

# The Allure of Finding Treasure

BY MICHAEL KARPOVAGE,  
AUTHOR OF *MAP OF THIEVES*

## Would You Pass Up That Chance?

**H**ave you ever watched *Antiques Roadshow* and given the proverbial “Wow!” after that breathtaking moment when the appraiser finally declares the monetary value of some seemingly innocuous item? Like an everyday bowl that turned out to be from the 14th-century Ming Dynasty and assessed at over \$300,000. How about some awful painting given as a housewarming gift turning out to be worth half a million dollars? Or the antique carved rhinoceros horn cups, from the late 17th-century, worth an astounding \$1.5 million.

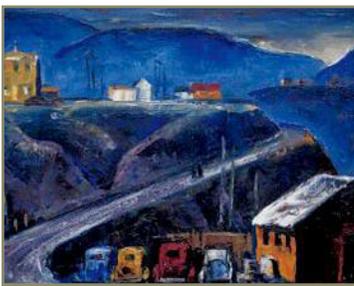


Photo: PBS

Oil painting by Clyfford Still  
valued at \$500,000.

That moment when the rare discovery is made, is sheer heart-pounding excitement. It's an adrenaline rush. It's a dream come true. It's that “Wow!” moment we all seek and want to share in. So much so that many more television shows spawned from the popularity of *Antiques Roadshow*, shows like *Pawn Stars*, *American Pickers*, and *Gold Rush*.

Because isn't it everyone's dream to find some hidden treasure? To take the risk, make the effort, to declare

ownership of it, and take credit for it, thus making your name immortal in the annals of history. Or maybe just cash in? After all, it's why so many people play the Powerball lottery hoping to win a multi-million dollar jackpot. For those particular gamblers, a dollar buys a momentary dream. Many get addicted to that elusive dream and gamble even more, their dollars adding up to thousands over many years.

It's the same with seeking treasure. You find a clue, you research harder, the bread crumb trail grows longer, you dive deeper, go further, and risk more. But where does the trail end? How much hope, money, and even personal relationships have you squandered in seeking your dream—including lives lost?

Profile the life of world renowned explorer Mel Fisher. He struggled for decades in seeking sunken treasure. His own son, his son's wife, and another diver even died when their boat capsized during a treasure hunt. After the discovery of a sunken wreck early in his career, Fisher said, “Once you have seen the ocean bottom paved with gold, you'll never forget it!” He was hooked. Finally, in 1985 he discovered the 1622 wreck of the fabled lost Spanish galleon *Atocha* off the coast of Florida. That motherlode treasure cache is worth \$450 million and includes 40 tons of gold, silver, and precious gemstones among many artifacts and jewelry. Even the U.S. government, through a Supreme Court decision, claimed a piece of the *Atocha's* pie.

Fisher's perseverance had paid off big time and is one of the key reasons why others think they, too, can find their own motherlode. His was the greatest haul of treasure since the discovery of King Tut's tomb in the 1930s. Incidentally, Tut's Tomb was so incredibly popular because it was the very first Egyptian pharaoh's tomb to be found entirely intact and not looted by other treasure hunters.

It's the adventure and "what if" of the find that is so tempting and exciting. Given the chance, you just can't pass up knowing if the treasure you seek will be real or just a pipe dream. That's the core of why we are so obsessed. We want that "if he can do it, I can do it" incentive in our lives. And we won't stop trying no matter how it destroys us or the people we love. It is an addiction that has possessed mankind since history has been recorded and legends were passed down.

Maybe you inherited a family heirloom, for instance a military artifact from a famous ancestor. That object has been sitting in a trunk in your attic for years and you've always wondered how much, if any, it may really be worth. Could it be a small fortune? The true value depends on the story behind it—the legend or the myth associated with the object. And that, to me, is the real draw of finding treasure; the history that makes the legend immortal and discovering the truth about it.



In my new mystery thriller, *Map of Thieves*, that object is a lost hat from a famous Union general during the Civil War. It's a simple commodity item, but what's stashed in the liner of this hat is a secret waybill that leads to a hidden Cherokee tunnel vault of gold in the north

Georgia mountains. Secured within that secret vault is an even more incredible treasure; the Golden Horse. And hidden within that trophy is yet the greatest treasure of all—a stolen gold and silver mining map from Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto that dates back to the 1540s—one of the greatest treasure maps of all time.

A fictitious map, of course.

If you had the chance to find all those treasures, one leading to another, would you? You know you would. Instead of sitting on your couch watching others pursue

their dreams, you could be an active player in finding your own "end of the rainbow." You could weave your own destiny, reaping huge dividends. Millions will continue to play the lottery for a cheap dream, but it's the select few who will actually get their hands dirty in digging for that same dream.

Take for instance getting a ping or a hit on a metal detector while out relic hunting. Your heart skips a beat. Could it be some lost artifact, maybe a silver coin, or a chest full of gold? In amateur metal detectorist Terry Herbert's case, his dream became reality in 2009. Known as the Staffordshire Hoard, this treasure trove of Anglo-Saxon gold and silver literally brought tears to the eyes of one history expert. Over 1,500 pieces were dug out of a farmer's field in England comprising weapons and helmet decorations, coins, and Christian crosses. The relics were dated to the 7th- or 8th-centuries and valued at well over \$3 million. For 57 year-old Terry Herbert, he had an adventure of a lifetime.



*Terry Herbert handling gold pieces from his Anglo-Saxon hoard.*

Back to your own reality; what if that heirloom object you own was a fake? You'd be devastated and angry. You had been living all your life believing one thing when it turns out to be a lie. Your dream would be shattered. That happens countless times over on these reality television shows and in real life, too. When we go treasure hunting at an antique store, we never truly know what we're going to get. We don't know the provenance or story behind the object. We hope to hit the jackpot, but more likely we acquire a worthless trinket in pursuit of our own little treasure hunt. But it was fun trying and why we can't resist doing it again and again.

How about outright fraud, though? A con man scamming you out of your dream? Convicted fraudsters George Juno and Russ Pritchard did this the best. They were the two military artifacts dealers who became infamous for staging

phony appraisals on *Antiques Roadshow*. But what they did outside of the show to the descendant of Confederate General George Pickett, the man who led the ill-fated charge at Gettysburg, is downright criminal. They deceived and defrauded the Pickett family out of their general's war collection to the tune of \$800,000.

## *Thou Shall Not Steal*

On the heels of fraud, comes theft. Racking up over \$8 billion a year in stolen losses, art theft is a highly lucrative field that offers one of the best risk versus reward ratios for criminal enterprises. For a career choice, it's preferable over armed robbery, drug dealing, arms trafficking, or money laundering, considering hardly any art thieves lose their lives or garner lengthy prison sentences. With the right take, the payoffs are huge.

Photo: Michael Karpouge



Stealing someone else's art, relics, or treasure is ingrained in the human narrative. It's a constant of our history. This happens on a small scale—like an American soldier in

WWII stripping a dead German officer of his prized Luger pistol. Or recently when a CIA operative stole Osama bin Laden's AK-47 and brought it back to the U.S. where it now sits in a secret museum within CIA headquarters.

In the prologue of *Map of Thieves*, I re-created an incident that really happened in the Civil War during the Battle of Atlanta—how Union General McPherson's body was stripped of his possessions while dying on the battlefield. His hat was stolen by a Confederate captain boasting that it was his trophy of war. Little did the captain know what was hidden inside of the general's hat. A story.



Another true trophy of war sits today in the West Point Museum. It's Adolf Hitler's famous golden Lilliput pistol. In fact, it sits beside his second-in-command, Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring's, diamond encrusted ivory baton. Hitler's pistol, among many

other of his personal prized possessions, was discovered by an American combat sergeant in Munich at the end of the war and brought back to the States. It sat under his bed in a box for 29 years, until he sold it to a wealthy Nevada businessman, who kept it in a bank vault for his own private viewing and satisfaction. That businessman, in turn, sold it to the West Point Museum. The pistol, baton, and the Union general's hat are all stolen by a highly prolific thief in my novel.

On a grander scale, there are examples of state-sponsored theft like the Nazis stealing art all across Europe from museums, homes, and private collectors. They even went as far as pulling gold teeth from their victims of the Jewish Holocaust. The Nazi plundering of art was one of history's greatest thefts ever. The story of how some of the art was recovered is featured in the book *The Monuments Men* (2009) and the movie adaptation (2014). It tells how a special Allied force of 345 men—museum directors, curators and conservators—risked their lives to find and keep the world's masterpieces from being destroyed by the enemy. Not all the stolen art was found, though. In 2011, a \$1.38 billion treasure trove of 1,400 pieces of fine art looted by the Nazis—including works by Chagall, Matisse, and Picasso—were discovered hidden in a storage pantry of a reclusive 80-year-old Munich man named Cornelius Gurlitt. His father, Hildebrand Gurlitt, was a former museum director and an art collector who worked with the Nazis in “acquiring” the priceless items.

One of history's most atrocious attempts of theft by taking involved King Philip IV of France, colluding with Pope Clement V, in a mass arrest and confiscation of the Order of the Knights Templar and their treasury. This happened on Friday the 13th, 1307 and why that day is synonymous with being unlucky. The Templars were the richest institution in the world at the time and had created the first international banking system. They were even associated with possessing and protecting the Holy Grail and the Ark of the Covenant. Their wealth was so incredible that greedy King Philip coveted it to fund his massive debt from wars. Although some of the Templar's treasure was captured, the vast bulk of it simply vanished from France on 13 ships. Philip tortured and executed many knights to get them to disclose the whereabouts of their treasures. Templar Grand Master Jacques de Molay was burned at the stake in 1314, but not before cursing the King and the Pope who both died within the year. The Order went underground, some saying under the guise of the ancient fraternity of Freemasons. Speculation has it

that the massive treasure made it to Scotland. Others theorize it sailed to the shores of the New World and was stashed in a pit on Oak Island off the coast of Nova Scotia. Scores more believe the great treasure is hidden and protected by America's Freemasons. That is, if you believe the fiction movie *National Treasure*. Perhaps, it's now even being protected by the dragon Smaug in *The Hobbit*? All joking aside, the Templar treasure is still listed as the #1 lost treasure in the world, some 700 years in the making.



### Treasure These Moments



Speaking of Freemasons, of which I am one, this little gem of a treasure story touches on an important tenet of the fraternity. Again, it takes place in post-WWII. A U.S. Army major was inspecting the sub-basements under Gestapo Headquarters in Berlin with another major and a colonel. In a nook in one of the many subterranean rooms that Heinrich Himmler used to keep records on many of the Nazi's adversaries, Major Alphonse Falise discovered a box that contained Masonic officer's jewels and medals. These had been confiscated by the Nazis when they banned



Photo: Michael Karpovage

Freemasonry under their regime. Most of the jewels came from unknown French, German, and Algerian lodges. He being a Mason, Major Falise tried to keep the box hidden, but was questioned by his colonel. After showing him the contents, they soon discovered that, unbeknownst to each other, all three American officers were members of the brotherhood of Freemasonry. Falise brought the jewels back to New York

City with him where they went on display in the Livingston Masonic Library. And he gained new brothers in the process, a treasure no man can put a price on.

### To the Victor Go the Spoils

Theft is a benefit of war. To the victor go the spoils. One empire confiscating another's treasure is commonplace throughout history. A King's victory allows him to loot his adversary's finances and most coveted trophies. The Viking raids and Roman invasions come to mind. How about the greatest empire of all, Genghis Khan's Golden Horde? Winning in war, looting, and stealing was how their wealth was accumulated.



At the end of WWII when the victorious Allies discovered the gold and currency reserves from the German Reichsbank, some of those soldiers participated in what's labeled by the Guinness

Book of World Records as "The Greatest Robbery on Record." According to the book *Nazi Gold* (1984), in a series of separate incidents, over \$2.5 billion in gold, currency, and jewels hoarded by the Nazis simply vanished. No one has ever been caught or tried in court. Some are still alive and enjoying their spoils today. It begs the notion that crime *does* pay.

### Gold Rush No Matter the Cost

In their rush for gold, Spanish Conquistadors invaded the Indian empires of South, Central, and North America, dispatching anyone who stood in their way. They stole their riches outright and mined the rest with Indian slaves. Entire empires crumbled. But some of those same Spanish explorers even lost their own lives during their unquenchable thirst for more; Pizarro, De Soto. It's a never-ending cycle of hope and despair that persists to this day.

The U.S. government acted as conquerors just the same to propel America's first gold rush in 1828 in north Georgia. Once the State of Georgia and Federal government found out there was "gold up in them thar hills," discriminatory

laws were enacted as part of America's manifest destiny to forcibly remove the Cherokee Indians from their ancestral homeland. That action led to the Trail of Tears. Over 4,000 men, women, and children were killed as a result. All to confiscate land and a chance at finding gold. Legend holds that many Cherokee hid their own gold possessions before they were rounded up since they could not transport them. It's where I first learned of the Cherokee Tunnel. To this day there are treasure hunters still looking for it along the Etowah River in Georgia.



*Liberty Without Turban  
Gold \$5 Half Eagle*

During Georgia's Gold Rush, in Dahlonega (Cherokee for "yellow money") the U.S. government established one of the nation's first gold mints. Today it's now a gold museum. But Dahlonega's legacy is that her purely gold coins are among the most avidly collected among American numismatics. A \$5 Half Eagle in excellent condition can be worth up to

\$50,000. When Georgia's gold dried up, though, scores more treasure seekers migrated out West during the great California Gold Rush in 1849. Later it was the Klondike Gold Rush attracting over 100,000 fortune-seekers. Only 30,000 actually made it that far north and just a tiny percentage actually struck it rich. Most turned back, others died from the frigid temperatures and starvation. People still dig for gold the world over even today, no matter the risk involved. They simply cannot help the lure it offers.

Why? Because gold is immortal. Its allure is universal. Gold is immune and divine. It doesn't corrode. It stands the test of time. The very scarcity of gold makes it highly valuable, coveted, and alluring. How scarce? If you were to take all the gold ever mined in the world, from pre-history to present day, it would fit in a cube 65 foot x 65 foot on all sides. It would be about the size of the base of the Statue of Liberty.

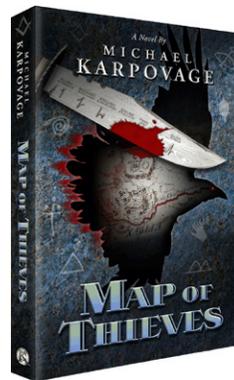
Vernon Silver, reporter for Bloomberg News, sums it up nicely. He says, "Gold's mystique lies in the unique values attributed to it for millennia: a store of economic value; portable wealth that transcends political change and war; a prestige item for display; the stuff from which idols are made."

## *Gold Makes People Crazy*

Some will do anything to get gold, no matter the cost in human life. What is this attraction, this addiction, this seduction, obsession, or some say, disease that drives us beyond reason to seek treasure? Why are *Indiana Jones* movies or books like *Treasure Island* so popular? Sixty year-old Captain Robert Mayne of Florida says years of experience has taught him that hunting gold can send people on an endless journey blinding them to all reason. "Gold makes people crazy," says Mayne. "They become lost in their dream."

"At some point in life, everyone dreams about finding gold," says Kim Fisher, CEO of Mel Fisher's Treasures LLC and a son of the late treasure hunter. "It's gold fever."

What if that fever, though, saw your valuable artifacts stolen by someone in your own family—a thief in the midst of your own home? And sold off on the black market. Would you disown that person? Enact revenge? What if it was your own son? And he happened to be a U.S. Congressman. Find out in *Map of Thieves*. •



*Michael Karpovage is the author of MAP OF THIEVES, the second novel in The Tununda Mysteries. The story involves the true theft of a Civil War general's hat and a hunt for Cherokee gold. Karpovage is a graduate of RIT and a Freemason with Hobasco Lodge No. 716 in Ithaca, New York. He now lives in Roswell, Georgia. Visit [www.MapofThieves.com](http://www.MapofThieves.com)*

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