

Art in Wartime: Understanding the Issues

At the age of 37, Walter Huchthausen left his job as a professor at the University of Minnesota and a designer and architect of public buildings to join the war effort. Several other artists, architects, and museum personnel did the same.

In December 1942, the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Francis Taylor, heard about the possibility of serving on a team of specialists to protect monuments in war zones. He wrote :

"I do not know yet how the Federal Government will decide to organize this, but one thing is crystal clear; that we will be called upon for professional service, either in civilian or military capacity. I personally have offered my services, and am ready for either."

Do you think it was a good use of U.S. resources to protect art? What kinds of arguments could be advanced for and against the creation of the MFAA?

Arguments for the creation of the MFAA:

Arguments against the creation of the MFAA:

Walter Huchthausen lost his life trying to salvage an altarpiece in the Ruhr Valley, Germany. What do you think about the value of protecting art and architecture in comparison to the value of protecting a human life?

Arguments for use of human lives to protect art during war:

Arguments against the use of human lives to protect art during war:



Germany had purchased some of the panels of the famous Ghent altarpiece (above) before World War I, then removed other panels during its occupation of Belgium in World War I. Under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles in 1918, Germany was forced to surrender all the panels to Belgium as reparations for German aggression. In July 1942, after invading Belgium, Hitler ordered Dr. Ernst Buchner, head of the Bavarian Museums, to bring the Ghent Altarpiece to Berlin. When World War II ended, all of the panels were returned to Belgium. Allied nations discussed whether art and cultural items should form part of the reparations that Germany owed after World War II.

Arguments in favor of using art and cultural objects as reparations in war:

Arguments against using art and cultural objects as reparations in war: