

This September a stolen Rembrandt self-portrait was recovered in Stockholm, in a police sting operation. Such episodes can seem as exciting as television thrillers, but, says **Shauna Isaac**, the reality of art theft is more grubby than glamorous

Stolen Masterpieces

On a late summer day in 2003, thieves entered Drumlanrig Castle in Scotland and stole Leonardo da Vinci's painting *The Madonna with the Yarnwinder*. The crooks posed as tourists and took the painting from the staircase hall. A female guide made a brave attempt to stop them, but they over-powered her and sped off in a waiting car.

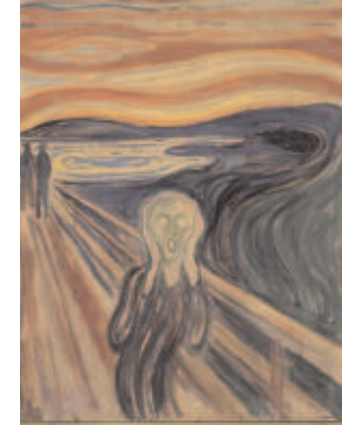
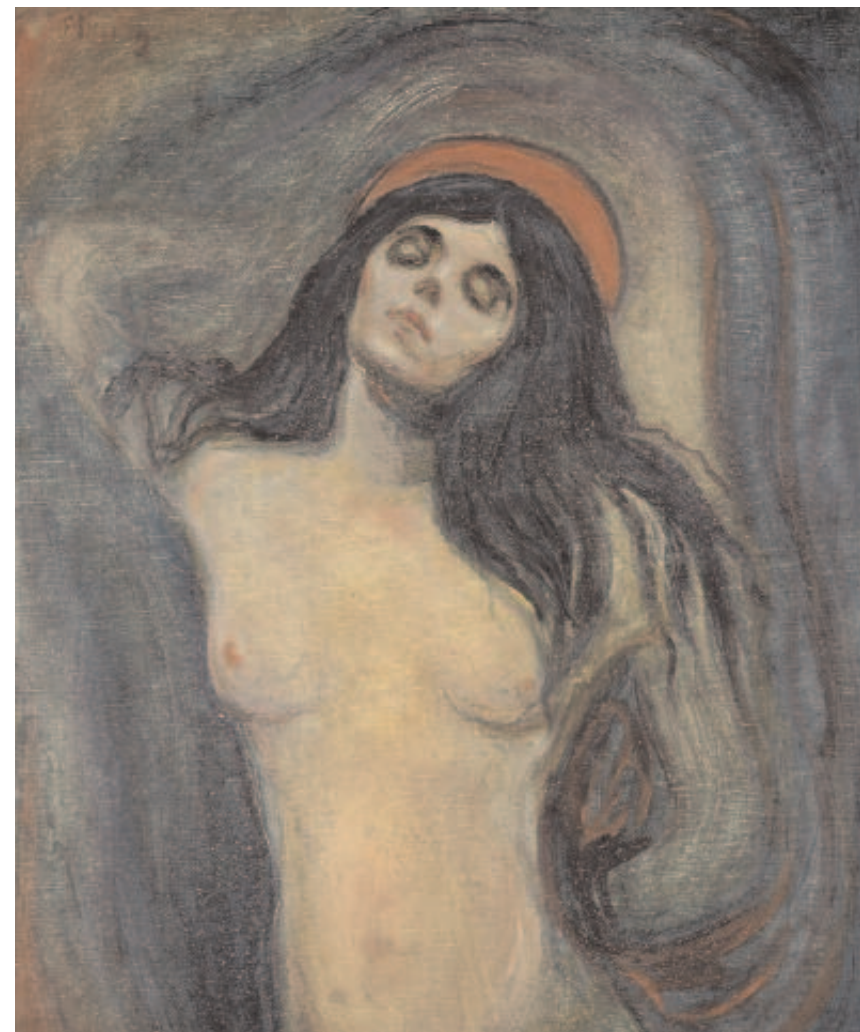
In August 2004, masked robbers stole two famous works by Edvard Munch – *Madonna* and *The Scream* – from the Munch Museum in Oslo. The men entered through the museum café and made their way towards the pictures. One burglar held the staff and visitors at gunpoint while the other yanked the paintings from the wall. The gang then made their escape in a black Audi.

As recently as September this year, a Danish police officer posing as an interested buyer recovered a Rembrandt self-portrait that had been stolen, along with two pictures by Renoir, from Sweden's National Museum five years ago (see page 42). The paintings were taken when three men entered the waterfront museum in Stockholm just before closing time. One of the criminals wielded a submachine gun in the lobby while the other two snatched the pictures. They planted car bombs and put spikes on the road to delay the police while they escaped in a speedboat docked near the museum.

Thousands of works of art and antiques are stolen every month, but it's the rare masterpieces that command the headlines. They capture the imagination of the public, and the press revel in writing about the daring thefts. This

is because the art world is perceived as glamorous, and the thieves are believed to be like those portrayed in films, either criminal masterminds like Dr No or dashing billionaires like Thomas Crown, who steal these objects for prestige or thrills. In reality, art theft is intrinsically linked to money laundering and drug trafficking, and the thieves have much simpler motives.

Mark Dalrymple, a loss adjuster who specialises in the recovery of stolen art, states that 'Ninety-five per cent of all major art thefts are because of money – this is the main motivation.' He goes on to say that 'Occasionally thieves steal because they think they ought to have the objects, but it whitewashes the criminal act they committed. They give it as an excuse because they think they have the right to display it in their residence.' He cites the example of Stéphane Breitwieser, a French waiter who stole more than \$1 billion worth of art for his own enjoyment. Breitwieser spent years scouring museums throughout Europe and selecting objects that were small enough to fit under his coat. When he was finally caught in 2003, his mother tried to destroy the evidence by throwing works into a canal and chopping up oil paintings, including a work by Lucas Cranach the Elder



entitled *Sybilie of Cleves*, which was valued at £5 million. Dalrymple emphasises that the Breitwieser thefts are an exception, and that the great majority of art thefts are carried out for financial reasons.

One of the ways that thieves try to make money is by collecting a reward. In August 2002, a stolen Titian painting entitled *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* was found in a plastic shopping bag seven years after it was taken from Lord Bath's Longleat estate in Wiltshire (see page 43). Thieves had broken into the first floor window of the house using a ladder and headed straight toward the drawing room where the

Opposite and top: Edvard Munch, *Madonna*, 1893–4, and *The Scream*, 1893; above: armed robbers make off with the paintings from Oslo's Munch Museum in August 2004.

painting hung. When the police arrived eight minutes later, the thieves had already vanished. The painting is worth £5 million, and Lord Bath's insurance company offered a £100,000 reward for its return. When the painting was first stolen, swindlers tried to claim the reward money by reporting bogus tips. It wasn't until seven years later, when former Scotland Yard detective Charles Hill mentioned the theft during a Radio 4 interview, that a man contacted him and said that he could help recover the Titian as long as the reward was still valid. When the painting was returned, the reward money was paid out.

Thieves are unable to sell stolen masterpieces on the open market since the objects are so well known that reputable dealers will immediately recognise them. The only way a masterpiece can be sold is on the black market, either for cash

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Top right: the Earl of Dalkeith outside Drumlanrig Castle with a reproduction of the stolen Leonardo *Madonna*; below right: the suspected thieves caught on CCTV; bottom: the Rembrandt self-portrait stolen from the National Museum, Stockholm, and later recovered.



or as collateral. A painting like Leonardo da Vinci's *Madonna with the Yarnwinder* could never be sold legitimately, and it is most likely that thieves are indirectly profiting from its use as collateral for drug trafficking.

Dick Ellis, who ran Scotland Yard's Art and Antiques Squad and is currently a consultant for Swift-Find, an online registry of valuables, emphasises that art theft is carried out either by low-level criminals or by professional crime syndicates in order to make a profit: 'Artwork is not stolen for the beauty of the art – it's a commodity. The mentality of some people is that if it's unsaleable it becomes a liability and there's a danger that they will destroy it.' He cites an example of a Gainsborough painting that was stolen several years ago. The theft of the painting was featured on the television programme *Crimewatch*. The criminal who took it saw this particular episode. Afraid that he might get caught, he kicked the picture out of the frame, destroyed it, and then sold the frame for whatever money he could get.



Another way that thieves try to profit from masterpieces is by demanding a ransom for them. When Munch's *Scream* was stolen in 2004 it was not the first time it had been taken. Munch painted four versions of his most famous painting. In February 1994, a more valuable version was stolen from the National Gallery in Oslo. Two men climbed a ladder, smashed through a window and cut the picture from the wall with wire cutters. In its place, they left a postcard saying 'Thanks for the poor security'. A month later, the gallery received a \$1 million ransom demand for the painting, but refused to pay since they didn't know if the demand was legitimate. Fortunately, the police were able to recover the work in a sting operation where a police officer posed as an interested buyer, rather as they were to do when they recovered the Rembrandt self-portrait stolen from Sweden's National Museum.

The authorities have not been as fortunate with the recent Munch theft. Although several arrests have been made, the

two stolen paintings have not been recovered. Ellis states that the theft was carried out by professional criminals, who are linked to a violent bank robbery in which a Norwegian police officer was shot. He also believes that inadequate security made the paintings an easy target for professional thieves: 'In the 1970s, bank robberies were fashionable but then security improved. In the 1980s and 1990s prices in the art market skyrocketed, but there was little or no security in place to prevent these kinds of thefts.' The lack of security and increased value made famous works of art more attractive to criminals.

Although hundreds of stolen masterpieces are missing, the recovery rate is higher than that for average antiquities. Mr Dalrymple notes that masterpieces are easier to recover: 'The art world is more interested in stolen masterpieces, which closes doors for thieves and makes it easier for investigators. With higher-value property it's much easier to put a mark on it.'

When masterpieces are recovered, they are returned to the owner. Sometimes this happens with very little fanfare, and sometimes it makes headlines, as it did when the Titian and Rembrandt paintings were returned. In several instances, the value of the object increases. In March 1997, a petty thief walked into London's Lefevre Gallery and asked an employee if a painting on the wall was by Picasso.

When she confirmed that it was by him, he pulled a gun on her and stole the picture. He then fled into a waiting taxi, which dropped him off in south London. The thief left the painting's frame in the car; it had his fingerprints all over it, leading to his arrest. The painting, entitled *Tête de Femme*, was returned to the gallery and successfully sold, with the buyer citing the theft as part of his reason for purchase. Infamy creates interest, which also influences demand.

Experts in the field of stolen art always emphasise that art theft is not glamorous. The crooks don't care about the object, and their main motive is to make money from the theft, through collateral, ransom or a reward. It's sad to remember, when dealing with objects of such beauty, that those who steal them think only of how they can profit from them, and not at all about their aesthetic value. h

Left: Tim Moore, General Manager of Longleat, displays Titian's *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* after its recovery, with the plastic bag in which it was found.



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