



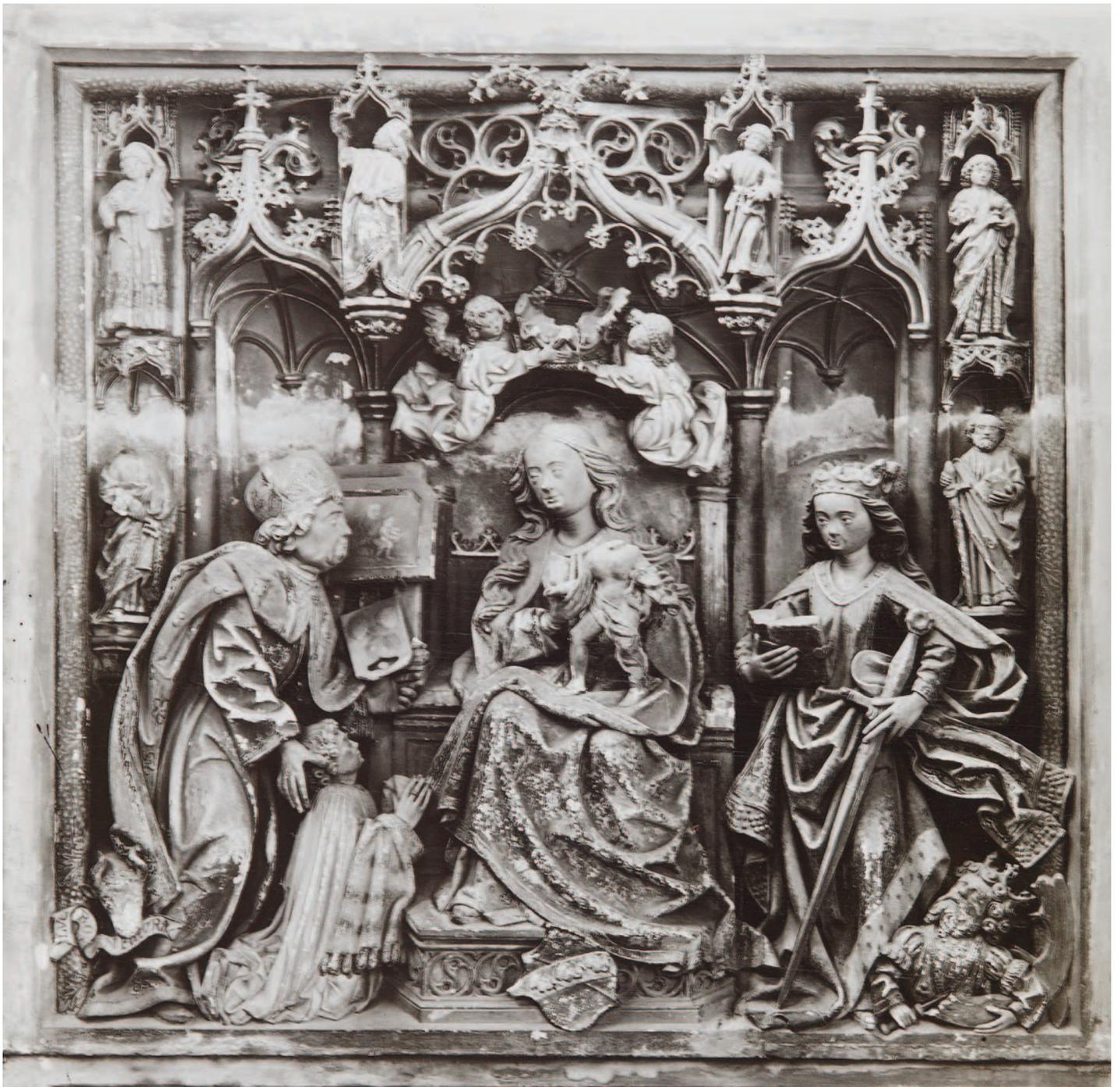
An episode of the “Monuments Men” on the Lower Rhine

*Lempertz mediates a precious late Middle Ages
sculpture back to Cleves*

In 2017, two important Middle Age angels, which had been lost after the war, were offered for auction at Kunsthaus Lempertz. In the early autumn of 2017, Lempertz acquired the permission of the consignor to mediate the wonderful sculpture to its place of origin, the Collegiate Church of Cleves, by way of a ‘private sale’. The delightful return was made possible by the generous support of donors including, amongst others from the private sphere, the Friends of the Cleves Museum, the diocese of Münster and from Lempertz.

*Dries Holthuys, active in Cleves around 1490–1515.
Two floating angels crowning the seated Maria.
After 1502. Part of the epitaph of Dr. Balthasar of
Distelhuysen in the collegiate church St. Mariae
Himmelfahrt in Kleve.*

On 7 October 1944, a single bomb attack destroyed the former duke and Brandenburg-Prussian royal seat of Cleves near the Dutch border. That autumn the allies flew attacks on all towns near the border to prepare for the march



The epitaph, around 1930, in its original condition.

planned on German territory in the late winter of 1945. The town of Cleves, though of no military or industrial importance was 90% destroyed. The castle dominating the silhouette of the city, the headquarters of the swan knight, and the mighty, two-towered collegiate church, tomb of the counts and dukes of Cleves, sank into rubble and ashes. Despite the every nearing battlefront, the valuable church inventory was not taken into safety and was almost completely destroyed in the bombing. In the years after the war, further numerous valuable objects were stolen from the unprotected church ruins.

A stone epitaph had been firmly encased in the outer wall of the south-chancel in 1502 in honour of the teacher, humanist, doctor of philosophy and medicine and personal physician of the Duke of Cleves, Balthasar Distelhuysen. Even in the 19th century this epitaph was regarded as one of the church's most precious artworks – on the one hand because its complex depiction gave a fascinating insight into the thinking of the late Middle Ages, and on the other due to its high sculptural quality.

The learned deceased is depicted kneeling before the centrally enthroned Mother of God, the baby Jesus on her lap. On the base of the throne is the coat of arms of Distelhuysen with three thistles. Behind him is the patron saint of doctors, the Evangelist Luke, who stands behind an easel, painting the Madonna. This motif was used in the Middle Ages by Rogier van der Weyden and in the Lower Rhineland by Derick Baegert, amongst others. Saint Catherine, the patron saint of scholars stands to the right of the Madonna. Distelhuysen studied in Cologne, and afterwards in Paris and Copenhagen, and was dean of the university in Greifswald. He left the university over a theological dispute on the interpretation of the teachings of Thomas Aquinas, and in 1490 took on the post of canon in Xanten and personal physician to the Duke of Cleves. After one year he moved to Cleves where he became canon and dean at the collegiate foundation. Eight years later, in 1502, he died.

The epitaph has been fixed to the wall of the south chancel since 1845. On recommendation of the Cologne Cathedral master builder, Ernst Friedrich Zwirner, it was restored at that time and then reworked by the Cologne painter Johann Stephan. Since then it has been regularly praised as a work of art in the literature, and in 1932 was attributed by the director of the Cologne Schnütgen Museum, Professor Fritz Witte, to the Cleves sculptor Dries Holthuys. Between 1490 and 1510, after the death of Master Arnt von Kalkar and Zwolle, and the rise of the virtuoso Henrik Douverman – the creator of the Altar of the Seven Sorrows in Kalkar – Holthuys was the most important sculptor on the Lower Rhine. His work can be seen in an archival stone Madonna from 1493 in the Xanten Cathedral.



View of the central nave of the destroyed Collegiate Church of Cleves, 1945.



Lieutenant Colonel Geoffrey Webb surveying the damage to the Distelhuysen epitaph, 17 March 1945. The angels are still in place.

Immediately after the capture of the city of Cleves, less than one kilometre behind the front line, the allied officers for the protection of art worked to secure the art scattered in the rubble. We are well informed about the catastrophic conditions in the evacuated city by reports from the art protection officer Ronald Edmond Balfour (1904–1945). This slight and short-sighted scientist, from an important British family and with a doctorate from Cambridge, had a key position in the protection of important architectural monuments in the Belgian, Dutch and Lower Rhine deployment areas. He had been in the military since 1939 and in 1944 joined the “Monuments Men” through his college friend Geoffrey Fairbank Webb (1898–1970), Director of the MFA&A (Monuments Fine Arts & Archives), department in the Allied Army. Balfour played a vital role in the protection of important cultural goods, for example in Rouen and in Hoogstraeten in Belgium. He was the first to report on the Nazi theft of the Bruges Madonna by Michelangelo, only a few days before the allies arrived. Wounded, he returned to his detachment in February of 1945. During the battles in the Lower Rhine at the end of February, Balfour succeeded in convincing Canadian commanders not to blow up the 14th century stone gate in Goch when they tried to penetrate the city with their tanks. He also saved parts of the important archives in Goch of the Collegiate Church of Cleves. A few days later at Moyland Castle, he collected archives and treasures simply lying in the fields.

On 3 March, Balfour reported from Cleves on his work in the destroyed collegiate church: “Fragments of two large 16th century retables of carved and painted wood have been collected and removed to safety. Parish archives found in a blasted safe and strewn over the floor of the wrecked sacristy have also been removed for safekeeping.” In a letter to Webb from the same day, he wrote: “It was a splendid week for my job – certainly the best since I came over. On the one hand there is the tragedy of real destruction, much of it completely unnecessary; on the other the comforting feeling of having done something solid myself. ... The plundering is awful. Not only every house is forced open and searched but also every safe and every cupboard. All that I can do is to try and rescue as much as possible and put up signs of warning. We did that in Kalkar but I do not know whether they actually had any effect. ... And my storage place in Cleves [Cleve] wouldn’t be exactly approved of by Washington as it’s an attic in a building occupied by troops and refugees. The house is without proper protection and shells fall ceaselessly in the neighbourhood but it’s the only building in the town that still has a roof, doors and windows. There’s a local monk there (the only civilian who’s allowed to move freely round the town) in whose charge I can leave the things when I go. If all goes well, I hope to be back at my headquarters next week as I’ve got a good deal of long-term work to do there. ... Yours very sincerely, Ronald”.

A week later, on 10 March, Balfour was killed by a grenade in Cleves when he tried to bring parts of the medieval altar of the collegiate church to safety with two civilians. He was the first of two “Monument Men” who lost their lives while working to rescue art treasures in Germany.

On 17 March, only one week later, his colleague and superior, the art historian and Lieutenant Colonel Geoffrey Fairbank Webb arrived in Cleves. One photograph in the Imperial War Museum shows him with a colleague in front of the Distelhuysen epitaph in the Collegiate Church of Cleves holding Mary’s head in his hand, and another with the fragments of the altar of the collegiate church, during the rescue of which Balfour was killed. Already before the war Webb had held the position of the famous Slade Professorship of Art History in Cambridge, and in 1943 he was elevated to one of the leading members of the Allied art department, on the one hand taking care of the safeguarding and protection of art, culture and archive material in Germany, and on the other preparing the re-procurement and return of ‘looted art’. The two ‘Central Collecting Points’ in Wiesbaden and München were his concept. In the autumn of 1944 he had already negotiated with the director of the Musées Nationaux de France, Jacques Jouard, about the repatriation of the artworks stolen by the Nazis in France and gained fame in his important role in the unmasking of the great art forger Han van Meegeren who had ‘faked’ numerous Vermeers. In honour of his accomplishments he received a ‘van Meegeren’ from the Dutch government which had been confiscated from the counterfeiter’s apartment. Webb donated the picture to the London Courtauld Institute in 1960. It hit the headlines again in 2015 when it turned out that the painting, which Meegeren always claimed was old, actually was an original 17th century painting.

The work of the MFA&A was brought into focus again in 2014 by the famous actor and director George Clooney by his film ‘The Monuments Men’. However the film provoked outrage in England because the role of Ronald Balfour, the only Briton who lost his life, was not appreciated. The Guardian newspaper sharply criticised this omission on 19 January 2014: “Clooney overlooks British war hero”.

In the photograph in front of the Cleves epitaph, Webb holds Mary’s head, found in the ruins of the church building, in its original place. The figure of Mary is just as badly damaged as the baby Jesus. It is astonishing to see in the photograph that under the canopy both angels which held Mary’s crown, are still present – a short while later they were broken off the epitaph and stolen.

The angels resurfaced 15 years later on the Düsseldorf art market, acquired there by the Cologne art dealer Eberhard Giese (1921–2015). Surprisingly he



The Distelhuysen epitaph in its damaged and looted state, without the angels with the crown, 1970.



*Lieutenant Colonel Webb inspecting the fragments
of the Mary altar of the Collegiate Church of Cleves,
17 March 1945, rescued by Ronald Edmond Balfour.*

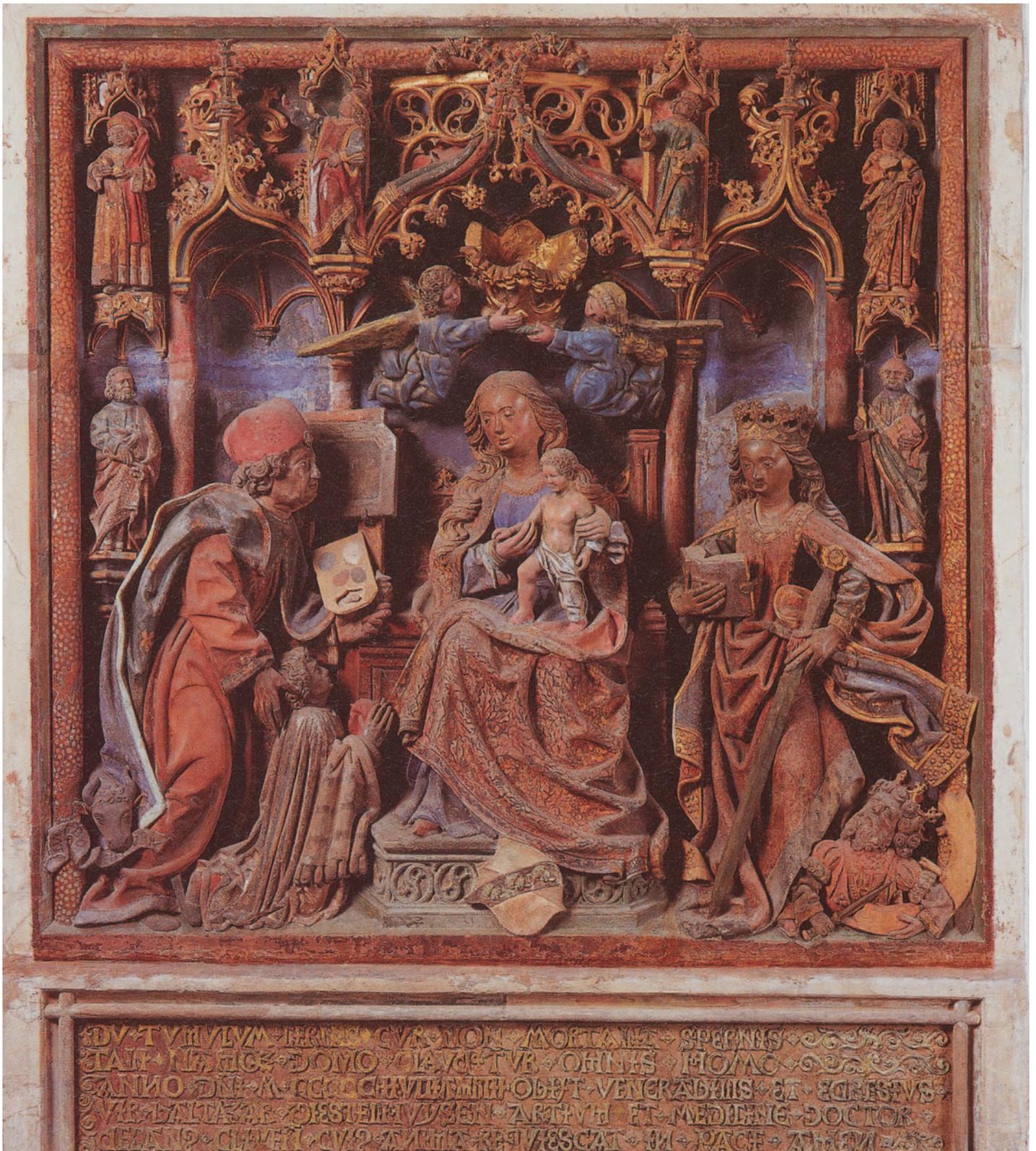
knew of the provenance and contacted the former provost of the Collegiate Church of Cleves, Franz Ortner (1945–1970), to discuss the legality of his purchase with him. Ortner, who worked tirelessly for the reconstruction of the almost completely destroyed building, was strangely willing to waive a claim against a donation of 500 DM for the church, as can be seen in a letter from Giese dated 15.12.1962: “I would like to again offer thanks from myself and my wife for leaving us and renouncing both damaged angels after hearing the facts”. Provost Ortner had presumably acted arbitrarily here without involving the church council, and so knowledge of the two angels was lost. The epitaph was restored in 1983–86, the casting from 1845 restored and missing parts replaced. Following the death of the art dealer Eberhard Giese (10.9.2015), whose business in the Komödienstraße 34 had long been one of the finest addresses in Cologne for art and antique lovers, parts of the Giese family collection went up for auction at Kunsthaus Lempertz. In the early autumn of 2017, Lempertz succeeded in returning the wonderful sculpture to the Collegiate Church of Cleves by means of a ‘private sale’. The happy return was made possible by the generous support of private donors, the diocese of Münster and Lempertz.

*Guido de Werd
Former director of the Museum Kurhaus Kleve*



*Ronald Edmond Balfour, Monuments Man,
who lost his life rescuing works of art from the
Collegiate Church of Cleves on 10.3.1945.*

Die deutsche Version des Textes ist online
und in der deutschen Ausgabe unseres
Bulletins verfügbar.



The Distelhuysen epitaph after the restoration of 1983–1986 with the reconstructed angels, which will now be replaced by the originals. Stone, 147 x 127 cm.