

## The Empty Frames

The strong north wind added to the bone-freezing cold. It was a late afternoon last December. I was walking along the Fenway in Boston. It was almost dark. I was going back to visit the place where the largest art heist in history had occurred nearly two decades earlier—March 18, 1990. No other robbery—artistic or otherwise—has been this costly.

The location was the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Nothing like it had ever been built before, and it is unlikely ever to be duplicated. Completed in 1898, it is an exact copy of the Palazzo Barbaro on the Grand Canal in Venice, but with the palace's exterior walls facing the inner courtyard of the museum. The shimmering color of the walls alters as the changing light floods through the enormous skylight that covers the whole atrium. In December, the courtyard was awash in poinsettia and desert blooms, complemented by the ever-present greenery and palm trees.

Make no mistake this was Isabella's museum...and home. She lived on the fourth floor and would roam the corridors at all hours, enjoying the art at her leisure. She admitted to being addicted to her masterpieces. As she herself said, "I've got the picture habit. It's as bad as the whisky habit. Downstairs, I feel, are all these glories I can look at. Just think of that! I can see Titian's 'Europa and the Bull', Velasquez, Vermeer et al. anytime I want to. There's richness for you."

The thieves stole not only a dozen of Mrs. Gardner's masterpieces, including the Vermeer, a Manet, three Rembrandt's and five Degas'. They also robbed the soul and memory of Isabella Stewart Gardner.

I wanted to see for myself the place where this tragedy had occurred. The gathering darkness, the creaking of the stairs, and the groaning of the massive wooden doors leading to the museum's Dutch Room added another layer of mystery and menace. This room is filled with ghosts.

The visitor is immediately struck by the sight of the south wall. There are two picture frames, perhaps as large as 3' x 5', with nothing in them except the green-gold brocade of the wallpaper. This does nothing

for the viewer but emphasize the enormity of the theft. Why wouldn't the directors replace them with other works—or at least move the empty frames to the basement? Mrs. Gardner was not only imperious, she was stubborn to a fault. Her will was so ironclad that nothing in the collection could be rearranged. Further, her will stipulated that if anything was moved all the art was to be immediately sold, with the proceeds going to Harvard. So the Rembrandt-less frame remains.

When we think of the commission of major crimes, the names that most often come to mind are the likes of John Dillinger or Clyde Barrow. But the total amount of money stolen by both is miniscule when compared to the value of the art taken from the Gardner. Of course, it's impossible to know the exact price of a work of art until it's sold. However, the estimated worth of the pieces stolen on that night in 1990 was \$500 million. (A previous director of the Taft Museum thinks that figure is exaggerated.) Twenty years later, with general inflation and the hyperbolic art market, the total may be closer to \$750 million. That's three-quarters of a billion dollars. A mind-boggling sum.

There are only 34 known paintings by Vermeer remaining in existence, so that one work by itself may be worth as much as \$300 to \$400 million. The painting, titled “The Concert”, is exquisite, and it defies easy interpretation. It’s baffling: Why does the concert master sit with his back to us, remaining forever anonymous? The very proper young ladies whom he is instructing stand in stark contrast to the painting on the wall behind them of an earthy street scene depicting a solicitation. (Interestingly, Vermeer owned this work, “The Procuress”, and it also appears in his “Young Woman Seated At a Virginal.”) The colors of the concert master’s chair and the oriental rug are dazzlingly brilliant. No reproduction can really do this painting—or any of Vermeer’s work—justice. To see one “in the flesh” is breathtaking.

About Vermeer: He was born in 1632 and is often referred to by art historians as the “Sphinx of Delft” because so little is known about him. He left no written record, no diaries, no letters. But that was not unusual for the age. Think of Shakespeare, who was born in 1564 and died in 1616. Almost nothing is known about his personal life, and the first written anthology of his plays—the First Folio—was not produced

until seven years after his death. All we have left are 38 of his plays done with numbing frequency around the world for the last four centuries.

But back to poor Vermeer. We do know that his wife gave birth to 15 children, of whom eleven lived. He was forced to move into his mother-in-law's home to provide for his family. It took him so long to complete a single painting—he was such a perfectionist—that he left us with less than 40 completed canvases. (By contrast, Frans Hals could complete a painting in a little over a week.) France invaded Holland in 1672, effectively destroying the Dutch art market, and Vermeer went ever deeper in debt. Painting was his only talent. His despair drove him rapidly to insanity. His wife informed the bankruptcy court that in less than a day and a half he had gone from being healthy to being dead. Vermeer was 43.

Who has the paintings? Not one has been recovered, despite the offer, since 1997, of a \$5 million reward. (The only larger inducement is for information leading to the capture of Osama bin Laden.) Conventional wisdom loves the “Dr. No theory.” The fairy tale begins

with an eccentric living on an exotic island in the Pacific a thousand miles west of the Galapagos. He lives by himself. He has many servants—powerful, but partially blind eunuchs who would lay down their life for their master. Each night he has a party where he is both host and sole guest, and his paintings are paraded out. His art burglars are very, very good and always fill the order.

This fiction is so pervasive that *The Boston Globe* and *The New York Times* ran stories the day after the robbery outlining where they thought the paintings really were—in the hands of a Dr. No guarded by his goblins.

Harold Smith, the renowned art investigator who worked for 15 years trying to recover the paintings and who died in 2005, thought this conjecture was poppycock. He had never found a secret stash of paintings in a billionaire's mansion or uncovered an art thief who would take such a job. It's not worth the risk. It makes them quixotic, when, in truth, they are cruel and unscrupulous. As Mr. Smith said, "You have to remember, the people who steal art aren't nice. They're crooks, and they steal things that don't belong to them."

This paper is too short to describe in detail how two thieves, masquerading as Boston policemen, managed to get into the museum, tie up two guards, and have the run of the place for almost one and a half hours. But why did they leave Titian's "Europa and the Bull"—one of the most valuable pieces of Western art? Or, why not take the much larger and more finished Rembrandt self portrait rather than the small Rembrandt sketch? Were they asked to take these paintings in particular? Or, were they just randomly choosing what looked valuable? Why do thieves even bother to steal famous works of art? It's like kidnapping the Prince of Wales. You can't show him off, and you have to keep him clean, healthy and undamaged.

This year there was an article in *The New York Times* on March 18<sup>th</sup> noting the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Gardner heist. The theft has not been forgotten. The \$5 million reward is being re-publicized, with the use of two highway billboards. The FBI has resubmitted evidence recovered at the scene for DNA testing. The statute of limitations for prosecuting the two men who actually took the paintings has long since

passed. So, why hasn't either of them come forward to offer information...and perhaps even claim the reward?

Art museums around the world hold the treasures of our past. It is as inconceivable to imagine The Louvre without the “Mona Lisa” as it is to accept the Gardner without its Vermeer. So the big question is: Will the Vermeer, the Rembrandts and the others ever come home to Mrs. Gardner again? Recent history would say “yes.” Monet’s “Impression, Sunrise” was stolen from the Marmottan Museum in Paris in 1985 and discovered in Corsica—a little the worse for wear—in 1990. “The Scream”, Edvard Munch’s most famous painting, was taken in August 2004 and returned two years later. And just last week (on March 24<sup>th</sup>) a work by Paul Klee that was stolen in 1989 was reunited with its rightful owner.

Aside from pragmatic detective work, there is also the power of conviction. Ulrich Boser, the author of *The Gardner Heist*, relates the following story: One afternoon a few weeks after the theft, a woman walked into the Gardner with a large bouquet of yellow tulips. She was

smartly dressed in a dark pantsuit and spoke with a decidedly English accent. She pushed the flowers into the arms of a museum employee and said, “Yellow is for hope.”

Howard L. Tomb, III  
Budget Paper  
March 29, 2010