

Posted on Fri, May. 21, 2010

Experts studying Paris art heist clues

By John Shiffman

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Who done it?

The theft of five paintings worth \$112 million from the Modern Art Museum in Paris on Thursday left experts on two continents studying clues to one of the largest heists in modern times.

Signs of an inside job: A disabled alarm system. Three night watchmen claiming they didn't hear or see anything.

Signs of amateurism: A smashed window. Paintings removed from their frames.

Signs of impulsiveness: The theft of a Picasso, weeks after another Picasso sold for a record \$104 million bid.

The founder of the FBI Art Crime Team said the heist carried hallmarks of a ruthless and loosely knit French art-theft gang believed to be holding about 70 stolen paintings.

"I'm sure that's who the police are looking at," said retired FBI agent Robert K. Wittman of Philadelphia, who worked three undercover cases targeting the French theft ring.

"It looks more like a crime of opportunity than a high-end, made-for-order theft," Wittman said. "Who breaks a window on a busy street near the Eiffel Tower? Cutting the canvas from the frames? That can ruin a painting. No serious collector would want that."

Vincent Noce, cultural editor of the Paris newspaper Liberation, agreed, saying the crime is unlikely the work of some gentleman, Thomas Crown-style thief.

"I think perhaps he took them for blackmail, revenge, or to hold them hostage for the insurance," Noce said from Paris.

Noce, one of France's foremost art-crime experts, said that the museum's alarm had been broken since March - and the thief likely knew it. "It was supposed to be fixed," he said.

Ronald Simoncini, the former security director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, said the theft of one painting, a Picasso, may have been inspired by a recent art headline. The record \$104 million bid for one likely increased the perceived value of the painter's other works.

"Thieves read the papers," Simoncini said.

Most members of the art-theft ring Wittman suspects are based along the French Riviera or in Corsica. A few members are serving jail terms in Paris and Marseilles.

Wittman knows the French art-theft ring well. From 2006 to 2008, his final years as an FBI agent, he worked undercover with the French police against the criminal organization.

In the first case, Wittman posed in 2007 as an American art broker to help recover \$66 million worth of Picasso paintings stolen in Paris. In the second, he went undercover in 2008 to rescue four paintings stolen from a Nice museum, including one by Claude Monet.

"I'm betting these are the same guys," Wittman said yesterday. "These thieves are thugs, not art aficionados. They are involved in drugs, bank robbery, that sort of thing. Art theft is just one more aspect of their activity."

The third undercover case targeting the French gang was a botched joint U.S.-French effort from 2006 to 2008 to solve the 1990 Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum robbery in Boston - a \$500 million theft.

In Paris, the two most valuable pieces stolen were Picasso's cubist *The Pigeon with the Peas* and Henri Matisse's post-Impressionist nude study *Pastoral*. The others were *Olive Tree near Estaque* by George Braque, *Woman with a Fan* by Amedeo Modigliani, and *Still Life with Chandeliers* by Fernand Leger.

Bertrand Delanoë, the mayor of Paris, issued a statement saying he was "saddened and shocked by this theft, which is an intolerable attack on Paris' universal cultural heritage."

If the Paris thief expects to make millions from yesterday's heist, he's in for a rude shock, Wittman said.

Stolen paintings usually fetch less than 10 percent of market value on the black market. The more famous the painting, the harder it is to sell.

The thieves who swiped *The Scream*, Edvard Munch's masterpiece, said to be worth \$75 million, struggled to off-load it. They wound up selling the work to undercover Norwegian police for just \$750,000.

"The real art in art crime," Wittman said, "is the selling, not the stealing."

Inquirer staff writer John Shiffman collaborated with retired FBI agent Robert K. Wittman on a book to be published next month, "Priceless: How I Went Undercover to Save the World's Stolen Treasures."

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