

FROM BOSTON to Brussels and from Tampico to Tokyo, some of the world's best detectives are running down clues to the whereabouts of stolen paintings worth more than \$5 million. Jewel robbery, it seems, is definitely old-fashioned; this year the smart crooks are going in for museum burglary—and in a big way.

The current chain reaction of art thefts reached alarming proportions during the summer months: a Pittsburgh millionaire forgot to turn on the burglar alarm in his suburban home and found \$500,000 worth of modern paintings gone when he returned from dinner, and the French Riviera was overrun by clever brigands with sophisticated taste in Postimpressionist art who stole canvases worth millions from several collections.

As a result, worried insurance underwriters have been opening their morning papers with a feeling of dread apprehension, art-gallery curators (instead of bankers) have been shopping for electronic protection devices, and the general alarms radioed from Interpol headquarters in Paris read like the catalogue of a top-flight art exhibit. Photographs of the paintings also have been widely circulated so that no art dealer—at least, no honest dealer—would touch the contraband canvases.

There are, however, other stratagems by which the wily art thief may profit by his traffic.

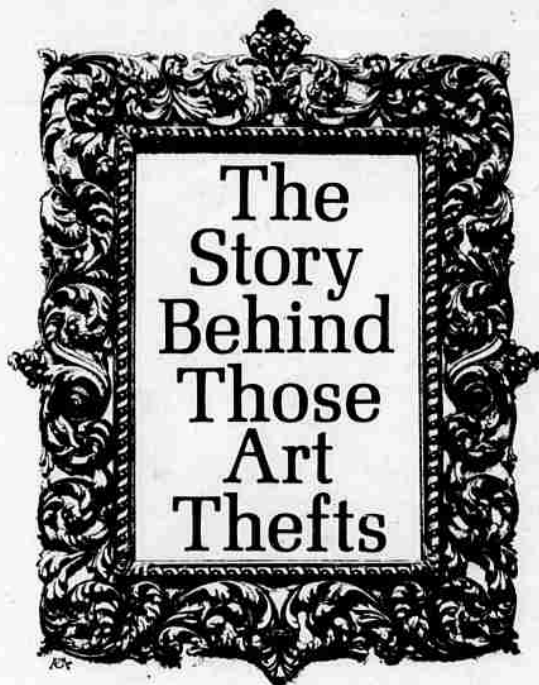
One hot night last July, a phone rang in the office of Commissaire Lavalette, chief of the Ninth Mobile Brigade, at Sûreté headquarters in Marseilles. "Monsieur le Commissaire," said a voice, "I want to return some art objects."

"Art objects?" The Commissaire jumped. "By all means. Where can I find you?"

"No, no. I had better handle this in my own way." And the mysterious caller hung up.

COMMISSAIRE LAVALETTE could scarcely hide his excitement. The newspapers had been impatiently critical of the recent art robberies in his territory and the lack of police results.

Less than two weeks earlier, someone had broken into the Annonciade Museum at St. Tropez, the fishing village that had become a fashionable resort, and made off with \$2 million worth of modern masterpieces. Just the night before thieves had crashed into an art gallery on the Rue d'Antibes, in Cannes, to steal a rare Vlaminck, a Marc Chagall, and a watercolor by Bernard Buffet: total value more than \$20,000. And he had just read



Criminals have discovered an enriching and virtually hazardless pursuit—holding precious paintings for ransom

By LAWRENCE BLOCHMAN

with Henry Pignolet
veteran Paris crime reporter

about a half-million-dollar coup in Pittsburgh.

It was unlikely that the mysterious caller had anything to do with the American crime, although in this jet age it was not impossible. More probably he was involved in the St. Tropez larceny. Commissaire Lavalette sincerely hoped so, for he had grave fears that the 57 masterpieces snatched from the St. Tropez museum might be lost forever. They were not insured—except against fire. So the thieves, robbed of their opportunity to shake down an insurance company, might well destroy them.

The technique of the modern art burglar is indeed that of the extortionist. With Interpol on the job, he has little chance of disposing of his booty on the open market: the Parke-Bernet Galleries in New York, Sotheby's in London, or the Hotel Drouot in Paris. However, museum thieves would rather hold loot for ransom than stick their necks into the precarious black market. Few insurance companies would refuse to dicker with an anonymous go-between if they could save two-thirds of a loss settlement. Few private collectors would refuse, either.

ON MONDAY, July 31, Commissaire Lavalette found in his morning mail an envelope containing the stub of a baggage check. Rushing to the railway station, he presented the stub at the check room and received a huge squarish package. It contained 19 oil paintings!

The first was a still life by Fernand Léger—and the Commissaire frowned. There was no Léger among the pictures stolen from St. Tropez. The second was a Marie Laurencin—and there had been no Laurencin stolen, either. The third was a Raoul Dufy—but not "The Jetty at Honfleur" which had been among the plunder from St. Tropez. Hurriedly the Commissaire turned up a Modigliani, a Braque, Rouault's "The Clown" . . .

"Nom d'un nom!" he exclaimed suddenly. "These are the pictures that were stolen from the Colombe d'Or last year!"

And he stared down at paintings worth \$750,000, an ending to a story right out of Hollywood. Although it has since been surpassed twice, the pillage of the Colombe d'Or collection was for more than a year the most sensational art robbery since Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" was snatched from the Louvre 50 years ago. The Colombe d'Or—the Inn of the Golden Dove—was founded by Paul Roux, an innkeeper who accepted unknown artists'

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These 20 paintings valued at \$750,000 were stolen from the Colombe d'Or in France and later returned; they include works by Picasso, Léger, Miro, and Braque.

