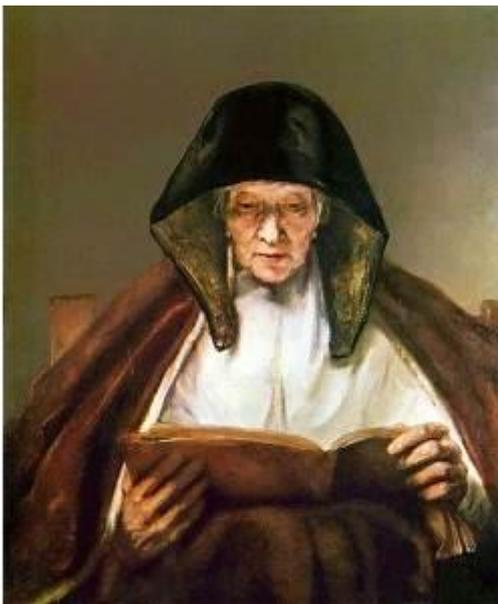




A GREAT BRITISH ART THEFT

In August 2003 the first group of visitors for the day gathered together in the courtyard of Drumlanrig Castle. They chattered as they waited to be shown round the Scottish home of the Duke of Buccleuch, the largest landowner in Scotland. The house is set amongst beautiful grounds in the middle of his thousands of square miles of hills on the Scottish borders.



The house of pink sandstone first built in 1679 is full of priceless art treasures, that the visitors were hoping to see on their guided tour: The *Old Woman Reading* by Rembrandt and the Leonardo *Madonna with Yarnwinder* being just the highlights. Because of these treasures and their value visitors are guided through the castle.

The 9th Duke was so proud of the *Old Woman Reading* he would put the picture into the back of his Land Rover to take it out to show it off.

The Madonna of the Yarnwinder shows the Christ child contemplating the prefiguration of the Cross in the outline of the yarnwinder. Does he draw away from it or accept it?



Despite some controversy the painting is now generally accepted as being the work of Leonardo himself and not just by his workshop. And so priceless.

This group were shown into the house and were being conducted by Alison Russell, then an 18-year-old who had just begun her first season as a tour guide. Alison was upset that despite her enthusiasm, she thought that two of the visitors were not really engaged with what she was saying. The two men were the first visitors to arrive at the foot of the Great Staircase. In the space under the oak staircase were two of the house's treasures: a Holbein and the Leonardo *Madonna*. As the guide began her explanation one of the visitors strode forward and began pulling the Leonardo from the case on the wall. The other man grabbed Alison and holding an axe to her throat "put his hand over my mouth and told me I had to lie down on the ground or he would kill me if I didn't".

Sarah Skene, 73, another tour guide, said she heard "a commotion" in the staircase hall housing the painting, and heard a male colleague shouting "Please don't do it. Retreat, retreat." When she rushed into the space, she saw the other thief also wielding an axe. "He was standing guard on the picture," Then smashing a window, they leapt through it, shouting to astonished visitors outside "Don't worry this is just a practice"

The two men jumped into a white Volkswagen Golf GTi waiting in the courtyard with two other occupants and disappeared with a screech of tyres down the long drive. The car was soon found abandoned in woodland, three miles north of the estate, along with the original discarded frame.

The Police issued descriptions of the thieves. One was in his early 40s, 5ft 10in, and wore a leather jacket and glasses. The other was in his late 40s and 5ft 10in to 5ft 11in. Both were wearing hats. CCTV images showed the thieves: a thick-set man wearing a white sunhat and a gilet-style waistcoat, and a slimmer man with a baseball cap and dark-coloured casual jacket. Both men walked under the CCTV camera with their faces obscured by their hats.

Of course, a large reward was offered for any information leading to the painting's recovery. But for four years, nothing at all was heard of the painting.

Then in 2007, a chartered loss adjuster acting for the Duke of Buccleuch's insurers was contacted by a solicitor, Marshall Ronald of Skelmersdale, Lancashire, who claimed that he could arrange for the return of the Leonardo *Madonna of the Yarnwinder* within 72 hours. Ronald was visited by two undercover policemen who posed respectively as an art expert and an agent for the Duke. Ronald allegedly told the two undercover police officers who were known to him as David Restor and John Craig, that "volatile individuals" were involved who would "do something very silly" if the police were informed.

Between 10 August 2007 and 4 October 2007, Ronald repeatedly asked the detectives to pay £2m into his own solicitor's firm's account and another £2.25m into a Swiss bank account.

During those weeks, Ronald and two co-defendants, Calum Jones, 45, and David Boyce, 63, drafted an agreement to organise the safe return of the Leonardo, once the £2m had been paid to Ronald's firm.

The charges would allege that in late September and early October 2007, Ronald embezzled £500,000 from his clients' accounts and arranged to take possession of the painting, from "persons unknown".

On 29 September, Ronald bought acid-free paper and a folio case, allegedly to transport the painting. Four days later, he allegedly paid £350,000 to another of his co-accused, a builder from Ormskirk called Robert Graham, 57, for the painting.

With the last defendant, John Doyle, 61, from Ormskirk, Ronald and Graham allegedly took possession of the stolen painting – an offence similar to receiving stolen goods known as "reset" in Scots law – and then took it to Jones and Boyce solicitors at their offices in Glasgow. It was here on 4 October, they showed the paintings to the two undercover detectives, demanding a total of £4.25m payable in two large sums for its safe return.

At this point four arrests were made, but not one of these men was one of the original thieves. It is believed the theft was originally organised to provide collateral for a £350,000 debt between two criminal gangs in

the Merseyside area. These four men were put on trial, charged with trying to gain money with threats. The eventual verdict under Scottish law was “Not Proven”. However, some of the case is after all these years still ongoing. Ronald even tried unsuccessfully to sue the Duke for failing to hand over the reward money.

The 9th Duke of Buccleuch never lived to see the *Madonna's* recovery as he had died unexpectedly only a month beforehand.

The Madonna of the Yarnwinder was lent to the Scottish National Gallery in Edinburgh in 2009, and remains on display there.

And the Rembrandt *Old Woman Reading*? It is still in the Castle, but moved to a far more secure location on an upper floor and the present Duke of Buccleuch does not take it for outings around Scotland.

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