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French Rembrandt Thief Lives Real-Life Version of ‘Goldfinch’ Story

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Man who stole painting for love and hid it for 15 years gets surprise when he comes clean

207

106 1130

France is abuzz about a former alarm technician who stole a Rembrandt painting and kept it hidden for 15 years before turning himself in.

Patrick Vialaneix, 42, has become an improbable celebrity for beating the system—twice.



Rembrandt's *L'enfant à la bulle de savon*, or *Child with soap bubble*, was swiped from a museum by a man who thought it looked like him.

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He first saw the Rembrandt, *L'enfant à la bulle de savon* (*Child with soap bubble*), at age 13 on a visit with his mother to the [municipal museum](#) in Draguignan, France. It reminded him of himself so much that viewing it was “like looking in a mirror,” he said. He became obsessed with the painting, returning over and over to behold its charms.

His fixation escalated until finally, at the age of 28, he decided he had to steal it.

As luck would have it, he was employed as an alarm technician, so he began with a painstaking study of the museum's security system. He planned the heist for July 13, 1999, during the noisy celebrations on the eve of the French holiday Bastille Day. Just before the museum closed, he discreetly crawled into a large cabinet and waited. Later that night, as helicopters thundered overhead, he jimmied open the painting's bulletproof-glass case, slipped out the work in a few seconds, and escaped just as the alarm sounded. By the time the police arrived, he was gone.

On returning home, he took a “selfie”—a Polaroid self-portrait—euphoric. Then he hid the painting, swathed in bubble wrap and a thick blanket, under his bed. He set an empty easel by his bedside where he would prop up the picture, gaze at it lovingly, and even speak to it (a ritual that echoes the story in Donna Tartt's popular novel *The Goldfinch*, whose narrator stole the painting of the same title by Carel Fabritius, a student of Rembrandt, from the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#)).

For Vialaneix, the trouble started a few months later, after he got married. He kept his secret and shifted the painting to his closet, removing it “to let it breathe” whenever possible. But as time passed, he was increasingly paranoid that some ill might befall the painting.

“I became its guardian but also its hostage,” he told [Le Monde](#). Consumed with anxiety, he moved his family several times, once after a robbery (the thieves took only his stereo), then after a termite infestation, and later because the house was too damp, or might present a fire hazard.

Several moves and 15 years later, he was deeply depressed. Finally, he confided in a childhood friend, who promised to help him. The friend organized a meeting in Nice with two men who identified themselves as insurance agents. Vialaneix gave them the painting, valued at 4 million euros, in return for a check for 40,000 euros.

But the men weren't insurance agents after all. Days later, Vialaneix read that the pair, on the verge of selling the Rembrandt on the black market, had been arrested by the OCBC, a police unit specializing in art trafficking, on an anonymous tip.

Realizing they were frauds and that he'd been framed, Vialaneix confessed to his wife (many tears ensued) and his therapist (who abruptly terminated the therapy treatment). The painting-loving thief turned himself in, suitcase in hand, ready for his prison sentence.

But he didn't have to do time. The statute of limitations had run out. So now, even though it wasn't his original intention, he stands ready to cash in on his crime. He is juggling several book and film offers.

Jeanine Bussièrès, the museum's chief curator, told *ARTnews* she is "overjoyed" to have the painting back and that "it had clearly been well taken care of."

The curator, who read *The Goldfinch* a few months ago, was astonished by the resemblance between the real-life art thief and his fictional counterpart.

That said, she is not so pleased about Vialaneix's sudden fame. She's worried it might attract copycats.