Detective zeros in on art thieves

By Josh Kleinbaum
Staff Writer

When about $100,000 worth of jewelry once owned by Elvis Presley disappeared from the wall-to-ceiling safe of a Los Angeles-area auction house, it seemed like the perfect crime, perpetrated by a master criminal.

For Detective Don Hrycky, it’s just another whodunit.

"To an outsider, it looks like the crime of the century," said Hrycky.

The crime of the century, Hrycky learned, was really a crime of stupidity.

Hrycky has recovered more than $62 million in stolen art in 11 years heading the LAPD’s art theft detail. He is believed to be the only full-time art detective working for a municipal agency. In many of his cases, the key to the crime lies in the patterns of the victim, not the crook.

At the auction house, only six people — all loyal, longtime employees of the company — had the combination to the safe. But they couldn’t remember it. Instead, they kept the combination on a piece of paper in an unlocked drawer in the same room as the safe.

"Every time someone needed something from the safe, they’d see this guy walk over, open up the drawer, pull out the combination, go over (to the safe), read the combination, and then put the combination back into the drawer," Hrycky said. "There was a part-time employee who had just been hired. He saw how...

“In the last 11 years, we’ve recovered more than $62 million worth of art. ... It’s viewed by most departments as a luxury. I think it’s one of the best jobs in any police department.”

— Detective Don Hrycky

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easy it would be to get in there.

"The problem is not clever thieves. For the most part, the problem is careless victims."

Since 1994, Hrycky has helped recover, among other things, Picasso paintings, Peanuts animation cells, a $3.5 million Stradivarius cello and an $850,000 Sanctus Seraphin violin and bow.

He's searching for much more than he's recovered. He maintains an extensive database of stolen art on the LAPD's Web site, which includes listings for two Marc Chagall lithographs, an Andy Warhol silk-screen of Arnold Schwarzenegger, an alligator costume and the mask and spear from the movie "Predator."

"Don is an excellent resource because he knows a lot about art and a lot about the law," said Katherine Dugdale, operations manager of the Art Loss Registry, a London-based firm that screens art for major auction houses to make sure they're not selling stolen goods. "We refer other police offices from around California and other Western states to Don whenever they have an art crime, simply because he's able to convey a wealth of information on how to respond to a situation."

The LAPD created the art theft detail in 1983, realizing that expensive artwork accounted for a large chunk of the stolen goods in Los Angeles. Bill Martin, the city's first art cop, launched the beat.

At the time, Hrycky was working homicides in the LAPD's 77th Division, one of the most violent parts of the city.

"The city was having over 1,000 murders a year," Hrycky said. "There were certain weekends when I would have three separate murder calls. It was a really tough time.

"Some of those murders were just because somebody was wearing the wrong shoes. The suspect didn't even know who the victim was. They just perceived that they were some sort of rival and blew them out of their socks."

By 1987, Hrycky was ready for a change. He heard of an opening in the LAPD's commercial crimes division — then called the burglary and auto theft division — and applied, not knowing the specifics of the job. When he got the job, he was paired with Martin on the art theft detail.

"It was really a fluke," he said.

In 1994, Hrycky permanently gave up the world of murders for the world of whodunits, becoming the LAPD's lead art detective. Instead of chasing gang members, he chased "Clue"-type characters — the butler, the chauffeur and the handyman.

In one of Hrycky's cases, the butler of oil tycoon Howard Keck stole a painting from the card room of the Keck mansion, replacing it with a photographed replica. He sold the painting in Sweden for $527,000.

Yes, the butler did it in the card room with a photograph.

In many art thefts, Hrycky said, the crook knows the victim well enough to have some inside information — they're familiar with the security system, they know when the victim won't be home, things like that.

In one case, the crook installed the security system.

Carol Neal, a vice president for Bill Melendez Productions, which owns the original animation cells to Charles Schulz's Peanuts, noticed in 1998 that some cells were missing. She figured they were misplaced, not stolen. To be safe, she asked the company's handyman to build shelves in a vacant room, install a new lock and give her the only key, turning the room into a safe. She moved all of the company's most valuable artwork into that room.

The next year, she was shocked to discover hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of art missing from the safe room.

That's when she met Hrycky.

"He's very much the gumshoe detective," Neal said. "He has a dry sense of humor. We talked the same language. He understood how a production studio works, and how art should be handled."

In his investigation, Hrycky discovered that Perry Gilfoy, the handyman who installed the lock on the safe room, stole the animation cells. Gilfoy eventually pleaded guilty to receiving stolen property.

Hrycky has a clear passion for the whodunit, which comes through on the LAPD's art theft detail Web site. He includes information about his favorite cases, and gives them names like, "The Butler Did It" and "The Chauffeur Did It." His title for the Peanuts case is "It's a Sad Day, Charlie Brown."

In the 20 years since the LAPD created the art theft detail, other organizations have...
he knows how to work a case. When you combine those things, it makes him very effective.”

Hrycky considers himself an expert on art theft, not art itself, but he’s developed plenty of art knowledge through the years.

When he took the job, he jokingly referred to himself as an art Neanderthal. He would enter art galleries and be drawn to certain colors or shapes, but he knew little about artists, techniques, or styles.

Now, after 11 years as a full-time art cop, Hrycky knows the jargon of the art world. He can sometimes identify an artist just by looking at a painting. Art experts say he can spot a fake at first glance.

The expertise comes in handy. Those in the art world laud his work, saying his knowledge and understanding of fine art makes it easier to recover stolen art. And he knows how to treat fine art once it’s recovered.

“He always checks with people like me and others before he checks for fingerprints,” said Robert Cauer, a violin expert who repaired the Stradivarius cello and the Seraphim violin after they were recovered. “A policeman who doesn’t know will inadvertently wipe dirt into cracks, which doubles the intricacies of the work. He’s already way off that.”

Now, after 31 years with the LAPD and 11 years covering art theft, Hrycky is considering retirement. But he’s worried about leaving without getting the chance to train a replacement.

After cycling through partners for most of his time on the art theft beat, Hrycky has been going solo for nearly four years, a victim of LAPD budget cuts.

“This is the type of job where it takes years in order to get it under your belt and do it effectively,” Hrycky said. “There’s no college, no school, to learn how to do this.

“In the last 11 years, we’ve recovered more than $62 million worth of art. It’s a good investment, but it’s viewed by most departments as a luxury. I think it’s one of the best jobs in any police department.”

Josh Kleinbaum, (818) 713-3669
josh.kleinbaum@dailynews.com
Art thieves have a brush with the lawman

LAPD Detective Don Hrycyk holds a Renoir replica that surfaced in Los Angeles with an asking price of $350,000.