

A Clickers & Flickers Film Review: By John Burchfield

The Missing Piece - a documentary about the mystery of the man who committed the biggest theft in Art history: **the stealing of the Mona Lisa**. The poster for this wonderful film says it best: **An Unlikely Thief - An Unthinkable Theft - An Unsolved Mystery . . . Until Now.**

The facts of the case: In 1911, an Italian painter and carpenter - Vincenzo Peruggia - who had been working in the Louvre in Paris, STOLE the Mona Lisa - and took it home to his flat. Of course, there was a huge investigation of the theft, but although questioned, Peruggia was considered too unsophisticated to have conceived - let alone accomplished - such a daring feat. Two years later, he smuggled the painting back to Italy, and sought some financial gain for its return. But this led to his arrest, and subsequent conviction for the crime. However, he received a sentence of only 8 months - and in the interval it was missing, the Mona Lisa was elevated from being simply admired and respected, to becoming the most famous painting in the world.

But a mystery - a missing piece - remained: exactly **WHY** did Peruggia steal the painting? It was always too famous to dispose of easily - and he waited years before doing anything with it - and he had no connections to the world of sophisticated collectors. Some suggested it was out of spite (his French co-workers at the Louvre often dismissively called him 'Macaroni' for his Italian origins), some said it was out of patriotism - to return Leonardo's masterpiece to Italy - 'where it belonged'. Others suggested it was the act of a mentally diminished fool: Peruggia had been twice hospitalized for lead poisoning (a potent neurotoxin) - the result of inadvertently ingesting some of lead oxide pigments used to prepare the paints he needed for his trade - a well known occupational hazard at the time.

Documentary film maker Joe Medeiros first learned the facts of this theft over thirty years ago - and the idea of making a film about it never left him. He wrote draft after draft - but could not bring the story to a conclusion - because the **WHY** remained elusive and unknown: the proper telling of this story required knowing the correct motive. Then a new fact appeared - an Internet search revealed that Vincenzo Peruggia had had a daughter - and she was still alive! With the help of a friend to translate, he phoned her to ask if she would agree to a filmed interview about her father - and she agreed. Medeiros promptly assembled a small crew, and left for Italy - he would make his film exploring **WHY** had Vincenzo Peruggia taken the Mona Lisa.

The Missing Piece is the result - and this highly personal work is a joy from start to finish. It actually consists of three stories - all intertwined: the new research to understand Peruggia's theft, Joe Medeiros' front and center detective work to discover the facts, and the participation of Peruggia's daughter and her children in the whole endeavor. Along the way are trips to the Louvre, a cemetery, French and Italian archives, interviews with learned art experts - and many detours! Transitions within the film are often cleverly accomplished with animations and good humor. **And in the end - The Missing Piece is revealed.**

Joe Medeiros has done an excellent job with this fine film - so much so, that a look into his background seemed in order. Well (!) - this gentleman is no neophyte to media production: he was the Chief Writer for the Jay Leno Tonight show for 17 years, also worked for Bob Hope, and was producer for a comedy show for ABC. **The Missing Piece** is clearly a labor of love - and is receiving an excellent reception on the film festival circuit: it is opening the Mill Valley Festival, and has been accepted to the Austin Festival as well.

In conclusion: a fine independent film, well produced, entertaining, and highly recommended! But one of Joe's most important points in this film is his own implicit story: **That it's never too late.** That idea which excited us 25 years ago can STILL be worthy of doing - check it out! (Don't give up on it - or yourself.) And finally, the film concludes setting our minds to rest: in this story of theft and threats to Art's highest value icon, there is a closing disclaimer: "No paintings were harmed in the making of this film."

