

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of *The Art Thief* further explores the intricate and carefully structured life of Breitwieser, who continues his passion for art theft with meticulous planning and devotion. While Anne-Catherine carries on with her daily activities and work, Breitwieser spends his time immersed in research at various key locations, such as libraries in Mulhouse and Strasbourg. His deep dive into the art world also includes regular visits to the University of Basel's extensive art-history collection, where he consults the Benezit Dictionary of Artists. This resource, filled with artist catalogs and provenance information, offers Breitwieser critical details to support his continued criminal pursuits. Fluent in multiple languages, including German, English, and French, he skillfully navigates the readings, absorbing important facts from a range of sources. His intense devotion to understanding art's history further fuels his obsession with acquiring it, making him increasingly meticulous in his criminal work. This approach to learning strengthens his sense of entitlement over stolen works, reinforcing the belief that he is preserving art rather than stealing it.

In the midst of his criminal exploits, Breitwieser organizes the stolen pieces he collects into detailed folders, alongside the relevant reference materials he meticulously gathers. Each piece is cataloged with sketches, notes, and his thoughts on their importance and aesthetic value. Thanks to the support of his grandparents, who provide resources for his growing collection, his personal library expands to more than five hundred volumes. These books serve not only as a tool for learning but as a reflection of his obsession with art, deepening his knowledge of various periods, techniques, and artists. One particular focus is the life of Georg Petel, a talented artist whose tragic death at thirty-four left a significant mark on the art world. Petel's untimely demise due to the plague resonates with Breitwieser, who is fascinated by how this loss contributed to the artist's mystique and legacy. While many admire

Petel's work, it is Breitwieser's obsession with preserving the artist's legacy, however illicitly, that drives him to steal such pieces. The more he studies these artists, the deeper his conviction grows, convincing him that he is rightfully collecting and preserving their creations, irrespective of the legality of his actions.

As Breitwieser and Anne-Catherine grow more comfortable with their criminal activities, they begin to target museums with weaker security, capitalizing on the vulnerabilities that many smaller institutions present. Museums, especially those with limited resources, often depend on public trust rather than robust security systems to protect their art, creating a perfect environment for theft. This stark contrast between the museums' intent to foster an intimate relationship with their patrons and the ease with which they can be exploited by criminals like Breitwieser highlights the systemic flaws in art protection. Breitwieser and Anne-Catherine expertly navigate these vulnerabilities, selecting targets that lack the security measures necessary to thwart their criminal plans. Their skills come into full play during their heist at the University of Basel museum, where they set their sights on a renowned painting by Willem van Mieris. Despite the presence of a security camera, Breitwieser's careful planning allows him to bypass the system and execute the theft with precision. With Anne-Catherine's help, the painting is swiftly concealed in a shopping bag, and the duo exits without raising any suspicion. The heist is successful, with only a vague video capturing a fleeting image of a man walking away. This chapter not only showcases the couple's audacity but also exposes the art world's inherent vulnerabilities, as well as the thieves' growing expertise and relentless drive. Their actions are a testament to the systemic flaws within museums, which remain unable to prevent such high-level art thefts despite efforts to secure their treasures.