The Art Cop

Introducing Det. Don Hrycyk, a thief’s worst nightmare

Most police officers deal with pickpockets or stolen Pontiacs. This one deals with Picassos.

Predrag Vukovich catches up with the LAPD detective with a real unique beat.

Pablo Picasso, "Nude Before a Mirror," 1932. This piece is valued at $8 million and was stolen from a Los Angeles residency in 1992. Thanks to an informant's tip, the art was recovered five years later in a storage facility in Cleveland, Ohio. Prosecution is still pending. Image courtesy LAPD.
Claude Monet wouldn't have painted here. Paul Gauguin wouldn't have left his wife to move here. Here is downtown Los Angeles, at the Parker Center police station, not a place naturally associated with high art. And here, on the third floor in the Burglary-Auto Theft Division, is the desk of Don Hrycyk, Los Angeles' — and in fact, America's — only Art Cop.

Just across the street from the Parker Center is Los Angeles' city hall now closed for renovation, its columns from steps given over to the local Shakespeare festival. Across a different street is the three-star New Otani Hotel. Then there's the ubiquitous parking lots, $1.50 per twenty minutes, $8.00 daily maximum, and the dive restaurants with names like The Kather Burrito that serve the municipal and other workers. Japantown is also near here, just a few blocks south. There's a free health clinic a block away; it's not too long a walk to the L.A. Times Spring Street headquarters. It's also close enough to the fledgling Latino Museum of Art and Culture and the more established sister Museums of Contemporary Art. Maybe this isn't Barcelona, with Miro sculptures everywhere, or even Redmond, Washington with its 1% for public art budget requirement. But that's not to say that this place is totally devoid of art. On the contrary, there are sculptures outside the police headquarters. To the right of the front door, an iron, elongated nuclear family. Very officious, very 1950s. Very Draguer, this father and son and mother holding child. There's also a charcoal-colored quadrilateral, a fountain-like marble memorial to fallen police comrades. And inside, across from the newspaper and snack stand in the lobby is a tile mosaic cityscape that gets ignored more by the citizenry than zero tolerance drug laws. Next to the tiles is the visitors' desk, where two uniformed officers sit and no metal detector is visible. Past the mosaic is an elevator. That takes us up on the third floor, down a hallway, through a saloon-style door leading to the burglary department. Here's an open space full of detectives in casual attire, no noticeable bulges at their hips. Just detectives, answering phones, making calls, joking around. Photos of families and friends on their desks; institutional clocks on the walls. A nice light blue paint hue, too. It's here, with this backdrop, where Detective Don Hrycyk, the Art Cop, greets a visitor.

Det. Hrycyk (say "Her-RIS-sick") is the lead — and until recently, only — officer for the LAPD's highly unique Art Theft Detail. Hrycyk inherited the beat 11 years ago from Det. Bill Martin, who inaugurated the full-time position in 1980 and has since retired from the force. Hrycyk's job description is to handle cases where art is the primary object of a burglary. The gig is an interesting one, a hard one, and also, a lonely one.

“I don't refer to myself as an art expert. There's a clear differentiation between somebody who is an art expert and that means you know about art history and you went to school and studied art, and somebody who's specialty is art theft investigation.”

— Det. Don Hrycyk

See, New York doesn't have an officer exclusively devoted to solving art crimes. Chicago doesn't have one. Same for Atlanta, Philadelphia, Phoenix, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. No other American municipality has an Art Cop. For Don Hrycyk, that can mean a real tough burden.

Det. Hrycyk does have help overseas, from Interpol, New Scotland Yard, and other national agencies in Europe and South America. Here, he gets help from corporate entities like the Art Loss Registry (more on them later), and interested non-profits like the International Foundation for Art Research and the J. Paul Getty Center. And these days, the detective even has a partner, Det. Pam Conrad, in her first year on the art beat.
after 16 on the force and the last six in auto theft. But that doesn't mean Hrycky's job is getting any easier. "The big problem for me and for anybody trying to pursue this in this country is that there is no training and there is very little in literature," the detective says. "In Europe, they have national, regional seminars; schools having to do with art theft investigations because they have enough personnel and it's organized well enough where they can actually put on an art theft school. Here in the United States, it's an aberration."

But the man has had to learn somehow. Had to learn the elementary stuff like how to tell the difference between a signed original painting and a reproduction. Had to learn how to listen to art-history-trained dealers and collectors give stolen art reports; had to learn some of that art-specific vernacular. So, with no one to teach him, the Art Cop taught himself. "Whatever I know about art," Hrycky says, "it comes from really being a researcher where I scan the Internet and I try to get information. I cut out articles, I read books, I search for books that have to do with art fakes and frauds and thefts, and I put together my own library of books having to do with that [see box]. But my cases, yes, each one is a training session in itself."

Whatever way the Art Cop is using to learn, it's obviously working. When he has time, he gives lectures — to the FBI, the American Association of Museums, the interested public. Over the course of a few interviews, Hrycky ably cites artists from Renoir to Matisse to Picasso to Walter Lanz, the Woody Woodpecker creator and illustrator. He knows an Ernst from a Dubuffet, calls Modigliani's lines "child-like," and can prattle on about Asian ivory art with the ease — but not the affected manner — of a big-time dealer. He uses his knowledge, and his own free time, to get the good word out about stolen art. He puts out his own Stolen Art bulletin; he's been making them from home for years because the police didn't use to have the necessary graphic design equipment. He did it because he had to — how else but with a picture can stolen abstract art be described? Art professors can barely explain a Kandinsky improvisational composition to their students; how would cops used to answering staccato teletypes listing make, model, year, and serial number react to something written in art historic-style language. Hopefully, the average men and women in blue have something better to do than interpret what "painterly flourish" or "luminous tone of a particular palette" means. "I don't even try to write traditional teletypes," Hrycky says. "I make up the bulletins, and I send the bulletins. At least there's a black and white photo."

But Hrycky doesn't say that to knock other cops. Far from it. In fact, the Art Cop doesn't even consider himself an Art Pro. "No," he says clearly, "I don't refer to myself as an art expert. There's a clear differentiation between somebody who is an art expert and that means you know about art history and you went to school and studied art, and somebody whose specialty is art theft investigation."

Then again, for a non-art expert, he surely can drop the names of a bunch of artists. Too bad Hrycky's not hitting the opening reception art gallery cocktail circuit; he'd probably be a big hit.

Crime & Punishment, 
Wine & Cheese
The first time I met Detective Hrycky he was lecturing at the auction house Butterfield & Butterfield in an event sponsored by the local art dealers association. Hrycky handled questions both inane and important with equal parts dignity and aplomb. He wore a suit. He didn't sit the wine and cheese table, like everybody else. And he used words like "thugs" and "perpetrator" the way you always want a policeman to. He wasn't

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A Collectors’ Guide
How to prevent art theft and aid in its recovery

There are certain, mostly common-sense precautions any art collector large or small can take in order to stave off theft and assist law enforcement officials with recovery. We start with the basics, swiped from a recent speech given by the Art Cop, L.A.D Det. Don Hrycyk. Have a working alarm. Be wary of placing ads in the public newspaper and allowing strangers to come to your door. Be especially careful if work crews have been inside your house recently. If your art’s in storage, keep it in a secure, fireproof facility, and in a cross-over from the prevention to the recovery side, keep meticulous written and photographic records of the pieces.

“The big thing is getting a good photograph,” the Art Cop says. “Front and back, but also of details. If there’s a flower, get a detail of that flower. And try to get somebody that has a decent camera or actually take the art to a gallery that’s used to taking transparencies so that you have fine-grain film that is capable of being blown up to look for details.”

Also carefully record the artwork’s edition number, any specific inscriptions or marks, and the exact measurements (framed and unframed). Hrycyk offers this advice, and so does the Art Loss Register, a New York and London based company that maintains a massive 100,000 works-strong database of stolen art, and boasts of having recovered over 900 works of art and 4,000 associated items with a total value of $50 million since 1991. The agreed-upon art-identifying criteria have pretty much become industry standard ever since a J. Paul Getty Center-sponsored conference held in Amsterdam in May of 1997 got everyone in the business of finding stolen art together and they came up with universal guidelines of how to describe artwork. The Object I.D. checklist includes everything from “Type of Object” to “Inscriptions & Markings” to “Distinguishing Features.” [see right]

Even given these guidelines, people still tend to get lazy or careless. “We’re handling a case right now where an Erte was stolen from a gallery and the gallery didn’t know what the edition number was on that, even though [in California] they are required to give out a certificate of authenticity which would list that number," Det. Hrycyk says. If a gallery can screw up that badly, imagine what mistakes an individual collector with all sorts of non-art related things to worry about could make. And by the way, don’t leave the photos you take of the art right next to the art, either.

In case of a theft, collectors should make sure they get a copy of the police report for their own personal files. Even with the advent of computers and contemporary disk drives, police only keep their copies of the reports on file for, at most, 10 years. Possessing these files is a necessity for victims seeking to prove recovered art work belongs to them.

Besides the police report, collectors should also make sure their work is entered into the Art Loss Register’s database and the FBI’s National Stolen Art File. Anyone can arrange the former, only law enforcement officials the latter.

Of all the ways to spend a precious weekend afternoon, being down on all fours with a tape measure and a pencil recording a painting’s particulars doesn’t shoot to the top of the “fun” list. It seems so unnecessary, and a waste of time, too. That’s all true until the art collector comes home to some empty walls. So like with most crime prevention efforts, the key is to practice some common sense. That’s generally the number one crime deterrent, anyway: Prudence mixed with paranoia, plus maybe a good insurance policy [see artCOLLECTOR Volume 1, Number 4]. But in the end, don’t forget to live a little, too. Being a prisoner to your own art possessions makes you less a patron and more a warden, and it makes less sense than not having any art to begin with.

— Predrag Vukovich

Object ID

CHECKLIST

Take Photographs
Photographs are of vital importance in identifying and recovering stolen objects. In addition to overall views, take close-ups of inscriptions, markings and any damage or repairs. If possible, always include a scale or object of known size in the image.

ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS

Type of Object
What kind of object is it (e.g., painting, sculpture, clock, mask)?

Materials & Techniques
What materials is the object made of (e.g., brass, wood, oil on canvas)? How was it made (e.g., carved, cast, etched)?

Measurements
What is the size and/or weight of the object? Specify which unit of measurement is being used (e.g., cm and inches) and to which dimension the measurements refer (e.g., height, width, depth)?

Inscriptions & Markings
Are there any identifying markings, numbers, or inscriptions on the object (e.g., a signature, dedication, title, maker’s marks, purity marks, property marks)?

Distinguishing Features
Does the object have any physical characteristics that could help to identify it (e.g., damage, repairs, manufacturing defects)?

Title
Does the object have a title by which it is known and might be identified (e.g., The Scream)?

Subject
What is pictured or represented (e.g., landscape, battle, woman holding child)?

Date or Period
When was the object made (e.g., 1933, early 17th century, late Bronze Age)?

Maker
Do you know who made the object? This may be the name of a known individual (e.g., Thomas Tompion) a company (e.g., Tiffany) or a cultural group (e.g., Hopi).

Write a Short Description
This can also include any additional information which helps to identify the object (e.g., color and shape of the object, where it was made, etc.)

Keep It Secure
Having documented the object, keep this information in a safe place.
all business - he laughed and improvised when his slide projector didn’t properly operate, and based on the post lecture buzz, he made a very favorable impression on the crowd. By the third time we met, we were on more intimate terms - to pose for a photo, he took off his over-shirt and flashed me his gun. This is the second time, though, and I'm sitting in a police interview room on the third floor of the Parker Center. A cheap institutional wooden table takes up 60% of the space. The walls are painted that same becalming sky blue. There are all sorts of circular cuts in the walls. I ask the detective if the circles are some sort of psychological torture designed to “bug you out?” He smiles and says there are no hidden audio devices - bugs - here. There is also no graffiti on the walls, no gun signs or tags. There’s only one carving in the wood table, and no fist or shoe-sized gouges on the walls. Other police station interview rooms aren’t like this one. Being the Art Cop does have its advantages: it attracts a higher class of scumbags.

Corinna Kowalsky, according to police, is one such scumbag. Or, we should note, alleged scumbag. She's a 26-year-old undocumented German alien who police say was a $300-an-hour call girl. Kowalsky had a “business relationship” with one particular john who was an art collector. She had access to the guy's house, and now his $46,000 art collection is missing. Including in the call girl's booty were an Art Nouveau style amphora and a bronze medallion shaped by Auguste Rodin. Police are still searching for the bombshell bandit.

If Kowalsky looks like a supermodel, then Raymond March resembles the kindly village elder. Neither fit the stereotypical image of a rogue, but it seems both, and especially March, did a lot of damage. According to Det. Hrycky, the white-haired gent with the plaid vest, yellow tie, and rose pin in his lapel may have spent parts of 40 years dealing art in the Los Angeles area. When his place was raided in 1995, cops found 30 pieces of art; only two were authentic. March denied any wrongdoing, but pled guilty. While maybe four decades of victims got a slap in the face, the septuagenarian received nothing but a slap on the wrist from the judicial system, restitution plus a sentence of a few years worth of felony probation. Provided the cat doesn’t knock over a bank or something, he pretty much got off free.

Robert Burmeo is another crook busted by Hrycky. In the early 1990s, Burmeo was a student at the University of California at Los Angeles. Given a work-study position, Burmeo responded by practically clearing out the school’s memorabilia archives — stealing 35 boxes of stuff valued at over a million dollars. The memorabilia, from Marilyn Monroe signatures to Henry Miller manuscripts to Star Trek and Woody Woodpecker animation cells, is considered part of Hrycky’s loot because, basically, it doesn’t fit in any other category. Anyway, like March, Burmeo was caught, convicted, and was poised to get off extremely easy for his crime until a UCLA-led letter writing campaign caused the local district attorney to reconsider his wrist-slapping. Instead, Burmeo was sentenced to three years in state prison.

Those are just a couple of the examples of the more than 400 art thefts that are reported in Los Angeles alone each year. So many other thefts go unreported — “it really is a hidden crime,” Hrycky says — that even those most in the know can’t come up with a total dollar amount to put on art crimes in the U.S. Even worldwide, estimates range all the way from one billion dollars to five billion dollars. Either way, that’s a lot of art.

Not all of the thefts feature villains as atypical as the call girl, the old man, and the sabotaging student. But most are either inside jobs or else burglaries where the loot happens to include fine art. “Most of our crimes are like residential burglaries that occur locally,” Hrycky says. Art gallery thefts are relatively rare, and museum thefts, though often spectacular and headline-grabbing, are fairly low in incidence, at least in the U.S. That’s partly due to our young country’s use of modern, specially-built edifices as museums. In the old world, the Art Cop notes, it’s often castles and chateaus that house the high art.

Still, there is occasional serious organized crime against high art. Hrycky knows of one case in England of an antique dealer who ran such a ring. “He would finger the items to be stolen, and then he would send out the thugs to do that.” The Art Cop also recalls a recent ring out
of Cincinnati, Ohio. In short, he hears about them from time to time, "But as far as sophisticated art rings, thank god that has not occurred very often."

Hrycky says it's rare but not unknown that a case will involve a movie-plot scenario like drug kingpins buying art in order to launder money. Even rarer these days are art-nappings or art thefts done for political reasons [The Mona Lisa was stolen in 1911 by an Italian irate that the French would have his countryman DaVinci's works in their national gallery]. The truth is usually much less sexy, the Art Cop reports. "I think that most of the thefts are done by street thugs who don't know what they're stealing and don't know the difficulty of getting rid of fine art once they've stolen it. And that's an advantage to us that they don't have an easy way to get the thing out of the country or out of the state."

A Close Community

Why is that extradition so difficult? Because of the closeness of the art community, Det. Hrycky says. "The art community talks to each other. As a result, if something is stolen and it's high value, they have a tendency to let the other art dealers know. And also, as far as being suspicious, if somebody comes to an art dealer and has an art work that is worth a lot of money by a good-named artist, the dealer asks questions about the provenance of the piece."

A good example of this was the UCLA-Burmeo memorabilia theft. Here, an alert collectsibles shop worker thought it was odd that a college kid could possess crates full of such valuable stock. Another example was stolen ivory art valued at $10,000 that an Asian art dealer turned in, even though he had already paid a cash advance for the product, and might have been able to re-sell it without revealing it was hot. And finally, there's the story of the Matisse painting that an art gallery in San Francisco reported was a fake after checking with a leading French Matisse authenticator. As luck would have it, this authenticator had already been contacted by an auction house interested in buying the piece. She told the auction house the same news, that it was fake, but the galleries did nothing, told nobody, merely returned the piece to the would-be seller. They probably figured it was an honest mistake, or maybe the seller had been ripped off by someone else. No reason to report the guy. And if the opposite was true, and the auction house wasn't being honest, then maybe they didn't want to deal with the police, the extra paperwork, the staff time taken up by too many people asking too many questions. Who knows what their own books looked like? How many other pieces of their art might have been stolen?

This is all speculation, but if the above cops-out seems too much like a cop-out, consider that even a minor investigation might be seen as a distraction for medium-sized businesses, and perhaps paralyzing for smaller gallery operations. But the owners of this particular gallery in San Francisco, upon hearing this was the second time the piece had been declared a fake, figured they had to do something. They called the local police, and ultimately, Det. Hrycky became involved. Had that gallery done nothing, the Art Cop reports, the cycle would have continued until eventually a potential buyer didn't consult this particular French authenticator, and went ahead and bought the piece. But in the San Francisco case, an investigation proceeded and led to a successful collar.

"At this point, the gallery could have gone back to the crook and said, okay, we found out that this thing is fraudulent. We are out all these expenses, which totaled more than $5,000 in trying to find a buyer. And doing that and spending money, and we are going to take you to court and we are going to report you to the police department unless you come up with the money. And probably he would have done that, and everything would have been even-steven, but then he probably would have gotten the piece back and shipped it out of state or taken it somewhere else. But to their credit, they called us. So what we did is, we seized the piece and we arrested the guy."

It can be hard for a gallery or an individual to do the right thing when they know that they could re-sell the piece — dupe somebody else — or knowing that they have already spent time and money trying to sell a piece that they just discovered is stolen. Det. Hrycky understands the dilemma, the emphasis of all art collectors being billionaires is far from the truth, and is even sympathetic to a point. He’s a policeman, after all, and the law is the law. And besides, Hrycky
points out, if a gallery or collector reports to the police, the district attorney will work on that victim's behalf free of charge, and will seek to recover a gallery's or individual's research and other expenses, too. No expensive private attorney's fees like there'd be in a civil suit, the Art Cop notes. He also gives another example to further encapsulate his point:

"I have a Renoir, it's a current case that is going on, and this Renoir got in the hands of an art crook that I'm aware of in the Los Angeles area, and I have followed at least five different victims he's tried to sell that to. And each time they either shipped the piece let's say to New York to have it examined by Sothby's or Christie's or by an art expert, and upon learning it was a fake, just merely said, 'Well, there is no deal.' They didn't pay money. So these are all attempts; him looking for a sucker, constantly looking for a sucker.

"And as long as he gets that piece back and they never call us, then this person has all the time in the world to finally find the person who's not diligent enough to try and learn the provenance of the piece.

"We've had a number of cases like that," the Art Cop continues. "It's remarkable how often, or how long, somebody involved with selling fraudulent art can continue doing it and never get arrested. It's always something that's a hidden crime. It's something that occurs, but it's invisible because it never comes to law enforcement's attention."

The officer's concluding thought on the subject echoes his earlier statements on how to make his own job easier, and also another art-buying public's pocketbooks heavier and their worried hearts lighter: "If they've been cheated in some way, let the police department handle it."

**Successes and Frustrations**

So for the Art Cop, there are successes. There are also a lot of frustrations. Suspects not reported. Millions of dollars of crime not taken seriously by the judicial system. Besides Burmeister and old man Marsh, there was the case of the convicted art forger whose punishment was to teach school children to paint murals. When last heard from, the forger, Tony Deauro, was claiming to be due big money from movie development deals.

The Art Cop himself may not be ready for the big screen, but his sometimes lonely beat has led to some big grosses. He's recovered $31 million in his seven years on the beat. That's $4.4 million per year. "More in terms of money than all other 18 geographic burglary detectives combined," he says with deserved pride. Then again, how many recovered VCRs and toasters add up to the value of one Picasso?

In a perfect world, there would be no art theft. Don Hrycky could work at a museum if he wanted to, or be a modern art librarian or a beach bum or a cowboy. But this ain't utopia, it's Los Angeles. So while an art collector has some basic, one-afternoon-a-year responsibilities to attend to aid in crime prevention [see page 42], Det. Don Hrycky's job as America's lone Art Cop is an all-day, all-year job, and at times, it must seem almost overwhelming. Considering all he's learned in all these long hours, then, I ask the detective if maybe one day he'd like to retire from the police force and open an art gallery? The 47-year-old answers in typically superstitious police-speak. "I just want to retire," he says.

Years from now, whenever Don Hrycky does retire, the LAPD will have to find a replacement for their leading Art Cop. But even if they choose not to, and even if they reassigned his second, Pam Conrad, to some other department, Los Angeles would then have the same number of art crime-specific police as all other major American municipality combined. That means zero. And that means bad news for everybody except the art thieves.
Robert Williams: Barbarian at the Gate

Exclusive Interview: Bernard Lewinsky on his photography

LAPD's Art Cop

Gorillas who paint