



## Venetian jewel heist Gentleman thief gives expert view

Angela Giuffrida  
Rome

Until January, only one other person had successfully pulled off a burglary at the Doge's Palace in Venice, the seat of power during the city's centuries as an independent republic and a museum since 1923.

In 1991, Vincenzo Pipino, nicknamed the "gentleman thief" for the polite way in which he pursued his criminal exploits, spent most of a night hidden in a cell in the New Prison building next door, carefully calculating a security



guard's movements. At his chosen moment he slipped out and walked across the Bridge of Sighs, which connects the prison to the palace.

From there, he entered the Consoli room, took a highly valuable Madonna col Bambino (Madonna with Child), painted in the early 1500s, covered it with a blanket and sauntered out of a side door.

The theft in January of €2m (£1.7m) worth of jewellery owned by a member of Qatar's royal family on the final day of an exhibition of Mughal and Maharaja treasures bore all the hallmarks of the Pipino heist - slick, peaceable, and successful.

"When I did my robbery, there was only one security guard," Pipino, 75, told the Guardian this week. "Security has improved a lot since then... but something was amiss. Possibly there were cracks in the alarm system."

January's thieves managed to deactivate the alarms, break into a reinforced case in the Chamber of the Scrutinio - an immense room on the second floor - steal some earrings and a brooch, and melt into a crowd of tourists. Police in Venice were so perplexed they were forced to call in experts from Rome.

Vito Gagliardi, the chief police commissioner, said at the time that the reinforced case, which was provided by the exhibition's Qatari curators, had been opened "as if it was a tin can". Officers suspected that the thieves had reconnoitred

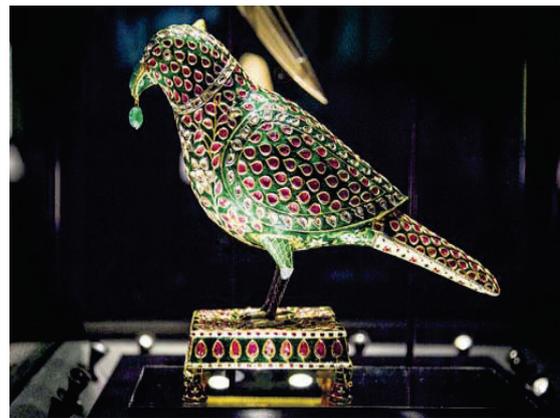
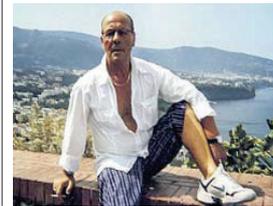
the vast palace, which attracts up to 4,000 visitors a day, before seizing the right moment. Two of the suspects were picked up on CCTV.

Last week, 11 months after the daring theft, there was a breakthrough when five people were arrested in Croatia. In a further extraordinary twist, one of the suspects briefly escaped custody, reportedly by climbing out of a bathroom window at a police station. He was intercepted trying to cross into Serbia.

Another suspect is said to be part of the Pink Panthers, an international network of jewel thieves. Investigators had been on the hunt for the same suspect

▲ St Marks Square with the Doge's Palace. Among the treasures are, left, a 1930s turban jewel and a gold tiger from an 18th-century throne, and, bottom, a jewelled parrot. Below, Vincenzo Pipino

MAIN PHOTOGRAPH:  
SENG CHYE TEO/GETTY



following the robbery of €10m worth of jewels during an exhibition in Basel, Switzerland, in 2011.

The mayor of Venice, Luigi Brugnaro, said that justice had been delivered "to those who thought they could commit a crime in Venice and get away with it".

Pipino, who spent 20 years in jail for 3,000 art thefts across Venice, believes the suspects had help from a collaborator within the palace, though the police have not said this. Pipino noted: "Unless the pieces are removed and sold separately, they are unsellable as they are."

He said he had had no intention of selling the painting he took from the Doge's Palace. He was working on behalf of Felice Maniero, the boss of the Mala del Brenta organised crime group, who wanted it as a ransom for the release of his cousin from prison. The tactic worked: the painting was returned and his cousin set free within a couple of weeks.

Pipino insisted that he only ever "robbed from the rich to give to the poor" or stole to get a favour, for example obtaining a coveted berth for his boat. "I gave everything back," he said. "If I had just one percent of what I stole over my career I would be rich... but if I had one percent of what I donated to the poor, I would be even richer."

Looked upon with respect in Venice, Pipino earned his reputation as Italy's most trusted thief for the non-violent way in which he carried out his trade. He also never left a mess in people's homes. Some of his targets even saw a visit by Pipino as a compliment to their good taste.

Pipino, who grew up in poverty, said the narrow alleyways of Venice became his "teacher" after he was expelled from school for fighting with the son of a pharmacist who refused to give him the core of his apple to eat.

In a book by the journalist Stefano Lorenzetto about notable Venetians, Pipino described being placed in a psychiatric ward before being sent to work in a mortuary. He began stealing aged eight, taking pastries while working at a bakery.

Nowadays Pipino, who over the years has also been accused of credit card fraud and drug dealing, something he denied, strives to deter young people from following in his footsteps. He also offers consultations for wealthy people on how to secure their homes. "I'll go along and look at the windows - they tell me 'this in an anti-intrusion window' and I say, 'no it isn't, I can open it within seconds.'"

## Israel heading for early election as Netanyahu coalition faces collapse

Oliver Holmes

Israel is due to hold elections early next year after the prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, lost his defence minister and talks broke down in his coalition government yesterday, a source close to the cabinet has said.

Netanyahu had met the education minister, Naftali Bennett, who wanted

the defence ministry post in the right-wing government, but the meeting ended with a decision to move forward national polls that had been due in November 2019.

A source close to Bennett said it had become clear that "there was a need to go to elections as soon as possible, with no possibility of continuing the current government".

Netanyahu's office said he would attempt to preserve the administration,

but that looked unlikely after he lost support from Bennett's Jewish Home party, which has the ability to force a new election. Netanyahu's coalition has 61 seats in the 120-member Knesset, so the withdrawal of Jewish Home, which has eight seats, could bring down the government if a no-confidence motion is called.

Another party could be brought into the coalition, but opposition figures have already declared their intention to run against Netanyahu.

Government figures would agree on a date tomorrow, the source added. Israeli law demands that election campaigns be held 90 days from when the government is dissolved.

## Judge orders return of CNN reporter's White House pass

Ben Jacobs Washington  
Agencies

A federal judge yesterday restored the White House press access of the CNN reporter Jim Acosta, dealing a blow to the Trump administration.

Acosta's White House "hard pass" must be returned immediately, Judge Timothy Kelly said. CNN had sued the

White House to demand the immediate return of Acosta's press credentials after the pass was revoked last week following a high-profile press conference standoff with Donald Trump.

The cable news organisation's lawsuit against Trump and several of his senior aides marked a major escalation in the crisis of relations between Trump and what he calls "fake news" and the "enemy of the people".

Kelly warned CNN that the battle was not over. "I want to emphasise the very limited nature of today's ruling," he said. "This doesn't end the legal battle over Acosta's access to the White House, it simply means that it is restored for now."