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## How the Filmmakers Behind ‘The Goldfinch’ Built Near-Perfect Replicas of the Met and the Dutch Masterpiece at the Story’s Heart

The book and the movie center on the Carel Fabritius painting of the same name.

**Sarah Cascone**, September 17, 2019



Ansel Elgort as Theo Decker in *The Goldfinch*. Photo by Macall Polay, ©2018 Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. and Amazon Content Services LLC.

The long-awaited film adaptation of Donna Tartt’s Pulitzer Prize-winning 2013 novel *The Goldfinch* hit theaters this weekend, bringing in an underwhelming \$2.6 million to finish eighth at the box office. Translating the nearly 800-page novel to the big screen seems to have proved something of a challenge for director John Crowley, who has faced a number of highly critical reviews since the film’s release.

When artnet News ran into one of the movie’s actors, Luke Wilson, at the opening party for New York’s Pace Gallery last week and we mentioned this article, he pleaded with us to “be nice.” (The main complaints have been about the picture’s 149-minute runtime and what’s been characterized as excessive fidelity to the book.) Ansel Elgort, Nicole Kidman, Jeffrey Wright, and Finn Wolfhard also star.

The movie, which centers on the diminutive Dutch Golden Age masterpiece *The Goldfinch* (1654) by Carel Fabritius, has been highly anticipated in the art world. The novel’s protagonist, 13-year-old Theo Decker (played by Oakes Fegley as a child and Elgort as an adult), encounters the painting with his mother—who considers it her favorite work of art—on a visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art the day it is targeted by a deadly terrorist attack. Theo survives, but his mother does not.

In the chaos that follows the bombing, an explosion-addled Theo, urged by the last words of a dying old man, ends up taking *The Goldfinch* with him.



Robert Joy as Welty, Aimée Laurence as young Pippa, and Oakes Fegley as young Theo Decker in *The Goldfinch*. Photo by Macall Polay, ©2018 Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. and Amazon Content Services LLC.

It turns out that the painting also survived an explosion in real life, when a Dutch gunpowder store blew up and killed 32-year-old Fabritius and destroyed almost all of his art. “One of the only things that survived, like a miracle, was that little bird,” Theo marvels in the film.

So how does the movie stack up in terms of its art-world accuracy? Here’s how the filmmakers recreated the works of art that appear on set, and how they shot the scenes at the Met.



C FABRITVS 1654

Carel Fabritius, *The Goldfinch* (1654). Courtesy of Mauritshuis Royal Picture Gallery, The Hague.

## Replicating a Masterpiece

*The Goldfinch* actually belongs to the Mauritshuis museum in The Hague, Netherlands. One of only a handful of extant works by Fabritius, the painting was chosen by Tartt in part because the little-known master represents a link between Rembrandt van Rijn, his teacher, and Johannes Vermeer, likely his pupil.

The painting that appears on screen is a replica. (In 2013, during a two-year restoration project, *The Goldfinch* traveled to New York for an exhibition at the Frick Collection that serendipitously opened the month of the book's release, but it hasn't been loaned out since.)

"The museum used a 3-D scanner to scan the surface and then rebuilt the painting in layers to scale. I admit, I was doubtful. I thought, 'This is going to look like a bad reproduction,' but when they held it up to the real painting, I was extremely impressed by how close they were," production designer K.K. Barrett said in a statement. "For some shots, we blew it up digitally and then a scenic artist overpainted it to give it exactly the same brushstrokes and textures we could see in the print."

In fact, all of the paintings in the exhibition Theo visits are reproductions, made from high resolution images licensed from museums including the Met, the Mauritshuis, and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. To convincingly depict more than 80 historic works, including masterpieces such as *The Anatomy Lesson* by Rembrandt—also at the Mauritshuis—the graphic and scenic departments used photographic paper, creating textured prints.



Screen capture from *The Goldfinch* trailer, with Metropolitan Museum of Art admission badge highlighted.

## Replicating the Met

As for the Met itself, you might be surprised to discover that most of the scenes set at the museum were actually filmed in a warehouse in Yonkers, where the crew built a perfect replica of the galleries. The museum “took us under their wing and gave us access to their curators who showed us how to put together an authentic-looking art exhibit of our own,” said executive producer Mari Jo Winkler-Ioffreda in a statement. The museum also dug into its stash of old metal buttons, phased out in 2013, for the occasion.

Because the Met galleries had to be destroyed on camera, the filmmakers never considered shooting there. Instead, there is just one scene of the facade shot on location, as Theo exits the building post-bombing, into the pouring rain. At the preview screening, artnet News ran into a few background actors exchanging notes on their experience: “we had fake rain being dumped on us from 3 a.m.,” said one extra.

“We started at crack of dawn on a Sunday morning,” Ken Weine, the museum’s vice president for external affairs, told artnet News. But by opening time, “it was as if it never happened.”



Jeffrey Wright as Hobie and Ansel Elgort as Theo Decker in *The Goldfinch*. Photo by Macall Polay, ©2018 Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. and Amazon Content Services LLC.

But not all requests to film at the Met get approved. “We had a crime show that wanted to have a whodunit episode where a curator was stabbed by another staff member—that’s not an appropriate thing for us to participate in,” Weine said.

Despite the terrorist attack in *The Goldfinch*’s plot, Weine said the museum wasn’t concerned. “The filmmakers were incredibly thoughtful. They were interested in the art, interested in the museum, and wanted to work with us to do something respectful,” he said. (Other films shot on location at the Met have included *The Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, in which two runaway children begin secretly living in the museum, and *Ocean’s 8*, in which a team of thieves carrying out a major jewelry heist at the Met Gala.)

In the end, the film shows how Theo develops a fascination with art and antiques as a reaction to his traumatic experience. “[Theo] becomes attached to antiques because he finds a kind of peace in knowing that they have been around a lot longer than us and will be around long after we’ve gone,” said Elgort in a statement. “An object can endure, and I think that idea comforts him. And the object he prizes the most—and the one that also haunts him the most—is *The Goldfinch*.”