CULTURE CAPERS

LAPD's Art Theft Unit is the only of its kind

BY ANNIE BUCKLEY

The butler stole the paintings from the wealthy couple, hanging inkjet facsimiles in their place, and ran off to Europe to sell them. The staff left the combination to the safe in a drawer next to it — just in case someone forgot — and soon the contents came up missing. A woman with a fake identity posed as an art dealer and stole hundreds of thousands of dollars from Canada to California. No, this isn't a game of Clue; these are actual art crimes committed in the Southland.

Tucked away in a bustling corner of Parker Center in downtown Los Angeles is one of the lesser known components of the Los Angeles art world: the Art Theft Detail. Staffed by a tiny roster of two, veteran detective Don Hrycyk, who has been with the unit since 1986, and Detective Stephanie Lazarus, who joined in January 2006, the Los Angeles Police Department's art crimes unit is the only one of its kind in the country, rendering the team a unique resource worldwide. In addition to investigating the roughly 30-35 cases open at any given time, the two detectives field a steady stream of inquiries about art theft from national and international organizations.

Given that the art community provides the main source of clues for each investigation, the detectives are eager to bridge what turns out to be a rather wide gap between the art world and police work. My own interview with the detectives was set at 09:00, the combined early hour and military time triggering my general wariness around police. Maybe it's the guns, the threat of tickets, or the time my wallet was stolen by the kleptomaniac friend of an off-duty officer; regardless, my reserve seems to mirror the art scene's relationship to cops.

As I set out one sunny morning, it was exciting, if slightly nerve-wracking, to flash my ID pass through the metal detector and make my way to the elevators, all the while marveling at how much the scarred surfaces and dusky environs resembled their television counterparts. Exiting the elevator, I found myself face to face with the homicide division. I was getting a little flustered when a petite, smiling woman offered an enthusiastic greeting and introduced herself as Detective Lazarus. She presented Detective Hrycyk, a veteran officer with the twinkling blue eyes and serious demeanor of a big-screen detective and the three of us found an empty conference room, pulled up some folding chairs, and spoke for ninety minutes about fighting crime in the land of art, which might as well be Oz for all its atypical business practices.

The Art Theft Detail was founded in 1984 by detective Bill Martin, and when a new position opened up in 1986, Hrycyk decided to apply. "I got tired of dealing with dead bodies," he says dryly, referring to his former beat investigating homicides in South Central Los Angeles. After landing cont. on page 30
the job, Hrycyk quips, “went from ghetto to Getty,” and immediately threw himself into understanding the new milieu and its “quirky business practices.” He has since amassed a large library on the subject and teaches courses to other officers on investigating art crimes, but given the vast number of fraudulent artworks he’s come across in his career, Hrycyk is reluctant to collect art himself. “I would always be wondering if I really had something,” he explains. Detective Stephanie Lazarus joined the unit in early 2006, leaving a night watch position as Detective Supervisor. Lazarus collects folk art on vacation, and hopes to take a watercolor class one day soon.

So what’s the biggest obstacle they come across? Armed with lots of investigative training and a good measure of common sense, what continually amazes these detectives is the lack of written agreements and documentation they find in the vast majority of cases. Musing on why this might be the case, Hrycyk says, “young artists are so eager to have someone represent them that they are embarrassed to ask for help” in compiling the necessary paperwork. But that doesn’t explain numerous examples the detectives cite of collectors who lack proper documentation to identify what was stolen, or arts institutions wary of reporting crimes for fear of bad publicity, including one that waited nearly two years to report a missing artwork.

While it seems self-evident that a field which defines itself by going against the grain would be hesitant to follow standard procedure, this same independent streak renders solving art crimes something of a wild goose chase. Certainly from the eyes of the detectives, I can understand that it would make sense for artists, dealers, and collectors to create contracts and keep careful records, but I’m curious about the apparent resistance to this: Is the art world’s tendency to operate “in good faith” representative of an inherent instinct to define itself as separate from the business world as we know it, or simply a hard-to-break habit? Maybe, as the commercial aspect of art continues to grow, this type of DIY business practice helps collectors to maintain a sense of community, however illusory it might be for some. But this is complicated by the fact that art crimes are most often perpetrated by friends, employees, or even family members. Apparently, the close-knit sensibility in the arts provides fertile ground for manipulation and theft. This phenomenon is made clear in multiple brief but entertaining narratives of past cases, written by Detective Hrycyk, on the Art Theft Detail’s website.

Maybe it’s The DaVinci Code, but something about art crime seems exotic. Leaving the building that day, I was under the spell, determined to catalogue my art, draw up a consignment form, and investigate criminality in the art scene. Truth is, I haven’t done any of these things, and maybe I never will. But I am a little less intimidated by the uniform, now I’ve met some people who wear it, and had a conversation about art no less.

For more info: www.lapdonline.org/art_theft_detail/
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