

Illustrations by Joanne Jo

The art of THE ART HEIST



Want to steal a masterpiece?

Join the queue...

By Simon Garfield



he morning after thieves disguised as construction workers smashed their way into a gallery at the Louvre last October and stole jewels valued at €88 million, I compiled a list of all the major art heists this century and, a week later, I was only getting started.

In December 2000, two Renoirs and a Rembrandt self-portrait were stolen at gunpoint from Stockholm’s Nationalmuseum, with the thieves making a getaway in a speedboat.

In August 2003, thieves stole “Madonna of the Yarnwinder” by Leonardo da Vinci from Drumlanrig Castle in Scotland. (“Don’t worry love, we’re the police,” the thieves reportedly told an onlooker as they climbed through a window with the painting, “and this is just practice.”)

In December 2007, thieves stole Picasso’s “Portrait of Suzanne Bloch”, valued at \$50 million, from a museum in São Paulo.

In February 2008, paintings by Cézanne, Degas, Van Gogh and Monet worth \$164 million were stolen from the Bührle Collection in Zurich.

It would be fair to assume that with advances in security — digital cameras, facial recognition, sophisticated movement-tracking and airport-style imaging — museum and gallery theft would be rare these days, but the opposite seems to be true.

In August 2023, a senior curator was sacked from the British Museum, accused of stealing thousands of gems and Roman cameos over several decades. The scandal, which resulted in the departure of the museum’s director, only emerged after a collector spotted some of the rare items on eBay.

In September 2025, thieves stole six kilos of uncut gold nuggets from a display case in the geology gallery at the National Museum of Natural History in Paris. A suspect was arrested in Barcelona two weeks later, in possession of 1kg of melted-down gold.

Since the Louvre break-in, which lasted eight minutes and occurred in broad daylight on a Sunday morning about half an hour after the museum opened, art institutions worldwide vowed to tighten security to ensure that similarly terrible and brazen things would never befall them.

Then this happened: in December 2025, armed thieves stole eight Matisse engravings and other works from an exhibition in São Paulo. (They

placed the prints in a canvas bag, left the building through the main entrance and walked along a pavement to an idling van.) A few months later, police found a message on one suspect’s phone that he had sent to a member of a crime gang: “My real specialty is books ... very valuable, very rare books. I distribute them all over the world. I’m getting into the art business now.”

At the end of March 2026, four masked thieves stole paintings by Renoir, Cézanne and Matisse valued at £8 million from a foundation near Parma, northern Italy. The operation, described by the police as “slick”, took less than three minutes. The incident was kept secret from the media for a week, reportedly in an attempt to recapture the works without obstruction, but also to save the institution from embarrassment. For how, in our modern and super-surveilled world, could such a thing still be allowed to happen?

Because these thefts occur so frequently (and the list above is just a very small sample), it’s possible to locate certain common attributes and patterns — a heist playbook. Should you ever consider lifting a valuable artwork from an institution yourself (and *Esquire* would obviously never advise such a thing), it might be useful to know the following.

1 THE MOST FAMOUS PAINTING HAS ALREADY BEEN STOLEN

A great many art heists are “the heist of the century”, and every generation believes it has witnessed the big one. But nothing says heist of the century like the theft of the “Mona Lisa”.

On 21 August 1911, a house painter named Vincenzo Peruggia turned up a couple of hours late for work, but he had a valid reason. Earlier that



morning, he had walked out of the Louvre with the “Mona Lisa” beneath his white smock, an act of patriotism: he believed, incorrectly, that it had been illegitimately seized by Napoleon, and claimed that he was stealing it back for Italy (he also sought a reward for its return, hoping to secure the future of his family).

It was an easy steal. Peruggia had previously worked at the Louvre as a craftsman and probably had a hand in protecting Da Vinci’s masterpiece behind glass. After the theft, the painting remained hidden in his apartment for two years, although he kept a postcard of it on his mantelpiece. Its disappearance made it famous. It was said that more visitors stared at the empty gallery space where it had once hung than had seen it when it was there.



(It had previously been displayed in a row alongside other Renaissance masterworks by Correggio and Titian, both of which Peruggia said he would have been equally happy with.) The thief served seven months of a year-long sentence, and then went back to his decorating job, less of the national hero than he had hoped.

Before Peruggia’s arrest, police attention focused briefly on another suspect: the 29-year-old Pablo Picasso, who had permanently settled in Paris in 1904. The artist had obtained two Iberian statuettes stolen from the Louvre in previous years, their ears inspiring those on the figures in his groundbreaking “Les Femmes d’Alger”. Arrested for his involvement in the theft, Picasso shivered “violently” as he was escorted to a cell (according to his then-mistress/muse Fernande Olivier). He professed to know nothing of the thefts of either statuettes or the “Mona Lisa”, and he was let off with a caution.

2 EVERYTHING IS PRICELESS

When museum chiefs are interviewed a day or so after each heist, they are always asked by the excited media how much the stolen items are worth. And they always say, after quoting a very speculative but very high figure, that the true worth cannot actually be quantified, because the loss to the museum/city/art world/civilisation is priceless. To which a sensible common response might be: “Well then, you should have looked after it better.”

3 IF A PICTURE GETS STOLEN ONCE, IT MAY BE STOLEN TWICE (OR MORE)

In February 1994, a few hours before the opening of the Winter Olympics in Oslo, two men climbed a ladder outside Norway’s National Museum, smashed a window and stole a version of Edvard Munch’s “The Scream” by snipping unalarmed wires that held the painting to the wall. The perpetrators left a postcard: “Thanks for the poor security.”

Ten years later, another version of “The Scream” was also stolen in Oslo, this time from the



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Munch Museum and during opening hours. Two armed men pulled it off the wall and took another painting on their way out to show visitors how easily it could be done.

Two works by Van Gogh have also been stolen twice: “Breton Women in the Meadow” was taken in Milan in February 1975 and recovered two months later. But five weeks after that, the watercolour was stolen again. This time it took six months to be found and, at the time of writing, remains unstolen. Van Gogh’s “Poppy Flowers” was stolen from a museum in Cairo in 1977, and was recovered a decade later in Kuwait. It was then stolen again in 2010, the canvas removed from its frame with a box cutter. It was valued at a) \$50m, and b) “priceless”. In 2010, it was stolen again, resulting in the closure of the museum for over a decade after massive security flaws were exposed (all anti-theft alarms were turned off; only seven of 43 security cameras were working). The museum reopened in 2021, but the painting is still missing.

In August 2020, during a Covid shutdown, “Two Laughing Boys with a Mug of Beer” by Frans Hals was stolen from a museum near Utrecht. Thieves adore this one, perhaps even more than the staff who display and protect it. It had been stolen twice before: the first time in 1988 (returned after a ransom was paid), and the second in 2011.

But the most popular artist by far is Rembrandt. “Portrait of Jacob de Gheyn”, now known as “the Takeaway Rembrandt”, has been stolen four times. Rembrandt ranks second to Picasso in the list of works stolen overall. It may be that these works are somehow less secure, but it’s far more likely that thieves believe that their names alone will yield a higher bounty.

4 BUT YOU CAN’T ACTUALLY SELL THE STUFF

In 2010, on trial for the theft of paintings by Braque, Modigliani and Matisse from the Musée d’Art Moderne in Paris, the burglar painted a tale of woe. He advised anyone in the courtroom who might be considering a similar theft to make sure they “have the resources” to fully engage, or else “drop the idea because it’s just too much of a headache”.

It is almost impossible to sell a famous stolen work of art. International art-loss registers instantly alert dealers and auction houses, and even oligarchs are wary of the consequences of acquiring hot items.

“There’s very little recidivism in it,” former FBI special agent Geoff Kelly, who worked on art crime for more than 20 years, told me. “If you do it once, you probably aren’t going to do it again, because you’ll realise that the easy part is stealing the artwork, and the hard part is trying to monetise it. It was difficult in 1990, but it’s virtually impossible now, because you can do a Google Image search of a painting at a yard sale, or an antique shop, and you can find out whether or not it’s stolen, and anyone can find out a great deal about the piece’s provenance just on their phone.”

One exception is jewellery, the target of the →

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Louvre robbery and a €100 million heist at the Green Vault museum at Dresden Castle in 2019. This at least can be broken down, recut and then resold, albeit at a fraction of the original worth.

5 MOST WORKS ARE EVENTUALLY RECOVERED (WITH ONE PARTICULARLY NOTABLE EXCEPTION)

Of the heists mentioned above, “The Scream” was found two years after its theft in 2004; the works by Van Gogh that were twice stolen were twice recovered; the São Paulo Picasso was found within three weeks; and Cezanne’s “The Boy in the Red Vest”, stolen in Zurich in 2008, was found in Serbia in 2012.

But the extraordinary haul stolen in 1990 from the Isabella Gardner Museum in Boston has yet to be located, and the venue still displays the ornate empty frames as a symbol of sadness and hope. In the early hours of 18 March 1990, two policemen called at the museum in response to a break-in. By the time their investigation was over, the night guards had been overpowered, and the museum had lost 13 works — including paintings by Rembrandt, Vermeer, Manet and Degas.

They were not real policemen, and there had been no untoward activity at the museum until theirs. The police suspected an organised gang, noting how diligently they had removed video footage recording their entrance. But they weren’t necessarily art cognoscenti, for they ignored paintings by Titian, Raphael and Michelangelo in favour of lesser works.

Geoff Kelly recently published *Thirteen Perfect Fugitives*, his account of working on the investigation for the FBI for more than two decades. Even 36 years after the robbery, he remains frustrated at the lack of progress, but optimistic that the art will turn up someday. “Check the attic,” he suggests, only half in jest. “Look under your bed.” He thinks that everyone directly involved in the robbery is now dead, some murdered, but they may have passed knowledge on to their families. As his book title suggests, he is now treating each artwork as he might a person on the run.

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6 MOST THEFTS ARE NOT THE THOMAS CROWN AFFAIR

In the 1999 remake of the 1968 Steve McQueen original, Pierce Brosnan has everything but the painting he covets, a delicious Venetian sunset by Monet. So he steals it with some fancy business involving a Trojan horse and several briefcases, and chuckles to himself as he later admires it in his lair. A fine film, but crushingly unlikely. Investigators call this the “Dr No Myth”, a fallacy that suggests not only that the super-wealthy have lairs (which they might have), but that they will

personally carry out the most debonair, Raffles-style heists (which they do not). The “Dr No” label comes from a scene where Bond meets his nemesis (in his lair) and double-takes when he sees Goya’s “Portrait of the Duke of Wellington”, which had been stolen from the National Gallery in 1961, a few months before filming began.

Kelly says that about 80 per cent of museum and gallery thefts are inside jobs, carried out either by staff or those with staff contacts, crimes that are often unreported to save an institution’s reputation. Of the more spectacular steals, most are committed by individuals who are part of, or paid by, traditional gangs:

“They would just as easily steal your car or rob you of your wallet.” More realistic, one supposes, will be the third *Thomas Crown Affair* currently in post-production, with Michael B Jordan directing and starring as a man determined to right the wrongs of a different kind of theft — artefacts removed from their countries of origin in the age of ruthless colonial empire-building by the West.

7 SOME THEFTS ARE ART IN THEMSELVES

In 2005, a man wearing a false beard, a thick scarf and a long coat attached a small, “ancient” object to a wall in the British Museum and, having fled, urged his many fans to find it. It was Banksy, of course; his object, a lump of concrete inscribed with a picture of a buffalo with spears in its hide and a prehistoric creature pushing a shopping trolley. *Peckham Rock*, roughly six by nine inches, was a reverse-heist, and came with its own typographically accurate label: “This finely preserved example of primitive art dates from the Post-Catatonic era... Most art of this type has unfortunately not survived. The majority is destroyed by zealous municipal officials who fail to recognise the artistic

merit and historical value of daubing on walls.”

Reporting on his successful installation, Banksy observed: “They’ve got their eye a lot more on things leaving than things going in, which works in my favour.” As the image on his installation suggested, perhaps art theft is merely an updated quest for ancient prey, the hunter-gatherer principle in contemporary London.

In June 2024, the British Museum was pranked again. The Brazilian conceptual artist Ilê Sartuzi, a graduate student at Goldsmiths, University of London, entered Room 68, the Money gallery, on the upper floor. He joined the Hands On desk, where a volunteer encouraged visitors to pick up and examine a few items, one of which was a 17th-century silver diamond-shaped coin from the English Civil War. Sartuzi knew the coin well, having observed it several times on previous visits; so well, indeed, that he was able to commission a convincing copy. The artist had a simple plan: he would swap the original coin for his 3D copy, and then leave the gallery, walk downstairs and deposit the original coin in the Perspex donations box near the entrance. Accomplices would secretly film the “performance”, and he would enter the work as part of his MFA thesis. But there was a snag. A volunteer became suspicious, and Sartuzi and his friends abandoned the project midway through.

They returned the next day. Sartuzi looked different. He had shaved his beard, and attended another Hands On demonstration unrecognised (there was a new volunteer behind the desk). His nine-minute film was called *Sleight of Hand*, and showed the artist replacing the genuine coin



with a fake one before donating it back. The artist reasoned that this wasn’t really theft at all, merely a temporary relocation, although the correspondence displayed in one of his subsequent shows suggested the BM’s legal department thought otherwise.

8 AI MIGHT YET SAVE OUR MASTERPIECES

There is a constant battle between a museum director wishing to display an object as openly and accessibly as possible, and that same museum’s security director wishing to lock everything down like Fort Knox. The compromise might be AI.

“Just a few years ago,” Kelly says, “a museum

might have a control room with a bank of 100 cameras, with guards whose job is to sit there and stare at all these screens with their eyes glazing over as they try to make sure they don’t miss something. But now, you have these AI-enabled cameras, much cheaper, where they detect the difference between a regular visitor and someone who might be there for a more nefarious reason. That person in the red sweater who was in last week — he’s here again and looking at the windows in an unusual way...”

This will work domestically too. Most paintings are stolen not from institutions but from private residences and, in his current role as a security consultant, Kelly is often bemused by the disconnect he sees between a wealthy owner’s attempt to protect his Rolex and his attempt to secure his Hockney. “You probably wouldn’t leave your \$100,000 watch lying around on your desk; you’d probably keep it in a safe. But you might have a million-dollar piece of art, and you’re just hanging it on a hook over your mantelpiece. The only alarm you have is the general one for your house, and you disarm it when you come home, and maybe you don’t arm it when you go out. And on top of that, the repair guy and the cleaning lady are coming in and out of the house all day.”

9 THE ETERNAL RELATIONSHIP

Several questions remain. Why do these things keep happening? Why don’t these priceless objects stay on their hooks and in their cases? One implausible but attractive theory is that museums need thieves as much as thieves value their contents, a compelling co-dependence. The art-insurance business relies on this relationship, as do crime syndicates, the media and Hollywood. Part of us roots for the criminal — the individual against the institution, the exhilarating chase. But we are also the poorer for these crimes, for they create a breach both in our visual history and the vital pleasure that art provides; with the rapid expansion of AI, the public presence of physical objects seems more important than ever. So we have a dilemma: to cheer the heist or condemn it? And is it a crime in itself to do both at once? ○

