

The art lover who stole *The Love Letter* for Bangladesh's freedom

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October 1, 1971, around eight o'clock at night. An unexpected phone call came to Walter Schuldens, a journalist at the Brussels-based newspaper *La Soirée*. As soon as Walter picked up the receiver, an unknown voice said from the other end, "I am Thyl von Limburg. A few days ago, I stole Johannes Vermeer's *The Love Letter* from the Brussels Museum of Fine Arts. If the museum authorities want this artwork returned in perfect condition, they must pay a ransom of 200 million francs (four million dollars at the time). But the condition is that the ransom must be paid to CARITAS, and the money must be used for the refugees suffering in the war in East Pakistan. I am not a professional criminal. I am simply an art lover."

The *Love Letter*, painted in the 17th century by the renowned Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer, is one of his celebrated masterpieces. Preserved at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the painting was valued at around 250 million francs at that time.

A special exhibition titled "*Rembrandt and His Time*" was being held at the Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels. For this exhibition,



Brussels Museum of Fine Arts

given for overnight stays became the new hiding place for *The Love Letter*, beneath the mattress of his hotel bed.

Why Mario Roymans stole the painting

One morning in August 1971, 21-year-old Flemish youth Mario Pierre Roymans was lying in bed, half-asleep, watching television. Suddenly, his eyes froze on the screen. The broadcast showed how the West Pakistani military was carrying out some of the most horrific and barbaric massacres in East Pakistan, all in the name of suppressing so-called separatists.

Mario saw helpless, innocent people running towards the border to save their lives, seeking refuge as displaced persons. He also saw decomposing bodies being torn apart by starving dogs and vultures.

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that he indeed had the painting. He said he would only believe Mario if he showed it to him in secret. Mario agreed and instructed Walter to be at a specific location before dawn the next morning. Accordingly, before sunrise, Walter arrived by car at a designated spot in the Limburg forest. Mario, wearing a mask, was already waiting there. He blindfolded Walter and took him near a church, where he produced the painting. Walter switched on his car's headlights and took several photographs of it.

On 3 October, *La Soirée* published a special report featuring these photographs and Mario's claims, causing a sensation across Belgium.

The report also attracted the attention of the Rijksmuseum authorities in Amsterdam. They contacted Mario by telephone, saying that if he truly possessed the original painting, they would have experts examine it. If verified as authentic, they would pay the ransom. They also assured Mario that he need not worry about any police involvement. But Mario did not take the bait.

host were deeply moved by his account.

Mario had made the call from a petrol station in Hasselt. Recognising him and tempted by the reward money, the petrol station owner's wife informed the police. Realising what was about to happen, Mario tried to flee on a motorcycle but failed. As the police chased him, he jumped off the motorcycle and hid at a nearby farm.

He was eventually captured by the police from a heap of manure.

The police then took Mario to conduct a raid at the Sitewete Hotel in Heusden-Zolder. From beneath the mattress in his hotel room, they recovered Vermeer's *The Love Letter*.

Trial, sentence, and public support

Mario Roymans was brought to trial on December 20 of that year. On January 12, 1972, the Brussels court sentenced him to two years in prison.

Demanding Mario's unconditional release and insisting that the ransom be used to aid helpless East Pakistani refugees, ordinary citizens took to the streets. Public signature campaigns were launched, and human rights activists, journalists, intellectuals, artists, and writers all rallied in his support.

Finally, responding to the overwhelming demand of the people and considering the nature of his actions, Mario Roymans was released from prison on July 12, 1972, after serving six months.

However, even from the moment of his arrest, Mario's actions had already played a significant role in shaping European public opinion in favour of the Bangladesh Liberation War. His efforts sparked widespread discussion across Europe about the ongoing genocide perpetrated by the occupying Pakistani forces.

Mario Roymans' later life

While in prison, Mario Roymans suffered severe psychological trauma that left him mentally devastated. At one point, he became somewhat unstable. After his release, Mario married, and the couple had a beautiful baby girl. Eventually, however, his mental health deteriorated completely. He began spending his days wandering the streets and sleeping at night in parked cars.

On the morning of Boxing Day in 1978, Mario was found in critical condition inside a parked car on a street in Liège. He was rushed to hospital, but by then his condition had worsened due to massive bleeding in the brain. After fighting for his life for ten days, Mario Pierre Roymans, a selfless friend of Bangladesh during the Liberation War, breathed his last on January 5, 1979. He was later laid to rest in a small cemetery in Nerem, Tongeren, his birthplace in Belgium.

I first learned about the theft of Mario Roymans' artwork through international media. The theft of Johannes Vermeer's world-famous painting *The Love Letter* caused a sensation not only in Belgium but across Europe at the time. Alongside *La Soirée*, the incident was covered in widely circulated Belgian newspapers such as *De Standaard*, *La Libre Belgique*, *Het Nieuwsblad*, and *Het Belang van Limburg*. Two days after the

sensational theft, reports also appeared in *Le Figaro* in Paris and *La Vanguardia* in Barcelona. Details about Mario's later life emerged much later in a 2021 feature published in *Het Belang van Limburg*, which recounted his acts of bravery.

Further insights into Mario can be found in journalist Su Summers' book, *MARIO: HET VERHAAL VAN TIJL VAN LIMBURG*, published in Flemish. Bangladesh-born Belgian expatriate Syed Musaddekur Rahman assisted me in accessing and understanding the book.

Searching for Mario Roymans' family
Fifty-two years after the Liberation War, I began tracing the final whereabouts of Mario Roymans and searching for his surviving family members. At first, despite speaking to several Bangladeshi expatriates in Belgium, I failed to uncover any information, as none of them knew anything about Mario.

Within a few weeks, however, one Bangladeshi expatriate introduced me to Humayun Maksud Himu, another expatriate Bangladeshi living in the city of Hasselt, Belgium. Through Himu, we finally discovered Mario Roymans' world, his last known address, and the whereabouts of his only daughter. As soon as Himu began speaking to us, Mario's address and family history started to unfold.

Himu first learned about Mario Roymans back in 2008. At the time, he attempted to locate Mario's family and contacted the Belgian Federal Police. But because Mario was a convicted criminal in Belgium, the police initially refused to provide any information.

Himu told me, "When they initially refused to provide me with the information, I explained to the officials that although Mario was considered a criminal in Belgium, he was an extraordinary figure in the history of Bangladesh's Liberation War." Eventually, they agreed to give him the address of Mario's daughter.

Himu then tried to contact Mario's only child, but even there he faced difficulties. "Her name is Isabella," Himu said. "When I went to her home and she learned why I had come, she refused to speak. She held Bangladesh responsible for her father's tragic end. On top of that, she faced a language barrier and did not understand anything except Flemish. I spent years trying to reach her, but she would not talk to me. After several years, her anger finally faded. She eventually spoke to me, and a few of us Bangladeshi expatriates met her several times."

However, over the years, the connection between Himu and Isabella broke again. Isabella changed her address, and he lost all contact with her. In 2021, *Het Belang van Limburg*, a widely circulated Belgian newspaper, published a special report on Mario Roymans' daring 1971 operation. After the article came out, Himu met the reporter who wrote it. With the reporter's help, he was able to locate Isabella's new address. She currently lives in the Belgian city of Hasselt.

With Himu's assistance, I was able to speak with Mario Roymans' only surviving descendant, Isabella Roymans. Isabella told me, "I was only three when I lost my father. My mother had already left us by then. I have no memories of my father. But knowing that he helped your people during the Liberation War makes me very proud. I am not financially well off now, but if I ever get the chance, I would love to visit your country at least once, because my father risked his life for it. My father may have been a criminal here, but what he did for your freedom struggle matters. I only hope your people will always remember that."

No one remembered Mario Roymans' bravery

Neither Belgium nor Bangladesh remembered the bravery of Mario Roymans. In Belgium, he remained forever labelled as a criminal. And in Bangladesh?

Between July 25, 2011 and October 2, 2013, the government honoured 339 foreign friends and organisations from 21 countries with the Bangladesh Freedom Honour, Bangladesh Liberation War Honour, and Friends of Liberation War Honour. But Mario Roymans' name never appeared on any of these lists.

Even in the latest compilation of Bangladesh's foreign friends—348 individuals from 33 countries—updated by the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs, Mario Roymans' name remains missing.

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Mario Roymans is being presented in court.

the Rijksmuseum had loaned *The Love Letter*. Along with Vermeer's masterpiece, several other notable artworks from the 16th and 17th centuries were brought in from museums in France, Denmark, and Germany to be displayed.

How *The Love Letter* was smuggled out

On the evening of September 23, Princess Pamela inaugurated the exhibition. At one point, Mario Roymans entered the museum on the pretext of viewing the exhibition. Being an art enthusiast, Mario was well aware of the artistic value of *The Love Letter*.

Just before entering the museum, and again after doing so, Mario carefully observed his surroundings. He noticed four unarmed police officers guarding the interior and exterior of the building. On one of the walls, Vermeer's renowned painting hung quietly. Before anyone could realise what was happening, Mario slipped into a drawer-like storage space.

The reason was simple: it was practically impossible to carry out a painting measuring nearly 17 inches in length and 15 inches in width without being detected. So Mario waited for the museum to close. Once it did, and as night deepened, he crawled out of the drawer. With a knife taken from his pocket, he cautiously slit the frame surrounding the artwork hanging on the wall. He then rolled up the canvas, folded it, and tucked it into his pocket.

Through a ventilation opening, Mario Roymans escaped before anyone noticed a thing.

Returning home to Tongeren with the painting, he found himself in great trouble. Where would he hide it? Unable to think of a better option, he buried the artwork in a nearby forest. But heavy rain fell that night, and at dawn he retrieved it and brought it back home.

Mario then began looking for work. Shortly afterwards, he found a job as a waiter at a hotel named Sitewete in Heusden-Zolder. The room he was



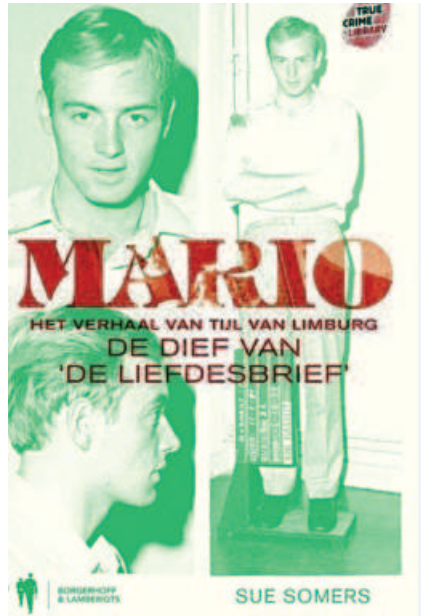
The *Love Letter* by Johannes Vermeer.

Mario was caught

The day after the incident, the Museum of Fine Arts authorities discovered that *The Love Letter* had gone missing. Detectives inspected the site and concluded that the theft was almost certainly the work of a professional organised gang. The Belgian government announced a substantial reward for information leading to the recovery of the artwork. A massive search operation also began.

On the night of October 1, during the phone call, journalist Walter Schuldens repeatedly asked Mario for his real name and identity. Each time, Mario introduced himself as "Thyl von Limburg". It is worth noting that "Thyl Ulenspiegel" is a legendary character in Flemish folklore, known for righteousness and moral courage. Over the phone, Mario also told Walter that if the ransom of 200 million francs was not paid for refugee relief, he would steal the remaining 39 paintings from the Brussels Museum of Fine Arts as well.

Walter then asked Mario for proof



The book *MARIO* by journalist Su Summers, about Mario Roymans.

Meanwhile, Mario contacted another newspaper, *Hot Faits*, stating that if the ransom of 200 million francs was not paid by 6 October, he would sell the painting. Several potential buyers had already approached him, he claimed. Mario added yet another condition: the payment of the ransom had to be broadcast live on television, and the insurance company responsible for the artwork had to be present during the signing of the agreement.

Realising that raising 200 million francs in such a short time was virtually impossible, the Dutch museum authorities eventually refused to pay the ransom.

On the morning of October 6, after failing to secure the ransom, Mario was given a chance to speak live via telephone on VRT Radio's popular show *To Bed or Not to Bed*. During the broadcast, he revealed his entire plan. He also described in detail the monstrous genocide being carried out by the Pakistani military in East Pakistan. Both the listeners and the