
The Rape of Europa

Illuminating documentary traces the legacy of the Nazi plunder and pillage of fine art during World War II.

{ Verdict: A- Not rated: Could be PG-13 for adult themes. Directed by Richard Berge, Bonni Cohen, Nicole Newnham. Narrated by Joan Allen. 1 hour, 57 minutes. The Nickelodeon, 426-7500. }

By WALLACE BAINÉ

Sentinel film writer Behold the audacity of the new documentary "The Rape of Europa." We've all heard it over and over again, the astounding story of the rise of Nazi Germany and its ultimate defeat in World War II. But that story is always told from the perspective of people: the

6 million Jews annihilated by Hitler, the plucky Brits, the humiliated French, the bold Americans and, of course, the Nazis themselves. But "Europa" tells the tale from the perspective not of people, but of stuff. It traces the effects of Nazi expansionism and the war on the great art treasures of Europe and, far from being shallow and materialistic – how can paintings compare with the worth of the human lives lost and disrupted? – the approach actually brings added dimension, even a fresh sense of horror, to the existential threat the Third Reich represented. Based on the book of the same name by historian Lynn H. Nicholas – who is among the interviewees in the film – this absorbing, no-gimmicks documentary focuses not only on the Nazi plunder of Europe's finest art, but it also underscores the brutality of the Holocaust by tracing the fate of the Jews' worldly goods. In one scene, a Jewish survivor of the war, who was put in a slave camp in Nazi-occupied Paris to catalog the Nazis' stolen pillage, tries to explain his feelings of pain when he comes across his murdered family's possessions. In this sense, the film recognizes the emotional resonance between people and their belongings. Narrated by the actress Joan Allen, "Europa" uses old newsreels and other archival footage to trace the Nazis' gradual accumulation of the spoils of war, including many of the masterpieces of European art. It examines the ravages experienced at the Louvre in Paris and the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. And it ponders the links between Hitler's well-known early life as an aspiring artist and the later spread of his murderous ideology. Central in this drama is Hermann Goering, Hitler's second-in-command who was one of the chief thieves of great art. Goering transformed a rustic country hunting lodge into a palatial show place for fine art with his plunder. The thirst of Hitler and Goering for these kinds of artifacts poses a fascinating question at the heart of this film: How can genocidal murderers also be capable of appreciating the exalted expressions of art? Of course, one answer to that question is that the Nazis weren't appreciators of art at all, but stole and collected it as a marker of conquest and status. But that seems too simplistic. "Europa" makes apparent, however, that the Nazis' attitude to art exposed the nihilistic decadence at the heart of their ideology. The film would have stood on its own by solely focusing on Nazis and great art. But it expands its vision further by looking at the Allied side of the equation and telling the extraordinary story of the Monuments Men, art experts and museum curators who served alongside American troops in the European theater for the sole purpose of mitigating the damage to great architecture and spearheading the efforts to recover lost or stolen artworks. The story of the Monuments Men is a jarring contrast to the American indifference to the ransacking of the great cultural treasures of Iraq in the early days of the current war. But their story, like the rest of this illuminating documentary, enhances the stirring central mythos of World War II, that this war wasn't merely a conflict between two morally dubious powers, but instead a rare instance of good and evil dividing neatly into opposite sides. And thank goodness, for the sake of art and humanity, the right side won.

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