Los Angeles boasts a committed and efficient art theft detail in the form of Detective Don Hrycky. Simon de Burton reports on the latest developments from the city of Angels.

Detective Don Hrycky is a man looking for a victim. As head of the Los Angeles Police Department's art theft detail, he is searching for the owner of a stolen painting by the popular South American artist Diego Rivera - but he doesn't know for certain whether such a person even exists.

"We have been contacted by an informant who knows of a burglar trying to sell what is believed to be a Rivera painting in the LA area. The informant has provided us with a photograph of the work, which he took surreptitiously using a digital camera, but so far we have been unable to find anyone who has reported such a painting as missing."

Hrycky has established through specialists in Latin art that the eye-catching canvas, which depicts a peasant couple in a street, could be worth up to $500,000, if it really is a Rivera. But until it is recovered, it cannot be verified as genuine.

"We believe the criminal who has possession of the painting is trying to sell it in pawn shops but, despite the huge Latin American population in California, the likelihood is that he will sell it to anyone who offers him a couple of hundred dollars and, if that happens, we stand to lose track of it forever."

Regular readers may remember the profile of the LA art theft detail, which appeared in Trace two years ago. Since then Hrycky has been left to run the show on his own due to his colleague being moved to a different department. The cases, nevertheless, still keep rolling in.

As you are reading this, Hrycky is likely to be giving evidence in his latest theft case to reach the courtroom involving the disappearance of several canvases by the rising Russian painter Yuroz.

It seems more than coincidence that the paintings were stolen shortly after the appearance of an article on Yuroz in the 'Los Angeles Times', highlighting the increasing value of his work.

In this case, an elderly home owner was burgled by someone who knew him relatively well and who, it appears, thought his victim would never report the missing paintings to the police even though they could be worth anything up to $45,000, explained Hrycky.

"However, the victim did contact us, and shortly afterwards some of the paintings began to mysteriously reappear in his back yard - it seems the thief knew he was in trouble and attempted to return the stolen goods by dropping them over the back wall."

To recover stolen art so easily is, admits Hrycky, unusual, but one thing is for certain - the existence of the Internet has contributed hugely to the effectiveness of the LA art theft detail, which remains the only full-time unit of its type in the United States.

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I have been working on this unit continuously since 1994 and it is clear to see that the Internet has helped hugely with the success rate in recovering and restituting artworks.

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Before working on art theft, Hrycyk spent his time on the homicide beat, but while the cases he gets involved with now are less tragic, they can be every bit as dramatic. One recent case even involved a suspect believed of traditional murder mysteries - the butler.

The case revolved around the magnificent Bel Air estate of oil tycoon Howard Keck and his wife Elizabeth whose multi-million dollar art collection included a canvas entitled "Fria Lufven" by the Swedish Impressionist painter Anders Zorn.

For several months, Elizabeth Keck had the strange feeling that all was not as it should be with the Zorn canvas, and eventually, after touching the surface lightly with her fingers, she realised that what she had actually been looking at for all those weeks was a photograph!

The 24-hour armed guard around the estate, its sophisticated alarm system and full-time house staff pointed to only one thing - an inside job. It emerged that a few months earlier the family butler, a Swedish national called Rune 'Roy' Gunnar Donell, had left his job of 11 years on 'medical grounds'.

Exhaustive international checks by Hrycyk and his team revealed that Donell, who was a freelance photographer, had snapped the real Zorn painting, taken the result to a photo lab to have it enlarged to the identical dimensions and then substituted it in the frame for the original work.

It emerged that Donell, 61, had made several flights to Sweden in the months before leaving his job and had consigned another artwork from the Kecks's collection with a Swedish auction house. He did the same with the Zorn, and it had sold for $527,000 dollars.

Donell was arrested and his West L.A. apartment searched. Detectives found evidence of money transfers from the sale of the Kecks' paintings, cameras, negatives of artworks and a receipt from a nearby storage yard where Donell kept a 25-foot motor home.

Inside, police found more blow-up photographs of the Zorn painting and another of a canvas, which was still hanging on the wall in the Kecks mansion.

Donell was however acquitted of all charges after claiming he had sold the two paintings in Sweden on behalf of Mrs Keck who was, at the time, in the process of divorcing her husband and wanted to liquidate assets without his knowledge.

Although Mrs Keck refused his claims as 'ludicrous,' some jury members did not feel the prosecution had proved the case against Donell 'beyond reasonable doubt' and felt obliged to find him not guilty.

But Hrycyk's fight against art crime doesn't just stop at paintings. In another case, he was called in to trace four unsigned sculptures by the San Pedro artist Kewal Soni which had been used in the Hollywood movie 'Star Trek: Insurrection'.

The sculptures, worth $29,000, were removed from 73-year-old Soni's storage yard during three separate thefts and taken to metal recycling plants in Wilmington and Carson. One $10,000 sculpture was sold for $9.10 cents. The three others were recovered before they reached the crusher and a 42-year-old man was arrested.

Another case concerned the disappearance of thousands of limited edition cartoon cells from the LA animation studio of Bill Melendez Productions.

A routine inventory initially revealed approximately 240 cells, valued at $173,000, were missing and, about a month later, a few began to surface on an animation art website in New York; some complete with their unique edition numbers clearly visible on the displayed images.

The discovery led to a paper trail, which took detectives from New York to Ohio, Arizona, Florida, Massachusetts and back to California and which revealed that no fewer than 7,600 separate items of animation art from the Peanuts cartoons - collectively worth almost $1.5 million - had been stolen.

The thief turned out to be a handyman who did occasional work at the Bill Melendez studios and who took the opportunity to loot archive material at the same time and earn himself considerably more than 'peanuts' in the process. For more information on the Los Angeles Art Theft Details, visit www.lapdonline.org/art_theft.
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