



Written by [Eric Egan](#) on February 9, 2014

Monuments Men: Not Exactly Fine Art but Still Worth the Price

Megalomaniacs and tyrants will always attempt to control history and culture. This was precisely the purpose Hitler had when he ordered his Third Reich cronies to steal all of the classical artwork in Europe and destroy any deemed “degenerate.” The Allies put a team of hundreds of art scholars together and gave them the mission of locating and saving as much of this artwork as possible. The mission was known as the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives Program. The hundreds of men and women who served in the program were simply known as “Monuments Men.”



These men and woman are fictitiously represented by the rag tag team of art scholars turned soldiers depicted in the new film *Monuments Men*. The movie is based on the historical book *The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History* by Robert M. Edsel. *Monuments Men* is George Clooney’s fifth tour of duty behind the lens, and the brushes he has to work with include a solid cast and fertile source material. The cast includes a who’s who of quirk, and promises to be a fun and educational heist movie with Clooney, Matt Damon, Cate Blanchett, Bill Murray, John Goodman, Jean Dujardin, and Bob Balaban all starring.

The fact that there were men and women dedicated to protecting and preserving the foundational culture of Western Civilization while millions were dying is fascinating. The question arises: Is the Mona Lisa worth even one life?

Unfortunately Clooney (who also co-wrote the film) does not quite succeed in allowing the film to rise above its pacing issues and its attempt to strike an appropriate tone. It has its moments but it suffers from mediocrity for much of the film both in terms of pacing and writing.

Many of the film’s issues come from the struggle the film has in attempting to balance the comedy with the more serious notes. There were moments that I felt should have been boisterously funny but that were held back because the filmmakers felt that this would have been out of place in a WWII flick based on a true story. Real men and women died for the cause of preserving thousands of cultural cornerstones. In their turn, the more serious notes that deal with the sacrifice of the men and women involved in the Monuments program are kept from having a deep emotional impact because the filmmakers did not want to overwhelm the overall lighthearted tone of the movie. It seems the filmmakers could not quite figure out how to marry *Hogan’s Heroes* to *Saving Private Ryan* and ended up with a film that was neither as touching nor as funny as it should have been.

This is all the more unfortunate because I still have to recommend the film. For all its flaws, the film is saved by its source material, the fine cast, and some genuinely funny and touching moments even if these are less effectual owing to lack of character development and emotional context. The general



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populace, until now, has been sadly unaware of The Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives Program. *Monuments Men* should go a long way in fixing that deficit. The film also brings up questions about how important our cultural heritage is. A painting is, after all, just gooey stuff on canvas. How could that possibly be worth even one soldier's life? The movie succeeds in showing why that line of thinking is a *reductio ad absurdum* without oversimplifying a very complex issue.

The film is a very light PG-13 with minimal military-related swearing, some minimal violence, and a completely unsensual temptation of a man to cheat on his wife that stems more from the loneliness of war than desire. The latter situation is refreshing for how it is filmed, even if the moment falls flat due to the lack of some emotional context caused by problems with the writing. All in all, *Monuments* is pretty safe for the whole family except for those at an age where any exposure to violence or swearing at all is inappropriate. I felt perfectly comfortable allowing my teen sisters, who are both painters, to tag along. They thoroughly enjoyed the art history aspect of the film.



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