California Art Squad

The courts don't take it seriously enough and there is only one full time art squad worth mentioning in the whole country. David Fanning reports on the LA cops who are trying to clean up art crime

Art thieves are not the sophisticated criminals of popular fiction and cinema, says Detective Don Hrycky of the two-man art theft detail in the Los Angeles Police Department. Generally, they are either opportunistic burglars who come across something without knowing its value or insiders, employees who take advantage of their position to steal something they know to be valuable.

"The LA art theft detail is the only full-time art theft unit in the United States"

Many years ago, relatives made them a gift of a bronze sculpture of a buffalo, by the American artist Henry Mervin Shady. A large and heavy piece of work, the owners kept it outside, by their back door. One day, it disappeared. Details and a photograph were circulated to hundreds of dealers, galleries and auction houses, but nothing was heard for a year or more.

Then an art dealer rang the art theft unit to say that he had seen something similar in a thrift shop a few months later. Enquiries revealed that the shop owner had bought the sculpture for $50 from a man called Henry who drove a van. He said he sold the piece a week later for $300, but changed her story under questioning, and revealed that the sculpture was in her garage.

The piece was restored to its owners, who recalled that they used to employ a handyman called Henry. One thing led to another, and Lightfoot was arrested and jailed.

When the bronze statue was recovered, the couple had already received $30,000 from their insurers. But then Hrycky discovered that another bronze from the same cast had sold for $25,000 through Christie's in New York, and the owners returned the insurance payment and regained title to a valuable and much-loved piece of work.

At the other end of the spectrum, one crook's cleverness was his own undoing. The case of ophthalmologist Steven G. Cooperman is a splendid example of a sharp insurance fraudster getting caught up in his own web of deceit and ending up being indicted on 18 charges in a multi-million-dollar scam involving two masterpieces.

Cooperman ran a high-profile eye clinic in Beverly Hills and, later enquiries revealed, was in huge financial distress in the early 1990s, with a number of banks seeking repayment of around $6.5 million in overdue loans. He staged a theft at his home in 1992, and claimed that two paintings had been stolen: Picasso's 'Nude Before a Mirror' and Monet's 'The Customs Officer's Cabin at Pourville'; together insured by Cooperman for $12.5 million.
The insurance companies became suspicious and baulked at paying the claim, so Cooperman took them to court and received a $17.5 million settlement, including $5 million punitive damages.

Following a series of telephone calls to Hrycyk, made over a number of years by Cooperman's former wife and a girlfriend, in 1997, the paintings were recovered by the FBI from a storage locker in Cleveland, Ohio, where Cooperman had hidden them. The paintings had been removed from Cooperman's home by his attorney, former federal prosecutor James Tierney, and taken to Cleveland by Tierney's one-time partner, entertainment lawyer James Little. Police evidence included taped recordings of Cooperman and Tierney discussing various means of destroying them.

The Internal Revenue Service became involved in Cooperman's downfall too, because the fraudster made a false tax return, failing to declare $5 million of the settlement he received in 1992. Cooperman was convicted in July 1999 and faces a maximum possible sentence of 18 years in federal prison. He still has not been sentenced, however, since the US District Attorney's office is trying to get a firm valuation for the Picasso and Monet paintings, at that will affect the length of the sentence.

One salutary point emerged at Cooperman's trial. The combined value of the two paintings was no more than $3 million, less than a quarter of the sum for which they had been insured.

'Most art thieves are neither expert nor clever'

Hrycyk says that he and his fellow detectives never know what they'll be asked to investigate next. One week in May this year, for instance, they were dealing with the theft of a Claes Oldenburg sculpture from a museum, the loss of a 40-million-year-old fossil, and the theft of a copper from a purported Goya painting, as well as the recovery of over $300,000-worth of paintings stolen from an art gallery and a $100,000 Picasso drawing removed from a private dwelling.

In the case of the Picasso ink-on-paper drawing, 'Faune,' it was discovered to be missing in late December last year. 'We felt certain it was an inside job,' says Hrycyk, 'and we had piles of suspects but few clues. The thief, a chauffeur, waited a month and then walked into Christie's auction rooms in Los Angeles with the drawing, details of which had been widely circulated. Stafford called the art theft detail and the man was arrested, underlying Hrycyk's point that most art thieves are neither expert nor clever. An $80,000 Tiffany lamp and other items had been stolen at the same time, but have not yet been traced.

The LA art theft detail was established in 1983 and has achieved some notable successes in its time. A 27-year veteran of the LAPD and a long-time homicide detective, Hrycyk joined the unit in 1993, since which time art and antiques worth $46.2 million have been recovered. His partner, Dan Schultze, who has also been with the LAPD for 27 years, joined the detail a year ago and is formerly a field sergeant working in the narcotics and hotels detail.

Both men are proud of the detail's achievements - particularly since it is the only full-time art theft unit in the United States. 'We are groundbreakers,' says Hrycyk, 'and our work will grow. What's good is that we look for cultural and historical property, for art that is worth finding, for unique one-of-a-kind items. That beats looking for toaster ovens and the like.'

Where Hrycyk is disappointed is in the attitude of the courts to art theft and fraud. 'The courts do not react well to these sorts of crimes, and the district attorney's office needs to take such crimes seriously.' He says that the sentences imposed prove no deterrent to offenders. 'Often there's no jail time at all, and perpetrators are simply told to keep their noses clean for three years or so.' The art theft detail is doing well, though, and he and his partner recover more property than all of the other LAPD burglary and theft detectives put together. It may take several years, in some cases, but Hrycyk and Schultze get there in the end.

For more information on the LAPD art detail, visit www.lapdonline.org/get_involved/stolen_art/art_theft_detail_main.htm

US art detectives

The LAPD art theft unit was established because many high-value art thefts were not being solved and few items were being recovered. The unit was formed as a pilot programme to develop new methods of solving those crimes and has now become a permanent fixture.

The idea has been slow to catch on in the States because such units are considered a luxury in tight-budgeted police departments that value generalists more highly than specialists. There is also a lack of training in how to investigate art theft crimes. However, a number of law enforcement agencies are now interested in forming such a unit, and the US Customs Service has announced that it is setting up a full-time art unit.

A Customs art recovery team will be stationed at the World Trade Center in New York, designed to expand an existing art fraud programme through additional resources and better coordination in the interception and investigation of stolen and counterfeit art, antiquities, and cultural property. The team will seek the cooperation of the New York art community.
Auction Review
Best of the June sales

Beauty Parade
Portrait miniatures

Lost and Found
Seventeen pages of stolen alerts, rewards and property seized by police