LWAG TALKS

A podcast by Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery

Art Aside 1: The Stolen Smile

Published on 8 May 2020

Transcript of the first episode of Art Aside, a series on the LWAG TALKS podcast of short episodes exploring unique, interesting stories in the history of art.

[music from Methyl Ethel’s song UBU fades in]

**TED SNELL:**

Welcome to Art Aside. This is a podcast about a parallel history of art and I’m Ted Snell.

[music from Methyl Ethel’s song UBU fades out]

*The Stolen Smile.* When Picasso said bad artists copy, good artists steal, he meant it. But did you know he was actually arrested for stealing the *Mona Lisa* from the Louvre in 1911?

It seemed like a bit of a lark, nothing more, when Picasso’s friend, Guilleme Apollinaire’s secretary, Géry Pieret, a young rogue, a former boxer and stoker in fact, arrived at his employer’s apartment with two Iberian stone sculptured heads and announced, with glee, they had come from the Louvre.

‘All museums should be destroyed because they paralyze the imagination’[[1]](#footnote-1), Apollinaire had said, but did he mean it?

Despite his friend’s hatred of museums, Picasso was enthralled by the early sculptures from his homeland and because he had just began a big painting about the girls in a brothel on the Rue Avignon and needed inspiration, he happily bought them from Pieret. Their faces are now familiar as the two main figures in *Les Demoiselle d’Avignon*.

Could it have been Pieret again or another of the Bateau Lavoir mob who took the most famous painting in the world?

When Picasso and his friend Fernande Olivier arrived back in Paris early in September 1911 they were met by ‘a frightened and frantic’[[2]](#footnote-2) Apollinaire. Picasso and Apollinaire spent a terrible night, lugging the sculptures around Paris in a suitcase looking for a place to throw them into the Seine.

But somebody tipped off the police. They raided Apollinaire’s apartment on the 7th of September[[3]](#footnote-3), seized the sculptures and took him off to prison, charged as the “chief of an international gang come to France to despoil our museums”.

During the six days Apollinaire sweated it out in jail, Picasso was in a terrible state, fearing deportation or even worse. Then the Police arrived and took him off to interrogation. To his eternal discredit, he claimed never to have met his old friend Apollinaire.

Picasso was released, not Apollinaire – he was held in jail for almost a week, before being finally released on the 12th of September, although he remained under suspicion.

Years later, Picasso admitted, ‘It wasn’t a robbery, it was just a good joke!’ But it had a terrible effect on Apollinaire: ‘I felt deserted by all, irretrievably ruined’[[4]](#footnote-4) he had said.

So anyway, who did steal the Mona Lisa? Well, it was Vincenzo Perugia, a former employee of the Louvre. They caught him and the painting was triumphantly returned to Paris on December 31, 1913. But not before eight forgeries had been sold to collectors. And some of them are still out there.

[music from Methyl Ethyl’s song ‘UBU’ fades in]

This episode of Art Aside was written and produced by me, Ted Snell. Our music is by kind permission of Methyl Ethel. The song is Ubu from their album, Everything is Forgotten, released on 4AD.

[music from Methyl Ethyl’s song ‘UBU’]

1. Norman Mailer, *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man*, The Atlantic Monthly Press, New York, 1995, p.319 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibid* page 325 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Calvin Tomkins, *The World of Marcel Duchamp, 1887-1968***,** Little Brown & Co, 1977, pp105-106 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid* p333 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)