

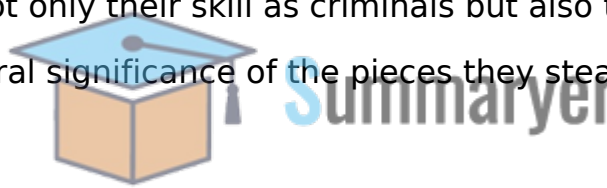
Chapter 16

Chapter 16 of *The Art Thief* continues to unravel the intense investigation led by Bernard Darties, who is determined to solve the string of art thefts that have plagued museums in France and Switzerland. In his detailed memo, Darties focuses on the theft of an ivory figurine from a museum in Brittany in August 1996. A witness recalls seeing a couple lingering near the display shortly before the theft, prompting Darties to believe that they were the culprits. This marks just one of many incidents, with a similar duo suspected of stealing a silk-embroidered tapestry in another town. Darties, who has spent a decade in antiterrorism before taking on the task of investigating art crimes, begins to perceive a pattern forming. He believes the thieves are not typical criminals, but rather individuals with a cultured background, possibly academics or art professionals, who possess a refined understanding of art and its value. Their expertise and knowledge make their crimes more intricate and their arrest far more challenging.

A significant case in Darties's investigation is the theft of a portrait by Corneille de Lyon, a well-known artist who worked under King François I. The portrait, painted in the early 1500s, depicted the king's daughter, Madeleine de France. Known for her delicate health, Madeleine tragically passed away at the age of sixteen, just one year after her portrait was completed. The painting had been on display in the Museum of Fine Arts in Blois, a town where Madeleine had been sent for treatment. When the theft occurred, the museum had been busy with visitors, and staff were stationed nearby. However, the painting vanished without a trace, leaving only its empty frame behind. This bizarre and seemingly impossible theft caught Darties's attention, as the boldness of the crime suggested a level of sophistication that could not be overlooked.

The theft of the portrait marks a significant turning point in Darties's investigation. With little to go on, Darties refrains from making the details public, fearing that it could give the thieves a heads-up and allow them to hide the stolen artwork. Meanwhile,

unbeknownst to Darties, another detective, Alexandre Von der Mühl, is also working on similar cases, leading to a collaboration between the two. The thieves' methods are too calculated and well-organized for Darties to dismiss them as opportunistic criminals. He begins to realize that these individuals view their heists as an extension of their passion for art, rather than just mere theft. Their meticulous planning and execution suggest that they possess not just a criminal mind, but a deep appreciation for the objects they are taking. Darties becomes more determined to catch them, knowing that it's not only their skill as criminals but also their disregard for the historical and cultural significance of the pieces they steal that makes them even more dangerous.



As the investigation grows, more reports of thefts from various museums across France and Switzerland surface, reinforcing Darties's suspicion that the same couple is behind these heists. These crimes are no longer isolated incidents, and Darties believes that the perpetrators are operating on a much larger scale. This realization pushes law enforcement agencies in both countries to cooperate, exchanging information and piecing together evidence. Darties's primary challenge now is to track down the couple before they commit any more thefts. He knows that the longer they remain free, the more valuable and irreplaceable works of art will be lost. Darties remains relentless in his pursuit, carefully analyzing every lead and every potential suspect. Despite the complexities of the case, he holds on to the belief that the thieves will eventually make a mistake that will lead to their capture. As the investigation intensifies, Darties's focus sharpens, and the stakes grow higher for both the criminals and the law enforcement officers trying to catch them.