LOW DOWN ART

BY ANDREW MYERS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JI SHIN

GALLERY BEAT: L.A.P.D. Art Theft Detail detectives Don Hrycyk and Stephanie Lazarus.

FINE ART FLATFOOTS Detectives Hrycyk and Lazarus connect the dots to protect and to serve—artfully

He's a master art thief, a scaler of stone and stucco, a traverser of red ceramic roof tiles who makes not a sound while stealing egg-sized jewels from the mansions of the mighty. Naturally he's as sure a heartbreaker as safe cracker. Naturally a beautiful blonde heiress is in love with him. Naturally he's Cary Grant in To Catch a Thief. And naturally that ain't the usual scenario. At least according to L.A.P.D. Detective Don Hrycyk, who, as a founding team member of the L.A.P.D.'s Art Theft Detail— the only law enforcement unit in the United States devoted full-time to the investigation of art crimes—ought to know. 'Most art thieves are opportunists,' he says, explaining they're much more likely to be an employee, acquaintance or casual interloper than George Clooney in a cat suit.

Not that catching them is easy, especially as the Art Theft Detail never numbers more than two detectives. Since 1984, the year Hrycyk (pronounced 'her-rih-sik') tired of being a South Central homicide detective and transferred to Detective Bill Martin's nascent art theft unit, well over $75,000,000 worth of fine art, antiques and collectibles has been recovered (dollar amounts have only been tabulated since 1993, making the actual total substantially higher). Several of these cases have garnered national headlines. Remember the $3.5 million cello, made in 1684 by Antonio Stradivarius, owned by the L.A. Philharmonic and stolen from the porch of principal cellist Peter Sumpf by a real-life bicycle thief in 2004? That was a Hrycyk recovery. Or the 1999 case of UCLA employee Jane Crawford, who stole a landscape by 19th-century artist Arthur Wesley Dow from the university and sold it to a New York gallery for $200,000? That, too. In fact, from March through July of this year, Hrycyk and his partner, Detective Stephanie Lazarus, who joined the detail in January, 2006, have made recoveries in excess of $645,000.

That's a lot of canvas. And the duo handles much more than theft, burglary, insurance fraud and investment scams involving art all fall within their purview. Take the case of Vilas Likhite, a physician, erstwhile cancer researcher and Harvard professor with bogus art—'de Kooning's,' 'Pollocks,' 'Brancaus'—selling for tens of millions of dollars, says Hrycyk, who arrested Likhite in 2004 in a sting operation, following Likhite's sale of a fake Mary Cassat painting for $800,000 to undercover officers.

That the sale took place at the New Otani Hotel—mere blocks from the Art Theft Detail's desks at Parker Center—serves to illustrate one aspect of what's kept Hrycyk interested in art crimes for 23 years. The perps are often pretty interesting. 'In art cases, you don't find the usual criminal motivations,' says Hrycyk. Greed is a given, but some steal to possess something they couldn't otherwise have (something, for example, not for sale) or possess (something they couldn't afford), sometimes treating it as a kind of aesthetic talisman or trophy. 'The rationalizations we hear are amazing,' says Detective Lazarus. 'Many claim to have rescued the art.' 'We have come to appreciate the strong attachment people have to these objects,' says Hrycyk. 'Even if the crook is never identified, finding and reuniting these cultural treasures with their owners is one of the most satisfying aspects of the job.'

In serious law enforcement, however, there's no room for levity. Asked what style of painting he prefers, Hrycyk puts his game face on: 'I like art that looks like something. I'm not so into Modern.' Then he smiles. 'I've seen so often how uninformed people get snookered by bright random splotches or colored squares on a canvas.'

For more information, visit www.lapdonline.org/art_theft.
THE NEW BOYS CLUB

THE RETURN OF THE REALLY, REALLY GOOD-LOOKING SUIT

MEET MINKA KELLY, H-WOOD’S SEXY NEW “IT” GIRL

ART HEAVIES MAKE L.A.’S GALLERY SCENE SIZZLE!

PLUS

TRICKED-OUT TIMEPIECES
ADRENALINE HIGHS IN HAWAII
THE CITY’S HOTTEST GASTROPUBS
AND MUCH MORE!