



Us
 red Baltimore antique
 of the FBI's best agents.

pscale Madrid hotel room for a very important de-

There was a knock at the door. It was a shaven-headed Spaniard wearing the garb of European thug: black T-shirt, tattoos on his arms, and a gold chain around his neck. He was holding a large flat package wrapped in brown paper.

“Put it on the bed,” said the tall man. “El professor will take a look.”

“El professor” carefully unwrapped the package to reveal a heavy, ornately-carved cradle frame that was securely holding a painting—an old one. He recognized it at once. There was the black-robed monk, kneeling by the shoreline, reading his Bible while all around him strutted half-human monsters, pig-faced, bird-bodied symbols of carnal desire: *The Temptation of St. Anthony* by Pieter Bruegel, one of the classics of Flemish art. The year before, it had been stolen from the penthouse apartment of Esther Koplowitz, the richest woman in Spain. As el professor inspected the piece, he heard the thief haggling with his partner.

“One million? Is worth four.”

“If it is authentic you will get ten. For this one and the others.”

El professor lifted the painting from the bed.

“I’ll have to take it into a dark room to use the black light,” he said. Accompanied by the thief, he carried the painting into the bathroom, shut the door, and turned off the lights. He scanned the painting with the dim purple of a UV lamp, looking for luminescent glows, telltale signs of modern paints that would indicate a forgery. He saw none. There was no doubt. This was the stolen Bruegel. But “El professor” was a fake. He was not an American academic working for Russian gangsters. He was Robert Wittman, undercover agent of the FBI. And in a few minutes, if all went well, he would say a coded phrase

BY OF PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY OF ARTS

that would bring this sham transaction to an abrupt end.

IF YOU WERE TO MEET BOB WITTMAN LOOKING over Civil War pistols in an antique store or relaxing in a bar, you would think him to be a pleasant conversationalist with a genial sense of humor. There is nothing flamboyant about him, just an air of quiet self-confidence. You would never guess that Wittman was an undercover agent for the FBI. Dozens of art thieves have made the same mistake, learning to their chagrin that the professor or antique dealer they trusted was not the man they took him for.

During his 20 year career, Wittman helped recover \$225 million worth of stolen art, antiques, and jewelry, leading *Maxim* magazine to hail him in February 2009 as the “World’s Greatest Art Detective.” Although his work has taken him from Poland to Peru, this cosmopolitan crime solver has deep Baltimore roots, and those roots helped make him a success.

Born in Tokyo in 1955 to an American serviceman and his Japanese wife, Wittman arrived in Baltimore as a toddler and lived here for the next three decades.

“I grew up surrounded by Japanese art,” Wittman recalls. “There were decorations all over the house. My dad ran all sorts of businesses—a home improvement business, a publishing business. He liked Asian art so much that he opened an antique shop on Howard Street that specialized in it.” Wittman’s Oriental Gallery was open from 1985 to 1997.

There was nothing unusual about Wittman’s upbringing: He went to Calvert Hall High School and then Towson University. He worked in his dad’s shop on the weekends. He went to Orioles games.

“He was just like any other kid,” says Wittman’s cousin Scott, a retired general contractor from Baltimore. “Liked sports, comic books. But he was a master of many talents.” Scott remembers that Wittman was so good at playing classical piano, he gave lessons to other kids in the neighborhood. This talent would pay off in unex-



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she had mixed impressions. "I thought he was overly confident in himself, but, at the same time, he was charming," she recalls. "On a later date he took me to his parents' home where he sat down and played 'Unchained Melody' for me on the piano. After that, we were inseparable."

After graduating from college in 1980, Wittman worked for a time in one of his father's publishing businesses, printing agricultural monthlies such as *Maryland Farmer*, and he continued to help out at the antique shop. "I used to go with my dad when he took clients out to lunch," he recalls. "I saw how they interacted." As he got older, he began working with the clients more directly, going to auctions, buying and selling antiques. He enjoyed the work, but something was missing. When he was a boy, he had avidly watched the Efrem Zimbalist TV series *The F.B.I.* Somewhere in the back of his mind, he had always dreamed of doing that kind of work himself. "It seemed like an exciting position," he says. "And relevant, an important job. I'd be on the forefront of protecting the Constitution."

In 1988, he saw a *Catonsville Times* ad calling for applications to the FBI and submitted his resume. Somewhat to his surprise, his application was accepted.

Suddenly, he'd be going from arguably one of the *least* dangerous jobs imaginable (who wants to hurt an antique dealer?) to one of the most dangerous. So how did his wife feel about this transition?

"Before I joined the FBI, Donna and I agreed that we would accept the danger," Wittman says. "We decided this together, made the commitment. As an agent you put your game face on and accept the consequences, accept the ultimate danger. You might say it's part of the contract."

AFTER HE GRADUATED FROM THE FBI ACADEMY in 1988, Wittman was assigned to the Philadelphia field office to work on the recovery of stolen property. (He has lived in the Philadelphia area since then.) His first assignment was a case concerning the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The museum had been the

he meant business. Worth about \$75,000, the "Man with the Broken Nose" was certainly a valuable piece of sculpture, but it was the notoriety of the case that made it a sensation.

"The robbery was a huge story," Wittman said. "Tips came pouring in. I was one of the agents who checked them out."

Tips eventually led the FBI to the thief, an out-of-work dancer. The statue was recovered undamaged, wrapped in brown paper and hidden under the water heat-

"Don't you trust me?" Wittman asked the drug lord. "You'd think I was with the FBI!"

er in the home of the dancer's mom. Although Wittman's role in the investigation was routine and unglamorous, he knew he had found his calling: recovery of stolen art and antiquities.

"This is a special type of investigation," he says, speaking with uncharacteristic animation. "Art and antiquities, these are the records of civilization. When someone steals these, it's like they're stealing from all of us."

The FBI recognized the value of Wittman's background in antiques and sent him to classes in art history and gemology to hone his skills. It gave him credibility as an undercover agent.

As John Kitzinger, Wittman's last supervisor at the FBI, notes, "Antiques were the foundation of his expertise. He knew talking points about art."

Baltimore antiques dealer Philip Dubey, who knew Wittman when he was still working for his father, confirms the value of such specialized training. "There is a lot of jargon in the antiques business," he says. "It's almost like a secret handshake. If someone finds a punchbowl in their attic they might describe it as 'sixteen inches wide, blue and white.' A dealer would say 'overglaze blue

Dubey remembers Wittman as an unusually affable and forthcoming young man. "He would share information," he says. "He wasn't one of those dealers who plays his cards close to his chest."

That "regular guy" persona seemed to suit the job. Former special agent Jerri Williams of the Philadelphia office had a nickname for him. "I called him LB—Lovable Bob," she says. "He comes across as a real person. Not arrogant, aloof, none of the things that people think an FBI agent is. How could a crook suspect that he is anything other than he seems to be?"

Wittman's flair for undercover work led him to become something of a globe-trotter, impersonating a dealer in African antiquities in Warsaw, an art broker in Copenhagen and Barcelona, a cigar-smoking antiquities buyer in Miami, and, of course, that shady professor in Madrid. Undercover work is not for the faint of heart.

Wittman still remembers his first undercover case.


"In 1995, a con man in Philadelphia tried to buy \$15 million worth of diamonds," he recalls. "He told a jeweler he was with the CIA. Not surprisingly, the jeweler called the authorities. My job was to be the courier. I had a briefcase full of fake diamonds attached to my arm with a handcuff. [As the courier], I was supposed to meet the con man in a hotel lobby, go with him to his room, hand over the diamonds, and get the money."

Wittman met the con man in the lobby, and they chatted for a few seconds. Then Wittman raised his right hand.

"That was the signal," he says. "Undercover agents in the lobby swarmed us. Later when we searched the hotel room we found cashier's checks made out for \$15 million—all fake, of course. We also found a few other things. The con man had been ready for a fight. He had turned all the mirrors in the room around so they wouldn't break. He had a pistol in the room, a hatchet in his coat, and a suitcase filled with surgical bandages. He was prepared to cut off my arm to get my suitcase."

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hot shot

cool customer, even in stressful situations. Of course, we have controls in place during undercover operations, but you can never be sure what will happen."

Wittman was so confident in his own abilities, he was even known to tempt fate. Once, when dealing with an Armenian drug lord who had stolen four paintings from the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Wittman, posing as a potential buyer, cracked, "Don't you trust me? You'd think I was the FBI!" The drug lord laughed, the negotiation continued, and Wittman got his man again.

BACK IN THE MADRID STING OPERATION, "El profesor" emerged from the darkened room where he had examined the stolen Bruegel, smiled at his partner, and voiced the coded phrase: "It's a done deal!" His words were picked up by a hidden microphone. Seconds later, a black hooded Spanish SWAT team burst through the door of the hotel room. Wittman dove behind the bed, holding the Bruegel in his arms. "Don't shoot!" he yelled. "Bueno hombre! Bueno hombre! Good guy! Good guy!" (He was still keeping his cover.) As usual in such cases, Wittman was arrested along with the suspects and was taken down to the city jail to be photographed and fingerprinted. Unlike the other suspects, he was quickly released.

After an eventful career with the FBI, Wittman retired last year at the age of 52. "There comes a point when you turn it over to the younger generation and give them a chance," he says. "Chasing criminals is a young man's game. The criminals, they're still 18. I'm not."

But he continues to fight art theft through his Chester Heights, PA-based private company, Robert Wittman Incorporated, working on security issues with museums, collectors, and insurance companies and consulting on recovery of stolen art. Over the years Wittman has never lost his connection with Baltimore, which he visits often. And although he doesn't allow his photo to be taken, you may see Wittman on the streets of Baltimore when he is in town: average height, average build, graying hair. Just a regular guy—or so he wants you to believe. **B**



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