

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

Theft Audio Walk

March 2020

Written and Produced by Sandy Goldberg of sgscripts

Palace Second Floor: Dutch Room

ANTHONY AMORE:

Hello, I'm Anthony Amore, the Museum's Chief of Security, and Chief Investigator. You're about to hear the story of a horrific robbery that deprived the Gardner Museum—and you, the public—of some of the greatest masterpieces in America. Thank you for joining me as we retrace the thieves' steps—and find out what really happened—on March 18th, 1990. In the hours past midnight. This room—the Dutch Room—was where the two thieves went, directly after getting inside the Museum. Turn to face the wall with the two large empty frames. The thieves entered this room from the doorway just opposite the frame on the right. At 1:48 am We know the time because internal alarms, from motion sensors, start going off to indicate that someone is on the landing just outside that doorway. But there's no one to check on them. Two security guards were on overnight duty, as was typical. They're stationed at a security area downstairs. The thieves had presented themselves at the locked outside door to that security area at 1:24 am - dressed as Boston police officers. Over the intercom from outside, the thieves say that they're responding to a report of a disturbance. It seemed plausible. After all, it was the night of St. Patrick's Day. Revelers are still out on the streets. Against protocol, the thieves disguised as police are buzzed in. Once inside, they immediately overtake the security guards. Cover their eyes and mouths with duct tape. And put them in basement spaces, away from each other. Handcuffed to pipes. Now the thieves know they have the run of the place. They can take their time. They come directly to this room. The Dutch Room. 6:09 We believe that the point of the theft was to get works by the Dutch artist, Rembrandt. In fact, every other museum in Massachusetts with Rembrandt paintings had been robbed before us.

The empty frame on the wall opposite the doorway held the only seascape Rembrandt ever painted.

[sfx: waves against large boat]

Picture the seascape: Stormy skies. Windy. Dramatic lighting. A boat full of men pitches in dangerous waves. It's "Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee." One man looks directly out at us. It's Rembrandt's own face—a self-portrait he included in the Biblical story.

The thieves take the painting down off the wall. They put it on the floor near this wall, face up. The motion sensors show us the path the thieves took that night. That's the route we're following.

[sfx: dot matrix printer]

The sound you're hearing now is the type of computer printer in 1990—a dot matrix printer. On their way out of the Museum, the thieves take the dot matrix printout tracking their movements with them. But they didn't realize that to get another copy, all we had to do was to hit the 'print' button again. In 1990, technology wasn't part of the thieves's planning.

Their next target is another large Rembrandt. The other empty frame on the same wall. It held a double portrait of a Dutch couple. Same method: the thieves take it down and put it on the floor. Then, using a sharp blade—probably a box cutter—they cut both paintings out of their frames. There are deep gashes on the wood supports around the edges of the canvas. They leave those supports behind. It's really a horrific crime scene.

Then they go after another Rembrandt in this room. Looking at the wall with the empty frames, it's to your right. That desk next to the windows. Go to the side of the desk nearest the wall with the empty frames.

There was a landscape painting here. Mountains and cloudy sky. The thieves move this painting to the floor too, propping it on top of one of the big frames, to remove it from its own frame. But the thing is: they only think it's a Rembrandt! In the 1980s it was determined that this painting was actually by a student of Rembrandt. A book that the Museum had published in 1974, called *American and European Paintings at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum* listed it as a Rembrandt. The thieves aren't exactly scholars—they don't keep up with the Museum's research. So at this point the thieves think they have three Rembrandts. They go for two more in this room.

But first they take what's on the other side of this desk. Move around.

This empty frame held the Museum's beloved painting by Vermeer, called *The Concert*. A horrible loss of such a rare painting—Vermeer only made 36 paintings during his entire life.

[sfx: far off harpsichord]

This one features a woman playing a keyboard instrument, a clavichord. A man seen from behind, with a viola. Another woman, her mouth open, in song. An amazing domestic interior. The thieves move this painting to the area by the large tables in the middle of the room. Then, holding the frame and the glass face down, they remove the canvas and let the frame fall.

[sfx: far off harpsichord cuts to sfx glass breaking]

The crime scene photos show the frame with the broken glass inside it.

[sfx: printer]

Now I want to point out something that's really incongruous—it's out of step with the rest. As you're facing the empty Vermeer frame—and the wall with the two big missing Rembrandts—look towards the right side of that wall. There's a tall portrait of a man in red. In front of it, there's a table with a cloth cover. Empty now.

That night, there's a Chinese bronze vessel on this table, shaped like a beaker. About ten inches tall. It is very old—12th century BCE—but not unusually valuable. When the thieves first try to grab it, it won't budge. They think it's connected to the cloth, so they cut the fabric. But that still doesn't work. It's attached to a heavy metal base underneath the cloth. I have that base in my office, and they really banged it up. They really want that beaker.

Now, turn directly around from this table. Move towards the doorway facing you. Just to the right of the doorway, there's a chair, and a wooden cabinet. Approach the cabinet. On the side of the cabinet next to the doorway, there's a small, empty frame.

You probably wouldn't have noticed this on your own—or what was inside it at the time: a small, black and white etching. About the size of a postage stamp. Yes, by Rembrandt. From the side you can see the screws attaching the frame to the cabinet. The thieves remove the screws.

They're so confident that police aren't coming that instead of just taking this little frame with them, they go over to the large table in the middle of this room—the one further away from us—and stand there unscrewing it to remove the etching. That took almost five minutes, which is the total amount of time of most art thefts! Then, they go after one additional Rembrandt in this room. It's the painting hanging just above the cabinet with the etching. In the gold frame. It's Rembrandt's self-portrait. Yes, it's still here.

They take it down, and lean it against this chest underneath the painting, facing the wall. And then they leave it behind. It sounds silly, but they forgot this artwork because the

backing on the painting wasn't the back of the actual painted wood panel. An additional backing panel is there. What tipped me off to the fact that the thieves thought they had it, is that the morning after the theft, the Museum's director stands at the doorway cordoned off with the police tape. She looks in, and even with the daylight, she sees the back of the painting—and she thinks it's gone too! So what must've happened is that as the thieves were gathering their loot from this room, they thought they had it with them. All in all, they spend about 40 minutes in this room.

Before we move on, here's a word from the Museum's Curator of the Collection, Nat Silver:

[ISGM music]

NAT SILVER:

It's so important that this Rembrandt self-portrait is still here—not only because it's a masterpiece. He's just 23 years old when he paints this. He wants to become a successful artist, and he's showing off what he can do. The light! Those textures! The velvet, the feather, and his hair. But it also has such special importance to us because in Isabella's letters she tells us that acquiring this Rembrandt gave her the idea of moving beyond collecting for herself, and creating this museum.

As a curator myself I have such admiration for her as a curator: she created visual conversations between works of art throughout the museum. For example, facing Rembrandt's self-portrait, on the opposite wall, was that big seascape. Do you remember Anthony mentioning that Rembrandt included his own face in that Biblical scene? I can't help but think that Isabella intentionally placed the 23 year old, ambitious Rembrandt gazing across the room, and seeing his older self, and his future.

ANTHONY AMORE:

One of the thieves is still taking some of the paintings out of their frames, when his partner moves on.

[sfx: dot matrix printer comes back in]

He goes through the doorway next to the Rembrandt that's still here. Let's follow along. He moves through this hallway in the dark. You can pause this audio if you need more time. He goes into the gallery straight ahead. The motion sensors record him passing through this space. He doesn't take anything. Then he turns right, through the doorway.

Palace Second Floor: Short Gallery

He moves into the next gallery—this one with the red walls. It's full of incredibly valuable and rare masterpieces. He takes...nothing. He's got a different destination. It's through the doorway ahead of you. Into that narrow gallery immediately through the doorway. It's called the Short Gallery. The panels on your right—with all of the framed prints and drawings—are his target. The panels swing open, with multiple layers behind them. Of course, the panels are closed and locked at night. He goes to the third cabinet door to the right of the doorway. If it's open at the moment, close the front panel. You'll see the list of the five drawings he takes from here. They're all by the artist Edgar Degas. Three of them are images of jockeys and horses.

And he takes one additional object from this room. Look to the right of the cabinet. Do you see that framed piece of fabric, with the blue, white, and red background? It says—excuse my bad French accent—"Garde Imperiale L'Empereur Napoléon" which means "Imperial Guard of Emperor Napoleon." It's a flag from Napoleon's guard regiment. The thief tries to unscrew the frame to remove the flag. He does take out a few of the screws, but then he gives up. Why doesn't he just break the glass? They

broke the glass on the drawings they took from the cabinet. It doesn't make any sense. In fact, it wasn't until a day after the theft—when conservators were in this space, cleaning up the broken glass from the drawings—that they discovered that something else was missing. In the corner where the fire extinguisher is now, there was a bucket of sand, for fire suppression—and in that bucket the conservators find the screws from the flag's frame. And that's what makes them notice that there's something missing from that frame. There used to be a bronze eagle on the top of it—attached to that short piece of metal protruding from the top. In fact, the first reports of the theft in the Boston Globe say that in all 12 pieces were stolen from the Museum. But this eagle, discovered to be missing the following day, brings the total to 13.

The thief takes the objects from this room back to his partner in the Dutch Room. Let's follow him back along the way we just came. I want to point out something on the way. Go through the room with the red walls again. The next room, before the hallway back to the Dutch Room, is the Early Italian Room. In Isabella's first installation of this gallery, she called it the "Chinese Room," and it still has some Chinese objects in it. Look just to the left of the big fireplace. There's a glass-covered cabinet. With four shelves inside. On the second shelf from the bottom are two bronze bears. Remember that Chinese bronze vessel the thieves worked so hard to get in the Dutch room? Well, these ancient Chinese bears are much more valuable, much more rare. And the thieves pass right by them.

From here they go back down the stairs the way they came up—the stairway just outside this room. On this level they had stolen six pieces from the Dutch Room. And six from the Short Gallery: the drawings, and the eagle. That makes 12. There's one more painting they took. It's downstairs.

Move down the stairs, and meet me at the bottom, at the garden Courtyard level—or ask for directions to the elevator. Pause this audio and I'll tell you where to meet me on that level.

Palace First Floor: Blue Room

Move around the Courtyard until you're in the North Cloister, which is the corridor with the benches and red cushions. On your way to the red cushioned benches, I'll tell you what happened when the thieves came down to this level, using the stairs you just descended.

From this level, the thieves go out the security entrance from which they entered. It used to be in an area not far from where you came down the stairs. Separately, they make two trips to load the stolen works into their vehicle. By this time, it's 2:45 am. They've been in the Museum 81 minutes—imagine that: an hour and 21 minutes! Most art heists are quick grabs-and-dashes of five to ten minutes!

Before they leave there's one more artwork they take with them. But we don't know when they took this one—because the motion sensors don't pick up their movements into or within the room it's in.

Let's go there. Are you in the corridor with the red cushioned benches? If not, pause this audio and find your way there. As you're facing those benches with the cushions, there's a wide opening in the center of the wall, with metal gates. Move through them, and ahead of you, on your right, is a doorway to the Blue Room. It's the gallery with light blue walls. If the Museum is crowded you may need to wait to enter. You can pause this audio if you're waiting; or go right in, or just listen to me describe it.

From this doorway into the Blue Room, moving directly ahead, there's a half wall coming into the space from both sides. Moving beyond that, almost at the other side of the room, look to your right. There's a large painting of an older woman dressed in black. It's by Edouard Manet. And just underneath it: is a small empty frame. It held a portrait of a man in a top hat. Also by Manet. The night of the theft, the portrait of the woman was in the museum's conservation lab. When they took the smaller painting of the man, they left this frame behind at the security desk. Remember: the motion sensors everywhere else in the museum guided us as to how the thieves moved. But at no time do the sensors go off in this room. The next morning, it's confirmed that the sensors in this room are working perfectly. Investigators try to figure out how the thieves avoided detection. No one can get by the sensors. I often say: it's like two different crimes. Everything that's taken on the second floor was done one way. This painting was done another way. The thieves don't touch anything else in the Blue Room, or on the first floor. And they never go to the third floor.

I'll leave you with a thought—and a request—maybe as you're making your way around the Courtyard again. There's not a day goes by that we're not still working alongside the FBI on the case. We're still hopeful that the pieces will be recovered. We're always looking for new tips, and yes! please contact us at Theft@GardnerMuseum.org if you have any concrete information. Any facts. And not theories. Believe me, we've heard all the theories a thousand times. The reward we're offering is ten million dollars. It's for information that leads us directly to the recovery of all 13 of our works in good condition. You can see images of the stolen artworks—and some crime scene photos—on our website: isgm.org/theft. We want everyone to know what these works look like because although they are gone—for now—they are not forgotten, and we look forward to the day when they can take their rightful place again so that you, our visitors, can enjoy them in person.

A final thought, at the Courtyard, from curator Nat Silver:

[ISGM music]

NAT SILVER:

This Courtyard encapsulates Isabella Stewart Gardner's amazing tastes, how she brought together objects from all over the world: Africa, Italy, Spain, Greece—to create this installation. We mourn the losses from the theft in the moments we pass by their empty places—but her vision persists, in the over ten thousand objects in the museum. We invite you to experience her vision and hope that you'll visit again soon. We promise you'll notice something new every time.