

# The world's most **STOLEN** painting



**Craig  
Brown**

Book of the Week

## Stealing The Mystic Lamb

by **Noah Charney**

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**T**here's no theft quite so fascinating as an art theft. Many a thriller has been based around fruity-voiced gents in balaclavas descending into galleries via elaborate pulley-

systems at the dead of night while tense music plays in the background.

But we are also intrigued by the aftermath. What does the thief do with the painting once he's stolen it? He obviously can't send it to auction or put it on eBay, or even hang it in his sitting room, unless he lives in a top-secret underground headquarters like Dr Evil.

I'm told that, these days, the normal procedure is for art thieves to hold the work of art to ransom so that the owners are obliged to buy it back at, say, ten per cent of its market worth. Meanwhile, the insurers act as the go-betweens, and the police are either never informed or else stay mum.

The vast 12-panel Ghent Altarpiece by Jan van Eyck, also known as The Adoration Of The Mystic Lamb, merits the offbeat title of the world's most stolen work of art.

The somewhat breathless author of this nevertheless interesting history of its various pilferings can't stop bigging up his tale. The Mystic Lamb is, says Noah Charney, 'perhaps the most important painting in the history of art. It was certainly the most frequently stolen, and, it could be argued, the most desired'.

A few pages later, he describes it as 'the most desired and victimised object of all time', and, two pages on, he is still at it. 'It is,' Charney says, 'a work of art that centuries of collectors, dukes, generals, kings, and entire armies desired to such an extent that they killed, stole and altered the strategic course of war to possess it.'

And so he goes on. Apparently, it has been 'looted in three different wars, and been burned, dismembered, smuggled, illegally sold, censored, attacked by iconoclasts, hidden away, ransomed, res-



cued and stolen time and time again'.

Needless to say, the story of the Mystic Lamb turns out to be not quite so eventful as he claims. It transpires that a lot of these ransoms, rescuings, thefts, etc, etc, are in fact describing the same episode. It is rather as though one were to

describe King Charles I as having been 'killed, executed, murdered, beheaded and sent to the scaffold'.

After all this, it comes as something of a relief when Charney takes a deep breath, calms himself down, and simply gets on with telling the tale.

**J**an van Eyck painted the altarpiece between 1426 and 1432. Charney eagerly describes it as being 'the size of a barn wall'. Its measurements are, in fact, 14ft 6in by 11ft 6in, which would make a pretty small barn, but, as paintings go, it is nonetheless pretty big.

For its first 140 years, The Mystic Lamb remained cosy and untouched in its rightful place at Ghent Cathedral. Then in 1566 came the rise of Calvinism, with its rabid suspicion of graven images. Hell-bent on destroying it, rioters attempted to break into the cathedral using a tree trunk as a battering ram, but a crafty bishop outwitted them by hiding all the panels in the towers.

There then followed another long period of calm until 1783, when the priggish Emperor Joseph, the Mary Whitehouse of his day, found that he could no longer bear the sight of the semi-naked Adam and Eve, so had their panels removed and put into storage. Eighty years later, copies of these panels were restored to the altarpiece, only this time with bearskins strategically placed over their naughty parts.

Its first real appropriation came in the wake of the French Revolution, when the central panels were forcibly removed by the republican army and carted off to the Louvre, which is, it seems, really one vast and grandiose warehouse of stolen goods.

Observing the pilfering that was going on in 1802, an Englishman called Henry Milton wrote that 'hordes of thieves in the form of experts and connoisseurs accompanied their armies to take possession, either by dictation or naked force, of all that seemed to be worth taking'. The first director of the Louvre, a Monsieur Denon, then added insult to injury by asking the Bishop of Ghent

whether he would be so good as to sell the Louvre the rest of their panels so that the altarpiece could be restored to its

former glory.

You may have noticed that, so far, none of the thefts of the Mystic Lamb have quite lived up to the thrillerish expectations promoted by Charney. In most of these cases, The Mystic Lamb was far from unique. Calvinists sought to destroy any number of religious icons, and the Louvre was packed from top to bottom with stolen art. When King Louis XVIII was restored to the French throne, he returned the Mystic Lamb to Ghent, but he also returned 5,233 other stolen objects to their places of origin.

**I**n fact, the saga of the Mystic Lamb is powered much less by common-or-garden theft than by the trophy-grabbing avarice of conquering armies. But sometimes it is a mixture of the two: at one point, the cathedral's vicar-general stole the wing-panels and passed them on to a fishy art dealer. The panels ended up in the Kaiser Friedrich museum in Berlin, and remained there until the end of the First World War, when Germany was forced to return them to Ghent under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles.

It is the fate of great, universal works of art such as The Mystic Lamb to become the emblems of nationalism, and the book works best when it is exploring this theme. For the Belgians, the return of the panels was symbolic of victory: they were transported back to Ghent in a special train decked with Belgian flags, and greeted by all the church bells in Ghent tolling in unison.

For Germany, on the other hand, the loss of the panels became a bitter symbol of defeat. For many years, a placard over the empty space in the Kaiser Friedrich museum read: 'Taken from Germany by the Treaty of Versailles.'

For more than a decade, the reunited altarpiece remained safe and sound. But in 1934, in what was the only truly cloak-and-dagger episode in its history, a double-sided panel went missing overnight. A ransom note for a million francs was sent to the Bishop of Ghent in a pale green envelope. 'It is our privilege to inform you that we possess the two paintings by Van Eyck which were stolen from the cathedral of your city,' it began, floridly. 'We feel that it is better not to explain to you by what dramatic events we now possess these pearls.'

Who stole the panel? Six months later, an outwardly respectable Mr Mainwaring-style 57-year-old stockbroker called Goedertier had a heart attack and, with his dying breath, confessed to the crime. Or so his lawyer claimed. But was his lawyer lying? Or were they both lying?



The mystery has never been solved, and has now become the subject of numerous rumours and batty conspiracy theories, making it the Belgian version of Lord Lucan.

And so to the Second World War when the entire altarpiece was again expropriated, this time by the Nazis. It was stored in an Austrian salt mine along with 6,577 other oil paintings. Charney argues, almost convincingly, that the Nazis may have been interested in various occult secrets that lay buried in its design.

The last third of the book is given over to the Nazis and their attitude to art, and I sense that this is the era that most excites Charney.

It would be reassuring to dismiss the Nazi love of art like *The Mystic Lamb* as entirely bogus or imperialist, but it was not. That men like Hitler and Goering could be both heartless mass murderers and, at one and the same time, passionate art connoisseurs, is one of the creepiest conundrums known to mankind.

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**OBJECT OF  
DESIRE:**  
Detail from The  
Adoration Of The  
Mystic Lamb

