



Vanished Smile: The Mysterious Theft of Mona Lisa

by R.A. Scotti

Hardcover: 256 pages

Publisher: Knopf (2009)

ISBN-13: 978-0307265807

Summary

Part love story, part mystery, "Vanished Smile" reopens the case of the most audacious and perplexing art theft ever committed--the theft of Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" from the Paris Louvre on August 21, 1911.

Product Description

On August 21, 1911, the unfathomable happened—Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa vanished from the Louvre. More than twenty-four hours passed before museum officials realized she was gone. The prime suspects were as shocking as the crime: Pablo Picasso and Guillaume Apollinaire, young provocateurs of a new art. As French detectives using the latest methods of criminology, including fingerprinting, tried to trace the thieves, a burgeoning international media hyped news of the heist.

No story captured the imagination of the world quite like this one. Thousands flocked to the Louvre to see the empty space where the painting had hung. They mourned as if Mona Lisa were a lost loved one, left flowers and notes, and set new attendance records. For more than two years, Mona Lisa's absence haunted the art world, provoking the question: Was she lost forever? A century later, questions still linger.

R. A. Scotti's riveting, ingeniously realized account is itself a masterly portrait of a world in transition. Combining her skills as a historian and a novelist, Scotti turns the tantalizing clues into a story of the painting's transformation into the most familiar and lasting icon of all time.

Reviews

Publishers Weekly

In this charming account of the brazen 1911 theft of the Mona Lisa from the Louvre and the two-year quest to bring her home, Scotti (Basilica) explores not only the puzzling crime but also the source of the painting's universal appeal and its provenance. On the morning of Tuesday, August 22, La Joconde was found missing from the Salon Carré. Even with help of renowned French criminologist Alphonse Bertillon, the trail was cold from the start. Rumors abounded about greedy, wealthy American collectors and the Louvre's lax security. No one in Paris was above suspicion, not even the young Pablo Picasso. While the portrait was finally recovered in Florence in 1913, its theft apparently the result of a young Italian's misguided patriotism (the painting's probable subject is a young Florentine, Lisa del Giocondo), Scotti is eager to remind readers that the mystery is far from over. The true motive for the theft—and the possible connection to a larger ring of art thieves—remains tantalizingly unknown by the end of this lively recounting. Photos. (Apr.)

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Booklist

At the outset, this has the feel of a cozy mystery about an art caper of a century ago. Scotti, brisk and irreverent, introduces characters with a keen eye for quirky traits, and enticingly sets the scene, the Louvre on an August Sunday of stupefying heat. The fact that this is a covertly informative work of entertaining narrative nonfiction only adds to its impact. Scotti, whose *Basilica* (2006) chronicled the building of St. Peter's, has reopened one of the most delectable unsolved cases in the annals of art crime: the 1911 theft of Mona Lisa. The lovely woman with the enigmatic smile was simply lifted off the wall and spirited away. The scandal was immense, the investigation feverish, the headlines screaming, and Scotti revels in every turn. Her lively, expert coverage encompasses the fascinating, many-chaptered story of Mona Lisa and ironic revelations about the frenzy among America's robber barons for old masters and the corresponding renaissance in art fraud. Then there are the two unlikely suspects, Pablo Picasso and poet and critic Guillaume Apollinaire. Leonardo's masterpiece was recovered after two frantic years, but the full story of Mona Lisa's abduction is yet to be told. Scotti's avid, exciting true-life mystery yields intriguing disclosures and reaffirms Mona Lisa's unique powers.

Time Magazine

" R.A. Scotti's deft account of the crime and its aftermath draws bumbling investigators, aristocratic con men and Picasso into a story that La Gioconda herself would have smiled at — enigmatically, of course."

BookPage

As full of twists, turns and suspense as any mystery novel....This approach will delight mystery lovers; of more interest to art history buffs, however, is the way Scotti positions the painting's disappearance at the crossroads of tradition and modernity....Placed in these contexts, the theft of the world's most beloved painting makes the Mona Lisa's story even more significant—and her smile even more alluring."

Biography



R. A. Scotti began her career as a novelist, writing international espionage. Since this was an exclusively male field, she posed as a man. Neither reviewers nor readers suspected her true identity. Writing as R. A. (rather than Rita Angelica) Scotti, she gained a reputation as "one of the best modern writers of intrigue" before dropping her disguise and turning to non-fiction. Scotti was graduated from Loyola

University in Chicago, and pursued additional studies in Rome. She has traveled extensively through Europe and the Middle East.

Eventually, Scotti returned to college and also spent time traveling. When she came home, the Journal hired her as a feature writer. Assignments ran the gamut from investigating special ed needs in Rhode Island to riding the lead elephant in the Ringling Brothers–Barnum & Bailey circus parade. From the Journal, Scotti moved to the Newark (NJ) Star–Ledger as editor of the daily feature pages.

Intrigued by the vogue of recovered memory in the late 1990s and disturbed by the rash of charges involving incest and child molesting, I wrote *For Love of Sarah*.

By then, Scotti had two children: a daughter, Francesca, and an infant son, Ciro. (Their father is the poet Evans Chigounis.) Ciro died at sixteen months after a long and complicated illness. Scotti wrote her first nonfiction book, *Cradle Song*, about that experience. She didn't write again for a number of years. She currently lives in NYC.

Bibliography

NON-FICTION

Basilica: The Splendor and the Scandal-Building St. Peter's (2006)

In 1506, the ambitious Renaissance Pope Julius II tore down the most sacred shrine in Europe--the millennium-old St. Peters Basilica. Construction of the new St. Peters spanned two centuries, embroiled 27 popes, and consumed the genius of the greatest artists .

Sudden: Sea: The Great Hurricane of 1938 (2003)

On September 21, 1938, the fastest hurricane on record caught the Northeast by surprise and left a wake of death and destruction across seven states. Traveling at record speeds, the storm raced up the Atlantic coast, reaching New York and New England ahead of hurricane warnings and striking with such intensity that seismographs in Alaska registered the impact. Winds clocked at 186 miles per hour stripped cars of their paint. Walls of water fifty feet high swept homes and entire families out to sea

Cradle Song (1988)

In this book, created as a tribute to the spirit of her son, Scotti has recorded her responses to the short life and painful death of her son *Ciro*. It is also a cautionary tale about the limits of medical knowledge--the illness which dominated nine months of her son's life was never definitively diagnosed. Scotti draws readers into the surreal aspects of extended hospital stays, and details the impact of her son's illness on family members and hospital staff. Written as a diary, the book has immediacy,

NOVELS

The Hammer's Eye (1988)

The author's barbed wit offers needed respite from the tense, tragic incidents that pile up as ex-CIA agent Matthias pits himself alone against powerful August Merriman. At age 88, Merriman has been doing business, legally and profitably, with the U.S.S.R. since 1917, after establishing a footing with Lenin. Is the old man now handing over Star Wars to anti-glasnost types in Moscow, as Conrad suspects? Is his politically savvy wife involved in the treachery? Why would Merriman's lovely granddaughter seduce the family's house guest, a real nerd? Because the nerd is a scientific genius with secrets the Soviets want? These questions tantalize Conrad, and he's bound to find the answers, defying the killers who try to stop him. Neither he nor the reader is prepared for the truth that surfaces at the end of a smashing tale.

The Devil's Own (1987)

This novel is about drug running, money laundering, and financial chicanery involving the Vatican Bank among other entities. It was based loosely on the murder of an Italian banker named Calvi, whose family is related by marriage to mine, and an Italian financier named Sindona who bought the Franklin Bank in New York. My novel ends with the Sindona character being extradited to Italy to stand trial. He is poisoned in his jail cell, and the case is never solved.

The Kiss of Judas (1986)

The protagonist here is an Italian terror ist who has infiltrated both his government's Antiterrorism Squad and the KGB. Scotti, who has a talent for evok ing Rome, conveys her bleak hope for Italy's future and provides many plot twists and much loveless sex.

For Love of Sarah (as Angelica Scott) is a courtroom drama. The defendant, Georgie Hillman, shoots her sleeping husband and claims she acted in self-defense as a proxy for her nine-year-old daughter who was too young to defend herself against her father's advances.

The most surprising facts in the Mona Lisa Theft case:

1. 98 years ago, Mona Lisa vanished from the wall of the Louvre Museum.
2. No one noticed for more that 24 hours.
3. Pablo Picasso was a prime suspect in the theft.
4. Her mysterious disappearance made Mona Lisa the most famous wanted woman in the world.
5. Mona Lisa remained missing for more than 2 years and was presumed lost forever.
6. A letter signed "Leonardo" led police to the lost painting.
7. Almost 100 years later, the brazen crime remains unsolved

RANDOM HOUSE 2009 INTERVIEW

Q: What brought you to write the story of the theft of the Mona Lisa?

A: When I was researching my last book, *Basilica: The Splendor and the Scandal—Building St. Peter's* (Viking, 2006), I stumbled on a reference to the greatest art theft of all time. As I read on, I was stunned. I never knew that the Mona Lisa had been stolen. The most famous painting in the world had been missing for two years and assumed lost forever. The prime suspects in the case were Pablo Picasso and Guillaume Apollinaire. Two subjects that have always interested me—art and crime—together in a rollicking, long forgotten caper: How could I resist?

Q: What about the Mona Lisa makes it such a unique and special painting?

A: I think it is the immediacy of the image, caught in a moment like the frame of a film, which entralls. The first description ever written of her said, "She does not appear to be painted, but truly of flesh and blood." Although the enigmatic smile is her most famous feature, it is the eyes that captivate. They are warm, brown, and inescapable. Each person who looks at her becomes the only person in her world. If a dozen people crowded into a room with her, each would feel as if she only had eyes for him. The attention is flattering and, at the same time, maddening, because she gives away nothing of herself.

Q: You include a history of the Mona Lisa in *VANISHED SMILE*, noting that she's always been the subject of adoration – even causing men to claim they'd fallen in love with her. What acts of adoration have men performed for her over the years?

A: Mona Lisa has always made men do strange things. Leonardo clung to her, carrying her with him wherever he went. Raphael copied her. The French king Francois I paid a fortune to possess her. Louis XIV and Napoleon brought her into their bedrooms. In the 19th century, Romantic writers wrote passionate dissertation on her charms. Sigmund Freud went off on a flight of psychoanalytic fancy to understand and interpret her. Even a libertine as calloused as the Marquis de Sade was not immune to her charms. He called her "the very essence of femininity" poised between seduction and devoted tenderness. There are more than a million artworks in the Louvre. Only Mona Lisa receives her own mail. It is mostly love letters. For a time in the early 1900s, the letters were so ardent she was placed under police protection. Visitors often came to the Louvre to court her. Some left flowers, poems and notes. In 1910, a hopeless admirer, facing a lifetime of unrequited love, shot himself in front of her.

Q: Why do you think she has had this hypnotic effect throughout the ages?

A: When he began the portrait, Leonardo was experiencing an uncertain time in his life. The aging painter no longer had a specific patron or a secure income. Donato Bramante, an old friend and collaborator, was in Rome building the monumental new Basilica of St. Peter. Leonardo's young challengers, Michelangelo and Raphael, were also being called to the

Vatican to work for Pope Julius. While they were in Rome becoming immortal, Leonardo was painting the young Signora del Giocondo. Financial records suggest that he agreed to paint the silk merchant's wife solely for financial gain, but he would not make it a simple portrait. He believed, "If the painter wishes to see beauties to fall in love with, it is in his power to bring them forth. . . . The painter can so subdue the minds of men that they will fall in love with a painting that does not represent a real woman." Some believe that Leonardo succeeded so well, he seduced himself. Whatever his intention, Mona Lisa is a continuum of desire. As one French Romantic wrote: "If Don Juan had met Mona Lisa, he would have been saved writing on his list the names of three thousand women. He would have written but one."

Q: Many mysteries have surrounded the Mona Lisa, almost since Da Vinci painted the portrait. One of them is over who the woman in the portrait was. What is the general consensus as to her identity, and how accurate to you deem this to be? Think we'll ever find out definitively?

A: In 1550, in his book *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, Giorgio Vasari, the richest but not always the most reliable contemporary source on the Renaissance art world, identified the sitter as Lisa del Giocondo, the wife of a wealthy silk merchant in Florence. She was born Lisa Gherardini on the fifteenth of June, 1479, in the vineyards of Chianti. Through the centuries, art historians have disputed Vasari's claim and suggested many other candidates: Isabella of Aragon; Beatrice d'Este, the Duchess of Milan; one of Giuliano de'Medici's many mistresses, probably Pacifica Brandano or Costanza d'Avalos, or maybe his wife, Philippa of Savoy, aunt of Francois I, which could explain why the king was so eager to own her. Others have contended that she is an idealization, a self-portrait of the artist, even a man in drag.

In spite of the many theories to the contrary, Vasari's identification is the most credible. Last year while I was writing *Vanished Smile*, some German scholars happened upon a note in a book belonging to a city official in Florence named Agostino Vespucci. The book was a collection of Cicero's letters. Vespucci had jotted a note in the margin that Leonardo da Vinci was working on a portrait of Lisa Gherardini del Giocondo, the wife of a local silk merchant. Vespucci must have been a punctilious bureaucrat because he dated his note 1503. What is indisputable truth to one expert is dubious evidence to another, and some da Vinci scholars are still not convinced.

Q: What kind of research did you do for VANISHED SMILE, and where did you do it?

A: Vanished Smile brought me to Paris, where Mona Lisa was lost and where she lives again; to Florence, where she was found and where Leonardo began painting; to his home town of Vinci, which has a museum devoted entirely to him, and to a number of libraries here, among them the Library of Congress, the Watson Library of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Frick Museum library. But for Vanished Smile, as for every book that I have written, my research began at the New York Public Library, one of the great research libraries in the world. It is continually expanding its resources and adding new databanks. Today you can sit on Fifth Avenue and read, for example, the Paris Herald or the London Times of August 1911. In its Frederick Lewis Allen room, the NYPL offers a sanctuary where authors can research and write undisturbed.

Q: Why do you think Mona Lisa was stolen? The theft made the painting more famous than ever, but even at the time it was taken, the painting was too well-known to be sold openly or even hung in someone's home. What would the payoff be?

A: Mona Lisa was not stolen for money. She was much too famous to ever sell, and the thief (or thieves) never demanded a ransom for her safe return. If we rule out money, unrequited love, and compulsive collecting, the most plausible motive left is politics. From the first, there were rumors of politics at play. The theft coincided with the flare-up in the tensions between France and Germany that would lead to the first World War. Mona Lisa's disappearance was a conveniently timed distraction, buying time for tempers to cool and war to be postponed. "The news has caused such a sensation that Parisians for the time being have forgotten the rumors of war," reported the New York Times. An American in Paris, well-connected in art circles, wrote home to his son: "One ingenious French friend told me confidentially that Mona Lisa was not stolen but it was an arrangement to serve as a new sensation for the public and press to divert attention from the German war scare and that the painting in time would turn up safe and sound." Pro-Germans suspected that the devious French had faked the theft, not to distract from the war threat, but to rouse sentiment against the Kaiser. Francophiles countered that Kaiser Wilhelm and his government had abducted a national treasure to humiliate France. Whichever the case, the timing seemed too perfect to be coincidence.

Q: As far as who perpetrated the crime—do you think it was someone in Picasso's circle, or do you buy the tale of the Marques that was brought out in 1932, 21 years after the theft?

A: I don't subscribe to either theory. When I began to research the case, I assumed that the tale of a suave international scam artist executing a brilliant sting, then making his stunning confession in the pages of the Saturday Evening Post was true. Six millionaire art collectors, very likely J. P. Morgan and Benjamin Altman among them, had each bought a copy of Mona Lisa believing it was the original. As I delved into the subject, though, the tale began to unravel. It was a perfect story, but probably not the true story. And there never was any credible evidence that anyone in Picasso's much maligned "gang" was involved. I soon discovered that, like Mona Lisa herself, very little was certain about the case. To separate indisputable facts from fancy: the person who removed Mona Lisa from her frames on Monday, August 21, 1911, was Vincenzo Peruggia, an Italian-born glazier who had helped to build a glass-enclosed frame for the painting. There is no question that Peruggia—a.k.a. "Leonardo"—performed the actual theft. He left his calling card. The left thumbprint on the frame was his, and examinations by French and Italian experts proved beyond a reasonable doubt that the Mona Lisa he returned was the same painting that he stole. But the idea that Peruggia was the lone thief is implausible. Although I don't believe he acted alone, I could not crack the case. Who was behind the theft and, even more puzzling, why, remains a baffling mystery that will probably never be solved.

Q: You write that this was really the first global media event outside of war. What about this story captivated the world? Do you think it would have been as well-followed had it not involved somewhat well-known personalities like Picasso and Apollinaire?

A: In 1911, Picasso and Apollinaire were not the famous personalities that they are today. They were young Turks just beginning to be noticed. What drove the case to a significant extent was new technologies—photo reproduction and Marconi's wireless. The story traveled around the world as swiftly as telegraph and cable could carry it. The New York Times reported, "Nothing like the theft of the Mona Lisa had ever been perpetrated before in the world's history." This was the golden age of popular journalism, when wars were reported as glorious adventures and crimes of passion were rewritten as Romeo and Juliet romances with a salaciously sinister edge. L'Affaire de la Joconde combined beauty and loss, mystery and money, with hints of lust and romantic obsession. When Mona Lisa slipped out of her frames, she seemed to change from a missing masterpiece to a missing person. She came alive in the popular imagination. Captivated by her mystery and romance, the public felt her loss as emotionally as an abduction or a kidnapping. Global attention lifted Mona Lisa out of the museum, the preserve of the elite, and brought her to a mass

audience. The Renaissance masterwork became the people's painting—the lost love of the nation and the world. Millions of readers who had never heard of her seven days before were glued to every installment of the missing person story.

Q: Reading the tale of the theft, it is surprising to hear how little security there was around the Louvre and the Mona Lisa at the time. How is the state of museum security today? (Considering that theft of Munch's *The Scream* in broad daylight from a Norwegian museum in 2004, is it that much better?)

A: When Mona Lisa disappeared, the porous security at the Louvre became a national scandal, and the museum director was fired. Today, Mona Lisa has her own personal room in the Louvre, constructed at a price tag of \$6.2 million and paid for by a Japanese television company. It is a virtual bunker. Mona Lisa is set in concrete behind two sheets of bulletproof triple-laminated, nonreflective glass, separated by 9.5 inches (25 centimeters). Her own personal bodyguards protect her from a repeat of the theft of 1911. Beyond her personal protection, though, museum security remains a concern. Although significant improvements have been made, devising and paying for a foolproof system is impossible. Millions of dollars are hanging on walls in museums around the world, presenting an irresistible temptation to thieves. And the problem is compounded by the failure to hold art thieves accountable. Vincenzo Peruggia served less than a year for pulling off the most audacious art theft in history. A soaring art market and the continuing problem of museum security have made art theft the third most prevalent crime in the world, surpassed only by international smuggling and drug trafficking. The risk is small, the potential gain is tremendous, and, if the thief is caught, the punishment is still minimal.

Discussion Questions

1. What did you find surprising about the facts introduced in this book?
2. How has reading this book changed your opinion about the Mona Lisa ? About the theft?
3. Does Scotti present information in a way that is interesting and insightful, and if so, how does she achieve this?
4. Does she seem to have a bias about the theft?
5. What is your point of view on the identity of the Mona Lisa. Why?
6. What were your reactions to the descriptions of museum security. Compare to museums today.
7. Was there a specific passage that had left an impression, good or bad? Share the passage and its effect.

8. What was unique about the setting of the book and how did it enhance or take away from the story?
9. Who do you think was responsible for the theft? Why?
10. What new information about the Mona Lisa did you encounter in this book? What surprises or discoveries about Leonardo da Vinci?
11. Did you enjoy the book? Why? Why not?
12. Did the book end the way you expected? If not, what information or actions did you want the author to have included?
13. What person in the book did you most identify with? Like most and least? Why?
14. At the end of the book, Scotti states that the Karl Decker expose newspaper article on the theft, may be "...authentic or the product of a lively imagination". What's your reaction to ending the book on this note?
15. Compare this to other art theft thrillers or mysteries (for example The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown or Chasing Cezanne by Mayle)

Suggestions for Further Reading

Davis, Margaret L. (2008) *Mona Lisa in Camelot: how Jacqueline Kennedy and Da Vinci's masterpiece charmed and captivated a nation*

Boser, Ulrich (2009) *The Gardner heist: a true story of the world's largest unsolved art theft*

Connor, Myles J.(2007) *The Art of the Heist: Confessions of a Master Art Thief, Rock-and-Roller, and Prodigal Son*

Dolnick, Edward, (2005) *The rescue artist: a true story of art, thieves, and the hunt for a missing masterpiece*

Edsel, Robert M. (2006) *Rescuing Da Vinci: Hitler and the Nazis Stole Europe's Great Art - America and Her Allies Recovered It*

Hart, Matthew (2004) *The Irish game: a true story of crime and art*

Haupt, Simon (2006) *Museum of the Missing: A History of Art Theft*