
NOT BORING MEDIA

THE STOLEN PAINTING FOUND BEHIND A COUCH

High-Interest Nonfiction Reading Passage

WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ Reading Passage
- ✓ Comprehension Questions
- ✓ Answer Key
- ✓ Teacher Guide

GRADES 4-6 • LEXILE ~750L • DOK LEVELS 1-4

Reading they'll actually do.

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WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ High-interest nonfiction reading passage (300-400 words)
- ✓ 6 comprehension questions spanning DOK levels 1-4
- ✓ Complete answer key with explanations
- ✓ Teacher guide with standards, pacing, and extensions

Questions or feedback? Leave a review or message us through TPT!

THE STOLEN PAINTING FOUND BEHIND A COUCH

In 1985, thieves executed a daring heist at the University of Arizona Museum of Art, stealing a painting that would become one of the most sought-after works in the history of art crime. For 20 years, investigators searched without success. Then in 2005, the painting turned up in the most unlikely place imaginable: casually leaning against a wall behind furniture at an estate sale in Tucson.

The painting, 'Woman-Ochre' by abstract expressionist Willem de Kooning, was valued at over \$160 million. It had been cut from its frame in a theft that took less than 15 minutes on a quiet November morning. Security footage showed a well-dressed man and woman entering the museum shortly after it opened. While the woman distracted a guard with questions, the man slipped into a nearby gallery and quickly cut the canvas from its frame using a sharp blade.

The couple was never identified, and the painting vanished completely. The museum offered substantial rewards for information. The FBI joined the investigation, treating it as a major art crime. Experts monitored auction houses and galleries worldwide, watching for any sign of the distinctive painting. Nothing turned up for two decades.

Then in 2017, an elderly couple in Silver City, New Mexico passed away. Their nephew, cleaning out their modest home, decided to hold an estate sale to dispose of their belongings. Antique dealers David Van Auken and his partner noticed a painting behind a bedroom door, partially hidden by furniture. Something about it looked significant, even though it was hanging in a cheap frame in an ordinary house.

They purchased it for less than two dollars as part of a lot of miscellaneous items. Later, researching their purchases online, they recognized what they had acquired. The painting was authenticated by experts and returned to the museum where it had hung 32 years earlier.

The mystery only deepened with this discovery. The deceased couple, a former schoolteacher and a speech therapist, appeared to be ordinary people with no criminal history whatsoever. Did they steal it? Did they purchase it unknowingly from someone else? Had it passed through many hands during its decades-long disappearance? No one knows, and with the couple deceased, no one likely ever will.

Word Count: 365 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: Baltimore Sun

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: _____ Date: _____

1 How much is 'Woman-Ochre' valued at?

- ☐ A) \$1.6 million
- ☐ B) \$16 million
- ☐ C) Over \$160 million
- ☐ D) \$1.6 billion

2 How long was the painting missing?

- ☐ A) 2 years
- ☐ B) 10 years
- ☐ C) 20 years
- ☐ D) 50 years

3 How did the thieves remove the painting?

- ☐ A) They removed the whole frame
- ☐ B) One person distracted a guard while the other cut the canvas
- ☐ C) They bribed a guard
- ☐ D) They came at night

4 What made dealers suspicious about the painting?

- ☐ A) It was labeled as valuable
- ☐ B) Something looked significant despite the cheap frame
- ☐ C) The owner told them it was stolen
- ☐ D) It was hidden in a safe

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What makes this case particularly mysterious?

- ☐ A) The painting was fake
- ☐ B) The couple who had it seemed ordinary with no criminal history
- ☐ C) The museum didn't want it back
- ☐ D) The thieves confessed

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What does this suggest about stolen art?

- ☐ A) Stolen art is always recovered quickly
- ☐ B) Stolen items can reappear decades later, raising more questions
- ☐ C) All antiques are stolen
- ☐ D) Museums shouldn't display art

ANSWER KEY

The Stolen Painting Found Behind a Couch

1. C) Over \$160 million

DOK 1 — Recall.

2. C) 20 years

DOK 1 — Recall.

3. B) One person distracted a guard while the other cut the canvas

DOK 2 — Inference.

4. B) Something looked significant despite the cheap frame

DOK 2 — Inference.

5. B) The couple who had it seemed ordinary with no criminal history

DOK 3 — Analysis.

6. B) Stolen items can reappear decades later, raising more questions

DOK 4 — Extended Thinking.

TEACHER GUIDE

The Stolen Painting Found Behind a Couch

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.1 — Refer to details and examples in a text
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.4 — Determine meaning of words and phrases
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.8 — Explain how author uses evidence
- C3 Framework — Historical thinking skills

PACING OPTIONS

- Quick Read (10-15 min): Passage + questions 1-4
- Standard (20-25 min): Full passage + all questions
- Deep Dive (35-40 min): Add discussion + extension

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- If you accidentally bought something that turned out to be stolen, what would you do?
- The elderly couple may have been the thieves or innocent owners. Does it matter if we never know?
- Should there be a time limit on claiming stolen art, or should original owners always have rights?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Research another famous art theft and create a timeline of events.
- Calculate how the painting's value changed over its 20-year disappearance.
- Write a fictional account of how the painting might have ended up in the couple's home.

DIFFERENTIATION

- Struggling: Pre-teach vocabulary, partner reading
- Advanced: Add research, compare to related events
- ELL: Visual supports, pre-teach context

SOURCE

- Baltimore Sun / FBI Art Crime archives