

## MONUMENTS MEN

Presentation by Elliott Brett

Captain Robert Posey and Pfc. Lincoln Kirstein were the first through the small gap in the rubble blocking the ancient salt mine at Altausee, high in the Austrian Alps in 1945 as World War II came to a close in May 1945. They walked past one side-chamber in the cold air and entered a second one, the flames of their lamps guiding the way. There, resting on empty cardboard boxes were eight panels of *The Adoration of the Lamb* by Jan van Eyck, considered one of the masterpieces of 15th-century European art. In one panel of the altarpiece, the Virgin Mary, wearing a crown of flowers, sits reading a book.

Posey and Kirstein were two members of the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives section of the Allies, a small unit of mostly middle-aged men and a few women who interrupted careers as historians, architects, museum curators and professors to mitigate combat damage. They found and recovered countless artworks stolen by the German military.

Their work was largely forgotten to the general public until an art scholar, Lynn H. Nicholas, working in Brussels, read about a French woman who spied on the Nazis' looting operation for years and singlehandedly saved 60,000 works of art. That pushed Nicholas to spend a decade researching her 1995 book, *The Rape of Europa*, which began the resurrection of their story culminating with the movie, *The Monuments Men*, based upon Robert Edsel's 2009 book of the same name. "Without the Monuments Men, a lot of the most important treasures of European culture would be lost," Nicholas says. "They did an extraordinary amount of work protecting and securing these things."

Written by Mr. Clooney and his producing partner, Grant Heslov, "The Monuments Men" gives us part of a great World War II story and turns it into light entertainment that doesn't ask you to think too hard. The story's real-life heroes were a group of curators, restorers, archivists and others who served in the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives Section, an Allied effort to protect Europe's cultural heritage. Nicknamed the Monuments Men, this group eventually included 350 or so men and women from 13 countries who were with the unit from 1943 to 1951. Its exploits have been related in various books, including "The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves, and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History," written by Robert M. Edsel, with Bret Witter.

Since World War II, there has been no unit equivalent to the MFAA in the U.S. military. The Monuments Men contribution to the world is one that should be duplicated, for their mission was not purely one of art conservation, but the protection of key artifacts that symbolized humanity's potential for creation. The obstacles the Allies faced in defeating the Nazis were not just ones of geographic and political sovereignty, but also the protection of cultures, and their potential to evolve, for generations to come. I highly recommend *Robert M. Edsel The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves, and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History* for those in need of inspiration. Its message is universal and transcendent.

Please sit back, relax, and enjoy the movie. And if you are motivated to know more, please check out the original books by Lynn H. Nicholas, or Robert M. Edsel. I hope to see you again soon, either here, or at Anderson House. Thank you for listening.