

## The Day the Mona Lisa was Stolen

On Monday, August 21, 1911, the world's most famous work of art—Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*—was stolen from the Louvre museum in Paris. That morning, many museum employees noticed that the painting was not hanging in its usual place. But, they assumed the museum photographer took the painting off the wall and was shooting pictures of it up in his studio. By Tuesday morning, when the painting hadn't been returned and it was not in the photographer's studio, museum officials were notified. The painting was gone!

The police were contacted immediately and they set up headquarters in the museum curator's office. The entire museum was searched from top to bottom. This took a week because of the size of the Louvre: it's a 49-acre building that runs along the Seine river for 2,200 feet. The only thing a detective found was the heavy frame that once held the *Mona Lisa*. It was discovered in a staircase leading to a cloakroom.

Once the news became public, French newspapers made several claims as to the nature of the theft. One newspaper proclaimed that an American collector stole the work and would have an exact copy made which would be returned to the museum. This "collector" would then keep the original. Another newspaper said that the entire incident was a hoax to show how easy it was to steal from the Louvre.

Many people were questioned about the theft – from museum employees to people who worked or lived nearby. Perhaps somebody might have seen someone acting "suspiciously?" The police even questioned Pablo Picasso. Picasso had previously bought two stone sculptures from a friend named Pieret. Pieret had actually stolen these pieces from the Louvre months before the *Mona Lisa* was stolen. Picasso thought that perhaps his friend might have also stolen the *Mona Lisa*.

Fearful of the implications and bad publicity, Picasso had the sculptures given to a local newspaper in order for their return to the museum. Picasso wished to remain anonymous, but someone gave his name to the police. After an interrogation the police concluded that Picasso knew nothing about the theft of the *Mona Lisa*.

Luckily, the painting was recovered 27 months after it was stolen. An Italian man named Vincenzo Perugia tried to sell the work to the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy for \$100,000. Perugia claimed he stole the work out of patriotism. He didn't think such a work by a famous Italian should be kept in France. . What Perugia didn't realize was that while the *Mona Lisa* was probably painted in Italy, Leonardo took it with him to France and sold it to King Francis I for 4,000 gold coins.

How did Perugia steal the *Mona Lisa*? He had spent Sunday night in the Louvre, hiding in an obscure little room. Monday morning, while the museum was closed, he entered the room where the painting was kept and unhooked it from the wall. In a staircase, he cut the painting from its frame. While trying to leave the building, he came to a locked door. He unscrewed the doorknob and put it in his pocket. He then walked out of the Louvre and into the pages of history.

Interestingly enough, ten months before the painting was stolen, the Louvre decided to have all masterpieces put under glass. Perugia was one of four men assigned to the job. Police questioned Perugia after the theft, but his easy-going, calm demeanor settled any doubts of his involvement.

*The source of this story is The Art Stealers by Milton Esterow, New York: Macmillan Company, 1966. Pp 100-152.*

