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In New Haven, an Exhibition on a Yale Professor Who Helped Rescue Art During World War II

By **THERESA SULLIVAN BARGER** MARCH 6, 2015

As the Allied forces advanced north in Italy during the last year of World War II, Capt. Deane Keller arrived in Pisa and found that the fighting had left much of the ancient city reduced to rubble.

Captain Keller, a Yale University art professor who was the type of officer depicted in the George Clooney movie “Monuments Men,” survived a night of bombing by the retreating Germans. The next morning, he navigated the crumbled buildings, mounds of debris, mines and booby traps left behind by the Nazis to reach the Camposanto building, a site where generations of Pisans are entombed in sarcophagi. The structure’s roof had been obliterated. Fires had caused the 14th- and 15th-century frescoes lining the walls to fall into thousands of pieces, and the loss of the roof exposed these fragments to the elements. He knew he had to act quickly.

With no staff officially assigned to him other than his driver, Captain Keller requested backup help, then directed soldiers and civilians to erect a canvas roof to shield the fresco pieces from sun and rain. Through his quick thinking and leadership, Captain Keller is credited with saving the frescoes, which are still being pieced back together today.

His story is told in the New Haven Museum exhibition, “An Artist at War: Deane Keller, New Haven’s Monuments Man,” through May 9. Through illustrations he drew for his 3-year-old son, letters to his wife and his paintings, photos and artifacts, visitors see a man who helped to save masterpieces by Botticelli, Raphael and Michelangelo. They also see a father longing to see his family and trying, through funny drawings and notes, to stay connected to his son.

In 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established a civilian commission that led to the formation of the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives section of the military — the Monuments Men — whose exploits were recorded by Robert M. Edsel in his book “The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves, and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History,” on which the Clooney film was based.

Members of these units were largely well-educated men and women who left behind their families and careers to work to protect paintings, sculptures, monuments and buildings from theft and destruction during World War II. As the Nazis occupied areas, they seized (and sometimes destroyed) art belonging to Jewish families, museums, religious institutions and municipalities.

The contributions made by these Monuments Men remained largely unknown before Mr. Edsel wrote about them. (In one of those books, “Saving Italy,” Captain Keller is a central figure.)

The curator of the exhibition in New Haven drew from Deane Keller’s papers, held in the Manuscripts and Archives collection at Yale University’s Sterling Memorial Library Manuscripts and Archives.

Although Mr. Keller was belatedly promoted to the rank of major because of his work in Pisa and elsewhere, he did not receive the thanks he merited during his lifetime, said the exhibition’s guest curator, Laura A. Macaluso.

Deane Keller was born in New Haven in 1901 to Albert Keller, a renowned

Yale sociology professor, and Caroline G. Keller. As Deane's elementary school report card in the exhibition shows, he excelled at history and science, but earned "fair" marks in art. He graduated from Yale with (at his father's urging) a bachelor's degree in history and science in 1923.

But painting was his passion, Ms. Macaluso said. He studied at the Art Students League in New York, returned to Yale where he earned a B.F.A. in 1926, and was awarded the Rome Prize fellowship from the American Academy in Rome. He traveled and studied for three years in Italy, learning the language, the culture, its people and its art. The exhibition includes a photo of Mr. Keller taken in his studio at the academy.

He returned to Yale to teach painting and drawing and began a portrait painting business. Before the war, he painted one of New Haven's best-known works of public art, "The New Haven Green in the Nineteenth Century," a mural in the main hall of the New Haven Free Public Library.

Mr. Keller, 42, enlisted, and he served from 1943 to 1946 as a fine arts officer attached to the Fifth Army in Italy. The exhibition includes pictures he drew for his son Deane of himself at work (such as interrogating a German soldier) and leisure (such as bathing, using water out of two helmets). Another shows Captain Keller leaning out of a train waving to his son. The illustrations are signed, "Love From Your Daddy" and say, "Hug Mummie" or, "Kiss Mummie."

A letter home to his wife, Kathy, tells of bombs "crashing all around" and says, "I PRAYED I tell you and I was trembling like a damned leaf and once it lasted 1.5 hours and I thought of you and Deane."

A photo shows two men inside the Gallery of the Academy in Florence looking up at Michelangelo's marble statue of David shortly after the brick sheathing built around the statue to protect it from bombings had been removed. Mr. Keller, reflecting on being there at this moment, wrote: "It was dusty and dirty, but it was a great thrill."

Another photo, which shows a blank wall in Florence's Uffizi Gallery where a Botticelli painting formerly hung, relates to the work of Mr. Keller and a fellow monuments officer, Lt. Frederick Hartt, who had been a Yale University Art Gallery historian. The two played leading roles in finding and safely returning the artwork from the Uffizi. The Uffizi staff had hidden it to keep it out of Nazi hands, but the Germans had found it and shipped it north near the Austrian border. Its exact location remained unknown to the Allies and Monuments Men for a year.

Captain Keller was one of the first on the scene in a mountainous region of Northern Italy to identify the Uffizi's artwork. Of hundreds of paintings, then valued at \$500 million, only 11 remain unaccounted for.

Mr. Keller received several awards for his work in Italy, including the Army's Legion of Merit, the Member of the British Empire medal, the Crown of Italy Partisan medal, the Medal of the Opera from Pisa and the Order of St. John Lateran from the Vatican.

The exhibition also touches on Mr. Keller's life after he returned to Yale. He rose from assistant professor to associate professor to full professor by 1948. But the art world had changed, and modernism, represented by artists like Jackson Pollock, held sway. Yale's School of Fine Arts appointed Josef Albers head of the Design Department in 1950, and Mr. Keller, who believed in the value of representational art, was no longer allowed to teach graduate art students.

Mr. Keller remained in demand as a portrait artist, painting more than 500 portraits over his career, including those of President Herbert Hoover, Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio and Gov. John Davis Lodge of Connecticut.

In May 2000, eight years after Mr. Keller's death, his sons Deane and William, surrounded by representatives of the Italian government, the City of Florence, the Church of Pisa, the Vatican and the United States Army, placed half of their father's remains in the Camposanto in Pisa. An inscription on the

marble memorial reads, “Amicissimus ad amicus,” meaning, “The very dear friend returned to his friends.”

Correction: March 7, 2015

A picture caption with an earlier version of this article misidentified the illustrator of “Daddy Inspects the Tower.” He was Walter Doherty, not Deane Keller.

“An Artist at War: Deane Keller, New Haven’s Monuments Man” is on display through May 9 at the New Haven Museum, 114 Whitney Avenue, New Haven. Information: 203-562-4183 or newhavenmuseum.org.

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