

A close-up, vertical view of the Mona Lisa's face, showing her eyes, nose, and mouth. The image is split into three horizontal sections by black bars containing text. The top section shows her eyes and the top of her nose. The middle section shows her nose and mouth. The bottom section shows her chin and the top of her dress.

The **THEFTS** *of*

THE COMPLETE STORY OF THE
WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS ARTWORK

The **MONA LISA**

NOAH
CHARNEY

FOREWORD BY STEVE BERRY

THE THEFTS OF THE *MONA LISA*

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the MONA LISA

THE COMPLETE STORY OF THE
WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS ARTWORK

NOAH CHARNEY

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To *Urška* / who designed this book and who beautifies my life.

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FOREWORD

I write fiction. More precisely, commercial fiction. What the industry calls “thrillers with a high concept.” A fancy term for stories that appeal to a wide audience, across the globe, regardless of nationality. At their heart, my stories are designed to entertain, but if along the way I can also inform the reader, then so much the better. They are a blend of action, history, secrets, and conspiracies. The niche I’ve carved for myself is that I keep my fiction about 90 percent to reality, only changing things where absolutely necessary. And so that there’s no confusion, I always include a writer’s note at the end that tells the reader what’s true or false.

To accomplish all that takes research.

For each of my novels, I use 300–400 sources, nearly all of which are printed books. Now, I don’t read all those books, but I do read large chunks of them. And it is from the notes garnered during that reading that my novels are born. So, understandably, I rely heavily on good, reliable, nonfiction material. Like the kind of books Noah Charney has long been writing.

My 2022 novel, *The Omega Factor*, dealt with a fabulous piece of art—*The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*. Or, as it is more commonly known, *The Ghent Altarpiece*. It’s a magnificent creation, completed around 1432, that carries the distinction of the most stolen and violated work of art in the world. It made great fodder for a high-concept thriller. But first I had to learn all about it.

That’s where Noah came in.

He wrote a book in 2010 called *Stealing the Mystic Lamb*. I found a copy and discovered that it was chock-full of fascinating history and important information, yet it read like a thriller. Just the kind of resource I needed. But who was Noah Charney? Was he credible? Did he know what he was talking about?

I found out that Noah has a master’s degree in art history from the Courtauld Institute of Art and the University of Cambridge. Impressive. He also has a PhD from the University of Ljubljana. Even more impressive. He’s been an adjunct professor of art history at the American University of Rome, a visiting lecturer for Brown University abroad programs, and the founder of the Association for Research into Crimes against Art, a nonprofit research group that focuses on issues in art crime.

All that sounded really good.

Then I found articles about him in the *New York Times* magazine, *Time*

magazine, the *Wall Street Journal*, BBC Radio, National Public Radio, *El Pais*, *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Tatler* among others. He's also a regular on radio and television, including BBC, ITV, CNBC, National Geographic, and MSNBC.

Which meant he was highly regarded and in demand.

He's also the author, or coauthor, of a number of magazine articles and full-length books on art. He's even given TEDx talks.

Clearly, this guy knew what he was talking about.

I loved *Stealing the Mystic Lamb*, which is now regarded as one of the definitive works on *The Ghent Altarpiece*. A must-read resource.

Now here Noah is again, with another story to tell.

The Thefts of the Mona Lisa reads like a thriller. But this stuff is *all* real. It happened. You will learn all about how and why one of the most famous works of art on the planet has attracted the attention of so many thieves and fanatics. What is it about that enigmatic face that seems to draw trouble? All is explained by a world-class expert. And, who knows? Thanks to this book, some writer (me included) might even find a new idea for a novel.

So, enjoy.

I certainly did.

Steve Berry
Multiple *New York Times* Best-Selling Author
April 2023

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book was originally conceived as an effort to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the *Mona Lisa* theft, about which much is said but relatively little is clear to the average citizen. An earlier version was published on a very small scale as a fund-raiser for ARCA, the Association for Research into Crimes against Art, which I founded in 2006. I am hugely grateful to the ARCA “family,” the dozens of students who have taken its postgraduate program, the hundreds who have attended its annual conference on the study of art crime, and particularly its CEO, Lynda Albertson, and its academic director, Edgar Tjihuis. If you’d like to learn more about real art crimes, you can come study with us every summer in Italy. To learn more, visit www.artcrimeresearch.org.

The record on the *Mona Lisa* could do with some setting straight. So, although relatively little in this book is entirely new scholarship, I have attempted to place the theft in the context of the history of art crime, something never done before, while also discussing the social and art history surrounding the portrait and its history. I have drawn largely on what I consider the two best histories currently available, Donald Sassoon, *Mona Lisa: The History of the World’s Most Famous Painting*, for the complete story of the portrait; and Milton Esterow, *The Art Stealers*, two chapters of which give an in-depth, well-researched analysis of the theft and the *affaire des statuettes*. Silvia Loreti was the first scholar to really shed light on the *affaire*, and she did so in a brilliant chapter in a book I edited, *Art & Crime: Exploring the Dark Side of the Art World*, so she deserves the primary research credit for that portion of the story. Martin Kemp’s work on Leonardo is my go-to, and I tend to agree with him 97 percent of the time. His *Mona Lisa: The People and the Painting*, written with Giuseppe Pallanti, became my primary resource for this new edition of my book.

I’m grateful to the team at Rowman & Littlefield, particularly my wonderful editor, Charles Harmon, with whom I’ve created several books and hope that this is only the start. Thanks also to Francesca Manzin for her research assistance, to Lauren Moynihan for her image hunting, and to Steve Berry for so generously offering to pen the best foreword an author could ever dream of.

And to my wife, Urška, who designed this book and who beautifies my life.

INTRODUCTION

the WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS ARTWORK

On August 2, 2009, an “unhinged” Russian woman hurled a mug, recently purchased in the Louvre cafeteria, at the world’s most famous painting.¹ The *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da Vinci emerged unscathed and unscalded, the empty mug having ricocheted off the bulletproof case that protected the painting. Guards quickly subdued the attacker, who put up no resistance and claimed to have targeted the painting to protest the fact that she had recently been denied French citizenship. This move was perhaps not the best way to ingratiate oneself to the French nation, but at least disaster was averted.

The incident did point to some glaring holes in the museum’s multimillion-dollar security system. Although it’s nearly impossible to smuggle a weapon into the Louvre, apparently you can buy one at the cafeteria for €2.50 and bring it into the galleries. Had the woman targeted any other painting in the museum, unprotected by a bulletproof cover, her projectile beverage could have done real damage.

The Russian woman was handed over to the police and later admitted to a psychiatric hospital. But this was not the first time that Leonardo’s most famous portrait had been the object of attack. In 1956 the painting was twice assaulted. It was sprayed with acid, resulting in damage to the lower portion of the painting

and several months in the museum's conservation studio. The very same year a Bolivian named Ugo Ungaza Villegas hurled a stone at the painting—it stuck just beneath *Mona Lisa*'s left elbow, requiring further conservation.²

The portrait was encased in bulletproof glass for its 1974 tour of Moscow and Tokyo. That did not stop a handicapped Japanese woman who, while the painting was on display at the Tokyo National Museum in April 1974, sprayed red paint at the *Mona Lisa* to protest the museum's policy for disabled visitors—the paint was stopped by the glass but made an impression nonetheless.³ The painting currently resides in an incredibly elaborate case with temperature and humidity controls and even an anti-earthquake cradle system.⁴

Ironically, the most famous incident involving the painting, its theft by Vincenzo Peruggia in 1911, was made possible by the museum's concern over vandalism. Fearing attacks by anarchists after the 1907 knifing of an Ingres painting, the Louvre staff commissioned the construction of glass cases to protect some of its most famous masterpieces. One of the workers assigned to prepare the glass to cover the *Mona Lisa* was an Italian painter working for the Louvre as a handyman—Vincenzo Peruggia.

I'm asked about the *Mona Lisa* constantly. Ask anyone on the street to name a famous artwork, and it's the one they'll cite, even if they know little to nothing about it. I've written on the painting in several of my books (including a previous edition of this one), for TED, and I've discussed it in appearances on numerous television programs. It continues to fascinate, from an art perspective as well as true crime. But it also acts as a prism through which to consider the idea of fame.

I'm not a Leonardo specialist. Though I teach, present, and write about art history, with a particular interest in iconography (the study of symbols in art) in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century paintings, I'm primarily an expert on the history of art crime. My fields combine in a book like this to tell as complete a story as possible of an artwork with a criminal history. But my knowledge of the details of the *Mona Lisa* comes from my research and conversations with the go-to experts, academic rock stars such as Donald Sassoon and Martin Kemp.

I'm a devout adherent to Kemp's theories on Leonardo, as I consider him the world's leading expert, and I'm grateful to be able to call upon him when needed (he even graciously wrote the foreword to one of my books). But even the experts disagree, part of the charm (or frustration, depending on your point of view) of art history. In almost all matters, I'm in the "Kempian" school, but I've tried to present other relevant views as well—and some irrelevant ones, come to think of it, because no artwork has attracted as many unusual theories, running the

gamut from feasible but unproven to completely bonkers, as has the *Mona Lisa*.

This book provides a complete look at the world's most famous painting, but its distinctive focus is on examining the criminal biography of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*. The goal is to separate fact from fiction in the story of what is not only the most famous art heist in history, but the single most famous theft of all time. In the process we will also tell of Leonardo's creation of the *Mona Lisa*, discuss why it is so famous, look at some unnecessary conspiracy theories surrounding it as well as other *Mona Lisa* paintings and how they fit into the story of the original, and investigate two other events in its history of theft and renown that few know of, make for cinematic stories.

First, we examine the so-called *affaire des statuettes* in which Pablo Picasso and Guillaume Apollinaire were arrested under suspicion of involvement in the theft of the *Mona Lisa*. Second, there has long been a question whether the Nazis stole the *Mona Lisa* during World War II. The chapter on that event will strive to answer that question. Because of these other events, coupled with Peruggia's mistaken belief that the Napoleonic army had stolen the *Mona Lisa* from his native Italy, this book has used the plural in its title, *The Thefts of the Mona Lisa*.

CHAPTER 1

the MOST FAMOUS HEIST in HISTORY

Vincenzo Peruggia breathed in heavily the scent of his sweat as he waited, barely willing to exhale, in the tight, dark closet beside the Salle des Sept Martres gallery in the Louvre. He listened for the footfalls of the guards. They gradually grew louder in a painfully slow crescendo. For an exquisite moment they seemed to stop right outside the door against which his ear was propped, but then they continued into the distance, echoing along the length of the corridor and into the night museum.

Peruggia knew that the Louvre had more than four hundred rooms but only two hundred guards, with a great many fewer patrolling the corridors by night. He knew the precise manner in which his quarry hung in the darkness ahead of him. He knew what he would say if he were caught: he was just an employee of a company that had been subcontracted by the Louvre. But nothing would help him if he were found with the painting in hand.

He had been working at the Louvre Museum over two four-month periods as a handyman, most recently involved in constructing wooden and glass cases used to protect some of the Louvre's most famous paintings from the threat of anarchists the directorship feared might target a masterpiece for vandalism as a political protest after a woman slashed an Ingres painting in 1907. He was one of five workers in charge of cutting and cleaning glass to build these cases in