

**Notorious Art Thefts and the Shadowy World of Stolen Art**

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**Presented December 13, 2013**

## **Hollywood depiction and the real world of art theft**

When I was assigned this topic, I immediately conjured up images from films such as the *Thomas Crowne Affair*, *Ocean's 12*, *Pink Panther*, *Entrapment* and *The Italian Job*. The Hollywood depiction of high end art theft has romanticized this industry – and after researching this paper, I believe it to be an industry – with tales of debonair men dressed in all black scaling down a rope from a skylight until they are inches above the case alarmed with motion and weight sensors holding their multi-million dollar prize for the night.

Consider this “how to” scenario from the *Thomas Crowne Affair*: 1) Turn off the air to drive out the tourists; 2) Close the gallery gates to keep everybody out; and 3) Make a lot of noise over there so over here you can take \$100 million off the wall and waltz out the front door. Piece of cake, right?

The breadth of art theft worldwide and throughout history is vast. It includes the looting of antiquities from the pyramids in Egypt all the way to the recent looting of the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad. It includes sensational thefts of multi-million-dollar works of art from museums to the run of the mill home burglary of a family antique. Art theft is performed by highly skilled con men (and a few con women) as well as your ordinary indiscriminate robber.

In the real world, most art thefts are never reported and only the highest profile thefts are ever reported in the media. Although it is impossible to measure, art crime is believed by some to be an industry estimated at \$6 billion annually. Interpol and UNESCO list art theft as the fourth largest black market in the world after drugs, money-laundering and weapons.

There are hundreds of thousands of art crimes worldwide each year, but we only hear of a small handful of big-name heists that make international headlines. The FBI estimates that less than six percent of art theft is ever solved. The reason for that is primarily because most of what is stolen are smaller pieces that are not easily identifiable. Approximately 90 percent of high-value art stolen from

museums and galleries is recovered because the pieces are difficult to sell. Those higher profile art works are a tiny fraction of all art theft, keeping the overall recovery rate low.

Bonnie Czegledi, an attorney in Toronto focusing on cultural property law, believes there are many reasons why someone might want to steal a work of art: “because you fell in love with it; because it is fragile and needs your protection; because if you steal just one more, your collection will be complete; because you loathe the snooty cultural establishment; because strolling out of a museum onto a crowded street with a stolen painting under your arm is an adrenaline rush like no other; because hanging a stolen work on your wall will impress your friends; because you can reap a ridiculous profit; because no one will catch you.”

Investigating stolen art is time consuming and often requires an international effort. Most countries have no dedicated art law enforcement and because of the ease of transport, stolen art rarely remains in the country from which it was taken. A stolen piece of art can remain underground for years or decades before it resurfaces, usually when someone dies and their relatives find the artwork having no idea it was stolen.

Retired FBI special agent Robert Whitman is one of the top art detectives in the world, and only one of a small handful in the United States. He founded the FBI’s Art Crime Team in 2004, partly as a result of the looting of the Baghdad Museum the year before. In an October 2012 interview with CBS News, Whitman explained that art thieves are most often great at stealing the art and lousy at getting rid of it. He explains one of three things usually happens: One, they find a buyer who pays significant money for the masterpiece. The buyer, however, is almost always an undercover law enforcement agent. Two, they try to cash in by offering to help return the work for a reward or they simply demand ransom for the return of the art. The third, and most likely, scenario is the thief holds on to the artwork to use as a bargaining chip should they get arrested for another crime.

For a report to his superiors, Los Angeles Police Department Art Detective Don Hrycyk compared the results of his two-person art squad to the other ninety detectives in 21 divisions working all other property crimes. From 1993 to 2008, the ninety detectives recovered stolen property worth \$64 million. Over the same time frame, the art squad with only two detectives recovered \$77 million in stolen art, \$12 million more than all other property crime. Despite the success of the art squad, LAPD leadership periodically evaluate whether the art squad is necessary.

The art world is largely unregulated and very secretive dealing usually in cash transactions with little, if any, paper trail. Often times a broker will represent a buyer or seller, so the identity of the person ultimately behind the transaction is never known to the other party. Few questions are ever asked, relying on the transaction as a “sale of the property of a gentleman.”

LAPD Detective Don Hrycyk best describes the art world like this: “The art world as a whole is very secretive. Deals are done on a handshake, on a sense of trust, and on the basis of a relationship. I’ve run into many situations where people will enter into multi-million dollar financial deals based on their personal relationship and evaluation of another person, just by eyeballing them. That model – no paper trail, business on a handshake – is the textbook example of how criminals buy and sell products: drugs, stolen items, et cetera. There’s not a big difference between a criminal receiver and a person who is confidential.”

Hrycyk goes on to compare a classic drug deal with the process of someone selling a piece of art. In a drug deal, you don’t know who the supplier is. You only meet with the middleman. The transaction happens in cash and there are no records. In an art transaction, the persons selling and/or buying the art are probably middlemen – brokers representing anonymous people. Because people want to protect their privacy, few questions are asked. The artwork gets bought and moves from one collector to another without a trace.

Not all buyers who pay pennies on the dollar are the naïve or novice art lovers. Legitimate art dealers know they are getting a steal (pun intended) when the offer price is far below its market value. But it's a good deal, and as long as they don't ask if it's stolen, they have plausible deniability. Remember that there are no regulations for the art industry. There is no requirement to ask if the artwork is stolen or to ensure legal title of the person selling it. It is what makes prosecuting people who buy stolen art so difficult. After the first trade introduces the artwork to the legitimate market, the more difficult it is to trace as it passes from person to person.

Organized crime and terrorist groups use stolen art as a sort of currency to settle debts and finance plots. For example, Mohammed Atta tried to sell looted antiquities in 1999 as a funding source for the 9/11 attacks. The Association for Research of Crimes against Art reports that "most art crime since the 1960s is perpetrated either by, or on behalf of, international organized crime syndicates. They either use stolen art for resale, or to barter on a closed black market for an equivalent value of goods or services."

Criminals also use art to launder money through auction houses. Montreal police officer Alain Lacoursière shared the story of a forged Cézanne that was put up for auction at a large auction house in New York. From wiretaps, Lacoursière knew the plan was to sell it at auction for \$16 million. The auction house got their percentage, roughly \$1 million, and the criminals just laundered \$15 million. Also, the painting weighed one pound and was sixteen inches wide which is a lot easier to travel with than cash.

In other examples I found, one person would trade art for drugs, and the drug dealer would then auction off the art for the cash value. In Montreal, two seventeen-year-olds broke into galleries eighteen times in a year and a half. Not only would they steal the painting, they would also steal the price off the wall. It was discovered later that they were using the art to pay off their drug debt.

I continued to run across one rule of successful art theft, which was to stay under the radar. The most effective thieves seem to focus on works of art valued at \$100,000 or less. This makes perfect

sense to me as the more valuable the work, the more well-known it is and the more difficult it would be to sell it. Most people have heard of Van Gogh, Rembrandt, Picasso, and Monet. But how many people have heard of Damien Hirst, Cindy Sherman, Tony Oursler, or Donald Judd? My guess is a lot fewer, although their art regularly sells for five and six figures in the legitimate art market. Imagine how easy it would be to sell their artwork for a fraction of its market value to someone less knowledgeable. The thief has the cash and an unsuspecting buyer just got a great deal.

### **Notorious art thefts**

According to a list published by the Art Loss Register in 2012, Pablo Picasso is the artist who has had more works stolen than anyone else with 1,147 paintings registered as stolen. Second to Picasso is the modern American artist Nick Lawrence who has 557 works on the list, most of which went missing after they were removed without the artist's knowledge for being in violation of a fire code in the building where they were stored. Number three on the list is Marc Chagall, the 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian-French artist with 516 stolen works. Karel Appel, the Dutch painter and sculptor is in fourth place with 505 missing works, just ahead of Salvador Dali with 504. Joan Miro, David Levine, Andy Warhol, Rembrandt and Peter Reinicke make up the remaining top ten. The Art Loss Register report also shared that 40 percent of thefts occurred in Britain and 16 percent in the United States, although it should be noted that the Art Loss Register is a London-based organization.

From the hundreds of thousands of stolen works listed in databases such as Interpol's Stolen Works of Art database, London's Art Loss Register, the FBI's National Stolen Art File and the LAPD's Art Theft Detail website, there are more than a few heists that stand out from the others. I picked out a select few to demonstrate the sensational, brazen and downright bizarre thefts.

The first recorded art heist in history occurred in 1473 of The Last Judgment by Hans Memling. The triptych painting was originally meant to be a part of the central altarpiece of a chapel in Florence, Italy. While on a ship delivering the painting to Italy, pirates took the ship and with it the painting. The pirates offered the painting to the city of Gdansk, Poland, to be part of its cathedral. To this day it remains in the Gdansk National Museum, as numerous efforts to return the painting to its home country of Italy have been unsuccessful.

The first significant art heist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is widely considered to have occurred in August 1911 of the Mona Lisa from the Louvre in Paris. What's more amazing is the disappearance of one of the most famous paintings in the world went unnoticed for 24 hours. The painting was recovered two years later in Florence, Italy, in the apartment of Vincenzo Purugia.

The case itself is one of the least understood and mysterious art heists in history. Purugia, who was a Louvre employee at the time, removed the painting from a wall, wrapped it in cloth and walked out the door – all in plain view of the security guards who assumed he was the Museum Photographer.

The theft shook all of France, the Louvre was closed for a week to aid in the investigation and the museum administrators were fired. It is believed that the mastermind behind the theft was Eduardo de Valfierno who commissioned a forger to create six copies of the painting to be sold in the United States while the location of the original was unclear. The plan fell through, and after two years, Purugia grew impatient and tried to sell the Mona Lisa to the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. The Gallery officials contacted police who arrested Purugia and took possession of the painting.

Purugia claimed he stole the painting to return it to its rightful home of Italy. He was hailed as a patriot throughout the country and, although found guilty of stealing the painting, only served six months in jail for the crime. Incidentally, the Mona Lisa was exhibited all over Italy before being returned to the Louvre.

On the evening of March 18, 1990, two men dressed as Boston police officers entered the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum claiming they were responding to a call. The guard on duty broke protocol and allowed them entry through the Museum's security door. Once inside, the men asked the guard to come around from behind the desk with a claim that they recognized him and had a warrant for his arrest. As he walked around the desk, and away from the only alarm button, the guard was told to call for the other guard on duty. Once the other guard arrived, the thieves handcuffed both guards and took them to the basement where they were placed 40 yards apart, secured to pipes and their hands, feet and heads duct taped. The next morning, the guard arriving to relieve the two overnight guards discovered the museum had been robbed.

During the night, the thieves took thirteen works of art from three floors of the Museum including works by Vermeer, Rembrandt, Manet and Degas. These works are currently valued in total at \$500 million and remains the largest property crime in American history.

This theft is listed as one of the FBI's Top Ten art crimes (FBI website). On the twenty-third anniversary of the theft earlier this year, the Gardner Museum and Boston office of the FBI held a news conference to bring renewed public focus on this crime. At the news conference, Anthony Amore, the Gardner Museum's chief of security, restated that the Museum is offering a \$5 million reward for information that leads directly to the recovery of all of [the Museum's] items in good condition. Amore continued by saying, "What that means is that you don't have to hand us the paintings to be eligible for the reward."

The FBI said it has recently identified the perpetrators and has been able to determine that that the art was transported to the Connecticut and Philadelphia regions. They have not made any arrests and haven't specifically located any of the stolen pieces. FBI Special Agent Geoff Kelly, who is heading the investigation, said "With these considerable developments in the investigation over the last couple



of years, it's likely over time someone has seen the art hanging on a wall, placed above a mantel, or stored in an attic. We want that person to call the FBI.”

During the festivities of Carnival in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, six young men executed a daring and violent robbery at the Chacara do Ceu art museum on February 24, 2006. Just before closing time on Friday evening, four of the men entered the museum as visitors and paid the admission fee while the two other men waited in a van outside of the museum. Once inside, they announced the robbery and brandished guns and at least one grenade. They easily overpowered the unarmed security guards and forced the museum staff to disconnect the building's alarm and camera system after they rounded everyone into the museum's security office. They stole four paintings by Monet, Picasso, Matisse and Dali valued at approximately \$50 million.

Before they left the museum, they robbed several museum visitors and assaulted a security guard who showed up for a shift change during the heist. The four men fled into the woods and into the massive Carnival crowds before escaping in the van.

Jean Boghici, who was a friend of Dali's and runs a gallery in Rio, told the *Chicago Tribune* that an unscrupulous collector probably commissioned the robbery or the thieves might try to extort the museum for a ransom in exchange for returning the works. She said selling the pieces on the black market, however, would be difficult. Incidentally, this was not the first time the Dali and the Matisse were stolen from the same museum. The first time was in 1989 and the works were quickly recovered. Unfortunately, none of the works have been recovered from this robbery.

In December 2000, a gang of thieves stole three paintings from the Swedish National Museum in one of the most sensational art heists reported. Three men entered the museum while it was open. While one man threatened people in the lobby with a submachine gun, the two other men ran upstairs

to remove two Renoirs and a Rembrandt, valued together at over \$30 million. Meanwhile, other accomplices blew up cars on opposite sides of the city and lay tire spikes around the museum to divert police during the heist. The men were in and out in less than 30 minutes and escaped in a speedboat waiting for them behind the museum.

One of the paintings was recovered in 2001 by Swedish police. The two other paintings were recovered in 2005 following a multi-month international undercover operation involving Danish and US law enforcement. In total, 17 people were arrested in connection with the heist.

In May 2010, a lone thief broke a padlock on a gated window of the Paris Museum of Modern Art in the middle of the night and made off with five masterpieces worth approximately \$120 million. As the investigation began the next morning, it was discovered that the museum's alarm system had been inoperable for at least a month. The external closed circuit TV cameras were all pointed at the roof of the museum. The three guards on duty overnight didn't see a thing because, as was later disclosed, they were taking a nap. The thief was in the museum about an hour and carefully cut the paintings from their frames.

A year and a half later, three people were arrested by Paris police in connection with the theft. One was a 56-year-old antique shop owner who was suspected of commissioning the robbery. The second was a 43-year-old Serb with the nickname "Spiderman" who was believed to have made off with the paintings. The third suspect was a 34-year-old watch repairman who told police during a later interrogation that, in a panic after he was first questioned by police, he had thrown all five paintings into a garbage bin on the street. I could not find any indication that any of the paintings have yet been recovered.

Not all art thefts are done for personal gain. In April 2003, three paintings by Van Gogh valued at an estimated \$8 million were taken from the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester, England. They were discovered the next day after police received an anonymous tip of their whereabouts. The thieves had placed the three paintings in a cardboard tube and hidden them in a seldom used public bathroom near the gallery. A note was inscribed on the tube claiming the thieves had taken the paintings to highlight poor security at the museum.

It would be a gross injustice to make no mention of the immense plundering of European art by the Nazis between 1933 and 1945. An entire paper could be devoted to just this topic. Before and during World War II, Nazis looted an estimated 20 percent of Europe's rich art heritage, confiscating precious cultural assets either owned by Jews or in museums within occupied cities. Tens of thousands of works looted by the Nazis have not been returned to their rightful owners or are still missing altogether.

In November 2013, it was reported that more than 1,200 paintings, lithographs and drawings were found in the Munich apartment of Cornelius Gurlitt, the 80-year-old son of a Nazi-era art dealer. The Holocaust Art Reclamation Project, founded in 1997 to document cultural property losses suffered by Jewish individuals, families and institutions by the Nazis, has called on the German Government to immediately publish a detailed inventory of the art seized and to expedite the process of identification and restitution of any Nazi-looted artwork in the collection.

The theft and trafficking of fine art is a tradition as old as the cultures they represent. What has changed is the ability of cultural pirates to acquire, transport and sell valuable art swiftly, easily and skilfully. These criminals operate on a global scale without regard for laws, borders, nationalities or the significance of the treasures they smuggle. As the monetary value of art continues to rise, the crime of art theft will continue to rise with it.

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