

# There's an Art to Solving These Cases

■ With Los Angeles a nexus for galleries and collectors, the LAPD has the only full-time art cop in the nation. He says the thieves he chases 'should be doing jail time just like the thugs.'

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By MILES CORWIN  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Detective Don Hrycyk picks up a call from a Santa Monica Art Museum employee who is reporting a theft.

"What was taken?" he asks.

"Well," she says, pausing, "it was a rubber chicken."

"Was it created by an artist?"

"No," the woman says. "It was a standard rubber chicken."

"Oh," Hrycyk responds, a bit confused. "How was it stolen?"

"It was lying in the coffin."

"In the coffin?"

"Yes, the coffin."

It turned out the rubber chicken and the coffin were part of a contemporary art exhibit at the museum. And the employee had called Hrycyk because he is the Los Angeles Police Department's art cop, the only full-time art cop in the nation.

While other LAPD detectives are chasing murderers, car thieves and muggers, Hrycyk ponders one of western civilization's great philosophical questions: What is art?

When three Picassos were stolen from a San Pedro warehouse two months ago, it was obvious this was a case for Hrycyk. But when a piece of valuable furniture was stolen recently, Hrycyk had to turn down the case because he determined the piece was not an antique.

The rubber chicken caper was a judgment call for Hrycyk. Yes, Hrycyk determined, the rubber chicken was art—or at least a key component of art. After all, it was in a museum. But he decided not to investigate because the value of the chicken was so low.

"I asked the woman at the museum if the artist could just pick up another rubber chicken," said Hrycyk, who often is contacted by victims from throughout Southern California. "She was adamant that he couldn't. Apparently this rubber chicken had a texture and size and hue that was extremely important to the artist. But so many cases are coming in, I have to draw the line somewhere."

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# ART: With More Collectors and Galleries Comes a Rise in Theft

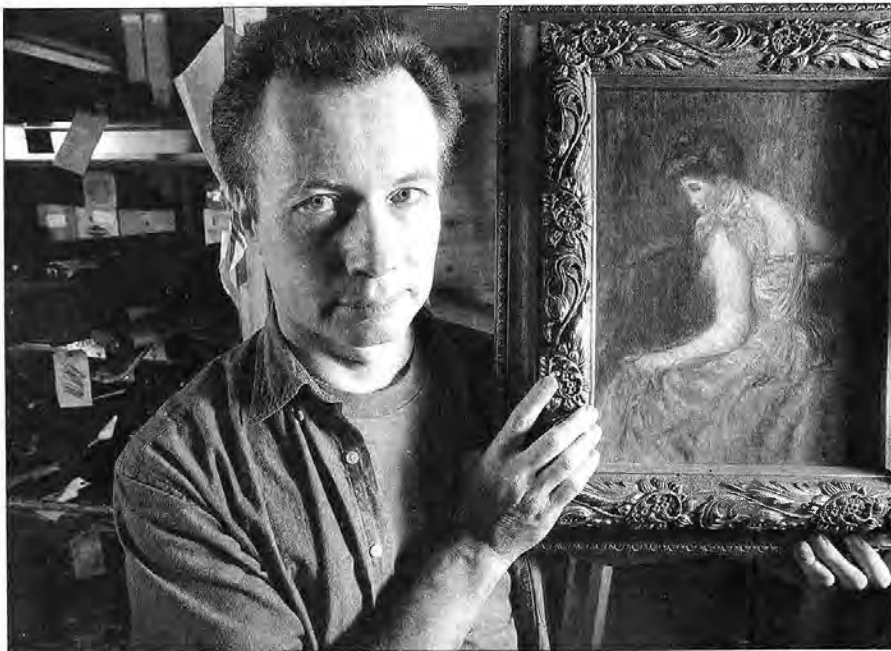
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Hrycyk has investigated the thefts of tapestries, Tibetan statues, antique porcelain pieces and paintings by Matisse and Degas. He has tracked cases involving a Renoir forgery and the theft of Henry Miller's manuscripts with his drawings in the margins.

Hrycyk (pronounced her-is-ik) also is responsible for investigating stolen collectibles. He was called in two years ago after the tap shoes worn by the Scarecrow in the "The Wizard of Oz" and Marilyn Monroe's original film contracts were stolen from a UCLA library. Hrycyk solved the case after a tipster informed him that the suspect was storing the items in his car.

With an abundance of private collectors and galleries, Los Angeles and New York are America's art theft capitals, said Constance Lowenthal, executive director of the New York-based International Foundation for Art Research. The New York Police Department has a detective who investigates art theft but also must track a host of other crimes. Hrycyk, however, "is unique in this country," Lowenthal said, "because he is the only police detective who specializes strictly in art theft."

The LAPD created the art theft beat because the city has become a nexus for art collectors, said Lt. Al Corella. The area has an expanding gallery business, numerous residents have expensive collections and art theft is on the rise.



BOB CHAMBERLIN / Los Angeles Times

LAPD Det. Don Hrycyk holds copy of Renoir's "La Loge," which buyers were led to believe was the original, with an asking price of \$350,000.

The international trade in stolen and smuggled art is now a multibillion-dollar business. It has been linked to money laundering and drug dealing because expensive paintings are an efficient way to transport wealth across borders. Lowenthal said.

"There's been a dramatic rise in thefts since the mid-1990s," said Anna Kisluk, director of the Art Loss Register's New York office, which compiles one of the world's largest databases of stolen art. "That's when prices in the art market really began to take off. There was so much attention focused on the astronomical prices that thieves took notice too."

"For example, a few thieves in Long Island used to rip off video stores, but they became mesmerized by the amount of money people were paying for art. These guys decided it was more lucrative selling stolen art than hot videos. They ended up stealing a number of works from museums in the Northeast."

The register has about 80,000 works on file, with more than 10,000 stolen in the last year alone. Included are about 300 Picassos, more than 200 Marc Chagalls, 240 Joan Mirós and about 75 Renoirs.

Hrycyk, who works about 45 cases a year, solves more than a quarter of them—a higher percentage than LAPD detectives who investigate residential and commercial burglaries. He recovers about \$5 million a year in stolen art and collectibles, but not all of the items recovered are as expensive as a Picasso or as esoteric as the Scarecrow's tap shoes.

"People hear about all the masterpieces that are stolen, but a lot of very common or everyday-type art is stolen too," Kisluk said. "About half of what we have listed as stolen would fall into the category of decorative arts, like antique silver and furniture."

On a recent afternoon, Hrycyk drives through Beverly Hills, north of Sunset Boulevard, past mansions and gated estates, private tennis courts and Rolls-Royces idling in driveways. Cruising through Trousdale Estates, he points out the car window and says, "I don't care if art thieves are living in houses like these. If they're steal-

ing, they should be doing jail time just like the thugs."

Hrycyk arrives at a stately home, decorated with antiques, oil paintings and Oriental art. A few months earlier, someone broke in and stole 68 *netsuke*, miniature Japanese wood and ivory carvings, some more than 300 years old. They are worth up to \$5,000 apiece.

An elderly couple invite Hrycyk into the living room, which is decorated in pink and beige, filled with freshly cut roses and looks out onto a lush garden. This is an unusual case because only a single painting and about a third of the *netsuke* collection were stolen. The rest of the collection and jewelry, silver and other paintings were untouched. Hrycyk is following up on his original conversation with the couple, right after the theft.

He tells them that he sent a flier, listing the stolen items, to 250 art dealers, galleries, auction houses, museums and law enforcement agencies across the country. But he has not received any leads yet.

"I also talked to your gardener," Hrycyk says.

"I fired him," the man says. "He doesn't have a record," Hrycyk says.

"Well," the man adds, "he didn't know the difference between a flower and a weed."

The woman tells Hrycyk that she believes a relative stole the *netsuke* and the painting. But Hrycyk says he has been unable, so far, to tie him to the theft.

"It's so frustrating to me because I know who did it," the woman says. "I think he's just stashing it away until I die."

Hrycyk asks the couple who else knew about the collection, who showed an interest in it and who might have wanted to steal it. He gives the couple the phone number and address of a national *netsuke* association and tells them that if their collection turns up for sale, the association will know about it.

"He didn't just take art," the woman says when Hrycyk gets up to leave. "He took a part of my life, a part of my history. I'm usually such a buoyant person. But this has

put me in a depressed state. This is heartbreak house now."

As Hrycyk drives off, he says he is not optimistic about solving the case.

"There's no physical evidence and no apparent logic to what was stolen and what wasn't," he says. "My fear is that someone stole these pieces for personal reasons and will just keep them in their home. If they never end up on the marketplace, all the fliers and all the contact with galleries and auction houses will be useless."

Hrycyk began tracking art thieves in 1987, after spending about three years as a homicide detective in South-Central Los Angeles, investigating as many as 20 slayings a year. He learned about art crime from Bill Martin, the detective who founded the LAPD's art theft unit in 1980. Martin, who retired two years ago, developed a professional and personal passion for art. He took art history and art appreciation courses at UCLA and collected original oil paintings.

For Hrycyk, 46, a 22-year LAPD veteran, art is a business, not a passion. He does not collect art or visit museums and galleries on his weekends. But he does spend an extensive amount of time talking to gallery owners, attending museum directors' meetings and collecting and studying books on art fraud and art theft.

He is soft-spoken, meticulous, writes extremely detailed crime reports and collates and cross-files all his cases on a personal computer. Hrycyk, who is based at the LAPD's Burglary-Auto Theft Division at Parker Center downtown, does not look like he spends days wandering about galleries and museums. He often wears jeans, sneakers and a Hawaiian shirt loose enough to conceal his 9-millimeter Beretta.

"Having someone like Don, who specializes in art theft, is a great help to us," said Kisluk of the Art Loss Register. "When I've dealt with him on cases, I've found him to be very knowledgeable about art, which is unusual with law enforcement people."

"An FBI agent called me once and said, 'I got a painting here by some guy named Ruben.' It turned out to be a Peter Paul Rubens masterpiece."

When Hrycyk began working the art detail, one of his first cases was the theft of an oil painting at an oil tycoon's Bel-Air estate—where there was a full staff of maids, a cook and a butler. The work, appraised at more than \$500,000, was painted by Swedish artist Anders Zorn. One day the tycoon's wife wandered by the picture and thought it looked odd. She ran her hand along the surface.

It was just a photograph that someone had slipped into the frame after stealing the painting.

The photograph was so finely detailed that Hrycyk and Martin figured it had to have come from a custom lab. After calling dozens of labs in Los Angeles, they finally found an employee who remembered making a replica of the painting. The employee recalled this particular photograph because the customer requested that it be blown up to an exact size. The dimensions, Hrycyk discovered, were the size of the painting.

The detectives obtained a de-

scription of the customer and quickly determined who stole the painting.

Of course, Hrycyk says, chuckling, the butler did it.

After working a year and a half with Martin, Hrycyk was transferred out of the art detail and spent the next few years working in an administrative detective unit and in bunco-forgery. About 2½ years ago, when Martin retired, Hrycyk applied for his job.

"I guess I was bitten by the bug," says Hrycyk, who now works without a partner. "The cases were so fascinating that I just wanted to get back to it as soon as I could."

After taking over the art theft unit, he began tracking a case involving a man suspected of swindling art galleries in Beverly Hills, Palms Springs and Las Vegas. The man would pull up to the galleries in a Mercedes, pick out a few expensive pieces and then, when it was time to pay, pat his back pocket, shrug and explain that he had forgotten his wallet.

"But he would quickly offer to call his wife at home and get his credit card number," Hrycyk said. "The two of them used to get hold of other peoples' credit card numbers, and she would read one of the

numbers over the phone to him. He was very well-dressed and slick-tongued and some of these galleries were used to dealing with absent-minded high-rollers. So they got taken in."

Employing this scam, the man purchased a few Leroy Neimans, valued at \$26,000, from a Las Vegas gallery. But one piece still had to be framed, and when it was ready, the man picked it up at a Los Angeles warehouse.

Although he might have been a slick operator at the gallery, he was a rube at the warehouse. He strapped the painting to the top of his car, and the warehouse supervisor surmised this was no art collector. He called the police and Hrycyk arrested the man at his house in Long Beach, which had a big neon sign on the roof, advertising the family palm reading business.

**I**n October, Hrycyk arrested three men involved in the theft of about \$2 million worth of statues, china, porcelain and paintings, including works by Picasso, Degas and Matisse. A wealthy San Pedro couple were moving and stored their collection in a warehouse that they were attempting to sell.

Two of the thieves, who knew there were antique cars in the warehouse but did not know about the expensive art, contacted the real estate agent. They feigned interest in buying the warehouse and asked for a tour. While the agent showed them around, one suspect distracted her and the other changed the warehouse lock. The men later slipped in, discovered all the valuables and, over several days, cleaned the place out.

Hrycyk picked up a lucky break on the case when an employee at a business near the warehouse told police that he had spotted several acquaintances with the real estate agent. One was an auto mechanic and the other was unemployed. Neither had the resources to purchase an 8,000-square-foot warehouse. Hrycyk obtained a search warrant and recovered some of the property from the garages, homes and storage lockers of the men. One man was sentenced to five years in prison, another to three years and the third is awaiting sentencing.

Although some LAPD detectives burn out after a few years in a unit and seek a transfer, Hrycyk still is fascinated by his job. The more he learns about art theft, he says, the more intriguing he finds the work.

"You can steal something like a car, change the color and the appearance and the car will not diminish in value," Hrycyk says. "Art is different. It can't be camouflaged. So it's difficult to sell and difficult to steal. It's a very unusual kind of theft to investigate. That's what makes it so interesting to track and so intriguing to solve."