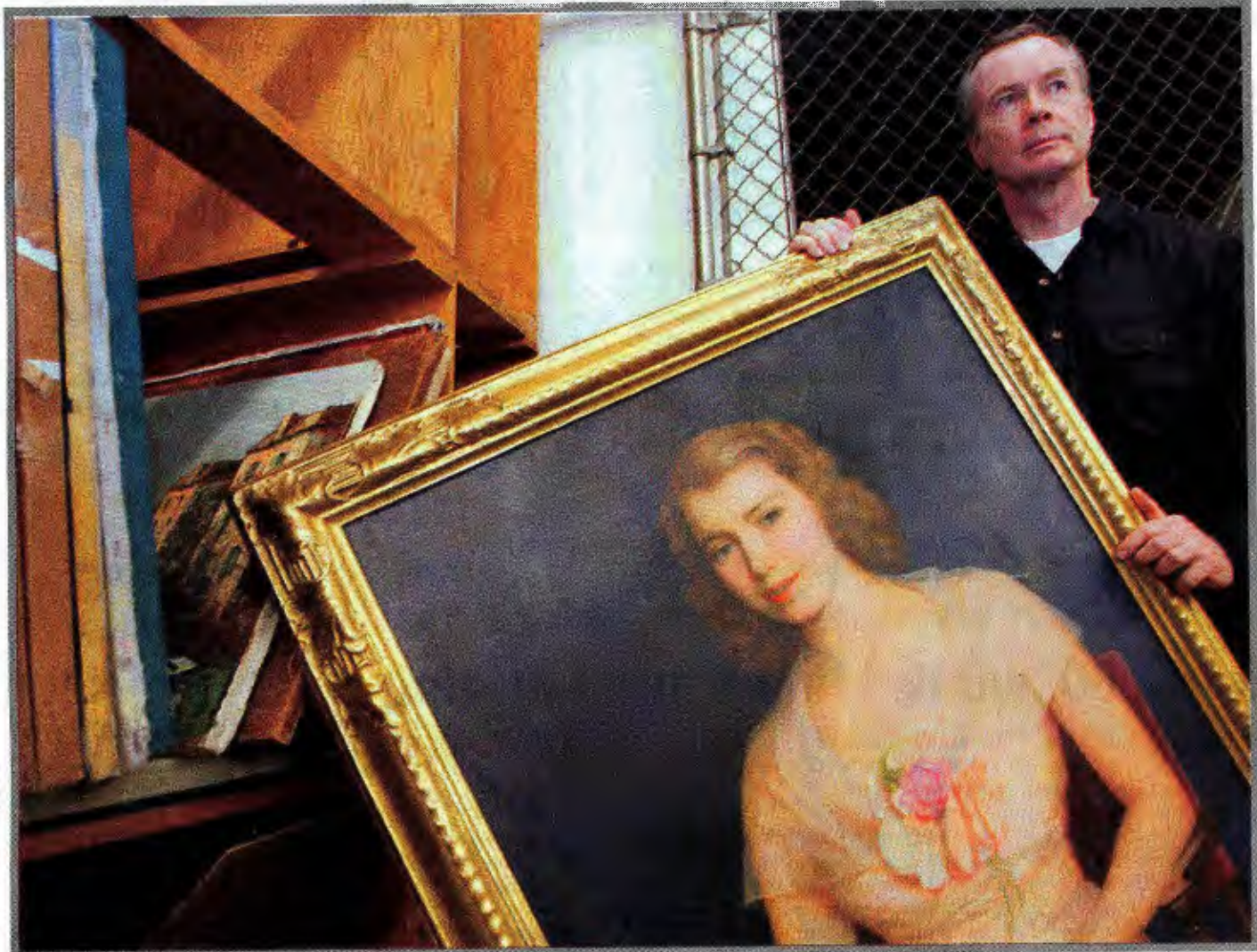


FOLLOWING THE PAINT TRAIL



David Sprague/Staff Photographer

LAPD Detective Don Hrycyk goes through stolen art, above, including one painting acquired in a sting operation, below.

Detective zeros in on art thieves

By Josh Kleinbaum
Staff Writer

When about \$100,000 worth of jewelry once owned by Elvis Presley disappeared from the wall-to-ceiling safe of a Los Angeles-area auction house, it seemed like the perfect crime, perpetrated by a master criminal.

For Detective Don Hrycyk, it's just another whodunit.

"To an outsider, it looks like the crime of the century," said Hrycyk.

The crime of the century, Hrycyk learned, was really a crime of stupidity.

Hrycyk has recovered more than \$62 million in stolen art in 11 years heading the LAPD's art theft detail. He is believed to be the only full-time art detective working for a municipal agen-

cy. In many of his cases, the key to the crime lies in the patterns of the victim, not the crook.

At the auction house, only six people — all loyal, longtime employees of the company — had the combination to the safe. But they couldn't remember it. Instead, they kept the combination on a piece of paper in an unlocked drawer in the same room as the safe.



"Every time someone needed something from the safe, they'd see this guy walk over, open up the drawer, pull out the combination, go over (to the safe), read the combination,

and then put the combination back into the drawer," Hrycyk said. "There was a part-time employee who had just been hired. He saw how

"In the last 11 years, we've recovered more than \$62 million worth of art. ... It's viewed by most departments as a luxury. I think it's one of the best jobs in any police department."

— Detective Don Hrycyk

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easy it would be to get in there.

"The problem is not clever thieves. For the most part, the problem is careless victims."

Since 1994, Hrycyk has helped recover, among other things, Picasso paintings, Peanuts animation cels, a \$3.5 million Stradivarius cello and an \$850,000 Sanctus Seraphin violin and bow.

He's searching for much more than he's recovered. He maintains an extensive database of stolen art on the LAPD's Web site, which includes listings for two Marc Chagall lithographs, an Andy Warhol silk-screen of Arnold Schwarzenegger, an alligator costume and the mask and spear from the movie "Predator."

"Don is an excellent resource because he knows a lot about art and a lot about the law," said Katherine Dugdale, operations manager of the Art Loss Registry, a London-based firm that screens art for major auction houses to make sure they're not selling stolen goods. "We refer other police offers from around California and other Western states to Don whenever they have an art crime, simply because he's able to convey a wealth of information on how to respond to a situation."

The LAPD created the art theft detail in 1983, realizing that expensive artwork accounted for a large chunk of the stolen goods in Los Angeles. Bill Martin, the city's first art cop, launched the beat.

At the time, Hrycyk was working homicides in the LAPD's 77th Division, one of the most violent parts of the city.

"The city was having over 1,000 murders a year," Hrycyk said. "There were certain weekends when I would have three separate murder calls. It was a really tough time.

"Some of those murders were just because somebody was wearing the wrong shoelaces. The suspect didn't even know who the victim was. They just perceived that they were some sort of rival and blew them out of their socks."

By 1987, Hrycyk was ready for a change. He heard of an

opening in the LAPD's commercial crimes division — then called the burglary and auto theft division — and applied, not knowing the specifics of the job. When he got the job, he was paired with Martin on the art theft detail.

"It was really a fluke," he said.

In 1994, Hrycyk permanently gave up the world of murders for the world of whodunits, becoming the LAPD's lead art detective. Instead of chasing gang members, he chases "Clue"-type characters — the butler, the chauffeur and the handyman.

In one of Hrycyk's cases, the butler of oil tycoon Howard Keck stole a painting from the card room of the Keck mansion, replacing it with a photographed replica. He sold the painting in Sweden for \$527,000.

Yes, the butler did it in the card room with a photograph.

In many art thefts, Hrycyk said, the crook knows the victim well enough to have some inside information — they're familiar with the security system, they know when the victim won't be home, things like that.

In one case, the crook installed the security system.

Carol Neal, a vice president for Bill Melendez Productions, which owns the original animation cels to Charles Schulz's Peanuts, noticed in 1998 that some cels were missing. She figured they were misplaced, not stolen. To be safe, she asked the company's handyman to build shelves in a vacant room, install a new lock and give her the only key, turning the room into a safe. She moved all of the company's most valuable artwork into that room.

The next year, she was shocked to discover hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of art missing from the safe room.

That's when she met Hrycyk.

"He's very much the gumshoe detective," Neal said. "He has a dry sense of humor. We talked the same language. He understood how a production studio works, and how art should be handled."

In his investigation, Hrycyk discovered that Perry Gilfoy, the handyman who installed the lock on the safe room, stole the animation cels. Gilfoy eventually pleaded guilty to receiving stolen property.

Hrycyk has a clear passion for the whodunit, which comes through on the LAPD's art theft detail Web site. He includes information about his favorite cases, and gives them names like, "The Butler Did It" and "The Chauffeur Did It." His title for the Peanuts case is "It's a Sad Day, Charlie Brown."

In the 20 years since the LAPD created the art theft detail, other organizations have

he knows how to work a case. When you combine those things, it makes him very effective.”

Hrycyk considers himself an expert on art theft, not art itself, but he’s developed plenty of art knowledge through the years.

When he took the job, he jokingly referred to himself as an art Neanderthal. He would enter art galleries and be drawn to certain colors or shapes, but he knew little about artists, techniques or styles.

Now, after 11 years as a full-time art cop, Hrycyk knows the jargon of the art world. He can sometimes identify an artist just by looking at a painting. Art experts say he can spot a fake at first glance.

The expertise comes in handy. Those in the art world laud his work, saying his knowledge and understanding of fine art makes it easier to recover stolen art. And he knows how to treat fine art once it’s recovered.

“He always checks with people like me and others before he checks for fingerprints,” said Robert Cauer, a violin expert who repaired the Stradivarius cello and the Seraphin violin after they were recovered. “A policeman who doesn’t know will inadvertently wipe dirt into cracks, which doubles the intricacies of the work. He’s already way off that.”

Now, after 31 years with the LAPD and 11 years covering art theft, Hrycyk is considering retirement. But he’s worried about leaving without getting the chance to train a replacement.

After cycling through partners for most of his time on the art theft beat, Hrycyk has been going solo for nearly four years, a victim of LAPD budget cuts.

“This is the type of job where it takes years in order to get it under your belt and do it effectively,” Hrycyk said. “There’s no college, no school, to learn how to do this.

“In the last 11 years, we’ve recovered more than \$62 million worth of art. It’s a good investment, but it’s viewed by most departments as a luxury. I think it’s one of the best jobs in any police department.”

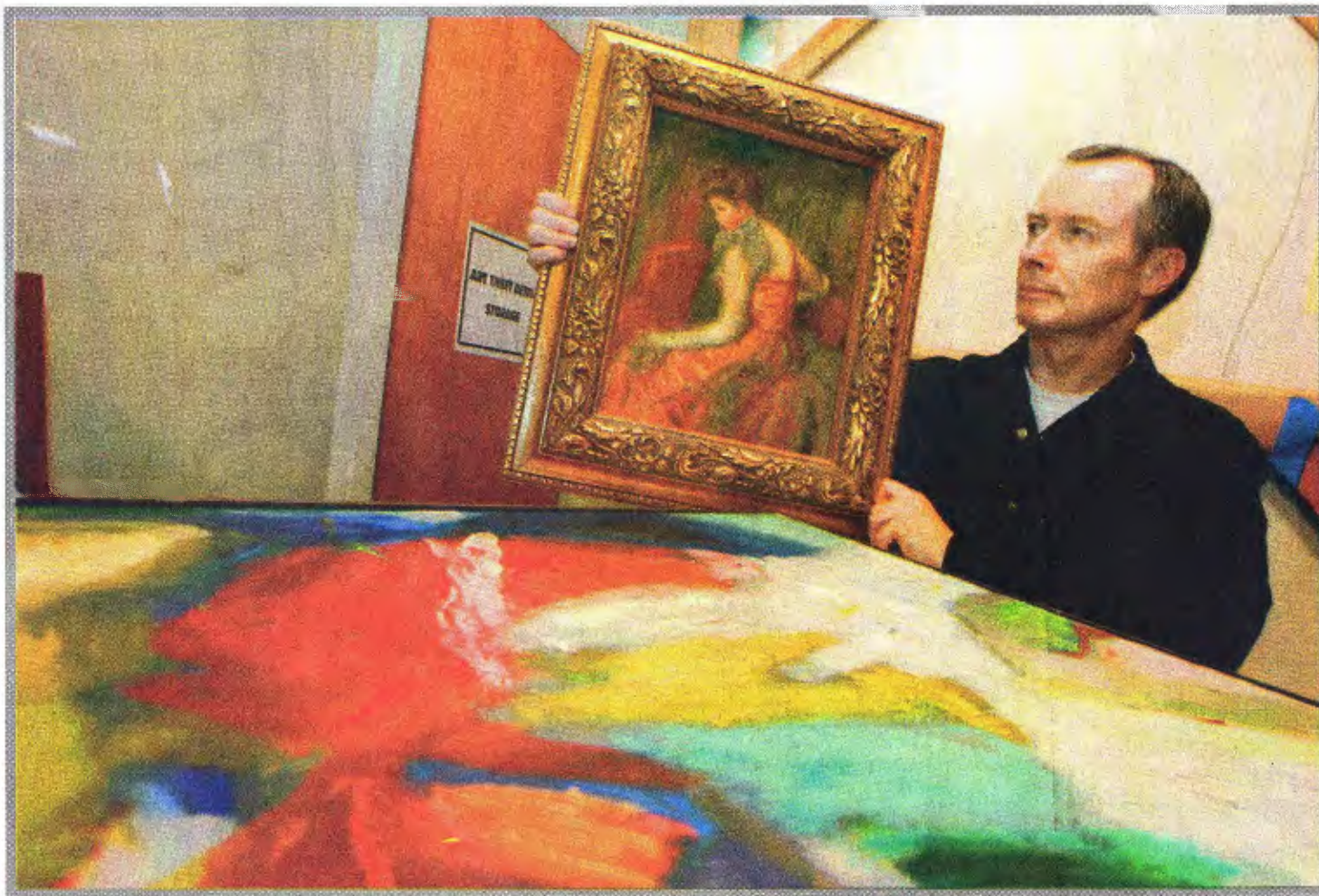
begun to catch on. The New York Police Department has a detective who focuses on art-theft cases, but he handles other cases, too. The FBI formed the Art Crimes Team in November, with special agents spread around the country.

“The value of art has gone up significantly in the last 10 years,” said Special Agent Christopher Calarco, a member of the FBI’s Art Crimes Team. “Any time things go up in value like that, it attracts crooks into the business.”

Calarco, who is based in Los Angeles, said he met with Hrycyk when he was assigned to the Art Crimes Team, and consults with Hrycyk on Los Angeles-area cases.

“He’s been doing it for so long, and he has such excellent relationships with a lot of people in the Los Angeles art community,” Calarco said. “He’s a really good detective, he’s smart, and

Art thieves have a brush with the lawman



David Sprague/Staff Photographer

LAPD Detective Don Hrycyk holds a Renoir replica that surfaced in Los Angeles with an asking price of \$350,000.