COPS ON THE ART BEAT
Meanwhile, law enforcement officials keep plugging away. In the mid-1980s, a police officer named Don Hrycyk took a position solving art crimes to get away from the gruesome realities of inner-city police work. He’d been with the homicide squad in the south end of Los Angeles for a few years, dealing on a depressing everyday basis with the violent, often senseless crimes of that beat: kids killing each other for wearing the wrong color of shoelaces; muggers blowing away an immigrant ice-cream vendor for not handing over his cash fast enough, and not realizing they were dealing with someone who didn’t speak English. After that, being surrounded by art—even photocopies of art illustrating a police bulletin—can feel like heaven.

“If you look at what is usually stolen,” he says, referring to everyday property crimes, “people can go to the neighborhood department store and get the new and improved version of what they lost. But this cultural property, these antiques, these collectibles, this art—by definition they’re unique and usually handmade and irreplaceable, so this really does deserve government and law enforcement’s extra effort, in order to maintain and preserve it, just to make sure that street thugs don’t get hold of it, because they have no respect for this type of property.”

European countries have long understood this. In Italy, three separate police forces have hundreds of personnel dedicated to solving art-and-antiquities crimes. But Hrycyk, who was born in 1950, is the only man on a local police force in North America with the full-time job of cracking art crimes. Because he knows that it won’t be much longer before he
retires, he shares his accumulated wisdom twice a year with other police officers from around the United States who travel to Los Angeles for a primer on the subject. “If you’re a burglary detective or a homicide detective, you have associations you belong to, conferences you attend,” he explains. No such organizations or events exist for art-crime detectives looking to share trade secrets.

In some ways, though, Hrycyk says that solving an art theft is like cracking any other property case. You scour the site for clues, probe the vulnerabilities, and draw up a list of the likely suspects. You might as well begin with what’s right under your nose. According to statistics gathered by the FBI, more than eighty percent of art heists are inside jobs. Hrycyk notes the number of wealthy and status-conscious art collectors in Los Angeles. Such people may be vulnerable because they employ domestic and maintenance staff who have easy access to their possessions.

Just being near the art every day can sometimes prove too tempting. In January 2004, a security guard at the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe, New Mexico, removed the painter’s slyly erotic Red Canna (1919) from its spot on a gallery wall and hid it inside a storage closet. Oddly, he called police to report a burglary in progress and was found out in short order. He convinced the court that he’d taken the painting not to sell but, rather, to punish his employers for treating him harshly. He was sentenced to time served.

One year before that, in March 2003, at least three employees of the famous Riker’s Island prison got it into their heads to snatch an original Salvador Dalí from the people of New York State. The four-by-three-foot pencil-and-ink drawing, which depicted the crucifixion, had hung in a glass-enclosed case in the prison since 1965 when the artist, on a visit to New York City, had sent it along as a consolation offering after an illness prevented him from making a trek to the island to spend time with inmates. After seeing it every working day and figuring its beauty was lost on the inmates, an assistant deputy warden and two guards arranged a fire drill in the middle of a winter’s night to provide cover as one of them removed the Dalí and replaced it with a laughably poor forgery. After a long investigation and a series of trials, the three were convicted and given light sentences. The Dalí, which was valued at about $275,000, is thought to have been destroyed.