

Chapter 33

Chapter 33 of *The Art Thief* provides a vivid depiction of the unfolding courtroom drama surrounding the trial of Stéphane Breitwieser, the infamous art thief. The proceedings are centered on the reality that, while Breitwieser's guilt is undeniably established—due to his confession—the defense team is determined to argue for his release after he has already served 444 days in jail. His defense attorney asserts that the thefts committed by Breitwieser were not malicious in intent but instead stemmed from his deep passion for art. According to the lawyer, Breitwieser was not motivated by greed or a desire to profit from the stolen items but instead sought to temporarily protect and preserve them. This narrative paints Breitwieser as someone whose obsession with art spiraled out of control, turning him into an unintentional criminal. As part of the defense, Christian Meichler and others testify, portraying Breitwieser as a passionate collector whose enthusiasm for art led to unfortunate missteps, bolstering the argument that his actions were driven by admiration rather than avarice.

Breitwieser himself is given the opportunity to speak during the trial, where he attempts to defend his actions by asserting that he intended to return the stolen pieces. He frames his thefts as temporary guardianships of the artwork, further emphasizing his emotional attachment to these cultural treasures. Breitwieser's heartfelt tears and emotional declarations during his testimony, in which he expresses regret, seem to sway some members of the courtroom. However, they are met with skepticism by the prosecutor, who argues that these emotional outbursts should not obscure the calculated and systematic nature of Breitwieser's actions. The prosecutor, in a pointed attack, outlines the long history of thefts carried out by Breitwieser, spanning a period of seven years, during which he methodically stole art on a regular basis. Drawing comparisons to other notorious art thieves like Kempton Bunton and Vincenzo Peruggia, the prosecutor underscores how Breitwieser's thefts were not the

result of fleeting impulses but rather a sustained, deliberate effort to acquire valuable works of art. These parallels aim to show that, despite the emotional nature of Breitwieser's testimony, his criminal behavior poses a significant threat to both the art world and society at large.

The prosecutor presents a compelling case, detailing the emotional and financial toll that Breitwieser's thefts have had on the art world. Witnesses testify to the significance of the stolen pieces, such as a rare 1584 bugle and numerous invaluable paintings, which were lost forever from museums and private collections. Morand, a museum curator, speaks about the emotional trauma caused by the thefts, as these artworks were irreplaceable parts of cultural heritage. This emotional testimony highlights the severe consequences of Breitwieser's actions, which go beyond the material loss to include the profound sense of cultural loss felt by those who worked with and cared for these pieces. Despite this, Breitwieser continues to deflect responsibility, attributing his actions to discrepancies in the labeling of the stolen art rather than accepting full accountability for his role in the crimes. To further illustrate his lack of remorse, the prosecutor presents a letter from Breitwieser in which he admits to still harboring a desire to commit further thefts. This letter, along with professional evaluations of Breitwieser's psychological state, strongly suggests that he remains a high risk for reoffending. In his closing arguments, the prosecutor argues that Breitwieser's release would put society at serious risk, and that the weight of his crimes must be fully accounted for. As the jury prepares to deliberate, the chapter leaves readers grappling with the complexity of the situation—considering the nuances of justice, the consequences of criminal behavior, and the emotional toll on both the victims and the perpetrator.