Artifice

Where else but in Tinseltown would the city police force have its own art crimes unit?

Detective Don Hrycyk, Los Angeles Police Department's Art Theft Detail.
No one would ever suspect Jane Crawford of being a thief, which is perhaps why she almost got away with the perfect crime.

Nearing the end of her career as director of student counseling at UCLA, Crawford had, by all accounts, a pretty good life: a nice house in a Los Angeles suburb; enough money to hire a part-time employee, Dean, to take care of her ailing father; a secure job with good benefits. In short, life was good. But then, says Don Hrycyk, “an opportunity fell into her lap, and like a lot of thieves, she just couldn’t resist the temptation.” According to Hrycyk (“Huy-rih-sik”), a detective with the Los Angeles Police Department’s Art Theft Detail—the only full-time municipal art investigative unit in the United States—Crawford learned from a retiring counselor at the college that a dark and dingy work of art hanging on a wall outside the registrar’s office was a valuable, if neglected, painting by landscape artist Arthur Wesley Dow. Crawford had the painting, titled “Frost Flowers, Ipswich, Massachusetts 1889” moved into her office. Then, when it disappeared, she told co-workers she was having it cleaned and restored.

Meanwhile, Crawford asked Dean, who was also an artist, to make an exact replica of the painting, telling him the original, which she later sold to a New York gallery for $200,000, belonged to her invalid father. Though she told the artist the copy was for her son, the plan was to hang it in her office and claim it was the restored original. Who would know the difference? “It was pretty much the perfect crime,” says Hrycyk. Then Crawford got greedy. “Once you cross that line and think you’ve gotten away with it,” says the detective, “it’s so much easier to cross it again.”

Crawford located several other valuable paintings, all endowed to the university, hanging in other offices on campus, including ones by Roy Lichtenstein and Edgar Ewing. She took photographs of the works and asked Dean to make exact copies of those works as well, claiming they also belonged to her father and he wanted to sell them. Even that might have worked—if Crawford hadn’t decided that Dean was dipping into her illicit bank account and helping himself. She filed a complaint with the sheriff’s department and sued the employee—at which point he contacted Hrycyk and related his suspicion that Crawford had stolen the Dow painting from UCLA.

The case, however, dragged on for more than three years, partly because the New York gallery (which had resold the painting for $317,000 just months after acquiring it) refused to cooperate and partly because UCLA had no record of the painting in its inventory. In the end, UCLA was able to locate proof that the Dow family had donated the painting to the university in 1928 and, after the Feds got involved and issued them a subpoena, the gallery contacted the buyer and produced the painting and relevant documentation for examination. As for Crawford, she was convicted of four felony counts and sent to prison.

According to Hrycyk, a lack of cooperation from art galleries and museums is rather common when it comes to art theft. “They worry about the civil liability,” he says, noting that even if they know for sure a particular work of art is a forgery or simply not by the artist as claimed, they’ll refuse to get involved. “Museums are the worst,” he says. “Most of them have a standing policy that will not allow them to comment on the authenticity of a work of art if it

By David Lansing | Photography by David Beeler | Illustration by Elvis Swift
means they might have to testify in court.” As an example, Hrycyk tells the story of a gentleman he refers to as “the Count” and a small painting, supposedly by Goya, owned by an elderly Hungarian couple living in Hollywood. The Count, whose real name was Gabor Eordogh, befriended the Hungarian couple when they were in their 70s. They showed the suave young man—who liked to wear pink socks, a pirate shirt with puffy sleeves and a cape—their precious painting, which they said had been in the family for 200 years. The Count offered to have the soiled painting cleaned—at which point both he and the painting disappeared.

Several years passed before the elderly woman, whose husband had since died, reported the theft to LAPD’s Art Theft Detail. Hrycyk determined that the Count was really a transient con man and a Hungarian fugitive. Eventually, the Count, who was sharing an apartment in North Hollywood with a colleague connected to L.A.’s porn industry, was arrested and the painting recovered. In court, the Count claimed the painting was not really a Goya but a clever copy he’d had commissioned as a decorative art piece. “The Goya experts in the U.S. are mainly curators at museums and none of them would comment on the authenticity of the painting,” says Hrycyk. As a result, the detective took the painting to an auction house, had it appraised for a few thousand dollars as decorative art and got a conviction that at least allowed them to have the Count extradited back to Hungary for prosecution.

Whether the painting was or wasn’t an authentic Goya was incidental to the family that owned it. “It was a part of their history,” says the detective. “It was a member of their family, and losing it was like going through a kidnapping. They just wanted it back. What you learn doing this job is that even though a crime report is very sterile, particularly when you’re talking about a stolen object, a work of art can be emotionally very important to someone no matter its value. These are like comfortable old friends that have been with them forever.”

Hrycyk, who has been investigating art theft for 12 years, came to the job after working in the homicide division and has no formal art training. “To this day I’ve never attended a specific training course on art or art theft,” he says. But don’t think that means he doesn’t know Monet from Manet. “I didn’t know anything when I started, but now I know a lot. In the beginning, I’d walk into a gallery and I wouldn’t
5 TIPS for Safeguarding Your Art

The LAPD Art Theft Detail has recovered more than $50 million in stolen art, as well as rare books, first-edition “Superman” comic books and even dinosaur eggs since its creation 20 years ago. We asked Detective Don Hrycyk for some tips on how to avoid being a victim of art theft.

1 Know what you have. “Have it authenticated and appraised,” Hrycyk says. “Just because your grandmother says it’s a Ming vase doesn’t mean that it really is.”

2 Get it photographed. “It’s amazing how many people lose a $50,000 painting and all they can show us is an old Thanksgiving photo with the family standing in front of a very blurry painting.” Hrycyk also recommends photographing the back of a painting “because it’s like a birthmark that can positively identify a painting.”

3 Have a good written description of the artwork. “And if it’s a print, note the number so we can identify it from other prints.”

4 Add your own mark. “Add something to the painting in a non-destructive manner, like put a pencil dot in a corner so you can prove it belongs to you.”

5 If it’s insured, make sure you have a buyback provision in your policy. “If we recover a valuable painting 10 years after it was stolen, it’s only going to be more valuable at that time,” he explains. “And if you’ve since filed a claim with your insurance company, you want to be sure that you can return the money and still get to keep your painting. Otherwise, we have to return it to the insurance company.” D.L.

Actually, the Cassatts and de Koonings Hrycyk is referring to were fakes being sold by another con man, Vilas Likhite, a medical doctor and Harvard professor who claimed to have inherited an astounding art collection from his father, who supposedly was given the art by an Indian maharajah who had come to the conclusion that the art, while beautiful, was too risqué. Likhite claimed that he’d sold some of his art to several Hollywood celebrities and collectors like Vegas casino owner Steve Wynn. "With the help of an accomplice in Australia, he’d put together some very impressive-looking photos and documents claiming authenticity, and that impressed people," says Hrycyk.

The problem was that it was all schlock art. "He was a scrounger. He’d go to estate sales and find paintings that were done in a certain style, like Mary Cassatt, and then claim that it was an ‘undiscovered’ painting." Then he’d find gullible investors—"people with money who knew nothing about art but were hoping to get a bargain”—and ask them to invest in his collection, which he claimed would eventually be sold for millions of dollars.

To trap Likhite, who had been selling fake art for more than 20 years, a sting was set up in a luxury hotel across the street from the LAPD. Two officers pretending to be a wealthy Korean businessman looking to invest in art and his interpreter met with Likhite who showed them 19 paintings, including a supposed Cassatt that he hoped would fetch $800,000. Instead, Likhite was arrested.

"After the sting, we found hundreds of paintings like this at his home and in storage," says Hrycyk. "Some of it had recently been purchased by a successful Los Angeles millionaire who wanted an ‘enviable’ art collection. He was the type who had made his own fortune and prided himself on being an excellent judge of character. He thought he could trust Likhite, so he gave him tens of thousands of dollars and was just completely conned by this guy. It wasn’t until we pulled up to his mansion that he realized he’d bought a collection of junk. And he was shocked, because he thought he was too smart to get conned. Which just goes to show you: No matter how sharp you think you are, you can be had."