

Woman in Gold (2015)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour 49 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 3; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 2.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

*When justice is done, it is a joy to the righteous, but
dismay to evildoers.*

Proverbs 21:15

*...yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her
justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually
coming.'"*

Luke 18:5

Director Simon Curtis and screenwriter Alexi Kaye Campell's "based on a true story" film follows the long struggle of an American lawyer and his Austrian-American client for justice. Taken together they are much like the widow in Jesus' parable who doggedly keeps coming back from the reluctant judge until at last he grants her request for a hearing.

The Austrian, a refugee from the Nazis, is Maria Altmann (Helen Mirren) from whose wealthy Viennese family the Nazis stole valuable paintings by the great painter Gustav Klimt because they were Jews. The lawyer is Randol Schoenberg (Ryan Reynolds,) grandson of the Jewish composer Arnold Schoenberg. He is at first reluctant to take the case when Maria, now in her eighties, approaches him because the principal lost painting is the masterpiece *Woman in Gold*, a centerpiece of Vienna's Belvedere Gallery. Maria persists because it seems the time is right. There is, in Austria, a panel dealing with restitution of art works stolen by the Nazis. As the two wind their way through the obstructionist Austrian bureaucracy one

or the other becomes discouraged and wavers, so it is actually as a twosome that they resemble most the widow in the parable—when one falters, ready to give up, the other will not let go of the quest.

Originally the painting was named *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I*, but the Germans and Austrians gave it the less Jewish name of *Woman in Gold*. The depiction of the painting of the portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer (Antje Traue) in 1907 opens the film. Little Marie, watching Klimt paint Adele comments that she wishes her Aunt would smile, but the latter, almost as if she can see the fate of the family, says that she sees the future. Through such recurrent flashbacks we see Marie (Tatiana Maslany) growing up with the portrait hanging in her family's luxurious apartment. Aunt Adele even gives her the large jeweled necklace she wore during her sitting for the artist. Maria meets and marries an opera singer named Fritz (Max Irons), and the pair anxiously watches as the Nazis march into Vienna and begin imposing their series of increasingly severe laws aimed at degrading Jews.

Her uncle uproots his immediate family and flees the country, but her more optimistic father and mother decide to stay. All too soon they can only watch helplessly as the Nazis invade their mansion and steal their valuable paintings and jewelry. Deciding to flee with her husband, Maria bids a tearful farewell to her parents, and then in a thrilling sequence the couple barely manage to elude the Nazi goons out to arrest them.

In modern day Vienna, the twosome become a threesome when Austrian journalist Hubertus Czernin (Daniel Brühl) joins them. He shares Maria's outrage over the injustice committed against the Jews, telling them at one point, "It wasn't enough to rob your family and try to destroy it. No. You had to be eradicated from history." His help proves invaluable in getting them into archives for retrieving documents and a will.

The legal battle in the Austrian courts and then in America, reaching all the way up to the US Supreme Court, is long and daunting. In Vienna we see that anti-Semitism is by no means a matter of the past. The officials of the Belvedere Gallery, regarding the magnificent painting as "The Mona Lisa of Austria," throw up every possible roadblock. Even near the end of the struggle, when Maria offers to share custody of the work, the head official refuses to consider the proposal, opting for a winner take all approach.

The film is enriched by a talented supporting cast that includes Frances Fisher as Randol's pregnant but supportive wife Barbara, and cameos by Elizabeth McGovern as a sympathetic Los Angeles Judge; Moritz Bleibtreu as Klimt; and Jonathan Pryce as a Supreme Court Chief Justice. The flashbacks help us understand the personal anguish of Maria, who lost not only her home and art treasures to the Nazis, but her beloved parents and relatives as well. Standing before the Reunification Commission, she says, "When you look at this painting, you see a work of art. I see my aunt."

Like the widow in Jesus's parable, Maria, Randol, and her family are outsiders, relatively powerless compared to their opponents. Indeed what happened to her parents and six million compatriots make Jews of the 20th Century the Ultimate Outsiders. Though Hitler and his hate-filled supporters are long gone, Maria and Randol still share the position of powerlessness as they battle the Austrian and museum officials, so the final hearing in Vienna, as well as the earlier the session before the Supreme Court, is a warm vindication of their determination to secure justice. No matter how entrenched the wrong are, never count out the power of what Jesus in another context called the blessed meek. This film is one more affirmation that perhaps the meek will inherit the earth after all.

The review with a set of discussion questions will be in the May 2015 issue of Visual Parables.