

Unsellable?

Art theft and the trafficking of stolen works of art is a major criminal business, perhaps the largest in terms of financial value after the illegal trade in arms and drugs. The FBI currently values criminal income from art theft at \$6-8 billion a year. The Art Loss Register – a private company that documents and helps trace stolen or lost artworks, antiques and collectables – has over 300,000 items listed in its database and adds a further 10,000 each year.

The theft of artworks is commonplace, but it becomes a news item, and lodged in the public's memory, when the works are by major artists or when they are taken from museums. The loss in these cases is shared and public, and interest may be piqued by the enormous value of the artworks and by details of exactly how they were taken – particularly if there are echoes of well known films.

On 20 May 2010 five paintings by five different modern masters were stolen from the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. The group ranges in date from 1906 to 1922, and represents a roll call of some of the most famous names in early modernism. A classic fauvist piece, *Pastoral* 1906 by Henri Matisse is a freely worked scene of naked figures in a hilly landscape of ochre, blue and lavender. Another fauvist painting, Georges Braque's *The Olive Tree near L'Estaque* 1906 is a landscape dominated by non-naturalistic reds, oranges and yellows. More sombre with its typical cubist palette of greys and ochres is Picasso's *Pigeon with Peas* 1911, a modest still life executed in a key period in the development of cubism. Larger, at a metre high, is Modigliani's *Woman with a Fan* 1919. Acknowledged as the finer of the two Modigliani paintings owned by the museum, this figure study shows Lunia Czechowska, a close friend and patron of the artist. Modigliani painted her no fewer than ten times (in her memoirs she recalled, 'As a sitter you had the impression that your soul was being dissected, and you had the strange feeling that you were unable to hide your innermost feelings.') Modigliani's works command high prices, and this work has been valued at £15.2 million. The fifth work stolen is Fernand Léger's *Still Life with Candlestick* 1922, an interior scene rendered in highly stylised but still legible shapes.

The museum's CCTV footage revealed that the theft was carried out by just one man, though he may have had accomplices waiting outside the museum. Masked and wearing black, he cut through a padlock securing a grille and smashed a window to enter the museum in the early hours of the morning of 20 May 2010. He selected the five works, which were in different galleries, and made his get away in no more than fifteen minutes. Three guards were on duty at the time but did not notice anything unusual, and the incident came to light only at 6.50am when a guard patrolling the grounds spotted the broken window. The works' empty frames were later found discarded outside the museum.

The museum had only just had its security improved while closed for renovations, but the electronic system had had a fault since March and was in fact not working when the theft occurred. CCTV cameras inside the museum captured the image of the burglar but the quality was so poor that the footage could not help identify him, even though he once looked directly at a camera. The thief stole works from separate rooms, taking paintings by Picasso, Braque and Léger from one and crossing two other rooms to reach the gallery where the Modigliani and Matisse canvases were on display. The care with which the thief chose these particular works among the several hundred on display raised suspicions that he may have been stealing to order by one or more private collectors somewhere in the world. However, art thefts are rarely undertaken to order: more usually, the works are taken to act as collateral in underworld dealings, or, in the case of private collectors, to demand ransom money (museums will not pay ransom demands to avoid encouraging theft).

The Paris museum remained shut for the day, as police attempted to gather evidence. They quickly revealed, however, that they had little to go on; and their alerting of airports and ports yielded nothing. The city and museum authorities speculated about why the theft had been carried out (the works were too famous to be sold legitimately) and how it had been achieved so easily, though they conceded that the building's security systems had been inadequate. Director of a nearby art museum, Pierre Cornette de Saint-Cyr, addressed those responsible for the theft directly in his comments to the press: 'These five paintings are unsellable, so thieves, sirs, you are imbeciles. Now return them.' As a prime purpose of a museum is to collect and preserve objects for future generations, the theft struck at the central function of the museum. Deputy Culture Secretary for the city of Paris Christophe Girard, described the theft as a 'serious crime against the heritage of humanity'. Amid concern that inside information about the temporary weaknesses in the museum's security systems may have reached the criminal world, others were directly critical of the museum authorities: Tom Cremers, founder of the Museum Security Network, commented: 'Security is a core business for museums, and it is not acceptable that a core business should be out of order for several months.'

Although barely a decade into the new century, press at the time were quick to call it the 'art heist of the century'. Valued at 100 million euros (though this may be conservative), the paintings are still missing and there is no public information known about what happened to them or where they might be now. The trail seems to have gone cold.

Negotiations to secure the return of stolen paintings may take years, or even decades, to conclude. But the expectation must be that these paintings will be returned one day, through one channel or another, to the museum and to the public that owns the works.

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