

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of *The Art Thief* takes readers deep into the mind of Stéphane Breitwieser, a self-styled connoisseur of art who has justified his numerous thefts not as criminal acts but as a means of curating beauty. Although his actions have made him a notorious figure in the world of art crime, Breitwieser does not consider himself a typical thief. His thefts, carried out with the help of his partner, Anne-Catherine Kleinklaus, are portrayed as a personal mission to collect art that he believes is rightfully his. Breitwieser feels a deep contempt for other art thieves, especially those involved in high-profile heists like the infamous 1990 Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum robbery, where thieves destroyed artworks during their escape. To him, the idea of causing harm to an artwork, whether through damage or violence, is anathema to his personal philosophy of art as something sacred.

Unlike many criminals who focus on quick, violent thefts, Breitwieser takes a much more calculated and respectful approach. He is deliberate in his methods, carefully removing paintings from their frames and ensuring that nothing is damaged. For him, the theft of art should not result in its destruction, and it is this meticulousness that sets him apart from the typical art thief. The museum, in Breitwieser's view, is an institution that stifles the true beauty of art, locking it away in sterile environments where it cannot be fully appreciated. He argues that the true value of art is only realized when it is experienced in a personal, intimate manner, far from the confines of the sterile, controlled atmosphere of the museum.

Breitwieser's justifications for his thefts are steeped in a complex philosophical belief about the nature of art. He sees himself not as a thief, but as a liberator of art—taking it out of the cold, impersonal museum setting and into a space where he can truly engage with it. This belief is most evident in his admiration for works such as the ivory "Adam and Eve," which he sees as sensual and deserving of closer inspection. Unlike

many other art thieves, who are primarily driven by the desire for monetary gain, Breitwieser views his collection as an act of aesthetic and emotional fulfillment. He takes pride in his ability to identify art that moves him, arguing that it is his deep appreciation for beauty that motivates his actions, not the desire to profit from stolen goods. Yet, despite these lofty ideals, Breitwieser cannot escape the reality of his criminal actions, which continue to define his existence.

In contrast to Breitwieser's idealism, Anne-Catherine offers a more pragmatic perspective on their lifestyle. While she participates in the thefts, she does so with more caution and awareness of the consequences. Living together in his mother's home, without paying rent, they are forced to rely on modest jobs and government support to survive. Anne-Catherine does not share Breitwieser's romanticized view of their actions. She is more attuned to the risks and dangers of their lifestyle, though she never directly challenges him on their crimes. Their relationship reflects a dynamic in which Breitwieser's idealism about art clashes with the practical realities of living a criminal life. Although they continue to steal, they do not attempt to sell the art, as Breitwieser finds the idea of profiting from stolen art to be dishonorable. This contrast between Breitwieser's philosophical justifications and Anne-Catherine's more grounded viewpoint adds depth to their relationship, underscoring the complexity of their motivations and the contradictions in their lives. Their story is one of both passion and pragmatism, as they navigate the fine line between art theft and artistic appreciation.