

# Claims Department



The Art of True Crime



Welcome to another Claims Department. It's November 2018 as I write this, and it's a good time to be alive.

What, I hear you say? Trump, dead bees everywhere, fires eating up your state, you don't manage more than 5 hours sleep most nights, and your kids are sick. How is this a great time to be alive?

Easy, I say as I sip my fourth cup of coffee this morning, Art.

There is more amazing art our there for people to see than ever before. Facebook is full of it. There was one my darling wife Vanessa shared yesterday that was a sushi chef creating beautiful works of statuary. There are gorgeous short documentaries about amazing art works, some political, some escapist, some just rad. There's Inktober, where so many people post their gorgeous works. There's an incredible amount of art in the Bay Area for me to look at, in museums and public spaces.

Yes, the world sucks, but man can people do some amazing things!

(\*note\* your mileage will likely vary based on so many different factors, many beyond your control.)



Which brings me to this issue on The Art of True Crime.

Where did it all begin? Unsolved Mysteries.

That's a big part of it. Every week, without fail, I'd watch. I'd tape most weeks and re-watch. I was a big fan, huge fan, and when we got America's Most Wanted, and Cops, and the various tabloid television shows in the 90s, I was hooked. Deep.

The real beginning was 1988, when the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Jack the Ripper's and the 25<sup>th</sup> of the JFK assassination led to so much coverage. I read everything I could on both, and the next year was 20 years since Zodiac. These were all in the news, being talked about on Drive Time Radio, on A Cur-

rent Affair, on Donahue, on Evening Magazine. It was all over the place, and I was 14 and loving it.

I am also obsessed with art. Fine art. Paintings and stuff. You know, the kind you find in museums! I love 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art, specifically what's being called Contemporary Art, and the kind known as conceptual art. I love it, and it's something that has led me to hang out in a lot of museums all over the place. The appeal is different than that of True Crime. It's as if it's the love aspect, while True Crime is all about the fear. Those, I think, are the two strongest forces in my emotional life.

The two might seem very separate, but in fact, they are not. Whether it's Andy Warhol's *Death and Destruction* series of silk screens, or the stories of heists and forgeries and on and on. It's a neat little set of cross-overs, and there was an awesome episode of *The Art History Babes* all about it.

And now there's an issue of *Claims Department* on the subject too!

Everything this go 'round is by me. I Should mention if'n you'd like to send a Letter of Comment, the best eDress is [garcia@computerhistory.org](mailto:garcia@computerhistory.org) or [johnnyeponymous@gmail.com](mailto:johnnyeponymous@gmail.com).

Y'all are the best!





# The Theft from the Musée d'Art Moderne

There are few thefts in the history of Art heists that compare to the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris. The story goes that in 2010, five paintings were stolen by a single robber, Vjaren Tomic, aka Spider-Man because he was adept at scaling walls in his thefts. The security system was disabled, but they caught his image on a camera. There were quite likely some assistants who worked on the inside. It wasn't the daring nature of the crime, but the actual works that were stolen.

They were five perfectly chosen works. Henri Matisse's *Pastoral*, an artist I do not enjoy, though it's a painting that is an excellent example of his work from the first years of the 20th Century. Far from the best work stolen, but Matisse sells. At the time, his record was in the 35-40 million range, but his work never failed to sell. It's the perfect piece to steal, but of course, they'd need to find a buyer without the auction system, which means they'd have to be tied in, which isn't always as easy as it sounds, even if you're a career criminal.

Georges Braque's *Olive Tree Near Estaque* is a lesser Braque, but he's an incredibly sellable painter these days. The work is lovely, but really, who wants a Braque? He's not exactly in massive demand, and his prices are much lower than the guy most associated with him, Picasso. The work itself is not from the period of Braque that does sell well, his Cubist run, but it's more Fauvist in nature. It's an interesting choice for a robber, and somewhat indicates that there was a specific list of artists he was looking for.

The Modigliani, *Woman with Fan*, is exactly the kind of work that could find a buyer in the Middle East. One observer has said this is the most beautiful of all the stolen works. I can't say I personally enjoy Modigs, but it's a fascinating work. It's another of his oddly-ovular women, but the composition hints at an ideal of angularity, especially as it relates to the principal colors. There are fields of color that feel very flat and simplified.

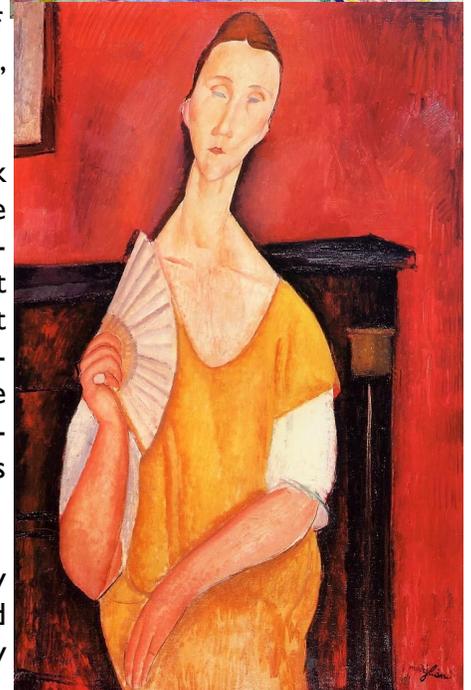
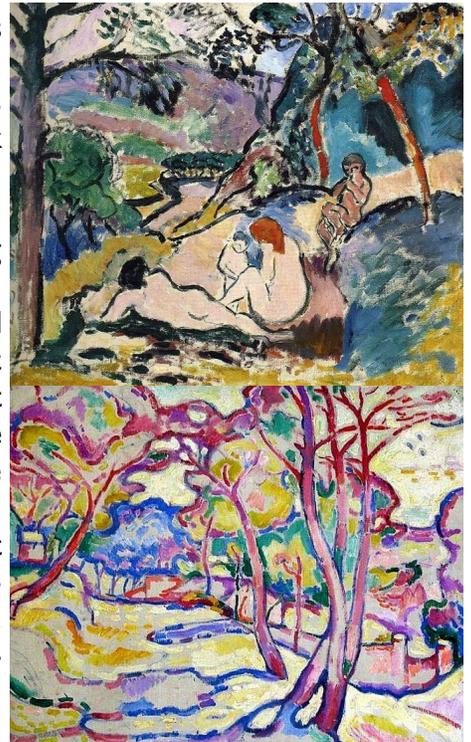
Frederic Leger's *Still life with Candlesticks* is a masterpiece by an artist who has been somewhat shunted to the side in favor of the contemporaries who would have certainly pointed to him as the master of the form. The work is amazing, and you can see why Leger is so much more important than he's usually given credit for these days. The work is gorgeous, the sort of formal clarity that drew the gaze of artists like Stuart Davis, and it's an incredibly striking work. This is the work that was the focus of the entire theft, that Jean-Michel Corvez paid Spider-man to steal for him, which gave him a good reason to walk off with the other works.

And then there's *Le pigeon aux petits pois - Dove with Green Peas*.

Pablo Picasso is the most stolen Western artist, and if every work that was stolen was as good as this, I'd completely understand why. The work is from his cubist period and it's as good if not better than the amazing Picassos at the MoMA or SFMoMA. It's a lovely work, and it's almost certainly the most valuable Picasso outside of a museum setting now that it's been stolen, adding to the story. You can sell Picasso just about anywhere on the black market. Hell, you could probably sell it to one of the smaller museums in China or Indonesia. The work is so perfectly structured, and when you compare it to the Leger, you realize that Leger was merely working within the mode that Picasso had laid out before him.

There is little hope, sadly.

The police closed in, and Vjaren Tomic got extra paranoid. They got him, brought him to trial and testified that he had flipped out and tossed the paintings in a dumpster. That's super-sad, though many





claim that it didn't actually happen, that instead he hid them, or passed them along, because he was so stupid to give up a hundred million dollars of art. The Leger, which was what Tomic was paid to steal, might have been moved already? That would mean at least one masterpiece was still around.

And maybe that's the problem – lack of closure. We can believe Tomic, that all the paintings were thrown into a dumpster, but then that means that we might be able to find it again, like Zach Penn digging up those Atari cartridges in the dump in New Mexico. That idea is that any grad student with time to dig and a slight idea can dig, search, pour through dumps, or maybe search any location associated with the criminals. The moment they find one of the paintings, any of them, their career is made! The possibility is what made that sort of obsession possible, and these things quickly become obsessions.

There's not a lot of English coverage of the case, but The Guardian had a very good article on the theft <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/may/20/paris-art-theft-picasso-matisse/>



# Young British Artist Old British Killer



Let us say you walk into an exhibition, Art of the 1990s. Amidst all the Koons, Emin, Hirst, and Schnable you see hanging, there is a portrait of a very 1960s young woman, an expression as indecipherable as the Mona Lisa. The Americans see it, the technique a sorta splatter up close but confirmed as a portrait from the cheaper seats. The Brits don't care about the technique so much as the subject, and if they are of a certain generation, the disgust the image brings with it.

The painter is Marcus Harvey, Young British Artist in good standing.

The Painting is Myra, 1996.

The subject is Myra Hindley, ½ of the team that did the Moors murder.

The early 1960s, and Myra Hindley was dating Ian Brady. These two were terrible for each other, a pair of toxins combining to become far more toxic than a single relationship could contain. It had to

spread out of them and into the surrounding environment. Brady was a complete psychopath. Hindley wanted nothing nearly as much as his attention, and so she put up with amazing amounts of abuse. He raped her many times, tied her up without permission. He broke her down, in many ways, and eventually destroying her was not enough.

Brady needed to kill. Not only that; he needed to kill children.

Using Hindley to bait his victims. She'd drive ahead, claim to have lost a glove or need help with boxes. Brady would follow behind on his motorbike. They would take their victims to Saddleworth Moor, and according to Hindley, she would stay in her car, and Brady would go and rape, torture, and murder the young person she'd gathered for him. They likely buried them together.

There is no doubt that she knew what was happening, though at times she's claimed otherwise. Five young people lost their lives, and it was the pair of them responsible. It is possible that Hindley did none of the actual killing, but she could not have been unaware. They were arrested, given a whole life tariff, and both died in prison.

Now, the painting. To understand what was going on, you have to understand the YBA. The Young British Artists grew out of a British art scene that had been stagnating since the late 1960s. Many of the names being exhibited were the same, and many British artists were abandoning the UK's shores for the US, France, and Caribbean. Out of Goldsmiths graduated a bunch of artists who were every bit as impressive as those that flowed out of Black Mountain School in the 1940s and 50s. The group were all decent artists, but they were phenomenal showfolk. They were, in their own words, "both oppositional and entrepreneurial" in equal measure. They were creating items that were designed to be huge money makers, but they also were making works that were at times literal garbage. They used throwaway materials, but almost instantly commanded massive prices. They were, in a way, saying the art world was garbage, while also doing everything possible to make sure they were the stars of that very same world. They were huge figures, hard livers, and making works that were designed to exploit shock value.

Marcus Harvey was not in the first YBA show, Freeze, but he was included early on. The show Sensation was arguably the most controversial art show in history, famous for the Elephant Dung Madonna, as it's become known, but also for Myra. The piece is a masterpiece of concept, really. Harvey used a model of an infant's hand to create the paint splotches that formed the image of Myra Hindley. The image itself is huge, 9 by 11 feet. The effect is overpowering, and to British viewers of a certain age, intense. Staring down, larger than life, is the most well-known mug shot in the history of the UK. Moreover, the most important aspect is that she was the most well-known child killer in UK history, and she was being displayed in a portrait like any you'd see in the National Portrait Gallery. She was being celebrated in paint, or so it seemed.

Harvey seemed to think Myra's role was far less significant than most, and especially the Crown, believes. The best reading of the image I've seen is pretty darn simple – it is an image of the most brutal of victimizers created with the handprints of her victims. That's a powerful concept, and one of the scary things is that it could be read as her image as a murderer is crafted from false children's marks, as if she was being blamed wrongly.

The question of whether or not this is an appropriate image to put into a gallery is more difficult. Like with the image of Emmitt Till that got Dana Schutz in so much hot water at the Whitney Biennial, the question of what is and isn't appropriate to show in a gallery setting is difficult. In the case of Schutz, it was a white woman working with such an iconic image from one of the darkest moments in the African-American experience of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In the case of Harvey, he is working with an image that is of incredible power to the UK population that was alive in the 1960s. Literally the image was everywhere in one of the periods where True Crime was huge. The idea of putting a painting of a murdered person was not new for Schutz, Warhol had done it, but it was her choice of subject and the context of the image she chose to reference that was incredibly problematic. Harvey's image is of the murderer of children, and the statement seems to be that either she was an innocent painted by the media as evil because of her proximity to the crimes, or that she was made into a star by the use of crimes against children. Many Brits saw this as celebrating Harvey, which may be what Harvey was actually trying to do. That is part of the YBA thing, to do the inappropriate thing, like celebrating a killer of children.

A formalist reading would see this as one of the most powerful images that True Crime has spawned, and a significant reason that the YBA, while a bunch of egotistical assholes, are actually incredibly important artists.





# Two Podcasts: One Crime

There are a lot of knowns, and a whole lot of unknowns, when it comes to the theft of 13 works from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. There are enough facts, and far more than enough conjecture, to fill many podcasts over and over and over again. The basics of the crime are simple – two men dressed as cops knocked on the door, made like they were arresting one of the guards on duty. Handcuffed them and tied them up, then spent 81 minutes going through a couple of rooms, cutting paintings out of frames. They stole 13 works, one of which was a Napoleonic finial from the top of a flagpole. There were leads, and everyone from Whitey Bulger to the IRA have been implicated. The paintings have never been found, and there have never been any arrests.

In 2018, there were two about the crime that drew great attention – *Empty Frames* hosted by Tim Pilleri and



Lance Reenstierna of *Crawlspace*, and *Last Seen* by The Boston Globe and WBUR hosted by Kelly Horan and Jack Rodolico. They are covering the same ground, but in completely different ways. So different that you can listen to both and not be sure that you're hearing the same events being covered.

And that's OK.

There is a concept I'm cooking up, and to me it's important. IT is the proper design of Podcasts. They shouldn't just be radio shows with swearing, as a few podcasters have said of them. If you take a podcast like *I Don't Hate This*, or even more so *My Favorite Murder*, you'll see the areas you can't really go into on Radio shows. Far more conversational. In a way, podcasts that are breaking ground are non-journalistic, and rather dismissive of the *Fresh Air* model of conversational interview. It's more akin to drive-time radio banter, but di-

rected. There are a lot of those, but there's even more. Length can vary, as can topic, and most importantly, there can be a variety of audiences. You don't have to try and provide for anything more than a narrow audience, and often when targeting those narrow audiences, you discover that the audience isn't so narrow, as the True Crime explosion has revealed over the last few years.

If it sounds like I'm down on Journalistic podcasts, it's because I am. *Serial* has done a lot of damage to the field of podcasting by presenting journalistic material like it were a radio show, and that's put so many different podcasts back in the mode that they have to be that form because it's what a good podcast does. I don't consider podcasters journalists, which I'm told is wrong. They have neither the rights nor the responsibilities of journalists unless they declare themselves as such, and ideally are represented by a media organization.

In the case of these two podcasts, one is that conversational podcast style, and one is a strictly journalistic podcast concept. Empty Frames conducts the bulk of its presentation through interviews. They are phenomenal interviews, too! The one with former thief turned consultant Turbo is worth every second of the entire podcast. They interview in a way that brings out the interviewee, but also allows them some space. They are both clearly fairly knowledgeable on the crime, but more importantly, they are passionate about their subjects. Passion, at least slightly divorced from journalistic practice, is something I adore and want to celebrate. They do that very well.

*Last Seen* is basically the perfect journalistic application of the podcast form.

The hosts are great, but don't go into any banter. There's

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The Boston Globe

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perhaps a little rough language, but not much. They are investigating, doing more-or-less traditional interviews and reportage. They talk to amazing people, a lawyer who probably has the best idea of what's really going on being my favorite, and they choose targeted information for presentation. This is not ideal from where I sit, as I want something more raw, but I can't say that it's not excellent. It's a true crime podcast in a way that *Empty Frames* is not. It's not quite an investigative podcast, but it's also not a strictly news podcast. It's something in-between and I like that.

Now, neither of these go into the *Up and Vanished* model, where the investigator is a major part of the story. That can work, and while the guys of *Empty Frames* are clearly doing the present in the podcast concept, they're not investigating, nor are they claiming to be. They seem to be saying that they want to solve it, but they're not taking us along for the trip. If you look at *Last Seen*, it seems like they're doing something along the lines of the first season of *Uncover*, the CBC's excellent series that first covered. That's a podcast that took facts that were out there, dug into investigation, but was a bit more personal. Tone wise, they feel very similar.

I don't think either of these podcasts will uncover anything super-significant. Neither are going to give us anything you can't already find on Websleuths or REDDIT, but they are both presenting the information in a way that rewards the listener.





I was lucky enough to get to do an internship at the National Museum of American Art, now the Smithsonian American Art Museum. It was a great time, 1993's wonderful summer, and the two pieces I was tasked to research were amazing, and had a big impact. The first one was the Altar Cesar Chavez took the bread from to end his most famous hunger strike. The other was a painting that told a story of the Chicano experience – The Death of Ruben Salazar.

Ruben Salazar was born in Juarez, Mexico, and worked as a journalist for the LA Times. He was a Foreign Correspondant, headed up the Mexico City Bureau, and after he returned to LA, he left the Times and joined the Spanish-language tv station KMEX as News Director. There, he made significant enemies of the cops because he was frequently reporting on LAPD planting evidence on Chicanos to pin crimes on them. His reporting led him to become a major figure in the Chicano movement. His coverage made him a target for FBI investigation and harassment. Salazar became involved with the National Chicano Moratorium March on August 29, 1970. The Chicano Moratorium was largely formed by participants in the 1968 LA High School walk-outs, and the March was one of their biggest events.

There had been major protests earlier in the year against police brutality and the war, but this was bigger. The Vietnam War was raging, there was the peace movement afoot, and the Chicano movement couldn't help noticing that the number of Chicanos serving was particularly high. As is often the case, the protest was on a hot day in LA, which ramped up tensions. The protest itself was almost completely but some scofflaws used the protest as a cover for petty theft. The owners of the Green Mill liquor store called in a couple of thefts to the Sheriff's department, though they did later deny calling it in. The protest was still going on, the march turning into a rally, and the Sheriff's department decided to clear Luna Park, and bussed in some cadets to increase their numbers to deal with the 20,000+ crowd.

This led to fights. The fights led more fights, more or less beginning a full-fledged riot.

Now, even a reporter, who also happened to be a significant figure in the movement, might well need a drink after a rough day like August 29, and so Ruben Salazar stopped into the Silver Dollar Club for a drink. He ordered a beer, and took a sip. One of the cadets, Tom Wilson, fired tear gas into the crowd. There are a couple of different kinds of tear gas canisters, one of which is designed to bust through barricades. That one can piece walls. An incredibly similar, nearly identical cylinder is fired for up-close groups, which creates a plume of smoke which disperses a crowd. Wilson fired a barricade cylinder, which broke through the wall and struck Salazar in the head, killing him instantly.

Many within the Chicano movement believed this was an intentional assassination to get back at Salazar for his reporting, but most think it was merely incompetence on the part of Wilson, and recklessness on the part of the Sheriff's Department. Wilson was not charged with murder; the Grand Jury determined it was an accident. Later, Salazar's family won a 700,000 dollar settlement. Hunter S. Thompson wrote about it in Rolling Stone; he called his article *Strange Rumbblings in Atzlan*. It's a fine piece of journalism.

Salazar became viewed as a martyr for the Chicano movement, and his image was often painted on signs or banners at protest marches. I can remember a building in East San Jose that had mural on it with Salazar standing beside Martin Luther King, and JFK. It's no surprise that Chicano artists would take on the subject of Salazar's murder in their art, and the amazing Frank Romero painted an incredible image in 1986 that was acquired by the Smithsonian in 1993.

#### *The Death of Ruben Salazar.*

The painting is vivid oils, almost having the appearance of acrylics for gloss and sheen. In it, there are three buildings, the central one is the Silver Dollar Bar and Café, with nude women in the front windows. In front of it, we see five cops in riot gear, firing into the roof of the Silver Dollar, massive plumes of smoke billowing out. Next to it is a theatre, and on the marquee is the title of the film – *La Muerte de Ruben Salazar*.

It is not a reporting of the event, but more in line with the tradition of Latino murals commemorating fallen heroes. If you look at some of the murals of Diego Rivera, you'll see some of the same techniques used for fallen Communist leaders. The painting is monumental, 6 by ten feet, and at first you're not thinking it's a serious work, because those colors! Then, you're drawn in, and start to see the importance of the work, and when you come to the context of the crime, the Murder of Ruben Salazar, it becomes the kind of painting that changes the way you see the world.



# The Theft of the Mona Lisa

All my life, the Mona Lisa has been the most famous, and likely most expensive, painting in the world. This was not always the case, and even in the lifetime of my Great-Grandmother it was not the case. The Mona Lisa has always been widely-appreciated, Francois I was a huge fan and is the one what bought it from Leo and brought it to France all legal-like, but there were many other paintings that were more famous. Then, something very interesting happened.

The Mona Lisa was stolen.

Now, it's not exactly rare that a painting being stolen will turn it into a massively famous work, it happened with various works by Rembrandt and Vermeer, but the combination of press frenzy, and the amazing story that was attached to the heist, all led to the Mona Lisa moving beyond just being the most enigmatic of Leonardo's paintings.

The morning of the 21<sup>st</sup> of August, 1911, saw what has become the second most famous art heist of all-time. It wasn't a fancy heist. In fact, it'd be hard to call it a heist at all. It was more of a simple snatch-and-grab operation. Vincenzo Peruggia was an employee at the Louvre, and also an Italian Patriot. At the time, Italy was undergoing a massive wave of national pride that had extended to those Italians living abroad. Even then, there were great conversations about recovering art considered looted. Many masterpieces had been looted by Napoleon more than a century prior, the Louvre was full of 'em, and there were cries by Italians to bring the boys back! The boys in this case being Raphael, Michelangelo, and Leonardo. They weren't having much luck.

Peruggia strolled into the museum at 7am, wearing his old smock from his Louvre days, mingled with the other Louvre workers. He milled about the Salon Carré, waiting for everyone else to go about their jobs in the hours before the public flooded in. Then, he hid in a storage closet. Later, when he came, and when he was alone, he simply lifted the painting off of the pegs, and walked over to a stairwell. There, he took the picture out of the frame, and then wrapped it in the smock he'd been wearing. For some reason, he also took off a doorknob for a door. I've never quite understood why. After that, he walked out the same door he came in through.

That's it. No descender to lower him into a gallery full of pressure sensitive plates or lasers. No intricate plan to distract the guards with a fake heart attack. No need for a serious disguise because there were no cameras. He brought only a small roll of tools, and nothing fancy. It was pretty simple and clean, and ultimately low-tech. Which it could be because at that time in museum security... well, there really was no museum security. There were no pressure sensitive plates, or lasers, or any alarm systems other than a pull-bell system. To activate these kinds of alarms, a loud ringing system of bells like you'd find in schools, you had to pull a rope or push a button to activate the alarm, so if a guard with access doesn't see you and pull the rope, you've got no problems. This would make for one of the most boring heist segments in the history of film.

Peruggia took the painting to his Paris apartment, and hid it in a niche next to the stove. Every former Louvre employee was questioned by the Parisian police, including Peruggia. He told them he'd been working elsewhere at the time, and they bought it. For two years, he held on to the painting, not trying to sell it, eventually bringing it out of his Paris home and heading back to Florence, Italy with it.

This is where the story goes into a couple of directions.

Now, like any Patriot, he also wanted to be able to live in the country of his greatest pride, but Italy was in the grips of serious economic problems. So, like many patriots when the going gets broke, he tried to sell The Mona Lisa. Maybe. He certainly contacted an art dealer and attempted to sell it to the Uffizi Gallery. That's how they caught him. There's also the idea that he stole it specifically to sell it, and he was only using patriotism as a cover, but I actually think that's slightly less likely. There are also more out there theories. One is that Peruggia wasn't as much of a patriot as we thought and he was working for Eduardo de Valfierno, the famed Argentine con man. He had then commissioned the legendary forger Yves Chaudron to create six copies of the painting to sell. Supposedly, the original stayed in Europe and the others were sold in the US. There are some problems with this, like the fact that there's no evidence for the existence of either Valfierno or Chaudron other than a single article written by a dude who usually took a lot of liberties with his work.

That's a good story!

Peruggia expected to be hailed as a conquering hero when it was discovered that he'd taken the Mona Lisa. He wasn't. He was arrested, and ended up doing six months. The Uffizi Gallery got to display the Mona Lisa for a few weeks, and then it was returned to the Louvre. Peruggia served his time, got out, and started a new life. He had a daughter, and ended up dying in his 40s. He was never hailed as the hero he thought he would be, and though he served well in WWI, he was never a major figure again.

It was the coverage of the theft that propelled the Mona Lisa from being considered the best of Leonardo's paintings to the most famous painting of all-time. It's odd that this was actually the second time the painting had a significant increase in visibility, as in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century the French art establishment had started to consider it the finest of Leonardo's paintings and taking it seriously. In fact, Leonardo as a whole was being re-considered and his significance grew greatly.

The theft of the Mona Lisa launched it into the heights that no other painting has ever really reached. It's likely the most valuable painting in history, and has made Leonardo the most valuable painter in history. The somewhat-questionable Leonardo that sold last year for nearly half-a-billion dollars pretty much means that the 100% certain Leonardo that hangs in the Louvre, La Gioconda or the Mona Lisa, is likely a billion dollar painting.





The most famous, and most podcasted about, art heist of the modern era, and there are so many theories that no one has managed to put them all to air. That's why I'm here! I've spend a decade studying all the angles, and now, for the first time, I am presenting the least-known, but almost certainly accurate, theories as to what happened with the Gardner Heist!

### Theory I – The Cops

The two men who got buzzed in and walked off with the paintings after 81 minutes were dressed as cops. That's the accepted theory, but the lesser-known theory is that they actually WERE Cops. Boston Mayor Ray Flynn had slashed many of the city's Police budgets, and a small, rogue element within the Boston Police who took it upon themselves to establish a fund to supply Boston cops with essential materials that would have otherwise been unavailable. A pair of off-duty cops managed the job, though since they had almost 0 idea about how art worked, they were sloppy and didn't grab the most significant works.

The cops sold the paintings through mobster Whitey Bulger, bringing in roughly 41 million dollars, which allowed the department to upgrade their computer systems and purchase new patrol vehicles.

The biggest problem with this theory is the thorough investigation of every off-duty cop in the depart-

ment, and the mainstream opinion of investigators that the thieves had art knowledge.

#### Theory 2 – Massachusetts Nazis

The late 1980s were a difficult time for the American Nazi Party, particularly in such a diverse city as Boston. The Nazis of Boston were desperate, and had friends within the guard community. They paid legendary art thief Myles O’Conner to steal a Rembrandt from the Museum of Fine Arts, pretty much directly across the street from the Gardner. That worked, but that wasn’t what they were after. Wanting to make a statement when they took credit for the theft, they targeted the Gardner, but a falling out with Conner over the fee led them to send in two of their own, who hacked the pictures out of the frames, actually destroying them to the point where they couldn’t be sold.

#### Theory 3 – An Inside Job... sorta.

This one was first posited at a speech given at the annual meeting of the American Society of Quantum and Theoretical Physicists in 1995. The theory goes that Boston College’s legendary physics lab had been working on a new form of field effect using a directed particle beam. The theory was they could control the beam using a series of secondary containment beams. Apparently, they were unsuccessful in controlling the beam, which shot through space, happening to damage several paintings in the Gardner, and completely obliterating the finial atop the Napoleon flag.

When the guards noticed this, they panicked. The two had been partying pretty hard, and if they were going to be drug-tested, that’d be the end of ‘em. So, they came up with the scheme to fake the robbery, using the box-cutter from the mailroom to remove the paintings from their frames. Since they were tripping balls, the cuts were awful, and they disposed of the paintings themselves by slicing them into pieces and flushing them down the toilet.

The best evidence for this theory are a series of small, unexplained power surges that occurred near the Gardner on the night of the robbery.

#### Theory 4 – Good Eats

The Competitive Eating podcast Bustin’ Buttons might not seem like the kind of place to find good info on art heists, but their 7th episode featured a remarkable story. Apparently, Nathan’s Hot Dog Eating Champion Michael DeVito was pitching a show to cable networks in which he’d go to exotic locations and eat strange things. Apparently, the production company he was involved with was actually an off-shoot of the Bulger crime family, largely as a way of laundering money. A deal was made where DeVito would eat two paintings, and when the producer, a small-time hood who had briefly worked as an assistant for Michael Iger in the mid-1980s, sent orders to grab three paintings for the project, somehow, the number went from 2 to 12. DeVito saw the pile of canvases the day of the taping, asked if it would get him sick, and was handed fifty grand as a bonus. That afternoon, he supposedly ate five canvases, and used the Rembrandt to wipe his mouth. They did a second day of shooting the next day, where he polished off all the remaining paintings. This theory does not address the whereabouts of the Finial, but it may have been taken as a prop to provide visual interest for the shoot.

### Theory 5 – In Plain Sight

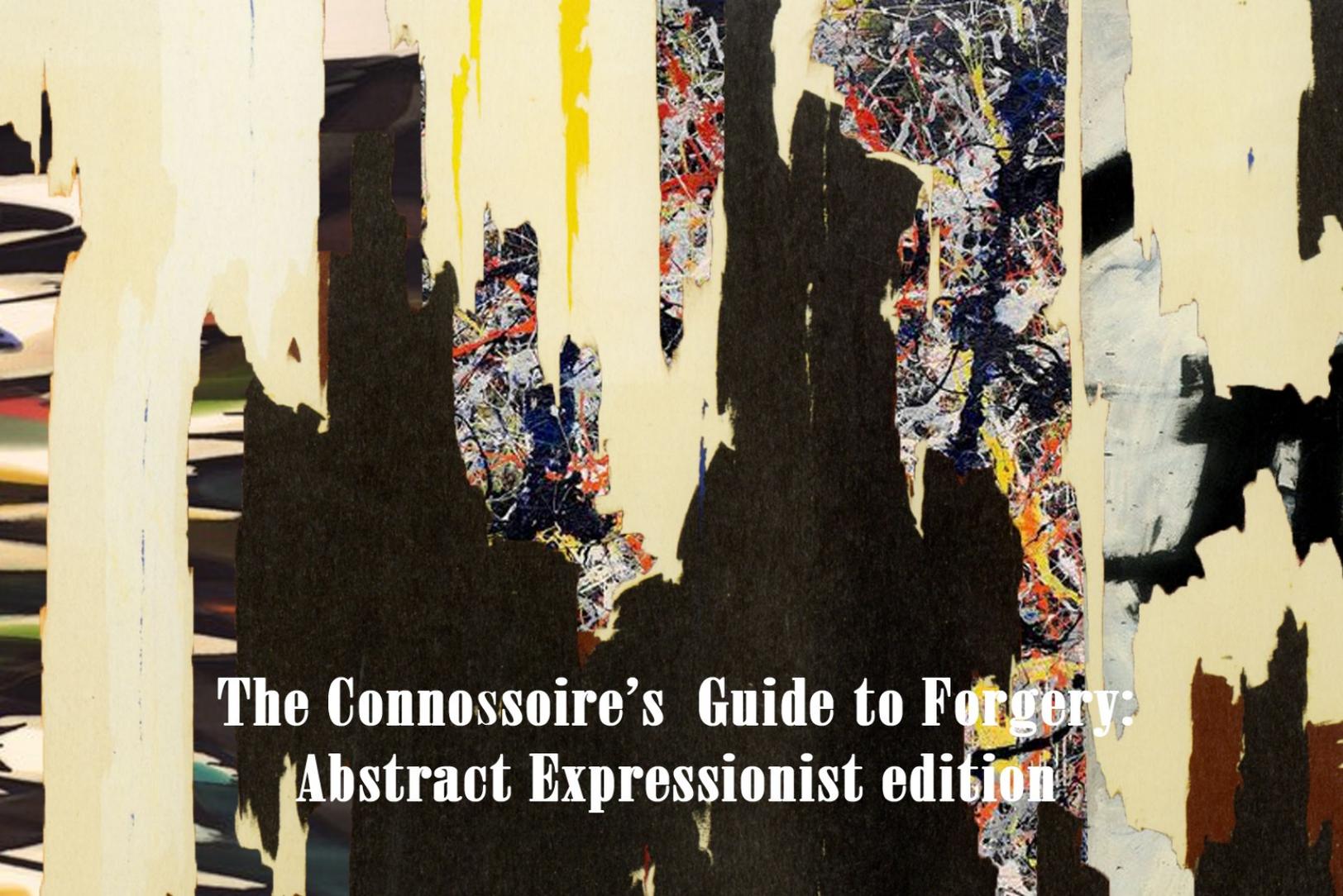
A lot of things can happen in 81 minutes, including a heart attack. According to Mexican Television tabloid news show El Shoot, the heist itself was organized by the guards on duty, with the two robbers who they let into the building being long-time thieves, known in the Boston area for a string of gas station robberies in the 1960s. After grabbing the twelve works on the second floor, one of the robbers began to suffer from chest pains, and the entire crew went into a panic. The guards, who were tripping on mushrooms at the time in celebration, panicked, and they grabbed the paintings, hid them the one place they figured they could grab them later. They folded up the canvases and hid them behind the seat covers in the bathrooms as the robbers made their way out to get the stricken one to the hospital. When the guards sent a friend to pick up the paintings, they were gone.

### Theory 6 – Must be trippin’

A 1996 issue of High Times, a theory was proposed that made some sense. The guards, known to throw psychedelic parties after-hours in the museum, had a couple of folks over. After a round of drinks and a couple of hits of acid, one of the visitors started freaking out, running upstairs and slashing at the paintings and basically being unruly. It took 5 minutes to calm him down, but the damage had been done. The others began to clean up what they could, but the slashed paintings and broken pieces went out the door with the friends, and was burned later. They hadn’t figured there would be a reward, or they would have held on to the pieces.

### Theory 6 – The IRS Connection

The most interesting recent theory, proposed by the hosts of the Police & Thieves podcast, is that the theft was not actually as theft at all, but a repossession. Apparently, an oversight by Internal Revenue Service workers at the time of the death of Isabella Stewart Gardner, had left a tax bill of 42,068 left unpaid. Upon discovering this, an IRS agent contacted the museum’s director and this led to a heated exchange where the IRS was demanding 420 million dollars (the amount owed + interest and fines x inflation) and the agent was laughed out of the building. Supposedly, the Agent was so incensed that he returned the next night and stole the paintings that would cover Gardner’s tab. The podcasters speculate that they are currently in storage in one of the Smithsonian museums.



## The Connoisseur's Guide to Forgery: Abstract Expressionist edition

Yes, the paintings look like any child could paint them, but that is so far from the truth. The fact is, there are so many signatures to Abstract Expressionist painting that make fakes incredibly difficult to fake. All you have to do is look at your kid's dribbles and smooches against the butcher paper at school next to a Pollock or a Kline to understand that there is far more going on than you assume. And so, here's a guide on how to avoid making stupid mistakes on your path to creating a multi-million dollar fake!

### **Mark Rothko**

They're just flat paintings of soft-edged squares, right? Kinda.

First, he didn't always use just paint. He'd combine primer and pigment to create his images, and they were ALWAYS huge. HE would sometimes use a brush, but often sponges or even rags were used. If you use

a sponge, you need to make sure it's not a natural sponge, but one of those thick square ones they sold in the 1950s. If you use a rag, remember that often fibers will come loose and embed themselves in the paint, so finding a period rag is probably your best bet.

As far as salability goes, you may want to go with faking one of his 1940s biomorphic pieces instead of his colourfield stuff from later in his career.

### **Franz Kline**

It's just a bunch of slashing lines he'd slap on, right?

Not even close.

Kline did way more mapping out of his images than almost any other AbEx painter. He'd draw them out in sketches. The sense that you are experiencing a moment with a Kline is completely and totally contrived through planning and sketching. Apparently, there are some where you can see Kline's pencil on the canvas. That's an important idea if you're gonna fake.

Next, the paint. He used to do things like squeeze an entire tube of black paint into a cup of turpentine, and then paint with it, eliminating just about everything but the pigments. That's why his were the blackest blacks, the whitest whites. That's utterly key. His brushes, on the other hand, were completely unexceptional, and as long as you've got brushes from pre-1956, you're gonna be OK on that measure.

### **Clyfford Still**

Don't even bother trying. He sells very well, but his works are some of the most tracked of all paintings. There is never a question as to where any of them are, and trying to do a copy of one of the few in private hands is a fool errand as his technique was so precise that to duplicate it is impossible without feeling like you're trying to duplicate it.

### **Helen Frankenthaler**

These are deceptively easy to fake, but you rarely hear of fakes, partly because her market isn't what it should be. Looking at her work, the first thing you need to do is spend about a year figuring out how to properly thin out paint. It's not as easy as it sounds,

Don't put primer on your canvas, but also use incredibly thick canvas. Her canvases were about twice as heavy as other painters of the time. Mix with turpentine, but not too much. Dumping small bucket-fulls of paint seems like a good idea, but really, she was much more controlled. She rarely used a single technique on a canvas, usually mixing brush and sponge and dumping paint directly on the canvas.

## Jackson Pollock

It's no problem to make a painting like Pollock, right? Just fling paint at a canvas and be done with it, yeah?

Nope.

Pollock is maddeningly difficult to fake. There's both material questions and technique matters you have to deal with. The materials are usually over-looked. He'd use oils, acrylics, housepaints, you name it. He's often combine them with dist, dust, cigarette ash, iron filings, you name it, and that would give his colors their distinctive muddy quality. He's also often drop a cigarette butt, or bristles of his brushes. He'd work with brushes, or sticks, or even boards.

The technique aspect is where almost everyone goes wrong. It was not chaos. Pollock claimed he knew where every line would go. This is actually attested to by the few portraits he did in his 'drip' method. He was not above gimmickry, as Blue Poles, where he hit the canvas with paint-dipped 2-x-4s will demonstrate. The lines have to be substantial, without being blobby. They need to be automatic in feel, but obviously controlled when studied closely. The lines need to be generated not with the force of a fling, but with gesture, far more from the shoulder than the wrist.



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