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# ART CRIME

## Shining Light on a Serious Problem

**W**hat do three Rembrandts, a Vermeer, a Manet, five Degas and a Cezanne have in common? All are among the still missing works of art on the FBI's list of top 10 art thefts worldwide.

Art theft isn't something many of us think of often. But, with the recovery of Norwegian artist Edvard Munch's "The Scream" and "Madonna," the looming problem of art crime has once again made its way back into the headlines.



"Art theft is one of those problems that goes in and out of policymakers' vision," Kenneth Polk, Professor at the Department of Criminology at the

University of Melbourne in Australia told Fine Art Registry (FAR). "Because of the Iraq situation, it has had some currency in US thinking in recent months. Before that, for a few years concern had dwindled."

To be sure, art crime is a serious and costly business. Art and cultural property crime, which comprises theft, fraud, looting and trafficking on a global scale, has estimated losses of \$6 billion annually. Yet despite its prevalence, some argue art crime has yet to receive the attention it should. In fact, apart from the relatively new FBI Art Crime Team and a handful of other law enforcement agencies specializing in art crime, few experts in the U.S. focus specifically on the subject of art crime.

"To many people, art theft seems to be more a private problem than a social problem, more a civil dispute than a criminal matter," expressed John E. Conklin, during a presentation of his paper, "Art Thieves' Intentions and Their Implications for Prevention and Recovery" at the Conference on Art

Theft: History, Prevention, Detection, Solution at Cambridge University in June 2006.



King's College Chapel, Cambridge University, Cambridge, England

Conklin argues that the general public still needs to be convinced that art theft is a “serious problem.” He began work on his book, *Art Crime*, in the late 1980s with the goal of expanding the scope of criminology to include art crime. When he sought out a publisher in 1992, he was surprised at the lack of interest in the subject. Though his publisher sold a modest 1,200 copies to university libraries and scholars, it has since gone out of print. Though interest in art crime may fluctuate, the incidence of art crime has been steady.

### **Growing Problem**

While the public isn't paying much notice, art theft is becoming a growing criminal enterprise.

“Art thefts seem to be on the rise, fueled in part by publicity about how much some of these works are worth,” Johanna Keller, Director of the Goldring Arts Journalism Program at Syracuse University, told FAR. “The other contributing factor is the lack of security in museums, particularly in some of the developing countries.”

Experts put the number at 170,000 pieces of missing art, with only about 10% ever found, according to Interpol. Often pieces of work resurface due to diligent police work and because a particular art

piece is hard to sell, especially if it is well known.

“Most of us who have studied art theft end up puzzled by why anyone would be stupid enough to commit this crime,” says Polk. “Given the network of instantaneous international communication, it will be impossible to dispose of any major stolen art work on the legitimate market.”

One of the biggest art heists occurred in the United States in 1990. Two men disguised as Boston police officers strolled into the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum during the city's St. Patrick's Day celebration. They convinced security guards to unlock the doors of the gallery and walked away with 13 priceless items including works by Rembrandt, Vermeer, Degas and Manet.

“One always worries when a major work is stolen because the possession of the work constitutes the basic physical evidence of the crime,” says Polk. “There is the ever present danger, as a consequence, that those involved in the theft will destroy the work when there is a threat of discovery or arrest.”

The Munch paintings were stolen by masked gunmen at the Munch Museum in Norway in 2004, while the museum was still open. Fortunately in the case of “The Scream” and “Madonna” police recovered the pieces of art on Aug. 31 this year, though they were slightly damaged.



Munch Museum, Oslo, Norway

“Art theft is tragic because it removes an important object of culture from the public. And it puts that object in grave danger,” says Keller.

Keller cited a case that occurred about two decades ago involving a portrait by Cranach that was stolen and buried in the ground. Though it was recovered and restored “its vibrancy was lost and it is now a minor painting because of its condition,” she says.

## Preventing Art Theft

While he commends the websites of organizations dealing with art theft that contain photographs and details about stolen art, Conklin said they are lacking in one important aspect. They provide little or no information on the crimes or whether the thieves who committed them have been identified or arrested.

“Information about stolen objects is essential for their recovery, but more details on what thieves intend to do with stolen art, and what they actually do with it, can be useful in devising better ways to deal with the important problem of art theft,” says Conklin.

Conklin believes that more research on art thieves and their crimes could help in establishing effective strategies to prevent theft, recover stolen objects, and bring thieves to justice. This would also encourage scholarly research and at the same time help bring art crime to the forefront of national and international debate where it should be.

The recent recovery of the Munch paintings helped shed light on art crime as a very real and serious issue. The Munch paintings were recovered two years after they were stolen. However, not all cases have

such a happy ending. Each year, countless pieces of art are at risk of theft: but it does not have to be that way. The importance of provenance, registries, registration and the Internet in preventing art crime will be the subject of discussion in part two of this series on Art Crime.

**to be continued...**

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**ANAYAT DURRANI is a freelance journalist with extensive experience in investigative reporting, a sharp wit, a keen nose and the tenacity of the British bulldog. She is writing a series of articles on art crime for the Fine Art Registry.**



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