

Culture thieves

Stealing the Lamb

BY NOAH CHARNEY

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Jan van Eyck's Ghent Altarpiece, sometimes referred to as *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*, has never been an easy painting to steal. As Noah Charney reports, its 12 oaken panels have a combined weight of almost two tons. Not that this proved much of a deterrent to the Napoleonic armies of the late 18th century who shipped it off to Paris, or to the Nazis, who stashed it in the Alt Aussee mine along with 6,577 other oil paintings.

Charney's wonderfully learned and entertaining book tells us about all the indignities this famous image has endured through the centuries (being disassembled in 1566 to keep it out of the hands of icon-smashing Calvinists, for instance, or having one of its panels pilfered in 1934), but the book also has some much broader points to make about the cultural significance of important paintings.

Charney explains why the altarpiece was always such a target. He claims (with an ounce or two of exaggeration) that it is "perhaps the most important painting in the history of art": the first great oil painting and, as such, a "fulcrum between the art of the Middle Ages and the



A detail from the Ghent Altarpiece

Renaissance". To possess it was to score an extraordinary cultural triumph and to lose it was to suffer a crushing cultural defeat: "The ability to defend art has been seen as an indication of a nation's strength or failure since biblical times."

It was therefore close to the top of Hitler's and Göring's hit lists and Napoleon was very keen to acquire it, too, even if, according to Charney, the great military leader was no

sort of art connoisseur – he apparently favoured anything that was big and lifelike.

In his bestselling novel, *The Art Thief* Charney proved himself to be a decent writer of fiction. Here, he demonstrates his skill as a sophisticated historian.

His appreciative descriptions of the Ghent Altarpiece and his account of van Eyck's life are first-rate and his ability to move effortlessly through 500 years of history filled me with envy.

Charney tackles some important subjects (the creation of the modern art-stealing industry, our sensible obsession with almost burglar-proof museums) but he wears his learning lightly and the next extraordinary tale is only ever a few pages away.

Best of a very good bunch must be the account of the Monuments Men: the highly qualified people who followed in the wake of the liberating armies at the end of World War Two. These experts in art and architecture helped to conserve buildings, protect archives, and root out the countless treasures squirreled away by the Nazis. Without their efforts the world's cultural heritage would have been dealt an intolerable blow.

It is good to hear their story and all the other bizarre tales this innovative and elegant book has to tell.

Jonathan Wright

