

Jasmine Harrison

## The Monuments Men

(Warning : Spoilers)

“Based on a True Story” ... sort of. George Clooney's *The Monuments Men* claims to tell the story of the allied mission to retrieve and protect cultural property during World War II – that's the 'true' part, the rest is more like “Based on a True Story... but from an overtly American perspective where art is seen as boring, only non-Americans die and the Cold War never ended”.

The 400 soldiers who made up the real Monuments men are condensed into 7 art experts – 5 Americans, one Brit and one Frenchman, both heavily stereotyped. It goes without saying that the Americans survive whereas Hugh Bonneville's and Jean Dujardin's characters are killed off, their deaths little more than emotional interludes in the American triumphalism.

The art experts and art itself are represented negatively. John Goodman's character is overweight, awkward and oblivious to everything that's happening in the war and Bob Balaban's is a specky weed – connoting the modern day 'nerd', precisely the people mainstream culture mocks for loving art.

The artworks get hardly any screen time and due to this lack of cinematic importance the film feels like just another reason to make its audiences hate the Nazis and the Soviets, who are represented as two dimensional and blandly evil. The Americans just want the art because the enemy has it – it's reduced to a prize - and when Clooney's character finally finds the Madonna, the priceless statue they have all been looking for, he risks all taking it, not to value the life of his British comrade, who fell trying to protect it, or to return it to the Belgians, but to stop the Soviets getting it – which is enhanced by a huge American Flag left smugly for the Soviets. The flag's size, and the pronounced low angle

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shot of it, hammers home the message that art has no intrinsic value; it's just something nations compete over.

The few shots we do see of art are brief; when the team find their 'treasures' the collections look like second-hand furniture warehouses. The ending scene confirms cinematically the idea that art isn't really "important" in complete contrast to its dialogue; Clooney's character, now 30 years older, stands before the Madonna statue and says that it was worth a British man's life... before turning his back on it and walking away, into the light – no shot of the statue to cement its (and art's) importance, just a heroic American.

This film has high production values and an impressive cast – but the forced American ideologies, and a clunky narrative structure, let down what could have been a well-made film of a fascinating story.