

C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
24 March 2021

The theft of art and jewelry looks glamorous only in the movies—as when Steve McQueen does it in *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968). Pierce Brosnan is hardly a match, but the 1999 remake can boast a well-choreographed central heist scene featuring Nina Simone’s electrifying performance of “Sinnerman,” with the New York Public Library standing in for the Metropolitan Museum.

beware the man in the bowler hat

Or, most suave of them all, Cary Grant on the rooftops of Nice in Alfred Hitchcock’s *To Catch a Thief* (1955).



The reality is, by comparison, usually quite sobering—as when seven thugs, all belonging to the Remmo clan, whose criminal activities have now been keeping the German authorities on their toes for three decades, smashed vitrines in Dresden’s famed Grünes Gewölbe. On November 25, 2019, they stole three 18th-century jewelry sets consisting of 37 parts each, including diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and sapphires formerly belonging to the kings of Saxony.



While some of the suspects were recently arrested, the whereabouts of their loot remains unknown and it is feared that the pieces might have been broken up to sell the precious stones piecemeal. Members of the same clan were also responsible for lugging the “Big Maple Leaf,” an enormous gold coin weighing 100 kilograms and worth about 4 million dollars, away from Berlin’s Bode Museum on the night of March 27, 2017. The police presume that the coin, too, was cut up and sold in bits and pieces, but at least in this case the object was merely an oddly shaped, oversized gold bar of no artistic merit or historic value.

This brings up the question of where stolen artworks might end up. For example, the Vermeer and Rembrandt paintings taken from Boston’s Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in 1990 are so famous that they could never be put on the market. Again, it is the movies that perpetuate the myth of the ominous übercriminal who has squirreled away stolen treasures in his lair—like Dr. No, who, in the eponymous James Bond film of 1962, shows off Goya’s *Portrait of the Duke of Wellington* (which had indeed been stolen briefly when on display at the National Gallery in London in August 1961).



If only this were the truth; after all, it would at least guarantee those works some tender loving care! The Remmo clan has so far not shown much reverence for art—nor, by the way, did the Nazis, who were second perhaps only to Napoleon when it came to art theft. In a classic case of advanced obedience, Gauleiter August Eigruber had set up eight bombs to destroy a good chunk of Western art destined for the future Führermuseum (the Ghent Altarpiece by the brothers Jan and Hubert van Eyck included!) in Hitler’s most notorious lair, the former salt mine in Altaussee, Austria. It was only thanks to the intervention of the mine’s administrative director, Emmerich Pöchmüller, that this act of vandalism was prevented.

It is probably fair to say that there is not a single known case of a famous artwork recovered in some luxurious hideout. Those that do resurface are usually found in the garage of some hapless petty criminal in a dreary suburb or godforsaken industrial wasteland. And the life of an art thief therefore probably looks less like the one enjoyed by Cary Grant’s John “The Cat” Robie and much more like that of Johann Georg Wogaz.



A notorious predecessor of today’s lowlifes, Wogaz broke through a grated window of the Royal Picture Gallery in Dresden during an unusually stormy night on October 21 and 22, 1788, to steal three paintings, among them Correggio’s famous (and famously racy) depiction of Mary Magdalene devoutly reading in the wilderness (lost, probably for good, since World War II).



Shown here, next to a detail from the masterful translational engraving after Correggio’s painting by Johann Heinrich Friedrich Ludwig Knolle, is a tiny version that illustrates the 1819 *Taschenbuch zum geselligen Vergnügen*. In this copy, discovered at the University of Pennsylvania’s Kislak Center, a prudish reader clearly took issue with the Italian master’s depiction of the saint’s décolletage and felt the need to cover it up in pencil.

Wogaz returned two of the paintings by depositing them anonymously in a box a few days later, along with a ransom note for the return of the Correggio. He was clearly better at breaking window grates than at concealing his traces and was soon arrested. A thorough second search of his house was needed, though, before the painting was found in the eighteenth-century equivalent of a modern-day garage—the hayloft.



The text beneath the image in this anonymous print explains the allegorical putti painting under a protective shield to the collection’s “recovered treasure. While Justice draws her sword, Johann Georg Wogaz is miserable.”

All of this was intended as an introduction to a passionate print lover who could not help but take some of his most beloved Rembrandt prints home from the British Museum. But now that I have digressed, again, for too long, the not-so-honorable Robert Dighton will have to wait until next week . . .



Copyright © 2021 C.G. Boerner. All rights reserved.

Want to change how you receive these emails?
You can [update your preferences](#) or [unsubscribe from this list](#).

