

Extracted from:

Sandra Costa, Alessandro Paolo Lena e Anna Rosellini (a cura di) 2025. *Lo sguardo rinnovato*. Vol. 2. Pensiero Radicale Esibito. Bologna: Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna. ISBN 9788854972285. <https://doi.org/10.60923/books/30>.

War's Toll of Italian Heritage: Unveiling Italy's Post-war Reconstruction through Transnational Exhibitions

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60923/books/30.333>

Pages: 114-139

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1. Introduction

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, Italy faced significant financial difficulties as it grappled with the immense costs of reconstruction and the burden of war debts. The war had devastated the nation's economy: infrastructure lay in ruins, industrial production had collapsed and widespread poverty prevailed.¹ These early post-war years were marked by austerity, political turbulence, economic uncertainty, and the formidable task of rebuilding a nation shattered by war. Yet amidst this devastation, the cultural sphere emerged as a powerful platform for national renewal. Italy gradually reclaimed its position as a global leader in the field of cultural heritage and

In 1945, the National Association for Italian War-Damaged Monuments organized the *Mostra d'Arte Italiana* in Rome, framing heritage as vital for rebuilding post-war cultural identity. In 1946, in collaboration with the American Committee for the Restoration of Italian Monuments, *War's Toll of Italian Art* was held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. These exhibitions—external to dominant narratives—remain under-explored. This article analyses them to reveal post-war Italian responses through a transnational lens. In the United States, the visual display of heritage destruction aimed to elicit emotional impact and drive fundraising, attributing universal value to the damaged Italian monuments. The article further explores the diplomatic value of these exhibitions, aligning with Italy's shift from Fascist propaganda to cultural cooperation and peace building. In this vein, the article argues that these post-war exhibitions exemplify early transnational financial aid for heritage, evolving international conservation guidelines, and the reshaping of Italian national identity.

conservation. Efforts to preserve historic sites, artworks, and traditions played a significant role in reshaping Italian national identity and fostering resilience in the aftermath of trauma. Crucially, this cultural transformation was not driven solely by domestic initiatives, but by dynamic transnational exchanges—an area still insufficiently explored in scholarship.

Within this broader context, a series of exhibitions about Italian artistic and architectural heritage were organized in Italy and the United States during the first years of peace. Among the most significant was

War's Toll of Italian Art, held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1946. The exhibition appealed to international solidarity in safeguarding Italian heritage, promoting the notion that cultural patrimony transcends national boundaries and should belong to all mankind. These exhibitions reflected a growing global consensus around the universal value of cultural heritage in post-war—a concern soon institutionalized through the founding of international organizations such as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). New partnerships emerged, new exhibition strategies took shape, and new diplomatic roles were assigned to culture. These exhibitions, forged in exceptional conditions, demonstrate how moments of profound crisis can also become catalysts for innovation in cultural diplomacy and heritage management. This article examines *War's Toll of Italian Art* and its related exhibitions to explore their political-social underpinnings from the transnational perspective. It asks: how did post-war exhibitions contribute to shaping the new global image of Italian cultural heritage? By tracing curatorial strategies, funding channels, and media reception, the study highlights how exhibition-making evolved into a critical tool of post-war diplomacy—an instrument not only for cultural recovery, but also for reconstructing Italy's international identity in a newly emerging global order.

2. A Precursor: *The Masterpieces of European Painting, Rome, 1944*

After four years of conflict and a series of devastating air raids, Rome was liberated by Allied forces on 4 June 1944. Barely two months later, on 28 August, the former Fascist stronghold of Palazzo Venezia reopened its doors—this time not for the Duce, but for an Allied Military Government-sponsored exhibition titled *Masterpieces of European Painting, XV-XVII Centuries*. Staged in the shadow of ongoing wartime uncertainty and logistical challenges, this exhibition held significant strategic and symbolic importance.

The exhibition was commissioned by the Allied Control Commission and entrusted to Lieutenant Perry Blythe Cott, an officer of the Sub-Commission Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives (MFAA) for Region IV (Rome). Established in 1943 as a part of the Civil Affairs and Military Government Sections of the Allied Army, the MFAA was tasked with a formidable mission: to safeguard Europe's cultural heritage from the ravages of war and the threat of looting.² Its personnel—recruited primarily from among leading American and British art historians, architects, artists, archaeologists, and archivists—were carefully selected, specially trained, and then dispatched to active war zones with other soldiers. Cott—then on leave from his custodial post at the Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts—arrived in Rome on 4 June 1944, the very day of the city's liberation, accompanied by his British colleague, regional archivist Thomas Humphrey Brooke. This integration of MFAA officers with the liberation forces enabled the immediate implementation of emergency measures to safeguard Rome's historic monuments and archival collections. Italy's shifting wartime allegiances created a complex and uneasy position for the Allied forces, who now found themselves responsible for administering and protecting the country's historic cities and cultural heritage. Initially aligned with Nazi Germany, Italy's position shifted dramatically after the Armistice of Cassibile was signed on 3 September 1943 and publicly announced on 8 September. This agreement signaled Italy's surrender to the Allies and a declaration of war against its former Axis partner. Despite this realignment, much of the country remained under German occupation, and the ensuing battles between German and Allied forces led to widespread destruction, including significant damage to cultural heritage sites. The Allied bombing campaigns, intended to weaken German military positions, inadvertently caused extensive harm to Italy's cultural landmarks. Notably, the bombing of the Benedictine abbey at Montecassino in February 1944 resulted in the loss of a historic and spiritual symbol. Such incidents were seized upon by Fascist propaganda, which portrayed the Allies as aggressors



1 Unknown author, *La guerra contro l'arte* (© Domus 1944)

2 Allied Military Government, Civilians and soldiers at the opening of the *Masterpieces of European Painting* exhibition on 27 August 1944 (© British School at Rome Archive)



intent on the cultural devastation of Italy. Publications like *La guerra contro l'arte*, released by *Domus* in 1944, featured stark black-and-white photographs juxtaposing images of cultural sites before and after Allied bombings, accompanied by inflammatory captions (fig. 1). The anonymous introduction condemned the Anglo-American forces, accusing them of betraying the very values they claimed to defend:

We wonder how the Anglo-American tourist, accustomed to finding spiritual solace and cultural nourishment among our treasures, will, in the not-too-distant future, be able to justify to himself such a complete disregard of a public heritage of art and beauty, caused by the savage ignorance of his country's aviators, unleashed upon our skies in the name of freedom and justice.³

Therefore, the exhibition *Masterpieces of European Painting, XV-XVII Centuries*, mounted shortly after the liberation of Rome by Allied forces, held profound symbolic and strategic significance. Staged within Palazzo Venezia—a former epicentre of Fascist power—it served as a direct counter to Fascist propaganda and an early example of the Allies' ideological use of art in their efforts to win Italian hearts and minds (fig. 2). The exhibition also served as a public declaration of Allied commitment to the preservation of Italy's cultural patrimony, propagandizing the MFAA's efforts since the landing in Sicily in 1943. The aims of the exhibition were: (1) to raise funds for urgent repairs to bomb-damaged monuments, and (2) to demonstrate to both Allied troops the cultural heritage they were called to protect.

Running from 27 August 1944 to 18 February 1945, the exhibition featured 46 masterworks from major Italian state galleries, including some of the most celebrated works of Renaissance art. Many of these artworks had been evacuated and safeguarded in the Vatican during the war, making it possible to assemble a collection that, under normal circumstances, would likely not have been brought together in a single exhibition.

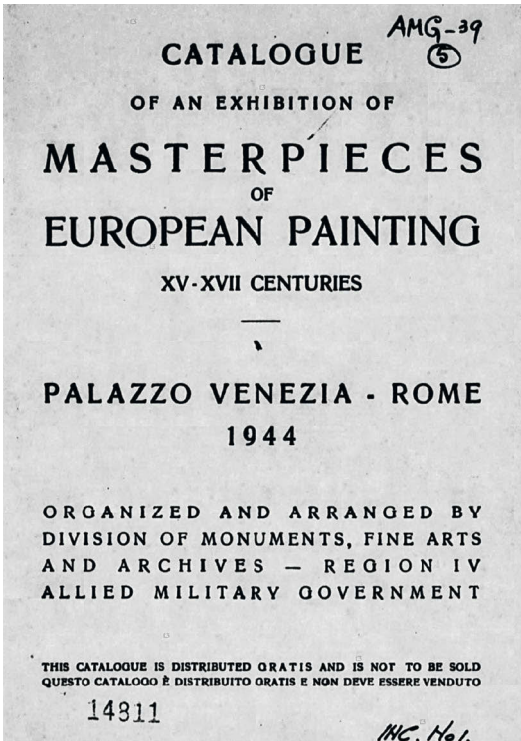
Highlights included Raphael's *Marriage of the Virgin* from the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan, Piero della Francesca's *Flagellation* from the Galleria Nazionale delle Marche in Urbino and Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* from the Galleria Borghese in Rome⁴ (fig. 3). For many Italians, seeing these works of art again after years of conflict was a profoundly emotional experience—one that offered both cultural reconnection and a renewed sense of hope that the war's end might finally be near.

Based on the MFAA's report, an estimated 100,000 persons had visited the exhibition.⁵ Admission was set at 20 lire, and additional revenue was generated through catalogue sales and private donations. In total, the exhibition raised over 2.9 million lire, with a final surplus of more than 1.5 million lire deposited at the Banca Commerciale Italiana, earmarked for projects to repair war-damaged buildings.⁶ Born of wartime exigencies, the initiative reinforced the potential of exhibitions as a tool for public engagement and heritage preservation. It set up a powerful precedent for using exhibitions to reforge the connection between art and national identity in post-war Italy. The model it introduced—emergency fundraising, cross-national collaboration, and cultural diplomacy—would go on to shape subsequent transnational exhibitions in Rome, New York, and beyond during the critical reconstruction years.

3. From Palazzo Venezia in Rome to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York

3.1. *Mostra d'Arte Italiana*, Rome, 1945

For the 1944 exhibition, Cott found strong allies within the Italian cultural administration—notably Aldo de Rinaldis, Superintendent of the Galleries and of the Medieval and Modern Works of Art of Lazio; Palma Bucarelli, Director of the National Gallery of Modern Art; and Emilio Lavagnino, then Superintendent Inspector and later Director of the National Gallery of Ancient Art. These individuals had already collaborated during wartime to secure endangered artworks. For instance, Lavagnino supervised the transfer of



3 Allied Military Government, Cover of the catalogue of the *Masterpieces of European Painting* exhibition (© Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives Branch [MFAA] Field Reports, compiled 1943-1946 in the National Archives and Records Administration)

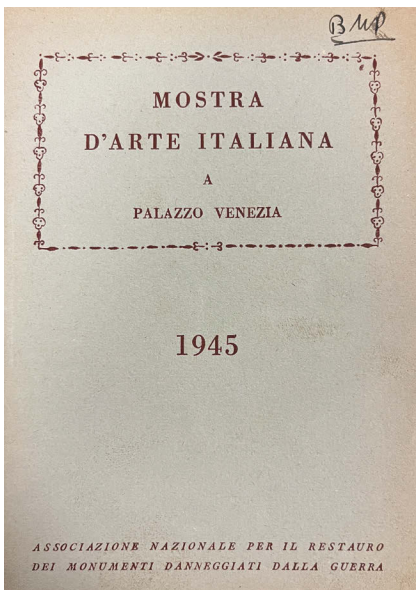
approximately 700 boxes containing thousands of artworks from across Lazio to the Vatican for safekeeping.⁷

Italian experts were well aware of the work being carried out by the MFAA, and new cultural organizations began forming within Italy itself. Three months after the *Masterpieces of European Painting* closed, the Associazione Nazionale per il Restauro dei Monumenti Danneggiati dalla Guerra (National Association for Italian War-Damaged Monuments, hereafter referred to as the National Association) inaugurated the *Mostra d'Arte Italiana* on 12 May 1945 at the same venue of Palazzo Venezia. This marked the first major post-war exhibition conceived and executed entirely by Italians, symbolizing a national effort to reclaim cultural agency following years of occupation and dictatorship.

As Umberto Zanotti Bianco—a distinguished archaeologist and the first president of the National Association—wrote in the exhibition catalogue (fig. 4):

This Art Exhibition constitutes the first major cultural initiative organized and carried out entirely by Italians since the beginning of the war and aims to direct the thoughts of the entire Nation, through the vision of the works of art, to a serious and urgent problem.⁸

The National Association was established on 30 October 1944 by a group of art lovers, scholars, and artists who recognized the urgent need to mobilize resources for the restoration of Italy’s war-damaged cultural heritage.⁹ “It aims, through art events and with the personal support of all Italians, to raise the greatest amount of funds possible, to save the wounded monuments from total ruin.”¹⁰ At a time when domestic aid was primarily directed toward displaced and impoverished civilians for housing, food,



4 Associazione Nazionale per il Restauro dei Monumenti Danneggiati dalla Guerra, Cover of the catalogue of *Mostra d'Arte Italiana* (© Catholic University of America, Special Collections, The Bernard Mann Peebles Papers, box 22)



5 Entry ticket to the exhibition, which shows the initial version of its title *Mostra di Capolavori della pittura veneta e di opere d'arte di collezioni private romane* (© Catholic University of America, Special Collections, The Bernard Mann Peebles Papers, box 22)

and healthcare rather than toward arts, the association's focus on cultural recovery was both ambitious and visionary. Under Zanotti Bianco's leadership, the National Association launched a broad range of public initiatives to raise awareness of the precarious state of Italy's cultural heritage and to garner support both domestically and internationally.

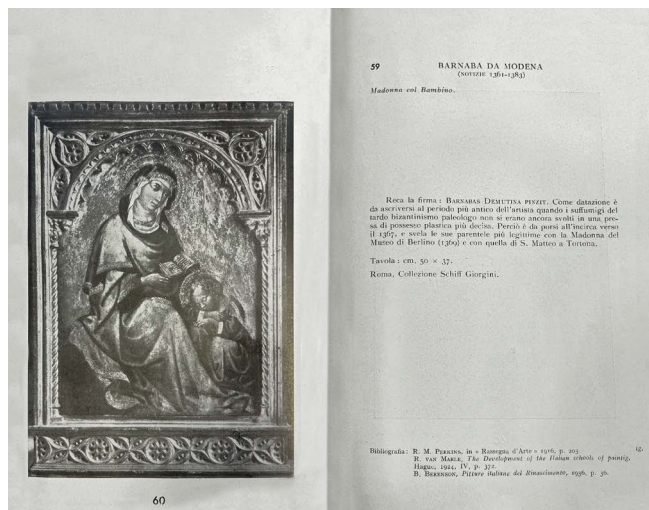
While the 1944 exhibition had emphasized a pan-European perspective, the new show underlined national pride and cultural resurgence. Its original title—*Mostra di Capolavori della pittura veneta e di opere d'arte di collezioni private romane* (fig. 5)—was later revised to *Mostra d'Arte Italiana* to reflect a broader, more unified national focus. Unlike the previous exhibition, which had included a few non-Italian works such as Spanish and Flemish paintings, this exhibition focused exclusively on the Italian artistic heritage, with particular emphasis on Venetian painting.

The 1945 exhibition was organized by a committee chaired by Prince Urbino Barberini, with superintendents Lavagnino and de Rinaldis central to the exhibition planning. The preparation of this exhibition also facilitate the reassessment of the value of the artworks, addressing unresolved problems and clarifying long-standing uncertainties prior to their return to the public galleries. The exhibition was divided into two main sections comprising 117 works drawn from both public and private collections. The first section, displayed in the Barbo Apartment and three monumental

halls, featured 58 Venetian school paintings primarily from Northern Italy. Many of these works had been temporarily deposited in regions like the Marche, Umbria, and Lazio before their transfer to the Vatican.

The second section, held in the Cybo Apartment, offered a particular and certainly more lively interest, as it was made up of 59 privately owned works from various schools of art and different historical periods (fig. 6). These were drawn from Rome's most esteemed private collections and, as the catalogue explained, allowed the individual citizens "to contribute, with their treasures that remained intact, to the salvation of those of the entire homeland, tortured by war".¹¹ To amplify this message, the Cybo Apartment was arranged to resemble the intimate atmosphere of a Renaissance domestic interior, drawing upon materials from the Palazzo Venezia Museum's own holdings.

The National Association implemented a two-tiered admission system to engage the public for a long-term contribution for the post-war heritage recovery. Beyond the entry fee for the exhibition, attendees were encouraged to join the National



6 Associazione Nazionale per il Restauro dei Monumenti Danneggiati dalla Guerra, Example from the exhibition's catalogue, showing the artwork *Madonna and Child* by Barnaba da Modena, from the private collection of Schiff Giorgini (© Associazione Nazionale per gli Interessi del Mezzogiorno d'Italia [ANIMI] Archive)

Association as ordinary members (1,000 lire annually) or as meritorious patrons (10,000 lire per year) (Ciancabilla 2010). As the art historian Roberto Longhi later reflected:

Before proceeding with the difficult task of reintegrating the works in the partially damaged and temporarily unusable museums (Brera, Sforza Castle, Parma, Padua, etc.), it was deemed appropriate to present the public with tangible evidence of what had been saved. Quick action was needed, and so the first exhibitions at Palazzo Venezia were organized in 1945.¹²

3.2. *War's Toll of Italian Art*, New York, 1946

With the end of war in 1945 and the transition of authority from the Allied Control Commission to the Italian government, the MFAA officers gradually returned to their home countries. Yet concern for safeguarding Italian cultural heritage in the post-war era extended far beyond national borders, garnering significant interest across the Atlantic. In collaboration with the Directorate General of Fine Arts and the newly formed American Committee for the Restoration of Italian Monuments (ACRIM), a series of high-profile initiatives—including exhibitions, publications, conferences, and films—was launched to raise awareness in the United States of the critical state of Italian monuments. These efforts aimed not only to document the destruction but also to mobilize international support, especially from those even in the United States who understood the importance of preserving a cultural heritage that belonged not only to Italy but to all of civilization.

ACRIM was formally established in the summer of 1946 as the institutional successor to the Committee for the Protection of Works of Art in the War Zone, originally appointed in 1943 by the American Council of Learned Societies. Many of ACRIM's members had played active roles during the war in protecting European heritage, including renowned MFAA officers such as Perry Cott and Ernest T. DeWald. Robert Woods Bliss served as ACRIM's president, with Millard Meiss as

vice-president and Richard Krautheimer as member of the board of directors.¹³ Most members were prominent scholars from major American universities, united by a shared sense of moral and scholarly responsibility. As Charles Rufus Morey—cultural attaché at the U.S. Embassy in Rome and an active member of ACRIM—wrote in the pamphlet published by ACRIM in 1946:

The restoration of its monuments is being shouldered by Italy to the utmost extent of that stricken country's resources. But these monuments belong to the common patrimony of western civilization, and the civilized nations of the West cannot but feel some share in the responsibility of preserving the from further ruin.¹⁴

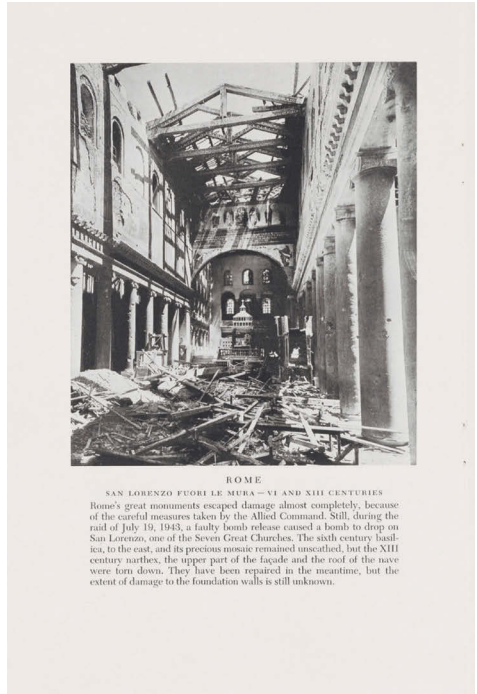
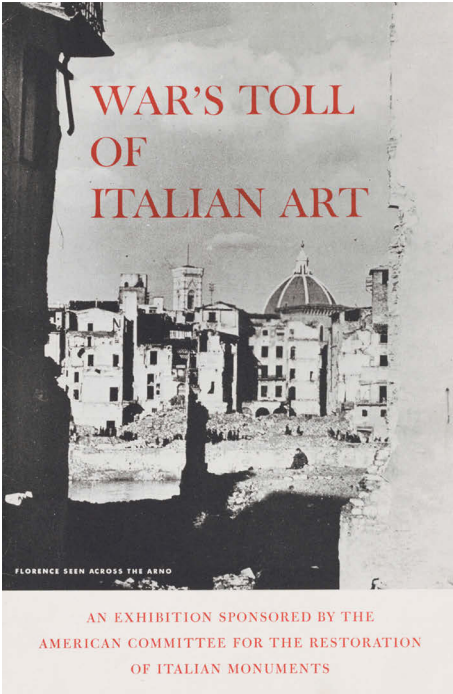
In preparation for a potential exhibition in the United States, ACRIM collaborated with the National Association for Italian War-Damaged Monuments in Rome, which promptly coordinated with various domestic cultural authorities across Italy. In April 1946, numerous letters signed by the Director of the National Association, Zanotti Bianco, were dispatched to regional superintendencies, requesting photographic documentation of local monuments that had suffered wartime destruction. A comprehensive collection of photographs showing the status of diverse monuments before and after the war, along with images of some ongoing restoration projects, was assembled by the National Association through the effort of Italian archaeologist Doro Levi and superintendent Lavagnino. This material, together with a selection of artworks lent by the Italian government—including sculptural fragments from the church of Impruneta, fresco fragments of the *Marriage of Virgin* from Santa Maria della Verità, a *Crucifixion* from the Museum at Arezzo, and two panels of the bronze doors of the Benevento Cathedral—, was subsequently shipped across the Atlantic to New York. From 18 October to 24 November 1946, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York hosted the exhibition *War's Toll of Italian Art*

(fig. 7). Approximately eighty large-format panels (ranging in size from 18 × 20 to 36 × 40 inches) functioned as “visual monographs”, each accompanied by detailed captions emphasizing the value and the state of the damaged objects and sites.¹⁵ The exhibition also included a photo-mural showing a view of Florence and a map of Italian cities whose art was damaged during the war.¹⁶

The exhibition revealed the staggering toll of war on Italian cultural heritage. Photographs documented the condition of about 70 monuments as of 1946, many more were in a dire state. As the exhibition indicated, over 2,500 buildings—along with countless frescoes and sculptural works—had suffered severe or irreparable damage. The opening was attended by nearly 2,000 visitors, and within five weeks, the exhibition had drawn a total audience of 36,750.¹⁷

Soon after, based on the materials from the exhibition, a volume titled *Cinquanta monumenti italiani danneggiati dalla guerra* was published in Rome by the Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato. Edited by the National Association for Italian War-damaged Monuments and translated into English by Sara T. Morey (*Fifty War-damaged Monuments of Italy*), the publication functioned both as scholarly documentation and a potent vehicle for cultural diplomacy. It highlighted 50 of the most significant war-damaged monuments, selected as initial candidates for restoration using funds raised through the exhibition. The book included the impressive photographs displayed in New York, accompanied by a text written by Emilio Lavagnino on technical assessments and financial estimates (fig. 8).

Thanks to ACRIM’s expansive network—rooted in American art history departments—the *War’s Toll of Italian Art* exhibition continued to tour across the United States, visiting 50 museums in cities like Philadelphia, Boston, Detroit, Chicago, San Francisco, and Kansas City. Many of the photographic panels were transported via a rail circuit coordinated by the American Federation of Arts, enabling the show to be presented in multiple venues over the course of more than a year. After its initial run



7 Pamphlet providing a hand list of the photographs and the small group of original objects included in the 1946 exhibition *War's Toll of Italian Art* (© American Committee for the Restoration of Italian Monuments, Smithsonian Archives of American Art)

8 Emilio Lavagnino. *Fifty War-damaged Monuments of Italy* (© National Association for Italian War-damaged Monuments)

at the Metropolitan Museum, the exhibition was displayed at the New Jersey State Museum in late November 1946, followed by a presentation at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., from 6 December 1947 to 11 January 1948. These displays were often accompanied by public lectures delivered by leading ACRIM members. On 26 November 1946, for example, Fredrick Hartt, a former MFAA officer who served in Italy, gave a lecture on *Toll of Italian Art* at Vassar College's Taylor Hall.¹⁸ When the exhibition reached the Cleveland Museum of Art from 12 March to 6 April 1947, Ernest T. DeWald from Princeton University—former director of the MFAA—delivered a talk on 28 March titled *The War's Toll of Italian Art*.¹⁹ Both lectures emphasized the extensive wartime destruction of Italy's cultural heritage and underscored the critical importance of international collaboration in restoration efforts. Collectively, these exhibitions and public engagement contributed to shaping the image of the United States as a benevolent patron of Italian art and cultural heritage. This narrative aligned with the precedent set by the 1944 *Masterpieces of European Painting* exhibition in Rome. By foregrounding the role of the Allied forces

FLORENCE - PONTE SANTA TRINITA



FLORENCE — PONTE SANTA TRINITA

This is perhaps the most important piece of architecture, from the point of view of art, that was destroyed by the war in Italy.

On the site of a bridge which was built in 1252, Bartolomeo Ammannati, between 1566 and 1569, spanned the Arno with this bridge which was destroyed on August 3, 1944, by German mines.

The design for the beautiful work was given to Ammannati by Michelangelo Buonarroti.

Ponte Santa Trinita was a remarkable union of linear elegance and structural power, an achievement which resulted from the massive solidity of the piers contrasting with the fine, springing lightness of the arches.

The bridge was adorned at its two ends by four marble statues representing the seasons.

Now that the architectural elements which were torn apart by the explosions have been collected with religious zeal or fished out of the Arno, and an imposing documentation of the work has been assembled from the very numerous photographs and accurate drawings, a reconstruction of the bridge will be attempted, making use of every remnant of the original, even to the smallest fragment.

Up to now 1,600,000 liras have been spent in work of recovery of material. It is estimated that 17,000,000 liras more will be needed for the complete architectural reintegration of this famous work of art.



in the preservation and restoration of war-damaged monuments, these initiatives strategically shifted public focus away from the wartime destruction—much of it caused by Allied bombings—and toward a vision of post-war cultural responsibility, and international cooperation.

4. International Solidarity and National Identity in the 1946 *War's Toll of Italian Art* Exhibition

4.1. Exhibition Narratives

Visualizing the large scale of destruction and significant value of Italian heritage became central to the emotional and rhetorical strategy of the exhibition, which was crucial to its success as a fundraising and diplomatic tool. *War's Toll of Italian Art* conferred universal value upon the monuments it showcased, framing their destruction as not merely a national tragedy but a loss for all of humanity. As the Italian General Director of Antiquities and Fine Arts, Ranuccio Bianchi-Bandinelli, put it, “They are turning for help to all men who realize to what an extent their own civilization is derived from Italy and that the destruction of her works of art would be a loss to mankind everywhere.”²⁰

While the 1944 *Masterpieces of European Painting* exhibition and the 1945 *Mostra d'Arte Italiana* in Rome focused on paintings, the 1946 *War's Toll of Italian Art* show in New York demonstrated the use of photography as a powerful tool. Photography was not just a medium of documentation but a carefully deployed instrument of persuasion. The images endowed the depicted monuments with global meaning, dramatized the extent of the damage, and appealed to the moral and aesthetic sensibilities of American viewers. As noted in the exhibition materials, a central device in this visual rhetoric was the juxtaposition of “before” and “after” states of damaged monuments: “Comparative photographs of the buildings in their present and previous states are given, as well as pictures of their temporary protection and the permanent repair, now in progress.”²¹ These contrasts foregrounded the former beauty and integrity of the monuments, intensifying the

viewer's sense of loss while simultaneously underscoring the urgency of restoration work through international support. The exhibition layout followed a three-part thematic path: Protection, Damage, and Repair.²² This curatorial structure communicated a sense of regulatory logic, mirroring phases of emergency response and long-term intervention. Moreover, the damage was not presented as a purely artistic or academic concern. The exhibition underlined the civil and social dimensions of the destruction, reminding American audiences that these were not only aesthetic masterpieces but integral parts of civic life. As one caption put it, "Buildings to be saved are more than artistic and engineering achievements of the past; they are the town halls, places of worship, bridges, and meeting places of the people, essential to life in the new Italian Republic."²³

4.2. Exhibition as a Powerful Tool for Heritage Restoration Fundraising

During the 1945 *Mostra d'Arte Italiana* in Rome, significant efforts were made to foster collaboration between public institutions and private entities in support of cultural heritage preservation. Building upon this foundation, the 1946 *War's Toll of Italian Art* exhibition in New York expanded these collaborative efforts by engaging private patrons in the restoration of war-damaged monuments. For instance, during the exhibition, effective appeals for funds were written by ACRIM members and published in American magazines, such as Dr. Alfred Frankfurter's text in *Art News* in November 1946 and Mr. C.G. Paulding's writing in *The Commonwealth* on 1 November 1946. These initiatives preceded the formalization of American governmental aid to Europe through programmes such as the Marshall Plan, signed into law on 3 April 1948. Collectively, these early endeavours provide valuable insight into the strategies employed in the immediate post-war period to mobilize international support for heritage preservation. The success of the exhibition catalyzed broader fundraising initiatives beyond museum walls. A national campaign was launched across the United States, featuring paid advertisements

in major newspapers and magazines that encouraged tax-deductible donations. Contributions were managed by a coordinating office in New York and allocated to selected monuments, often supporting modest yet symbolically significant restoration projects. Corporate philanthropy also played a crucial role. The Samuel H. Kress Foundation, for instance, funded high-profile restoration projects such as the Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini, the Santa Trinita Bridge in Florence, and the Campo Santo in Pisa. These contributions not only facilitated restoration work but also positioned American benefactors as key patrons of European cultural heritage.

By the spring of 1948, ACRIM had identified a list of Italian monuments to benefit from the collected funds, based on criteria such as artistic and historic importance, geographical distribution, American interests, and the urgency of repair.²⁴ Selected sites included the Bramante portico of Sant’Ambrogio, the Palladian Basilica, Villa Falconieri in Frascati, and sites in Pompeii and Faenza. The Committee requested that the Italian government publicly acknowledge these donations by placing announcements for new projects alongside prior works at the Malatestiano, the Campo Santo, and the Santa Trinita Bridge. This strategy underscored the importance of visibility and public recognition in framing the United States’ emerging role as a cultural patron, crafting a benevolent post-war image of America as a guardian of Italian cultural heritage.²⁵

4.3. Diplomatic Value of Post-War Exhibitions

The 1946 *War’s Toll of Italian Art* exhibition—like many other Italian cultural initiatives abroad in the immediate post-war years—was primarily organized by external actors, particularly American institutions. This marked a clear departure from the Fascist era, when cultural diplomacy was tightly controlled and used to project nationalistic propaganda. Instead, post-war exhibitions were shaped by an “external gaze” that interpreted and represented Italian heritage within an international framework, often mediated through foreign patronage and curatorial leadership.

At the same time, the newly established Italian Republic, under Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi (1945–1953), pursued a redefinition of cultural policy. While the state drastically reduced funding for cultural activities abroad—cutting the budget to a fraction of its prewar levels and dismantling several Fascist-era institutions—it also promoted a new vision of cultural relations grounded in exchange, peace-building, and mutual understanding.²⁶ This shift aligned with broader post-war currents of multilateralism and international cooperation, which came to define the diplomatic strategy of Christian Democratic Italy.

Within this context, exhibitions such as *War's Toll of Italian Art* took on a renewed diplomatic role. They embodied emerging policies of “multilateral initiatives” and “cultural cooperation” that resonated with a growing global zeitgeist of cultural universalism. This era saw the formation of various intergovernmental organizations aimed at fostering peace through culture, education and cooperation—most notably the founding of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in November 1945. Italy's admission to UNESCO in 1947 symbolized its reintegration into the international community under a democratic and cooperative ethos. An appeal from ACRIM, issued in conjunction with the *War's Toll of Italian Art* exhibition, poignantly captured this spirit of transnational solidarity:

Will you help? Your money will give needed employment; it will help create the One World friendship and respect on which the future depends; and will acknowledge our debt to the cultural life of western civilization which made possible our own greatness.²⁷

This appeal underscores how cultural preservation was framed not only as a national imperative but also as a shared civilizational responsibility, advancing both reconstruction and reconciliation in a fractured post-war world.

5. Echoes: Post-war Exhibitions as Vehicles of Transformation

During the 1946 *War's Toll of Italian Art* exhibition, some restoration work conducted by the Istituto Centrale del Restauro (Central Institute of Restoration, ICR) in Rome was presented to American audiences, showcasing the expertise and dedication of Italian conservation professionals. Coinciding with the exhibition's opening in New York, *Life* magazine published striking images of two ICR technicians meticulously reassembling nearly 20,000 pieces of the damaged *Marriage of the Virgin* fresco from St. Mary the Trinity in Viterbo—vividly conveying both the devastation of war and the precision of scientific restoration in Italy (fig. 9). Through this exhibition, the Italian expertise in a highly specialized field was not only celebrated but also internationally recognized, laying the groundwork for Italy's post-war leadership in the field of heritage restoration.

The 1946 exhibition and its accompanying catalogue would leave a lasting imprint on the 1950 *Mostra della Ricostruzione Nazionale Roma* at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni from 27 January 1950 to 26 July 1951. This later exhibition, accompanied by the publication *La ricostruzione del patrimonio artistico italiano*—released during the Fifth General Conference of UNESCO in Florence in 1950—offered a moment of reflection and recalibration. Unlike the urgency and grief that shaped the 1946 event, the 1950 exhibition in Rome projected a more confident vision of national progress. It reassessed the values, methodologies, and operative frameworks that had guided the country's restoration and reconstruction in the five years since the war's end, recasting them as a symbol of resilience and pride.

From 1944 to 1950, these exhibitions in the immediate post-war years served multifaceted purposes, at once practical and symbolic. They pioneered transnational models of fundraising for cultural heritage, documented the emergence of modern conservation practices, and provided a platform for Italy's reintegration into the global cultural community.



RESTORED ART

From Italy's bomb rubble artists reconstruct some old masterpieces

Thanks to a remarkable job of restoration, the U.S. this week will see some priceless fragments of Italian Renaissance art which at one time appeared to be lost forever among the rubble of World War II's bombings. The display, which is scheduled to go on exhibition in New York City's Metropolitan Museum, was arranged by the American Committee for the Restoration of Italian Monuments, which is doing its best to raise money to help sal-

vage what remains of Italy's damaged art treasures. Among the masterpieces to be exhibited is part of a 15th Century fresco (*dofos*) painted by Lorenzo da Viterbo, on the walls of a church in Viterbo, about 40 miles north of Rome. The church was gutted by bombs in 1944 and the fresco broken into about 20,000 pieces. These pieces were painstakingly collected and the job of putting together the world's greatest jigsaw puzzle began (above).



FIRST STEP in restoration process was placing the 20,000 fragments on a full-size photo of original fresco.



NEARING COMPLETION, fresco has parts in place except pieces of arm at left which could not be found.



RESTORED FRESKO was completed by filling in the empty spaces with tone similar to original painting.

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9 Article titled "Restored Art. From Italy's bomb rubble artists reconstruct some old masterpieces" with a photograph showing two Italian technicians from the Istituto Centrale del Restauro working on restoring Lorenzo da Viterbo's fresco *Marriage of the Virgin*, which had been shattered into nearly 20,000 pieces (@ Life Magazine, 28 October 1946, p. 103)

These exhibitions symbolized Italy's transformation from a war-torn past to a future rooted in collaboration, professionalism, and shared cultural values. As subtle instruments of soft power, these exhibitions became spaces where art mediated diplomacy, and where wounds of war were reinterpreted through gestures of care and acts of reconstruction. In these curated encounters, transnational solidarities were forged, material and moral support was galvanized, and a new vision of cultural identity took root—one grounded in professionalism, cooperation, and resilience.

- 1 Masera 1983.
- 2 Edsel, Witter 2010.
- 3 *La guerra contro l'arte* 1944.
- 4 Allied Military Government 1944, Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives Branch (MFAA) Field Reports, compiled 1943–1946 in the National Archives and Records Administration.
- 5 Dummy of Commission Report (3 of 5), 1946, p. 56, catalogue of “Galleys and Page Proofs, compiled 1946” in the National Archives and Records Administration.
- 6 Ibidem.
- 7 Lavagnino 1974.
- 8 Zianotti Bianco 1945.
- 9 Associazione Nazionale per il Restauro dei Monumenti Danneggiati dalla Guerra, Documenti, 1944–1946, Roma, in Associazione Nazionale per gli Interessi del Mezzogiorno d'Italia (ANIMI) Archive.
- 10 Zianotti Bianco 1945.
- 11 Catalogue of the *Mostra d'Arte Italiana*, Rome, Associazione Nazionale per il Restauro dei Monumenti Danneggiati dalla Guerra, 1945, in ANIMI Archive.
- 12 Longhi 1985, p. 64.
- 13 American Committee for the Restoration of Italian Monuments (ACRIM), in W.G. Constable papers, 1905–1983, bulk 1920–1976, Box 5, Folder 22, Smithsonian Archives of American Art.
- 14 Ibidem.
- 15 Morgante 2013.
- 16 Letter from Millard Meiss to W.G. Constable on 3 December 1946, in W.G. Constable papers, 1905–1983, bulk 1920–1976, Box 5, Folder 23, Smithsonian Archives of American Art.
- 17 ACRIM's Report to the Members on 15 December 1945, in W.G. Constable papers, 1905–1983, bulk 1920–1976, Box 5, Folder 23, Smithsonian Archives of American Art.
- 18 “Hartt Lectures” 1946.
- 19 Francis 1947.
- 20 Bianchi-Bandinelli 1946.
- 21 Wurmbrand 1946, p. 2.
- 22 Bronfman 1946.
- 23 Francis 1947, pp. 71–72.
- 24 ACRIM's Report to the Members on 15 December 1945, in W.G. Constable papers, 1905–1983, bulk 1920–1976, Box 5, Folder 23, Smithsonian Archives of American Art.
- 25 Russo Krauss 2017.
- 26 Medici 2009, p. 88.
- 27 American Committee for the Restoration of Italian Monuments (ACRIM), in W.G. Constable papers, 1905–1983, bulk 1920–1976, Box 5, Folder 22, Smithsonian Archives of American Art.

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