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NOVEMBER 2005

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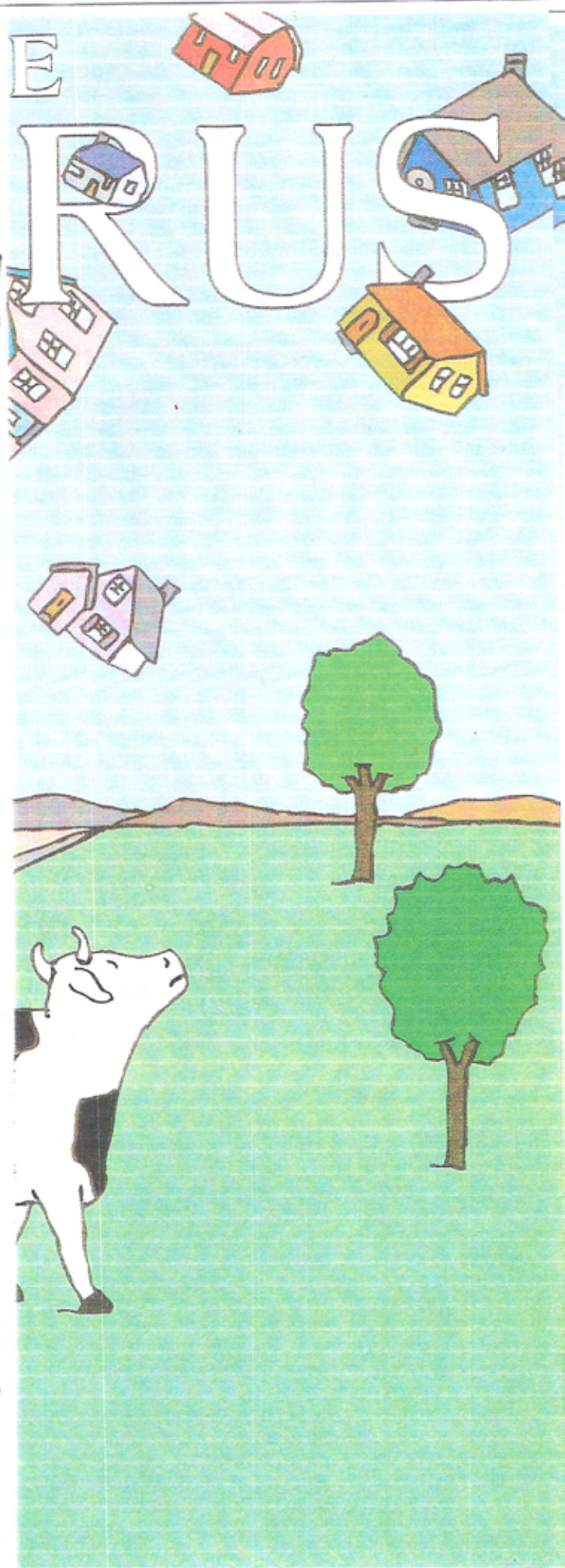
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Artful Crimes

The Walrus, November 2005 Volume 2 Issue 9

by Joshua Knelman

Curators call it the Lost Museum, a vast fictional place that houses all the artwork ever stolen. Rembrandts, Picassos, Renoirs, and Edvard Munch's The Scream hang on the walls. The halls bustle with activity, fed by an ever-increasing flow of art and antiquities snatched from the world's galleries and museums. This fantastic site has its real origins in the multi-billion-dollar global art-theft business. Much of the bounty is disappearing into private collections, as police fall behind in the battle against con men, thieves, and collectors willing to pay almost any price to own a work of genius.

Lawyer Bonnie Czegledi sits in a brightly coloured office that doubles as an art gallery, sorting through lists of stolen art strewn across the table in front of her. The lists detail works looted from historic sites across the world, pieces taken from occupied France or lost during the Russian Revolution—thousands of paintings, sculptures, etchings, and drawings. Czegledi has many theories about why you might want to steal one of these works of art: because you fell in love with it; because it is fragile and needs your protection; because if you steal just one more your collection will be complete; because you can reap a ridiculous profit; because you loathe the snooty cultural establishment; because strolling out of a museum onto a crowded street with a stolen painting under your arm is an adrenaline rush like no other; because hanging a stolen work on your wall will impress your rich friends. The Toronto lawyer, whose practice is devoted entirely to art theft, could go on. After all, so much art is being stolen that according to unesco, The Greatest Show You've Never Seen, as insiders call it, is now worth an estimated \$6 billion annually—making it the second most-profitable criminal enterprise in the world, after drug trafficking.

It's not just Rembrandts and Picassos that are attracting thieves. Following the US invasion of Baghdad in 2003, looters sacked the Iraqi National Museum, removing a staggering array of Mesopotamian antiquities. Many of the pieces, including a priceless 5,000-year-old life-sized head of a Sumerian woman carved from marble, have disappeared only to be found on the doorsteps of private collectors, museums, and antique shops. In June, some tiny but valuable Babylonian artifacts reached the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto when a man arrived at the office of Dan Rahimi, the museum's executive director for development, carrying what he believed to be six 3,000-year-old cylinder seals once used to roll imprints onto flat surfaces. These two-inch-long symbols of authority, carved out of marble or shaped from clay, are worth up to \$100,000 (US) each.

The holder of these Iraqi treasures told Rahimi that a third party had purchased them on eBay. Rahimi, a trained archeologist who has worked extensively in the Middle East, was suspicious about the true origins of the cylinder seals, and their presence in Canada raised a troubling question: with art theft so rampant, what should prospective buyers do when

the ownership of a work cannot be clearly established? The answer seems simple enough: don't accept it. But in the world of art, where genius, money, and ego collide, morality can quickly fall by the wayside. Rahimi is always on guard against people who attempt to create a paper trail of legitimacy surrounding a disputed piece by loaning it to the room. After carefully examining them, Rahimi determined that four were original and two were fakes. "The room was absolutely not interested in them," he says.

Such a decision represents a minority choice among collectors, who seem more than willing to buy stolen works—a fact reflected in the number of paintings posted on Interpol's Most Wanted art list. Among the recently stolen items: Leonardo da Vinci's painting *Madonna of the Yarnwinder* (\$65 million), dated 1501; Pierre-Auguste Renoir's painting *Head of a Little Girl* (\$300,000), stolen from the famous Paris auction house Tajan; and five Italian Renaissance bronze plaques valued at \$1.1 million lifted from London's Victoria and Albert Museum last December—the third robbery there in three months.

Some blame the growing number and brazen nature of the robberies on unprepared gallery owners and museum administrators. Incredibly, in 2004, at the Munch Museum in Oslo, Norway, two armed and masked men ripped Edvard Munch's nineteenth-century painting *The Scream* (\$88 million) off the museum wall in the middle of the day and in full view of gallery visitors.

In the United States, the FBI has created a special task force to combat art theft, and Interpol tracks stolen art worldwide. But Canada appears to be an open field: the RCMP doesn't have anyone dedicated to the problem, nor do any of the provinces save for Quebec, which has only two officers. "[Canada is] a great place to steal art, to hide looted art, and to smuggle it into the United States," says Czeglédi. "There's no one paying attention. It's like the Wild West out there." Indeed, Interpol's list of art stolen in Canada includes works by this impressive roster: Marc Chagall, Joan Miró, Peter Paul Rubens, and contemporary artists such as Alex Colville and Andy Warhol.

"We need to be more aggressive and go into museum and gallery collections," insists Czeglédi, "and say, 'Listen, don't say this [painting] is an anonymous loan,' say, 'It was stolen from a couple who were killed in the Holocaust.' Canada is not doing anything."

The Art Loss Register in New York City, which helps potential buyers verify whether works are stolen or not, rarely receives a call from north of the border. "We have very few clients in Canada who search our database," says the register's operations manager, Katherine Dugdale. "Certainly, auction houses there don't use us."

An unusual glimpse into the Canadian art-crime scene occurred in January 2004, when five eighteenth-century ivory statues carved by Huguenot craftsman David le Marchand and belonging to media magnate Ken Thomson, were stolen during business hours from the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. The thieves simply lifted the glass cases containing

the \$1.5-million statues and walked out. A \$150,000 reward was offered by an insurance company, and two weeks later a lawyer acting as a go-between returned the statues.

That seemed like a painless ending for both the gallery and Thomson, who was so relieved when police returned his ivories that he placed them lovingly on his bed. "They meant so much to me," said Thomson at the time. "People wouldn't understand unless they were collectors themselves and had a very special affinity with something that they possessed that virtually became part of them." But did the thieves actually receive the reward money as ransom, allowing them to escape justice and rob again? It wouldn't surprise those who understand the sophistication of art thieves, and the almost compulsive desire of galleries and collectors to secure the safe return of their prized possessions.

Chad Wolfond remembers the morning of September 11, 2001, not only for the attack on the World Trade Center, but also for the robbery at his Lonsdale Gallery in Toronto. Waking up early that morning, he skipped breakfast and left on his usual ten-minute walk to work. Once at his desk, Wolfond tapped the keyboard of his computer, expecting it to power up. When it didn't, he glanced down to discover it was gone. Then he noticed a paper trail across the gallery floor leading to filing cabinets where his vintage pinhole photography collection was stored. As he rifled through the drawers, his heart sank—the best works he owned, including those by leading French photographer Ilan Wolff, were missing.

"I felt simultaneously pissed off and mildly flattered," recalls Wolfond. "The thief had left photos that I also thought were inferior."

Shaken, Wolfond phoned police, and by noon they were dusting for fingerprints. Before leaving, one of the officers told him that a detective would be in touch, but added, "Chances are slim that you will ever see these photographs again." A month later, the thief returned and took almost \$35,000 worth of art, including photo-based works by Toronto artist Lori Newdick. Although some of the work has been recovered, Wolfond lost photographs valued at over \$250,000, all told.

Some of the colleagues he contacted after the robberies advised him not to alert the media. News of the robbery, they argued, would only damage his gallery's reputation as a secure place to show and sell. Some hinted that they too had been robbed, but had mourned in private. One suggested Wolfond call Czegledi. Contrary to received opinion, Czegledi counselled Wolfond to go to the media, believing that publicizing the theft would make the works impossible to sell. "Do everything you can to promote these stolen pictures," she told Wolfond, who took her advice. "Contact Interpol. Talk to the media. Get listed on the Art Loss Register in New York City."

On this particular day, Tarah Aylward, director of Toronto's Ingram Gallery, has dropped by Czegledi's office for legal advice. In October 2002, as part of the Toronto

International Art Fair, a group of Yorkville galleries organized a lecture at Hazelton Lanes, an upscale shopping mall, to celebrate several Canadian artists. Staff at the mall volunteered to install sculptures in its courtyard by some of the artists Aylward represents, including Toronto figurative sculptor Joe Rosenthal. Aylward was told not to worry about security, but the Saturday before the lecture she received a phone call: two of Rosenthal's bronzes had vanished.

Other galleries in the area were also hit during the 2002 art fair; in 2003, during the same period, a figurative painting by French artist Camille Cabailot-Lassalle worth \$28,000 disappeared from the Odon Wagner Gallery. The Toronto fair might be a magnet for criminals, but art theft is hardly a Toronto phenomenon. "I get emails from galleries across the country saying they have been robbed," complains Aylward. "The thieves who do this work are not street criminals. They are sophisticated, polished. Certainly, they are successful."

The largest art heist in Canadian history took place in 1972, when thieves broke into the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and stole paintings by eighteen European masters, including Honoré Daumier and Jean-François Millet, worth a combined \$2 million. Only one of the paintings has been recovered. Since that historic theft, the problem has only worsened in Quebec. The Sûreté du Québec now has two full-time detectives, Sergeant Alain Lacoursière and his partner, Sergeant Jean François Talbot, tasked with bringing art thieves to justice. Lacoursière says that each year in Quebec alone there are 150 new cases in which \$20 million worth of art is stolen. The only help he has outside his own force is from Interpol, which has one Ottawa-based employee compiling brochures about stolen objects, which are then distributed to police forces across the country. According to Lacoursière, the process is slow, and there is little communication between agencies. "I get phone calls from Toronto once in a while," he says, "but I have no idea what's happening in Vancouver. It's a blank spot."

The absence of hard information troubles Lacoursière, who knows just how quickly thieves can move a painting out of the country. He tells the story of a 1995 theft in which a robber stole a huge abstract painting by Quebec artist Jean-Paul Riopelle from a house in Montreal's Westmount neighbourhood. Before he took it, the robber showed a picture of the painting to a prestigious auction house in Paris, which indicated interest. By the time the family arrived home from a weekend at their cottage, the Riopelle and the thief were already on a plane for Paris. The painting was quickly auctioned off for \$200,000, just as Montreal police were getting around to filing a report. There was a further delay before other police forces were alerted by Interpol. "If I call Interpol to tell them a Riopelle was stolen in Montreal," says Lacoursière, "that information won't be delivered to the world for six months," referring to the discs of stolen works circulated by Interpol. By then, paintings like the Riopelle have slipped undetected into a private collection.

Art-savvy criminals love practising their craft in Canada. "There are twenty-five full-time art thieves working in this country that I know of," says Lacoursière. "I arrested a guy last

week. He's been in prison in seven different countries, but he told me, 'I like Canada. If I get caught here, you have the nicest prisons.'"

Lacoursière knows his beat well, and keeps the email addresses and cell-phone numbers of several thieves on hand. When the \$150,000 reward was offered for Ken Thomson's ivories, the detective quickly fingered two of his regulars as the likely culprits. He called them. One was in Toronto at the time, and Lacoursière told him, "Listen, you can't sell them; they're too well-publicized. And there's a big reward being offered." Whether Lacoursière's man was the thief or not is unknown, but a couple of days later a lawyer came forward with the sculptures.

The ever-expanding database at the Art Loss Register in New York is clear evidence of the growth of art theft worldwide. When Katherine Dugdale started there three years ago, 140,000 stolen pieces were registered; now there are 160,000. "I was shocked at how many works are stolen," she says. "I associated art crime with cultural artifacts, like the antiquities looted in Iraq. I didn't think we would have 500 Picassos registered." The stolen works, she says, are moved up through the tiers of the industry until they make it back to the top, where they are finally legitimized in museum catalogues and gallery collections.

Pilfered art is often laundered into "good title" in Switzerland, which, compared to other Western countries, has weak laws regarding the importation and exportation of cultural property. Thieves regularly move stolen work through the country where officials ask few questions. But, if not careful, museums too can provide coverage for stolen works lacking provenance. "When a piece of art enters a prominent museum catalogue, it [can] triple in value," explains Czegledi. "And it's not that hard to do."

Czegledi also points the finger at her own profession. Lawyers who don't perform due diligence can end up "cleaning" a stolen piece by accident. "Of course, that puts their reputation at risk if anyone else checks their work," says Czegledi. But, she adds, "no one will check."

Lacoursière doesn't expect rigorous provenance (history of ownership) checks to become a regular practice at Canadian institutions anytime soon. "Galleries and auction houses will never be forced to check the provenance," he says. "It would mean having to hire extra staff." The detective's ire is understandable. "Even pawnshops have to list everything—where it's from, who they sell to. They deliver that list to the police each week." But in many cases, he says, provenance is all but impossible to verify—if an Iraqi digs up an ancient cylinder seal or another valuable object of antiquity and smuggles it to the West, who's to know?

During a lecture on international art crime at the Royal Ontario Museum, Czegledi

lamented the cultural loss caused by the thefts at the Iraqi National Museum. Clicking off the lights, the words "iraq red list" appeared on a screen at the front of the room. An alabaster vase, then a necklace made of precious stones, then a Babylonian cylinder seal appeared, then dozens more art objects. "Iraq's two greatest non-renewable resources," Czegledi told her audience, "are oil and antiquities."

In January, partly in response to the extensive, devastating looting at the Baghdad museum, the fbi unveiled its first Art Crime Team, a task force of eight detectives paired with prosecutors. Robert K. Wittman, a Philadelphia-based special agent and the team's senior investigator, told an audience of dealers and museum officials in New York City that the art trade "is the biggest unregulated business in the United States and ripe for fraud." To learn more about the illegal trade, each officer spent a week at the prestigious Barnes Foundation in Pennsylvania, founded in 1922 to promote the appreciation of the fine arts. There, Wittman says, they were taught the difference between a Matisse and a Miró.

Czegledi and Patty Gerstenblith, an art law professor at DePaul University in Chicago, co-chaired a conference of the American Bar Association's International Cultural Property Committee at the Plaza Hotel in Manhattan in March of last year, for which they pulled together a roster of speakers to discuss Iraq. One of the speakers, Colonel Matthew Bogdanos, was a former boxer with a degree in the classics—one part intellectual, one part commando. Bogdanos's assignment in Iraq had been a daunting one: recover more than 14,000 objects of art and antiquity looted from the country's National Museum. The colonel described his task as if it were a video game for art collectors: wander Baghdad, track down the loot, return it to the museum, and don't get killed. "We decided it was more important to recover items than prosecute offenders," he said. "So we arranged a period of amnesty, and so far we've recovered almost 4,000 pieces." That left some 10,000 still missing, in addition to the continual flow of objects being extracted daily from thousands of unprotected archeological sites in Iraq.

One year later, at an antique shop on Madison Avenue in New York City, Czegledi and I peered through a glass display case at a handful of tiny cylinder seals ranging in price from \$10,000 to \$100,000 (US). "Do you think they're from Iraq?" she whispered, as the proprietor watched us out of the corner of his eye. "Excuse me," Czegledi finally said, "where are these from?" He answered expertly and without guilt: "Western Iraq. Uruk, early-dynastic upper Neo-Assyrian calcite cylinder seal."

War has long been a boon to art thieves. Earlier this year, Czegledi hunched over her boardroom table, long black hair spilling across her face as she spread out photocopies of detailed transport lists stamped Top Secret. One list showed the movement of hundreds of paintings—by Matisse, Monet, Chagall, Rubens, etc.—from Europe during World War II to transatlantic destinations such as Havana, New York, Washington, and Ottawa. Czegledi found the documents while conducting provenance research on behalf of a client at the National Archives in Washington, DC. "The easiest way to destroy a culture

is to steal its soul," she said. "The Nazis understood that very well."

Lately, Czegledi has been spending more and more time tracking down the rightful owners of artwork that the Nazis sold to unscrupulous collectors, and cataloguing thousands of pieces that disappeared during the German occupation of Poland. "There are Rembrandts," she says, "and then there are the Polish masters that I've never seen before, and that are unbelievable." One piece, a sixteenth-century etching of a woman by the German artist Albrecht Dürer, is in storage at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. Says Czegledi, "I call her the lady in the drawer."

Part of Hitler's personal art collection—including a charcoal portrait of Benito Mussolini, dozens of portraits of Hitler himself, and his own signed Christmas card—has surfaced in Canada, too. Two years ago, an Ontario woman approached Czegledi and told her that at the end of World War II her late husband, then a British soldier, had been sent to Berlin as part of an advance party. The Russians had reached the city first, having sped ahead to pillage and burn. By the time the British officer reached the German capital, he found the Reich Chancellery trashed. He wandered into a severely damaged chamber in Hitler's headquarters and found a portion of the führer's private art collection lying in a heap on the floor. The soldier then did exactly what Hitler would have done—he stole the art. The former soldier later emigrated to Canada, bringing the art with him, and now his widow wants to be rid of it. Czegledi has been shopping the art to all the major museums in the country, but so far there have been no takers. Her current plan is to send it to a gallery in Bavaria, the collection's region of origin.

In March, over a lunch at a French bistro off New York's Park Avenue, Lawrence Kaye and his partner, Howard Spiegler, two of the world's most prominent art lawyers, discussed not how to dispose of Nazi-era art collections, but how to return them to their rightful owners. Kaye had recently accepted a case involving more than 1,300 artworks, mostly by Dutch Old Masters, owned by Jacques Goudstikker, an avid collector who fled the German-occupied Netherlands in 1940, leaving his collection behind to be pillaged.

Kaye had had some success abroad: the Israel Museum in Jerusalem had recently agreed to hand over a charcoal drawing by Edgar Degas, *Four Nude Female Dancers Resting* (1898). In Canada, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts was being less helpful. The museum had agreed to turn over one of Goudstikker's paintings, *The Deification of Aeneas*, a seventeenth-century painting by Charles Le Brun, if ownership could be established, but Kaye was becoming impatient. "We're disappointed that we're having resistance in Montreal," he said, "but we'll be more active with respect to this particular painting, which is high on our list."

Efforts at restitution and law enforcement in the United States have received a helping hand from courts. Kaye cited the 2002 conviction of Frederick Schultz, a Madison Avenue dealer of Egyptian relics, as an important precedent. Schultz owned a number of rare and valuable pieces, including the head of Pharaoh Amenhotep iii, which he'd sold for \$1.4 million. The sculpture had been dug up by tomb raiders and exported illegally

into the United States. Schultz was eventually sentenced to almost three years in prison.

Despite Kaye's experience with the Le Brun painting, there are some encouraging signs in Canada. The fact that no Canadian museum has shown an interest in acquiring the art from Hitler's personal collection suggests a new caution. As well, the first Canadian symposium on art looted during World War II took place in November 2001 at the National Gallery in Ottawa. Like many other institutions across Canada and the United States, the National Gallery has posted a list on its website outlining the disputed art within its collection—including 100 paintings, sculptures, and drawings with gaps in ownership information between 1933 and 1945.

Michael Pantazzi, the curator of the European and American collections, says the National Gallery was the first in Canada to voluntarily return looted art. Among the best-known pieces it has returned is *Le Salon de Madame Aron* (1904), a painting by French artist Édouard Vuillard that was stolen in France during World War II and bought by the gallery in 1956. A second case of successful restitution involved an eighth-century Chinese limestone statue of a Buddhist holy man. It was handed over to the Chinese government in 2001 during a ceremony in Beijing.

But have museums learned from history? Are they doing all they can to keep today's stolen art from entering their great halls? The rom's Rahimi takes the provenance argument one step further. He believes that museums and galleries should refuse to accept works that seem even slightly suspect. This would mean abandoning the "good home" practice, which allows an institution to purchase a work of art with dubious credentials in order to prevent it from being damaged or lost further along the chain. "Anything we see we assume is bad," he says. "We assume it's fake, and if it's not fake then it's illegally obtained."

Even if museums and galleries clean up their acts, the allure of stolen art remains strong for private collectors. Czegledi sees a complex mixture of ego, money, and power at work. "Collecting art," she explains, "can become an obsessive behaviour. These collectors and dealers operate like a cult." This explains why even a well-publicized painting with no hope of resale, such as *The Scream*, gets stolen. "If you possess something that is special, you become special," Czegledi says. "It's power."

Rahimi wishes collectors and donors would see art collecting in ethical terms—if buyers felt a deeper sense of obligation toward shared cultural treasures, they might not be so quick to add the latest gem on the illicit market to their walls or display cases. But Rahimi agrees with Czegledi that the impulses that drive collectors to buy stolen art cannot be controlled. "People collect art for strange, personal reasons," he says. "Some of them are really driven. They are obsessed with making collections." That compulsion—to own a piece of genius—keeps thieves busy adding to the Greatest Show You Will Never See.

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