According to new laws, property that belonged to Jewish families who fled Paris or who

had been deported was pronounced ownerless and thereby made available for Nazi pillaging. Hitler had grand plans for the creation of a museum in Austria, and many of his desired pieces were deposited into the Jeu de Paume. Unbeknownst to the Nazis,

Valland recorded in small notebooks all Nazi visits, in particular those by Nazi Raichmarschall Hermann Goering, an art enthusiast. After the arrival of each important looted collection, Goering paid a visit to a hastily set up exhibition to select the paintings that were to enrich his personal collection. Spying on the Germans allowed Valland to provide information on the Nazi administration in Paris to her supervisor, Jacques Jaujard. (Bouchoux, 442)

Jaujard and his assistants worked closely with the Resistance movement in Paris, and they were able to inform the Free French Government on the whereabouts of the country's national treasures.

Keeping her composure while witnessing these criminal acts had to take an incredible amount of self-control. It is a miracle that Valland somehow managed to survive. "Her dowdy looks certainly did not invite the advances from the Germans, and she was regarded by all as an insignificant administrative functionary. Her presence at the heart of this undertaking, which the Germans wished to conceal from the French, was an anomaly" (Nicholas, 135). As a result of Nazi suspicion, she was dismissed on four occasions, but her diplomatic skills enabled her to return each time.

Amid the commotion and volatility, Valland "proved to be clever, discreet, and especially observant, recording as much as possible on paper or by memorizing the facts" (Bouchoux, 539). She had a remarkable memory and profound knowledge of art, as a result of her studies at the university. Valland was able to record the titles of the paintings and their provenance, "anticipating the day when [they would] have to look for them and recover them" (Bouchoux, 539). Her efforts were not confined to the museum; Valland would even converse with truck drivers employed by the Germans, and she was thus able to learn about apartments being ransacked and trains being loaded.

As France's liberation neared, an American platoon known as the Monuments Men arrived in Europe to help rescue stolen

artwork. This group of museum directors, curators, art scholars, and educators consisted of men who volunteered for the service in the newly created Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives section of the U.S. Armed Forces. Second Lieutenant James Rorimer, curator of the Metropolitan Museum, was put in touch with Valland by Jaujard in hopes that she would confide in him and share her recorded information. Valland was extremely protective of her knowledge, and it took a great amount of time before she trusted Rorimer, and in turn for Rorimer to believe that Valland did in fact have the information that he needed. In August of 1944, Valland alerted Jaujard that a train containing 148 crates of impressionist paintings from the Jeu de Paume was scheduled to leave for Germany. Because of simulated mechanical failures, the train was delayed in leaving Paris and consequently seized by the 2<sup>nd</sup> French Armoured Division. Valland's accurate information regarding the train instilled faith in Rorimer, and he continued his efforts to gain her trust.

In his diary Rorimer noted that Mlle Valland, though recently appointed Secretary of a newly created French Committee to recuperation of art, has not yet given the French authorities all of her information about destination and location of the works of art sent to Germany. (Nicholas, 309)

In *The Rape of Europa*, a romantic relationship between Valland and Rorimer is suggested but never confirmed. When Valland was finally able to trust Rorimer, she gave him "photographs of Goering inspecting artwork...receipts, copies of train manifestos, everything the Western Allies would need to prove which items had been shipped to Germany through the Jeu de Paume" (Edsel, 247). Valland told Rorimer that there were also thousands of stolen works of art hidden in the Neuschwanstein Castle in Bavaria, Germany, and she shared the exact locations of repositories of stolen artwork throughout Southern Germany. In an Altaussee salt mine in Austria, with a blocked entrance booby-trapped with enough explosives to detonate the entire mine, lay more than ten thousand objects of great artistic value, including the Ghent Altarpiece. Thanks to Valland, the Monuments Men were able to gain access into the mine and recover the artwork.

In 1945, Valland requested to join the First French Army and set off on a mission to Germany for eight years. She was able to

collaborate effectively with Rorimer, and she oversaw the return of 1,400 crates of artwork from the Neuschwanstein Castle to the Jeu de Paume. Under the direction of Valland,

hundreds of crates of art were shipped by train from Neuschwanstein directly back to Paris, bypassing the collecting point. The crates were not even opened. Thus, the French avoided the risks linked to unpacking and repacking the pieces which could have led to theft or damage—a remarkable achievement!” (Bouchoux, 1004)

Valland was not content simply in only visiting the repositories and overseeing the shipments. She showed initiative by looking up military staff (whose names she had jotted down back at the Jeu de Paume) and paid them a visit. She was able to confirm several additional repository sites and send the information to the Monuments Men. Valland also appeared in the Nuremberg trials, held for the purpose of bringing Nazi war criminals to justice (Bouchoux). She confronted Nazi Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering, confirming his twenty-plus visits to the Jeu de Paume and the artwork he stole. In 1946 Valland was put in charge of the Fine Arts activities for the French Oversight Board. “This appointment allowed her to verify that no work of art that was supposed to be returned to France remained in German hands” (Bouchoux, 1031). She assisted with the recovery of precious French coins, and she identified and authenticated tapestries. Her continued work in Germany resulted in the return of numerous paintings and sculptures belonging to France.

In 1953, Valland returned to France where Jacques Jaujard appointed her head of the Works of Art Protective Services at the Louvre. As she continued to wrap up “the operations resulting from the spoliations of artwork during the previous war—in other words, continue the recovery work—she held an administrative position that required competence and diplomacy” (Bouchoux, 1218). Valland inventoried collections and identified sites where artwork could be hidden in case of another war. It was also during this time that she began her memoir, *Le front de l'art*, which would be published in 1961. She omitted personal information, choosing instead to stick to the facts of her involvement with the Jeu de Paume during the Nazi occupation of Paris. Throughout the book she describes her work as duty, and she never characterizes herself as a heroine. Her memoir sparked the interest of an American

screenwriter, and in 1964 *The Train* was released in theaters. Directed by John Frankenheimer, the film dramatized actions by the French Resistance to stop a train carrying artwork to Germany. Valland's character in the film had to shame a commander to even consider saving the artwork on the train. What follows next are scenes full of "speeding locomotives, strafing planes, explosions, crashes. Machine gun fights, dynamite, unsimulated leaps and dives, and Germans yelling 'Schnell!' It's a mix of brute force, cunning and I kid you not, jokes about cheese" (Hoffman). This embellished film clearly catered to those who sought an action-packed WWII movie, rather than an accurate historical documentary.

At the age of 70, Valland retired from the Louvre. During the 1970s, Valland and her companion, Joyce Heer, studied together at the Sorbonne. Although Valland never confirmed her relationship with Heer, their involvement became quite evident when Heer died in 1977 and was interred in Valland's family vault. "Besides sharing the vault, the only other 'official' acknowledgement of the relationship between these two women is Valland's posthumous publication of Joyce's doctoral thesis" (Bouchoux, 200). After Heer's death, Valland's *joie de vivre* decreased drastically, and she passed away in 1980. Valland's funeral was not that of a decorated war hero; "not a single official representative attended her funeral in her native village, in spite of the fact that she was an officer of the Legion of Honor" (Bouchoux, 1334). A month after her funeral, a commemorative mass was held with the French Museums director and the Army Museum director in attendance. Valland's legacy was buried with her, and it would take another 14 years for her to reappear in literature and film

### **The Legacy of Rose Valland**

With the work of Lynn Nicholas in her detailed and well documented masterpiece, *The Rape of Europa: The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War*, Valland's heroic efforts were again brought to public attention. Valland is recognized as a hero in the 2006 documentary on *The Rape of Europa*. In the film, the narrator claims that Valland spoke German unbeknownst to the Nazis, which gave her the ability to spy on conversations. In Hector Feliciano's *The Lost Museum*, not much more insight into Valland's life is given, but she is acknowledged in a few sentences throughout the book. It is very possible that these books inspired Robert Edsel to conduct his



research on the Monuments Men and to write his book by the same name. Edsel went to great lengths, using public and private collections of field journals, interviews, articles, archives, diaries, films, wartime reports, and letters, to accurately tell the story of the Monuments Men. Edsel describes Valland as a matronly, elusive, sharp, secretive lady, with “fire and intelligence in her eyes” (160), and he gives praise to Valland in the words of Jacques Jaujard:

her loyalty to France and to artwork is beyond question... Rose Valland probably saved more important paintings than most conservators will work with in a lifetime. Especially the ones who didn't have to live through this damn war. (163)

There is no doubt that Valland risked her life to save France's historical and cultural treasures. At any point the Nazis could have discovered her spying, and she would have been “liquidated.” Despite this danger, “Valland felt entrusted with a mission: participating in the salvage of the stolen artwork at all costs” (Bouchoux, 590). She spent an exorbitant amount of time at the museum, cataloguing and recording the artwork. In her observations, she discovered an area of the museum which she would refer to as the “Room of Martyrs,” where the Nazi's stored modern or “degenerate” art. In 1943, while Valland helplessly stood by, “the modern works were kicked or slashed out of their frames, trucked into the garden of the Jeu de Paume, and burned along with trash (Nicholas, 170). These works included paintings by Picasso, Leger, Mattise, Picabia, and many others.

Valland dedicated her life to rescuing stolen artwork, and it is shocking that she continues to receive so little recognition. “Why isn't there today a room named after Valland at the Jeu de Paume Museum, and why is there still no commemorative plaque in the Louvre Carrousel entrance?” (Bouchoux, 1519). It took 60 years before the French Minister of Culture honored Valland with a plaque at the Jeu de Paume “to commemorate Rose Valland's extraordinary service and her commitment to save a little bit of beauty in the world” (Edsel, 414). It is believed by some that the significance of Rose Valland has been buried with the desire to forget about the horrors of WWII, but this is no reason to put aside all the work she did. A non-traditional member of the Resistance, involved only for “her love of art, a keeper of fearsome secrets but isolated in her job, working on sensitive archives but memorizing the key points of her activities, Valland had neither

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the mind-set of a heroine, nor the taste for limelight” (Bouchoux, 1744). With prominent films and literature on Rose Valland, one can only hope that this remarkable woman will be more appreciated and honored. Her story, the very image of heroism, needs to be retold again and again. While she did not seek recognition, such recognition is well deserved and long overdue.

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