

# Los Angeles Times

## The Monuments Men did more than rescue Nazi-looted art

BY CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT, LOS ANGELES TIMES ART CRITIC  
FEB. 13, 2014 11:03 AM PT

The greatest Rubens altarpiece in America is in Ohio, at the Toledo Museum of Art. We have the Monuments Men to thank for that.

George Clooney's galumphing all-star movie "The Monuments Men" did not impress the critics -- "inert," lamented L.A. Times movie critic Kenneth Turan -- but the real-life story of soldiers sent to protect and rescue Europe's great artworks during and after World War II is impressive.

The Rubens had been stolen by Hermann Goering, who oversaw much of the Nazi art-plunder, from the great Berlin collection assembled by Jewish banker and industrialist Leopold Koppel. It passed through the Munich collecting point for confiscated art, a site that Wittmann visited many times.

After the war, when Wittmann took the Toledo job, he learned from Metropolitan Museum of Art curator Theodore Rousseau -- with whom he had worked at the OSS -- that the painting was available. Koppel's son, Albert, had recovered the stolen masterpiece and wished to sell it. The Met, unsure of its authenticity, turned down the opportunity to buy it.

Wittman's connoisseurship, however, coupled with the knowledge he gained in Europe, gave him confidence to proceed with its acquisition.

He turned out to be right. Today the altarpiece is universally accepted as being entirely by Rubens' hand. It's a linchpin in the museum's impressive collection, which is especially strong in 17th century Dutch, French and Italian painting, as well as 19th century American art.

"The Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine" is one of countless paintings and sculptures that found their way into American museum collections for a generation starting in the late 1940s, thanks to information gained and relationships forged by curators and directors who had been engaged in the restitution of Nazi looted art.

After Wittmann's 1976 retirement from Toledo, he moved to Southern California and became a trustee at the Los An-

geles County Museum of Art and the J. Paul Getty Museum. His papers are today housed at the Getty Research Institute in Brentwood.

I haven't perused them. But, if the Rubens coup is any guide, I suspect they contain surprises.