

L.A. Police Unit Makes Stolen Art a Pursuit

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LOS ANGELES—If you're missing your Matisse, or your etching has taken a hike—or even if someone has stolen your rubber chicken (yes, chicken), as was reported by one Los Angeles area art museum—who ya gonna call?

In Los Angeles, you'd dial LAPD Detective Don Hrycyk or his partner, Kara Clifford, partners in the nation's only dedicated art-theft unit. These two investigators have tracked down stolen Monet, Degas and Picasso paintings, Tibetan statues, antique porcelains and tapestries, rare Henry Miller manuscripts, Japanese wood and ivory netsuke, a Red Skelton clown portrait, the "Peanuts" animation cels (the company handyman was arrested), and the Scarecrow's tap shoes from the original "Wizard of Oz."

"But I have to draw the line somewhere," Hrycyk recalled. He declined to investigate the rubber chicken caper, even though the purloined poultry was part of a contemporary art exhibit at the Santa Monica Art Museum. "I asked the museum if the artist could just pick up another rubber chicken."

The stolen rubber chicken aside, the two detectives keep busy with a host of other cases, some of which involve schemes worthy of a Columbo movie. A university counselor in Southern California sold a century-old painting, American artist Arthur Wesley Dow's "Frost Flowers, Ipswich 1889," to the highly-regarded Spanierman Gallery in New York for \$200,000. The counselor, Jane Crawford, had claimed it was a family heirloom. But the truth was, the painting had actually been hanging in her office, donated to her employer, the University of California at Los Angeles, in 1928.

The \$500,000 Anders Zorn painting in the Bel Air oil tycoon's estate looked a bit odd. One day, the family looked a little more closely at the work. Touching the surface, it turned out to be a replica—just a photograph slipped into the original frame. The actual painting had been stolen.

In Sherman Oaks, Calif., Bill Melendez Productions discovered the theft of some 7,500 one-of-a-kind "Peanuts" cartoon movie animation production cels, worth about \$1 million. Later, they were sold over the Internet to collectors in New York, Ohio, Arizona and Los Angeles.

In 1985, a Missouri art dealer was swindled in his \$191,000 purchase of a Renoir painting, "La Loge" (also known as "Au Theatre"), which turned out to be fake. Although the fraud was uncovered, the original seller disappeared, and so it was that 10 years later the dealer consigned the



▲ The Art Theft Detail maintains its own section of the L.A. P.D.'s official Website, including information on suspects and case files.

painting to another gallery, which in turn consigned it to Jesaia "Bob" Venger in Los Angeles. Even though Venger knew the Renoir was fake, he tried to sell it for \$350,000 to one buyer after another.

Finally, the Los Angeles Police heard about the fraud. Detectives from LAPD's Art Theft Detail investigated, seizing the fake Renoir. They also learned that Venger had been targeted by art galleries, dealers and artists who have all claimed he defrauded them in their business dealings. One art dealer purchased a Carl Hofer gouache and a Hans Purrrman watercolor—both of them forgeries. Another dealer bought a fake painting by a Canadian artist. And the detectives discovered that Venger had written a fictitious credit card purchase receipt for a Modigliani, processing the "sale" through a stamp shop's merchant account. Venger was charged with grand theft.

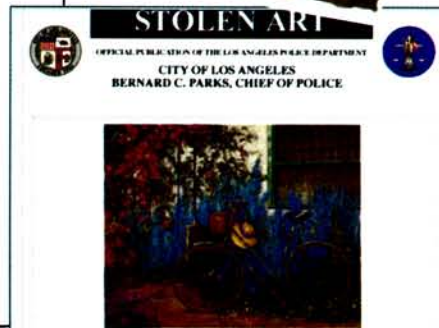
As the number of gallery businesses have expanded and more residents have expensive collections of fine art, art theft from homes and galleries has been on the rise. As a result, The Los Angeles Police Department created the Art Theft Detail in the mid-1980s. In the past five years, the Art Theft Detail has recovered more than \$31 million in art—more than all other Los Angeles burglary detectives recovered in the same period. Although Los Angeles has not been hit with the rash of armed art heists that have struck old European estates, it has had a rise in robberies of art and collectibles. In 1997, about 400 art theft crimes were reported to the LAPD.

The unit also investigates fakes, frauds, forgeries and other art crimes. "In a city the size of Los Angeles," said Hrycyk, who personally works about 45 cases a year,



▲ This Web link shows individual images that are reported lost.

◀ This page shows an image of all of the lost art currently being investigated. Included with the image and title of the piece is the name of the artist.



FLISSON, Head
1796
Rose Cottage
redgraph on canvas
148 / 98
24" x 28"
LAPD DR# 97-022008 (Case 18-397)

on this case, please contact

"there are 3.5 million suckers they can sell fraudulent art to."

Los Angeles and New York are America's art crime capitals, though misdeeds occur in cities large and small throughout the nation and the world. Since the mid-1980s, said Anna Kisluk, director of the Art Loss Register in New York, "there's been a dramatic rise in thefts. There was so much attention focused on the astronomical prices [of art] that thieves took notice too." Art theft and the international trade in stolen and smuggled art is a \$2 billion to \$5 billion annual underworld business, linked to money laundering and not far behind drug dealing and arms trafficking in revenues, according to the FBI. The Register has some 80,000 art works on file, including about 300 Picassos.

LAPD's Art Theft Detail's files are smaller, but the team gets the job done. Hrycyk regularly sends out art theft bulletins to galleries, art dealers, auction houses, museums, art journalists and publications (including *Art Business News*), art associations and other law enforcement agencies. And now it has a web site (www.lapd

www.lapd.org/art_theft—which details case files, current crime alerts, suspects, bulletins and stolen art from A—John Altoon's 1965 untitled lithograph on woven paper—to Z—an 1850 oil painting by Zhefferelli. "We're finding more and more stolen art on the Web," said Hrycyk. "The Web is turning into not only a great device for disposing of stolen art, but a great tool for finding it."

For instance, last month, the Web site presented information on an 18th century William Ashford landscape painting, taken along with sterling silver, collectibles and expensive clothing in a home burglary in December, 1999 and on two Chiparus bronze statues taken in another residential burglary late last year. Among the art works the Art Theft Detail is also looking for are: Maynard Dixon's 1922 oil painting "Black Mesa," Marc Chagall's 1962 lithograph "The Wandering Musicians," two Andy Warhol portraits of Elvis and Mao; Rembrandt's 1654 etching "The Golf Player," two Henri Plisson works, "Lily Pond" and "Rose Cottage;" and a 1937 color pho-

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tograph by George Hurrell depicting Joan Crawford with a flower.

Originally, the art-theft unit was headed by Bill Martin, who became an art connoisseur, taking art history courses and, eventually, collecting oil paintings himself. After Martin retired, Hrycyk took over. This plainclothes officer who wears loose untucked shirts and sneakers to work describes himself as an “artistic Neanderthal” who, unlike his mentor Martin, doesn’t collect art. “I think this job has made me leery.” Hrycyk added, “I’m not an expert in art history, authentication or appraisals. My expertise is in the investigation of art crimes.” But Hrycyk does collect books on art fraud and art crimes, goes to art galleries and attends art museum directors’ meetings. “In Los Angeles, we attend Museum Roundtable meetings about once every other month,” Hrycyk observed. “Security personnel from museums in the region attend along with local law enforcement and the FBI, which makes sense because the police department and the FBI have joint jurisdiction on thefts of cultural property from museums and special collection libraries.”

Although art theft is a crime that often goes unsolved—art thieves are caught far less often than bank robbers, who are apprehended nine times out of ten—Hrycyk is very optimistic about the potential for success with each case.

“I often hear people say that stolen art tends to fall into a black hole out there, never to return. That has not been my experience,” said the detective. “Police depart-

ments typically have two main categories of stolen property reported to them, both of which become more difficult to recover as time goes by. One category involves property that eventually becomes obsolete. Who is still looking for a computer or a television or clothing stolen ten years ago? These items deteriorate in value to the point where they become worthless.

“The other category is property that may be distinctive and high value, but can be disguised. So, even if you encounter the item, you may not recognize it. For example, a distinctive diamond bracelet can be melted down for its gold and the stones removed to fashion an entirely new piece of jewelry. A luxury car can have parts replaced and the vehicle identification number altered. With a new paint job, fraudulent paperwork and new plates, you now have a car that is worth as much or more than the original,” Hrycyk observed.

“But in ten years, a stolen artwork will

still look pretty much as it did when it was stolen and will probably appreciate in value. It may have a new frame and need cleaning, but a David Hockney will still be a David Hockney. A thief isn't going to try to alter the artist's name and replace it with an alias. Art has intrinsic value for what it is. Therefore, art and other distinctive cultural property are recoverable if we put in place the tools to locate and identify these items when they eventually surface.”

So, whodunit in some of the cases Hrycyk and his team did solve? Believe it or not, the butler did it, in the case of the Zorn painting stolen from the oil tycoon's mansion. Hrycyk tracked down the custom photo lab which had made the finely-detailed replica of the painting, and obtained a description of the customer—which matched the tycoon's employee to a T.

The high-roller who purchased Leroy Neiman works with bogus credit card numbers was undone by a suspicious framing

warehouse manager, who called police when he watched the man strap his newly-framed art to the top of his car.

Jane Crawford was caught when she ran out of money and concocted a scheme to steal more artworks from UCLA. She took photographs of eight pieces she had targeted, and asked two part-time workers, who had helped her before, not knowing she had stolen the Dow painting—to help find buyers. Nearly caught, the scheme was aborted, but then Crawford accused the pair of stealing some of her money. Oops. They called the Art Theft Detail, and the jig was up: the university staffer was eventually convicted of four felony counts.

Even with such strange shenanigans so common to the art world, Hrycyk finds his unusual job appealing. “Art can't be camouflaged. It's difficult to track and difficult to sell. It's a very unusual kind of theft to investigate, and so intriguing to solve. **ABN**