



## Are We Experiencing a Resurgence of High-Profile Art Thefts?

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### *Picasso Painting Worth \$650,000 Disappears En Route to Spanish Museum*

When the CajaGranada Cultural Center prepared to unveil its new exhibition, *Still Life: The Eternity of the Inert*, on October 9, one painting was expected to be among its highlights: Pablo Picasso's *Still Life With Guitar*. A truck carrying nearly 60 loaned artworks arrived from Madrid a week before the opening, but the crates were left unopened. It wasn't until October 6—just days before the exhibition—the curatorial team made a shocking discovery: the Picasso was missing.



Recently there have been several high visibility heists: for example, just this week the Louvre Museum in Paris was hit in broad daylight, marking one of the most daring museum thefts in years. Are we experiencing a resurgence of high-profile art thefts?



Varied reports from reliable sources such as INTERPOL, the FBI and academia paint a muddled picture (pardon the pun!)

Some sources estimate 50,000 artworks stolen annually worldwide, with a black-market value in the **\$6-8 billion** range. The Federal Bureau of Investigation's "Art Crime" website notes that since 2004 its Art Crime Team has *recovered* more than 20,000 items valued at over US\$1 billion.

Some very famous paintings are being stolen repeatedly, not necessarily for resale but as bargaining chips or prestige items among criminal networks (i.e. "The Scream" in 1994 and 2004 for example).

Several recent examples include a theft from The British Museum in August 2023 where around 2,000 artifacts including gold jewelry and gems had been stolen over a long period in what the museum described as an "inside job".





During a COVID pandemic shutdown in August 2020, thieves broke in via a back door to steal "Two Laughing Boys" by Dutch Golden Age painter Frans Hals from the Hofje van Mevrouw Van Aerden museum near the Dutch city. The 1626 work, valued by one expert at 15 million euros (\$18 million), *had been stolen twice before*.

Earlier in the COVID shutdown in March 2020, Van Gogh's "Spring Garden" painting was stolen overnight from the Singer Laren Museum, where it had been on loan.

In November 2019 thieves stole pieces that contained more than 4,300 diamonds with an estimated value of over 113 million euros (\$124 million), by breaking through a grilled window at the Gruenes Gewoelbe (Green Vault) museum in the city in the eastern German state of Saxony. Most of the jewels were recovered.

However, many thefts go unreported or are held in private collections, so determining a clear trend is challenging. Are we simply seeing more visibility of dramatic heists as opposed to either an actual increase or simply more media coverage?

The fact that museum thefts are complicated to detect and/or report (many items go missing or unnoticed, and many thefts are unreported) means we may very well **underestimate** the frequency of major thefts.

Another factor is that high-value works are harder to fence/resell, so thieves may shift toward "smash-and-grab" metal/gems or lesser-known works, which may affect the profile of thefts rather than just the raw number.

Based on my experience and research, I would say, yes — we are seeing a **resurgence** (or at least a renewed wave) of *high-profile museum and gallery thefts* — it would appear that the "big museum heist" stories seem more frequent.

It's time for cultural institutions to assess their vulnerabilities and perhaps retool their countermeasures to reduce their risks of becoming victims of the theft of their irreplaceable artifacts. With the continuing advancement in technology and declining costs, it's well worth the cost of having a professional risk assessment which will provide a roadmap of how to mitigate your cultural institutions risks.

**Doug Beaver, CPP**, is an independent security consultant dedicated to helping museums and cultural organizations protect what matters most — their collections and heritage. His firm, [Cultural Risk Associates](#), combines deep experience in cultural property protection with practical risk management and compliance strategies. Working where heritage preservation meets modern security, [Cultural Risk Associates](#) offers tailored solutions to help museums and cultural organizations safeguard the irreplaceable treasures that define our collective heritage.

