



Antiques & Art.
Vintage Collectibles.
Jewelry.

Recent Archives

Arabians will swiftly fill Kentucky horse museum

Art sales ended on a high note for some in 2009

Tom Porter, former owner of Garth's, dies

'Antiques Roadshow' sets its 2010 tour schedule

Portrait miniatures: Pretty as a picture

News Article

Going undercover with investigator Robert Wittman

For years, Robert K. Wittman has perfected the art of the shady deal.

From the port city of Marseilles, to the backstreets of Warsaw, and to a farmhouse deep in Brazil, Wittman has played the role of the greedy and unscrupulous art dealer.

His feats during his 20-year tenure with the FBI are nearly legendary. He has played a key role in the recovery of more than \$225 million in art, antiques and antiquities.

Nearly nine out of 10 of the theft investigations conducted have required an undercover operation.

For his own part, Wittman will readily admit he doesn't have what it takes to work undercover in the drug world. But, at 52 years old, with salt and pepper hair and rugged tanned features, he has that special panache to work within the underworld of the art and antiquities trade. He still forbids his photograph to be published; at the very least it would be detrimental to his craft. It could also cost him his life.

Throughout his career, Wittman has posed as the unprincipled collector, the avaricious mobster, and the reserved professor. All in the name of art.

Under these guises, he has played a key role in the recovery of vanished art, created by the likes of Rembrandt, Picasso and Rodin. His resume is impressive. He has rescued precious artifacts such as ancient Babylonian seals, a first edition folio of Shakespeare's plays and the original copy of the Bills of Rights. It was Wittman who masterminded the unveiling of the infamous "Watermelon sword" on AntiquesRoadshow, recovered the pistol that Theodore Roosevelt carried up San Juan Hill, and brought back to the public a 2,000-year-old golden Pre-Columbian piece of body armor.

In mid-September Wittman retired from the FBI. But, for someone with an appreciation for fine art and antiquities let alone a penchant for global intrigue, it is an impossible craft to leave. Now, in private practice, Wittman remains dogged in his pursuit, working for institutional, private and corporate clients which have become victims of art fraud and theft. In addition, Wittman – and his partner for nearly 20 years, former Assistant U.S. Attorney Robert Goldman – advise these entities how to best buy, sell and protect their valuables. Goldman worked specifically as the national prosecutor with the FBI National Art Crime, assembled and directed by Wittman, during the past three years.

"Out of the last 47 days (nearly from the time he officially retired), I have been home four days," Wittman says, from his home office in Philadelphia. "I've been to Italy, Los Angeles, New York, the Midwest, Dallas and Chicago. That's the places, I can remember ... I'm busier now, than ever."

And for good reason. The black market art and antiquities trade is \$4 to \$6 billion a year, by federal estimates. And, he surmises, he'll be busy well into the future.

"There's \$80 billion of legitimate art trade going through the United States each year," he says. "It's one of the largest unregulated industries in the world. As a result, it's like the wild, wild West out there."

And, as such, the business is filled with a myriad of pitfalls. Since the beginning of time, career criminals have abided by one commandment: Follow the money.

"When they asked Willie Sutton why he robbed the banks, he answered 'because that was where the money is,' but now – as we have seen lately – the money's not in the bank, it's in art and collectibles," Goldman, who is now a partner in the firm of Fox Rothschild LLP., says. "And now we see all kinds of these people drawn to the arts."

After their nearly 20 years each, working on the federal government side, Goldman says he and Wittman "know how the criminal thinks."

That's the trick, they say.

"That's the model for undercover," Wittman says. "It's to adapt, befriend and betray. That's how you infiltrate. That's how you get people to want to do business with you."

Going undercover means acting, "not really being yourself," Wittman says. But, unlike the actor, the undercover agent only "gets one shot," and that shot – particularly, coupled with multi-million dollar stakes - can easily mark the difference between life and death.

Take a few years ago when the famous Renoir Self Portrait, valued at \$36 million, finally resurfaced after a spectacular 2000 heist, involving automatic weapons and a speedboat, from a museum in Stockholm. Wittman stepped in to play the role as a middleman for an Old Masters collector. Wittman had set the deal: the collector was willing to pay cash. No questions asked.

Arriving at a Copenhagen hotel, as arranged, Wittman – carrying \$250,000 in \$100 bills – met the Iraqi-born Swede who was carrying the Rembrandt. Wittman took the man up to his room, flashed

the cash – all arranged in neat piles – and the man handed over the 8 by 4in Rembrandt. After that, Wittman signaled the Danish police, who stormed the room and arrested the thief.

Or the elaborate sting, moving through two continents, culminating last August.

The ruse began in Miami, where the FBI's local office picked up a tip that career criminal Bernard Jean Ternus was discreetly shopping masterpieces to art dealers throughout central Florida. Wittman, again taking the guise of an art dealer, flew into Fort Lauderdale and introduced himself to Ternus. Wittman told Ternus he was specifically interested in Impressionists and Dutch Old Masters. He made sure to add that he wasn't overly concerned about the art's most recent provenance.

From there, the two men had several meetings, including one on a yacht as they drank Champagne. In January, they met in Barcelona. All the time Ternus – and his co-conspirators – were sizing Wittman up. During Wittman's charade – altogether taking nearly 10 months – he was seemingly passing all tests set up by the other side. By early spring, Wittman brought another "actor" – a French police agent – into the scenario. The Frenchman was to be the money man.

Wittman, serving as a go-between, set up another meeting in Marseilles between the French agent and the thieves who had recently heisted important works from the Museum of Fine Arts in Nice. On June 4, the thieves waited for the Frenchman to show up with \$4.6 million in cash to buy paintings by Brueghel, Sisley and Monet. Instead, they got nearly a dozen French police cars – it was set and match. Ternus later pleaded guilty to conspiring to sell stolen art.

It not only takes steel nerves and a chameleon adaptability to successfully pull off the shady deal, sometimes there's a certain amount of chutzpah involved. Such was the transaction in which Wittman was attempting to buy Geronimo's eagle feather war bonnet, in 1999. Not only did the sellers – including an attorney – admit they knew the sale of eagle feathers was illegal, they also signed a receipt for the \$1.2 million artifact.

"Again, the question was, did we have enough evidence," Wittman says. "Once we got the Fed Ex package with a copy of the law (law 16 USC 668, The Bald Eagle Protection Act) did he tell us we had enough."

The attorney forfeited his headdress to the Justice Department and was allowed to plead guilty to a minor misdemeanor, "unknown bartering," for which he received a six-month suspended sentence.

A big part of what has enabled Wittman to pull off his job, has been his background. As the son of antiques storeowners in the heart of Baltimore – on the city's storied antique area of Howard Street – Wittman was immersed in the business. Most importantly, it gave him the "the ability to haggle and an appreciation of old stuff."

His partner Goldman is also a collector of militaria and historical items. He has a large collection of Theodore Roosevelt material.

Contact: (610) 361-8929

Eric C. Rodenberg

11/14/2008

Comments For This Post

Post A Comment

Name :

Email :

Comment :

Submit Comment