

Art Vandalism Recent Problem in Europe

There has been a series of notable vandalism and theft cases in Europe recently. In early October, intruders broke into the Musee d'Orsay in Paris and punched a four inch hole in the Monet masterpiece *The Argenteuil Bridge* from 1874. The vandals, who were captured on video, but were able to escape before the police arrived, are thought to be intoxicated revelers celebrating the White Night Festival or a French rugby victory that evening.

The break in follows the theft of plates and chalices from a church in the southern French city Perpignan, and an incident at an Avignon museum where a woman left a lipstick stain on a white canvas by Cy Twombly. A Marchel Duchamp urinal from 1917 on view at the Pompidou was attacked with a hammer last summer.

Also in early October, a gang of hooded vandals walked in to a gallery in Lund, Sweden and destroyed several explicit photographs by Andres Serrano. The vandals, who played death-metal music during the incident, later posted the attack on You Tube. The break-ins have been embarrassing and indicate a broader vulnerability to museums and monuments. While many art treasures, like the *Mona Lisa*, live behind a layer of bulletproof glass, many do not. Museums consider allowing proximity to artistic masterpieces a mark of a civilized society, but directors, are reconsidering this privilege.

While some of the recent cases can be attributed to pranksters, the usual culprits are those with a cause, and are often religious extremists bothered by freedoms celebrated or symbolized in an artwork. Terrorist activities targeting cultural institutions are also an enormous cause of concern. Museums want visitors to see art as close as possible, but more glass enclosures and security are soon likely.

JSIS Insurance, November 2007