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To Catch An Art-Thief

By Urška Jeran, Slovenia



Art historian Noah Charney. Photo courtesy of Noah Charney.

In broad daylight, just before closing on February 10, three masked gunmen burst into the prestigious Bührle Museum in Zürich (Switzerland), where they forced guards and museum-goers to the floor at gunpoint, and thereupon proceeded to steal four paintings worth an estimated \$163 million right off the walls. The alarms went off as the thieves escaped with *Boy in a Red Waistcoat* by Paul Cezanne, *Count Lepic and his Daughters* by Edgar Degas, *Poppies near Vetheuil* by Claude Monet, and *Chestnut in Bloom* by Vincent Van Gogh. After a little more than three minutes, the police arrived on the scene - but it was too late.

"This theft, like the 2004 Munch Museum theft, has all the markings of organized crime," says Noah Charney, an art historian, art crime expert, and author of a literary thriller called, aptly enough, *The Art Thief* (Atria, 2007). "This was the second multi-million dollar art theft in Zürich in one week, and it shows a harvest of high-value artworks, which will be used for barter and collateral in deals between crime syndicates for other illicit goods, such as drugs and arms."

According to Charney, art collectors were not involved in either theft. "It was a smash-and-grab operation," he said, "[with the] thieves taking whatever was noted as being easiest, not specific targets. The paintings taken were the most valuable works that were nearest to the door."

Charney initially became interested in the study of art crime while doing research for *The Art Thief*. At the age of 28 he is one of the leading authorities on art crime in the world. He holds two Master's degrees, one in 17th century Roman Art, and the other in 16th century Florentine painting, and is nearing the completion of his PhD.


With almost no academic material on art crime, Charney was spurred to take action to protect the treasures that speak volumes about our shared history, human thought and expression. His organization, Association for Research into Crimes Against Art (ARCA) www.artcrime.info, is the first think-tank on issues involving art crime. This non-profit organization acts as a bridge between academics and law enforcement on an international level, while studying and analyzing art crime through history and today.

Art crime, according to Charney, is the fourth highest-grossing criminal industry worldwide, financially fueling other international criminal activity. Yet due to the current lack of empirical evidence and the poor statistics available, most governments do not understand the severity of art crime, nor do they take it seriously enough to allocate human resources and money to help address the problem. Furthermore, international collaboration is fairly under-developed, which only increases the possibility for art crime perpetrators to avoid capture and conviction.

Charney says there is a kind of perverse patina associated with art crimes which is based on the popular misconception that art crime is not serious, occurs rarely, and only involves the collectibles of the wealthy.

"In reality, there are tens of thousands of reported art crimes every year, though only the major museum thefts tend to make headlines. And because art crime is the realm of organized crime, it funds all their other activities, making it very serious, indeed," he said.

Many misconceptions about art crime are fueled by film. Indeed, who wouldn't want to steal for charming Sean Connery in the movie *Entrapment*? But contrary to this popularized image, Charney says, almost all art crime is perpetrated by petty, sleazy small time crooks with no art experience who are hired often only once to steal art on behalf of a criminal syndicate. "Interesting and unique to the

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psychology of art crime is that there is a popular fiction regarding the existence of criminal collectors," Charney said.

In fact, the so-called crimes of passion that we tend to associate with a criminal collector taking pleasure in possessing stolen art are few and far between. It does happen, however, that film and fiction influence naïve criminals to assume that stolen art is not difficult to sell on to a collector. They soon realize that this is a false assumption.

"So much of the psychological rationale for art collecting is in conspicuous consumption," Charney explains. "When you remove the ability to show off your purchase, you remove most of the impetus. There are very few people in the world willing to risk prison to own an artwork that they can't show anyone nor tell anyone about."

As a result, most stolen art becomes just another commodity that is used in an exchange of illicit goods. Charney says this underground activity is a funding source for activities in which organized crime is involved, including terrorism.

According to the statistics that do exist, the best stolen art recovery rates are about 10%. Prosecution

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rates are unfortunately much lower. Roughly 75% of all art crime is comprised of antiquities looting from illicit archeological sites, usually perpetrated by local peasants who are professional part-time tomb raiders.

When stolen unregistered objects are taken directly out of the earth, they can be sold on an open market with an invented provenance. "There is a lot of indication that Islamic fundamentalist groups are receiving a significant portion of funds through the illicit antiquities trade. You get something like the Taliban in power in Afghanistan, which is going to have the support of local communities who know where to find unexcavated tombs. Looted objects are passed on to government who may then use them to fund terrorist activity," Charney explains. The covert nature of this disrespectful manipulation of archeological artifacts means that concrete evidence is difficult to come by.

And what about the four paintings ripped from the walls of the Bührle Museum? Strangely enough, on February 17, two of the paintings - the Monet and the Van Gogh - were recovered in an unlocked car with stolen license plates, parked near the museum.

The obvious question is what happened, and where are the remaining two paintings? "The nature of this recovery, so quickly after the theft, the paintings found in an unlocked car so near the crime scene, smacks of money having changed hands, a ransom having been paid," said Charney. "But paying a ransom only encourages future thefts. It seems that these thieves succeeded where the Munch thieves had failed."

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