

Trite ‘Woman in Gold’ Lacks a Compelling Story

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Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – The horrors of the Holocaust have been expressed in cinematic art through many angles. “Woman in Gold” takes another track, that of restoring a work of art that was stolen from a Jewish family in Austria. The legal maneuverings, however, lacks a sense that this is victorious.

The story – based on true events – simply isn’t told interestingly enough, or maybe there just wasn’t enough power in the situation in the first place to expand it into a movie. All the gravitas is there, including Helen Mirren as the old Austrian immigrant, who lives in Los Angeles in the 1990s, fighting to restore some dignity to her family by reclaiming their work of art. One of the two main characters are miscast, and the flashbacks to Austria circa World War II era adds no depth to the contemporary portion of the story – it probably could have been handled without the flashbacks. The truth of the story comes down to ownership and the profit from that ownership, both for the country of Austria and the ex-citizen who tragically lost relatives during the Holocaust era. Is there a winner?

An older Austrian immigrant, Maria Altmann (Helen Mirren), is the only surviving relative of her Jewish family from the old country after her sister dies. In going through her sibling’s effects, she finds some letters that remind her of a painting that was created by famed Austrian artist Gustav Klimt, “Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer.” Bauer was her aunt, and her uncle commissioned the painting, which was owned by her family and hung in their Austrian home in the pre-World War II years.



Maria (Helen Mirren) and Randol (Ryan Reynolds) with the Titular Painting in 'Woman in Gold'

Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

The painting was stolen from her family during the Nazi invasion of Austria in 1938, and ends up owned by an Austrian museum. In contemporary 1998, Maria enlists the services of lawyer named Randol Schoenberg (Ryan Reynolds), himself a relative of Austrian Holocaust victims. Even though he risks his new job in a prestigious law firm, the pair travel to Vienna, to restore the rightful ownership of one most famous paintings in the country.

In real life, this was one of the highest level settlements or restitution in art history, with hundreds of millions of dollars as part of it. The film makes the case that the restitution is only about pride and memory, but with so much cash at stake, there is a feeling that there might have been more to it. It might have been more interesting to explore that angle, because as Groucho Marx once said, “when money comes through the door, love goes innuendo.”

The reason that the flashbacks don't work that well is they are too much of a shorthand. Director Simon Curtis (“My Week with Marilyn”) had to tell that part of the story too quickly, and there is no nuance. The Nazi invaders are as evil as a 1940s propaganda film. It's not that they weren't evil – they were – but with no subtlety there is nothing to learn about that era that hasn't been seen before in this genre of film.

The casting of Ryan Reynolds was also very interesting, as in it didn't work at all. Granted his part was underwritten – as all the roles were, save Helen Mirren – but his idea of being a crusading lawyer was to wear glasses, and smirk a lot. His chemistry with Mirren was at a low energy, despite their screen time together. Reynolds should stick to comedy, which he is stellar at, or the next Green Lantern movie, if that franchise has any legs.



Adele (Antje Traue) Poses for the Painting in ‘Woman in Gold’
Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

The casting of the painting’s subject, Adele Bloch-Bauer, was the highlight of the film. The mysterious atmosphere that German actress Antje Traue creates with the character is worthy of the film that should have been made, had Adele not died before the war began. There is a scene in the prologue between Adele and painter Gustav Klimt (Moritz Bleibtreu) that expresses more emotionally than the entire rest of the film.

There is a brief scene with the eventual buyer of the painting, the cosmetics mogul Ronald Lauder, and it is a reminder of what art is “worth.” Ownership, value and the eventual auction is really the theme of “Woman in Gold,” the story just doesn’t want to dwell on that.

“Woman in Gold” opens everywhere on April 1st. Featuring Helen Mirren, Ryan Reynolds, Katie Holmes, Daniel Brühl, Elizabeth McGovern, Jonathan Pryce and Antje Traue. Written by Alexi Kaye Campbell. Directed by Simon Curtis. Rated “PG-13”



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [22]
Writer, Editorial Coordinator
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [21]

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