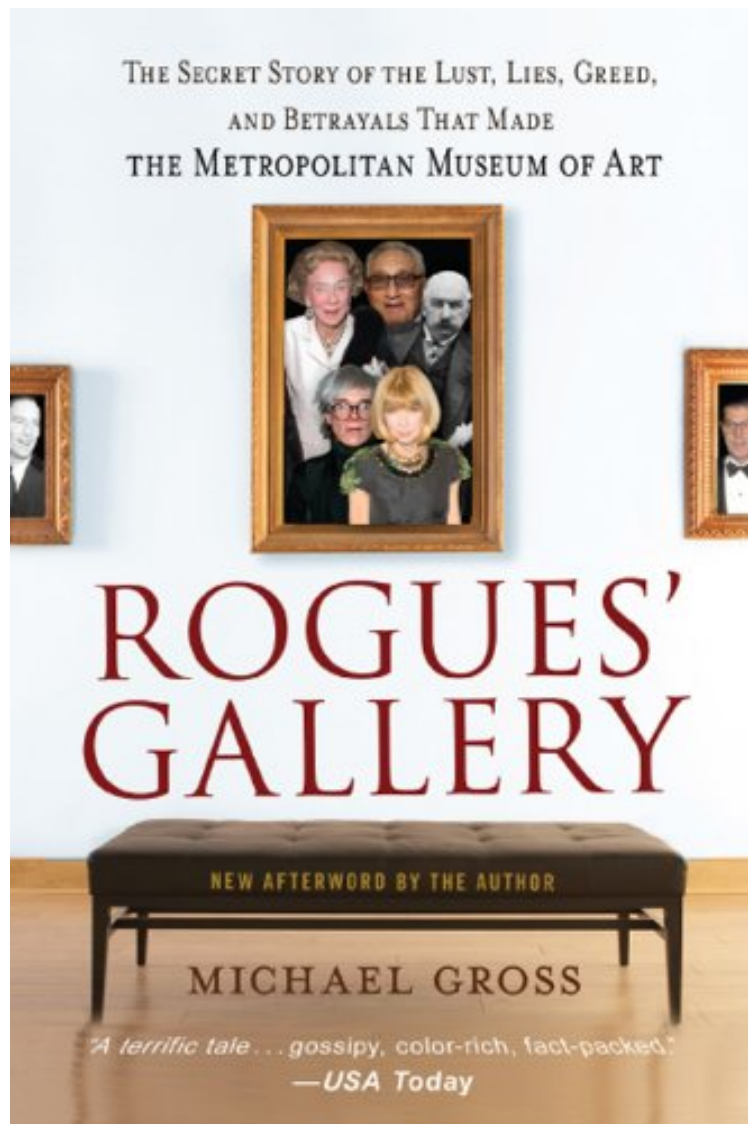


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Rogues' Gallery: The Secret Story of the Lust, Lies, Greed, and Betrayals That Made the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Michael Gross

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Michael Gross : Rogues' Gallery: The Secret Story of the Lust, Lies, Greed, and Betrayals That Made the Metropolitan Museum of Art before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Rogues' Gallery: The Secret Story of the Lust, Lies, Greed, and Betrayals That Made the Metropolitan Museum of Art:

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Flawed, biased but fascinatingBy Robert GinsbergLike nearly

everyone else, I found Rogues' Gallery fascinating to read. I am an inveterate Met goer, and have been for 50 years. The stories Gross tells are delicious. But I'm not clear on the author's real intentions. On the one hand, he criticizes the Met over and over again for being a private club. (As though anyone but the truly rich could found and maintain a world-class museum.) When the Met takes public money, he complains that the Met remains secretive. But when public money is withdrawn, he criticizes the Met for commercializing itself to raise money on its own. It isn't the fault of the Met that donors are selfish or willful; it's not the fault of the Met that the people who come to help it are rich and self-interested. Many of the people who have worked there have had difficult personal lives or have behaved badly. (But that would be true of every great institution in the world.) A startling number have actually died in service to the museum. But it seems no matter what, the Met administration is always shown in a bad light. And while the gossip is delicious, most of it isn't relevant to what we see in the museum. Some of it (like the story of Jane Engelhard's birth and first marriage, which could be a book in itself) seems to be there just because Gross had done the research and found a good story; it has no bearing on the Met at all. And while the book is very detailed, it is not always clear. As someone who is familiar with the Met's many changes, I would have appreciated a much clearer presentation of the Master Plan that has governed the Met's development for over 30 years. At the end, Gross confronts the chief problem the Met now faces: the truly rich are no longer much interested in the Met any more. And so Gross goes from demonizing the great donors of the past as difficult and selfish (and bad fathers!) to lamenting that they have disappeared from the earth and will no longer endow the Met with their treasures. This book is deeply flawed, and the author is biased, but I recommend it to anyone who loves (or just visits) the Met.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Very interesting, but slow going
By David A. Crossley
First, Great Title!! This is an extraordinary account on the history of one of America's most important cultural treasures. Walking in the place and looking around gives no hint at the complex often dark backstory. The author says repeatedly that his efforts to get the historical material from the museum were rebuffed, so where did all this detail and dirt come from? The super-rich patrons named in the work certainly did not provide it, as most of them don't come off very favorably. Also the museum's collection has a checkered history of pillage, deceit and fraud that was carefully suppressed. The material is fascinating, although after a few chapters the book becomes a list of handouts from billionaires. Overall, I recommend it.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Rogues Indeed
By Gustavus Ramsay
It is a while since I finished it. I found it historically interesting but also fairly depressing when one sees that the acquisition and maintenance of the country's greatest collection involves such horrifying amounts of ego, manipulation and downright dishonesty. The beauty that is art is often subjugated to the social and financial ambitions of some pretty unsavory characters. The answer, as always, is that money talks loudest in New York City and gives the power that often trumps connoisseurship. I thought often of Oscar Wilde's remark about people who knew the cost of everything and the value of nothing. But a very good read, and the museum is as indisputably full of treasure as it sometimes is of duplicity. A great house of culture even if I would NOT want to sit down to dinner with most of the major donors.

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.