

Francofonia (2015)

Not Rated. Running time: 1 hour 28 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 1; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 0.

Our star rating (1-5): 4.5

Wisdom is better than weapons of war...

Ecclesiastes 9:18a

Russian director Aleksandr Sokurov, who gave us the remarkable film about St. Petersburg's Hermitage Museum, *The Russian Ark*, takes us through the Grand Mistress of Museums in his new film, *The Louvre in Paris*. He does not indulge in *Ark's* incredible single shot lasting 96 minutes that awed critics and film lovers, but this time uses more historical reenactments. "Who would we be without museums?" Sokurov, whose voice we hear throughout the film, is musing as much as questioning. He more than answers himself in the fascinating scenes that follow that explore the relationship between war, art, and a nation's culture.

He moves back and forth hundreds of years in history to show the growth of both the building and of its contents. We see Napoleon (Vincent Nemeth) and the mythical French national symbol Marianne (Johanna Korthals Altes) strolling through the Museum. While she repeats "Liberty. Equality. Fraternity." the Conqueror of Europe enjoys gazing up at the many paintings that feature himself. Each time he proudly says, "That is me." Much of the ancient artifacts were plundered by him and brought back to Paris, thus connecting the Museum's present day holdings with colonialism and imperialism. This makes quite a contrast with the nation's alleged values, "Liberty.

Equality. Fraternity." Napoleon is so full of himself that even when he and Marianne sit before Da Vinci's *The Mona Lisa* he repeats, "That's me."

Another interesting linkage is that of images of The Hermitage in St. Petersburg, pictures of Stalin and siege of Leningrad, and the invading Nazis occupying Paris. Old newsreels show the Nazi troops marching into Paris in 1940 after the French capitulated and of Hitler looking at the Eiffel Tower. Prior to this the Louvre's director Jacques Jaujard (Louis-Do de Lencquesaing) had ordered the removal of the paintings from the walls and shipped to various secret chateaus throughout France to prevent the Nazi's from looting them. Unlike the majority of civil servants Jacques had refused to flee but had remained at his post to direct the removal.

Count Wolff-Metternich (Benjamin Utzerath), appointed by Hitler as the Director of the German Kunstschutz (Art Preservation) in Paris, was a lover of all things French, so he too is dedicated to preserving the priceless art works. He resisted and procrastinated Hitler's order to find and ship the art to Germany so the dictator and his cohorts Goering, Goebbels, and other art-loving friends could decorate their homes with them. The Frenchman and the German may be enemies, but they share a love of great art and a desire to thwart the Nazis' plundering.

Spaced throughout the film are shots of the film director Sokurov trying to communicate with the captain of an art laden cargo ship beset by a powerful storm. It appears that the captain might have to jettison the cargo containers loaded with the art in order to save the ship. This would be a catastrophe—and thus serves as a metaphor for the fate of much of the art through the centuries. A shot of sculptures from the Louvre's collection of Assyrian art is no doubt meant to bring us to the present threat to ancient art, with ISIS defacing and destroying ancient art in the territory it controls in Iraq—and a few years earlier when the Taliban

dynamited the huge Buddhist statues in Afghanistan.

Aleksandr Sokurov offers us plenty of material to reflect upon in regard to art, war and plunder, and the preservation of art. (You might want to revisit [*The Monuments Men*](#) after seeing this film.) Especially for us living in a culture that too often regards art as an extra frill—which program is often the first to be cut when our schools are forced to reduce their budgets? Our school budget practice might not be as barbaric as that of the Muslim extremists, but it is cut from the same cloth. For Sokurov art is of the very essence of civilization, and, I believe he is saying—and agree—it should be for us as well.

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the May issue of Visual Parables