

Carried Away with the Mona Lisa

In the 1970s, writer and filmmaker **Joe Medeiros** was reading up on **Leonardo da Vinci** when a sentence in **Liana Bortolon's** book *The Life and Times of Leonardo* caught his eye. It mentioned the infamous theft of August 21, 1911, when an Italian mason named **Vincenzo Peruggia** walked out of the Louvre with the Mona Lisa.

Medeiros, who had recently studied film at Temple University in his hometown of Philadelphia, dreamed of making a movie about the crime. He began collecting information on Peruggia, a workman and Louvre employee living in Paris, and his possible cohorts and motives. One of the first references he turned to, he says, was *The Art Stealers* (1966), by *ARTnews* editor and publisher **Milton Esterow**; the book dedicates two chapters to the crime.

Medeiros eventually moved to California and became head writer for *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, but the story of the theft stayed on his mind. He had even written several dramatic scripts based on the subject. Now, more than 30 years later, and with the 100th anniversary of the event nearing, Medeiros has decided to take a different approach. He and **Justine Medeiros**, his wife and executive producer, are piecing the crime together in a documentary film.

From May through October of last year, the couple trekked to Paris, London, Florence, and Dumenza, Italy (Peruggia's hometown), to collect footage for the self-funded project. On their travels they interviewed the descendants of the people involved in the theft, visited historical locales, and examined official French and Ital-

Peruggia kept the painting in his Paris apartment for nearly two and a half years and then, in December 1913, brought it to Florence, he said, as an act of patriotism. Peruggia claimed that Italian art in the Louvre collection had been looted by **Napoleon** and that he was returning *La Joconde* to her rightful place. But King Francis I had purchased the

June 1914 in Florence. Deemed "intellectually deficient" by a court-appointed psychiatrist and thus only partially responsible for the crime, Peruggia was sentenced to one year and 15 days in jail. Soon the sentence was reduced to seven months. When he was freed, Peruggia joined the Italian army to fight in World War I,



LEFT Vincenzo Peruggia, the Italian workman who stole the Mona Lisa in 1911.
RIGHT Filmmakers Joe and Justine Medeiros with Peruggia's daughter, Celestina (center), dedicating a plaque in the thief's hometown.

ian documents from city archives, hospitals, and police departments. The Medeiroses hope to finish the feature-length film—tentatively titled *The Missing Piece: The Puzzling Case of the Theft of the Mona Lisa*—in the next year and shop it to TV networks and film festivals. The couple documented their travels online at monalisa-documentary.blogspot.com.

According to police reports,

painting from Leonardo, so it was rightfully French property. The Italian government returned it to French soil in January 1914. In Italy, though, Peruggia became something of a folk hero, especially since the painting was permitted to tour the country before it was sent back to France. Admirers sent him food, wine, and money while he was in jail awaiting trial.

The proceedings began in

and returned to Paris afterwards, where he died of a heart attack in 1925, at the age of 44.

The Medeiroses remain fascinated by the numerous "missing pieces to his puzzle," including, Justine says, "how a simple workman outwitted the best police minds of the time, whether he was working alone or with accomplices, which entrance and exit he used, and what his

true motivation was." She adds that Peruggia has variously been described as "a patriot, a thief, or a man in love who wanted to impress a woman."

One of the couple's most significant encounters took place in Dumenza with **Celestina**, Peruggia's 84-year-old daughter. Celestina hadn't yet been born when the painting was stolen, and she didn't know Peruggia particularly well (he died when she was 4 years old). But after finding out about her father's misdeed when she was 20, Celestina told the Medeiroses, she "felt shame and ambivalence" over her heritage. One particularly upsetting moment came in 1978,



Silvio Peruggia in the Louvre with his grandfather's loot.

when an Italian television show fictionalized the story of Peruggia's theft. Celestina's mother was portrayed as a bigamist who caused Peruggia to die of a broken heart. She did remarry, Celestina said, but not until two years after Peruggia's death.

In Paris, the Medeiroses filmed Celestina's son, **Silvio**, in his grandfather's Tenth Arrondissement neighborhood, and in the apartment where Peruggia lived with Leonardo's masterpiece. Silvio also accompanied the Medeiroses to the Louvre and retraced his

grandfather's escape route. Despite construction in progress (and the fact that the painting is now located in a different gallery), they were thrilled to gain access to the museum. They filmed on a Tuesday afternoon—when the Louvre was closed to the public—last fall, with no one else there except security guards and a cleaning crew.

As for Peruggia's true motive, the Medeiroses are fairly certain they have it figured out (thanks to a selection of his letters they found in Florence's national archives), but for now they're keeping mum. "Will our film redeem him?" Joe asks. "You'll have to wait and see."

—Laurie Hurwitz

Wynn's Triple Play

When **Elaine Wynn** commissioned **Timothy Greenfield-Sanders** to photograph her billionaire hotelier and art collector husband, **Steve Wynn**, it took the two very busy men about a year to agree on a day and time. Greenfield-Sanders arrived at the Wynn Las Vegas hotel shortly before their

appointment last summer and, after settling into his room, made his way to the 8,000-square-foot ballroom that would be his makeshift studio.

"I had the 20-by-24-inch Polaroid camera out and Wynn was just thrilled," Greenfield-Sanders says. "After a few shots he said, 'OK, I'll be back in an hour with the boys.' I didn't really know what he meant by that."

Wynn returned an hour later with **Warren Buffett** and **Bill Gates**. Buffett's company NetJets was hosting a poker tournament down the hall, and Wynn wanted to get his "boys" in on the action. Greenfield-Sanders took a triple portrait as well as shots of them individually. "Gates is a little reserved," the photographer says. "You can sort of fantasize that he's just thinking of calculations all the time. And Buffett's extremely outgoing and funny."

Wynn was so pleased with the large-format Polaroids, he asked Greenfield-Sanders to show them at the NetJets tournament. "We brought them into the next room," Greenfield-Sanders recalls. "Steve grabbed a mic, stopped everyone, and said, 'I've just had my portrait done by the world's greatest photographer! Come and see! They're all here right now!' Of course, I was a little embarrassed." —Rachel Wolff



Timothy Greenfield-Sanders's 2008 triple portrait of (from left) Steve Wynn, Warren Buffett, and Bill Gates.



GREETINGS FROM 125TH STREET **Barkley L. Hendricks** chose to avoid obvious landmarks when the Studio Museum in Harlem asked him to design a card for its ongoing series "Harlem Postcards." Instead, he focused on subjects like a bargain shop on 125th Street, as seen in his photograph *Harlem's High Heel Heaven/4 Pairs for \$20.00* (2008), above. "Harlem is part of New York," says the artist, who is known for his life-size painted portraits of African Americans, some of which are also on view at the museum. (Both shows are up through March 15.) "A lot of spots in Harlem, like this store," Hendricks adds, "are part of universal New York heritage." A reproduction of his postcard, along with others by **Coco Fusco**, **Lauren Kelley**, and **Joshua Phillippe**, is installed in the museum lobby next to stacks of cards. They offer fresh perspectives on Harlem that viewers can literally take home with them free of charge.

—Natalie Brewster