‘Lost Michelangelo’ painting stolen days before authentication

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A painting thought to be a missing masterpiece by the famous Renaissance painter Michelangelo has been stolen from a small church in Belgium just days before experts arrived to verify its origin.

In a detective story worthy of its own Dan Brown novel, the painting was taken during the middle of the night from St Ludgerus church in the small Flemish town of Zele.

The theft came shortly before art experts were due to examine the painting of the Holy Family to verify if it actually is the work of the 16th century Renaissance painter whose creations rank among the most famous in existence. If confirmed, the painting could be worth $100mn or more, and would be Belgium’s only painting by the Italian master.

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For 16 years, the painting sat in a dark corner of the small church after it was donated by a parishioner. Then, one day the local priest noticed that it bore stylistic similarities and shared a theme with the artist’s only other work located in

Belgium, the Madonna of Bruges sculpture.

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“The drawing, which is 100 percent sure of Michelangelo, shows just the same scene. That is why I thought that this too could be the work of Michelangelo, or one of his pupils,” Pastor Jan Van Raemdonck said.

After making the potential discovery, Van Raemdonck requested that the Church council approve funding for burglar alarms to be installed at the church, but the money was instead spent on restoring the church tower.

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Without sufficient security measures in place, a thief was able to break in between 5am and 6am Friday and make off with the artwork. East Flanders police say that thief was a young man, aged between 17 and 20. The painting weighs a hefty 100kg, so the pastor believes more than one criminal was involved.

“They were only interested in that one painting,” says Johan Anthuenis, the chairman of the church council, *“They have not even looked at all other valuable items.”* The targeted nature of the theft has led the council to believe that the theft was connected to Van Raemdonck’s research.

Van Raemdonck knows something about art, and, ironically, art theft. He is an amateur novelist that had written a book about the theft of the “The Just Judges,” one of the most infamous art thefts in Belgium's history, before finding himself as one of the main character’s in the country’s latest art-world criminal escapade.

The Pastor’s most recent novel was on the Holy Family painting itself, he told Belgium media. *“I would not have anticipated that the painting would really be stolen,”* he added. *“It is a beautiful painting – I just hope we can get it back.”*