

Woman in Gold

“Women in Gold” is another “based on a true story” film with a World War II backdrop, showing that war’s legacy of Nazi thievery being avenged, rather like last year’s (disappointing) “The Monuments Men.” It is a compelling story, told dutifully, but with a crucial flaw in casting.

The film traces one woman's effort to seek justice and reclaim her family’s heritage. In 1998, 60 years after she fled Nazified Vienna, an 80-something Jewish woman, Maria Altmann (Helen Mirren), long living in Los Angeles, learns that the Austrian government has instituted an “arts restitution” program on claims of art theft from displaced or murdered Austrians. Her family lost major art works to the Nazis, and Maria looks to claim them, especially Gustav Klimt's famous painting of her aunt, *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I* (later named “The Lady in Gold”).

Through a friend’s recommendation, Maria hires an inexperienced but earnest young 30-something lawyer Randy Schoenberg (Ryan Reynolds), himself the grandson of an illustrious Viennese family. This odd couple launches a battle which takes them, much against Maria’s wishes, to Vienna, where they find a staunch ally in the Austrian journalist Humbertus Czerin (Daniel Brühl).

This contemporary story is contrasted (via Maria’s remembrances) with the last days of the prosperous Bloch-Bauer family in Vienna, where the young Maria (Tatiana Maslany) grows up with her beloved aunt Adele (Antje Traue, a dead ringer for the painted Adele), uncle Ferdinand (Henry Goodman) and her parents, Gustav and Therese (Allan Corduner and Nina Kunzendorf). The flashback segments climax when Maria and her young husband, Fritz (Max Irons) are able to escape to London and the US just after the Austrian *Anschluss*. These scenes of a sumptuous pre-war Jewish life are finely mounted and touchingly directed by Simon Curtis.

Early challenges to the Austrian authorities are thwarted, but Maria and Randy doggedly pursue their claim of the Klimt works, which have long since been housed in Vienna’s Belvedere Palace. Their fight for the paintings eventually takes them to the U.S. Supreme Court and to a landmark arbitration hearing back in Vienna.

The principal reason to see “Woman in Gold” is, no surprise, Helen Mirren. As Maria, she again plays a woman older than herself (e.g., “The Queen”), dons a very serviceable Austrian accent, and easily shifts from genteel charmer to acerbic defender of her cause, with sundry nuances in between. You believe her as the sweet shop owner from LA just as much as the woman in high dudgeon challenging officialdom. You rejoice with her, too, when she re-visits her old Viennese apartment in the film’s final redemptive scene, re-living her swirling wedding of golden memory.

Mirren also too easily outshines her co-star Reynolds, veteran of action flicks and romantic comedies, who here seems just callow and miscast as her attorney. It doesn’t help his character either when the script detours to exhibit his own tepid and “troubled” family life with wife Pam (Katie Holmes) which brings out forced histrionics.

Curious thing about “Woman in Gold”: the credits indicate that the screenplay by playwright Alexi Kaye Campbell is “based on the life stories of E. Randol Schoenberg and Maria Altmann” but credits no written sources, this when the case has been the

subject of several books, most notably “The Lady in Gold” by Anne-Marie O’Connor. An inexplicable omission that somewhat undercuts the project.
(The film runs 110 mi. and is rated “PG-13.”)

(April 2015)