



The Thefts of the Mona Lisa: The Complete Story of the World's Most Famous Artwork

Noah Charney

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In *The Thefts of the Mona Lisa*, Noah Charney reveals fascinating details about the beguiling masterpiece's artistic and social history, including its infamous 1911 theft and two years' absence from the Louvre.

The book includes incredible details about museum security before the theft, with *objets d'art* displayed in a casual way—as if they were in someone's living room. A century ago, artworks were uncased, unanchored, and unguarded—not safe behind bulletproof glass as the painting is now. Charney next relays how the startling theft was accomplished, reveals the intriguing motives behind the heist, and covers the worldwide media frenzy that followed. An account of how Pablo Picasso and Guillaume Apollinaire were involved in a contemporary art theft from the Louvre layers in even more astonishing details.

Charney's assured, witty prose covers other art thefts too, alongside nerve-wracking accounts of how museum staff safeguarded and moved French art treasures throughout the countryside during World War II, helping the portrait to escape from the Nazis. There's also consideration of *The Mona Lisa* "as a prism through which to consider the idea of fame": Charney notes that *The Mona Lisa* is a familiar but "invisible icon," with most knowing little about the subject and never gazing on the enigmatic portrait at length. He remedies this with appealing stories about Leonardo da Vinci's life, Renaissance beauty standards, and modern techniques, musing on how *The Mona Lisa* looked when it was freshly painted. And he uses memorable passages about contemporary art crimes—some with violent, organized crime aspects—to dispel common myths about the art world.

The Thefts of the Mona Lisa is a thorough, diverting analysis of the Renaissance painting—the world's most recognizable artwork and visage.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (January / February 2024)

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