

Short Story: The Disappearance of the Mona Lisa

Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting was stolen from the Louvre in Paris on the morning of August 21, 1911.

The heist was discovered the next day when a wealthy museum patron and amateur painter arrived to study the famous portrait. Instead, he found a blank wall space.

France's borders were effectively closed, with officials examining every vehicle crossing the country's eastern border. Media coverage of the heist spread across the globe, turning the little-known painting into a household name.

Police distributed 6,500 leaflets with the painting's image and offered a 40,000 Franc reward for any news that would lead to the return of the painting. Pablo Picasso was one of the first suspects but his name was soon cleared.

The real thief was found two years later; it was 32-year-old Vincenzo Peruggia, an Italian national, a painter, mason and a Louvre employee. Peruggia was caught in December 1913 trying to offload the painting to an Italian art collector. Peruggia claimed he wanted to see the great work returned to its real home, Italy.

He told police he entered the Louvre, closed because it was a Monday, dressed in a white worker's smock. He lifted the painting off the wall and took it to a nearby service staircase. There, he removed the protective case and frame and walked out into the streets of Paris through the same door he had entered.

Peruggia received a seven-month jail sentence and the Mona Lisa was returned to France. By then, it was the most famous painting in the world.

Today, Mona Lisa is the jewel in the Louvre's crown, helping attract over 10 million visitors to the Paris museum annually.

