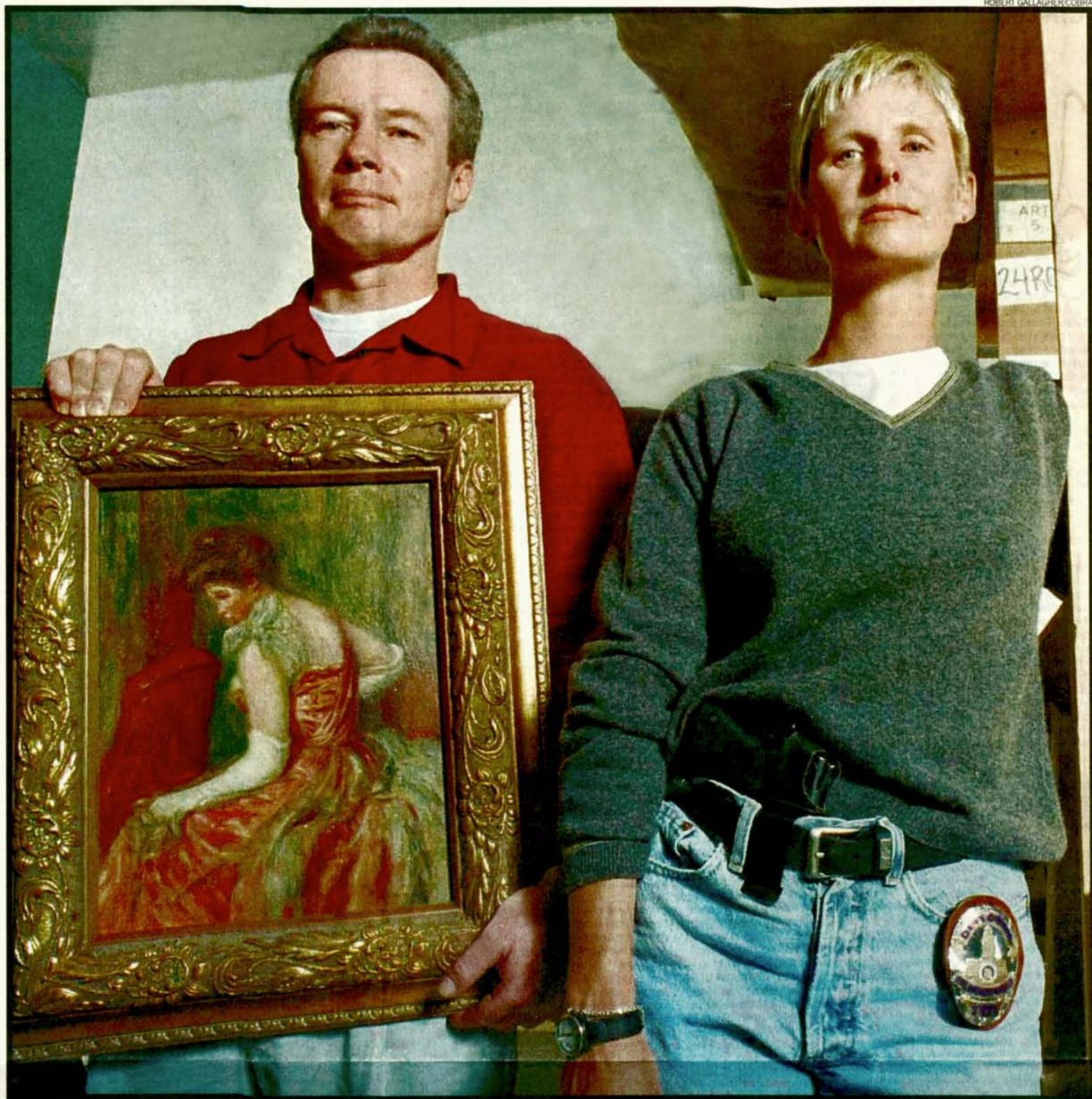


How we traced \$31m of stolen art

America's only full-time art police are on the trail of stolen and fake masterpieces. **Grace Bradberry** reports



Detectives Don Hrycyk and Kara Clifford with a fake Renoir. Between 1993 and 1997 the art crime squad, led by Hrycyk, tracked down more than £31 million of stolen art

In most cities, to see great art you go to a gallery. In Los Angeles it's different. Of course, there's the Getty Centre and the Los Angeles Museum of Modern Art but, if you want to see the really good stuff, there are better places to go — inside people's homes, for example, or the opulent offices of Beverly Hills.

The offices of CAA, one of the largest talent agencies, were designed by an architect who had completed a project at the Louvre. Once inside the soaring atrium, it is impossible not to stare at the large Roy Lichtenstein.

Michael Ovitz, who founded the Artists Management Group, has imported a similar aesthetic into his Brentwood home near San Francisco, where he has perched a temple-like gallery on top of the house. "I'd almost board up the windows to get more wall space for the art." Mr Ovitz is

The butler was arrested but the painting never returned

reported to have said.

And that's just the beginning of the art tour. Dennis Hopper's enormous corrugated-iron Los Angeles home is stuffed with contemporary art; music and film mogul David Geffen has one of the greatest collections of Abstract Expressionist and Pop art in Los Angeles; Steven Spielberg has several Norman Rockwells.

It is also possible to view art in a battered high-rise building half an hour down town from the celebrity homes and offices of the Westside. A fake Renoir and other pictures obscured by brown paper are stored on a shelf among an arsenal of machineguns and machetes.

This stash is "curated" by Detective Don Hrycyk, 48, and Detective Kara Clifford, both of whom have "done the tour" of the city's art world and met many key players. Together Det Hrycyk and Det Clifford constitute the LAPD's art crime squad, an offshoot of the burglary and car-theft department, situated in the Parker Center, LA's Scotland Yard. They have no office but Det Hrycyk and Det Clifford enjoy a special status as America's only full-time "art cops".

"Let's go to a nice, cosy interview room," says Det Hrycyk. With his purple shirt untucked, you can barely tell that he's carrying a gun. He began tracking art thieves in 1987 after spending three years as a homicide detective in South-Central investigating as many as 20 murders a year. Det Clifford, who also wears her shirt loose over her gun, only recently transferred to work with Hrycyk. Slightly built, she nevertheless takes an active part in raids.

Between 1993 and 1997 the art crime squad, led by Det Hrycyk, recovered more than \$31 million worth of stolen art. During the same period the 90-odd burglary detectives in the LAPD recovered about \$20.5 million in stolen goods.

But the sophisticated art burglary is not, on the whole, what Det Hrycyk and Det Clifford are up against. Los Angeles' galleries, mostly recently built, are too well defended. Instead, the city is a playground for confidence tricksters and opportunists.

In one case, a family butler nearing retirement decided to supplement his pension. He took a painting worth

\$500,000 from the Bel Air home where he worked, replacing it with a photograph the same size. This being the home of William Keck, the oil tycoon, a painting worth only half a million was easily overlooked. "The fence around the property alone cost \$1 million," remarks Det Hrycyk.

One day Mrs Keck, the tycoon's wife, wandered past the painting, noticed something odd and ran her fingers across it. The butler was arrested but the painting never returned. It was by the Swedish artist, Anders Zorn, and the butler, himself Swedish, had returned it to the land of his birth. When the owners asked for their picture back, the Swedish Government refused.

"He looked like a kindly old gentleman," says Det Hrycyk. "He thought that it meant a lot to him, and not a lot to them."

In other cases it's not always clear whether a crime has been committed at all. Det Hrycyk and Det Clifford are dealing with the case of an art burglary that turned out to have been arranged by the artist himself, who was in England while it was going on.

Simon Bull, a respected and commercially successful British artist whose vibrant flower paintings sell for up to \$35,000, decided he was being ripped off by his LA dealer. Frustrated that he had not been paid for art that had been sold, he persuaded the dealer's secretary to enter the office in the evening and take \$1 million worth of his paintings home. The dealer reported the loss as a burglary.

Speaking from his home in the Lake District, Bull seems unaware of the havoc he has caused, but he's indignant that he has to prove the art is his in the first place. "If I'd bought the pictures wholesale that would be easy. But because I made it myself I've no way of showing that it's mine," he says. For the moment the case remains on the books as a burglary, although Bull's LA attorney is working on that.

Det Hrycyk's most elusive criminal may also be British. In the late 1980s "Richard Eszterhazy" posed as a Hungarian art dealer. He had a plausible manner and spoke with a smooth British accent. At his Hollywood auction gallery he accepted hundreds of art works and antiques on a consignment basis — in other words without paying. Then, in March 1989, he unexpectedly left the country.

The art was recovered before it was shipped abroad but Mr Eszterhazy, who claimed to be member of the Hungarian Royal Family, has still not turned up. Det Hrycyk shows me an address in Ealing, West London, where they believe the suspect's mother lived. She is now dead. The suspect's real name may or may not be Zoltan Letay. "Not very British, is it?" says Det Hrycyk.

But he has also cracked some seemingly intractable cases. One triumph was solving the mysterious burglary at the Brentwood home of the LA ophthalmologist Dr Steven Cooperman. In July 1992 paintings by Monet and Picasso were stolen. There were no signs of forced entry, and nothing but the paintings had gone. The insurance company refused to pay. Dr Cooperman sued and was awarded \$17.5 million. Dr Cooperman then left California, and for three years there was no progress.

"Then we got a call from a woman. She had sketchy information based on the fact that she was married to a possible suspect. We found someone who knew something, and our first informant filled in the blanks. We realised it was an insurance scam, and that one of the paintings was somewhere in Cleveland, Ohio." The FBI recovered it from a

storage locker. Bizarrely, Dr Cooperman had persuaded two Los Angeles attorneys to carry out the fake robbery. "They should have made it look more like a burglary," says Det Hrycyk. "Dr Cooperman could never explain how they had been able to bypass the alarm."

Now 56, Dr Cooperman was convicted in July of 18 charges, including conspiracy and money laundering. He has yet to be sentenced.

But the case that has really gripped LA this summer is that of Jane Crawford, a 50-year-old administrator at UCLA. Ms Crawford, who had worked at the university

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for 23 years and lived quietly with her elderly father, was found guilty last month of stealing and selling a landscape that had been hanging in her office on campus.

In 1928 the widow of the Arts and Crafts artist, Arthur Wesley Dow, had donated his *Frost Flowers, Ipswich 1889* to an association affiliated to UCLA. Over the years it became covered in grime and was shuffled from office to office. Disliking the painting, the registrar passed it on to a more junior colleague, who passed it on to Ms Crawford. The quiet divorcee, who had never had a stain against her character, saw an opportunity.

"Suddenly the painting dis-

appeared from her office," says Det Hrycyk. "When people asked, she said it was being restored and cleaned. What people didn't know was that she'd taken it home. She had then told an artist acquaintance that it belonged to her invalid father, and did he know someone who could sell it. She also asked him to make an exact copy."

The painting was sold through a New York dealer for \$200,000, and Ms Crawford bought a new house. The money ran out, however, and Ms Crawford decided to repeat the stunt, identifying eight works that hung around the campus. One was a Lichtenstein; another by Edgar Ewing. She took Polaroids, ready to have copies made, and began asking around for buyers. The Ewing, however, had been created specifically for the late Irving Stone, a famous art biographer and a fixture of Los Angeles high society.

A dealer contacted his widow, Jean Stone, tipping her off that the picture she had donated to UCLA was up for sale. "She created hell," says Det Hrycyk. The Ewing turned out to be hanging in Ms Crawford's office. But it emerged that the Wesley Dow was not.

Det Hrycyk knew a crime had been committed. "But UCLA had no knowledge of the painting," he says. "We waited more than two months for them to dig up information."

Ms Crawford was not taken to one of Det Hrycyk's "cosy" interview rooms. Instead, she was visited in her office. "She had two stories. The first was that a colleague had given her the painting as a gift. But she also explained how the painting was not cared for, how she had given it status that was invisible to the university. She thought that the paper trail would not show — but it did."