

The Great American Art Heist

In June 1943, President Roosevelt established the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives Section or MFA&A. For simplicity, I will refer to the soldiers in this organization as the Monuments Men although there were several women who were also part of this organization.

The purpose of this outfit was to help protect cultural property in war areas during and after World War II and to find and return works of art and other items of cultural importance, that had been stolen by the Nazis or hidden for safekeeping.

In late March of 1945 as the U.S. and Russian armies were closing in on Berlin, the Berlin State Museums, to protect their nation's art treasures, moved most of their artwork to the Merkers salt mine.

On the morning of April 7th, soldiers from Patton's third army entered the mine and found the paintings. As this treasure was in the Russian zone of occupation, it was quickly transferred to Frankfurt Reichsbank building as a temporary storage facility.

On August 20, 1945, this art was shipped from Frankfurt to The U.S. Central Collecting Point in the former Landesmuseum in Wiesbaden. This collecting point would house many German owned collections which had been taken into custody. The architect, organizer and first director of this institution was Monument Man U.S. Captain Walter I. Farmer.

In Wiesbaden, Walter Farmer would oversee the sorting, cataloging, restoration, safekeeping and the eventual restitution of this art.

Who was Walter Farmer? He was born in Alliance, Ohio on July 7, 1911. He graduated from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio in 1935 with a degree in architecture. Upon graduation, he worked for the A.B. Closson Company in Cincinnati.

During World War II, Captain Farmer served as the Adjutant of the 373rd Engineers. His regiment repaired bridges and roads in France and then Germany. In June 1945, his unit received official notice that they would return to the States within the month. It was at this time that Farmer found out that there was a Monuments Man office in Frankfurt. So he went to their office and interviewed with British Colonel Geoffrey Webb and American Lieutenant Charles Kuhn.

Lieutenant Kuhn was the Deputy Chief of the Monuments Men and he was looking for someone to rebuild a former museum in Wiesbaden that had been the headquarters of the western division of the Luftwaffe. The Landesmuseum had survived allied bombing with moderate damage to the roof but unfortunately most of the windows had been blown out. The Landesmuseum appeared to be the obvious choice for the collections of art that were piling up in Frankfurt. But before the art could be moved the building would have to be repaired and made secure.

When Lieutenant Kuhn interviewed Farmer, he did not reveal that he was also from Cincinnati. But he saw in Farmer that he had organizational ability that he had acquired as regimental adjutant. He also knew that his architectural engineering skills and his great appreciation for art made him the perfect man for the job. He hired Farmer on the spot.

Captain Farmer arrived in Weisbaden at the end of June 1945. The Landesmuseum was an E shaped structure with over three hundred rooms and 2,000 broken windows. To make this building usable was going to take a lot of work. The two most important things were restoring the building's systems and the maintenance of its security perimeter. The value of the art that would be stored in the Landesmuseum would be enormous. The building had to be completely waterproofed, cleaned, and

heated. In addition, he had to find a competent, well trained staff.

The U.S. Army was not a big fan of the Monuments Men so unfortunately, he was pretty much on his own. The only people available to do the work were Germans. He needed skilled workers who could repair and maintain the building, guards, cleaners and secretaries to staff the offices. He found these people at the Wiesbaden employment agency.

In July and early August, the engineers got the heating system, the elevator and the plumbing working. The big problem was glass because most of the windows had been blown out. Sadly, most of the buildings all over Germany were windowless, so there was not glass available.

Fortunately, one of the workers said that the Luftwaffe had been building barracks near the Wiesbaden airfield and the company he had worked for had delivered several tons of wire impregnated glass to the building site shortly before Germany surrendered.

Farmer drove over to the airfield where next to the nearly completed barracks he found the glass. It was buried under a mountain of debris so the Army Air Corps, who now controlled the airfield, never knew it was there. Without asking permission or telling anyone, he took trucks and a truck-mounted boom and made off with

twenty-five tons of glass. It took time but the windows were replaced.

By the 20th of August, Farmer had repaired enough of the museum to accept the transfer of art while securing the building with tanks and infantry.

It was an unbelievable treasure: the Hungarian crown jewels, the bust of Nefertiti, works by Titan, Botticelli, Rembrandt and Caravaggio, along with many others. Farmer had seventy-six rooms ready to receive the art.

On the day the shipments began all intersections to the road between Frankfort and Wiesbaden were blocked so the heavily armored convoy could travel without interruption. Every piece was recorded as it entered the building.

Included in these shipments were cases of classical antiquities, Egyptian art, Islamic ceramics and 1,188 paintings from Kaiser Friedrichs Museum. The value of this art was absolutely priceless. The responsibility for protecting this art would fall squarely on the shoulders of Captain Walter Farmer.

When one problem was solved another one surfaced. Farmer thought the Landesmuseum was secure but it wasn't. The Luftwaffe had their headquarters in a group of buildings across the street from the museum and a

tunnel had been dug to connect the two. The Luftwaffe headquarters had been destroyed by bombing and the entrance to the tunnel had been closed. However, there were paintings stored in rooms at the end of the tunnel. Some creative American soldiers had opened the tunnel and filled the floor with hay. In effect, they had turned it into a mini bordello. They would then bring female soldiers down there and in payment for their services, the women could pick out a painting to decorate their rooms. Talk about the high price for sex. Fortunately, their commanding officer when inspecting their rooms saw the paintings and informed Farmer. The paintings were returned and the tunnel sealed.

In late October, Army Colonel Harry A. McBride toured the Landesmuseum. He was critical of the condition of the museum and wondered why the building was in such bad shape with pools of water on the linoleum floors and damp Army blankets hanging in the doorways. Farmer carefully explained that unable to obtain working humidifiers this was the only way to keep the wooden panel paintings and Gothic sculpture preserved. The air in the museum was bone dry and moist air is essential to the preservation of the centuries-old panel paintings.

On November 6, 1945, a telegram arrived from the military government office in Wiesbaden that made Farmer absolutely furious. He was ordered to ship at least 200 German owned paintings to the United States. These

paintings were not Nazi plunder. They had been hanging in German museums for years and years. As Farmer said at the time, “It seemed to me that everything that had been done to demonstrate the integrity of the United States government in the matter of its handling of German cultural properties would be discredited if this shipment took place.”

The next day Farmer called a meeting of all the Monument Men even those as far away as Paris and Berlin, and asked them to meet the following day in Wiesbaden in order to protest against this order. Farmer realized that this action could result in a court martial but he didn't care. As far as he was concerned, we were as bad as the Nazis. We were looting German art. Thirty-two of the thirty-five Monument Men then stationed in Germany attended the meeting. Many of these men had reservations about the proposed action. With the war over they wanted to return to the United States and resume their careers in the top American museums, especially the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. It soon became apparent however, that high senior individuals at both museums had been involved in the order for the shipment of the 202 paintings. If these men signed the protest what would happen to their future careers?

By the end of the day, the protest which would be known as the Wiesbaden Manifesto was written. One of the men

said, “I feel like Thomas Jefferson when he wrote the Declaration of Independence.”

Of the thirty-two Monuments Men present, twenty-four signed the protest. Three of the men stated that they agreed with the manifesto but did not feel at liberty to sign. Five others also did not sign but wrote letters to their boss Major Bancel LaFarge.

At the end of the war, LaFarge had been named Chief of the Monuments Men in Germany. His high-ranking position allegedly prevented him from signing the document but he said he agreed with the sentiments of his fellow officers. However, LaFarge did not send the Wiesbaden manifesto on to higher authorities. Instead, he hid the document in his desk. He later said that he did that to protect his friends and colleagues from being court martialed. Which raises the question: did he do this to protect his men or himself?

In the middle of November, Colonel McBride returned to Wiesbaden to pick out 202 paintings for shipment to the United States. He said these paintings were going to the United States for “safekeeping”. Unfortunately, McBride was wearing two hats: one as a colonel in the United States Army and the other as an administrator at the National Gallery of Art. Included in this selection were fifteen paintings by Rembrandt, six by Rubens, five by Botticelli, three by Raphael and five by Titian. This was

not a random list of paintings but a careful selection of priceless masterpieces that could only have been drawn up by trained art historians.

Construction of the National Gallery began in 1937 and was completed in March of 1941. Many of the paintings were donated by Paul Mellon and other art collectors. Some people felt that taking these German owned paintings would be a great way to fill out the National Gallery's art collection.

On November 20, 1945, the 202 paintings were shipped to New York and arrived on December 6th.

After the manifesto went into Major La Farge's desk, most people assumed that this would be the end of the protest but they would be wrong.

Army regulations prohibited the publication of the manifesto but there were several copies of the document that were held by the Monuments Men. Charles Kuhn, the Monument Man who had hired Walter Farmer had one of those copies. Although he did not sign the Wiesbaden Manifesto, he strongly agreed with his colleagues. After returning to his teaching post at Harvard, he wrote a lengthy article in the January 1946 College Art Journal. In the article he highly praised Captain Farmer for the work he had done in restoring, operating and securing the

Landesmuseum. Kuhn then published the text of the Wiesbaden Manifesto.

The manifesto would slowly gain momentum. On May 9, 1946, a further protest was signed by 95 museum officials and academics throughout the country and sent to President Truman.

Unfortunately, this and other efforts did not produce any results that would lead to the return of the 202 paintings. Instead the paintings sat in the storerooms of the National Gallery while their fate was debated.

On March 17, 1948, the National Gallery opened their exhibition of the German owned paintings. The opening day attendance of more than eight thousand climbed on the weekend to a crowd of thirty-five thousand visitors. As word quickly spread about these priceless works of art and the controversy surrounding it, attendance passed the quarter million mark in two weeks and art lovers all across the country poured into Washington for a chance to see this extraordinary collection. On one Sunday, 67,940 visitors viewed the exhibition. This was said to be a one-day record. The National Gallery in order to handle the increased crowds had to hire more guards and the Army sent a detachment of military police to provide security for the paintings. Because of its popularity, the show was extended for a week and by the time it closed, almost one million people had seen it.

Protests from museum officials, the press and some politicians would force the National Gallery to return the paintings to Germany. By April 22, 1949, all paintings had been returned to Wiesbaden.

So what happened to Walter Farmer? He returned to the U.S. in 1946 and resumed his career as an interior designer. He opened his own firm, Greenwich House Interiors, which he owned and operated until his death.

In February 1996, the German government awarded Farmer the Commanders Cross of the Order of Merit for trying to prevent the shipment of the 202 paintings. This award was Germany's highest civilian honor. Farmer died the following year in Cincinnati on August 9, 1997. Here was a man who easily could have done nothing. However, he had the moral courage to challenge the Army high command.

I wonder how many people in Cincinnati who were clients of Walter Farmer knew that he was a Monuments Man and that he had led the effort to stop, the great American art heist.