

LAPD theft unit a real work of art

By Troy Anderson

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Amid the guns, stolen stereos and bags of drugs that fill the LAPD evidence room is what appears to be a famous Renoir painting of a woman in a red dress.

It is not. Rather, it is a meticulous fake seized from a Los Angeles art dealer who tried to sell it for \$350,000 to a Northridge collector.

"In a city the size of Los Angeles, there are 3.5 million suckers they can sell fraudulent art to," said Detective Don Hrycyk, one of two investigators in the Los Angeles Police Department's Art Theft Unit.

With Los Angeles' growing affluence and love affair with art, comes a regular rogue's gallery of crime.

In recognition of Los Angeles' emerging art culture and the criminals profiting from it, the Los Angeles Police Department in the mid-1980s formed what would become the nation's only dedicated art-theft unit.



Gus Ruelas/Daily News

LAPD Art Theft Unit Detectives Kara Clifford, left, and Don Hrycyk show some recovered booty, a "Peanuts" cel and a bogus Renoir.

Detectives draw on wives to nab art thieves

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It has recovered more than \$31 million in art in the past five years — more than all other burglary detectives recovered city-wide in the same time period. About 400 art theft crimes were reported in 1997.

Los Angeles has not been hit with art heists like Europe, where armed thieves take millions in art from old chateaux, but the private homes and estates of the wealthy are frequent targets.

And the market for fakes is enormous, police say.

Nose for art

Whether the unit is investigating thefts of art from little-known artists or tracking down stolen Monet and Picasso paintings, Hrycyk and his partner, Kara Clifford, need a mix of a bloodhound's tracking ability, an art connoisseur's expertise and a swindler's mind to catch art thieves.

The work of an art detective involves knowing who can authenticate artwork, expertise in computer enhancement technology, plenty of patience and the instincts to piece together subtle clues in the art theft puzzle.

The unit was headed by now-retired Detective Bill Martin, a big, burly man known to toss off references to obscure artists with the greatest of ease.

In contrast, Hrycyk describes himself as an "artistic Neanderthal" who learned his trade from Martin when he retired in the early 1990s.

"I have very little artwork at home," said Hrycyk, a plain-clothes officer who wears jogging shoes and his shirt untucked over his 9 mm Smith & Wesson handgun. "I think this job has made me leery of attempting to buy good art."

Art theft, considered one of the top criminal enterprises in the world behind drug trafficking and arms sales, is a \$2 billion- to \$5 billion-a-year underworld business. The illicit trade in stolen art and cultural artifacts has increased dramatically in recent years, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

It is also a crime that goes unsolved in most cases. While bank robbers are caught nine times out of 10, art thieves are caught only two times out of 10, LAPD detectives said.

Recent cases

The LAPD's art theft detail has made a few arrests recently in art cases involving San Fernando Valley residents.

These include the "Well Traveled Renoir" and an Altadena man

who is accused of stealing more than 7,500 one-of-a-kind "Peanuts" cartoon movie animation cels worth more than \$1 million from a Sherman Oaks animation company, detectives said.

In the Renoir case, Jesaia "Bob" Venger knowingly obtained the fake oil painting titled "La Loge" and a repudiated certificate of authenticity, Hrycyk said.

Despite this, Venger tried to sell the fake Renoir, Hrycyk said.

On Feb. 29, he pleaded no contest to a charge of grand theft and was sentenced to 15 days in jail and three years of probation, fined \$200 and ordered to perform 200 hours of community service.

In the "Peanuts" case, Altadena resident Terry James Gilfof, 49, was arrested on a charge of grand theft April 20 at his home. He is accused of stealing 7,500

animation film cels valued at \$1 million from a Sherman Oaks animation company called Bill Melendez Productions, detectives said.

A judge agreed there is enough evidence to take the case to trial.

The case began when Melendez Productions reported it was missing some of the animation cels from a "Peanuts" holiday special, Hrycyk said.

Gilfof had been working for the company as a handyman.

"They trusted him," Hrycyk said. "He worked unsupervised and we are learning he helped himself over a period of time to the high valued animation cels and sold them all over the country. He sold them in New York, Ohio, Arizona and Los Angeles."

The detectives broke the case using the Internet.

"Some of the stolen property

showed up on the Internet in New York," he said. "They were unwitting buyers who had obtained the stuff."

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