NEWS LESSON

How Two Stolen Renoirs Were Found Behind a Wall



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. Why do some paintings become worth millions?
2. Would you rather own a famous picture or one you simply love?
3. What makes a real-life theft different from a film heist?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**forensic**	☐	A	using science to study evidence from a crime
2	**elaborate**	☐	B	left in a place so that it is kept there
3	**deposited**	☐	C	the careful repair of something old to its first condition
4	**paradox**	☐	D	very detailed and carefully planned
5	**discreetly**	☐	E	a connection between two things in people's minds
6	**municipal**	☐	F	a situation with two parts that seem to contradict each other
7	**restoration**	☐	G	belonging to a town or city
8	**association**	☐	H	in a careful way that avoids attention

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

An alarm, a DNA trace and a hiding place under a staircase: how an ambitious theft of two Renoirs at Cagnes-sur-Mer unravelled.

1 At 5.48am on 8 September 2026, the alarm at the Renoir Museum in Cagnes-sur-Mer began sounding. Five minutes later, municipal police were at the scene. The intruders had already made off, apparently abandoning half their intended haul in the rush to escape. Two paintings by Pierre-Auguste Renoir remained missing. Investigators had to work through the forensic clues the thieves had left behind. By October, prosecutors placed the combined value of the missing works at approximately €4.2 million, although earlier estimates in the press had been considerably higher.

2 The museum occupies the painter's former home on the French Riviera, a setting better known for its association with Impressionist art than organised crime. According to the French Ministry of Culture, the burglars breached a fence and entered through a window before removing four works. The alarm cut the operation short, and two paintings were discarded nearby. The thieves nevertheless escaped with Portrait of Madame Colonna Romano and Young Woman at the Well, works that had been deposited at the museum by Paris's Musée d'Orsay. Their cultural significance made the disappearance especially troubling, regardless of which financial valuation was used.

3 Investigators eventually came across an important trace on a protective cover abandoned during the getaway. DNA helped identify a suspect who was already under investigation in a separate case, meaning police had access to information about his vehicle's movements. Combined with surveillance and communications evidence, those details allowed officers to reconstruct links between individuals and locations. The investigation illustrated a persistent weakness of elaborate criminal schemes: the more people and journeys involved, the more opportunities there are to leave an identifiable trail.

4 Police did not wait for every question to be resolved. After surveillance suggested that one suspect had visited the Maeght Foundation, another prominent art institution, the Marseille prosecutor said investigators feared a further robbery was imminent. Arrests followed. Six people were detained and four men were given preliminary charges relating to organised theft, receiving stolen property or alleged criminal association. The legal distinction matters: prosecutors had set out their case, but the suspects had not been convicted.

5 The two missing paintings were eventually discovered concealed behind a wall beneath a staircase in a house. The paintings were recovered, but not unscathed: officials reported a torn canvas and damage to a frame. The works were transferred for specialist examination and potential restoration before their planned return to the museum. The physical harm also illustrated why art theft is not simply a dispute over ownership. A painting can survive for more than a century only to be damaged during a few hurried minutes of illegal handling.

6 Beyond the improbable hiding place, the case exposed a vulnerability shared by many regional museums. They preserve works of enormous cultural importance while operating without the formidable security budgets of major national institutions. Yet the burglars confronted a paradox too. The more recognisable a stolen masterpiece becomes, the harder it is to dispose of it discreetly. This robbery may have been ambitious, but its aftermath was defined by ordinary evidence, the fear of another crime and two famous paintings concealed in a space barely large enough to hold them.

Sources: Associated Press. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The prosecutors' valuation of the paintings was lower than some earlier press estimates. T F NG
2. The thieves took away more paintings than they left behind. T F NG
3. Police could link a suspect to the theft partly because of a separate investigation. T F NG
4. A trial date has been set for the four men charged. T F NG
5. Police arrested the group only after a second theft had been attempted. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

breached **concealed** **detained** **discarded** **imminent** **persistent** **reconstruct** **vulnerability**

1. The consultant warned that the software contained a serious _____ that hackers could exploit.
2. Several protesters were _____ overnight and released without charge the next morning.
3. Having judged the proposal unworkable, the committee _____ it in favour of a simpler one.
4. Detectives had to _____ the sequence of events from a handful of CCTV frames.
5. The spy's microphone was so cleverly _____ inside the lamp that nobody noticed it for years.
6. Despite repeated refusals, her _____ lobbying eventually changed the law.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. The merger was met with widespread _____ among long-serving staff. (SCEPTIC)
2. Her _____ to accept criticism damaged her working relationships. (WILLING)
3. The theft cast doubt on the _____ of the museum's alarm system. (RELY)
4. Experts expressed _____ over whether the canvas could be fully repaired. (CERTAIN)
5. She had _____ deleted the file, and only later realised what she had done. (INTENTION)

7 Language focus: prepositions

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. At this level, fixed phrases such as tantamount to and fraught with are worth learning as single units.

at	from	of	on	over	to	with

1. A raid on a gallery this size was fraught _____ risk.
2. Selling a famous stolen painting openly is tantamount _____ announcing the crime.
3. The loan of the works was contingent _____ adequate security.
4. Many thefts of this kind stem _____ a belief that small museums are easy targets.
5. The plan was bereft _____ any realistic way of selling the paintings.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. What does a museum owe visitors as well as the objects it protects?
2. Would a stolen painting be worth anything if you could never show it?
3. Should museums display a convincing copy when an original is missing?

9 Role-play: more money for museum security

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the museum manager

A small museum has just lost two paintings. You want money for a better alarm and a night guard. Explain why it matters and say what will happen if you get nothing.

Student B · the town councillor

The town has a small budget and many other needs. Ask how much the museum wants and why. You can say yes, no, or give some of the money.

Useful phrases

We'd like to ask for some extra money.

It's not just about the paintings, it's about the visitors.

How much would it cost?

I'm afraid we can't afford all of it.

Could we start with the alarm?

That's a fair point, I'll think about it.

Afterwards, tell the class: how much money did the museum get, and was it fair?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 A · 2 D · 3 B · 4 F · 5 H · 6 G · 7 C · 8 E

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 T · 4 NG · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 vulnerability · 2 detained · 3 discarded · 4 reconstruct · 5 concealed · 6 persistent

6 Word forms

1 scepticism · 2 unwillingness · 3 reliability · 4 uncertainty · 5 unintentionally

7 Language focus

1 with · 2 to · 3 on · 4 from · 5 of

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