

Picasso Patrol

THE ART POLICE MAKE L.A. SAFE FOR COLLECTORS

By FRANK SWERTLOW
Staff Reporter

By all accounts, Patricia Maureen Bayes was a smooth-talking art dealer who victimized galleries, antique shops and private dealers throughout the Los Angeles area in a series of scams.

Using the name Janet Jamieson, Bayes received art on consignment, but then kept the money when the art was sold — more than \$100,000. Bayes also lured victims into investing in paintings, only to disappear with the money and the art.

Enter the Art Cops, formally known as the Los Angeles Police Department's art theft detail. Last summer, they tracked the 46-year-old Bayes to a youth hostel in San Pedro, where she had assumed a new identity and was earning a living leading sightseeing tours. She pleaded guilty and is serving a two-year term in state prison.

Bayes' case is hardly unusual. Art theft has become the fourth-largest illegal activity in the world, just behind drug trafficking, money laundering and gun running, according to Interpol — the International Criminal Police Organization that coordinates investigations into art thefts for its 174 member countries.

"It's about \$2 billion a year, but I hate to put a number on it," said Angela Meadows, program manager in charge of cultural property at Interpol's office in Washington.

LAPD's art theft detail is the only full-time unit in the United States devoted to recovering stolen art, and the squad is busy.

"Los Angeles is becoming more important as an art center, especially with the Getty Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art," said Det. Don Hrycyk, 46, head of the two-person detail. "L.A. and California artists are becoming more marketable and desirable. The big auction houses are here now. As the amount of art activity increases, so do the number of thefts and number of people who try to get rid of art that was stolen elsewhere."

Erroll Southers, a former FBI agent who is head of security at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, worries about the potential for art theft as wealthy citizens in Los Angeles pursue trophy collections. "There are private collections in Los Angeles that are worth billions," he said.

New York-based Art Loss Registry, an organization that catalogs art thefts here and abroad, reports a doubling in the number of works that have been stolen in the past six years. Its current database of stolen art includes 80,000 pieces, up from 35,000 in 1991.

There are no accurate statistics for art theft in Los Angeles, authorities said. Many crimes, especially those involving fraud and fake art, become civil matters. Many robberies, especially when it comes to low-value art, don't come to the attention of the art theft squad and remain within the juris-



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Police: Det. Don Hrycyk, left, and partner Det. Pamela Conrad.

diction of local precincts.

However, there were about 400 incidents in Los Angeles involving art theft in 1996, according to Hrycyk. The number of such incidents is likely to rise in the years ahead, he said, as L.A.'s art market heats up.

"Theft here usually follows the art market and the market is starting to make a recovery," Hrycyk said. "That means there is potential for more thefts, more fraud, more investment scams involving art and phony estate sales."

The art squad investigates about 10 percent of the reported local incidents, usually the biggest cases. Over the past five years, Hrycyk, a 24-year veteran of the LAPD, has recovered \$31 million in stolen art.

"Don is knowledgeable in his field," Interpol's Meadows said. "He knows who to contact. He knows everyone in the art community in Los

Angeles, and he is a good investigator."

The LAPD's art theft detail was started in 1980 and headed by Bill Martin, who retired from the department in 1994 and is now a businessman in the San Fernando Valley. His partner was Hrycyk.

"Historically, there has been a low recovery rate," Martin said. "Police-men don't have their ears tuned to the art community. When you specialize, you develop those contacts. You get a leg up. There's no magic. You have to maintain your contacts, just like in burglary where you go to fences and pawn shops."

Hrycyk, who replaced Martin as head of the unit in 1994, operates out of an office at the burglary/auto theft division at Parker Center. His partner for the past six months has been Pam

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Conrad, who formerly worked auto theft.

When contacted by a victim, the two study an incident to determine if a crime took place. Conrad, a 16-year veteran, said she spends a lot of time on paperwork, especially search warrants used to look for stolen art and documents relating to thefts.

Hrycyk also publishes a newsletter, "Stolen Art," which reports on crimes and arrests. He meets with local museum directors every two months to discuss upcoming events, like LACMA's Van Gogh exhibit that opens next year. He also lectures on art theft at auction houses. Even so, Hrycyk admits he is no art expert.

"I am an artistic Neanderthal," he said, "but we learn something new from each case."

He and his partner use that knowledge to track down art thieves who have become more devious than the three robbers who smashed in the doors of a Brentwood Gallery last August and grabbed three David Hockney lithographs. Today's art thieves, Hrycyk said, are sophisticated. Crooks use stolen art and even fakes for investment scams.

"One guy used a fake Warhol to trade for an apartment building," he said. "Another type of investment crook will say, 'Give me the money and I will maintain the art in a climate-controlled area.' The crook winds up with the painting and the money and then disappears."

Hrycyk said art that is stolen in Los Angeles usually heads east to New York and London, two centers of the art world. Some objects go underground while the thieves wait for authorities to lose interest.

"The art world knows that things may disappear, but they also know they will surface," Hrycyk said. "This is not like a TV set that can have a serial number taken off, or jewelry that can be re-cut and turned into a new piece. You don't paint David Hockney's name off a painting and then try to sell it."

While there is no specific profile for an art thief, Hrycyk said many of those he has encountered are of the champagne-and-caviar variety.

"It's a glamorous world," he said. "It's a far cry from the usual burglaries and thefts you handle. There are so many twists and turns. These people are interesting and smart."

They also tend to have long careers. "If you are a robber, how long can you stick guns in people's faces and run?" Hrycyk asked. "Art crimes, you can do to your last dying breath."