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Buried, burned, lost or destroyed

The best new art books



Heather Benning, *The Dollhouse: Fire #2* (2013). Courtesy Heather Benning

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Lost and found

The scholar and author [Noah Charney](#) contends that if you collected together all the works of art that have fallen through the cracks of history, the collection “would contain more masterpieces than all the world’s museums combined.” In his expansive study *The Museum of Lost Art*, Charney provides a survey of works that have been stolen, confiscated, obliterated, painted over, erased, buried or that perhaps never even existed. The result—appropriately—is something of a revelation.

Thomas Crown has a lot to answer for. There is little romance in hoards such as that discovered in the Munich apartment of Cornelius Gurlitt, the reclusive son of Hitler’s art dealer Hildebrand Gurlitt. The prosaic truth is that family treasures, enjoyed

by generations and cherished by collectors, gather dust out of sight, stripped of their fundamental purpose. In hideaways like Gurlitt's, they are reduced to clutter.

Charney is the founder of [ARCA](#) (the Association for Research into Crimes against Art) and has written and lectured widely on forgery and looting, expertise that is here matched by an engaging delivery (he describes an armed raid on Oslo's Munch Museum as a "frighteningly sudden fist of a crime").



Heather Benning, *The Dollhouse: Dusk #3* (2007, printed 2011). Courtesy Heather Benning

This book is more than a compilation of hold-ups and heists, although it delivers all of the usual suspects, from the 1969 job on the Oratorio di San Lorenzo in Palermo, which saw a Caravaggio altarpiece slip into Mafia hands, to the 19th-century exploits of Adam Worth, the prototype gentleman art thief. Charney also details works which perished through accidents, acts of God and the whim of owners (infamously, Lady Churchill had Graham Sutherland's portrait of her husband, Winston, thrown onto a bonfire in the dead of night).

Charney embraces a liberal definition of 'lost'. Works, he maintains, can be lost or found by an attribution. Some specialists consider *La Bella Principessa*—a portrait of young woman with braided hair—to be by the hand of Leonardo da Vinci; others credit [Shaun Greenhalgh](#), an English forger working out of a garden shed in the 1970s.

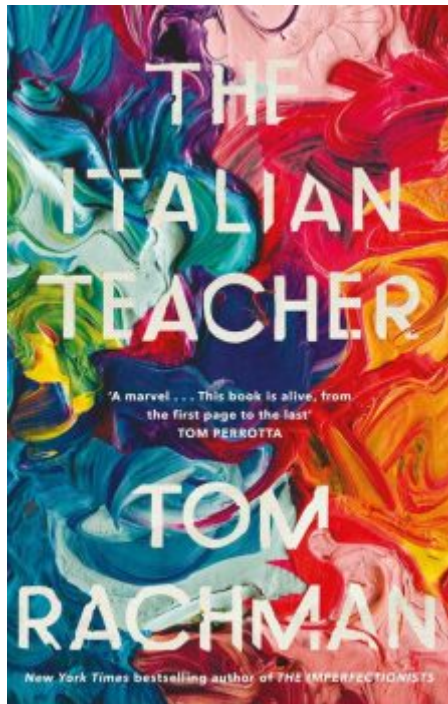
And then there are temporal works that were meant to vanish, pieces like [Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *The Gates, Central Park, New York 1979-2005*](#) (7,503 gateways, billowing with saffron-colored fabric) which took over Central Park in the winter of 2005. And, in 2013, when [Heather Benning](#) burned down a full-size dollhouse she had created out of an abandoned farm building she made a new work—a happening—out of its end.

Ultimately, Charney brings a philosophical eye to the issue. He notes that "art blessed with survival is not necessarily the art that was most important or influential when it was first displayed." And, amusingly, he even considers whether some works would, in hindsight, be better off lost.

The Museum of Lost Art is published by Phaidon

Burning it all down

Charney writes that “the practice of artists destroying their own work is almost exclusively a phenomenon of the modern era”. Bear Bavinsky, the bombastic 20th-century painter at the heart of Tom Rachman’s new novel *The Italian Teacher*, adopts the practice with a relish. “Fact is, I burn most everything,” he declares. “Maybe six canvases a year make the cut.”



Cover of Tom Rachman, *The Italian Teacher* (2018). Courtesy Quercus Books

At the novel’s outset, Bear is an “immoral Greenwich Village artist” living the expat life in 1950s Rome, on his second marriage and burnishing a reputation for irascibility. He is known for his “life-stills”—a series of heavy impasto large-format figurative studies with titles like *Hands XI* and *Throat and Shoulder, XVI*. In Bear, there are biographical echoes of [Cy Twombly](#), although their sex lives and canvases are markedly different.

Rachman has created a flesh and blood artist. Bear smokes a pipe in the bathtub and has an appetite for women only equaled by his indifference to the resultant offspring. The exception is his young son Pinch, who gets an art education at home. “An artist doesn’t see as normal people do,” Bear explains. “When normal people look, they see events: a bus stop, a pretty girl waiting, the rain. When an artist looks, he sees geometry.”

In fact, Pinch also sees things differently, and over the next half a century his own particular talent—no spoilers here—will affect his father’s legacy. Rachman is merciless about how artistic greatness often comes at an unacceptable domestic cost. He is also sharp on the shifty players who orbit artists: a gallerist whose phone calls come with an audible fake smile; a sycophantic journalist who morphs into a world authority on Bear; a cast of distant relatives all wanting their share.

There’s also a nice line in counter-intuitive art history. Bear is an anomaly in his own time. He stands separate from Pop, Abstract Expressionism and Color-Field painting. He strikes out at [Franz Kline](#)’s baseball game, throws up in [Elaine de Kooning](#)’s sink and gets slapped about by [Jackson Pollock](#). And Bear wants to see his paintings only placed in museums, hence his tendency to take a Zippo to his works. As he sees it: “Destruction is a relief as completion never can be.”

The Italian Teacher is published by Quercus/Viking