



WHAT CAME BEFORE

From Iraq to Haiti and
too many hot spots between,
Corine Wegener champions
cultural heritage imperiled
by war and natural disasters

by Chris Lazzarino

Photographs by Steve Puppe

Before she arrived in Baghdad in May 2003, Corine Wegener, then a major in the U.S. Army Reserve, was already fuming over the same news reports that horrified the world: 170,000 pieces of art, said to be the entire collection of the Iraqi National Museum, had been stolen or destroyed in the lawless spring of 2003.

What she found upon her arrival, more than a month after the national museum had been ransacked, was an altogether different reality. The entire collection was actually more than a million individual items, and nothing remotely close to the entire collection—in fact, not even close to the original misrepresented number of the collection's breadth—had been lost.

Thanks to the heroism and dedication of Iraqi curators who proved deeply devoted to the museum, the actual number of lost pieces was, in Wegener's estimation, about 15,000—many of which were later recovered—and “really high-value objects” from the treasures of Nimrud and the excavation at Ur had been stashed by curators in Central Bank of Iraq vaults.

Other works were hidden in secret caches around the museum compound, and even hiding places that ultimately failed—storage rooms whose entrances had been walled over—revealed the ingenuity of Iraqi collections managers.

Wegener, g'94, g'01, who returned to campus in early October to deliver a lecture in the Spencer Museum of Art and meet with art history students intrigued by her career, is now the Smithsonian Institution's first cultural heritage preservation officer. She recalled being startled by the realization that Iraqi curators saved what they could while risking the wrath not just of frenzied mobs, but also Saddam Hussein, who likely hoped to get his hands on the treasures ahead of the advancing armies; but that was her first foray into arts and culture recovery. Over the next decade, she pieced together a theme.

“When art is saved during armed conflicts,” Wegener says, “it's almost always saved by the people who take care of these works of art every single day. We've seen this again and again throughout history.”

The recent history of art destruction

began with wars in Bosnia and Iraq. Other cultural calamities flared in the chaos of Mali, Egypt and Syria, and even natural disasters such as hurricanes Sandy and Katrina and the 2010 earthquake that leveled Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

“If there is a bright spot to the kind of cultural destruction that we've witnessed over the past years,” Wegener says, “it's that those things have galvanized the cultural heritage community into action, creating better awareness among ourselves about what our responsibilities are as museum professionals, as archeologists, as librarians, that we really do have a role to play in this.

“But also the greater public really has gained a sense of outrage and awareness, that these things are irreplaceable, and, in these cases of shared cultural heritage, you can't go back once it's destroyed.”

Shortly after graduating high school in Fremont, Nebraska, Wegener in 1982 joined the U.S. Army Reserve. At the University of Nebraska Omaha, Wegener joined Army ROTC, met and married a classmate, Paul Wegener, and after both graduated and earned officer's commissions, they eventually ended up in Lenexa.

That's when Wegener decided to study for a political science master's degree at KU, and her life would soon take a most unexpected turn.

“I was about to graduate and needed to take an elective, so I took Intro to Art History,” Wegener recalls. “And I found that I was fascinated by it.”

Just as she was considering applying for yet another KU master's program, this time in art history, Wegener found within the training manual published by Civil Affairs, her Army Reserve division, a reference to “arts, monuments and archives officers.” Another serendipitous element slipped into place at the time when she happened upon Lynn H. Nicholas' *The Rape of Europa*, a best-selling history of the arts experts turned Army officers who saved countless masterpieces and cultural treasures.

“It told the whole story of the development of the ‘monuments men’ in World

War II, which I didn't really know about. I just knew then that there were these [Civil Affairs] positions and they wanted you to have a museum background, so that book was a real eye-opener.”

In the midst of her art history graduate studies, Wegener's Kansas City reserve unit was sent in 1997 to Bosnia. After her return, in 1998, Wegener joined the Minneapolis Institute of Arts as an intern, and in 1999 was hired for a full-time job as research associate. She completed her KU art history master's degree in 2001 and was promoted to associate curator of decorative arts, textiles and sculpture.

As she prepared in spring 2003 for deployment with her husband to Afghanistan, Wegener lobbied to be sent to Kabul, where a museum had been devastated; that wasn't in the Army's plans for her, and Wegener was ordered to stop asking.

Then came the fall of Baghdad and the looting of the Iraqi National Museum, which Wegener followed on TV news reports with disgust.

“Knowing what I knew about our capabilities to do this kind of work in World War II, I couldn't imagine how this could happen,” she said. “I was so mad.”

Although it would mean they would not deploy to Afghanistan together and would likely spend a year apart, Wegener's husband told her, “This is crazy. You really need to be there.” Encouraged, Wegener made one last push to be sent to Iraq as an arts, monuments and archives officer.

She emailed former commanding officers who put in a good word on her behalf, and soon came a change in orders.

“They pulled me out of my unit,” Wegener says, “and sent me to Baghdad.”

Prior to her arrival in Baghdad in May 2003, the Army's uniformed experts sifting through the remains of the Iraq National Museum were a landscape archeologist and an anthropologist.

“I wasn't the first soldier on the scene,” Wegener says, “but what I was able to say that nobody else could say is, I'm in the military, I'm a soldier, and I'm also a museum professional just like you. I'm a curator at my museum and I would be

devastated if this happened to my museum and my collection. Please tell me how I can help you.”

The Hague Convention of 1954, a unified response to Hitler’s ravaging of European art and culture, requires armies of its member nations to refrain, when possible, from destroying irreplaceable cultural objects and sites. Of course lawless looters, like murderous dictators, are not bound by international treaty, so Wegener carried with her not just the fear of working in a combat zone—a member of her team was shot and paralyzed, and her interpreter was killed by a hidden roadside bomb—but also the weight of rescuing from the rubble artifacts from the dawn of human civilization.

“It’s the Fertile Crescent, the land between the two rivers, the land of the first cities, the first writing,” she says. “Every time I’d walk into the Iraq museum I was struck by this incredible feeling of awe and protectiveness.”

During her nine-month deployment in Baghdad, Wegener and her team restored the museum and even managed, at the urging of the Italian ambassador, archeologist Piero Cordone, to stage a one-day exhibition of rescued art objects, including priceless treasures that had been secreted away in Central Bank vaults, which flooded when it was hit by a bomb.

“Cori has a lot of credibility,” says Richard Kurin, the Smithsonian Institution’s under secretary for history, art and culture who in 2012 hired Wegener as his first cultural heritage preservation officer. “Her experience in Iraq, working with military authorities, working with civilians in a difficult circumstance, proved that she had the diplomatic chops, but she’s also an experienced museum curator.

“She has the knowledge on the museum side, and she has the ability to work in the field under tough situations. When you’re doing disaster response and recovery work, it’s a tough situation.”

Throughout her stressful tour, Wegener took comfort in her original inspiration: intrepid arts officers that she read about in her KU discovery of *The Rape of Europa*.

“They were often told that their mission wasn’t important, and I got a lot of that,

too. Those were the days when I thought about Lynn Nicholas and the monuments men. I thought, well, those guys could do it; I can do it, too.”

By the time Wegener left Baghdad, in March 2004, and joined her husband in Minneapolis, both decided it was time to retire from the Army Reserve. She resumed her work as curator, trained soldiers and marines in cultural preservation whenever she was invited to do so, and set about righting yet another wrong, which had nagged at her ever since making a startling discovery while serving in Baghdad:

The United States had yet to ratify the 1954 Hague Convention treaty.

Wegener assembled a national coalition of curators and art historians to lobby the U.S. Senate; thanks in large part to their education and testimony, the Senate in 2009 ratified the Hague treaty. Along the way Wegener’s alliance formed the U.S. Committee of the Blue Shield—a blue shield is the Hague Convention’s symbol—and, as the group’s first president, Wegener on Jan. 12, 2010, again answered the call of duty.

The earthquake that killed more than 100,000 Haitians and left more than a million homeless also ripped bare the Caribbean nation’s rich artistic heritage.

Wegener was granted leave from her museum to serve as the international coordinator for U.S. Blue Shield, the Smithsonian and other agencies, and she prepared to descend into another chaotic scene of frightening destruction.

Before traveling to Port-au-Prince, Wegener saw in the New York Times a plea issued by sculptor Patrick Vilaire, who, along with other artists and intellectuals, feared for the preservation of a cache of 19th-century Haitian political and history books.

“The dead are dead, we know that,” Vilaire told the Times. “But if you don’t have the memory of the past, the rest of us can’t continue living.”

Resentment at missions dedicated to preserving cultural heritage in hot zones where human suffering had yet to be

salved were nothing new to Wegener. But in Haiti she was forced to confront the misgivings head on when, in the lobby of their hotel, humanitarian relief workers fumed that Wegener and her team were there to save art objects while human beings still suffered.

Reflecting on the incident five years later, Wegener says, “I never heard a Haitian say that. Not once.”

Wegener explains that arts and culture preservationists do not arrive until weeks after a hot spot has erupted, either in combat or natural calamity. Humanitarian agencies are always there first. Once they do arrive, curators take pains to never interfere in ongoing work to save citizens and restore housing and infrastructure.

Wegener explained to humanitarian workers that the art experts were there at the request of the Haitian Ministry of Culture, as well as artists who bemoaned, “Yes, we’ve had this terrible tragedy and a lot of people are dead, but also hurricane season is coming and our cultural heritage is laying on the ground with no roof over it. Who helps us?”

Wegener worked closely on Haitian relief with the Smithsonian and other U.S. cultural institutions, and Kurin says he quickly saw the immense value of her unique skill set.

“What Cori was able to convey was that when you’re dealing with saving the stuff that’s most important to people, which gives them a sense of who they are, you’re doing something very important in terms of relieving their pain and giving them tools for the future,” Kurin says. “Cori got it. She knew that the people in Haiti have tremendous resilience to get through the earthquake and the aftermath, and it was their history and heritage that gave them the tools to do that.”

Kurin draws a parallel with tornado victims who return to flattened homes and search not for a couch or bookcase, but instead seek out photographs and other touchstones of family history.

“We look at it as part of humanitarian relief,” Kurin says, “but it’s also part of an exertion of the human right to culture, to identity, to be who you are, to have your own history and identity, to sing your

song, to speak your language, to express yourself. It's a very deep and fundamental aspect of being human."

When Kurin hired Wegener, in November 2012, Hurricane Sandy had just torn up the Eastern Seaboard. Wegener jumped into coordinating the Smithsonian's relief efforts for museums and cultural institutions, most notably New York City's famed Martha Graham Dance Company, whose decades-old costumes, sets and archives were flooded by the surging Hudson River.

Since joining the Smithsonian, Wegener has also organized international war-zone workshops to offer education, relief and professional camaraderie.

In West Africa, museum professionals from across the battered region discussed emergency planning, illicit art trafficking, and how they might use their museums as peaceful spaces for healing and community building.

Syrian curators traveled in secrecy to Wegener's Smithsonian workshop in Turkey to learn about crating and packing and how to protect archeological sites while also savoring an opportunity to talk among themselves about how each had endured years of civil war.

"I am every day inspired by these fantastic colleagues around the world who, no matter what's going on in their own lives, feel that they have a responsibility to save their cultural heritage," Wegener says. "Every day they go out there and work harder to either plan how this won't happen to their cultural heritage again or they're actively in recovery mode, trying to save things, many times at the risk of their own lives.

"My colleagues in Syria, I can't imagine what they're going through and still maintaining their positive outlook about saving Syria's heritage for the future, for when the war is over and they want to teach their children about their heritage. They want to make sure there's something left. That's what keeps me going."

The mission, wherever it is called upon around the world, needs no more explanation than that. Tomorrows cannot arrive unless first we protect that which came before. —C.L.



Wegener on Oct. 3 met with art history graduate students

Preparation begins at home

At her Oct. 2 lecture in the Spencer Museum of Art, Corine Wegener emphasized a crucial aspect of the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property: Along with requiring that armed forces respect museums and monuments and that countries refrain from protecting military assets by staging them near cultural sites, the treaty also insists, in Wegener's words, "Make sure your own house is in order."

Museums and other cultural institutions must keep collections in good order and well documented; if photos have not been taken, a stolen object "might as well never have existed" as far as Interpol is concerned, Wegener told her audience.

The edict to plan for trouble does not apply only to museums in likely war zones; even in the safety of a calm enclave such as Kansas, microbursts (2006) and water-main breaks (2012), along with the ever-worrisome specter of tornadoes, force curators to heed the spirit of the Hague Convention.

"Even something as simple as a power outage is something that we have to take very seriously," says Spencer Museum of Art director Saralyn Reece Hardy, c'76, g'94. "The quiet life of a responsible museum is inclusive of emergency preparedness, a robust scenario-building that is protective of both works of art and people."

Reece Hardy and her administrative team create, update and review

with all staff, including student interns, "decision trees" that outline authority and responsibilities in the event of various emergencies, "so people don't waste time trying to decide whose job it is."

"Man-made disasters are happening more and more in the U.S.," Wegener says, "where we're having infrastructure failure because we haven't kept up with things like rebuilding water mains that are 100 years old and then we're shocked when they break. Those are the kinds of things that I think would behoove all of us who are responsible for collections to be thinking about.

"Emergency planning: It's not just for wars anymore." —C.L.

—C.L.