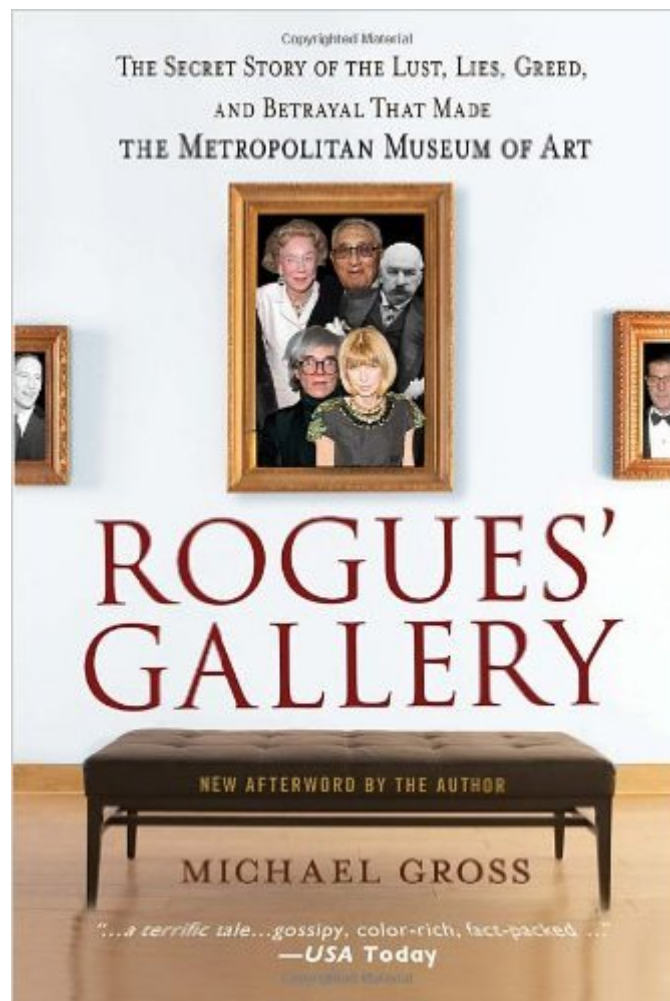


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Rogues' Gallery: The Secret Story Of The Lust, Lies, Greed, And Betrayals That Made The Metropolitan Museum Of Art



Synopsis

“Behind almost every painting is a fortune and behind that a sin or a crime.” With these words as a starting point, Michael Gross, leading chronicler of the American rich, begins the first independent, unauthorized look at the saga of the nation’s greatest museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In this endlessly entertaining follow-up to his bestselling social history *740 Park*, Gross pulls back the shades of secrecy that have long shrouded the upper class’s cultural and philanthropic ambitions and maneuvers. And he paints a revealing portrait of a previously hidden face of American wealth and power. The Metropolitan, Gross writes, “is a huge alchemical experiment, turning the worst of man’s attributes—extravagance, lust, gluttony, acquisitiveness, envy, avarice, greed, egotism, and pride—into the very best, transmuting deadly sins into priceless treasure.” The book covers the entire 138-year history of the Met, focusing on the museum’s most colorful characters. Opening with the lame-duck director Philippe de Montebello, the museum’s longest-serving leader who finally stepped down in 2008, *Rogues’ Gallery* then goes back to the very beginning, highlighting, among many others: the first director, Luigi Palma di Cesnola, an Italian-born epic phony, whose legacy is a trove of plundered ancient relics, some of which remain on display today; John Pierpont Morgan, the greatest capitalist and art collector of his day, who turned the museum from the plaything of a handful of rich amateurs into a professional operation dedicated, sort of, to the public good; John D. Rockefeller Jr., who never served the Met in any official capacity but who, during the Great Depression, proved the only man willing and rich enough to be its benefactor, which made him its behind-the-scenes puppeteer; the controversial Thomas Hoving, whose tenure as director during the sixties and seventies revolutionized museums around the world but left the Met in chaos; and Jane Engelhard and Annette de la Renta, a mother-daughter trustee tag team whose stories will astonish you (think *Casablanca* rewritten by Edith Wharton). With a supporting cast that includes artists, forgers, and looters, financial geniuses and scoundrels, museum officers (like its chairman Arthur Amory Houghton, head of Corning Glass, who once ripped apart a priceless and ancient Islamic book in order to sell it off piecemeal), trustees (like Jayne Wrightsman, the Hollywood party girl turned society grand dame), curators (like the aging Dietrich von Bothmer, a refugee from Nazi Germany with a Bronze Star for heroism whose greatest acquisitions turned out to be looted), and donors (like Irwin Untermyer, whose collecting obsession drove his wife and children to suicide), and with cameo appearances by everyone from Vogue editors Anna Wintour and Diana Vreeland to Sex Pistols front man Johnny Rotten, *Rogues’ Gallery* is a rich, satisfying, alternately hilarious and horrifying look at America’s upper class, and what is perhaps its greatest creation.

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Customer Reviews

Any wealthy, social-climbing, self-important, status-seeking individual even sensing that Michael Gross is taking an interest in their doings would be well advised to donate every penny of their riches to charity and flee to South Dakota, pronto. At least, that's my advice after reading Rogues' Gallery, a peek behind the scenes at the shenanigans of the donors, trustees, curators and directors at the Metropolitan Museum of Art over the nearly 140-year life of that institution. Indeed, given all the dysfunction that Gross chronicles, I'm amazed that the museum manages to open its doors at all, much less function more or less smoothly as a superb collection of the world's greatest art. This is an intriguing book to appear at what may be a major turning point in the Met's history. Some of today's mega-collectors (hedge fund tycoon Steve Cohen, retailer Eli Broad and casino king Steve Wynn) have shown little interest in getting involved with the Met; others have favored their regional museums or contemporary art collections. Meanwhile, its core function -- offering visitors a collection of the 'best of the best' -- is challenged by what former director Philippe de Montebello has referred to disparagingly as ultra-nationalists bent on destroying the universal cultural mission of the great museums. (Translated: countries like Greece and Turkey would like their pilfered art back, please.) It's not surprising that Gross didn't win the cooperation of Met authorities for his work on this book, and almost certainly it's being scoured (as I type) by various attorneys for people who would love to sue Gross for libel. (They probably won't succeed; his most outrageous insights into the characters of folks like Oscar and Annette de la Renta seem to be well-documented.

Does this book deliver the goods? Alas not. Let's face it, a biography of the Met could be, would be one of the most exciting biographies of an institution. However, in the hands of Michael Gross, the book reads like a series of gossip columns strung together. Some of the stories should be as exciting as anything...how Dietrich Bothmer was able to secure a priceless collection of Greek vases from the Hearst Corporation or how the Museum out-negotiated the Smithsonian in obtaining the ancient Dendur Temple from Egypt - while the 6 day war between Egypt and Israel was raging. But what the book lacks is excitement for the art...why certain pieces meant "everything" to certain curators or industrialists. In so many instances, Michael Gross overlooks the critical issue - how owning and exhibiting certain masterpieces of mankind's most exhilarating artistic creations moves the soul, forces us to rethink the very meaning of human existence and importance. As an example, the book says almost nothing about the 'Unicorn in the Garden' tapestries in the Cloisters (The Medieval Branch of the Met in upper Manhattan), We get just a few words how John Rockefeller bought them for about a million dollars and then a sentence or two that suggests they were casually donated to the Museum. These are the same tapestries that are unmatched anywhere in the world but for Paris in the Cluny Museum - the "Lady and the Unicorn" set. People will travel from all corners of the globe to the Cloisters to get a glimpse of these, to be awed by these, to try to comprehend the symbolism of these. But that story seems unimportant to the author of this book. I much preferred Thomas Hoving's "Making the Mummies Dance." Sure, this ex-Director of the Met is a controversial figure.

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