

Heist: The Case of the Stolen Rembrandt

Three years ago, a little painting caused big trouble for undercover agent Bob Wittman. Here, for the first time, he tells all.

By Simon Worrall From [Reader's Digest](#)

It's Christmastime in Stockholm. December 22, 2000, 4:45 p.m., to be exact. Snow blankets the ground. The last visitors to the National museum are putting on their coats, ready to leave. They're talking and laughing, but the festive mood is about to come to an end. Because just at that moment, thieves are parking a Mazda and a Ford sideways across the only two roads leading to the museum, a Renaissance-style palazzo at the tip of a peninsula, almost completely encircled by water. They douse the vehicles with barbecue lighter fluid and set them on fire. Then they strew steel spikes over the road to puncture the tires of any police cars that try to get through.

As the cars burst into flames, three members of the gang race into the museum. They wear ski masks and carry pistols and machine guns. "Everybody lie down!" shouts the gang leader, putting a pistol to the head of a guard.

Screams echo through the marble halls as two gang members sprint up the stairs. They know exactly where to go, having studied floor plans for months. Their job is made easier by the fact that there are no glass screens or cameras. Using bolt cutters, they quickly pluck a Rembrandt from the wall and stuff it into a bag. Then they cut the wires securing two Renoirs and race back down the stairs with their booty, past a woman who lies whimpering on the floor.

The gang leader pulls his pistol away from the head of the terrified guard and jams it into his denim jacket. Then the three masked men rush out of the building. They turn left, and left again, then sprint along the wharf behind the museum, where an associate is waiting for them in a speedboat.

The boat heads east, past Skeppsholm Island, under Danvikstull Bridge, and across a bay. At a harbor used by fishermen, the thieves tie up the boat and leap ashore, where they disappear. In less than half an hour, the most daring art theft of the century is over.

Sweden is in mourning. Losing the Renoirs was a shock, but the Rembrandt has been a national treasure since its arrival in 1956. To get it back, the Swedes ultimately look to the world's foremost art detective. A self-avowed keeper of the world's cultural flame, Robert Wittman is at the time the head of the FBI's Art Crime Team—a specialist force of 13 agents dedicated to hunting down stolen art (he left recently to work for a law firm that specializes in stolen and fraudulent art). In a career stretching back 20 years, he has helped recover more than \$250 million in artwork, including paintings by Norman Rockwell and Mark Rothko, gold body armor taken from a tomb in Peru, and Geronimo's warbonnet.

"Saving these things brings us closer together as human beings," says Wittman, explaining why he goes to work every day. Besides, Rembrandt's *Self Portrait* will look good on the résumé.

No artist painted himself as obsessively as Rembrandt van Rijn. In more than 90 self-portraits -- from the tousle-haired youth of the 1620s to the hoary old man of 1669, the year of his death—he created a record of human aging without equal in Western art. *Self Portrait*, from 1630, is one of only five paintings he executed on copper, and one of his smallest, the size of a hardback book. But packed into this space is a work of staggering genius: a portrait of the Dutch artist as a young man, age 24, that has all the energy and pathos of a living person.

Dressed in a dark-brown coat, with a black beret pushed insouciantly off his frizzy chestnut hair, Rembrandt stares out at us with an expression that is both vulnerable and steely. A costly gold leaf overlay makes the colors glow, as though lit from within. When it was first sold in Rotterdam in the 17th century, it changed hands for 35 florins, the equivalent of \$35. Today you would need \$40 million to own it.

Which goes a long way toward explaining why art theft is a growth industry. It's estimated that the worldwide trade in stolen and forged art is worth upwards of \$6 billion annually. Only drug dealing, gunrunning, and money laundering are more profitable. Some museums will pay a ransom to get the artwork back. Others aren't given that option by the thieves, says Wittman. In some cases, the robbers try to sell the work on the open market. But this rarely works—after all, a knowledgeable collector isn't going to buy a stolen Monet that he can't display publicly. So the purloined artwork tends to stay in the underworld for an average of seven years before a buyer is sought. If it's sold, it's usually for about 7 to 10 percent of its legitimate value. Not bad, considering some are worth millions.

The Swedish authorities don't have to wait long to recover one of the Renoirs, *La Conversation*. Acting on a tip, police rescue the painting. Thirteen people are arrested, among them three Iraqi-born brothers. Two of them, Baha and Dieya Kadhum, are acquitted; only the middle brother, Safa, is convicted. Still, the other two works of art are nowhere to be found. And after Baha and Dieya walk free, the trail goes cold.

Los Angeles. March 25, 2005, 3 p.m. Officers from the local organized-crime squad arrest a suspected member of a Eurasian crime syndicate while looking for drugs.

They don't find any dope this time. Instead they find a painting, a portrait of a woman with a soft bow at her neck. To find out who she is, they call on a local curator, as well as Bob Wittman and his FBI Art Crime Team. After photographs are scanned and databases checked, the painting is identified as the other Renoir, *Jeune Parisienne*, stolen nearly five years ago in Sweden.

When task force agents interrogate one of the thieves nabbed with the Renoir, he

tells them the whereabouts of the other, far more valuable painting snatched from the National museum: the Rembrandt. He also reveals the names and contact information of the people holding *Self Portrait*.

With phone numbers in hand, Wittman and his Swedish counterpart, Detective Magnus Osvald of the Stockholm police, concoct a sting operation to bring the Rembrandt back.

"I played an undercover art expert for a European organized crime group in America," Wittman explains. "I flew to Copenhagen, then got into contact with the people in Stockholm who were holding the painting."

The Scandic hotel, Copenhagen. September 15, 2005, 10 a.m. Wittman waits in his room for a phone call. He is used to living out of suitcases. Some months, he spends more time on his cell phone than he does at home with his three kids and wife of 23 years. Besides the United States, he has worked in Brazil, Ecuador, France-18 countries in total. There are times when he wakes up and can't remember what city he's in.

Today, as usual, he has checked into a hotel under a false name, using false travel documents. Pretending to be someone else is a big part of his job. It helps that he has one of those faces that are easy to forget. No distinguishing features, no scars, no cauliflower ears. Average height, average build. A regular-looking guy. Put him in a crowded room and he would blend into the background, like a camouflaged moth on a tree trunk.

Sometimes that can be a problem. Three years ago, in a Madrid hotel, he had to throw himself on the floor as a Spanish SWAT team burst into the room to arrest Angel Suarez Flores, the head of a crime syndicate. Flores had offered Wittman one of the gems of medieval Flemish art, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. It had been stolen from the penthouse of Spain's richest woman, along with paintings by Goya, Pissarro, and Japanese painter Foujita—a \$50 million haul. When the cops tore into the room, Wittman was worried they wouldn't know he was on their side. He got out alive by diving behind a bed, shouting, "Don't shoot! *Bueno hombre!* Good guy!"

As Wittman checks the money he has brought from the States to buy the Rembrandt, \$250,000 in cash, his cell phone rings. It's the Swedish police, who have been doing surveillance all the way from Stockholm. "The three art thieves came by train, with one of them holding the painting in a shopping bag," he recalls. "They switched trains at the Danish-Swedish border."

The Swedish police do not arrest the men right away. They want to catch them selling Wittman the stolen Rembrandt. Baha and Dieya Kadhum, the two acquitted Iraqi-born brothers, plus a 29-year-old Swede named Alexander Lindgren, think they are about to pull off the final move in one of the biggest art heists in history. Instead they are walking into a perfectly laid trap.

In Copenhagen, Lindgren and the two Kadhum brothers walk around the hotel a couple of times to make sure they are not being followed. Wittman, using the phone number he got from the snitch in L.A., calls them on their cell phone and arranges to meet Baha Kadhum, the leader, in the lobby.

Kadhum is in his late 20s: black hair, lean face, sallow skin, hooded eyes.

He is wearing designer jeans, a T-shirt, and expensive leather shoes. "We discussed how we would do the trade," says Wittman. "We would go upstairs. I would flash the money. If he's happy with that, I'll see the painting, which is outside with the two other guys."

At the heart of Wittman's job is what he calls "befriending and betraying." In every undercover operation, there is a tipping point, a moment when the bad guys move from suspicion to trust. Wittman calls this "the moment of acceptance." The period just before that is the most dangerous. A sweaty lip, an overeager smile, and he could blow his cover and end up dead. But years of practicing the art of deception ensure that, as Kadhum walks into the hotel room, Wittman looks as affable as a high school history teacher. It's Kadhum who's jumpy, while Wittman pats him down to make sure he isn't carrying a gun or a knife. "He keeps fidgeting," recalls Wittman. Kadhum's eyes dart around as though he thinks someone else is there. "Only when he has the money in his hands does he begin to relax. He trusts the money. And that is his big mistake."

Kadhum says he will return with the painting in a few minutes. A half hour later and no Kadhum. What if something has gone wrong? What if Wittman's cover has been blown? What if he isn't clean?

Keeping clean is FBI-speak for making sure an agent has not been tailed. Art thieves are a cautious lot, says Wittman, which means "I usually have people following me for a while. So you don't go anywhere you shouldn't until you have been cleaned. But you always have to be aware of that possibility."

And you always practice countersurveillance. You watch the people watching you. But never alone. Wittman is always part of a team. The team is his shield, his radar. This time, the Swedish and Danish police have set up operations in a room a floor above him, as well as in the room next door. Wittman's room is wired, and there's a miniature camera hidden in a lamp.

"After I flash him the money, Kadhum leaves the hotel room and goes downstairs," says Wittman. "The other two guys are on the street with the bag. But the three of them then go to another hotel room where a fourth guy actually has the painting." He smiles. "They are good. The other bag is just a dummy."

When Kadhum finally does come back to the hotel, he's carrying the painting in a red felt bag tied tightly with cord. "I had a hard time opening the bag," recalls Wittman with a laugh, "what with there being no knives in the room!"

But untie it he did. And there it was, the Rembrandt.

"You ever take it out of the frame?" asks Wittman.

"I never touched it," says Kadhum.

"You an art lover?"

"No. I am just in it for the money."

Wittman takes the painting into the bathroom and uses a miniature ultraviolet lamp and a black light to check it for signs of forgery or damage. The end is only seconds away now, and soon all hell will break loose.

Turning off the lamp, he gives the prearranged signal. "It's a done deal!" he says to Kadhum in a loud voice.

As the door flies open and Danish police barrel in, Wittman shields the painting with his body. The five agents are encased in body armor and are toting semiautomatic weapons. "Freeze!" they scream at Kadhum.

National museum, Stockholm. September 20, 2005, 6 p.m. Champagne corks pop and cameras flash as Rembrandt's *Self Portrait* is rehung. For the people of Sweden, the painting is a dear friend. Bulletproof glass and security cameras help ensure it never leaves them again.

There is no bubbly for Wittman. He is already back in America, undercover, working another case. The guests toasting the return of their beloved Rembrandt have no idea how complicated the sting operation was. Or how a quiet American with a face no one remembers risked his life to help recover it.

But Wittman's no martyr. Just ask him what it's like to hold a Rembrandt.

"It's a eureka moment," he says, grinning widely. "It's always a eureka moment."

The Kadhum brothers and Alexander Lindgren were convicted of receiving stolen goods, but their sentences were later overturned by a Swedish appeals court, which ruled they were "provoked" by American and Swedish police. They are still living in Sweden.
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