

The Monuments Men (2014)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour 40 min.

Our content advisories (1-10): Violence 3; Language 4;
Sex/Nudity 1.

Our Star rating (1-5): 4

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Matthew 6:19-21

I love it when an old genre, such as the war film is revisited from a fresh perspective—such as this George Clooney WW 2 film. He not only directs and stars in it, but also co-wrote the script with Grant Heslov. (Their script is based on the book by Robert M. Edsel.) Although the film opens with Clooney's character rounding up his crew for a special mission, just as Lee Marvin's character did in *The Dirty Dozen*, the objective this time is not to kill and blow up. Instead the goal of what came to be called "The Monuments Men" is to preserve and save. The Nazis have stolen millions of paintings, statues, and such for display in a Hitler art museum the dictator plans to build when he has won the war. In the event that he should lose, his orders are to destroy all of the treasures. Thus, with the war at last moving toward a German defeat, there is a sense of urgency, and as we soon see, also great danger.

Clooney is an art historian named Frank Stokes (based on real life Harvard art conservationist George Stout). He convinces

Army brass that his proposed mission is worth supporting, and they in turn have convinced President Roosevelt. The six people with the needed skills that he selects are—James Granger, a curator of medieval art at the Metropolitan Museum (Matt Damon); Richard Campbell, an architect (Bill Murray); Walter Garfield, a sculptor (John Goodman); Jean Claude Clermont, a French art dealer (Jean Dujardin); Preston Savitz, a historian (Bob Balaban); Donald Jefferies, a British art expert (Hugh Bonneville of *Downton Abbey* fame); and Sam Epstein, a young German Jew who serves as their driver and translator (Dimitri Leonidas).

Except for Sam, all of the recruits are a bit old for boot camp, but they gamely give it a go. One of the several moments of humor is the somewhat overweight Garfield's initial assumption that the bullets fired just above their heads as he worms his way through a barbed wire barrier are blanks. A longer running gag is the reaction of several characters to James Granger's bad French: he had assured his superior that he was fluent in the language. The Parisian partisan tells him to switch to English, and when Granger tells him he had learned the language in Montreal, the Frenchman shudders disapprovingly, seeming to say, "That explains it!" Another humorous moment, which I hope is true, is when, pressed by time because of the advancing Russians, our heroes try to figure out where the missing wing of the Ghent Altarpiece is, and—.

There are numerous tense moments as well, including a standoff at gunpoint with a German straggler; an anxious moment when Garfield discovers he is standing on top of a landmine; and a tragic scene when one of them is hiding in a Belgian cathedral and sees the Nazis preparing to steal a Michelangelo statue of Madonna and Child.

In Paris Claire Simone (Cate Blanchett), serving as secretary to Hermann Goering, enters into a ledger the name of each stolen art treasure and its destination. After the liberation

of Paris, she fears that the Americans will not keep their word to restore the artifacts to their original owners, so she refuses to cooperate with James Granger because he is a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Only as she is drawn to him romantically and begins to trust him does she at last reveal the whereabouts of the vast trove (over 15,000 pieces!) hidden in a mine in Germany. The hint of romance (Granger remains faithful to his wife) is fictionalized, probably to add drama to an otherwise sexless tale, but the woman and her ledger that enabled the team to locate the treasure are not make believe. How the team found the art pieces, as well as virtually all of the gold ingots of the Reich treasury, just as the Russians are about to arrive at the mine adds an additional note of suspense.

The story is one of great courage as well as sleuthing, two of the team members losing their lives during the mission. (The death of one of them is redeeming, making up for a past failure that had brought shame to his father.) This unique film—well not quite so, as there is John Frankenheimer's 1964 *The Train* about a group of Resistance fighters thwarting a Nazi colonel's plan to ship out all the French paintings he could gather from a Paris museum, also based on a true story—is a thrilling tribute to the men and a woman who deserve to be remembered for what they risked so much to accomplish.

Can you imagine the world without Jan van Eyck's masterful Ghent Altarpiece? Or the beautiful Michelangelo statue of the Madonna and Child? I know that Jesus warned about laying up treasures on earth, but I think he would understand mission leader Frank Stokes' ardently held belief that saving some of the great achievements of European artists was a worthy goal.