ART COP CONFIDENTIAL

Don Hrycyk

During the '80s, when Detective Don Hrycyk was working homicide in LAPD's 77th Street Division, he was always busy. Back then, with more than 1,000 murders committed yearly in Los Angeles, Hrycyk (pronounced her-RIS-ik) sometimes had to deal with three killings per weekend. People were dying for simply wearing the wrong colors. After kicking around for several years in various divisions, Hrycyk was offered entry into a new unit.

It was called the Art Theft Detail. The officers in this new unit would be responsible for all thefts and burglaries targeting fine art in the city of Los Angeles. They would also investigate all art forgeries and fakes. It would be the only full-time urban cop squad in the country devoted to solving art crimes. "When I got into art theft," Hrycyk says, "I was hooked."

In a battle-scarred interrogation room of downtown's Parker Center, I am wedged behind a metal table that is way too big for the room. There is less than a foot between the peeling walls and myself. It must be intentional. Designed to intimidate suspects. But today, I am asking the questions. Across from me sits Hrycyk, relaxed and composed. He's wearing a short-sleeved, army-green Cabela-style sport shirt over a pristine standard-issue white T. His wristwatch is one of those huge, outdoorsy kinds with tiny knobs. A fat, black pen peeks out from his shirt pocket; an ID pouch drapes from his neck.

He sports dark-green slacks, the kind you can hike in — which is what he does in his spare time, including recent treks to Borneo and Africa. He is in trim, solid shape and appears 10 years younger than the age reported on his California driver's license.

This is a guy comfortable in his own skin. If an actor were to play Hrycyk in the movie of his life, it would no doubt be the late Richard Widmark — circa 1950s Panic in the Streets.

Over the past 15 years, Hrycyk has been involved in more than 600 cases. In the past 10 years alone he has recovered more than $62 million in stolen art works — Chagalls, Picassos, Rothkos and Lichtensteins. He is still on the hunt for some stolen dinosaur eggs, a few Disney animation cells and a Red Skelton clown self-portrait, as well as a set of stolen comic books — among them a Detective Comics No. 1 from March 1937, a Detective Comics No. 27 (which introduced Batman) from May 1939, and an Action Comics No. 1. A copy of the latter, which introduced Superman, recently sold at auction for $300,000. "The reason the Superman Action Comic is so valuable is that it is in pristine condition," he explains. "There are only six known copies."

"This big Hollywood actor became a major comic book collector," Hrycyk recalls. "In his smoking room he paid to have these little vaults — metal and bulletproof glass that are little displays mounted on the walls. You put the comic book in and you close it and you lock it with a special key. The actor had a New Year's celebration where he had, like, 400 people over. It was a very dimly lit room."

"A cleaning person finally noticed some of the display boxes were empty," Hrycyk says with a chuckle. "The thing that was boneheaded about the whole thing was, here you have this elaborate security system with this special key. What he did was leave the key right in there. So whoever took it didn't need to be a master criminal."

Alongside Hrycyk is protégée Stephanie Lazarus, a 25-year veteran of the force and a serious Tyne Daly look-alike à la Cagney & Lacey. This mother of a 2-and-a-half-year-old daughter has been working alongside her mentor for the past three years. I ask if she knows anything about art. "Hangs on the wall," she shoots back jokingly. "After working here and seeing all the phony art, I said, 'I can do that.'"

So she started taking oil-painting classes. "I've been to Florence several times," she adds on a more serious note. "I started to love art when I went to Europe at 18."

With the economy going south, I ask Hrycyk, might there be a rise in high-end art crimes? "Not necessarily," he replies. "It depends on if there will be a market. In the past we have seen art-theft rates go up when you see in the newspaper that some artwork sells for a huge amount of money. A thief looks at that and says to himself, 'Why should I steal a whole cargo container of TVs when I can just steal one painting worth that entire thing?'"

For the most part, though, Hrycyk says high-end art crimes are usually an inside job. Instead of The Thomas Crown Affair it is more often a butler-did-it affair.

On March 18, Hrycyk celebrated his 35th year on the force. Before he retires he hopes to pass along most of what he knows to Lazarus. "I'm taking it day by day. But for right now it's interesting. It's a pioneering unit. We're still trying to figure out how to do these things. This is the only full-time art-theft unit in the country. Hey, even New York doesn't have one," he says proudly.

As I write up my report I let the two of them get back to work.

I know where to find them.

—Mark Groubert