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The Crooked frame

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THE CROOKED FRAME

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ABSTRACT

Every weekend when I was growing up, I could be found glued to the television set in my Spider-Man pajamas, inhaling my favorite frosted covered cereal, basking in the glow of the Saturday morning cartoons. My favorites were the reruns of the classic Looney Tunes shorts, featuring the famous chases between that long eared hare Bugs Bunny and the egg-headed hunter, Elmer Fudd. Even as a child I was in awe of their timeless sense of humor and their limitless ability to parody any subject matter. Twenty years later, I strove to capture the same style and spirit that the Warner Bros. Studio made famous during the golden age of animation with my thesis film, *The Crooked Frame.*

During my graduate studies of 2D animation, I developed a knack for using the chase as a theme; both of my first two animation projects dealt with similar stories. However, my initial efforts were rather simple, without much development beyond the initial chase structure. With my thesis, I wanted to develop a more complex chase sequence that played with different humorous situations. The animation would challenge both my narrative and comedic skills, which made it an overly ambitious undertaking, as I tend to bite off more than I can chew.

I decided to use the history of art as the vehicle to drive the film because of its potential for great visual humor and compelling imagery. Having studied fine art in my undergraduate career, I understood how its rich history and context could be used to create humor. Individual pieces of artwork provided inspiration based on its design and composition, while the contrast of two different paintings hanging side by side offered another comedic outlet. Through careful planning I was able to use my fine arts background to parody the world of fine art.

Proposal

When I began preparing to propose my thesis, I had trouble choosing one out of the many ideas I had at the time. I sought after a project that would challenge me to work on different narrative and animation principles. With that in mind, I decided to make another chase-based animation because I wanted to finally master its structure after my earlier botched attempts. The humor in my past projects lacked a good sense of comedic timing, so I wanted to find a strong theme for the animation's source of farce. I chose fine art as the theme because I was familiar with its history and thought its visual composition could create many different hilarious gags. Ultimately, I chose to animate a chase-based cartoon set in an art museum, where the interaction between the characters and the artwork created the humor. The appeal of art as the core component of the story came from the variety of visual composition it could create and the potential for humorous situations of character interaction. The art gallery created the perfect setting for the characters to have constant interaction with different artwork.

After choosing my initial concept, I wrote a loose story about a thief who steals a necklace from a woman in an art museum, and is then chased by her boyfriend while he tries to retrieve it. During the chase, the thief and boyfriend interact with the artwork, using it against each other as they battle. The humor in the story was created from the interaction of the characters with the different artwork. I had the concept of the characters going inside the worlds of the different paintings. My thesis committee, Skip Battaglia, Tom Gasek, and my chair advisor, Brian Larson, gave their suggestions and feedback on the proposed idea, and, with their comments and advice in mind, I put together my completed thesis proposal to be presented.

At the proposal meeting, I met with three other teachers, who were uninvolved with my project, and pitched to them my film for their approval. The proposal committee found the core concept of the animation, the interaction of the characters with the artwork visually compelling, but they questioned the strength of my initial story idea. After each committee member discussed their concerns about my proposal, my thesis just managed to pass with two out of three votes of confidence and the condition that I would fix the issues within my story. Though stressful, the proposal meeting was actually very helpful because it showed me that my animation needed better chase construction to carry the visual humor. The doubts of the proposal committee motivated me to fix the animation and prove them wrong. It also allowed me to view my script with fresh eyes, as I now saw that my characters seemed rather flat and uninteresting. With summertime approaching, I used the feedback I had received to set my new goals: to create memorable characters, fix the chase structure, write the final script, and to select the artwork I would animate, all key elements to making my film worth animating.

Preproduction

The first two months of the summer working on my thesis I found it difficult to get myself into a creative mood as I struggled to make ends meet by working odd jobs. Making matters worse I broke my right thumb seven weeks before I was supposed to return to school in the fall. The long recovery for my injured drawing hand meant that I had to scrap my plans to work on my character design and storyboards for the time being. However, this minor setback rewarded me with the chance to iron out the revised script and to polish the artwork gags. Another positive influence on my final script was *7 Minutes: The Life and Death of The American Animated Cartoon,* a very eye-opening book about the American cartoon by Norman M. Klein. The book demonstrates the American cartoon's rise and fall in prominence throughout the decades and gives an insightful historic overview of the cartoon styles that evolved within the different animation studios. Chapters fifteen through twenty-one illustrate the evolution of the chase cartoon and the elements that are inherent to its structure. I began to understand the chase:

> ***Chases are not necessarily "faster."*** **In the chase, when we stop to watch, the hand is slower than the eye, not the other way around. There is something in the subtlety of the form that allows for many pauses, a lot of contrast, not simply velocity. (162)**
>
> **...** ***The Chase is the collision of improbables meeting on a field where only greed and invasion operate*****. The more levels of collisions in a single gag, the funnier it is. (164)**
>
> **...Vary speeds of actions in a scene. A change of pace is usually highly desirable in animation. Learn the value of a "hold," that is, just the right amount of time to linger on a "pose" so that it will register with the audience, for all its worth. Study the art of going in and out of "holds", of cushioning into "holds", of when to "freeze" and "hold" dead still, and when to keep up subtle animation during a "hold" to give it that breath of life. These points and others under "timing" are the essence of the art of animation as they are also the art of acting, and an animator is the actor of the animated cartoon film. (224-5)[1]**

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[1] Excerpts of 7 `Minutes The Life and Death of the American Animated Cartoon`

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Klein's book helped me start to recognize the different elements of the chase cartoon; the changes in pace, the different layers within a gag, and the importance of having holds, poses and timing. The chase cartoon needed layers of action, while having moments for the characters to breathe and come to life. I realized that the chase should not just be running the whole time; that there needed to be a rhythm with peaks and valleys, in order to balance the extreme broad action against the subtle pauses and holds. I quickly saw the mistakes in my earlier chase structures, which contained constant action with no variation; no holds for the characters to react to their current predicament. I needed to emphasize change in speed with the idea that a hold would allow the audience to catch their breath until a new action at an unexpected time would set the chase back into motion. The chase cartoon is controlled chaos; the animator sets the rules.

> **…Thus, there were three essential roles which evolved within the cartoon, and each was allowed certain moments of uncontrolled violence (or license). To review, they were the nuisance, the over-reactor, and the controller... (Klein p.37)[2]**

The concept of a power struggle between three different types of characters in a cartoon, made me realize what the biggest problem with my story. There were too many characters. I simplified the story by eliminating the couple and centering the story on the art heist, with the characters consisting of the thief as the over-reactor, the guard as the controller, and the artwork as the nuisance. The thief as the over-reactor becomes the character that takes his lumps during the chase, the butt of the jokes. The guard as the controller sets the rules for the chase, as he tries to restore order to the museum. The art as the nuisance sets the chase in motion by instigating the over-reactor, in this case by directly interacting with the thief and guard. The chase structure puts the elements of this triad into many different humorous and conflicting situations, giving each character of the trio a chance to gain dominance over the others in their shifting power struggle.

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[2] Excerpt of 7 *Minutes The Life and Death of the American Animated Cartoon*

After I was satisfied with chase structure of the script, I began the process of choosing which pieces of artwork that the thief and guard would be interacting within the story. Picking a collection of artwork proved to be difficult; I needed to evaluate how each piece fit into the story both visually and structurally. The individual pieces needed to support the story and have a strong composition that was easy to parody and bring to life through animation. My knowledge of fine art helped in the selection of paintings from different periods of art history like the Italian Renaissance and modern movements like Pop Art. I gathered a variety of artwork that constructed a believable museum space trying to create a consistent theme.

I was also very careful to make sure that the collection contained a lot of iconic artwork, with pieces by well-known artists such as Picasso, Van Gogh, and Michelangelo. It was vital that the artwork be identifiable to a wider audience, so that people without extensive art knowledge could still be able to appreciate the humor based off the artwork. If someone in the audience at least vaguely recognized the artwork, then the joke would have a better chance to take hold. In order to appeal to a broader audience, I surveyed different people, gauging what artwork they recognized. Choosing more familiar work also allowed me the chance to add layers to the jokes beyond being a simple gag. In one example, I selected to use James McNeill Whistler's painting, *Arrangement in Grey and Black: The Artist's Mother*, which most people refer to as "Whistler's Mother". To exploit the colloquial name of the painting, I had the "mother" spot the thief and then "whistle" to warn the guard of the intruder. In another gag, I have the thief run into Andy Warhol's Campbell Soup can prints, resulting in the cans tumbling to the floor and scattering. Even if the audience may have never seen that particular piece before, they can still recognize and appreciate the visual reference of knocking over a stack of cans at a supermarket.

After I had finally settled on a collection of artwork that created humorous gags that advanced the story, I began working on the visual representation of the artwork. Experimenting with different visual interpretations of the artwork, I decided to use high-resolution jpegs for all the paintings because it would have taken too much time to recreate all the artwork in the same visual style as the cartoon characters. Using the real artwork created a nice contrast between the characters and the background, it also gave the space more depth and achieved the look of a real art museum. After a highly successful test of run cycles with a digital cutout horse from Picasso's *Guernica*, I decided to use cutout animation for all the animated artwork characters. The visual style created the feeling that the paintings were alive, and was reminiscent of the animated work of Terry Gilliam's *Monty Python.*

Arriving back at RIT in the fall, I met with my committee to reveal the new changes to the thesis, listening to their feedback on what was working and what needed tweaking. Storyboarding the film began slowly as my thumb regained strength, but the sluggish process allowed me to better visualize the script. While I had been working on the original thesis proposal, I found an editor for the project, Justin Potter, because I wanted constant feedback on the cuts and transitions to help adjust the film's timing. Justin's own knowledge of fine art was helpful in coming up with humorous scenarios and I enjoyed the collaboration aspect of having another person on the film and learning how to direct them. Together, we began to tighten up the edit of the animatic, paying attention to the comedic timing to create a balance in the chase structure that kept the story moving but gave each joke time to breathe. By the end of the fall quarter we had finished the first animatic. The film was slowly coming into focus, but I still needed to finalize the character design before actual production could begin.

I had created a chicken before the egg situation by ignoring the biggest area of my thesis for too long, the character design. How could I think about starting to animate my film if I had not even finalized the visual design of the thief and guard? It became the stumbling block that derailed the animation production for over a month. I wanted simple character designs that would allow for easy animation but still create visually appealing characters. I did not want the character design to feel too similar to the Looney Tunes style and not have any of my own personal aesthetics included in it. Struggling with the visualization, I spent the whole month of December drawing different designs for the thief and guard in my sketchbook. What would be the general look of my thief? Did he wear a mask? What was his trademark? Would the guard have a flashlight? Could I somehow incorporate it into the story?

The final look for the thief became stereotypical; he became a sneaky French thief, with an iconic mustache to top off the design. I decided to make the thief wear a solid black outfit so that he could hide in the shadows when he snuck around the museum. To combat the problem of him blending into the shadows, I used a white outline to help his silhouette stand out against the different backgrounds. It took a lot of trial and error to achieve the final look of the outline, but it is my favorite part of his simple design. I wanted the guard to stand in contrast with the fast and sneaky thief, so I created an imposing brute who stood tall in height and wide in frame. His design made him like a boulder, an obstacle for the thief to overcome. In the end I found that drawing him as more of a gentle giant worked best for his character, while his clothing design followed the conventional look of a security guard, with a blue uniform and a cap. The guard's character design, particularly his face, was very troublesome for me; it took many attempts before I was satisfied, but I was never completely happy with his design.

Production

Production on the animation began in January, a month behind the scheduled timeframe. Despite the development issues, I was grateful for the additional month of preproduction because it allowed for extra time to address problematic shots and camera angles, which strengthened the composition and visual gags. Because I was behind schedule, I started to search for people to assist with the cutout animation of the artwork. I enlisted the help of Sean Malony, an undergrad animation student who specialized in cutout animation. He fabricated and animated all the cutout sequences, which included all the moving artwork characters, Whistler's Mother, American Gothic's farmer and daughter, Guenerica's horse and bull, and Bosch's demon fish.

With Sean working on the artwork cutouts, I concentrated on the animation of the thief and guard, electing to hand draw the animation to improve my drawing skills. I chose to use pose-to-pose animation, which consisted of drawing the key frames on paper, inbetweening the additional drawings, and then scanning each sheet into the computer to clean the line work in Toon Boom Animate Pro. To save both time and money, I colored the drawings digitally and exported the sequences into After Effects to compile the film. I did not have much experience with hand drawing previous to this project and it was starting to take too long to finish simple walk cycles. My own lack of confidence in my animation skills and the time it took to get comfortable animating my characters was slowing me down. At a crossroads, I abandoned the hand drawn style for directly animating into Toon Boom using the Cintiqs in the graduate lab. Switching from traditional to digital animation would help save time, as digital animation made for quicker cleanup, and allow me to experiment with a quicker style of animation.

Wanting to tackle the long list of animated shots left in my film, I decided to go with a limited animation style similar to that of Chuck Jones' *The Dover Boys*[3]. The famous animated short uses a stylized form of animation known as smearing, to create exaggerated character movement by twisting the forms of the characters as they quickly move from one key pose to another. The individual drawings seem laughable by themselves but in motion create active movement, where the character starts in a dynamic pose before he zips out, or he abruptly comes to a stop when he zips back in from off screen. The advantage to smear animation is that it requires fewer drawings and inbetweens, saving the animator's time. My decision to apply this technique to my film was for its aesthetic as much as its time-saving capabilities in the hopes of creating different ways to move the thief on and off screen with humorous results. After some initial struggles with the style, I started to get the hang of smearing my character, imagining new ways to distort and blur his design with each new shot. Having the thief stand in dynamic poses and anticipating his next action enhanced his movements, making him feel sneakier.

With the basic animation done by the end of the winter quarter, I knew that I needed to push myself to the limit in order to finish the project on time. Everyday from the end of the winter quarter until the final week of the spring quarter, I was in the lab logging many long hours. As each day blurred into the next, I felt like Bill Murray's character from the movie, *Groundhog Day*, repeating the same routine over and over again: wake up early, go to the lab and work late into the night until my eyes grew tired, drag myself home, and repeat. I took the time to go back over shots I had completed earlier, refining the animation until I was satisfied, making sure that the animation stayed visually consistent in each scene through the film.

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[3] Merrie Melodies Cartoon

Next I focused my attention on the background design of my film to create a stylized art gallery with a great sense of space and purpose. I studied the work of Maurice Noble, one of the many background and layout artists who worked with Chuck Jones on shorts like *Duck Amuck.* Achieving the design of the art gallery at nighttime required the right choice of hues, shadows and highlights. The background needed colors that would showcase the different artwork but not be visually distracting. I worked to create a visual cohesiveness between the artwork and the backgrounds, by using different architecture and colors to construct individual spatial themes. With classical artwork I included marble pillars to frame the paintings and create depth, while with graphic artwork I removed the pillars to create a modern space. My first attempt at the background design had a good color balance but was too flat. At the suggestion of my advisors, I added textures to the background elements to create more depth and contrast. After overlaying several different textures at different levels of opacity and contrast, I was able to find a balance that both popped the characters off the background and gave the museum its dimensionality.

By the end of March, I had finished the animation itself and began the hardest but most important part of the production pipeline, clean up. While not the most exciting aspect of animation, it is vital to achieving the final design of the film. And while a rather quick process, it became quite tedious to redraw the same drawings over again, but it was worthwhile when the line work was completed. Next I began to color all the frames, filling in each character with swatches of color. It was a very easy process because the character design was very simple. The only complication was drawing the white outline of the thief, used to distinguish his costume from the background. I had to consistently draw a white line over his outline every frame, if I missed a frame it would create an unwanted strobing effect. With the coloring complete, the production of animation was finished, and I was happy with the results of my labor.

Post-Production

Production was finally over, but the project itself was still far from over, I needed to finish the post-production. At the beginning of the spring quarter, I received a thousand dollars from the Callahan Rennalls Production Grant to assist with my thesis production. The financial assistance would enable me to compensate my composer and purchase more elaborate supplies for the cutout animation. Besides the financial support, the grant also gave me more confidence to finish the animation because I now had the faith and support of people outside my committee.

Reenergized, I began to work on the sound design for the film's soundtrack. Originally, I had my friend composing the score, but creative differences forced me to find a new composer towards the last few weeks of production. The new composer, Blaine Willhoft, helped brainstorm a soundtrack with influences of jazz similar to the animated titles sequences from the *Pink Panther* films that felt cohesive with the art gallery setting and humor of my film. While Blaine worked on finishing the score, I collaborated with my editor, Justin Potter, on recording all the sound effects needed for the film. We experimented with different sounds that would capture the cartoon humor of the animation. My favorite sound effect recorded was the bending of a plastic CD back and forth that generated a bizarre reverberation. We used the "wow-wha" effect to construct the soundscape in the surreal landscape painting.

As the final deadline loomed, I started to make conscious decisions on what needed to be cut in order to finish the film on time. Like a giant jigsaw puzzle, the animation took shape as I pieced all the artwork, character animation, and backgrounds together. After all the components of the film were synchronized, I spent time adding the last bit of polish, creating an end credits

sequence to thank all the people who helped make the animation possible. Adding all the last minute details, while time consuming, allowed me to see the light at the end of the tunnel. With the visual form of the animation complete, Justin and I began work on the final soundtrack mix, tweaking the sound levels of both the score and sound effects, and syncing it to the final picture lock. Waiting for the final render of the animation to export made for a long night but it was worth every minute of sleep deprivation to finally finish my film.

Screenings

The night of screenings, I was anxious to screen the animation in front of a large audience, since it was the premiere of a project that I spent over a year to complete. I expected a large audience as well because many of my friends and classmates wanted to see the animation. Feelings of excitement and nervousness consumed me, as I waited to see the audience's response to my film. Questions popped in my head. Would they laugh at the jokes? Did I have a good chase structure? Would they like the animation? Humor was a core aspect of my animation, so fears of no one laughing at the jokes started to creep into my thoughts. I based the success of my film on the audience's laughter, watching their reactions instead of my animation. As my film screened, my fears went unwarranted because the audience began to laugh from the beginning and through the end credits. After the lights turned back on, I went up to the front of the auditorium for remarks from the audience; they commented on the success of the humor, the diverse selection of artwork, and the attentions to detail. Even though I acknowledge the flaws and mistakes within my animation, I did not receive one negative comment from the crowd. Their reaction to my thesis animation was overwhelming, but I enjoyed every second of it.

Conclusion

I learned a great deal about animation and myself while working my thesis film, *The Crooked Frame.* I wanted to make an animated cartoon in the vein of the Looney Tunes that my favorite animators made so many years ago. I am happy with the animation because I created a film that paid tribute to the golden age of cartoons but tried to explore different styles and add my own ideas. There are still many aspects of the chase structure I need to explore, but I am happy to finally execute an enjoyable chase cartoon. Using my knowledge of fine art, I was able to create a film that was both visually compelling and funny in narrative storytelling. The use of artwork in my film created a lot of fun and challenging animation sequences to tackle. The hardest aspect of using artwork in the animation was choosing which art made it into the film and how it would be used.

I tackled a limited animation style with some varying degrees of success, but I think with more practice and more drawing my animation will continue to improve. I created an animation that lays the foundation and understanding of how to create a film, which gives me a good starting point for my filmmaking career. I had put the pressure on myself to make a great film, but I never could have imagined a better response to my film. The positive response to my animation makes me confident in my ability to make a film that an audience can enjoy. I still have a long way to go as an animator, but knowing I can get an audience to laugh and enjoy themselves has me excited to work on my next film. I am ready to challenge myself with new ideas and styles of animation.

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Appendix A

Original MFA Thesis Proposal

John Sabbath
05/07/10
Thesis Proposal
Master of Fine Arts in Imaging Arts/ 2D animation
The School of Film and Animation
The Rochester Institute of Technology
"Framed"

Approved for submission by:

Brian Larson
Assistant Professor
The School of Film and Animation

SYNOPSIS

An animated cartoon about a man chasing down a thief through the medium of fine art for the affections of a girl.

STATEMENT

For my MFA Thesis, I want to create a short animated film in the style of the Warner Bros seven-minute shorts. This is a story based on strong visuals and solid comedy narrative.

This story is about a man, Seymour, who is dragged to an art gallery on a date. The man is narrow-minded when it comes to the artwork around him. A thief steals his date's necklace and the man tries get it back, but in order to do so must interact with the artwork in the gallery to foil the thief. The chase takes place in the world of the artwork. Fine art was a big part of my undergrad, and I have an appreciation for art history and want to continue to work with it. With the idea of characters traveling through art I can explore the different movements of art and satire them. With the use of animation I can bring the artwork to life. The paintings will be famous artwork from different art movements that will help to carry the story and help to add to the humor.

I want this film to show that the seven-minute short isn't dead and that I can make a smart and funny film that parodies art and the chase.

PROCESS

I am interested in combining different visual styles to create a unique world for the animation. I will combine 2D hand drawn techniques with the use of computer-aided coloring with programs like TV Paint. The universe of the animation will be simple but visually interesting. I plan on playing with artwork in different ways so there is a variety to the artwork and the way they are represented. Sometimes the character will interact with the whole painting and at other times just elements of the painting. This will allow me to create a film that I can complete in a timely manner. Sound will play an important part to the visuals, and will definitely be important to

create the mood of the piece. There will be limited dialogue, with voice acting that I will use to enhance the humor and story.

TREATMENT

At an art museum, a crowd of people gather around, ohhing and ahhing at artwork. Seymour and his date enter the gallery, the woman excited to see the art, with the man begrudgingly being pulled along. Seymour and his date go through the art exhibit looking at the artwork. He tries to hide his disinterest in the art as his date leads him along. Exasperated by the experience he sits down on a bench as he waits for his date to examine the art. He sits as still as a statue, a crowd member comments on how life like the art is touching the man, thinking it's a stature.

A shady character enters the space, sneaks behind sculptures and conforms to their shapes, as he gets closer to center of the room. With Seymour distracted, the thief sneaks up to his date and steals her necklace, running off as she screams. Seymour reacts to her and sees the thief getting away. He runs to her, reassures her that he will return her necklace and to wait for his return. Seymour enters the main gallery of the museum and begins to search for the thief.

Inside the gallery, Seymour begins to scan the room for clues and finds a set of footprints left from paint, leading into a gallery. He follows them inside. The footprints go up the wall and onto the ceiling; Seymour follows them and is upside down, falling down when he realizes this. Getting up, he spots the thief, who is putting more jewelry in his grab bag. Seymour tells him he caught him red handed but the thief's hands change colors like a chameleon. Seymour begins to run towards the thief who reaches into Andy Warhol print of Coca Cola bottles and throws them in his path. Seymour trips and bumps into a Jackson Pollack painting and the paint drips fall on him.

The thief jumps into the "American Gothic" by Grant Wood, disguising himself as the farmer holding the pitchfork. Seymour passes by the painting looking at it but thinks nothing of it. When he turns away from the painting, the thief takes the pitchfork and pokes him in the butt. Seymour jumps into the air in pain, while the thief grabs the "The Great Wave off Kanagawa" by Hokusaia and puts it underneath him, Seymour splashes into the painting. Inside the painting

the wave crashes down on him and washes him out of the painting, where he emerges dripping wet.

Next the thief jumps into the "Nighthawks" by Hopper and stops for a sip of coffee with the patron at the bar. He looks at his watch realizing the chase is back on and dashes out without paying. Then the thief passes by the Picasso's "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon", the cubistic painting of the five female nudes. He talks to the ladies distracted by their beauty, until Seymour catches up to him. The thief and Seymour jump into the MC Escher staircase, the thief and Seymour go up and down stairs and in an out of doors. The chase continues, in a hallway of paintings, as the thief and Seymour enter and exit in and out of paintings, they change accordingly to the different styles.

At the peak of the chase the thief jumps into a postmodern version of a Kandinsky painting, a very open space with abstracted space and perspective. Seymour enters in afterwards and chases the thief to the edge of the painting. The thief takes the bag jewels and holds it over the edge, threatening to drop them if he comes any closer. Seymour takes a step closer, the thief drops the bag and it falls toward the empty void. To the surprise of the thief, Seymour tackles him over the edge as they both fall along with the bag of jewels. As Seymour falls, grabs onto a line of the painting and pulling it down with him. Seymour pulls the line around the thief trapping him inside.

The camera zooms out from the thief to reveal the thief framed inside a painting, entitled "Man in Painting" with a crowd of people around it. Seymour stands with his date at his arms wearing her necklace as the crowd applauds his new work of art. The last shot is the painting of the thief hanging up in a bank. The thief exits the painting grabs the money and before he leaves the room, turns to the camera and says, "Reproductions, nothing beats the original".