The Monuments Men: An establishment film, in almost every way

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Directed by George Clooney; screenplay by Clooney and Grant Heslov

George Clooney's film, *The Monuments Men*, is the story of a squad of art experts, serving in the US and Allied military, who, toward the end of World War II, attempt to rescue art masterpieces stolen by the Nazis.

The film is loosely based on Robert M. Edsel's book, *The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves, and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History* (2009). Edsel also co-produced the 2006 documentary *The Rape of Europa* (directed by Richard Berge, Bonni Cohen and Nicole Newnham), an important work that explores the Nazi plunder of art treasures from German-occupied countries.

On *The Monuments Men*, Clooney worked with long-time collaborator Grant Heslov, who co-wrote the script. Heslov was co-producer of the Clooney-directed *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2004), about television journalist Edward R. Murrow's confrontation with the witch-hunting Senator Joseph McCarthy. Heslov also directed *The Men Who Stare at Goats* (2009), starring Clooney, which dealt with the US Army's exploration of psychic powers and their potential military application, and he co-wrote Clooney's *The Ides of March* (2011), about dirty politics in a presidential election.

The subject matter of Clooney's work is worthy and fascinating. However, despite the occasional moving and engaging moment, *The Monuments Men*'s treatment of highly dramatic historical events is remarkably undramatic. The film is largely flat and tepid.

The movie begins toward the end of the war. Art historian Frank Stokes (Clooney), with the approval of President Franklin Roosevelt, puts a small group of art experts in uniform to enter the European war zones and rescue masterpieces that Hitler has been thieving for his planned Führer Museum in Germany.

Stokes' crew includes art restorer James Granger (Matt Damon), architect Richard Campbell (Bill Murray), sculptor Walter Garfield (John Goodman), French art dealer Jean Claude Clermont (Jean Dujardin), art historian Preston Savitz (Bob Balaban) and British art expert Donald Jeffries (Hugh Bonneville). The team is provided crucial assistance by Sam Epstein (Dimitri Leonidas), a young German Jew who drives and translates.

As Allied bombs flatten historic structures in Germany, Italy and France, Stokes makes the case for his mission by asking "Who will make sure that the statue of *David* [Michelangelo] is still standing and the *Mona Lisa* [Leonardo da Vinci] is still smiling?" Few works of art actually appear on screen, but the movie does focus on the hunt conducted by Stokes' team, part of the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives (MFAA) program, for two particular works: Michelangelo's marble sculpture, "Madonna of Bruges" (1501-1504) and Flemish masters Hubert and Jan van Eyck's 12-panel Ghent Altarpiece (1432).

While most of the "Monuments Men" race around Western Europe by jeep, Granger is in Paris making the acquaintance of Claire Simone (Cate Blanchett), a French Resistance fighter who worked at the Jeu de Paume museum and meticulously recorded the movement and whereabouts of the cultural objects pilfered by the Nazis from both Jewish owners and museums. Initially, Claire suspects the Americans are involving themselves to confiscate the recovered masterpieces. After Granger convinces her the art works will be returned to their rightful owners, Claire gives him her ledger, with its meticulous accounting of the Nazi art thefts. It turns out the Germans have stashed much of the stolen art deep in salt, copper and other mines, at times, booby-trapped with explosives.

To the question posed many times in the film, "Is art more important than human life?," *The Monuments Men* answers in the spirit of the book: "The story of Nazi looting after all, wasn't merely the robbing of nations of their treasures and the human race of its historical and cultural touchstones. More than anything, the Nazis robbed families of their livelihoods, their opportunities, their heirlooms, their mementos, of things that identified them and defined them as human beings."

One imagines that Clooney and Heslov are seeking to offer a more thoughtful and adult alternative to the standard Hollywood studio product at present: empty, sexed-up action or animated superhero films, laden with special effects and computer-generated imagery. All to the good so far…

Clooney and Heslov take considerable, perhaps inevitable liberties in fictionalizing the immense contribution of the Monuments Men. Clooney's Stokes is based on the real-life George L. Stout (1897-1978), the group's leader, who became

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curator of the Fogg Museum in Boston, the Worcester Art Museum and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. Damon's Granger stands in for James Rorimer (1905-1966), the eventual director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, and Blanchett's character was suggested by the remarkable Rose Valland (1898-1980), French art historian and member of the anti-Nazi Resistance, who was the overseer of the Jeu de Paume Museum in Paris at the time of the German occupation of France.

The Germans organized a special task force, the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR), to transport their looted art, using the Jeu de Paume as their central transport and sorting station. Valland began secretly recording the more than 20,000 pieces of art brought to the museum. In 1943, she could do nothing but witness and document the horrifying destruction by fire of modern, "degenerate" works at museum, including pieces by Pablo Picasso, Francis Picabia, Roger de La Fresnaye, Paul Klee, Joan Miró, Max Ernst, Jean Arp, Salvador Dalí and Fernand Léger.

Some 350 men and women from thirteen countries eventually served in the MFAA, fighting to recover art works seized in the "greatest theft in history," as Edsel writes. No "epoch in history has produced such precious ruins," he also notes. In the course of their occupation of Europe, Hitler and the Nazis stole more than five million cultural objects, shipping them to the Third Reich.

The most interesting sequences in *The Monuments Men*, those with the greatest (or only) dramatic tension, are those portraying or involving the German operations. In one, we see the swinish *Wehrmacht* commander Hermann Goering (Udo Kroschwald) arrive at the Jeu de Paume and rapidly, brutally pick out pieces for his own private collection, much to the horror of the museum's French staff. In another scene, two of the Monuments Men, more or less by accident, stumble upon stolen paintings by French Impressionists on the walls of a former high-ranking officer's country farmhouse. The latter claims the works are reproductions, but the art experts invited in for lunch recognize them as paintings taken from the famous Rothschild collection.

But so many things are weakly, limply done in the Clooney-Heslov film: a running gag about Granger's bad French, for example, and the out-of-place silliness of Murray and Goodman, who do little more than show up and play themselves. Far sillier is Claire's sudden transformation from a reserved, buttoned-up and bespectacled museum curator to a femme fatale as she attempts to seduce Granger in honor of "springtime in Paris." When all else fails, or even before, *The Monuments Men* practically hurls itself at one cliché after another.

Overly dark cinematography and an insipid, predictable score don't help matters. The latter in particular seems to express the film's intellectual laziness and conformist ideas about America, the war and the Roosevelt administration. Clooney and Heslov lack a profound, important understanding of history, which would inevitably have socially critical implications for the present day, and that hinders them from creating an urgent, compelling work. The film is made up of dozens of fragments, which refuse to cohere. Why, for example, should we be moved, on cue, about the Bill Murray character's fondness for his family, when we know nothing about the man?

Sadly, on reflection, one cannot think of a single moment in *The Monuments Men* that is genuinely challenging to conventional wisdom, or even surprising. All this speaks to the state of official Hollywood liberalism at present.

The filmmakers have clearly accommodated themselves to what they consider to be a popular prejudice against anything difficult or complex. In a film devoted to and dominated by a group of world-renowned art experts, astonishingly, there is *not a single scene* in which an artistic problem or controversy is discussed in any depth.

John Frankenheimer's black-and-white movie *The Train* (1964) treats some of the same historical material, but in a far more dynamic fashion. Frankenheimer's work pits French Resistance fighter Burt Lancaster against art-obsessed Nazi officer Paul Scofield, who is trying to get a train full of stolen art to Germany. *The Train* demonstrates some of the dramatic possibilities so lacking in the Clooney-Heslov film.

Even worse, as *The Monuments Men* chugs towards its finale, it becomes a quasi-Cold War piece and its narrative follows the line of postwar American foreign policy. The heroic Americans rush to find artwork before the Soviet army arrives in a sector of Germany that has been assigned to them. The squad leaves a giant US flag behind as a means of taunting the Russians. In its own unpleasant way, *The Monuments Men* contributes to Washington's current anti-Russian campaign.

No doubt Stout, Rorimer and the others played a courageous role in their efforts to protect the artistic treasures. But times have changed in America. It should not be forgotten that in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the US ruling elite permitted and encouraged the looting of that country's museums and libraries. The National Museum in Baghdad, the greatest trove of archeological and historical artifacts in the Middle East, was robbed of more than 50,000 irreplaceable artifacts, relics of past civilizations dating back 5,000 years, under the US military's watchful eye. Was anyone in Hollywood paying attention?

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