

Idiom by Lon Yan

完璧歸趙

wan2 bi4 gui1 zhao4

Two paintings by Vincent van Gogh have been returned to the Amsterdam museum from where they were stolen over 14 years ago.

The paintings, valued at hundreds of millions of dollars each, were recovered by Italian police investigating suspected Italian drug lords.

Experts called it a “miracle” that the works have been recovered and “even more miraculous almost that they are in relatively unharmed condition” as the thieves had ripped them out of their frames and fled in the 2002 heist.

In Chinese idiom, it is a perfect case of “完璧歸趙” (wan2 bi4 gui1 zhao4).

“完” (wan2) is “complete,” “intact,” “璧” (bi4) “a doughnut-shaped piece of flat jade with a hole in the middle,” “jade annulus;” “歸”

(gui1) “to give back,” “to return,” “to go back to,” and “趙” (zhao4) “a Chinese surname,” “the name of an ancient feudal state.”

“完璧歸趙” (wan2 bi4 gui1 zhao4), literally, is “to return the jade intact to the State of Zhao.”

The idiom was about the envoy of the state of Zhao (趙國) who managed to bring back a precious jade annulus after having been forced to show it the king of Qin (秦王), who coveted it.

Figuratively, the idiom means “to return something to its owner in good condition,” “to return something intact to its rightful owner.”

A related term is “璧還” (bi4 huan2), meaning “returning it with thanks.” The term is a polite saying when you return something to its owner after having borrowed it.

Terms containing the character “歸” (gui1) include:

歸咎 (gui1 jiu4) – to ascribe the blame to

回歸 (hui2 gui1) – the transfer of sovereignty

歸屬感 (gui1 shu3 gan3) – sense of belonging; loyalty

歸家 (gui1 jia1) – return home; home-coming