

For LAPD, an artistic niche

Detective recovers \$52m in stolen art work since '93

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LOS ANGELES — After more than three years as a homicide detective in the city's South Central neighborhood, Detective Donald Hrycyk had grown weary of all the senseless killings: the man killed for wearing the wrong color shoelaces, the robber who tried to wing the ice cream vendor, but shot him in the heart. So in 1986, Hrycyk sought a transfer.

The lone opening for an investigator in the Los Angeles Police Department was on the art-theft detail, the only police unit in the country devoted solely to investigating crimes involving works of art or artifacts. Nearly two decades later, this self-described "artistic Neanderthal" is the only detective in the nation assigned exclusively to art crimes, an expert sought by other agencies trying to recover stolen paintings, sculptures, or collectibles.

"It's part of our culture and our history," Hrycyk said, explaining what has kept him on the art beat all these years. "In a world of violence and instability, these objects represent our better nature and are really things worth finding. If we lose them, we lose part of our culture."

Earlier this month, Hrycyk returned a stolen Stradivarius cello, valued at \$3.5 million, to the Los Angeles Philharmonic. The instrument had been plucked from in front of the home of the orchestra's principal cellist on April 25 by a passing bicyclist after the cellist absently left one of only 60 such instruments crafted by Italian master Antonio Stradivari on his front porch overnight. The thief remains at large, but the publicity the police helped orchestrate around the case led to its return after it was found discarded by a trash bin.

Including the cello, the LAPD art-theft detail has recovered more than \$52 million worth of valuables since 1993. Now the lone member of what had been a two-detective unit, Hrycyk handles not only theft, but also burglary, insurance fraud, investment scams, and any other crimes involving fine art, collectibles, or antiques.

Investigators of homicides, sex crimes, robberies, and other offenses have associations and schools to help hone their skills and set up meetings to trade information and tactics. But not even the FBI has agents working on art theft exclusively. Detectives from other agencies often contact Hrycyk asking for advice, such as a recent call from police in Canada about three oil paintings stolen from the University of Toronto in February.

"He provides a very unique resource that no other precinct or police department can provide," said Amanda Hannon, art historian at the New York office of the Art Loss Register, a company that maintains the world's largest database on stolen art and collectibles. "The LAPD is really the only one in the country that has an art-theft detail. Most of the other police departments don't have the resources or funding."

"People call about where to start, and what to do, and the major resources available," said Hrycyk, whose contact list includes major auction houses, galleries, art



APP FILE PHOTO

Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra cello player Peter Stumpf with the Stradivarius cello that was stolen in April and recovered some three weeks later.

and antique dealers, and in the case of the stolen cello, musicians around the country who thought they had spotted the instrument.

In addition to stolen paintings ranging from works by artists from Rembrandt to Red Skelton, he's also tracking the whereabouts of a first edition of James Joyce's "Ulysses," a collection of 17 photos of Marilyn Monroe, a 200-pound Buddha statue taken from a Korean temple, and a pair of pre-Columbian terra cotta sculptures from Mexico. He's also on the lookout for missing Peanuts animation cels, a 40-million-year-old alligator skull fossil, props from the movie "Predator II," and a copy of Action Comics No. 1, the 1938 comic book featuring the first appearance of Superman.

"There's a lot of weird things that are stolen," Hrycyk said. "Each one is like a specialty in itself."

Rather than criminal masterminds, the majority of thieves and swindlers are what he calls "informed opportunists."

"Most of the thefts are low-tech shoplifting or a brick heaved through a window, or it's an employee," he said.

Like the day laborer hired to move boxes at the home of actress Della Reese, who later broke in and took some of the items he had earlier spied. Or the chauffeur who stole a 1937 Picasso drawing from his boss, Hollywood producer Peter Guber, and then aroused suspicion at Christie's auction house, where he tried to sell it, saying the work was "really ugly."

Some perpetrators had never been in trouble before, but were seduced by the prospect of a big payoff and the belief they wouldn't get caught, such as the UCLA administrator who didn't think anyone would miss a masterpiece by Arthur Wesley Dow in her office, replacing it with a forgery and selling the original for \$317,000.

Hrycyk's worst-case scenario is the occasional thief who steals out of a desire for the object itself. But thieves rarely hold onto items indefinitely; more often, he said, they're seeking a quick score. "If you

wait long enough, major pieces will show up," Hrycyk said.

Though the biggest art heist in American history — the 1990 theft of a dozen works of art, including three Rembrandts, five works by Degas, and a Vermeer, from Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum — remains unsolved after 14 years, that's only half as long as it took to recover the items in one LAPD case. Nineteenth-century Native American blankets and other artifacts stolen from the Los Angeles Natural History Museum in 1973 turned up at an exhibition in St. Louis 28 years later.

Even though recovery might take a while, the uniqueness and intrinsic value of art items increase the chances they'll resurface someday, Hrycyk said. Though the average victim would rather buy a new television than recover one stolen 15 years ago, the attachment is a little stronger for a 320-year-old stringed instrument. A stolen car can be altered beyond recognition and maintain its value, but the Stradivarius thief, even if he knew what he had, probably wouldn't have taken it to a cello chop shop and sold it for parts.

In fact, the instrument may have been in more danger from the woman who recovered it from the trash. She was unaware of the value of her scavenged treasure and asked her boyfriend, a cabinet maker, to turn the spruce and maple masterpiece into a CD case. He didn't get to the task before she figured out what she had, though, and if her story checks out, Hrycyk said, she could be eligible for the \$50,000 reward offered by an anonymous donor.

Hrycyk didn't get into his job because of a lifelong passion for post-Impressionists. He simply wanted a break after 3½ years investigating homicides in South Central Los Angeles.

"It wears on you after a while," he said. "It was a big change. One day I was working murders; the next day I was working art theft."

He left the beat in the early 1990s, then returned in 1993 because the cases were so interesting. "You begin to delve into people's attachments to inanimate objects. You see what things mean to people."

One case involved a woman who lost \$100,000 in Japanese netsuke carvings plus a single painting worth far less. But she was most concerned about the latter, a gift from her late husband 30 years earlier.

"Things such as art or collectibles or antiques really bring back a time and place long since gone that they strongly attach to. It's like losing a person," Hrycyk said.

The LAPD created the art-theft detail in 1983 to focus new strategies on cases of stolen artwork with high values yet few clues, which previously had been lumped in with more conventional thefts.

New York police once had their own art investigator, Robert Volpe, the subject of the book "Art Cop." But nowadays, even the FBI agent pursuing the Gardner Museum theft has other cases in his workload, as well, said Gall Marcinkiewicz, spokeswoman at the FBI's Boston field office.

Hrycyk doesn't have to school himself on Manet vs. Monet when a theft report lands on his desk. And though his job has turned him into something of an expert, he's no aficionado. "Off-duty I don't go to museums," he said. "I collect art books," but they're reference materials for his job.