



Stealing Van Gogh: The Russian Collection, Soviet Confiscation, and American Reception of Night Cafe

Robert C Williams

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On the surface, the transaction was quite ordinary. In 1961, Yale University accepted Vincent Van Gogh's famous painting Night Café and twenty-two other pictures as a bequest from Stephen Clark, wealthy heir to the Singer Manufacturing Company fortune and Yale alumnus. How the painting arrived at this point and what has taken place since is a fascinating and enlightening tale that stretches over all or parts of three centuries. The story of Night Café begins at a bar in the South of France in 1888 where thirty-five year old Vincent Van Gogh painted the café interior in garish and clashing colors. What happens to the painting after that is a long journey ending over a hundred and thirty years later in a court of law. Follow this trail of art and money from Paris to Moscow, then New York and New Haven where it currently resides at Yale University. It is a story of capitalist wealth, personal obsession, greed, espionage, museum secrecy, foreign trade, diplomacy, Soviet economic desperation and the shenanigans of the art world. The secrets of Night Café's journey serve as a guide to the human condition and the history of our times. Praise for Stealing Van Gogh: "Robert Williams, arch-sleuth of Russian-American art dealings, has struck again. Decades after his insightful and droll Russian Art and American Money he now brings to us the century-long drama of the diplomatic, financial, and legal intrigues surrounding Van Gogh's masterpiece, Night Café. Spanning three regimes in Moscow and awash with American money, Williams' story should disabuse anyone who thinks art is only about art." S. Frederick Starr, Professor of History, Johns Hopkins University and author of The Ferghana Valley: The Heart of Central Asia "With a light, deft hand, Robert Williams tells the fascinating story of the odyssey of a painting, Vincent Van Gogh's Night Café. From a private owner it was appropriated by the Soviet government only to end up in the hands of a wealthy American collector. The painting is the device for telling the larger story of intrigue, conspiracy, theft, exploitation, genuine good taste, and how the very rich collected treasures that the relatively poor Soviet government was willing to give up. A thoroughly enjoyable read, Stealing Van Gogh guides us through a rollicking tour of early Soviet-American relations and the vagaries of the art market." Ronald Grigor Suny, Professor, University of Michigan and author of The Soviet Experiment

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