

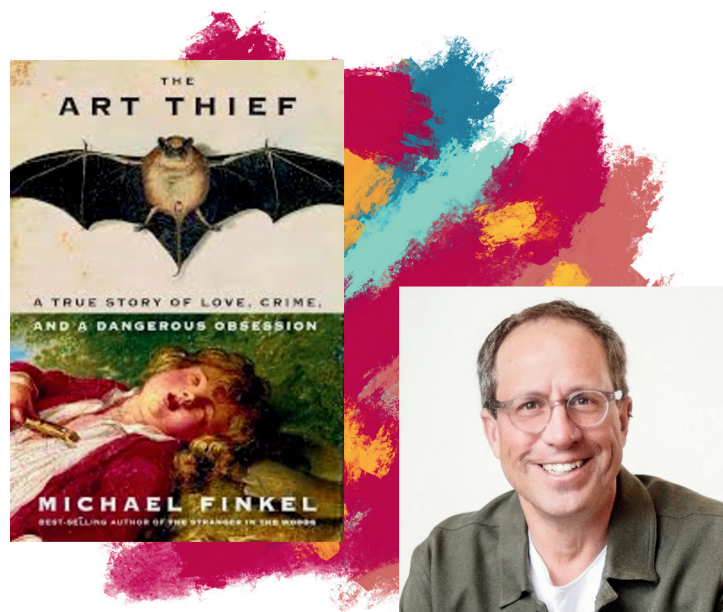
Art Thief by Michael Finkel

In this spellbinding portrait of obsession and flawed genius, the best-selling author of *The Stranger in the Woods* brings us into Breitwieser's strange world—unlike most thieves, he never stole for money, keeping all his treasures in a single room where he could admire them.

For centuries, works of art have been stolen in countless ways from all over the world, but no one has been quite as successful at it as the master thief Stéphane Breitwieser. Carrying out more than two hundred heists over nearly eight years—in museums and cathedrals all over Europe—Breitwieser, along with his girlfriend who worked as his lookout, stole more than three hundred objects, until it all fell apart in spectacular fashion.

In *The Art Thief*, Michael Finkel brings us into Breitwieser's strange and fascinating world. Unlike most thieves, Breitwieser never stole for money. Instead, he displayed all his treasures in a pair of secret rooms where he could admire them to his heart's content. Possessed of a remarkable athleticism and an innate ability to circumvent practically any security system, Breitwieser managed to pull off a breathtaking number of audacious thefts. Yet these strange talents bred a growing disregard for risk and an addict's need to score, leading Breitwieser to ignore his girlfriend's pleas to stop—until one final act of hubris brought everything crashing down.

This is a riveting story of art, crime, love, and an insatiable hunger to possess beauty at any cost.



About the Author

Michael Finkel is also the author of the New York Times bestseller "The Stranger in the Woods: The Extraordinary Story of the Last True Hermit," about a highly intelligent man who lived alone in the forest of Maine for 27 years, as well as the book "True Story," about Finkel's bizarre and unhealthy friendship with a murderer, which was adapted into a 2015 major motion picture produced by Brad Pitt and starring James Franco and Jonah Hill. Finkel has reported from more than fifty countries across six continents, covering topics ranging from the world's last hunter-gatherer tribes to conflicts in Afghanistan and Israel to the international black market in human organs to theoretical physics. In the line of reportorial duty, Finkel has skied off the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro, set sail on a Haitian refugee boat, joined a cult in Colorado, been in a car that was run over by a tank in Afghanistan, climbed into an active volcano in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and crossed the Sahara Desert on the back of an open truck. His work has appeared in National Geographic, GQ, The Atlantic, Esquire, Rolling Stone, Vanity Fair, and The New York Times Magazine. He lives with his family in western Montana and southern France.



The Apothecary by Willem Van Mieris. c. 1720. Oil on wood. Stolen from Pharmacy Museum in Basel, Switzerland



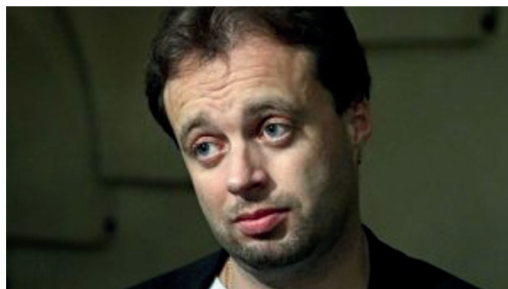
Chalice, c. 1590, silver & nautilus shell. Stolen from the Art & History Museum in Brussels, Belgium.



Festival of Monkeys by David Teniers the Younger, c. 1630. Oil on copper. Stolen from the Thomas Henry Museum in Cherbourg-en-Cotentin, France



Still Life by Jan van Kessel the Elder, c. 1676. oil on copper. Stolen from the European Fine Art Foundation in Maastricht, Netherlands



Stéphane Breitwieser



New Yorker article about how Breitwieser stole 2 million dollars in art

"Unlike most art thieves but very much like a classic heist hero, Breitwieser steals art because he loves it. He spends his free time reading histories of art, biographies of artists, and catalogues raisonnés, and he tells Finkel that beautiful objects should be liberated from the "prison" of museums so that they can be experienced appropriately: at length, up close, in the privacy of his bedroom."

Schulz, K. June 19, 2023. *How a Frenchman Stole Two Billion Dollar's Worth of Art*. The New Yorker.

1. Discuss Breitwieser's views on museums as "prisons for art." What do you see as the purpose and role of museums?
2. Breitwieser also says, "The story of art is a story of stealing." What did he mean by that and to what extent do you agree? How does Breitwieser's story fit into the history of stolen and looted art over centuries?
3. Breitwieser stole over \$2 billion worth of art but did not try to sell or profit from it. What does this say about his motivations?
4. Why do you think Breitwieser was so obsessed with art? What drove his compulsion to steal it?
5. Are you a big art fan? To what degree can you empathize with Breitwieser's passion for and visceral reaction to art? Or is there anything else that you feel as passionately about?
6. Why do you think Breitwieser was seemingly unable to stop stealing art, despite multiple close calls? What parallels do you see between Breitwieser's obsession with art and typical characteristics of addiction?
7. What did you think of Breitwieser's relationship with Anne-Catherine? Was she a victim or willing accomplice?
8. How did Breitwieser's childhood and relationship with his mother shape his personality and later actions?
9. Do you think it's credible that Breitwieser's mother never suspected what he was doing?
10. Why do you think Breitwieser's mother, Mireille Stengel, ultimately reacted by destroying pieces of the collection in such an extreme way? Do you think she deserves some blame for enabling her son's crimes?
11. Why was Breitwieser so successful in his career as an art thief? What differentiated him from other thieves?
12. How does Breitwieser's story illustrate the conflict museums face between accessibility and security?
13. Discuss your reactions to Breitwieser. Did you sympathize with him at any point? Why or why not?
14. What do you think happened to the over 80 pieces of stolen art that are still missing?
15. Why do you think we are so fascinated by stories of art theft and heists in general?