

Art Thefts

Art theft statistics indicate that approximately 50,000 pieces of artwork are stolen each year. The black market for stolen art is estimated to be in the range of \$6 to \$8 billion dollars. The FBI has an art crime team of 20 special agents dedicated to retrieving stolen art. Why steal art? The most obvious reason, presumably, is for profit, even though selling purloined art is notoriously difficult. As one FBI agent put it, "Criminals are better thieves than businessmen." But sometimes the motive is not money; it is for the thrill of the trophy (as in the fictional theft of Monet's *San Giorgio Maggiore at Dusk* (ca. 1908-1912) from the Metropolitan Museum of art in the 1999 film, *The Thomas Crown Affair*). In addition, the mafia is infamous for stealing art for purposes of collateral and negotiation. Parenthetically, while researching this piece, I discovered that there is a scholarly (peer reviewed academic) journal called *The Journal of Art Crime*. Who knew?



Here's a little rundown on a few of the most famous art heists in history. Not peer reviewed. Yet.

One of the first recorded art heists was in 1473. Hans Memling's *The Last Judgment* (1467-1471) was on board a ship bound for Florence, when a Polish pirate boarded the ship and absconded with the painting. The triptych was put on display in the Basilica of the Assumption in Gdansk, after which Italian authorities tried for decades to have it returned. It is now in the National Museum in Gdansk.



At the turn of the 20th century, the now iconic *Mona Lisa* (ca. 1503-1517) by Leonardo da Vinci was considered a good work by a famous artist, but there was nothing that distinguished it per se. Then in 1911, Italian handyman and former Louvre security guard, Vincenzo Peruggia, removed the painting

from the pegs securing it to the wall, took it to a nearby service staircase, wrapped a smock around it, and walked out of the museum with it. He stored it in his apartment in Paris for two years, then contacted a gallery owner in Florence, clearly expecting a reward for returning the painting to its homeland. The gallery owner and the director of the Uffizi Gallery, who had been called in to authenticate the painting, informed the police, who then arrested Peruggia. The painting was returned to the Louvre in 1913. Peruggia claimed that he stole the painting for patriotic reasons, saying he wanted to return it to Italy after it was stolen by Napoleon. In fact, da Vinci had given the Mona Lisa to Francis I when he went to France to be a painter in the king's court. Though correspondence showed that Peruggia had planned to profit from the theft, the court may have partially believed in Peruggia's patriotic motive, as he served only seven months for his crime. The notoriety of the heist helped propel the painting to its current iconic status. Today, the Mona Lisa is encased in bullet proof glass, and visitors to the Louvre view the work from behind a railing six feet from the painting.

A fictionalized version of the story was made into the 1931 film, *The Theft of the Mona Lisa*, in which Peruggia steals the painting in order to impress a French girl whom he loves and who resembles Mona Lisa. She rejects him; he then claims he stole the painting for his country and is hailed as a hero.



There has been only one successful theft from the National Gallery in London. It took place in 1961, when a thief snuck through a bathroom window while the security system was deactivated for cleaning, evaded security guards, and made off with a painting that had just recently been saved by the British government from a sale to an American collector. Bus driver, Kempton Bunton, stole the high profile Goya painting, *Portrait of the Duke of Wellington* (1812-14), who was angry because pensioners like himself had to pay a TV license fee from his modest income while the government could afford to spend tax payer funds on artwork. The painting was returned voluntarily four years later. Bunton was convicted only of stealing the frame, which was not returned.

The painting was featured in the 1962 James Bond film, *Dr. No*, displayed in Dr. No's lair. A film entitled *The Duke*, starring Matthew Goode (as Bunton's barrister), Jim Broadbent (as Bunton) and Helen Mirren

(as Bunton's wife) is set for release in 2021. For a review of the upcoming film, see: <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/the-duke-film-review-venice-2020>



In 1969, Caravaggio's *Nativity with St. Francis and St. Lawrence* (1609) was stolen from the Oratory of San Lorenzo in Palermo, Italy, where it had hung for 350 years. It was cut out of its frame by thieves. The painting, with an estimated value of \$20 million, is on the FBI's Top 10 Unsolved Art Crimes. According to an interview with the parish priest filmed in 2001, the painting had been in the home of Gaetano Badalamenti, a Sicilian mafia boss. Badalamenti purportedly had sliced off a corner of the painting to convince the Catholic Church to come to the negotiating table for its return. Badalamenti was the ring leader of a \$1.65 billion drug smuggling operation referred to as the Pizza Connection which used pizzerias as fronts for distributing drugs. He died in a U.S. federal prison in 2004. Hopes of finding the painting had been fading, since most of the suspects and witnesses had died.

In 2018, the investigation took on new life when a mafia informant told authorities that Badalamenti had at one point been put in touch with an art dealer in Switzerland. However, the painting has not yet been recovered, and experts question whether, even if found, the painting would be in good condition. Apparently the thieves rolled up the painting, since centuries old paint easily cracks.



Another theft that is on the FBI's Top 10 is the 1999 theft of Paul Cézanne's *Paysage d'Auvers-sur-Oise* from the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England. Shortly after midnight, January 1, 2000, guards at the museum responded to a fire alarm, and found the painting missing. Police believe that the thief or thieves used a smoke bomb and took advantage of the New Year's fireworks to successfully complete the theft. It was the only painting taken, although there were others in the museum by equally famous artists. Authorities theorize that it was stolen to order by a collector. At the time of the theft, the painting was valued at three million pounds. Police did respond to a tip that the painting had been seen in a West Midlands pub. However, it turned out to be a copy. When police arrived, the painting was still wet, being painted by the pub landlord. The painting has not yet been recovered.



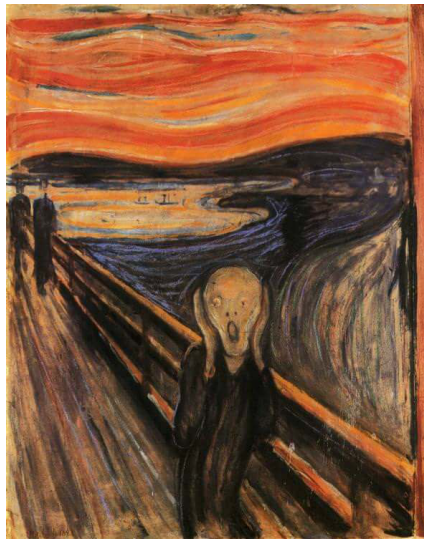
Two different versions of Edvard Munch's *The Scream* have been stolen. In 1994, the day of the opening of the Winter Olympics in Lillehammer, four men broke into the National Gallery of Norway in Oslo, by climbing a ladder and breaking a window, and stole the painting. They left behind a note saying "Thanks for the poor security." The painting was recovered as the result of a sting operation conducted by British police with the help of the Getty museum. Here is a link to a short interview with one of the key

members of the sting operation, Charlie Hill, dubbed the world's greatest art detective.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/magazine-26128595>

In 2004, a different version of *The Scream* was stolen at gunpoint from the Munch Museum in Oslo, along with another Munch painting, *Madonna*. The thieves were actually photographed by a bystander as they were making their way to their getaway car. Authorities were concerned that the paintings might be damaged as they later discovered the discarded frames and glass. However, when they were recovered two years later, there was only minor damage caused by carelessness and neglect. Three men were convicted of the theft even before the paintings had been recovered. In 2005 the city government of Oslo offered a sizeable reward for the return of the paintings. To sweeten the deal, the candy manufacturer, M&M, said it would give two million M&M's (about two tons) in exchange for the painting. No one came forward. The paintings were ultimately recovered in 2006, but police offered no public details on their recovery, just that they were safe, they had not left Norway, and no reward had to be paid to retrieve them.

Munch's original *The Scream* (1893) has been described as invaluable. An 1895 version, pastel-on-board, sold at auction in 2012 for \$120 million.



In 2010, a burglar nicknamed Spiderman stole five paintings from the Musée de l'Art Moderne in Paris. Spiderman, aka Vjieran Tomic, got his nickname by clambering into Parisian apartments and museums to steal valuable gems and works of art. In this heist, he cut through a padlocked gate and broke a window to enter the museum whose alarm system had been awaiting repair for several weeks. Guards were on duty but the disappearance of the paintings was not discovered until the next morning. When arrested in 2011, Tomic told police he had only come for one painting, Fernand Léger's *Still Life with Candlestick*, not thinking he would be able to steal more. In fact, he made off with four others: Pablo Picasso's *Pigeon with Green Peas*, Henri Matisse's *Pastoral*, George Braque's *Olive Tree near Estaque*, and Amedeo Modigliani's *Woman with a Fan*.

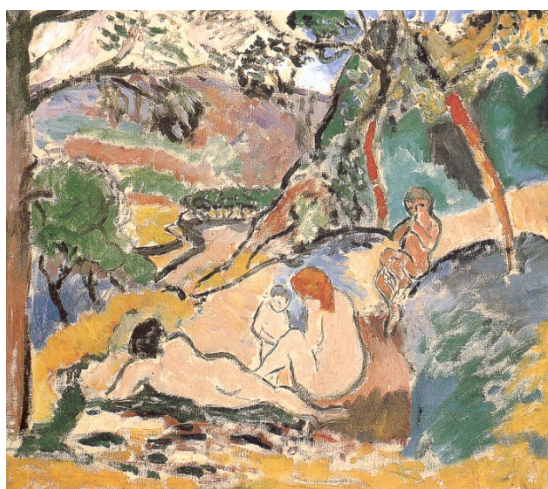
Tomic was arrested in 2011 and sentenced, along with two accomplices, an art dealer accused of ordering the heist, and a watch dealer who hid the paintings. The paintings have not been recovered. One of the accomplices claims to have destroyed them, but experts are not convinced.



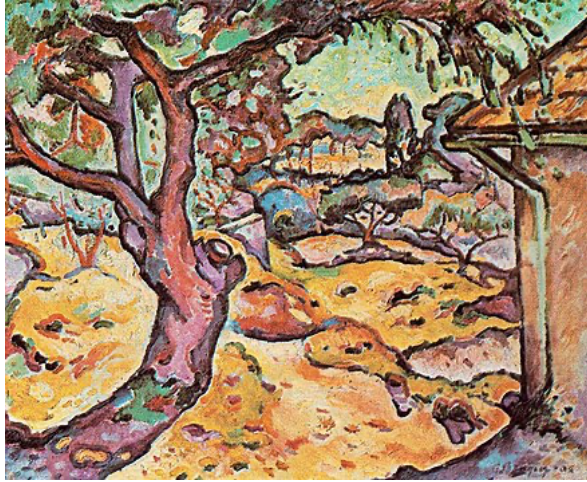
Léger, *Still Life with Candlestick* (1922)



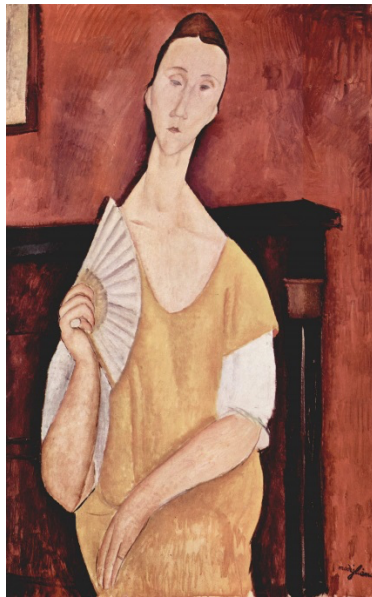
Picasso, *Pigeon with Green Peas* (1911)



Matisse, *Pastoral* (1905)



Braque, *Olive Tree near Estaque* (1905)



Modigliani, *Woman with a Fan* (1919)

Often considered the greatest art heist of them all is the theft of 13 works of art from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. In the early morning hours of March 18, 1990, two men dressed as police officers knocked on the door of the museum and told the security guard they were responding to a disturbance. The security guard let the fake police officers in; the thieves tied him and another security guard up and left them in the basement of the museum. A mere 81 minutes later, they had made off with 13 works of art. Among the works of art stolen were Rembrandt's *Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee* (1633); Vermeer's *The Concert*; five Degas drawings; and Manet's *Chez Tortoni* (ca. 1875). There is a \$10 million reward for information leading to the recovery of all 13 works of art in good condition. Despite some promising leads, the works have not been recovered.

If you visit the museum, you will see empty frames where the stolen paintings were previously hung. When Gardner died, she left no heirs so she left her worldly goods to the public. There was a stipulation: According to her will, the works couldn't be rearranged, sold, or donated, and new art couldn't be added. If these conditions were ever violated, the entire collection, along with the house and the land, would be turned over to Harvard. After the theft, there were glaring blank spots on the walls. Since the museum wasn't allowed to fill them, it rehung the empty frames. According to the museum's website, the empty frames are "a placeholder for the missing works and as symbols of hope awaiting their return". Here's three of the 13 that were stolen.



Rembrandt, *Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee* (1633)



Vermeer, *The Concert* (1664)



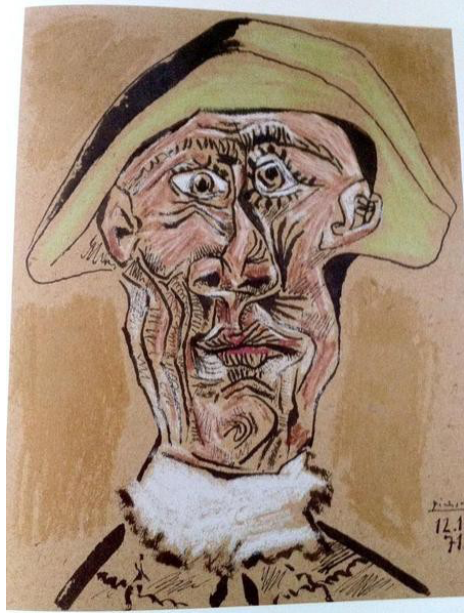
Manet, *Chez Tortoni* (1875)

To wrap it up, a few fun facts:

The most frequently stolen piece of art is a bit contested. One candidate, cited by the Guinness Book of World Records, is Rembrandt's *Jacob de Gheyn III* (1632), which has been stolen four times since 1966, surfacing once in a lost and found luggage office, once on the back of a bicycle, once under a graveyard bench and once in a taxi. The other is *Ghent Altarpiece*, or *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* (completed 1432), found in St. Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent, Belgium. It is the joint work of the Flemish brothers Hubert and Jan van Eyck and has been stolen (all or in part) seven times over six centuries.



The most stolen artist of all time is said to be Pablo Picasso. According to the *Art Loss Register*, 1,147 of his paintings have disappeared. One of the paintings was his *Harlequin Head* (1971), was among seven paintings that were stolen from the Kunsthal Museum in Rotterdam in 2012. A year after the theft, two members of an organized crime ring pleaded guilty to the robbery. The paintings have not been recovered.



Finally, the world's most prolific art thief? That would be Stéphane Breitwieser, who has robbed nearly 200 museums and amassed a collection of treasures worth more than \$1.4 billion. The link below is to an extensive interview with *GQ* in which you will learn his secrets and what motivates him.

<https://www.gq.com/story/secrets-of-the-worlds-greatest-art-thief>

Unfortunately, his book, *Confessions of An Art Thief*, has not been translated into English. However, there is a book (available for Kindle) with a similar name, *The Art of the Heist: Confessions of a Master Thief*. It is the true story of a "legendary art thief", Myles Connor. According to *Book Cover*, "From New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, to the Smithsonian Institution in D.C., to Boston's Museum of Fine Art, to dozens of regional museums throughout the United States, no museum was off-limits to legendary art thief Myles Connor. He has used every technique in the book, from breaking and entering, to cat burglary, to false identities and elaborate con jobs. He once even grabbed a Rembrandt off a wall in broad daylight and simply ran like hell. His IQ is at genius level, and his charm is legendary. The fact that he was in jail at the time of the famous robbery of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum—which remains the largest art theft in American history—has not stopped the FBI from considering him a top suspect in that still unsolved robbery."