



A & A Update

The Art Squad

LOS ANGELES -- If you believe Hollywood, the average art thief is a gadget-loving ninja who limbo dances through laser beams to pull off silent heists of Rembrandts and Renoirs. But when Detective Don Hrycyk solves an art crime, the guilty party usually is a trusted friend of the victim, not Sean Connery in a cat suit. "The problem isn't smart criminals," Hrycyk says. "The problem is careless victims who leave themselves vulnerable to opportunists. We have investigated cases involving state-of-the-art alarm systems that were never turned on, or treasures placed in impregnable safes with the combination left in an unlocked drawer nearby."

Hrycyk knows the predatory nature of art thieves well: He's a nine-year veteran of the Los Angeles Police Department's Art Theft Detail, the only law enforcement unit in the country dedicated to fighting art crimes full-time. By publicizing thefts and by staying in constant contact with local galleries, museums, auction houses and collectors, the two-detective detail has recovered nearly \$50 million in stolen artworks since 1993. It tackles everything from phony estate sales stocked with fake antiques to consignment fraud, home burglaries, art-related insurance scams and--occasionally--dramatic heists fit for Hollywood.

The LAPD formed the detail in 1983 in response to a rash of unsolved high-value art thefts. It was a smart decision, says David Shillingford of the [Art Loss Register](#), a London-based stolen-art archive that has aided in recoveries totaling more than \$100 million since 1991. "What has been done in Los Angeles is fantastic," Shillingford says. "In an ideal world, other metropolitan areas would take the same approach." But law enforcement agencies don't operate in an ideal world. Most lack the resources and the community support to make stopping art crimes, which are perceived as non-violent, a high priority. "That's why what they're doing in Los Angeles is so unique," Shillingford says, "and why, sadly, it's likely to remain fairly unique."

Advantage gained

Detectives investigating homicides or armed robberies typically have at least a few clues to work with--some shell casings, a muddy footprint, a bloody murder weapon--but art crimes are different. "Most of the time you're kind of at a roadblock, with no clues, witnesses or informants," Hrycyk says. "So what we've done is to turn our attention away from the suspect to focus on the property. With art, you have distinctive, highly recognizable properties floating around out there. A lot of what we do involves finding the property and then working the paper trail backward to find the suspect."

In the past few months, Hrycyk and his partner, Detective Ivett Garav.

recovered the bulk of a 14-item collection of African and pre-Columbian art stolen in a residential burglary more than 25 years ago. The recovered pieces are worth \$218,000. That investigation, which is still underway, was sparked in May after one of the pieces suddenly surfaced at Sotheby's New York. "In this case," Hrycyk says, "the people who had possession of the stolen art had owned it for almost the entire 25-year period. So, actually, we're probably just one owner away from the thief."

The case shows how important it is for collectors and dealers to recognize stolen art when they see it. That's why the Art Theft Detail sends out e-mail alerts describing stolen art and suspected art thieves to its contacts in the Los Angeles art community. The detectives also maintain a Web page at www.lapdonline.org/art_theft on which they post images of stolen works by Rembrandt, Chagall and Caravaggio alongside descriptions of top suspects and known crooks. The site has led to some important recoveries. Picasso's 1937 drawing "Faune," for example, was recovered in 2001 after a man nonchalantly tried to sell his \$100,000 "ugly painting" to Christie's in Beverly Hills. An alert appraiser checked the Web site, saw the stolen work and called the police. The thief turned out to be a chauffeur who had broken into the house of his movie-producer boss to swipe the Picasso, a Tiffany lamp and other pieces worth more than \$400,000.

Wealthy movie producers aren't the only victims of art crimes. Take Colombian artist Luis Magin. In 1995, about 12 years after he moved to the United States to pursue his art career, Magin loaded 25 of his best paintings into a van after an exhibition. He later returned to a ransacked and empty vehicle. In a flash, the artist had lost three decades of work. He fell into a depression, stopped painting and developed health problems.

"There was another story in 1998 involving the sculptor Kewal Soni," Hrycyk recalls. "Some thug broke into his studio and dragged off a \$10,000 sculpture Soni had worked on for a year. He took it to a metal recycling place and sold it for scrap for \$9.10." A cancer patient who had been victimized by art thieves several times, Soni also fell into a depression and stopped making art. He believed he didn't have enough time left to replace any of the sculptures, Hrycyk says. "This has happened several times, where everything an artist has created, the works that are going to be their future, are just gone."

For Hrycyk and Garay, reuniting artists and collectors with their art is the most rewarding part of their jobs. Magin, for example, brightened up after the detail recovered a few of his paintings. Soni, whose cancer treatments proved effective, received more good news when the detail arrested the thief, who was convicted in 1999.

-- Joel Groover