busted!

you think museum thefts are on the rise? think again. *marc spiegler* debunks six persisting myths of art crime

CHANCES ARE YOU'VE PLAYED THIS GAME: Looking around a gallery of priceless works, you ask yourself, "If I could possess any of these masterpieces, which would it be?" Then, unless you're a saint, you pose the natural follow-up question: "Well, how hard would it be to steal?"

In the Metropolitan Museum of Art or the National Gallery in London, the answer is "extremely hard." But in thousands of smaller museums and historic estates around the world, stealing artwork has proven to be quite easy.

Over the past few years, a string of daring museum thefts, often carried out in broad daylight, have made front-page headlines. Itinerant Alsatian waiter Stéphane Breitwieser's seven-year spree of museum thefts was a one-man crime wave. His sorties throughout Central Europe, even hitting several museums twice, netted him an incredible 239 objects, including paintings, musical instruments and medieval weaponry. Only a lucky citizen's arrest brought him to justice in late 2001.

But even with Breitwieser behind bars, Europe has been the stage for a slew of audacious museum heists. One night last May, thieves broke into Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum and lifted Benvenuto Cellini's circa 1540 saltcellar, valued at roughly $57 million. A few months later, two men posing as tourists entered Drumlanrig Castle in Scotland, tied up the summer intern and grabbed Leonardo's 1501 *Madonna with the Yarnwinder*, which British authorities estimated to be worth $70 million. Hightailing it to their getaway car, the pair passed some startled tourists from New Zealand and reportedly quipped, "Don't worry, love, we're the police. This is just practice."

Most recently, just before Christmas, a gang of men visited the Diamantmuseum (Diamond Museum) in Antwerp with a concealed sledgehammer, smashed two display cases and escaped with more than $1 million in Art Deco jewelry. As *Art & Auction* went to press, all three crimes remained unsolved.

Given such high-profile cases and the incidence of smaller-scale art burglaries, you'd think museum theft was epidemic. Almost every day, the art crime Web sites run by Ton Cremers in Rotterdam

Stolen moments: Scenes from *The Thomas Crown Affair*, 1999, starring Pierce Brosnan; *How to Steal a Million*, 1966, with Audrey Hepburn and Peter O'Toole; and *The Maltese Falcon*, 1941, with Humphrey Bogart, Peter Lorre, Mary Astor and Sydney Greenstreet

(www.museum-security.org) and his American collaborator, Jonathan Sazonoff in Chicago (www.saztv.com), carry reports of another heist—sometimes a major score, sometimes minor objects gone missing from a storeroom. Meanwhile, recent films such as *Entrapment* and *The Thomas Crown Affair* (both starring actors who have played James Bond) have given art theft a glamorous luster. Yet once you start talking to the art crime experts, it's clear that the fantasies perpetuated by slick caper movies and breathless true-crime stories obscure the realities of art theft. Which, in their own way, are dramatic enough.

1 MYTH: MUSEUM THEFT IS RISING

Granted, it certainly seems that our cultural institutions are being besieged by thieves. And the true number of stolen works is likely even higher than reports indicate, because their disappearance is sometimes deliberately covered up by museums. Why? To avoid copycat thefts, higher insurance premiums and public embarrassment. What's more, some crimes remain undetected for years. In December, hundreds of artworks and artifacts were suddenly discovered to have vanished from the Barnes Collection outside Philadelphia. The museum's executive director suspects that some of them may have been missing for decades. Often, the most damaging thefts involve unglamorous but highly effective art

embezzlement by curators, visiting scholars and others with access.

But does all this mean that museum theft is escalating? Experts say no. "There are no reliable statistics on this, and art crime goes in cycles," explains Lynne Chaffinch, who heads the FBI's Art Theft Program. "I can't tell if there is more theft today or whether it's just better reported, because there's a lot more pressure now for museums to be open with the public."

Surely, if anyone could judge whether there's an epidemic afoot, it would be Interpol art crime specialist Karl-Heinz Kind. He is unconvinced. "I'm not aware of any major increase in museum theft," Kind says. "It's always been an important problem. What we are seeing is a change in methods: Criminals are moving away from the traditional nighttime burglary."

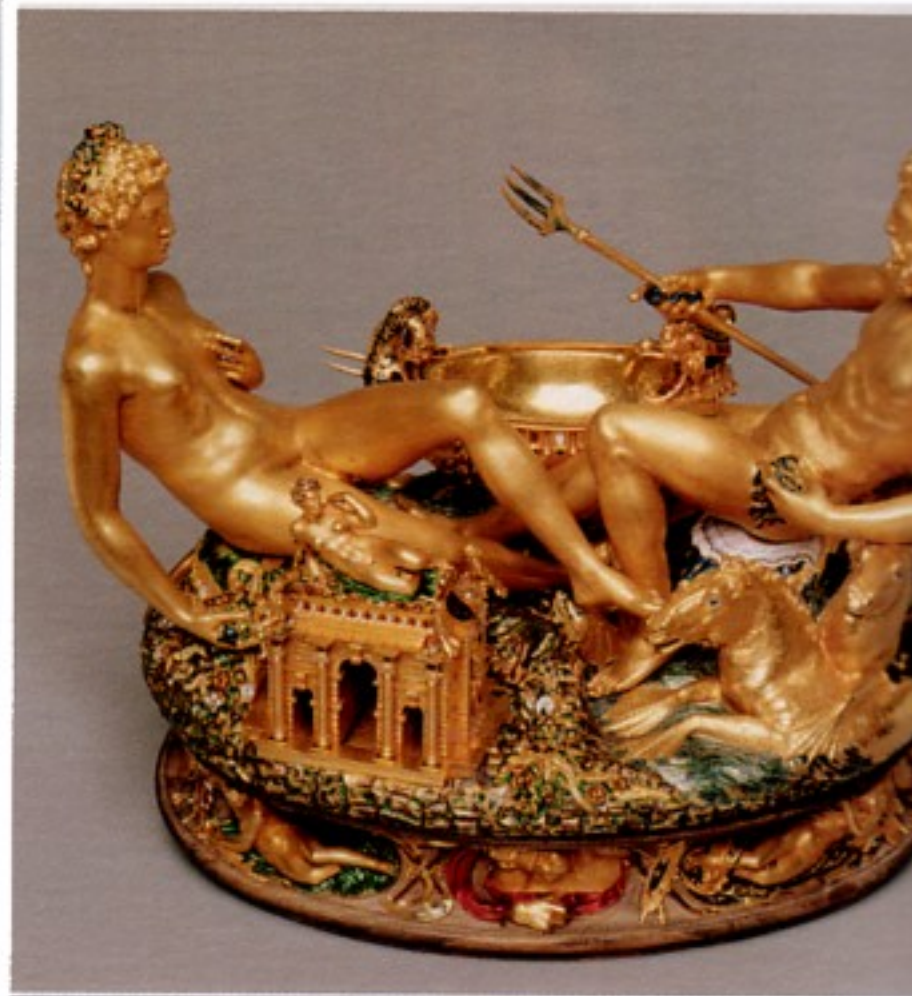
2 MYTH: THE THIEVES COME OUT AT NIGHT Back when wary watchmen were the best detection devices, the cover of darkness was the burglar's most effective tool. Museums have been fighting back with improved "perimeter defenses," deploying alarms, exterior motion detectors and reinforced glass to stop thieves from even entering the building. Once inside, the criminals might have to elude closed-circuit cameras, laser beams, body-heat detectors and motion sensors to reach their target. It takes an adept thief to get past such high-tech centurions.

But there is at least one weakness in every museum: the front door. For such systems have little value when the museum is open to the public and anyone can walk in and stroll through the galleries. The defenses are down, and potential thieves know it. "Daytime thefts are increasing because nighttime thefts are so much harder to pull off," says Charles Hill, former head of the Scotland Yard Art and Antiques Squad, now in private practice as an investigator. "Also, many more people are going to museums than before. Naturally some very small portion of those new visitors will try to take the art home."

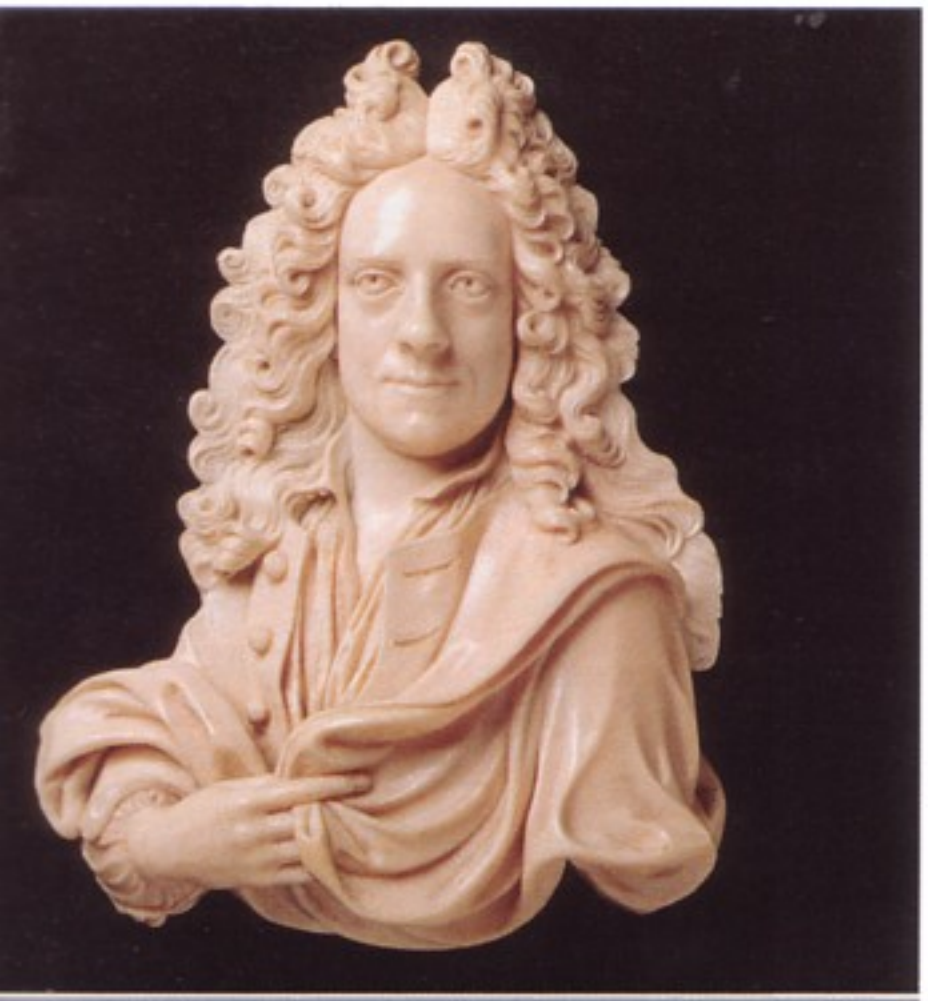
No publicly available statistics break down museum thefts by time of day. But Clive Stevens of Euronova in Bristol, England, a firm that specializes in asset-protection devices, says, "I've seen confidential police studies showing that daytime crimes accounted for two-thirds of all thefts in 2000, and the situation is getting worse. We call this 'crime migration'—when one security problem gets solved, criminals attack the next weakest link."

Generally, that weak link is human. It starts with museum directors who underestimate their vulnerability and goes down to the first line of defense: guards, who are often undertrained and underpaid—particularly in regional U.S. museums. "In some European countries the guard jobs are perfectly respectable employment, so people hold them for decades," says museum security expert Steven Keller of Ormond Beach, Florida, whose clients include the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. "The president of one major security company here told me his formula for setting a museum security guard's hourly wage: He checks what McDonald's pays in that region, then offers 50 cents less. So the people protecting our art are the ones who couldn't get jobs flipping burgers."

Guards are often among the first suspected when the crime seems to have been an inside job. In January, after the $500,000 Georgia O'Keeffe painting *Red Canna*, from 1919, disappeared from the O'Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe, police soon arrested the guard who had reported the theft. His wife reportedly said, "If he did do this, it was because he felt overwhelmed with debt." Not surprisingly, there's been a big push to replace fallible employees with (theoretically) trustworthy new technologies.

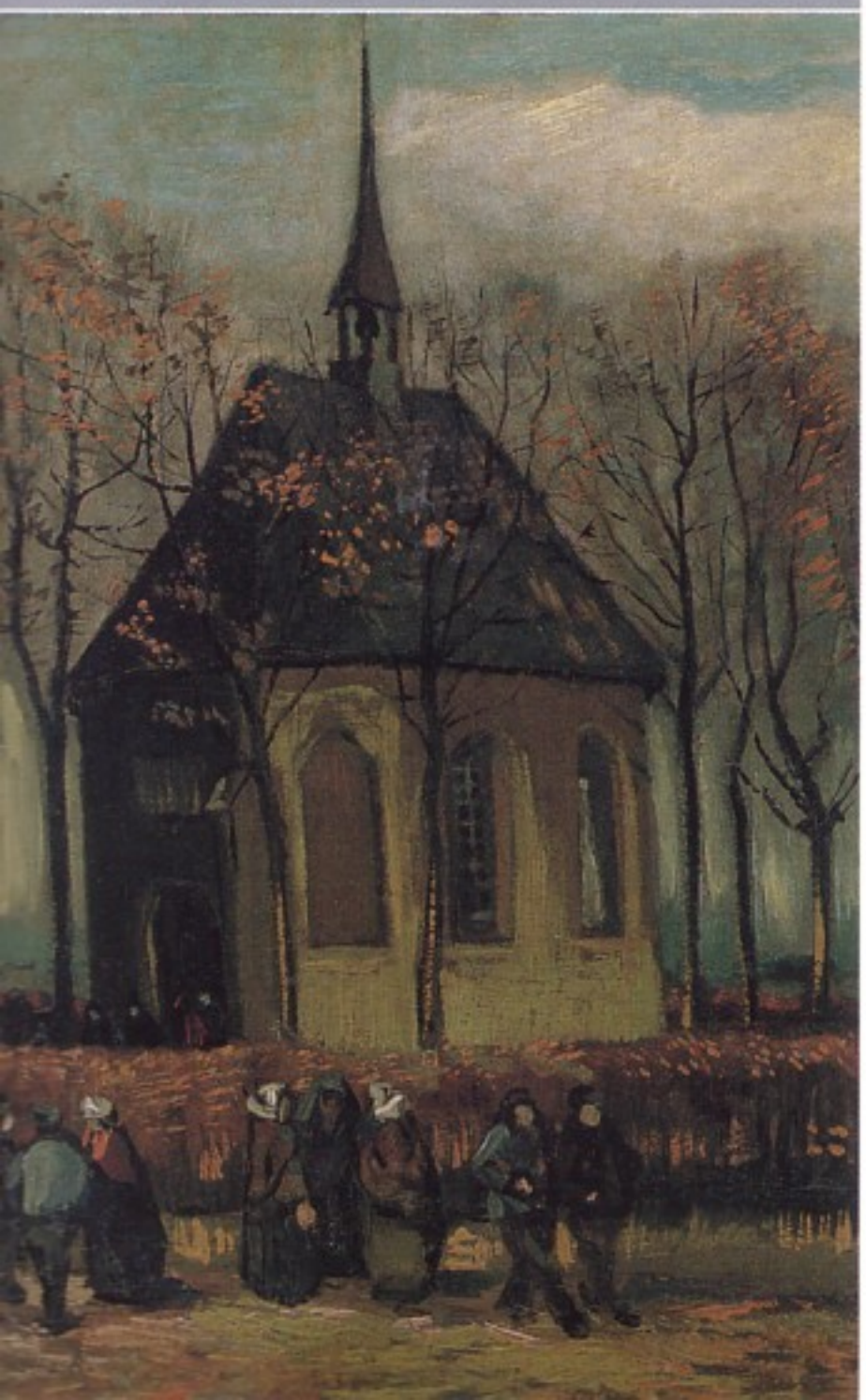


Can a masterpiece be on display without being exposed to theft? Above: A Benvenuto Cellini saltcellar, circa 1540, stolen from the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Below: Leonardo's *Madonna with the Yarnwinder*, 1501, seized in broad daylight from Drumlanrig Castle, Scotland



The chances that a museum will recover a stolen masterpiece within 30 years are a scant 15 percent. This page: David Le Marchand's portrait of Sir Humphrey Morice, 1716–20, above, taken from the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; and van Gogh's *Congregation Leaving the Reformed Church in Nuenen*, 1884, below, from the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Opposite: From top, Renoir's circa 1874 *La Parisienne*, and a Rembrandt self-portrait, 1630, both stolen from the National Museet, Stockholm



3 MYTH: YOU DISPLAY, YOU PAY At some level, the two main functions of any art museum—exhibiting work for today's public and safeguarding them for future generations—are at cross-purposes. The curator wants visitors to have the most intimate relationship possible with the work, while the security director would prefer that each work were encased safely behind bulletproof glass surrounded, perhaps, by a piranha-filled moat.

But with recent security advances, works can be displayed and protected at once. Exploiting one of the more cutting-edge technologies around, for example, London security firm ISIS attaches to artworks the same sort of radio-frequency identification (RFID) tagging devices recently proposed to track individual U.S. cattle in the fight against mad cow disease. Running off a miniaturized battery, the device broadcasts its presence to a receiver wired into a computerized security system. Several thousand times a day, the system checks for the device. If the artwork moves from its location, alarms go off. For even more security, such tags can be combined with a hair-trigger motion sensor to foil tricks such as cutting the canvas from its frame. Not surprisingly, ISIS clients include major American collectors, corporate art collections and the British royal family.

But such cutting-edge security is too expensive for the vast majority of museums. "It would take £300,000 [$550,000] to install an RFID system that protects all the works displayed in a large museum," says Robert Green, managing director of ISIS. "But most museums don't have large security budgets." In a survey released by the Association of Art Museum Directors in 2002, curatorial and exhibition budgets in the U.S. averaged $325,000, while protection services barely topped $100,000, despite surging attendance figures.

In one sense that's perfectly logical, since poor exhibitions surely endanger a museum's future. The threat of robbery seems more abstract—until a piece walks out the door. Faced with this dilemma, many museum directors spend the bare minimum required on security and then fervently pray that thieves will target another institution.

Technological advances always cut in two directions, and museum theft is no exception. "Thieves today can use cell phones to communicate during a crime," points out Julian Radcliffe, chairman of the Art Loss Register in London. "Not to mention digital cameras to prepare their operation and study escape routes or security devices. With the new cameras integrated into mobile phones, it becomes hard to monitor whether someone is planning a crime or just text-messaging." Steven Keller warns his clients against relying too much on highly centralized digital security schemes, even advising them to keep such systems disconnected from the Internet. "A criminal hacker wouldn't even have to crash a museum's system to succeed," he explains, "just make it burp for the few minutes it takes to get a piece out of the building."

4 MYTH: SHADY COLLECTORS HAVE WORKS STOLEN TO ORDER In the first James Bond film, *Dr. No,* Agent 007 penetrates the secret island hideout of the eponymous supervillain. There he spots Francisco de Goya's 1812–14 masterpiece *The Duke of Wellington*—which was in fact stolen from the National Gallery in London a year before the film's 1962 release—and dryly remarks, "So that's where it went."

Certainly the idea of some shadowy mastermind amassing a premier collection through commissioned thefts has plenty of panache. (The fact that it resonates so well with the public might give the art world cause to reflect on what the public's perception of collector scruples may be.) When a thief stole Paul Cézanne's circa 1880 *Auvers-sur-Oise* from the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford in 2000, for example, local police suggested that it had been "stolen to order," and the media trumpeted that idea far and wide.

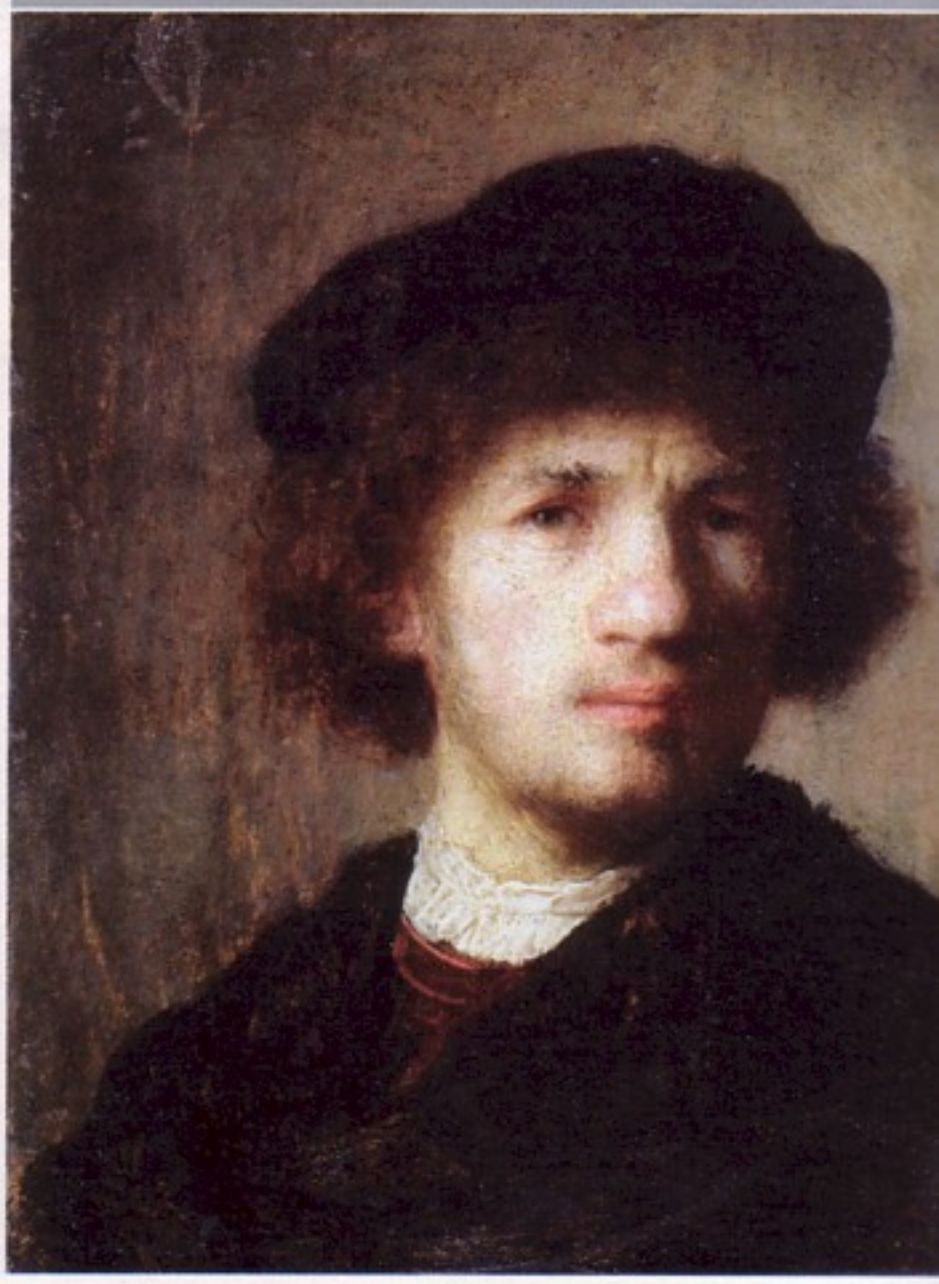
But consider the prerequisites for such a scenario. First, you would need an art aficionado willing to possess a Cézanne that could not be displayed, sold or bequeathed; second, he would have to locate thieves capable of stealing the particular works; finally, both the thieves and their patron would have to keep quiet for decades. Viewed thus, it's scarcely surprising that art crime experts are unequivocal on this topic. "I've been working in this area for 20 years and I've never seen such a case," says Interpol's Karl-Heinz Kind. "It's fascinating to imagine such a person, but it's just a myth."

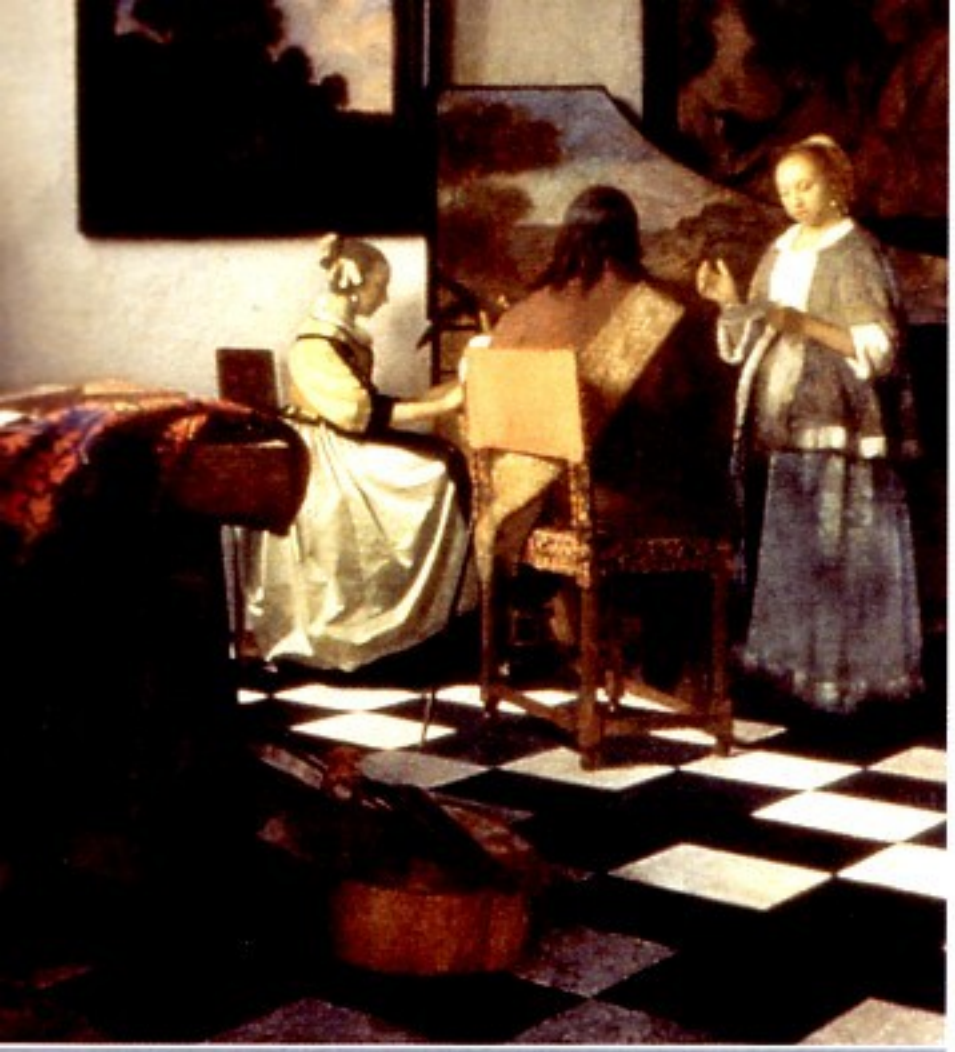
To the extent that he did the dirty work himself, Stéphane Breitwieser, the waiter moonlighting as a world-class art thief, doesn't fit the image of a Dr. No. But professionals regularly cite him as the closest real-life case because of his connoisseurship. Breitwieser started making his "acquisitions" haphazardly with minor objects, then moved on to greater works, refining his taste. "By 2001, I would never have considered stealing the objects I stole in 1995—they were too low-quality," he testified at trial in February 2003. And rather than simply hide the works, he treated them as a real collection, commissioning period frames, mounting rotating private exhibitions in the house he shared with his mother and doing extensive research.

But such cases come once a century. "The Breitwieser types are so few that you can consider them nonexistent," says Hill of Scotland Yard. "Most art thieves are like those idiots who broke into the Van Gogh Museum [in 2002] but didn't take the self-portrait. And generally collectors want to be admired by the world for what they own, and not to keep it hidden."

Further fueling this theory, stolen works have sometimes resurfaced in organized crime busts, especially those involving Eastern European gangs. But don't imagine such men as unsavory aesthetes. "The artworks serve as currency within those criminal circles, getting traded for drugs or women," explains Kind. "One piece stolen from [Zurich auction house] Galerie Koller resurfaced when police raided a Serbian arms-dealing gang in Germany." Of course, since artworks are far less easily monetized than drugs, guns or women, they are sometimes passed along mafia networks like a hot potato, making them almost impossible to track down. Then again, so are most stolen objects.

Partners in crime: From far left: Sean Connery and Catherine Zeta-Jones in *Entrapment*, 1999; Ryan O'Neal in *The Thief Who Came to Dinner*, 1973; and Joseph Wiseman, Connery and Ursula Andress in *Dr. No*, 1962





In the most infamous museum heist in U.S. history, thieves made off with more than $200 million worth of art from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. The haul included Jan Vermeer's *The Concert*, 1660, above; and Rembrandt's *Storm on the Sea of Galilee*, 1633, below

Opposite: From top, Edgar Degas's *La Sortie de Pelage*, undated, and Édouard Manet's *Chez Tortoni*, 1880, were among the loot

5 MYTH: STOLEN WORKS USUALLY RESURFACE, ESPECIALLY FAMOUS ONES

The retrieval of big-ticket works years after their disappearance makes excellent copy for journalists. When Hill recovered a $9 million Titian in 2002, seven years after it was stolen from Lord Bath's English estate, it made news worldwide. So did the Art Loss Register's 1998 success in helping to locate Cézanne's *Bouilloire et fruits* two decades after its theft from a Massachusetts home; the work subsequently sold for nearly $30 million at Sotheby's London in 1999.

Such happy endings are rare. One night in 1990, two men gained access to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston and made off with masterpieces by Rembrandt, Vermeer and Degas worth at least $200 million. Despite some potential leads, the most famous museum robbery in U.S. history remains unsolved.

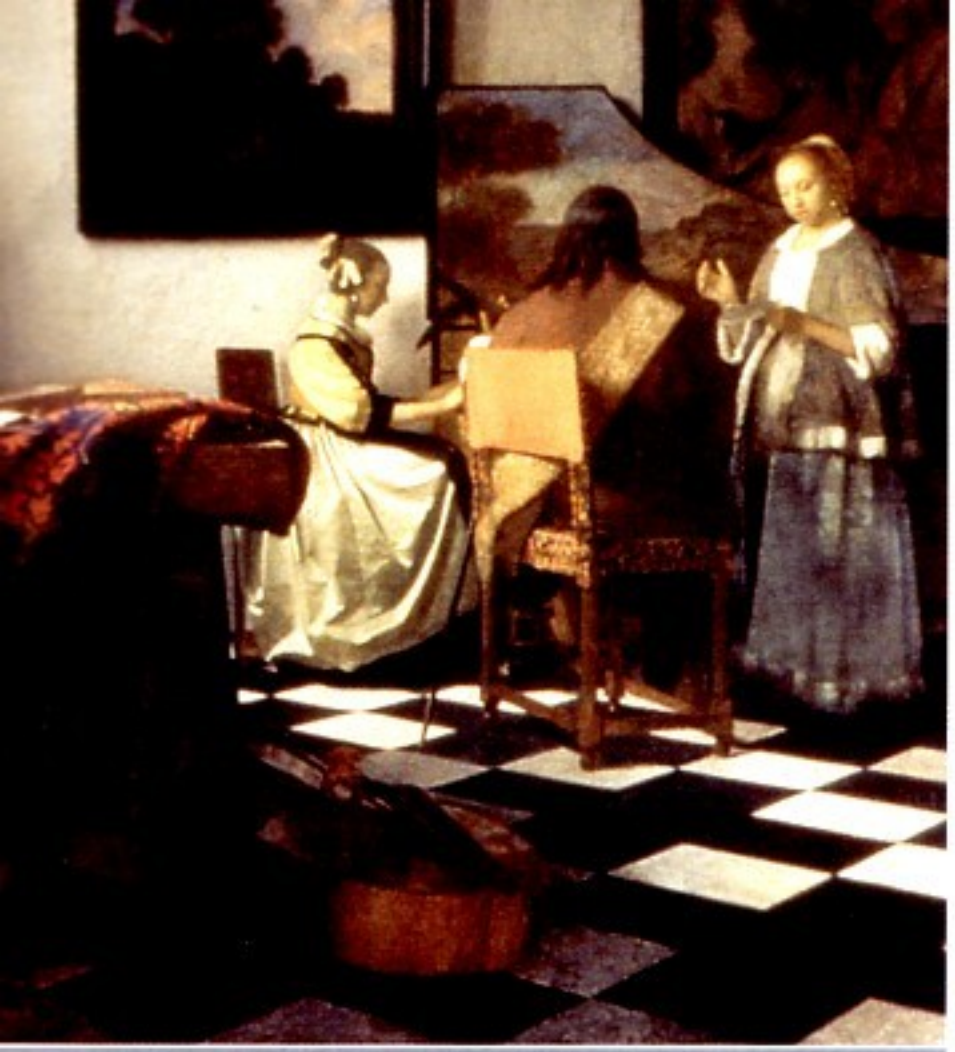
"Only a small number of works, perhaps 10 percent, resurface," says the FBI's Chaffinch. "Once it's stolen, it's as good as gone." The obstacles to recovery, she continues, start with the fact that some museums lack the high-quality images and thorough descriptions necessary to put out an art world all-points bulletin.

The type of work stolen also affects the chances of finding it. The jewels take from the Antwerp Diamantmuseum, for instance, could be pried from their settings and sold off as individual stones. With objects such as furniture and clocks, alterations often suffice to make them difficult to identify. Paintings fare best because they are fundamentally impossible to modify without torpedoing their value. Still, the odds are low: Radcliffe of the Art Loss Register estimates that the chances of recovering high-value paintings within 30 years of the theft are about 15 percent.

So what happens to stolen objects? Less famous works tend to have what Radcliffe terms "high velocity." Rapidly fenced to dealers on the low end of the ethics spectrum, they move through the art world through progressively more upstanding galleries. Often pieces cross the Atlantic in the process. "Europe is the source, America is the market," says Chaffinch. But since discretion is the bedrock of art world commerce, chances of recovery remain slim unless such stolen objects come to auction or otherwise gain public attention. As a last resort, victims sometimes offer ransoms to flush stolen works out of hiding, but the tactic is frowned upon because it encourages more thefts long-term.

Higher-value objects tend to have low velocity—or none at all. Sometimes that's a cost of doing business, as thieves or their fences need to let the heat burn off. But often novice art thieves realize to their distress that they have risked prison terms for works that are unfenceable. Some masterpieces are thus bunkered forever—or worse yet, destroyed to avoid leaving evidence, as happened with the $250,000 Salvador Dalí drawing stolen from Rikers Island prison by three wardens last summer.

"People in the art world think that famous art is protected by its fame," Cremers says. "It isn't." Given the tendency of masterworks to disappear forever, high security seems the only hope. But is it enough?



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6 MYTH: BETTER SECURITY MEANS FEWER THEFTS

This is not wholly a myth, of course. Sophisticated security deters theft and results in faster detection. But that does not mean that art theft overall will decrease. For one thing, there are always other targets. As Cremers points out, "If you have five museums in a town and some start installing better security, it just means that the least secured are more likely to get hit."

Worse yet, increased antitheft measures could make art crimes more violent. The logic goes thus: Nighttime systems such as laser beams and motion-control detectors have driven the current trend toward daytime thefts. Now technologies such as RFID tags are making it harder to steal objects

undiscovered. But rather than give up, the thieves will instead turn toward armed robbery tactics, honing plans hinged on getting in and out quickly, detection be damned.

Indeed, many big-ticket art thefts last year were short on subtlety and long on brute force. Beside the *Madonna with the Yarnwinder* and diamond museum hits, there was the lightning raid on the Rothschild family's Waddesdon Manor in England last June. The multimillion-dollar heist started off when five thieves drove an SUV through a reinforced window. Four minutes later they were gone, with more than a hundred antique gold boxes worth millions of dollars.

"We're seeing a lot more violence during daytime thefts," Cremers notes, sounding worried. "With today's technology, if someone wanted the Mona Lisa in the Louvre or those Vermeers in the Frick, they would never try to sneak in. They would just go in there with their guns drawn and grab it."

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Caught in the act: From far left, Michael Caine in *Gambit*, 1966, Robert Conrad and Don Stroud in *Live a Little, Steal a Lot*, 1975; and Robert Morley and gang in *Topkapi*, 1964