

Crime: To Catch a Thief

Bob Wittman has recovered more than \$100 million in stolen art and artifacts, thrown dozens of violent criminals behind bars, and protected the cultural heritage of half a dozen countries. So why does he think he's going to Hell?

By Roxanne Patel

Don't shoot!"

Robert Wittman drops to the floor of a Madrid hotel room, yelling for his life while a gang of machine-gun-toting Spaniards storms in. They wave their weapons. Across the room, a man screams. Wittman doesn't look up. Instead, he clutches a \$4 million painting to his chest with one hand, covers his head with the other, and holds his breath.

It's late June 2002, and Wittman — far from his home near Chadds Ford — has been in Spain for just four days, trying to broker a deal between Spanish art thieves and Eastern European mobsters who want to buy 10 stolen paintings, worth about \$50 million. Over the past few days, he's charmed the thieves with his professorial intellect, convinced them to bring him a valuable Pieter Brueghel painting to authenticate, and promised them a \$10 million payout. He's laughed at their jokes, made plans for future meetings. All the while, he's pushed away any thoughts of his own guilt, of the sick feeling he'll take home with him — of the betrayal. That will come later, when Wittman has time to ponder the state of his soul, the righteousness of his God-given talents.

Right now, he's too busy pondering his immediate future. The gunmen sweep through Wittman's hotel room, shouting angrily in Spanish — which Wittman can't follow. He only hopes they can understand him.

"*Bueno hombre!*" he pleads from the floor. "Don't shoot!"

FBI Special Agent Bob Wittman considers himself for a moment in his bedroom mirror. At 49, he's a distinguished middle-aged man: stocky but not paunchy, with crow's-feet around almond-shaped eyes, and graying dark hair — short, but not too short. He's neat, tucked-in, restrained — just how he likes it. Then, to do what he has to do, Wittman starts to shred his carefully constructed image. He loses his gray G-man suit, the polished black wing tips, the crisp white shirt. He locks away his .40-caliber Glock, puts his badge in a drawer. He sheds his law-enforcement devotion to rules, blurs his beliefs in right and wrong, good and bad, black and white. Without fanfare, he lets go of just enough of his conscience to do his job.

A few days earlier, Spanish police called Wittman in his office at the FBI's Philadelphia headquarters with a plan to lure their country's most notorious art thieves into a trap, using Wittman as an art professor hired to authenticate the paintings for a potential buyer. The agent readily agreed to help. He had been following the case from afar since August 2001, when the penthouse of Spain's richest woman was robbed of 17 paintings and several sculptures, including Francisco Goya's *The Swing*, worth over \$12 million, and works by Brueghel, Camille Pissarro and Juan Gris. Spanish authorities realized almost immediately who the perpetrators were: a violent gang known as the Angel Suarez Flores Organization, on Spain's most-wanted list for 10 years. But Spanish law required that the thieves be caught with the stolen works in hand before arrests could be made. And for that, the Spaniards needed Wittman.

As the FBI's sole undercover agent dedicated to art and artifact crimes, Wittman had already recovered some \$50 million in pilfered works since 1998, including five Norman Rockwell paintings missing from Minneapolis for 20 years, three of which he tracked to Brazil; 2,000-year-old gold Peruvian body armor he intercepted in Philadelphia; Geronimo's \$1.2 million feather headdress; and one of the 14 original manuscripts of the Bill of Rights, stolen during the Civil War. The United States is one of the world's biggest consumers of stolen art, and through his work, Wittman has put Philadelphia in the center of the war against art theft — the fourth-largest international crime, after drug dealing, gun running and money laundering. Posing as a dealer or collector, Wittman sometimes lures suspects to his own backyard, often arresting them after stings in area hotels. As a result, the U.S. Attorney has prosecuted more museum thefts in Philadelphia than anywhere else in the country. This year, largely due to Wittman's success, the FBI launched an art theft squad — eight agents throughout the country dedicated to investigating cultural theft, all trained by Wittman in Philadelphia.

Still, Wittman had never worked a case as important as the one in Madrid — not even close. The theft was the largest European art heist in several decades, and the stolen works were considered part of Spain's national heritage. A lot was at stake. By the time the Spanish police called Wittman in June 2002 — 10 months after the robbery — Angel Flores and his gang had already sold some of the paintings, and were getting antsy about the rest. Flores, after all, was no Thomas Crown; he didn't steal the paintings to prove he could. He was a bank robber, drug dealer and kidnapper, in it for the cash — and desperate for it quickly. He was also skittish, and knew all too well that the cops were after him. Wittman would have to be convincing.

Before he left for Spain, the FBI agent methodically turned himself into a believable art professor. First, he took a crash course in the stolen paintings from conservators at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In particular, they told him how to quickly identify Pieter Brueghel's 16th-century surrealist work *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, the hardest of the lot to forge: painted on board, not canvas; in rich magentas, blues and greens; with 450-year-old cracks in the varnish. Then Wittman considered his cover. By now, he'd learned to keep his backstory as close to the truth as possible. So he's Bob (no last name needed), married to Donna, with three teenage kids he makes a point of eating dinner with every night. He lives in the suburbs, near Pennsylvania historical spots he loves; he coaches his kids' soccer and basketball teams, goes to almost every high-school lacrosse game. The youngest son of Baltimore antiques dealers, he's a collector of Oriental art and Civil War artifacts, each with its own story.

Finally, Wittman sloughed his FBI persona, hanging his suit in the closet and donning instead a black golf shirt, crisp khakis and casual loafers. He told his wife where he was going, but not why or as whom. If a fellow passenger on his Madrid-bound plane asked about his trip, though, he would be ready: "I'm an art professor. I'm going to Madrid to authenticate some paintings."

There are lies, and then there are lies — and not all lies are equal. Or are they? Bob Wittman's not so sure anymore. What is the difference between a good lie and a bad lie? *It's all evil.* He hears himself saying it — in his head, rarely out loud — and he knows it sounds melodramatic, even evangelical. *Evil feeding on evil.* The man's not prone to melodrama; he's not inclined toward fire and brimstone. But he also can't lie to himself — is that the difference? — can't deny what lying is, what it does: chips away at his soul, bit by bit, until he can feel

CHASE

CHASE
SAPPHIRESM
SPOTLIGHT

FIND THE MOST
POPULAR EVENTS
& ATTRACTIONS
THAT ARE
IN-DEMAND
THIS MONTH!
BROUGHT TO
YOU BY
CHASE SAPPHIRESM.

VIEW EVENTS



himself heading towards a special corner of Hell reserved for fabulists, even well-intentioned ones.

Oh, his intentions *are* good — saving art, preserving cultural heritage, enforcing the law. No doubt about that, even for him. And he's certainly not a bad man; he's known bad men in his career, thugs, murderers, frauds. In fact, he's an inherently decent man — that's the problem. When he joined the FBI in 1988, Wittman was like most other agents he knew: consciously upstanding, a straight-shooter, a rules guy. That's what it took to do the job: always knowing what side of the line to stand on, what page in the FBI manual to turn to. He didn't drink, so he'd always have his head on straight. He didn't smoke or sleep around, and he'd married a woman who seemed, above all else, incredibly truthful. It mattered. And it still matters. He's still happily married, still doesn't drink or smoke or cheat.

But he lies. Often, and well. In fact, he's brilliant at it — never breaking a sweat, never skipping a heartbeat, never caught unprepared. It's as easy to him as knowing the difference between Impressionism and cubism, as tying his shoes. Two years after Wittman joined the FBI, the Bureau sent him to art school, then gemology school, then diamond school, and by 1999 he was teaching at undercover boot camp, even though he had never been through it himself. He was a natural. His job takes confidence, amiability, quick thinking — all of which Wittman has in spades. He's conspicuously normal — a football-loving, SUV-driving guy's guy who's also the sensitive one other agents come to with their problems, who was sent to comfort the families of local people who died on September 11th. He's nice. People open up to him. He knows how to get people to trust him.

Wittman counts on this a few days after he arrives in Spain, when he waves to Angel Suarez Flores across the lobby of Madrid's luxury Meliá Castilla hotel. It's a steamy 3 a.m. after a 103-degree day, and "Profesor Bob" is with his "client" — another undercover officer posing as an Eastern European mobster, in tight black jeans and a leather jacket. Scores of additional cops, armed and wired, blend in as clerks, beggars and guests. Flores looks right past them as he introduces himself, and his associate, to the agents. Scrawny and hunched, he's an ugly, ugly man — more like a gnarly gnome, snaggle-toothed, bug-eyed and bald. Flores plops into a chair next to the "mobster" and starts speaking to the undercover officer in pidgin French — the only language he thinks they have in common.

Wittman mirrors Flores, an undercover trick he knows will put the man at ease. When Flores sits on the cushiony sofa, Wittman sits; when Flores laughs, Wittman laughs; when Flores leans in, Wittman follows. It starts to work. After several minutes of small talk — in broken English — Wittman sees Flores visibly relax. He gets down to business. From a manila envelope, he hands Flores a color printout of the stolen artwork that he's downloaded from the Internet and asks the thief to tell him which paintings are still available. Flores glances at the page.

"Ah, FBI website!" he says.

Wittman freezes, catches his breath. He knows he cut any references to the FBI off the printout — but apparently that wasn't enough. "Uh, well," he says. "It's the only place I could think to find pictures."

"Yes, yes, good idea." Flores shrugs, and Wittman realizes with relief that he doesn't suspect a thing. He silently curses himself for the slip-up, but is also impressed: Flores may be a thug, but he's done his homework; he knows who's after him.

After looking through the pictures, Flores agrees to bring Wittman the Brueghel so the Profesor can assure his client it's real. Worth \$4 million, the surrealist work is neither the most valuable in the lot nor the least, and it's a steal at \$1 million, which the "mobster" agrees to pay. If all goes well with that deal, Wittman tells Flores, his client will pay another \$9 million for the remaining nine paintings. He sees Flores smile widely, while across from him, his associate leaps up.

"Okay, let's go," he says. "We'll take you to the painting."

Wittman thinks fast. He knows they can't leave the hotel, where officers are poised to jump in if anything happens. But he also can't let them walk away without some sort of arrangement. "No, no, no," he stammers. "I'm not going anywhere."

Flores smiles. "Ah, that's right," he says. "You are not a professional [criminal]. You're scared."

"Yes!" Wittman says. "I'm ... too scared to go anywhere."

Flores nods, then agrees to meet back at the hotel in a couple of days. Wittman can tell the thief is pleased, as though he's proud to associate with a sophisticate, not a criminal. As he gets up to go, Flores takes Wittman's hand and whispers to him about another job he hopes they can do together in Amsterdam the following spring, where he plans to steal several van Goghs. "We can make lots of money together," he says.

He walks away, and Wittman sits back, smiling to himself. He's done it again.

On a sweltering morning two days later, Wittman waits for Flores in a sixth-floor hotel room wired with hidden cameras and microphones. A duffel bag with \$1 million in cash sits on the floor by the bed, watched over by a Spanish policeman — supposedly in the mobster's crew — with a tiny five-shot revolver at his hip. Anything could happen. Flores might bring the Brueghel as promised, ready to do the deal. He might bring a fake. He might also come in shooting, make a grab for the duffel. Wittman sits calmly on the bed, unarmed.

Since their first lobby meeting, Wittman had seen Flores once more — to give him some sample bills, to prove the "mobster" has real money. The thief thanked him hungrily, then hinted at how desperate he was: If this deal hadn't come up, Flores said, his gang had planned to kidnap a London art professor and get him to authenticate the paintings so they could move them. Still, despite the thief's obvious greed and sordid record, Wittman has actually started to find some good in him, just a bit. Flores seems to love beautiful things; he doesn't know much about art, but is eager to learn. He walked through the lavish hotel lobby with Wittman, admiring an exhibit of antique locks, offering to take the Profesor antiques-shopping in Seville. That was all Wittman needed — a glimmer of respect, a sense that Flores was capable of appreciating the finer things in life. He wasn't all bad.

Wittman had been searching for some good quality in Flores, the way a priest searches for faith in a heretic. He always does, always looks for something he has in common with his suspects; otherwise, he'd never be able to do his job, to convince them he's their friend, on their side. That's easy for Wittman; on or off duty, he inherently likes people. Friends admire the way he can talk with anyone about anything — art and culture; travel (he's been all over the world); sports (he's an Eagles fan); politics (he's a Democrat). But he prefers to ask questions, to learn more about a new acquaintance than he gives of himself. He spends his free time in art museums and at movies — favoring comedies over cop flicks — or throwing hoops with his sons at a local school. He's not a brooder or a heavy-browed thinker, and he doesn't lose sleep over his moral qualms — or anything else, for that matter. At work, Wittman's so steely and calm, he inspires even seasoned colleagues to coolness. When he's not undercover, he's a dogged detective, interviewing witnesses, pumping sources, and scouring auctions for stolen artifacts. He regularly calls on local museum security officers to update them on the latest safeguards; nothing, if he can help it, is ever stolen from right under his nose. Off the job, though, he puts it out of mind, never taking work home, never complaining, so even his wife has never known him to have a bad day. He knows that the thieves and smugglers he befriends are bad guys; in some cases, like Flores, really bad. And they deserve what they get. Still, it's not always easy to accept his part in their fall.

Wittman is forever pained by his memory of Joshua Baer, a Santa Fe art dealer suspected of illegally selling Indian artifacts. Over six months undercover, Wittman grew genuinely fond of the smart, funny dealer; he even offered to help Baer's daughter out when she came East for college. But when Baer tried to sell Wittman an eagle feather headdress in 2000, the local feds arrested him, and Wittman testified against him in court, a harsh blow to the man's long-established business, most of which was legit. Later, they exchanged poignant e-mails. "I don't know what to say," Baer wrote. "'Well done?' 'Nice work?' We're devastated." And Wittman replied in kind: "This was the hardest case I had because I really like you. ... Call me anytime." They never spoke again.

Even the easier cases have started to take their toll. It's why he's glad the FBI assigned more agents to the art-theft beat this year, so he can pass his skills on to a new generation, step back a little, mentor them from afar. Still, for now at least, Wittman doesn't hesitate to go undercover, about a quarter of his time. How could he? It's his job. And when you come down to it, there may be something more important than honesty, more important than betrayal, even more important than the state of his own soul: the art.

In his Madrid hotel room, Wittman snaps back into character as an officer calls from the parking garage to say Flores has arrived. A few minutes later, the thief calls — on a disposable, untraceable cell phone — to say he's 10 minutes away. For several hours, Flores has been driving around the city, doubling back on himself, trying to lose any police who might be following. Now he peers around the lobby, to see what activity his phone call might have spurred. No one moves, but cameras in the garage, elevator and hallways capture his every step. A few minutes later, he knocks on Wittman's door and walks in with a wide, flat package, about three feet by four feet, wrapped in brown paper. He puts it on the floor and rips off the covering.

Wittman gasps. He can't help it. Every single time, he's surprised anew to see an actual treasure. Wittman can tell, right away, that the painting is a real Brueghel. Still, he makes a show of studying the picture in detail. Part Middle Earth fantasy, part Revelations apocalypse, the surrealist work seems to sing with moral anguish: A pained St. Anthony preaches desperately to contorted semi-humans in varying degrees of distress. It's weird, nothing Wittman would want to collect — he's more an Impressionism guy — but it's still transcendent: more than 400 years old, perfectly crafted, perfectly aged, one man's perfectly executed vision.

"Do you like it?" Flores asks.

"It's beautiful," Wittman says. "And it looks real. Do you want to know how you can tell?"

Flores nods. Wittman leads him into the dark bathroom and pulls out a black light. The Profesor points out Brueghel's repairs, just visible under layers of newer varnish, and the fine cracks on the surface that show the painting's age. Flores soaks it all in, grins widely — almost sweetly, Wittman thinks. After a few minutes, they go back into the bedroom, and Flores leans over to count his money. Wittman nods to the officer at the door. "It's real," he says.

In an instant, the door flies open, and a throng of Spanish policemen in black riot gear, their machine guns waving, storm into the room. Wittman grabs the painting and leaps across the bed, crouching on the floor to keep it safe. On the other side of the room, the officers shout at Flores, who screams as though he's been shot. Downstairs, in the parking garage, more officers jump his associate and open his car trunk. Inside, in a neat stack, are seven of the other stolen paintings, including Goya's \$12 million *The Swing*. Later, police find the rest of the \$50 million in stolen works in a beach house, allegedly bound for the collection of a Colombian drug lord. Upstairs, meanwhile, Wittman calls out to the officers:

"Bueno hombre! Bueno hombre! Good guy! Don't shoot!"

By the time Wittman stands back up, a few minutes later, Flores is already in cuffs, and shouting in indignation. He looks over at Wittman, who can see his disappointment. And once again, the agent feels that familiar pain.