

Art of the Steal

THE LOS ANGELES POLICE DEPARTMENT'S ART COPS ALWAYS GET THEIR MONET

WITH HIS SHOCK OF GRAY HAIR, RAY MARCH LOOKED LIKE your grandfather. Unlike most grandpas, he had been peddling fake art for decades. He sold some works to an L.A. businessman, who later had the pieces authenticated and learned he had been swindled.

- End of story? Not quite. The businessman contacted the Los Angeles Police Department's Art Theft Detail, a division based in Parker Center whose two detectives are the only full-time law enforcement art investigators in the country. From 1993 to 1997, it recovered more than \$31 million worth of stolen art, according to LAPD statistics. During the same period, the approximately 90 burglary detectives in the entire LAPD recovered about \$20.5 million in stolen goods.

Founded in 1984, the unit today comprises detectives Donald Hrycyk, 47, a genial 24-year LAPD veteran, and Pamala Conrad, 37. With the L.A. art market heating up, Hrycyk expects their caseload to increase, noting that criminals can make more selling a Basquiat than a load of hot VCRs.

Says Mike Kelley of Pasadena's Kelley Gallery: "The art world is very complex for an outsider to penetrate. I literally tip my hat to those guys."

The crooks range from slick to stupid. One pilfered Henry Merwin Shrady's *Monarch of the Plains*, a bronze sculpture of a buffalo, from a backyard in early 1996 and promptly hocked it at a thrift shop for \$50. The cops eventually arrested him and recovered the work. Shortly after the theft, Christie's in New York auctioned a statue from the same cast for \$123,500.

Hrycyk's highest profile investigation involved a complicated 1992 robbery in which oils by Monet and Picasso worth \$13 million were stolen from a Brentwood ophthalmologist's home. Hrycyk learned that the works were being stored first in Los Angeles and then in Cleveland. Hrycyk called the FBI, whom he had been working with on the investigation, and the missing paintings were tracked down in a Cleveland storage facility last year.

Then there was Richard Kolosky Jr., who in 1990 donned a three-piece suit and posed as a Maserati-driving art dealer named Wayne Peters and convinced several Southland gallery owners that he could move their inventory. He "borrowed" pieces, then disappeared. But in March, Hrycyk tracked him down in Beverly Hills, where he was selling BMWs.

As for septuagenarian Ray March, the art cops instructed the ripped-off businessman to call March, profess to loving his wares and arrange a second meeting. "We had the businessman wired, and we had a surveillance, and when March arrived, we took him down," recalls Hrycyk with a smile.

Grandpa pleaded guilty. — JON REGARDIE

The Art Theft Detail has tracked down \$31 million worth of stolen works.



BOOTY CALL: The LAPD's Donald Hrycyk holds a fake Renoir that sold for \$350,000.

LABUZZ
crime