

Portrait of a thief

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With art sales setting records, burglars are more savvy of artworks' value

Katie Rook, National Post



UBC Museum of Anthropology/handout

The disappearance this month of 12 gold artifacts handcrafted by the influential native artist Bill Reid is exposing the underbelly of the Canadian art industry recently buoyed by record-setting sales. As Canadians increasingly gain confidence in artworks and cultural artifacts as promising and secure investments, a new wave of criminal activity in the art world is also taking root.

It is a problem Canadian police are being forced to address while scrambling to locate the Reid items, which disappeared overnight last week from a closely guarded exhibit at Vancouver's Museum of Anthropology.

Investigation of the theft, decried in the art world as a major loss, requires resources and experience that many Canadian authorities are without.

The RCMP investigating the Reid thefts, for example, have no specialized section dedicated to the investigation of art theft. In an interview from Vancouver last week, RCMP Constable Annie Linteau said, "When we do encounter this sort of thing, we do get in contact with Interpol, who do have the expertise and the ability to [assist.] It is obviously quite common in Europe. In Italy and France, it is something I think they deal with pretty often."

For the past several decades, most art thefts in Canada have been investigated simply as stolen property. Such an approach has deprived authorities of the opportunity to establish investigative protocols and a database of stolen artworks.

Detective Sergeant Alain Lacoursiere, with the Surete du Quebec, is one of only two investigators in Canada whose attention is devoted exclusively to looking for stolen art.

He says that as art-sale prices continue to set new records and the public's knowledge of art grows, police are encountering fewer burglaries where thieves gut a home but leave behind the \$75,000 Riopelle painting hanging on the wall.

He began investigating art theft exclusively in 1993, and in the years since then, reports from border authorities encountering art crime have increased. "Now, with Canadian Customs, every three to four months we seize a lot of paintings, and it never happened before," he said.

Art theft in the form of fakes and forgeries is common enough in Canada to create a demand for Det. Sgt. Lacoursiere's expertise, but the art industry has not often been rattled by the theft of noteworthy pieces.

The Reid thefts recall the disappearance of five palm-sized ivory carvings, valued at \$1.5-million, stolen in January, 2004, from the Art Gallery of Ontario. The 18th-century statues, on loan from the late art collector and billionaire Ken Thomson, were taken from a locked glass case during gallery hours --only to be returned two weeks later.

In response to increasing incidents of art theft in the United States, the FBI in 2004 established a team of art-theft investigators. There are now 12 agents in the department who have to date recovered 850 items valued collectively at about \$100-million.

"As artwork becomes more valuable -- and not just artwork, but all cultural property and collectibles become more valuable -- I think the criminals are more cognizant of what is out there and that it is valuable," FBI Special Agent Robert Wittman said.

Asked to explain what motivates those like him who investigate art theft, he offers a simple yet lofty response: "We are rescuing the past for the sake of the future."

"It's a good feeling to be able to recover art work," said Special Agent Wittman. "We look at it as being cultural property that's important to the

whole world. So when we recover a piece of artwork, whether it's for the United States or we recover it for another country, it's like returning the piece to the eyes of the world."

Art-theft investigators were last week reluctant

to cite market demand as a factor that might have motivated the Reid thefts. However, record-setting sales of the Dundas Collection of Northwest Coast American Indian Art at Sotheby's in New York in October, 2006, point to an increased interest in Native art.

Det. Sgt. Lacoursiere was one of the first people Vancouver RCMP contacted last week once the initial stages of their crime scene investigation were complete, Const. Linteau said.

By the time Det. Sgt. Lacoursiere received Const. Linteau's phone call on Monday, he had already alerted his network of about 75,000 gallery owners and art aficionados with a description of the missing items.

Det. Sgt. Lacoursiere said he is not involved with the Reid investigation, but describes the world of art theft as an underworld that can be irresistible to a wide range of scholars, quacks and gangsters alike. "All is possible in that kind of break-in. Maybe it is an inside job, maybe it's an [organized crime] order. Maybe, maybe, maybe ... All the possibilities are there: criminal, scholar, to laundering money, for the gold--everything is there."

While police in Vancouver attempt to determine how thieves could have overcome a sophisticated security network, Det. Sgt. Lacoursiere said he is not convinced thieves would target the items only to melt them down for the value of their gold.

"I don't know nothing about the investigation, I know nothing about the crime, but it's hard to believe that someone is going to take all that chance, all that trouble to pick up 15 little gold sculptures and melt them just for the gold. It's hard to believe," he said.

"If it was an inside [job], the guy now is in a very bad position because he doesn't have any way to ask for someone to melt it or to sell it or to travel with it or put it at auction in all the world."

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