Heist of the century

The *Mona Lisa* was stolen from the Louvre in Paris 100 years ago this month. **Jon Bryant** reports on the most audacious art theft of all time

On the evening of Sunday, 20 August 1911, former Louvre employee Vincenzo Peruggia hid in a storage cupboard off the Salon Carré where the *Mona Lisa* was hanging. The Louvre was closed to the public on Mondays but early the next morning, as the cleaners and workmen were arriving, he struck. Dressed in a white workman's smock, the Italian lifted the painting off the wall, removed it from its frame and new glass casing and walked out of the gallery – with the help of a gullible plumber who opened the door for him. The cleaners and guards who passed through the room that day and stared at the four bare hooks on the wall believed the *Mona Lisa* was with the museum's photographers. It was only the following day when the artist Louis Béroud, who had been sketching the room, persisted in his questions as to the portrait's whereabouts that the dreadful truth became known. The famous smile was gone.

The Louvre was closed for a week during investigations. Borders were shut. Boats and cars searched. The avant-garde poet Guillaume Apollinaire was brought in for questioning, as was Pablo Picasso. The local Prefect Louis Lépine believed the picture was being held to blackmail the government, yet as the months went by, it was feared the painting was lost forever. Eventually a portrait by Raphael replaced the *Mona Lisa* in the gallery.

Then, two years on, the Louvre received word from the Uffizi Gallery in Florence that a man named Leonard Vicenzo (Peruggia's false name) had approached them via a Florentine

The Louvre was closed for a week. Borders were shut. Boats and cars searched. Pablo Picasso was brought in for questioning

THE ART OF THE CRIMINAL

Despite more advanced security systems, paintings are still being stolen regularly from French art galleries. In May 2010, five modern masterpieces worth a combined €500 million were taken from Paris' Musée d'Art Moderne. *Les Choristes* by Edgar Degas was snatched from Marseille's Musée Cantini a few months earlier.

In 2007, four paintings, including a Brueghel and a Monet, were taken from the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Nice… and it was the Sunday afternoon theft of Camille Corot's *Le Chemin de Sèvres* from the Louvre in 1998 which led to a drastic update in the museum's security systems. None of the paintings have ever been seen again.

antiques dealer to acquire the painting 'for Italy'. The Uffizi's director had checked identification marks on the back of the painting against photographs of the original and could confirm it was the real *Mona Lisa*.

A century on, it still seems unbelievable that Peruggia, apparently working alone, had hidden the painting under his bed for two years before deciding to sell it. Nevertheless, after a triumphant tour of Italy and 'to promote good relations between the two great countries' on 4 January 1914, the painting was finally returned to the Louvre in France. Peruggia was sent to jail – although just for seven months. He was, after all, a patriot and national hero. And the conspiracy theories began, including a link to an Argentine conman named Eduardo de Valfierno who maintained that the *Mona Lisa* had already been copied over a dozen times and shipped to millionaire buyers across the globe, each one believing they had the original.

Having survived paint and coffee cup attacks the *Mona Lisa* now resides behind a bulletproof glass panel under a light-box ceiling in the Salle des États with a large wooden arc keeping her thousands of daily visitors at bay. One advantage of her excessive popularity is that it leaves the rest of the Louvre relatively free to wander around.

All you can say is that such is the security surrounding the priceless image that even Thomas Crown would have to come up with something pretty special to steal her again. **ꝏ**