

The Strange Joy of Watching the Police Drop a Picasso

The status of “art” can elevate an object into something with which we struggle to live naturally. What if we were more accepting of art’s impermanence?



Credit...Photo illustration by E S Kibele Yarman

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The Greek police were showing off. They had solved an art heist that flummoxed the nation for nearly a decade. In 2012, a thief made off with three artworks from the National Gallery in Athens: Piet Mondrian’s “Stammer Mill With Summer House” (1905); a 16th-century sketch by Guglielmo Caccia; and Pablo Picasso’s “Woman’s Head” (1939), which the artist gave to the museum in recognition of Greece’s resistance to the Nazis during World War II. The supposed thief was a Greek builder, now 49, who kept the paintings in a private home — until, alarmed by reports that the police were tracking him, he transferred them to a warehouse and finally hid them in a gorge, from which they were ultimately recovered.

The police summoned the press, as they tend to on such occasions. In a video of their news conference, we see two men staging the paintings, small works that look flimsy without their frames. They are balanced side by side on a thin ledge, leaning back against a short barrier, like cutting boards slanted against the side of a refrigerator. Then, suddenly, the Picasso begins to slip. This has the slow-motion feel of any imminent disaster, though it’s happening quite quickly. The angle of the canvas shifts.

Then the artwork slides rapidly off the ledge and onto the floor. There is an instant of suspense — is it broken or torn? — before a man wearing a mask but no gloves stoops down and picks the painting up, fingers on the canvas, flipping it over and returning it to its perch.

Watching this is like watching someone else's nightmare. This lost Picasso is worth tens of millions of dollars; it also has particular sentimental value, the Greek culture minister said, that is, in another sense, incalculable. But at the very moment of its triumphant recovery, the painting clatters to the floor, by simple accident. Then it is handled in a casual, slapdash way, like a paperback that slipped off a shelf. You can imagine the impact of the fall causing irreparable fissures in the paint; you can imagine oils from the handler's fingers degrading the pigments; you can imagine his thumb carelessly poking a hole through the painted woman. You can imagine all manner of things, but you cannot see them in this video, because they don't appear to happen. Indeed, what's astounding is that by the end of the clip, it's as if nothing has happened. The sacred object seems basically fine. It fell to the floor, as objects do. Someone bent down, picked it up and returned it to its original position. It's like a magic trick: Everything is as it was. Only, of course, slightly different.

When I was a child, I remember being rushed out of the Museum of Modern Art in New York after trying to touch an Ellsworth Kelly painting. I was confused when I heard alarmed voices as I approached the painting, hand outstretched. I couldn't connect the voices with myself, because what I was doing seemed very logical to me: I was attracted to a deep red, so I wanted to touch it.

We do not live very comfortably with art. There are other kinds of valuable objects with which we coexist more easily: sports memorabilia, antique furniture, musical instruments, luxury watches and handbags. We handle and wear and touch these things, perhaps because we have a sense of them as objects with some use or purpose. But the status of "art" often elevates the object into something with which we struggle to live naturally.

There are practical reasons for this. Art is often meant to be encountered visually, on display, out of reach of fingers. It can be fragile and require protection to last — especially when we've decided it must be preserved as part of our cultural heritage. And yet I watched the video of the falling Picasso over and over, feeling not consternation but a rush of childlike joy. It was a vaguely transgressive experience, to watch the usual rules — *handle with care, proceed with caution* — be so casually broken.

A boundary was crossed. This was the inverse of another transformation: when a forgotten canvas in an attic is recognized as a Rembrandt or a van Gogh, taking on sudden significance and value. Here we get to watch the opposite. Very briefly, a painting by Pablo Picasso becomes a quotidian object, something that falls on the floor and is picked up again. (The thief, too, converted art into something pedestrian; during the heist, he reportedly told the police, he cut his hand, used the 16th-century sketch to wipe it and then discarded the piece in a toilet.)

I thought, before seeing this video, that I was tired of art. I write about it, among other things, for a living, but after a year away from museums, I did not feel the expected desire to return. It was only after watching this video repeatedly that it occurred to me:

What I was tired of was not *art* but the predictability of how we encounter it. It is always at a distance, frequently behind glass, often in sterile galleries that resemble airports. Much of the world's art is not encountered at all; the financial value of artworks has led more and more collectors to purchase them as investments and store them, unseen, in climate-controlled vaults.

One reason art heists capture the public imagination, I suspect, is the way they puncture this state of affairs. Someone has removed the artwork from its white cube. Perhaps the person has taken it home, where he or she could put it next to the TV or lean it against a wall in the kitchen. This is not always what motivates art theft; some people are in it for the money, and for years the Greek police believed the National Gallery robbery had been executed by a well-organized gang. But the builder — according to reports of his confession, at least — acted alone. He claimed to have been “tormented” by thoughts of the paintings. If this was a crime of passion, of wanting to live alongside these artworks, then who cannot understand the desire to touch, maybe even to take, an object that we have been told not to?

“Woman’s Head” has circulated for more than 80 years, handled both roughly and with incredible care. And yet much of how it will age is out of our hands. “The paintings fade like flowers,” Vincent van Gogh wrote to his brother, as he watched the pigments in others’ paintings change during his lifetime. He argued in another letter that this was “all the more reason” to paint boldly and use raw colors. It might also be a reason we should endeavor to live more easily with artworks, allowing them to be the impermanent objects they are. I think sometimes of Zoe Leonard’s work “Strange Fruit,” for which she tore open hundreds of pieces of fruit and then stitched the rinds back together. This was, in some ways, an act of repair and rescue, but “Strange Fruit” also makes its decay and ephemerality extremely visible: We see immediately that the fruit is in the process of falling apart, like all art, and like all of us. As the conservator Christian Scheidemann told Leonard, while they debated how the sculptures might age, “Decay is always the same, and at one point it will all be powder.”