

Art and Lawlessness/Light and Darkness

By: Bruce Petrie on January 30, 2014 on graydon.law

George Clooney's new movie *Monument's Men* opens on February 7, based on Robert M. Edsel's book *The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves, and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History*. It's the story of Hitler's looting of the masterpieces of Europe and how a group of museum directors and art professionals-turned-soldiers helped recover at least some of the artwork. Much remains lost and unrecovered to this day.

It's also a story about the relationship between art and civilization. We're reminded that the centuries of paintings, sculptures and masterworks are more than valuable decorations and beautiful objects; they are embodiments of civilization and humanity. To criminality at the level of Nazi thieves, they were spoils for the taking.

One example is Johannes Vermeer's *The Astronomer*, stolen by the Nazi's in 1940 from the Rothschild family after the German invasion of France and stamped on the back with a swastika in black ink. Fortunately for civilization it was recovered and now hangs in the Louvre. In light of that history, Vermeer's light coming through the window—onto the world globe and the face and hands of an inquisitive astronomer—takes on a powerful symbolism that surpasses the imagination of even Johannes Vermeer.

That's how great art embodies light and civilization rather than darkness:

