

## **BOOK REVIEW**

Vincent Noce, *La Collection Egoïste (The Selfish Collector)* pp. 328.  
J. C. Lattès, Paris, 2005. ISBN 2-7096-241-9.

**Reviewed by Lyndel V. Prott\***

Few people who follow cases relating to the illicit trade can have missed the celebrated case of Stéphane Breitwieser, the Alsatian misfit who stole, over a period of 8 or so years, hundreds of objects from museums and churches to squirrel away in his attic rooms, or that of his mother Mireille Stengel, who destroyed almost all of it by disposal in the family garbage bin or by throwing it into a canal. This book, however, shows just how much a dedicated investigative journalist can add to the record, details that are not only useful in trying to understand the mentality of Breitwieser (by no means an isolated case as this account shows) and even more useful in showing the loopholes in the investigations, the lack of coordination between countries, and the sheer ineptitude of many institutions in securing their collections. Noce, editor of the cultural section of the French newspaper *Libération*, has joined the select company of Karl Meyer (articles in the *New York Times*<sup>1</sup>) and Peter Watson<sup>2</sup> who have added greatly to our knowledge of how the illicit trade works. French journalists, too, are greatly helping expose the unsavory details of these activities (see Noce's previous book *Descente aux Enchères*<sup>3</sup> and that of Emmanuel de Roux and Roland-Pierre Paringaud, *Razzia sur L'art*<sup>4</sup>).

Breitwieser had developed a taste for antiques and old paintings and indulged his passion at the expense of middle-sized museums likely to have few visitors and sparse, and possibly less alert, guardians of the treasures they held. However art fairs, salerooms, churches, and flea markets were also subject to his attentions. His chief means of access was a Swiss army knife, with which he unscrewed or pried open cabinets, but in at least one case a car key was sufficient. He ripped a seventeenth-century Flemish tapestry off the wall of the Chateau de Gruyères in Switzerland with ease—it was only held by Velcro. Measuring 3m30 × 3m60 and weighing 20 kilos, it was too big for his backpack. He rolled it up, opened a window, threw it out, and then walked out and recovered it without difficulty. Smaller objects went into his backpack and at least some into that of his girlfriend or the boot of her car. There was dissension between them as to

---

\*Australian National University, Canberra, Australia. Email: lvprott@bigpond.com

how deeply she was involved in these thefts, but it was clear that she often accompanied him on his expeditions.

The result of his depredations was severe: works by Boucher, Brueghel, Cranach, Durer, van Ruysdael, Sisley, and Watteau, the seventeenth-century Flemish tapestry, and a host of lesser objects including ivories, cross-bows, andirons, antique watches, a seventeenth-century violin, silver and gold plate, paintings on copper, miniatures, a book of hours, and a French hunting horn from the Wagner Museum in Lucerne (the theft that led to his arrest). From the canal alone, the police recovered 95 objects, most badly damaged, including 20 statuettes in wood, ivory, ceramic, or bronze; a mediaeval manuscript and a trumpet engraved with the date 1746; a broken vitrail; a knight's helmet; a battle-axe; a blunderbuss; pistols; fob-watches; 20 pieces of a dinner service; vases; and a gilded key. Sixty-five Renaissance jewels were taken from Denmark. Other countries that suffered his ravages include Austria, Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands. The total value of what is known to be stolen is estimated at about €1.5 billion worth of art (about \$1.4 billion).

However, the case is even more extraordinary because of the deliberate and almost total destruction of this collection by Breitwieser's mother. According to her own account, a few days after her son's arrest, Mireille Stengel decided to destroy the collection. Taking a knife and a sledgehammer, she broke the picture frames and jumped on them with both feet, cut or tore up the paintings, smashed wooden panels to bits, put as much as she could in garbage bags and placed them in the rubbish bin. What she could not destroy—paintings on copper, chalices, a knight's helmet, and the like—she put in boxes in the boot of her BMW and drove 100 km to drop them in the Rhine-Rhone canal. She first said that she had done so to protect her son from the consequences of his criminal behavior. Six months later she claimed to have done it as an act of vengeance against her son, whom she hated. Her destruction of his clothing and personal effects seems consistent with the latter explanation.

Stéfane had in fact confessed to a long line of thefts before he knew of her acts, so her actions did not benefit him. The booty in the canal was discovered by a pedestrian who saw something shining in the water: a trumpet and what he thought was a hubcap. The police found it to be a chalice, and went on to recover another 93 objects. Some were objects he had mentioned and others he confessed to when confronted with them. Arrested in November 2001, by July 2002 he had confessed to the theft of 230 antiquities and works of art.

For many in the art trade, the *selfish collector*, who commissioned thefts and hid them away to enjoy in privacy, was a myth. Noce shows that, even though it is not the core of the illicit trade, it is certainly an aspect not to be ignored. He exposes the case of *Jean-Yves* who, unlike Breitwieser, was a true kleptomaniac; he stole from supermarkets as well as cultural institutions. There was also the winegrower from whom Montpellier police seized 356 pieces he stole over 10 years; he directed police to another 110 pieces, including 28 pictures at a dealer's, surpassing

Breitwieser's haul. There is also the retired school principal found with 450 objects of religious art taken from churches in Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg, and Alsace worth €220,000 packed in cartons in his home; but, as Noce drily remarks, he appears to have supplemented his pension by the odd sale to second-hand dealers. An even more bizarre case was that of a 32-year-old engineering teacher who made off with more than 1,000 books from the Strasburg Library's celebrated library of ancient texts, having discovered information about a secret passage into the Monastery of St. Odile in a magazine he found there. Of the items he stole, 584 were precious, and he subsequently returned another 150. The story of the sting set up by the police, which involved a secret door into the attics and crawling through them among the bells, is worthy of an *Indiana Jones* movie script.

Noce's listing also recalls other cases to this reviewer: Shy doctor and leader of the *chateau gang*, Xavier Richier's impeccable judgment located the best furniture and original pieces in chateaux for the gang to "acquire." His small house in the northern coalfields of France was choc-a-bloc with the most precious of it, and members of the gang sold off the rest. There also was the Greek magnate who apparently commissioned the theft of certain works from Hungary. Furthermore, a Swiss weapons collector had a secret room in his home. His heir, who offered the pair of ivory-handled pistols found there for sale, was surprised to find that they had been stolen 30 years before from the *Musée de l'Armée* in Paris. Other items in the secret room appear to have had equally surprising provenances.

Like Richier, Breitwieser was a lonely, socially detached man. They both succumbed to the joy of confessing their deeds when they found a sympathetic listener who appeared to appreciate his artistic taste and knowledge. They dwelt on fine art magazines and auction catalogs. They had similarly fantastic memories of their hauls. Breitwieser could also remember the details of each theft, such as whether he had to undo three screws or four to remove the objects from its cabinet—an intelligence not displayed in his desultory studies in law, history, and commerce, none of which he completed. His love of art was accompanied by commercial dealings in art, the destruction of some objects that he no longer favored, and maladroit efforts at restoration that caused damage. He seems also to have been subject to bouts of rage that made his victims fear him.

There are many aspects of the Breitwieser/Stengel case that remain suspicious. Have all the objects stolen been found or confessed to? How far were Breitwieser's mother, father, and girlfriend involved in his criminal career? He drove a BMW, as did his mother. His girlfriend wore designer clothes and they had had holidays in Italy, Tunisia, Egypt, the Dominican Republic and twice in Kenya; the next were planned for Venice. He had given his girlfriend a Cartier ring and he wore a Gucci watch. How did Stéphane, then working as a café waiter, come to have €30,000 in his bank account? And how did his father know of this and not wonder about its source? Where are the 60 other objects which he confessed to stealing? No trace of them has been found. How did a number of objects come to be discovered in the forest, where Mireille Stengel claimed she had never been? And how could she

have managed to carry a statue weighing 70 kilos into the forest, whereas her son could hardly move it? Strangely enough, it is the most valuable pieces of silver- and gold-plate that are missing.

One of the more worrying aspects of Noce's account is the obviously poor co-operation between the different judicial and prosecutorial services, both within and between the states affected. Why was the inquiry into Breitwieser's French bank account cut short, when it might have revealed a distinctly commercial operation? How were details of the meticulous Swiss inquiry released to the French press when that inquiry was still underway and it might still have been possible to get more information about the contents of his collection from Breitwieser, who did not yet know of its destruction?

Although Stéphane had stolen from all over Switzerland, these crimes were never combined in one list until the formal inquiry began when he was in custody. Had there been a central list, the scale and similarity of the *modus operandi* might have led to earlier investigations. For 3 weeks in 1996, the French police tracked a series of 14 similar thefts from west to east across France, implicating a couple, but the trail petered out. Stéphane and his girlfriend had crossed back into Switzerland and continued their odyssey there. Had the French and Swiss police, or even the museum authorities, been exchanging information, he might have been caught years earlier.

Where a central authority existed, such as the Office Central de Répression du Trafic des Bien Culturels (OCBC) in France, there seem to have been tensions between local and central services and between the police and gendarmerie, which hindered better collaboration.

The amount of damage caused, far beyond the ability of any of the accused to compensate, also draws attention to the relatively light sentences often awarded by judges in these cases. Perhaps they are seduced by a sneaking admiration for an autodidact who develops exceptional aesthetic judgment. Thus, Richier was given a suspended sentence, whereas Breitwieser was given 4 years of imprisonment with an 18-month nonparole period by the Swiss judge and a similar penalty by the French judge. One is left with the impression that the legal profession, as well as the curatorial and enforcement authorities, are in need of a serious campaign for raising awareness. Only about 110 pieces have been recovered, and many still languish in the hands of enforcement authorities, awaiting drastic restoration and conservation.

Anyone interested in the motivations of art robbers and in the careful unraveling of years of activities by a dedicated serial thief of valuable artworks should read this book.

## ENDNOTES

1. Meyer, *The Plundered Past*.
2. Watson, *Sotheby's*.

3. Noce, *Descente aux Enchères*.
4. de Roux & Roland-Pierre *Razzia sur L'art*.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

de Roux, E., & Roland-Pierre Paringaud, R. *Razzia sur L'art*. Paris: Editions Fayard. 2003.

Meyer, K. *The Plundered Past*. *New York Times*; London, Readers' Union. 1974.

Noce, V. *Descente aux Enchères* Paris: Lattès. 2002.

Watson, P. *Sotheby's: The Inside Story*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing. 1997.