

A HISTORY OF VANDALISM – TANIA HARRINGTON



At the February U3A meeting Tania gave an extremely entertaining talk on vandalism in art. Tania has M.A. in History of Art from the University of Edinburgh and is also a practising artist as well as a public speaker..

Numerous acts of vandalism against art exhibits are known and some objects, such as *Mona Lisa*, *Night Watch* and *The Little Mermaid*, have been intentionally damaged several times. A vast amount of damage consists of leaving a minor scratch, a stuck chewing gum, a pencil mark and so on, and usually escapes publicity. More visible acts of vandalism were premeditated, as the tool of destruction – a knife, paint, acid or hammer – was intentionally brought to the scene. In most cases, the artworks were restored. Restorations were costly and time-consuming and in many cases were followed by shielding the artwork from future attacks

Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci has long been attracting vandals. In 1956, the lower part of the painting was severely damaged when a vandal doused the painting with acid. In the same year, a young Bolivian named threw a rock at it which resulted in the loss of a speck of pigment near the left elbow, which was later painted over.

Bulletproof glass has shielded the Mona Lisa from recent attacks. In 1974, a handicapped woman, upset by the museum's policy for the disabled, sprayed red paint it. In 2009, a Russian woman, distraught over being denied French citizenship, threw a terracotta mug, purchased at the museum, at the painting in the Louvre; the vessel shattered against the glass enclosure.

A Russian woman, apparently frustrated at having failed to obtain French nationality, hurled a ceramic cup at it but failed to leave her mark.



The Little Mermaid in Copenhagen has been damaged and defaced many times since the mid-1960s but has been restored each time.

In 1964, the head was sawn off and stolen by politically orientated artists. The head was never recovered and a new head was produced and placed on the statue. In 1984, the right arm was sawn off and returned two days later by two young men. In 1990, an attempt to sever the statue's head left an 18 centimeters deep cut in the neck.

In 1998, the statue was decapitated again; the culprits were never found, but the head was returned anonymously to a nearby television station, and reattached. In 2003, the statue was knocked off its base with explosives and later found in the harbour's waters. Holes had been blasted in the mermaid's wrist and knee.

In 2004, the statue was draped in a burqa in a protest against Turkey's application to join the European Union. In 2007, it was again found draped in Muslim dress and a head scarf.

Paint has been poured on the statue several times, including one episode in 1963 and two in March and May 2007. In 2006, a dildo was attached to the statue's hand,

green paint was dumped over it, and the date March 8 written on it. It is suspected that this vandalism was connected with International Women's Day, which is on March 8. The statue was found drenched in red paint on May 30, 2017. About two weeks later the statue was drenched in blue and white paint.

In 1914, the militant suffragette Mary Richardson attacked **Velázquez's Rokeby Venus** in London's National Gallery as a protest against the arrest of her fellow suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst. She entered the gallery and slashed the painting with a small hatchet concealed in her muff.

Laszlo Toth, a Hungarian-born Australian geologist, attacked **Michelangelo's Pietà** with a hammer in 1972, crying "I am Jesus Christ, risen from the dead."

In 2006, a French performance artist named Pierre Pinoncelli took a small hammer to **Marcel Duchamp's Fountain**, calling his action a work of art and a tribute to Duchamp and other Dada artists.



In 2007, police arrested artist Rindy Sam after she kissed the all-white canvas which was the centre of a triptych of **Phaedrus by Cy Twombly**, leaving a red lipstick mark. She defended herself by saying to the court: "It was just a kiss, a loving gesture. I kissed it without thinking; I thought the artist would understand. It was an artistic act provoked by the power of Art."



Gainsborough's The Morning Walk was attacked by a homeless man with a drill bit but fortunately it did not penetrate the thick varnish.

Anish Kapoor's 'Dirty Corner' at the Palace of Versailles was painted with anti-Jewish slogans. Kapoor wanted the graffiti to remain. It was covered in gold leaf but the slogans could still be read through the gold leaf.



More locally **Maggie Hambling's sculpture, The Scallop'** on Aldeburgh beach has been the subject of graffiti on at least 12 occasions.

Tania has a series of art related talks – details can be found on her website - www.taniaharringtontalks.co.uk