



AMERICAN FOUNDATION OF SAVOY ORDERS

Savoy History Lecture Series - October 15, 2010

“The Venus Fixers – The Art of Italy in World War II”

By: Comm. Marco Grassi



The eighth annual edition of the *Savoy History Lecture Series*, sponsored by the American Foundation of Savoy Orders, was held on Friday, October 15, 2010. Comm. Marco Grassi, Chairman of the series, was pleased to introduce this year's speaker, Dr. Ilaria Dagnini Brey to a gathering of over sixty confreres and friends. The title of Dr. Brey's illustrated lecture was: *The Venus Fixers – the Art of Italy and World War II*.



As he has in the past, the Lecture Series Chairman chose a different venue. This year, the lecture was held at the Grolier Club at 47 East 60th Street. Founded in 1884, the Grolier Club is a private association of men and women who share an interest in the art of the book. It is named after the great sixteenth century French bibliophile Jean Grolier. The Club maintains an important reference library comprising over 100,000 volumes; it also sponsors lectures, exhibitions and publications. The present home of the club is its third and dates to 1917.



Dr. Dagnini Brey presents "The Venus Fixers" Lecture in the Exhibition Hall of The Grolier Club



Dama Gr. Cr. Baronessa Mariuccia Zerilli-Marimò comments on the unnecessary destruction of Monte Cassino

The Venus Fixers, the title of a recent book by Dr. Brey, and also the subject of the evening's lecture, is the story of how Italy's unparalleled artistic patrimony survived the harrowing events of World War II. It is the often heroic story of the men, both of the Allied forces and on the Italian side, who were charged with the care of that patrimony. Particularly interesting was how, in England and the United States, small units of officers were prepared, even before hostilities broke out, to identify and plan for the safeguarding of major monuments.



The Gothic Eremitani Church in Padua before and after the Allied strike of March 11, 1944



Destruction of the North Bank of the Arno River in Florence

Despite this, as the front steadily advanced up the peninsula, a few terrible losses occurred, such as the destruction of Monte Cassino, the bombings in Pisa and Padova, and the dynamiting of Florence's bridges, as well as the destruction of innumerable lesser monuments. But there were also remarkable incidents of great works of art saved and recovered. A lively question period followed the lecture, during which Dr. Brey elaborated on a number of fascinating aspects of this historic wartime narrative.



Monuments officers of the Allied Forces sort through the rubble of the Library at Monte Cassino



The roofless Camposanto of Pisa after a stray shell hit it on the night of July 27, 1944



The Allied monuments officers mostly employed local craftsmen in the restoration of damaged art & monuments



Monuments officer Frederick Hartt in the Piazza della Signoria in 1945, later made an honorary citizen of Florence



Crated Florentine paintings taken by German officers located in South Tyrol before repatriation



Artworks being evacuated from Venice during the war

Dr. Brey is a native of Padova and received her degree in literature at that city's university. She continued post-doctoral studies in England and, after entering the publishing field with Marsilio Editori of Venice, Dr. Brey came to New York to join Rizzoli International. A free-lance journalist, she has been a regular contributor to, among others, *Corriere della Sera*, and *Elle*. Several years ago, Dr. Brey began researching the events of March 1944 that resulted in the tragic destruction of Padova's Ovetari Chapel with its magnificent frescoes by Mantegna. This research was then continued and much expanded, eventually becoming *The Venus Fixers*. Dr. Brey lives in Manhattan with her husband, the noted cellist Carter Brey and two teen-age children.



(l to r) Dama Gr. Cr. Baroness Zerilli-Marimò, Dama Vivian Cardia, Cav. Gr. Cr. Avv. Carl Morelli Dama Joan Bartilucci, Uff. Nicholas & Mr. Paul Bartilucci



(l to r) Mrs. Thomas Pecora, Mr. Carter Brey, Dr. Ilaria Dagnini Brey, Cav. Thomas Pecora & Comm. Avv. L'On. Pasquale Menna

The evening's program continued after the lecture with a congenial reception in an upper-floor library room and the adjoining rooftop terrace of the club and a buffet dinner in the handsome exhibition hall downstairs. Catering for the event was provided by 'Bistro 61', a well-known East Side restaurant. Marchesi Frescobaldi of Florence generously donated the wines for the reception and dinner.

Guests Enjoying the Evening's Reception and Dinner at The Grolier Club



Comm. Grassi announced that next year, the 150th anniversary of Italy's birth as a nation, the Risorgimento will appropriately be the Savoy History Lecture's theme. The Savoia family played a pivotal and indispensable role in that remarkable story: it eventually led to Victor Emmanuel II ascending to the throne of a united Italy.

Comm. Marco Grassi