



Robert Wittman's undercover work requires steady nerves, fast thinking and a silver tongue.

THE

Art

by
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**Former FBI agent
Robert Wittman
is a master of
deception who
braves perpetual
danger to help
recover millions
of dollars' worth of
precious artworks**

SLEUTH

The sun was setting over the New Jersey Turnpike as Special Agent Robert K. “Bob” Wittman walked toward the car. Most thieves drove beat-up Chevys or Ford Caprices with cracked windshields. But this was a gleaming, black Lincoln Town Car. With diplomatic plates. The man who stepped out of the car didn’t look like the kind of lowlife Wittman was used to dealing with, either. He was a tall, distinguished-looking man in a dark suit with one of those musical names—Francisco Humberto Iglesias—that made him sound like a Latin pop singer. According to the business card he handed Wittman, he was no crooner, though. He was the consul general of the Republic of Panama in Washington, D.C. ■ “I’ve always wanted to go to Panama,” said Wittman, not missing a beat. ■ “One day you will come and visit as my friend,” said the suave man in the dark suit. ■ The two other men sitting in the Lincoln Town Car were already familiar to Wittman: Orlando Mendez, a muscular 31-year-old of Puerto Rican descent, and Denis Garcia, a 51-year-old Cuban American with white hair and glasses.

They were based in Miami, but for the last two months, Wittman had been meeting them at rest stops along the Turnpike to fine-tune their deal.

It was Wittman's first big international case, but he already had begun to inhabit his undercover role as an art broker for an underworld collector with the authenticity of a well-trained actor. At one meeting the smugglers had asked who the collector was. "A man who likes gold," Wittman had told them, enigmatically. In the negotiations, he became known as The Gold Man. What they didn't know was that the prosecuting attorney who would put them in jail and who was at that moment sitting in a car a few yards away, along with a dozen armed FBI agents disguised as tourists or holed up in a white plumber's van outfitted with enough video and sound recording equipment to do a remake of *Fantasia*, was actually named Bob Goldman.

"Let's see what you've got," said Wittman, walking to the rear of the Town Car. The diplomat popped the trunk. Inside a Samsonite suitcase, wrapped in some T-shirts and underwear was the largest piece of gold ever found in the Americas: a slab of metal bigger than the blade of a spade weighing two and a half pounds. Known as a backflap, it was worn suspended from a belt to protect the derrieres of warrior-priests of the Moche culture, which dominated Peru between 200 B.C and 700 A.D. Looted from a royal tomb at Sipán, the backflap had been smuggled into the United States in a diplomatic pouch by Iglesias. The asking price was \$1.6 million. Around the top of the backflap was a rattle—hollow spheres with copper pellets inside them, which jingled as the warrior-priest advanced into battle or slit the throats of enemy combatants in sacrifices to bring rainfall and fertility to the land. A figure known as The Decapitator was depicted in the center of the rattle, holding a sacrificial knife, known as a tumi, in one hand and a severed human head in the other. It was like *Indiana Jones* meets "The Sopranos."

"The sun was setting," recalls the 53-year-old Wittman, "so that it shone on the gold and made it glow. I was the first legitimate person who had ever seen this nearly 2,000-year-old archaeological piece and it was amazing to see it there in the trunk of a diplomat's car on the New Jersey Turnpike, wrapped up in underwear!"

Wittman, who recently retired as the head of the FBI's Art Crime Unit to run his own art recovery and consulting company, Robert Wittman Inc., was the doyen of art sleuths: a master of deception who tricked dozens of criminals into selling him their ill-gotten treasures. During a distinguished career lasting nearly two decades, he recovered more than \$225 million worth of artworks, including works by Rembrandt, Bruegel and Monet; a copy of the U.S. Bill of Rights; and Geronimo's eagle-feathered war bonnet. Police forces all over the world hired him to recover their national heirlooms and honored him when he did so. For recovering

the golden backflap he was awarded the Peruvian Order of Merit for Distinguished Service. "I would have preferred that the criminals who stole the art brought it to me," he says, with his trademark laconic humor. "But for some reason they didn't do that; so I had to go and get it."

The Thomas Crown Affair it wasn't. Art is almost never stolen "on commission" by gentlemen thieves with a passion for Picasso. Art thieves are like other hardened criminals: violent, ruthless, mercenary. The canvases they rip at gunpoint from the walls of museums or private homes are commodities to be trafficked, like cocaine, high-performance cars or women. It's a fully globalized business; and a growing one. No hard and fast figures are available, but Wittman reckons the worldwide trade in illicit art is worth between \$1.5 billion and \$6 billion annually, making it the fourth largest international crime, after drug dealing, gun running and money laundering. Paintings stolen in Sweden or France can turn up in Los Angeles or Miami. They are bartered for heroin, used as collateral between gangs or leveraged by terrorists to buy weapons.

Recovering them placed Wittman in extreme and constant danger. In 2002, in a Madrid hotel, he had had to throw himself on the floor shouting "*¡Bueno hombre! ¡Bueno hombre!* Good guy!"—when Spanish police armed with submachine guns failed to recognize him as they stormed into the room to arrest a drug trafficker and bank robber named Angel Flores, who was trying to sell Wittman *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, by Pieter Bruegel, part of a stash of stolen art that included works

by Goya, Juan Gris and Pissarro (collectively worth nearly \$50 million), which had been snatched from the penthouse of Spain's richest woman. In another case, he found himself hugging a Rembrandt self-portrait to his chest in a Copenhagen hotel bathroom as a Danish SWAT team burst through the door to arrest an Iraqi-born hoodlum named Baha Kadhum, leader of a gang that had stolen the Rembrandt at gunpoint from the Swedish Nationalmuseum in Stockholm.

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Bob Wittman never planned to be an FBI agent. As a child, he dreamed of becoming a concert pianist. "I thought I could practice my way to success," he says, wryly. "But I needed some talent too. I still play the piano, though: show tunes, Streisand. At Christmas the family gathers round the piano and we sing carols."

Wittman's interest in art stemmed from his extensive exposure as a young man to the antiques business that his parents ran in Maryland, which allowed him to learn about the business side of art and gave him a grounding in art history. In 1988, a chance newspaper ad seeking agents led him to the FBI—and the mean streets of Philadelphia. "I specialized in jewelry store robberies," he says. "Gangs that went all over the U.S. doing smash-and-grab robberies with handguns and sledgehammers."

His first brush with art crime came when an unemployed dancer wielding a handgun snatched a bronze sculpture and a Chinese vase from the Rodin Museum in Philadelphia in 1988. An agent was sought who could tell a Miró from a Manet and Wittman put up his hand. "I felt very comfortable with the job," he says. "And, basically, I never looked back."

His phenomenal success in entrapping art thieves depended on an astute understanding of the way the black market for art works. "The art in



Wittman helped recover this ancient gold backflap, which had been lifted from a tomb at the Sipán archeological site in Peru.

art theft,” he explains, “is not stealing the art; it’s selling it. A robbery, if well planned, is easy. Selling masterpieces is not. If someone is rich enough to buy a Picasso, he’s not going to be stupid enough to buy a stolen one. Most collectors love showing their art. If you’ve got stolen art, you can’t show it.”

So why does anyone steal paintings?

“’Cos they’re schtoo-pid!” says Wittman, roaring with laughter.

It’s not as ridiculous as it sounds. Dazzled by the staggering rise in the value of collectibles (before the recession knocked the prices back) and the lack of security at museums, castles and private houses in Europe, the source of most stolen art, criminal gangs that had usually gone in for armed robbery or drug dealing were drawn to art theft like moths to a flame. But having escaped with a horde of Monets or Manets, the thieves found they had no idea how to sell them. “A painting is worthless unless someone says it’s worth something,” Wittman explains. “It’s a few dollars’ worth of canvas, paint and wood. You can’t eat it, or drink it, it can’t keep you warm! And the people who rob a museum usually don’t know anything about the market and how it works. I gave them a structure. I made them feel secure.”

Working undercover is like walking a high wire. Your senses are on full alert. Your mind is totally focused. Adrenaline courses through your body. But whereas the wire walker stays in the air for only a few minutes, an undercover agent may spend weeks, even months, with the outcome hanging in the balance. One false move, one moment of clumsiness or inattention, and you can come crashing to the ground.

But in every sting operation there came a tipping point, a moment when the people he was trying to entrap trusted him. Wittman calls this “the moment of acceptance.” The period before that moment was the most dangerous. Often, the targets would practice their own countersurveillance, following his car or testing his cover story by asking him trick questions about the criminal underworld. “The secret is to make people believe that what you are saying is true,” he says. “You have to suspend their sense of disbelief and create a common goal so that the targets do what you want them to do while they think they are doing what they want to do. It’s an interesting dance.”

Wittman is keen to emphasize that he never worked alone and that without his team he could not have succeeded as he did. But he was the one who made it all work. He had no formal training in undercover work. The FBI academy taught him basic survival skills, such as how to “blade” himself when knocking on a door by standing sideways to make himself a smaller target. But the ability to win the trust of dangerous criminals is not something you can learn. It is something you possess, like a gift. “You can’t teach yourself to be plausible, to ingratiate yourself and make people like you,” Wittman says, with a self-deprecating grin. “You have a talent for that. So I just used my normal personality traits and adapted them. I’m disarmingly ingratiating.”

He also possesses a poker player’s ability to hide what he is thinking and feeling; infectious charm (his colleagues at the FBI called him LB—Loveable Bob); and a silver tongue that could talk a bird out of a tree. If a target accused Wittman of working for the FBI, his standard response was: “Hell no, I thought you were!”

Like a spy, he had a fictional identity: different name, fake address, credit cards, driving license. But, ironically, the key to success—and survival—was to be himself. “You’re not acting,” he explains. “No one can act

for two months. You have to stay as close to yourself as possible. I was never playing a low-down drug dealer. I was always myself. I was always Bob.”

Sometimes there were moments of comedy. “You usually had two or three different names and you had to remember which one you were using for each case,” Wittman recalls with a grin. “One time I was at a restaurant with some targets and I picked up the bill and wrote my real name. That was a real problem. I mean: how do you change your name on a bill? Even the waiter is going to think it is strange that you are crossing out your real name!”

The retired art detective can joke about such moments now. But the double life Wittman lived for nearly two decades was not easy for his family. Some months he spent more time on his cell phone than he did at home. And even at home, he was on call. “Undercover cases go 24/7,” he explains. “You are at a cookout and a call comes from a target and you have to go and deal with that. I have to stop being Bob Wittman. I might be working five or six cases at once too. You have to remember who’s who, where you are in each case. And that’s hard for your family.”

Harder still was the constant threat of exposure or kidnap when he was in the thick of a sting operation. So wherever he was and whatever time it was at home, before and after meeting with a target, Wittman would call his wife, Donna. “We talked mostly about the kids,” he says. “It grounded me, stopped me from trying to be a hero. The important thing is to remember that that’s your real life. People who don’t remember that get into trouble. They make bad decisions.”

Wittman had another ritual. At the end of the operation, when the art had been recovered and the criminals detained, he would find a quiet spot by himself and smoke a cigar. “I always carried a Partagas No. 3, which I got at Holt’s cigar store in Philadelphia,” he says. “It was a celebratory experience. It gave me the chance to sit back and ponder on my good fortune to be able to have solved the case. I had survived the dangers and I was happy to be alive. The team was safe. It was like having a good brandy after dinner. It helped to savor the moment.”

Wittman smoked cigars all over the world: in the Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen, after he recovered the Rembrandt self-portrait; on a park bench in Madrid after taking Angel Flores down; in Warsaw, London and Miami. One Partagas he remembers particularly vividly: “I had gone to Rio de Janeiro to recover some Norman Rockwells,” he says. “I remember sitting in the sand on the beach at Ipanema looking up at the sky. It was night and I didn’t recognize the constellations because it was in the southern hemisphere. I remember being amazed at that and feeling how lucky I was to be sitting there, alive.” ❖

Simon Worrall is the author of The Poet & The Murderer (Dutton) and a frequent contributor to magazines, including National Geographic, The London Sunday Times and The Smithsonian.

