

THE ART COP

The LAPD's Don Hrycyk on top forgers, invisible DNA markers and the Mona Lisa's horrible smile

How big of an industry is art crime?

It's the third biggest illegal industry in the world, right behind drugs and illegal arms sales. There's \$1 to \$2 billion worth of art stolen each year.

What does an art cop do?

I investigate fine-art crimes—everything from art that's stolen out of museums to private antique robberies to objects of historical significance that have been swiped. I've been on cases that involved Stradivarius violins, Japanese swords, movie props and animation art.

Are a lot of art cops just frustrated artists?

In my case, I was working homicide in the south end of LA and an opening came up in art burglary downtown. I went from working dead bodies one day to working art the next. We're at a disadvantage in this country, though, because there are no national art theft squads like there are in Europe or South America.

Do you think about starting an art collection of your own?

No. There's so much fake art around that I'm not confident of getting the genuine article, but the job has definitely made me a lot more knowledgeable—each case brings me in contact with artists, appraisers and historians. Working with these people is an education in itself.

Is it true that the reason for Mona Lisa's silly grin is because she did the nasty before posing?

Well, the speculation on the Mona Lisa ranges from the theory that she had a medical condition causing compulsive teeth grinding to another that she is actually an artist in drag. I think that during the long hours of posing, Ms. Gioconda amused herself by drifting into private fantasies.

What's the toughest case you've worked on?

There have been lots of tough cases, but the toughest are the ones still unsolved. Back in the early '80s there were a slew of cases involving high-value art—\$500 million on average—with no clues, no prints, no tool marks, no informants, no witnesses. Nothing. Those are the typical means we use to solve crimes. Because of that, we had to rethink our strategy. Now we focus on finding the missing property and working backwards to find the suspect.

When you profile art thieves, do you find they steal because they can't paint a lick?

That's the thing, when you're trying to profile an art thief, there's no guideline. We've handled street thugs who steal sculptures worth more than \$10,000 and sell it to a metal recycler for \$9.34. Art crime is quite challenging; it covers a huge scope of activities. There are countries that have literally been victims of cultural terrorism because of art theft. In Italy the Mafia tried to burn the

Shroud of Turin for revenge and in Ireland the IRA stole art to show the impotence of the authorities and to raise money for their cause. In France there have been lots of what we call "artnappings," where thieves steal work just to sell it back to museums and insurance companies.

Is it true that art thieves are hired by wealthy private collectors to conduct art "shopping trips" that fall on the other side of the law?

That's an old debate. But actually there aren't many wealthy people willing to trust their future to a street thug who would drop a dime on their "employers" the minute they got into trouble. It's hard to say where a lot of it is going. I don't think the well known art, the stuff that's worth millions, is being stolen much anymore. Art thieves have difficulty with those items. The art world is very small, and if one of these pieces suddenly

shows up on the market and it's worth millions, then people want to know where it came from. You can see that with the Isabella Gardner Museum theft in Boston 10 years ago. There were literally millions of dollars in work stolen and it's still missing. I don't think they'll ever find a real buyer. That has to be the biggest unsolved mystery in the art world. There have been clues, but nothing has panned out. When that stuff surfaces it will be one hell of a find.

Do good art thieves have to know their way around a trapeze?

No. I think for art crimes there are two categories: straight art thieves and con men. The con men are pretty slick customers. They not only use stealth, but also are into other types of sophisticated crimes, including fakes, forgeries and phony art investment scams that usually defraud the elderly.

Do the elaborate theft prevention devices used in the *The Thomas Crown Affair* really exist?

Sure, there are lasers and counter-weights and such, but only for very specialized cases. These days a lot of attention and money is paid to vandalism. Any person can walk into a museum with a hammer or acid and in a matter of seconds do immeasurable damage and cost the establishment thousands. Believe it or not, it happens all the time. Recently, there was a guy in Italy who thought he was Christ going around taking a hammer to Pietas. He ruined dozens and dozens of pieces of art.

How accurate was the Sean Connery movie, *Entrapment*, in depicting art thieves?

Not at all accurate as far as how most art theft occurs. Clever high-tech wall-crawlers in ninja suits are not our primary adversaries. The real problems are foolish victims who leave themselves vulnerable to petty criminals, involving state-of-the-art alarm systems that were never turned on

or priceless treasures placed in safes with the combination left in an unlocked drawer nearby.

What are some of the coolest gadgets?

One new process that has emerged is placing the artist's invisible DNA markers on the artwork so that it can be scanned later with a handheld device to determine its authenticity. Other devices include implanting radioactive isotopes or encoding the art with micro-crystals.

Who's the sneakiest art thief of all time?

Depends upon what area you're looking at. As far as stealing rare books, you can't find a better thief than Steven Blumberg. When he was finally taken down he had broken into the best collections in the country—both private and public ones—and had stocked his entire home with stolen books. He was a real cat burglar, one of the all-time greats. Then there's Van Meegeren—he fooled everybody. He began making fake Vermeers to get back at the experts who frowned upon his "real" artwork. He made fakes and had them authenticated by these same experts. During World War II he sold fakes to the Nazis and afterwards was charged with collaborating with the enemy. He told the truth and nobody believed him, so they put him in a studio and had him create another Vermeer from scratch.

How common is it for senile old ladies to walk out of museums during working hours with art?

Not very—it's not the old ladies I'm concerned with, it's the thugs who wear Armani and carry guns. They slice priceless paintings out of the frame, plunder archaeological sites and cut pages out of rare books.

FHM's favorite work is "Dogs Playing Poker."

Do you know if anyone has ever tried to steal it?

I hope not. It has been entertaining people for a long time. It doesn't score high marks with art critics, but I'm sure it gets the popular vote of most Americans.

What's the oddest place you've found stolen art?

There was this guy living in an old house who had turned the garage into an aviary for rare birds and was raising pot-bellied pigs in the living room. It smelled so bad we could barely walk in the door. He had \$1 million worth of stolen Tibetan artifacts in a dusty bookcase beside the front door, like he had just forgotten about them or something. There was also this billionaire oil tycoon who discovered his \$450,000 painting was suddenly a photograph. The woman of the house walked by it for weeks before noticing that somebody had photographed the painting, blown it up to the exact size to fit the frame and then walked off with the original.

Did you catch him?

Yeah, it turned out to be the butler.

Do you always catch your man?

More often than you might think.

Interview by Steven Kotler

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A No. There's so much fake art, I'm not confident of getting the genuine article.

