

# Chapter 15

Chapter 15 of *The Art Thief* deepens the exploration of art crime, as it follows the investigation led by Alexandre Von der Mühl, one of Switzerland's few specialized inspectors in the field. Von der Mühl, who is known for his sharp analytical mind and dedication to justice, finds himself dissecting the surveillance footage from the Alexis Forel Museum. In the footage, a young couple is seen executing a well-coordinated heist, using their intimate knowledge of the museum's security systems to steal a valuable serving platter. This incident is just one in a troubling rise of art thefts, primarily occurring in Switzerland, which Von der Mühl believes are linked. His experience in art theft, combined with a deep appreciation for artistic heritage, fuels his investigation. As he watches the footage, he begins to see patterns that lead him to believe the thefts are part of a larger, more organized crime network. His observations spark a broader investigation that will uncover the complexities of art theft on an international scale.

As Von der Mühl digs deeper into the case, he begins to recognize a pattern in the stolen artworks: they are primarily lesser-known but highly valuable works from the late Renaissance. This indicates that the perpetrators are not typical thieves looking to sell high-profile pieces for quick cash. Instead, they seem to have a refined understanding of art and a penchant for choosing specific items with particular value, not just financial but also cultural. The couple, Von der Mühl deduces, has likely targeted these lesser-known works for their uniqueness and the relative ease with which they can be stolen and sold. As he analyzes their actions, Von der Mühl surmises that the motivation behind the thefts may be rooted in a more sophisticated understanding of art's value. These criminals may view their actions as an exploitation of an art market that has seen an unprecedented boom in recent years, with art fetching increasingly higher prices at auctions worldwide. This growing financial value

in the art market is making it a prime target for organized criminals, further complicating the efforts of law enforcement.

The chapter also highlights the alarming global prevalence of art theft. Statistics reveal that there are at least fifty thousand art thefts each year worldwide, contributing to a criminal economy worth billions. These numbers illustrate the magnitude of the issue and underline how art theft has become a significant problem for law enforcement agencies across the globe. The thefts also involve some of the most famous artists in history, such as Pablo Picasso. Picasso, despite being a renowned artist, was also wrongfully implicated in the infamous theft of the *Mona Lisa* in the early 20th century, despite his prior involvement in art misappropriation. This situation sheds light on the complexity of art crime, where even prominent artists and their works can become the subject of criminal activity. In addition to Picasso, artists like Salvador Dalí and Andy Warhol have also been targeted due to their iconic works, which are highly sought after in both the art world and the criminal underground. While these artists are not as widely known for being involved in art thefts as Picasso, their works continue to be prime targets for criminals looking to profit from high-value pieces.

The chapter continues by recounting a major success in the fight against art crime. In 1976, a significant recovery operation led to the return of 118 stolen works by Picasso, demonstrating the potential success of specialized law enforcement units that focus specifically on art theft. This recovery marks an important moment for art crime law enforcement, showing that with the right tools and collaboration, even large-scale thefts can be undone. Countries like Italy and France have long been at the forefront of these efforts, developing specialized art-crime units to address the growing problem. These units are dedicated to combating art theft and recovering stolen pieces, and their success has contributed to the global effort to preserve artistic heritage. While Switzerland's art-crime force is smaller compared to other nations, it still reflects the increasing international awareness of the need to fight art theft. The chapter closes by emphasizing the importance of these efforts, highlighting how the fight against art theft is becoming a global priority. With more coordinated international cooperation, the chances of apprehending art criminals and recovering stolen pieces continue to

rise, but the challenge remains immense.

