ForeWord Reviews

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Stolen Masterpiece Tracker: The Dangerous Life of the FBI's #1 Art Sleuth
Thomas McShane
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Of all the places one might expect to find a Van Gogh, a Brooklyn gas station probably isn't one of them.

Over the course of his thirty-five years as an undercover investigator with the FBI's art theft division, Thomas McShane has seen it all: a Picasso in a roach motel, a Vermeer in a taxicab, two Rubens hurtling down from a third-story balcony. For a man who has dedicated his life to protecting art, such roughshod treatment is akin to sacrilege. Yet if there is a lesson to be learned from this high-spirited memoir it is that even when the bad guy wins, the power of art endures. The reader doesn't know whether to laugh or cry when during an undercover negotiation, a hardened drug dealer balks at McShane's offer for a stolen Rembrandt and shouts, "It's been part of me!"

After graduating Fordham Law School in 1968, the author joined the FBI and fell into his field almost by accident when an unexpected tip led him to recover a Picasso at an Oklahoma airport. Intrigued, the author spent the next several years immersed in the Manhattan art scene and soon became an expert himself. For the action-hungry rookie, the fact that the art theft division was one of few allowed to work undercover in J.Edgar Hoover's conservative FBI pretty much sealed the deal.

With the help of co-author and veteran crime writer Dary Matera, McShane chronicles his adventures in a style that is by turns street-wise and sensitive, crass and poignant. He is equally prone to making the occasional homophobic remark as he is to musing about Degas' "powdery, glowing" pastels. Though at times overdone, McShane's humorous tone lends the book a brisk pace that keeps suspense running high. True crime lovers will be rewarded with plenty of action in his escapades as pimped-out art-dealer "Thomas Bishop"; while art aficionados will come away with fascinating trivia and insight into a part of the field that is too often left to Hollywood.

Art theft today is a booming industry, totaling annual losses close to $6 billion according to the FBI's most recent estimate. The skyrocketing value of many masterpieces compared with

the relatively small consequences for stealing them means that for most criminals, the risk is worth it. “Someone could snatch the Mona Lisa off the wall of the Louvre in Paris, sell it in New York’s Central Park for a cool $350 million…and expect to be given no more than 18 months or so for the ‘sale and transportation of stolen property,’” laments McShane.

Hawking the Mona Lisa anywhere is no simple task—especially for a low level thug. While commissioned thefts by wealthy collectors certainly exist, McShane claims that most are financially motivated and carried out by a mix of mobsters, terrorists, drug dealers and even ordinary citizens seduced by an unexpected opportunity. One of the book’s most colorful cases involves the eight-year odyssey of a Rembrandt titled *Le Rabbin* (*The Rabbi*). When museum staff failed to secure the painting after inventory in 1971, a giddy art student simply lifted the piece off its hook, hid it under a trench coat, and waltzed out into broad daylight.

McShane details *The Rabbi*’s circuitous journey through six countries and two continents. Along the way it passes through many hands (none of which are able to sell it) and suffers a host of indignities: buried twice, stuffed at the bottom of a crate of cheap china, glued to God-knows-what, and witness to a murder. The divide between those who steal art and those who buy it is often so vast that many thieves sit on paintings for years before they are lucky enough to find a buyer—or in this case, a crafty undercover agent posing as one.

Not all McShane’s stories have happy endings, however. In a particularly gripping chapter about the 1990 robbery of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston—widely considered biggest art heist in U.S. history—the author admits that most of the items taken in the $300 million theft remain at large. He displays a rare moment of melancholy as he describes the empty frames that still hang there as reminders of the irreplaceable treasures.

However tragic, art theft will always be an integral part of the industry, an irony that also evokes a certain poetic justice. McShane would be the first to admit that the allure of a work of art rests largely in the richness of its history: Who painted it, who sold it, who bought it—and who stole it?

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