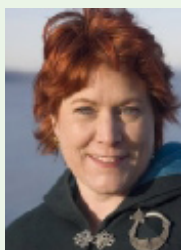


THE SEAMY SIDE

Two Spring Reads from the Underbelly of the Art World

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Framed: American's Art Dealer to the Stars Tells All
by Tod Volpe
ECW Press 2003 ISBN 1-55022-615-0

The Irish Game: A True Story of Crime and Art
by Matthew Hart
Walker Publishing Company 2004 ISBN 0-8027-1426-9



About 1998 I went to the Isabella Stuart Gardner museum to look at Vermeer's *The Concert*. Imagine my embarrassment when I found an empty spot on the wall. Somehow, I'd missed the fact that it had been stolen in 1990. I had not yet become a huge Vermeer fan and 'collector' (collecting live views of the paintings, that is, not the paintings themselves, wee bit out

of my budget) in 1990, but still, how could I have missed a huge thing like that? And besides, it'd been eight years – why didn't they have the dang thing back already? Isn't it a little hard to misplace something as distinctive as a Vermeer?

Ah, how naive I was, thinking that an art theft was a rare thing which would be considered on the law enforcement and media scale somewhere akin to a major international terrorist incident. Turns out art theft is pretty run of the mill, and hardly attracts notice outside a small circle of friends, which includes museums, insurers, and potential buyers of said stolen goods. In fact, art theft is bigger than the illegal drug business, but while international drug dealing gets media and law enforcement

glamour, glory, and big bucks, art crime (and other touchy-feely crunchy-liberal-sounding concerns like endangered species smuggling) is mostly considered business-as-usual.

I mean, say the voices of cynicism, 'if you hang the functional equivalent of a few hundred thousand dollars in very portable form on the wall by your front door, and it walks off, that's your problem. And who would waste that kind of money on an ugly picture anyway. Besides, it's insured, right?' Throw art fraud into the conversation, and you just grind further into the dirt. 'Not only are you wasting all that money on an ugly picture, but the whole thing is probably a scam anyway, and what did you expect. Next time, buy diamonds.'

The cynicism is spawned by a cultural divide that assumes art, as well as other aesthetically pleasing resources like the natural environment, are the sole province of the mega-rich. But art's benefits to all facets of a culture are enormous, and those works in the hands of mega-rich individuals today may well be in a museum or public space tomorrow, or at least accessible to researchers and students who

petition for permission to view and study. Once those artworks disappear down the pipeline of fraud or theft, they are lost to all of us, and the quality of our world diminishes.

(In fairness, growing up in New York I heard this same cynicism about theft levied in regards to much less valuable objects. The conversation would go something like this: "Ma, my bike was stolen." "Did you leave it in the middle of the lawn." "Yeah." "Well whose fault is it then." "Oh. Well should I report it?" "No, they'll just laugh at you for being so stupid as to leave a bike on the lawn. Besides, it was probably the cops that stole it.")

There are two books on the market that make for the perfect spring read (not quite mindless enough for beach-towel consumption, yet readable enough to munch through between the quarters of spring soccer games and waiting to pick up the kids from school). The first, *Framed* by Tod Volpe, will leave you wallowing in unadulterated cynicism if not outright anger; the second, *The Irish Game* by Matthew Hart, will at least leave you laughing, and possibly even inspired.

"Framed," Or So He Says

Art dealer Tod Volpe did federal time for art fraud, and wrote this book upon his release, so apparently in this case, crime pays once in the doing and then again in the telling. Volpe makes no apology for his over-the-top involvement in forging signatures on paintings, contracting for art 'repairs' and identifications grounded in smoke and mirrors, manipulating the media with public relations barrages designed to drive up certain markets, and ultimately 'churning'

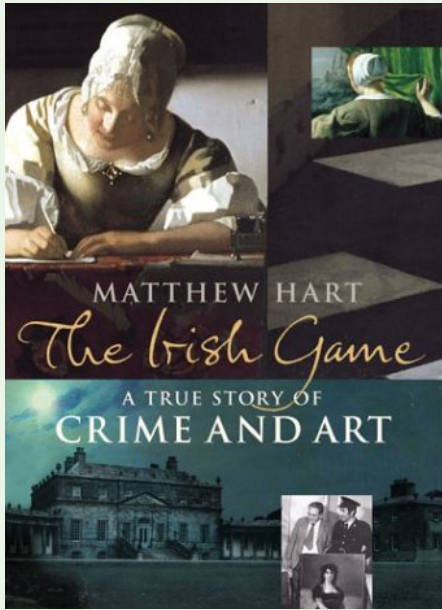
his clients funds and artworks in ways similar to those that get stockbrokers and financial planners in trouble, borrowing off of funds and against goods that belong to someone else.

Instead, Volpe asks his readers to feel sorry for him, because he is a self-described 'Rogue with a Heart' who had a horrendous childhood – the details of which involve the fact that his father was tired from working long hours and so they had to live in a small apartment and not have as much stuff as he would have liked. (Okay, everyone out there who grew up in similar conditions, raise your hand...) "My father said he was content to ride the subway to a factory every day because he cared about his family. According to my mother, any man who would sit at a sewing machine for 40 years and not try to get on in life was lazy," Volpe writes. "...Seeing houses in better neighborhoods on the way to school made it very clear to me what some people had and others didn't....I felt the wounds of poverty keenly...I would have been a good student if my teachers had tried to understand what was plaguing me..."

Then, he wants us to be impressed by how he rose above that childhood travesty of karmic justice to ride the cocaine-driven wave of New York City gallery explosions, and from there to Hollywood where he held actual conversations with people like Jack Nicholson. "I sat next to movie stars I had worshiped in my youth and rubbed shoulders with Elizabeth Taylor, Gene Kelly and Sidney Poitier.... In Tinseltown it is easy to lose your footing as well as your sense of perspective. Along Rodeo Drive, the streets are lined with Gold. Cars are plated with platinum.... To live and die in LA is



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an expression everyone uses. I would learn the meaning of that quotation, first hand.” Hmm, I thought, *To Live and Die in LA* was the name of a novel that got made into a movie in the mid 1980’s, but I guess Volpe didn’t learn that first hand, and he’s also not dead yet; in fact, his name appears in conjunction with at least one intriguing current painting representation

matter. It would really be funny were he not so intensely earnest.

Truth and Art

But if you can make it through the book without chucking it across the room in disgust (and mind it doesn’t hit anything breakable), you’ll walk away with an intriguingly knowledgeable impression of how the world of art business works, where art is a commodity, a never-ending stream of objects that, in Volpe’s eyes, seem to materialize from nowhere (in 260 pages of ‘expose’ Volpe talks about art values and pricing, manipulation and sale, collectors, galleries, and auction houses – but NOT artists), get joined up with prices pulled from thin air, and sold to whoever can be duped into buying them for whatever they will pay.

“By buying competitors off and catering to the needs of our collectors we created a way of controlling the marketplace,” Volpe writes. “It resembled the mafia, with people having different turfs. We were the Corleone family of the art world...” As to the fraud, Volpe says it’s par for the course: “The number of distortions fed into the art market on a daily basis is mind-boggling. There are millions of objects being moved around the

game board every single day by dealers and auction houses all over the world. The art arena is flooded with bogus items... Truth in the art world is hard to ascertain.”

But if you read Volpe’s book, don’t wallow in your angry response for too long – there is an antidote. Walk into a living artist’s studio (or connect with one through [Fine Art Registry](#)™) and buy a real painting or sculpture from its creator for the sole reason that you really like it and want to support the artist in his or her creative vision to make more beautiful, meaningful objects in a similar vein. Skip the fraudulent brokers and marketers and middlemen dealing with ‘objects’ and ‘product’ and buy some real art from real artists – for beauty is truth, and truth, beauty. That’ll show them.

How Many Robbers Does it Take to Steal a Vermeer?

Then after you buy that true artwork, think about protecting it, and to that end – as well as to restore your sense of humor – read Matthew Hart’s *The Irish Game*. Hart centers his book on the story of the 1986 heist of the Russborough House in Wicklow, Ireland. A huge estate, the boxy lines, wings, and colonnades of Russborough House stood as a stark monument to the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland, built by a devoted member of the Orange Order and thus generally treated with derision by the surrounding populace. (If you’re not entirely up on the last 800 years of Irish history, suffice it to say it’s an Irish/English thing. Don’t worry, the book will fill you in enough, but not too much.) After passing through a variety of hands it came to the ownership of an English couple who collected art, but otherwise lived rather quietly and by all accounts did little to irritate the locals. Hart

estimates the Russborough House collection at over US\$200 million, “and there it was,” he writes, “in a drafty old house in the country.... One would have thought thieves would be parked along the road with their engines running. Yet Sir Alfred and Lady Beit lived peacefully at Russborough House for twenty-two years before people started robbing them.”

First the place was ripped off in real 1970’s style by a bunch of alleged Irish Republican Army activists headed by a wild English heiress in rebellion against folks like mummy and daddy. Since rebels are rarely quiet, that matter was fairly swiftly put to rest.

You might have thought that the ease with which the ‘wily wobblers’ walked in and walked out with a carload of incredibly valuable paintings (including Vermeer’s *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid*) might have inspired the homeowners to take additional precautions. But, they didn’t. So another batch of thugs walked in, this time genuine criminals headed by a notorious Dublin thug named Martin Cahill. They took eighteen paintings, among them a Rubens, a Goya, a Gainsborough... and Vermeer’s *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid*. Apparently Vermeers are a restless lot of canvas; no wonder I didn’t see that one at the Isabella Stewart Gardner museum in Boston, it’s hard to keep track of them.

The chase for Cahill, in fact, led to the Gardner museum, and the story wanders to the theft of Munch’s *The Scream* from the National Gallery of Norway in Oslo as well (another painting that has walked off the walls on more than one occasion – and the news reports that three men have just been sentenced for the most recent of these in April 2007). Hart tells it all as a rollicking tale, replete with a dogged Scotland Yard detective, a cameo by an FBI agent acting like a Keystone Cop, and a variety of art

historians and experts making interesting discoveries along the way. In fact, the theft of the Vermeer led to the canvas coming into the hands of an expert consulted about its repair, who, given the unprecedented opportunity to take such a rare item in hand, made some impressive discoveries about how Vermeer gauged his perspectives. So see, inside every cloud there lies a silver lining...

Although Hart focuses on this one set of inter-related art thefts, by the end of the book you’ll have a good sense of how stolen artwork plays an increasingly key role in international drug crime and funding criminal enterprises. And you’ll be astonished at the ease with which most art thefts are conducted. Which will likely inspire you to take steps to secure both your own art collection, be they your own inventory as an artist, the works of local artists and friends like my own collection, or an investment collection of works by modern or classical top names. And while you are at it, encourage your favorite art venue – be it your local municipal offices, library, or town museum – to also inventory and protect their works, so that you and others will be able to enjoy them for a long time to come.

To this end, sufficient insurance backed by an accurate record of works held, together with registration of those works with Fine Art Registry, so that there is both an existing publicly – accessible listing of works you own, as well as the Fine Art Registry identification tag which will make fencing the works more difficult and return of them significantly easier. So while you’re waiting for summer to come, read about the seamy underside of the art world, and then register your art to protect it against slipping unnoticed into the hands of thieves, or even unscrupulous art industry middlemen. 