

State of Siege

How to protect your collection against theft. BY CAITLIN RANDALL

The execution was crude and the planning shortsighted, but on February 1, 2006, as alarms blared, a gang of masked thieves stripped a 17th-century manor house in southwest England of a treasure trove of art and antiques in 20 minutes. The loot—valued at an estimated \$150 million and part of a collection amassed by reclusive multimillionaire Harry Hyams—then was tossed into two trucks and carried off into the night. It was Britain's biggest burglary.

According to the FBI, art crime worldwide generates around \$6 billion a year, making it the fourth-largest criminal activity, after drug running, arms dealing and money laundering. Feeding the growing international appetite for stolen art are the dizzying prices achieved for major pieces at auction and the publicity that follows in their wake.

And in that shadowy world, most art objects—more than 80 percent—are stolen from people's homes, according to Scotland Yard. "Museum thefts grab the headlines, but the vast majority of stolen art is taken in residential burglaries," says Detective



Platinum and diamond necklace with platinum, diamond and emerald brooch, French, c. 1930, one of 200 pieces stolen from a Belgian art fair in August 2006.

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Sergeant Vernon Rapley, who heads Scotland Yard's Art and Antiques Unit in London. Big-ticket stolen artwork, the detective explains, is used as collateral, for ransom, barter or—depending on its value—to claim a reward. It has become a kind of alternative currency for criminals, helping them finance drug deals, arms transactions and

other shady undertakings. Lesser-known artworks and antiques can often slip through the cracks and be sold at antiques fairs, galleries and, increasingly, on the Internet (a valuable antique firearms collection was recently discovered on eBay). And while a flurry of high-profile thefts in recent years have spurred museums to beef up security by installing sophisticated gadgetry and hiring better-trained personnel, many private collectors continue to rely on outdated alarms, poorly trained guards and even the neighbors to keep thieves at bay.

Will Geddes, who heads London-based International Corporate Protection (ICP) describes visiting a new client at his northern European retreat: "There was a Picasso, a Hockney and, I believe, a Pollock, all hanging in the living room. They didn't even have glass over the front of the paintings," he says, noting that any

unscrupulous visitor could have walked away with a fortune hidden under his coat.

"An armed bank robbery nets on average about \$1,000 for the thief," says Robert Goldman, an art attorney with Fox Rothschild in Philadelphia who until recently was one of the top U.S. prosecutors for art crime. "Stealing art from a home is easier, much less risky and will earn the thief more money." Furthermore, he adds, given the scarcity of police and federal agents detailed to work art crime, the odds are definitely in the thief's favor. By the FBI's own accounting, only 10 percent of stolen art worldwide is ever recovered. "Collectors need to recognize the risks and take extra precautions," he says.



a&a advisor

effective deterrent," says Geddes. "For the thief, the risk becomes too great."

Buy Art Insurance

Most experts agree that any collection valued at more than \$250,000 should be insured by companies that specialize in art, such as Chubb and AXA Art Insurance Corp. They know best how to assess the value of a collection and give good advice on safeguarding it. They also can help track down stolen art, working closely with specialists such as the Art Loss Register (ALR), the world's largest database of stolen art and antiques, which has 170,000 missing, stolen or looted artifacts on file.

Dorit Straus, worldwide specialty fine arts manager for Chubb, counsels collectors aiming to buy art insurance to prepare a detailed inventory of their artwork, get an updated

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appraisal that reflects the fluctuations in the art market and make sure the documentation—which should include very specific descriptions of each piece—is in order. "Most specialist insurers will request all of this in an assessment of the collection," she says. "They should also offer advice on how to protect the collection from theft and on security procedures to take if collectors are lending their art."

"At the very least, even collectors who don't invest in insurance for their own reasons should employ some of the methodology that underwriters would suggest," adds Straus, beginning with an up-to-date alarm system and a background check of household employees.

Photographs and Object Identification

"Chubb is a big advocate of Object ID," Straus says, explaining that a detailed description following the guidelines spelled out in an internationally established checklist is crucial to properly insuring your property and, if it is stolen, in recovering it. The Object ID checklist includes a short description of the artwork, its title, the artist and the period in which the piece was made, dimensions and information about the materials used, as well as any specific marks, numbers or defects that might help identify the work.

Precise, accurate photographs are critical to a police investigation and are essential for tracing recovered artwork back to its true owner, says Sarah Jackson, Historic Claims Director for the ALR. She advises that photographs should be in color and show a variety of views, including, for example, the back of a canvas or the underside of a piece of furniture. A technique called macrophotography captures a subject so closely it's like looking at it an inch away from your eyes. Texture (down to the level of the brushstrokes in a painting) can be recorded in extraordinary detail.

Short of spending several thousand dollars on a new macro lens, ordinary photographs are a more available solution, experts say, but warn that both photos and identifying information should be stored in a safe place away from the collection. One unfortunate victim saw his photos and Object ID carted off in the very oak cabinet he was lovingly trying to protect, according to Scotland Yard.

Register Your Art

If you are robbed in the United States, first contact the police or the FBI, which has its own database. (In Britain, you would contact Scotland Yard, which will log the robbery onto the Art and Antiques Stolen London Art Database, known as SLAD.) Then, register the crime with a private database such as the ALR. Swift Find, where artwork is listed prior to theft in a secure, online registry, is another option. The ALR also provides a search service that can help recover stolen works.

"If the worst happens, don't lose hope. Some of these criminal gangs have the resources to sit on the art for years, keep it hidden, locked away, even buried," says ALR's Jackson. She notes that it can take decades to recover a stolen artwork, but that sometimes pieces show up by chance. In one such case, a Cézanne painting was stolen from a home in Boston in 1978 and hidden for 20 years. It was recovered when the ALR got a tip that the canvas was on its way from Russia back to America. Returned to its rightful owners, the still life, Cézanne's "Bouilloire et Fruits" sold in 1999 at Sotheby's London for nearly \$30 million. ☒

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