



IN IT FOR THE MON

Special agent Robert Wittman, head of the FBI's art crime unit, inside the Philadelphia Museum of Art

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Last year, a notorious gang of art thieves made headlines when they stole four masterpieces from a gallery in Nice. They thought they'd got away with it. Then this man came along. Report by Simon Worrall



T

he Musée des Beaux Arts, Nice, France. August 5, 2007. “*Haut les mains!*” shouts the man in blue overalls and ski mask, pointing a Colt 45 pistol at the head of the woman behind the welcome desk. “Put your hands above your head!”

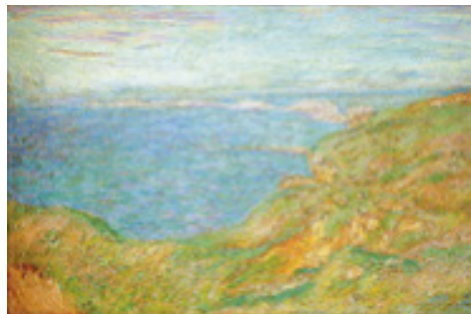
It’s Sunday lunch time on the Côte d’Azur. On the beaches of The Bay of Angels, topless sunbathers roast under a lapis-lazuli sky. Families stroll home from Mass. But at the Musée des Beaux Arts, a peaches-and-cream-coloured villa a few blocks from the Med, an art heist is underway.

“Everybody else, down on the floor!” shouts the masked man. He is Noel Dumarais-Pierre, the gang’s armed-robbery specialist, a hardened, 60-year-old French con currently *en cavale*, on the run, having escaped from jail halfway through a 10-year sentence. Since then he has been living underground, without papers or identity.

The thieves left Marseilles that morning in two groups. Dumarais-Pierre rode in the Peugeot van with the other “oldies”: the 45-year-old Patrice Lhomme, a former amateur boxer; and Patrick Chelelikian, 52, a Marseilles drug dealer of Armenian origin with a record dating back to the events that inspired the movie *The French Connection*. The “kids”: Moullec Gregory, 30, and Ritter Lionel, 35, petty criminals from Marseilles’ *gitanes* (gypsy) community, rode on a motorbike. Two of the gang sprint down the corridor to where two Breughels – *Allegory of Water* and *Allegory of Earth* – hang. They rip them off the wall and stuff them into black bin bags. Two



The gang sprints to where two Breughels are, rips them off the wall and stuffs them into bin bags



The stolen paintings, from top: Breughel’s *Allegory of Earth*; Sisley’s *Avenue of Poplars* at Moret (left) and Breughel’s *Allegory of Water* (right); Cliffs Near Dieppe by Monet

others run up the marble staircase to grab Alfred Sisley’s *Avenue of Poplars* at Moret; and Claude Monet’s *Cliffs Near Dieppe*. The big kahuna.

Flooded with light so bright you need Ray-Bans to prevent retinal burn-out, this great work is one in a series of sea and landscapes of Normandy that Monet painted in the 1880s. But the thieves’ only concern is that at 39in wide it’s too big to fit in the bag. Ripping open the back, they leave the broken frame lying on the floor. The masked man pulls the gun away from the head of the woman. The gang runs down the steps, loads the paintings into the van and drives off. It is all over in less than five minutes.

Ten weeks later in Miami, Florida, Special Agent Robert “Bob” Wittman sits in a car outside a K Mart supermarket waiting for a Frenchman, Jean-Bernard Ternus. Wittman is the head of the FBI’s art-crime unit. In a career stretching back 20 years, he has recovered stolen art works from around the world, from a Rembrandt *Self Portrait* to Geronimo’s war bonnet. For several years, he has been running undercover operations in Miami, posing as a high-end art dealer who moves stolen art for crime syndicates and drug barons.

As he waits in the car, he goes through what he has learnt about the Frenchman. Age: 56; from a family of *gitanes* in Marseilles; resident in Cooper City, Florida since 2006; green card application pending; lied when applying for a visa about his criminal record, which includes assault, armed robbery and counterfeiting; nickname: Sonny.

A motorbike slides into the bay next to Wittman. Sonny dismounts and gets into the car. That’s a good thing; the Agency’s techies have wired it with enough bugging equipment to spy on most of Miami-Dade County. >>>

Right: bare walls inside the Musee des Beaux-Arts in Nice after the thieves stole four paintings. Below: the front of the museum

Ternus looks like Joe Pecci: 5ft 8in; dark hair; a muscular physique that could do damage. The only thing that doesn't fit the tough-guy image is the voice. It is squeakier than David Beckham's.

Yesterday, at their first meeting in a downtown Marriott hotel, the men had barely mentioned paintings. Today, they talk about the deal in general terms. Wittman explains that stolen art is only worth about 10% of its value in the legitimate market. "At Sotheby's," he says, in his gravelly voice. "The Monet alone could fetch \$40m. But on the black market, all four are worth \$3m to \$4m, tops." Wittman smells sweat. That's good. It means Ternus is nervous. They arrange to meet again in a week's time.

Sting operations, Wittman likes to say, are all about befriending and betraying. His two previous meetings with Ternus have gone a long way to establishing trust. But he wants to make sure that the Frenchman is hooked. So he arranges a honey trap. The meeting, on October 25, takes place on a speedboat moored at Miami Beach Marina. Wittman doesn't attend himself. He wants to stay in the background – make Ternus think that his time is too valuable for partying. Instead, he sends an "assistant" and a couple of female FBI agents with 9mm Ladysmiths hidden in their make-up bags.

Ternus says he plans to return to Marseilles to meet his colleagues and that he wants to be able to tell them he has a buyer for the paintings. He also says he is interested in buying a large shipment of cocaine to sell in Europe. "No problem," says Wittman's assistant. "We got a guy in customs."

"God I love this country!" says Ternus, raising a Pacifica beer as the sun sets over South Beach.

On October 31, from an anonymous, high-rise building near La Defense in Paris, Pierre Tabel, head of The Central Office for the Fight Against The Traffic of Cultural Artefacts (OCBC), tracks Ternus as he boards an Iberia Airlines flight from Miami to Madrid. The Spanish capital is just a diversion. Ternus' real destination is Marseilles, where he will meet up with the other gang members and visit his wife and children.

Tabel, 42, is a colonel in the gendarmerie, with a background in violent crime. He runs one of the most aggressive art-crime units in Europe. After the robbery in Nice, he had set up a task force under the code name Operation Charet, after Jean Charet, the founder of the Musee des Beaux Arts. The crime scene had yielded little in the way of leads. There were no CCTV images. And, though there had been witnesses to the robbery, they had generated little information. A DNA trace from a cigarette butt dropped by the Peugeot van and one harvested from a bin bag left behind in the museum yielded no matches. But, thanks to the intelligence flowing back and forth across the Atlantic, Tabel has been able to put the gang under surveillance. Now, from his office in La Defense, he watches as Ternus meets



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with Dumarais-Pierre, Chelelikian and Lhomme, in bars or cafes; or at Ternus's house in Marseilles. A few weeks before Christmas, Tabel sends a text to Wittman. "Sonny" has boarded American Airlines flight 63 at Orly, destination – Miami.

On January 5 in Miami, Ternus is already waiting when Wittman arrives at their usual meeting place: the K Mart car park. Wittman watches as Ternus clammers off his motorbike and comes over. It is going to be another clean recording. "How was your trip?" he asks, as the

Frenchman takes the seat beside him. "Good," says Ternus, unconvincingly. "The boys say hello."

Ternus admits to Wittman for the first time that the gang he is connected to stole the Nice paintings. This will be crucial in any court case. Then they haggle over the price. As an opening gambit, Ternus says he has had to pay over \$100,000 for the gang's expenses, for things like car hire and house rentals while they lie low. But the final price for the four paintings, he says, is for the leaders of the gang back in France to decide. He is just the middleman. "Maybe it's time for me to meet them," suggests Wittman.

Ternus says he will try to arrange something for the week of January 16. "But not in Marseilles," says the Frenchman, anxiously, "in case we are being watched." "Whatever," says Wittman, laconically. "How about Barcelona?"

It is January 19, and the rendezvous is a dingy, two-star hotel a few hundred metres off Barcelona's main drag, Las Ramblas. The Spanish police have chosen the location and wired the fifth-floor room, a small, airless space with a stained carpet and cheap furniture. Wittman and his two "assistants" sit on one side of a table opposite Ternus and Patrice Chelelikian, who, during the three months of negotiations, has emerged as the gang's leader. He looks even nastier than the mug shots Tabel has sent from Paris: a tall, wiry man with grey hair, a sallow face and ferret eyes. Wittman smells sweat again. But this time it is his own.

The Armenian confirms that he and his gang are holding the paintings, but he won't say where. For the first time, though, he names a price: €3m in cash, non-negotiable. Wittman says he is okay with that. But Chelelikian has another condition.

"You get two of the paintings – the Breughels – for the first 1.5m," he says. "If that goes okay, you get the other two more valuable paintings." Chelelikian insists he has total trust in the American. But what if *les flics* have got wind of the deal? The Monet and the Sisley will be collateral. If any of the gang is arrested they will use them as a bargaining chip to negotiate their release. >>>>

STEALING BEAUTY: continued

Wittman's last meeting with Ternus takes place on a yacht in a marina near Fort Lauderdale on April 18. Three months have passed since Barcelona. The two sides have haggled over the small print and finally agreed on the price: €3m. But Wittman is opposed to the two-part deal proposed by Chelelikian. He knows from experience that sting operations are fraught enough, just in terms of paperwork, without having to do them twice.

The two sides also haggle over geography. Initially they had agreed that Wittman travels to Barcelona with an "assistant" to collect the first two paintings while Chelelikian sends his people to Miami to receive the first €1.5m. But, on April 10, Wittman's assistants had told Ternus that "the Boss" now wanted them to take possession of the paintings on his behalf – in France, not Barcelona.

The meeting at the marina today is to sign off on the final arrangements. There are no bikini-clad girls. This is business. Again, Wittman does not attend. He sends two underlings and a few bottles of Dom Perignon. Ternus arrives with the heavyweights Chelelikian and Lhomme.

The atmosphere in the room is heavy with distrust and menace. Several times, Wittman and his assistants go downstairs to the street to talk. Empty coffee cups and full ashtrays litter the table. Finally, the two sides agree that the paintings will be handed over at a location near Marseilles. But when the undercover agents say that, instead of them travelling to France, as previously agreed, they want the deal to be closed by a French associate of Wittman's, Chelelikian explodes.

"Who the f*** is this guy? Why haven't you mentioned him before?" The Armenian is right to be suspicious. Wittman's "French associate" is actually a member of SIAT, the French secret service. FBI agents have no jurisdiction on French soil and if Wittman's team are involved in the arrests, it could derail a future court case. It is also a question of Gallic pride. "If this is a trap," says Chelelikian, banging the table with his fist. "And the *flics* are there when we hand over the Breughels, we will f*** ing *arracher* the two other paintings!" "Tear in pieces," translates Ternus. "As you see, Patrick is not a big art lover."

Everyone laughs, champagne corks are popped and the men raise their glasses in a toast.

Carry-le-Rouet, a seaside resort 30 kilometres west of Marseilles, is famous for the *oursinades*, a festival of sea urchins that takes place between December and February, and as the place where the jazz singer, Nina Simone, lived out her final years. It is here, on May 16, that Chelelikian has chosen to meet Wittman's French connection, but for other reasons. He has a lock-up garage where the blue Peugeot van is hidden, with the four paintings inside it. But he will only show the agent two of them, Breughel's *Allegory of Water* and Sisley's *Avenue of Poplars at Moret*.

They meet at a friend's apartment. The French undercover agent studies the paintings for a few moments then asks for the gents. Not to take a leak but to study the canvasses under a portable, ultraviolet light to make sure they aren't fakes.

Chelelikian follows him into the bathroom and watches as the purplish light sweeps across the canvasses. When the agent is satisfied, the two men go back into the living room and the agent "flashes" Chelelikian half the money: €1.5m inside a briefcase. "The Boss says it's got to be one deal, though," insists the agent. "None of this two-part bullshit. We get all four paintings. You get the whole enchilada: €3m."

Up to now, Chelelikian has been cautious to the point of paranoia. But the sight of those crisp 50- and 100-euro notes makes him drop his guard. He trusts the money. And that is his big mistake. "Okay," he says, shaking the undercover agent's hand. "It's a deal."

On the day of the handover, June 4, Chelelikian, Lhomme and Dumarais-Pierre leave Marseilles by car just after dawn. As they wind along the Riviera towards Carry-Le-Rouet, the Mediterranean glints like tinfoil. They are not alone. As the climax of the sting

It is a myth that paintings are stolen to order by criminals with a passion for great art

operation approached, Pierre Tabel and his team in Paris ordered what the French call *surveillance ferre*, literally "iron surveillance". For the past month, a team of over 25 police officers have been monitoring the gang's every move. In all, 10 people are under surveillance, the hard core in Marseilles, the rest in Paris.

In Carry-Le-Rouet, they load up the paintings and head back to the Prado district of Marseilles and park by the Corniche. Dumarais-Pierre stays by the van. Chelelikian and Lhomme walk a few hundred yards to the bar where they have arranged to meet the SIAT agent. The agent will hand over the money. Lhomme and Chelelikian will then take him to the van and hand over the paintings.

From an unmarked patrol car half a mile away, Pierre Tabel monitors the operation over the radio. More than fifty police officers, some disguised as street cleaners, postmen or passers-by, are positioned in and around the Prado area. Some watch Lhomme and Chelelikian. Others cover the blue van. Five addresses in Marseilles and Paris are also under surveillance. On the other side of the Atlantic, in Cooper City, Florida, FBI agents are staked out around Ternus' house.

It is 9.10am when Tabel gives the order. Agents with guns swarm out of doorways. Others launch themselves at the men with flying rugby tackles. Motorcycles and police cars, sirens blaring, block off the adjacent streets. Bundled to the ground and handcuffed, Chelelikian, Lhomme and the SIAT agent are pinned face-down on the pavement. Inside Chelelikian's jacket, police find a Colt 45 pistol. Lhomme has

a Czech-made hand grenade. To avoid suspicion that he is an agent, the police are especially rough with the man from SIAT. At the Corniche, police overpower Dumarais-Pierre. They find the paintings in the van, packed in cardboard boxes.

Twenty minutes after the arrests in Marseilles Tabel calls Wittman in Miami. Under US law night-time arrests are only possible in exceptional circumstances, so Wittman and his team have to wait until 6am to enter Sonny's home in Florida. The Frenchman is still in his pyjamas when a SWAT team breaks down the door. His wife and children are asleep. Ternus offers no resistance as he is overpowered and handcuffed. Six days later he pleads guilty to conspiring to transport four stolen paintings knowing they were stolen. He also pleads guilty to visa fraud for lying about his criminal record. Sonny's American dream is over.

In a banquet hall on the edge of Philadelphia on September 19, several dozen people – FBI agents, museum curators and security experts, Wittman's family and closest friends – assemble to bid farewell to the most famous art detective in the world, who, after 20 years, is retiring to start a new life as an art security consultant and author. "I'm hanging up my gun and badge," he tells me. "And replacing them with pen and paper."

Wittman downplays the dangers of the job that has taken him to over a dozen countries, but he is lucky to still be alive. In Copenhagen three years ago, he had to hide in the bathroom with a Rembrandt *Self-Portrait* worth \$40m when a Danish SWAT team burst into his hotel room to arrest the Iraqi-born leader of a gang that had tried to sell it to him after one of the most violent art thefts of recent years. After torching a car to block the only road leading to and from Sweden's National Museum, the gang had burst into the museum with automatic weapons, ripped the painting from the wall and escaped by speed boat. In another case, in Madrid, Wittman had to throw himself to the floor when the Spanish police failed to recognise him as they burst into the room to arrest a drug-trafficker named Angel Flores, who had tried to sell Wittman *The Temptation of St Anthony* by Pieter Breughel the Elder, which had been stolen from the penthouse of Spain's richest woman.

One of the most pervasive myths about art theft is that paintings are stolen "to order" by sophisticated criminals with a passion for great art, as portrayed in *The Thomas Crown Affair*. Wittman knows the reality is very different: that for art thieves paintings are just another black-market commodity, like drugs or cars. And though it is masterpieces like Monet's *Cliffs Near Dieppe* that make headlines, most of the cases that passed across Wittman's desk in the past 20 years were of a more humdrum nature.

"Ninety five percent of art that's stolen is not big-ticket items," he tells me. "But from household burglaries. It's pieces of art worth thousands, not millions. For every Rembrandt that is stolen there are 10,000 minor paintings stolen every year." ■