How we traced $31m of stolen art

America's only full-time art police are on the trail of stolen and fake masterpieces. Grace Bradberry reports

Detectives Don Hrycyk and Kara Clifford with a fake Renoir. Between 1993 and 1997 the art crime squad, led by Hrycyk, tracked down more than £31 million of stolen art.
In most cities, you see great art up in a gallery. I mean, of course. There's the Getty Centre and the Los Angeles Museum of Art. You want to see the good stuff, you have to go and pay a ton of money. And you have to make a reservation. It's a nightmare. But if you're a soccer player, it's perfectly usable. You can just walk in and out. And if you're lucky, you can even get a free ticket.

The offices of CAIA, one of the largest art galleries in the country, have been moved to the Brentwood area of Los Angeles. They have a main entrance, a green door, and a sign that says "CAIA." The gallery is open from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on weekdays, and from 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. on Saturdays. The entrance fee is $20 for adults, $15 for seniors, and free for children under 12.

Butler arrested but painting never returned

The butler was arrested but the painting never returned.

The report said that a painting originally purchased from Los Angeles art dealer George Simonds for $35,000 was later discovered by the art dealer in his personal collection. The painting was a $35,000 piece that had been stored in a safe in the art dealer's home for several years. The art dealer had asked the butler to remove the painting to another location in the house. When the butler returned to the safe, the painting was gone. The art dealer then contacted the police, who arrested the butler.

In other words, it's not always easy to leave the butler behind. For example, when the painting was returned the butler had made a claim to the insurance company for the original painting. The insurance company refused to pay the claim, stating that the painting had never been returned. The art dealer then filed a lawsuit against the insurance company, and the case is still pending in court.

The butler has been charged with theft and has pleaded not guilty. If convicted, he could face up to five years in prison and a fine of up to $10,000.

The art dealer has been interviewed by the police and is cooperating with the investigation. The art dealer's attorney, Dr. Steven Cooper, said that the art dealer is working with the police to recover the painting.

The art dealer is now working with a private investigator to try to locate the painting. The art dealer is also working with the California Art Institute and the Los Angeles Art Commission to try to recover the painting.

The butler was arrested last week after the police found evidence linking him to the painting. The butler has been a butler for the art dealer for several years. He is known for his thefts, which have included items such as jewelry, electronics, and artwork.

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storage locker. Bizarrely, Dr Cooperman had persuaded two Los Angeles attorneys to carry out the fake robbery. "They should have made it look more like a burglary," says Det Hrycyk. "Dr Cooperman could never explain how they had been able to bypass the alarm."

Now 56, Dr Cooperman was convicted in July of 18 charges, including conspiracy and money laundering. He has yet to be sentenced.

But the case that has really gripped LA this summer is that of Jane Crawford, a 50-year-old administrator at UCLA. Ms Crawford, who had worked at the university for 23 years and lived quietly with her elderly father, was found guilty last month of stealing and selling a landscape that had been hanging in her office on campus.

In 1928 the widow of the Arts and Crafts artist, Arthur Wesley Dow, had donated his Frost Flowers, Ipswich 1889 to an association affiliated to UCLA. Over the years it became covered in grime and was shuffled from office to office. Disliking the painting, the registrar passed it on to a more junior colleague, who passed it on to Ms Crawford. The quiet divorcee, who had never had a stain against her character, saw an opportunity. "Suddenly the painting dis-appeared from her office," says Det Hrycyk. "When people asked, she said it was being restored and cleaned. What people didn't know was that she'd taken it home. She had then told an artist acquaintance that it belonged to her invalid father, and did he know someone who could sell it. She also asked him to make an exact copy."

The painting was sold through a New York dealer for $200,000, and Ms Crawford bought a new house. The money ran out, however, and Ms Crawford decided to repeat the stunt, identifying eight works that hung around the campus. One was a Lichtenstein; another by Edgar Ewing. She took Polaroids, ready to have copies made, and began asking around for buyers. The Ewing, however, had been created specifically for the late Irving Stone, a famous art biographer and a fixture of Los Angeles high society.

A dealer contacted his widow, Jean Stone, tipping her off that the picture she had donated to UCLA was up for sale. "She created hell," says Det Hrycyk. The Ewing turned out to be hanging in Ms Crawford's office. But it emerged that the Wesley Dow was not.

Det Hrycyk knew a crime had been committed. "But UCLA had no knowledge of the painting," he says. "We waited more than two months for them to dig up information."

Ms Crawford was not taken to one of Det Hrycyk's "cosy" interview rooms. Instead, she was visited in her office. "She had two stories. The first was that a colleague had given her the painting as a gift. But she also explained how the painting was not cared for, how she had given it status that was invisible to the university. She thought that the paper trail would not show — but it did."