This summer, the Monuments Men Foundation and Kimbell Art Museum in Ft. Worth, Texas announced that a Renaissance portrait bust in the Kimbell collection had been stolen by the Nazis during World War II and was one of thousands of works of art found in the Altaussee Salt Mine in Austria.

This incredible discovery occurred in conjunction with an unrelated project. In the fall of 2009, while researching the missing albums containing photographs of the works of art destined for Adolf Hitler’s Linz Museum, we came across a wartime photograph of the Steinberg salt mine in Altaussee, Austria. In early May 1945, during the closing days of the war, the Monuments Men were in a race against time to locate the last great Nazi repository of stolen works of art. A key tip led them to the Steinberg mine. They arrived to discover that a Nazi plot to destroy the salt mine and its priceless contents, including more than 6,000 paintings, had only hours before been thwarted, a harrowing story recounted in The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves, and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History.

Hidden inside the mine were many of civilization’s greatest artistic masterpieces including Michelangelo’s Bruges Madonna, Jan van Eyck’s Ghent Altarpiece, and two Vermeer paintings (The Astronomer and The Artist’s Studio), to name just a few. Of the many photos taken inside the salt mine, we had not come across the photo above before. The photo shows the Kimbell's terra cotta bust of Renaissance art patron Isabelle d'Este being removed from the mine. We recognized the sculpture immediately and knew it had to be the Kimbell's version and not a copy because of the vertical firing-line cracks on the sculpture's front. We were aware that the Kimbell’s provenance for the bust made no mention of being in Hitler's art hideout.

Our discovery that a fourth major work of art in the Dallas - Fort Worth area was part of Hitler and the Nazis’ cultural theft of Europe highlights the extent of the looting operation. Fortunately, the end result was purely historic: the Kimbell’s ownership is 100% validated. Visitors to that great museum will, however, have an extraordinary chance to see a magnificent work of art in a setting far different than the cold, dark salt mine in Austria where it was found by the Monuments Men. The Foundation’s research on other such leads continues.

My summer was spent completing research on the Monuments Men operation in Italy. The story is filled with heroism and courage as these few men worked tirelessly to preserve Italy’s priceless cultural treasures and rescue 700 masterpieces stolen by the Nazis from Florence’s great museums. It is a story I look forward to sharing with the public in my next book about these great heroes and their work in a country in which I lived for almost five years.
When the Monuments Men discovered the cache of artwork in the Altaussee salt mine, they had to remove the art as quickly and as carefully as they could from a narrow mine shaft. The artworks were then taken to the Munich Collecting Point, which was housed in the former Nazi party headquarters in Munich, as it was one of the largest buildings left standing after the war. Upon the arrival of the works of art in Munich, the Monuments Men created property index cards for each object. In researching those cards we discovered the “smoking gun”: Altaussee inventory card number 1246, which documented the arrival in Munich on June 28, 1945 of the terra cotta bust of Isabelle d’Este, which at the time was “attributed to Leonardo da Vinci.” The back of the inventory card revealed that the sculpture was returned to the Netherlands on June 3, 1946.

With these inventory cards and photo as evidence, Foundation President Robert Edsel met with Kimbell Director Eric Lee to explain the discovery, and turn it over to his team to piece together the history of the bust from the time of its acquisition by Hitler’s agents.

Nancy Edwards, the Kimbell’s Curator of European Art and Head of Academic Services, began researching the story and was able to determine that the sculpture was sold by art collector Dr. Otto Lanz to Hitler’s key art advisor, Hans Posse, who in 1939 was appointed by Hitler to build the collection that would form his Führer Museum. When the sculpture was returned to the Netherlands after the war, Dutch officials believed that the sale to Posse had been a legitimate - not forced - sale, and that the work would not be returned to the Lanz family. The bust was then sold at auction in March 1951 and was purchased by Anna Gertrud Lanz Kijzer, Otto's daughter, for 35 guilders (then about $10) as a gift for her brother Dr. Adrian Berchtold Lanz who had always liked it. Because the work had belonged to Otto Lanz before the war and to his son after, the Kimbell had logically and fairly assumed that it had been in the family for the war's duration. Nancy’s work documents with clarity the path of the sculpture and reaffirms the Kimbell’s ownership today.

The bust is currently on display at the Kimbell as part of the permanent collection. Director Eric Lee says a photograph of "Isabella" being transported out of the salt mine may at some point be included on the label along with its wartime provenance.

The Monuments Men Foundation was proud to work with Dr. Lee, Dr. Edwards, and the Kimbell Art Museum to bring to light this important part of history. This not only honors the legacy of the men and women who served as Monuments officers but fulfills a key component of the Mission Statement of the Foundation. The Kimbell Art Museum has once again handled a Nazi-era provenance case in the most exemplary manner.
Col. Pomrenze at the Offenbach Archival Depot after World War II. (NARA)

“In the Footsteps of the Monuments Men” European Tour

The European tour has been rescheduled by The National World War II Museum for September 2012. The museum’s Five Star Tours will join with Robert M. Edsel to offer a tour in search of a different kind of wartime hero: the Monuments Men. This exclusive inaugural trip will be led by Edsel himself. It departs September 16, 2012 from Paris, on a 10-day adventure of discovery – retracing the route the Monuments Men took across a battered, war-torn continent. Along the way are visits to some of the artistic treasures saved from ruin as well as sites where the Nazis stashed their stolen plunder, ending at the salt mines of Altaussee, Austria.

The tour includes travel from Paris to the tour's final destination in Munich, luxury accommodations and meals, as well as the opportunity to experience history in an intimate-sized group with Edsel.

Space is extremely limited. Get more information and a detailed itinerary or book your journey at www.nationalww2museum.org/travel or 1-877-813-3329 ext. 257.