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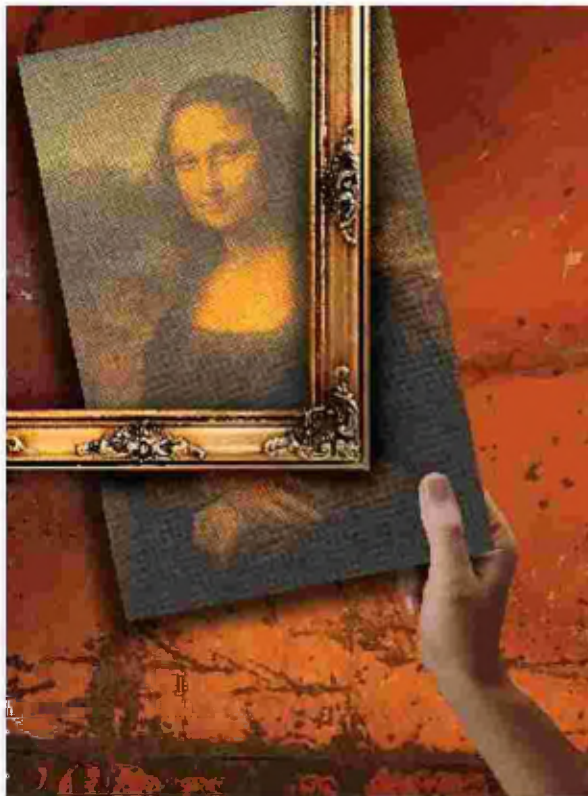
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STEALING BEAUTY

LAPD's Art Theft Detail is one of the only municipal high-art theft units in the country and boy they are busy

BEFORE THE MUSEUM OPENED FOR THE DAY, A YOUNG MAN ENTERED the Louvre, strode to the Salon Carré, dismantled the protective glass covering the painting he was after, then snatched it. In the stairwell, he removed the frame, hid the canvas under his smock, descended to the exit, and emerged into the Parisian sunlight. That was in 1911. His name was Vincent Perugia. The painting was the Mona Lisa.



The modern era of art theft officially began that day. While objects d'art have been pilfered ever since art migrated off cave walls, trade in illgotten works didn't reach billion-dollar status until the last century. Many lament that art doesn't mean as much as it once did, yet fine art still has enough cultural impact that Iraqis pillaged the National Museum in Baghdad before they hit the local grocer's.

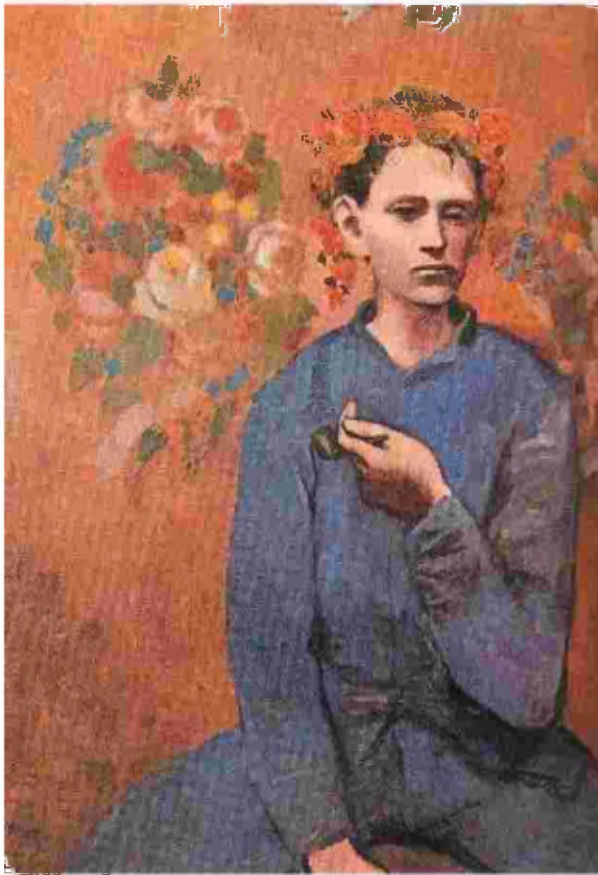
That must mean something. In fact, due to the 20th century boom in art prices, people actually have found meaning in the value of art—monetarily, at least—irrespective of its honest acquisition. But the cosmos of five-fingered art appropriation isn't what you think, for art thieves, a la Warhol, believe "Art is what you can get away with."

PAINT BY NUMBERS

INTERPOL ranks art theft as the fourth largest criminal activity behind drugs, money laundering, and illegal arms trading. While the numbers are inexact, the art theft economy is estimated at between three and eight billion dollars per year. If we settle on \$5.5 billion, that's approximately equivalent to the annual revenue of Apple Computer, Inc. People tend to think, "that's only a few Picassos," says Detective Don Hrycyk, of the LAPD Art Theft Detail, the only municipal high-art theft unit in the nation. But actually it's much more.

Picasso's *Garçon a la Pipe* holds the record for price paid at auction — \$104.1 million. But thieves aren't stealing that little boy, and even if they were, to make up the numbers they'd have to pilfer another 52.8 of them. There just aren't that many worthy portraits around.

Nevertheless, plenty of other art is up for grabs, most of it grabbed from homes. The Art Loss Register, a company devoted to tracking and recovering stolen art, estimates that tens of thousands of art thefts occur every year, 54 percent of them occurring domestically.



It isn't usually the art that's targeted, the paintings and vases simply get thrown in the bag with other loot, Hrycyk says. Museums and galleries account for just 12 percent of thefts, with churches accounting for another 10 percent. By ALR figures, the safest place to keep precious art is in storage. Only 2 percent of art is purloined from warehouses and just 15 percent of all stolen art is ever recovered.

Unsurprisingly, European countries head INTERPOL's list of nations most victimized by thefts. Though government backing raises the protective bar for national museums, tax proceeds don't provide enough

to thwart dedicated burglars. It wasn't until Edvard Munch's *The Scream* was stolen from an Oslo gallery in 1996 that the government rubbished the 25-year-old closed circuit video system meant to protect it. (The painting was recovered that year from an anti-abortion group).

Coincidentally, the money governments spend on museum renovation provides two of the most popular methods of entry for burglars — scaffolding and ladders.

A THIEF IN THE NIGHT. . . AND DAY

Art robbers are not cast strictly in the molds of misanthropic financier Thomas Crown or lackeys employed by shady collectors, truth be told, the plutocrat commissioning thieves to procure objects of his desire is mostly myth.

"Very little art theft is commissioned— there is no 'Dr. No' community of art collectors," Hrycyk comments. "Why would you put your future in the hands of a thief who'll turn you over in a second?" The Cooperstown of art thieves is peopled by students, Hungarian auto mechanics, ophthalmologists, university administrators, and septuagenarians who will goldbrick anyone in nearly any way for nearly any reason: jealousy, collateral, artistic aspiration, wagers, and charity. The one uniting trait? They are consummate opportunists. A sample of 20th century heists:



- In 1990, two men dressed as policeman entered the Isabella Stuart Gardner Museum in Boston after hours, tied up the guards, and stole paintings by Flinck, Rembrandt, Degas, and Manet, as well as, quizzically, a Chinese beaker. Some art experts estimate the take could be worth as much as \$300 million, according to the FBI's art theft division. Though the case is still open, and in spite of a \$5 million reward that can still be claimed, nothing has ever been heard from the men and none of the works have been recovered.
- Over a 6-year period, Stephane Breitwieser, a waiter in France, visited seven countries in order to abscond with 239 artworks that included pieces by almost every notable name. The amassed collection was worth about \$1.8 billion dollars. His motive? The thrill. His mother, upon hearing of his arrest, threw the sculptures and pottery into the local canal, then cut up the paintings and shoved them down the garbage disposal or threw them in the trash.
- Award for "The Kindest Art Thief in the World?" A 61-yearold unemployed truck driver seized Goya's *Duke of Wellington* from London's

National Gallery by hanging around until the museum closed and exiting through a bathroom window. He tried to ransom it back, unsuccessfully, in order to use the proceeds to help England's poor with home television access.

WORSE THAN GENOCIDE

It might come as a surprise to find out that a great many works of art—especially among museum collections—aren't insured. Insurance companies don't want to insure hundreds of pieces of nearly priceless items.

Therefore, one of the problems thieves often encounter when they steal works, especially if the purpose is to ransom them back to concerned parties (otherwise known as "art-napping"), is that none of those parties can foot the bill, Hrycyk says.

Another problem is that of shortsightedness. Robbers, having chosen a painting because it's worth a fortune, hope to flog it for a slightly smaller fortune. Yet paintings that attract big money also attract big attention, making them impossible to fence. Dealers won't touch them knowing they can't disavow knowledge of their theft, according to Hrycyk. An unavoidable fact is that a fair amount of the 85 percent of stolen art never recovered is destroyed for being so hot it's incandescent.

A final problem for thieves is the number of authorities on their tails. Internationally there are INTERPOL, UNESCO, the International Council of Museums, and Scotland Yard, just to name a few. And almost every nation in Europe has a government department responsible solely for recovering stolen art. In the United States, there is the FBI, the Art Loss Register, and a legion of independent Web sites concerned with art and its minutiae. The Los Angeles Police Department has the only municipal art theft unit in the nation, the 20-year-old Art Theft Detail, called in when art is the primary object of attack and not incidentally stolen as part of a larger burglary, Hrycyk says. The Detail was begun when the LAPD began to notice a pattern of valuable art being stolen and had no clues or methods established for solving such crimes. A two-person detail was assigned, and two decades on it's still just a two-person detail (that might have 40 open cases at any given time), but in just the last four years those two have recovered \$336,000 in stolen property as a result of posting items on the Art Theft Detail's Web site. Since 1993, when Hrycyk took over the Detail, the unit has recovered more than \$52 million dollars in stolen art, which is more than all 18 theft and burglary divisions in the LAPD combined. Its greatest asset is its institutional memory, which the other burglary departments don't have. For example, the Hearst's Navajo rugs and Native American artifacts stolen from the Natural History Museum were recently found after 28 years, Hrycyk says. He did not want to comment on how the rugs were recovered.

Another example of an art crime solved was the 1992 theft of several Monet and Picasso oil paintings from a home in Brentwood. A doctor convinced two attorneys to steal several insured Monet and Picasso oil paintings from his house. But the insurance company wouldn't pay and a lawsuit ensued. Years later, the estranged wife of one of the attorneys called the police and exposed the plot.

Unfortunately at the time there wasn't enough information to make any

arrests. But a year later, a new girlfriend of the same attorney called with additional information and the police were able to recover the paintings that the thieves had hidden in Cleveland, according to Hrycyk.

Art theft is on the rise; there's too much money in play and too many people who balance the odds by paying up. Insurance companies will sometimes quietly pay a ransom for a work instead of paying out on the policy, Hrycyk says. In many countries, if buyers can prove they bought a work unaware that it was stolen, their title is considered valid no matter how much proof the original owner has of its theft. And though it might be excessive to say that museums rely on art thieves, many institutions are known to dip their toes into the streams of faintly warm art coursing through acquisitions departments.

Establishing provenance isn't about what an art historian knows exactly, but what can be proven.

Nevertheless, it is history—the very thing that makes most art so valuable in the first place—that muddies the waters of art theft. The simple fact is, as one dealer said in the opening of author Milton Esterow's book on art theft *The Art Stealers*, "All antiquities are faintly hot. Otherwise they wouldn't have survived."

— Jonathon Ramsey