

# Why Do Thieves Steal Art?

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*The recent theft from the Museum of Modern Art in Paris prompts the question: Is it for the money, the thrill, or something darker?*

Why steal art? The theft last week of five rare paintings by Picasso, Matisse, George Braque, Leger, and Modigliani worth over half a billion dollars from the Museum of Modern Art in Paris prompts this question, which keeps returning to haunt us.

In many cases, the art thief's motive is purely monetary. In such cases, the fate of the art depends on a number of factors. If the stolen work is too famous, it is unmarketable and even a crooked dealer will not touch it. Such too-hot-to-handle pieces often end up as barter for weapons, drugs, or other black market contraband. Alternatively, the artworks can be held for ransom, with the thief attempting to sell the art back to the owner or the insurance company, which would rather buy back the art at a discounted rate than pay out a full claim.

Sometimes art is stolen on a lark by those who do not understand what is required to fence these creations through the criminal art chain and the frustrated thieves will simply dump the stolen pieces and walk away. With luck, the artwork is recovered before too much damage has occurred. Other categories include insurance fraud and organized crime, the latter being one of the reasons the FBI Art Crime Unit was established in 2005. Art theft is a multi-billion dollar trade for organized crime groups, almost as profitable as drug trafficking.

Art thieves like to subscribe to the self-serving notion that their work is a "bloodless" hunt or a victimless crime. The truth is that many – not only the artists and the owner – are victimized by art theft. The public also becomes victim through the loss of cultural experience and national identity. Art theft also results in higher insurance premiums, which are already so prohibitive for both collectors and galleries that approximately 50 per cent of art is now uninsured.

While most dealers in stolen art are in it for the money, the most chilling art thief is the obsessed psychopath. Much like the stalker, this type of person has a sense of entitlement regarding art and is indifferent to the impact of his behaviour on the victims. The desire to possess a particular work, even one that cannot be sold or shared, comes from deep within the criminal psyche. The psychopathic art thief desires something that makes him feel sophisticated and refined, compensating for some personal deficiency. Perhaps the thief feels he is rescuing the art; perhaps he is expressing contempt for the cultural "elite"; maybe he needs the high of getting away with the crime; perhaps he simply wants to complete his rare collection to show off to his clique or trade amongst other criminal collectors and dealers. Or his motive may be simpler: perhaps he steals art because he loves it. Such was the case with Stéphane Breitwieser.

Between 1995 and 2001, Breitwieser, a French waiter, stole \$1.4 billion (U.S.) in art. His method was to cut paintings from their frames and walk out with them under his coat while his girlfriend distracted officials. Like most psychopaths, Breitwieser was described as an outwardly ordinary person. He was caught and arrested at the Richard Wagner Museum in Switzerland in November 2001. His mother subsequently destroyed much of the evidence, throwing many of the artworks down the garbage disposal or into a river nearby. In the ensuing trial, Breitwieser explained that, when he was not stealing, he had a feeling of emptiness that made him feel ill.

In their desperate yearning for control and possession, art criminals like Breitwieser deprive the rest of the world of the enjoyment of art.

With the recent theft at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris, the thief took his time to carefully remove the paintings from their frames, leaving them tauntingly behind. (As an artist, I must often remove frames in order

to transport paintings, and it takes time, tools, and some skill.) This theft was not a smash-and-grab, and the fact that the thief was clearly knowledgeable about the inadequacies of the security system indicates a possible element of stalking.

This stalking brings to mind a bibliophile kleptomaniac who studied the security systems of libraries before stealing rare manuscripts, demonstrating the obsessive-compulsive aspect of this type of crime. Over a sixteen-year period, wealthy college dropout Stephen Blumberg travelled across Canada and the U.S., visiting libraries along the way from which he stole 24,000 rare manuscripts. Before burglarizing a library, Blumberg carefully examined its layout and security. He found creative ways of reaching secret collections, earning the nickname "Spiderman." In May 1990, on an informant's tip, FBI agents entered his house and found an immaculately preserved collection. It took them two days to confiscate 867 boxes of stolen books. With each book, Blumberg had carefully removed all evidence of previous ownership. By soaking and ironing pages on which libraries had embossed identification stamps, he made it impossible, in most cases, to trace provenance.

Blumberg showed us how easy it was to steal, especially when many libraries were unwilling to admit to being robbed, which is also true for many galleries. Improving security and reporting thefts will both contribute to curbing theft, but there must also be stiffer sentencing reflecting the seriousness of this crime. Blumberg served almost six years in jail, swiftly returning to his old habits upon his release.

If the Paris thief is arrested and convicted, we will see how soon the beat goes on.

*Bonnie Czegledi is the author of [Crimes Against Art: International Art and Cultural Heritage Law](#) (Thomson Carswell: May 2010).*

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