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ART

From the Art World to the Underworld

The FBI's Robert Wittman has spent his career chasing missing masterpieces. Now thieves are growing bolder -- and more violent.

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By KELLY CROW

Shortly after 9 a.m. on June 4, three men drove to a seaside promenade near Marseilles, their van carrying paintings by Brueghel, Sisley and Monet. The art had been stolen at gunpoint from the Museum of Fine Arts in Nice last August. Now a Frenchman working for an American art dealer was supposed to show up and buy four works for \$4.6 million in cash. Instead, nearly a dozen French police cars pulled up, led by a colonel for the gendarmerie who quickly took a call from Pennsylvania. "We got them!" Col. Pierre Tabel shouted into his cellphone.



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Art's top ten most-wanted works

The caller was Robert Wittman, an agent for the Federal Bureau of Investigation who had acted as the American "dealer" and orchestrated the sting. Mr. Wittman thanked the colonel and celebrated alone, drinking a mug of coffee on his back porch while his wife slept.

Mr. Wittman is one of the world's top art-crime investigators. His specialty is going undercover. The 52-year-old has spent two decades impersonating shady dealers and

befriending thieves. In all, he's tracked down \$225 million in missing objects, including a Rembrandt self-portrait and an original copy of the Bill of Rights.

Skyrocketing values for art and endemic security flaws at museums are enticing a new generation of thieves and raising the stakes of his job. An increasing number of thieves have started taking art by force in broad daylight rather than by stealth, according to the International Council of Museums, a nonprofit that represents 1,900 museums and galleries around the world. Jennifer Thevenot, the council's program-activities officer, says, "Previously, it was all 'Pink Panther' – guys in gloves slipping in at night – but now they walk in with weapons."



FBI Philadelphia

A Rembrandt self-portrait recovered in Copenhagen.

The U.S. is the biggest buyer within the \$6 billion black market for art, the FBI says. Last year alone, 16,117 artworks in the U.S. were listed by the London-based Art Loss Register as missing or stolen, up from 14,981 the year before. At the same time, worsening economies and shifting priorities are forcing governments to slash their budgets to combat art crime. New York City cut \$4 million from its museum-security budget earlier this summer.

For years the FBI has relied solely on Mr. Wittman to play the undercover roles of gullible or greedy art lover, but now for the first time the

bureau is upending tradition by training a nationwide squad to combat art crime. Prosecutors and law-enforcement officials are hailing the move but wonder whether any of the dozen-odd agents in the FBI Art Crime Team will be ready to take over Mr. Wittman's covert work before he retires later this year.

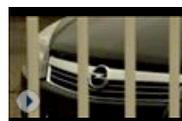


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The recent sting in France illustrated Mr. Wittman's approach to undercover work. The operation began after the Nice museum was robbed last August. The FBI's Miami office got a tip that a shaggy-haired career criminal named Bernard Jean Ternus was discreetly shopping masterpieces to art dealers near Fort Lauderdale. Mr. Wittman flew in and introduced himself to Mr. Ternus as a Philadelphia art dealer who liked to buy Impressionists and Dutch Old Masters and didn't care where they came from. The two men held several meetings, including one on a yacht where they drank Champagne. In January, the pair met in Barcelona, Spain, so the rest of the crew could size up Mr. Wittman. By late spring, Mr. Wittman got so chummy with the group — one man ran a motorcycle shop, another rented bulldozers — that he was able to introduce his so-called sidekick, actually an agent for the French police. That agent promised to bring the money to Marseilles on June 4. The sting was set. (Mr. Ternus later pleaded guilty to conspiring to sell stolen art and will be sentenced in Florida on Sept. 18; the other men arrested with the art in Marseilles are awaiting trial in France.)



Chris Chrisman Photography

FBI agent Robert Wittman

Mr. Wittman says such work can be "incredibly stressful" because "unlike actors, you only get one shot and you have to remember everything you ever said." Col. Tabel, who investigates art crimes for the French government and followed Mr. Wittman's chess-like maneuvers throughout the 10-month sting, is more effusive: "To me, he is a living legend."

Yet within the FBI, Mr. Wittman has always been an anomaly because of his interest in chasing art thieves. Despite the public attention that follows major art thefts and any subsequent recoveries, the FBI has historically treated art crime like a tweedy backwater compared with offenses like terrorism, racketeering and drug smuggling. Cases involving looted artifacts were hardly a priority five years ago. Even now, New York's art cases are handled by a major-theft agent, James Wynne, who doesn't go undercover. But after the massive looting of Baghdad's National Museum five years ago sparked public outrage,

Mr. Wittman realized the bureau might be persuaded to invest more in protecting U.S. museums.

The FBI quickly began working with U.S. Customs and governments throughout the Middle East to stem the flow of Iraq artifacts into the U.S. and still regularly posts images of missing pieces on its Web site. The bureau made its first Iraq-related recovery when a Marine turned in eight ornately carved stones that he bought on duty as souvenirs, not realizing until later they had been stolen.

Mr. Wittman, who had been the FBI's only undercover art agent for about 15 years, began petitioning his superiors shortly after the Baghdad looting to create its own art-crime team. The idea won the support of several other art-crime fighters outside the bureau. Rather than pull agents from other squads, their plan was to train around a dozen agents who could be posted at field offices throughout the country and be allowed to pursue art cases as their regular caseloads permitted. Should a major theft occur, the group could be sent to the scene immediately, their roles already defined, or work with police agencies around the world if invited to help out.



Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nice/ Musée d'Orsay/Reuters

"The Lane of Poplars at Moret" by Alfred Sisley

It helped Mr. Wittman's lobbying efforts to point out that far smaller countries already had art squads, even if some have lately suffered under recent budget cuts. Scotland Yard in London has four art detectives, down from 14 during their squad's heyday two decades ago. France has 30, and Italy boasts 300 art-hunting carabinieri, including investigators who use helicopters to patrol the country's myriad archaeological dig sites.

The team, assembled in large part by Mr. Wittman, was allotted an annual operational budget, aside from agent salaries, of around \$100,000. The members quickly began tackling a variety of art cases. In St. Louis, Frank Brostrom, who joined the group after working as a bomb technician and surveillance expert, caught a man three years ago who tried to peddle a forged Rembrandt for \$2.8 million by masquerading as a Saudi sheikh in full ceremonial garb.

Among the FBI's rank and file, art crime remains a tough sell, agents say. Geoffrey Kelly, who works art crimes out of Boston, says he "gets a lot of ribbing" from co-workers for lining his cubicle with books on Renaissance painters as well as crime-scene photos; Mr. Brostrom says agents on his former violent-crimes squad in St. Louis bought him art books as gag gifts when he joined the art team. "I actually use those books," he says.

By and large, the agents signed up for the team either because they are intrigued by art or because they respect the careers of Mr. Wittman and Mr. Wynne, a former banker who investigates art cases in New York. Some members, like Christopher Calarco, a former prosecutor in Los Angeles, joined after only having six years' experience at the bureau. None

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had any prior expertise in fine art. After Mr. Calarco was tapped, he says he tried to brush up by digging out his notes from a college art-history course.

To take on major art cases, Mr. Wittman needs the team to have a delicate understanding of the art world – and underworld. That means being able to discern the difference between etchings and aquatints, palettes and provenance, genuine masterpieces from expert forgeries. (One clue: The varnish on a 300-year-old painting will be laced with tiny cracks, which fakes rarely have.)



FBI Philadelphia (2)

A 2000-year-old gold Peruvian armor, right, and Geronimo's war bonnet.

Mr. Wittman grew up working weekends at his family's antiques shop in Baltimore, where his father taught him "how to haggle and how to appreciate old things," he says. When he joined the FBI in 1988, he was assigned to Philadelphia's eastern-district field office where he initially investigated crimes like truck hijackings and jewelry-store robberies. He quickly expanded his caseload to take on art crimes, though, and over the years, he built up a reputation for making quirky cultural recoveries. In 1999, for example, he caught an Atlanta lawyer trying to sell Geronimo's feathered headdress for \$1.2 million despite the federal ban on selling bald-eagle feathers. Two years earlier, he

confiscated a 2,000-year-old piece of gold Peruvian armor that had been smuggled into the U.S. by a Panamanian diplomat.

These days, he works in Philadelphia but tries to call the team members every week or so to keep abreast of their caseloads. Occasionally, he fields their art-related questions. Once he had to politely correct an agent who described Picasso as an Impressionist: "I didn't want to embarrass him, so I just said, 'People usually call him a great modernist.'"

The group has spent time together in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia and Santa Fe in order to learn the basics of art crime as seen by museum security directors, art dealers, and academics. When the group showed up at the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe last year, the museum's director of operations, Amy Green, spotted them immediately in the crowd: "We're pretty casual here, and they were the only ones wearing ties."

Brian Brusokas, a cybercrimes expert with the FBI in Chicago, says he was surprised to learn that about 80% of museum thefts are orchestrated by insiders, not burglars. He and the other art agents have started visiting their regional museums and acquainting themselves with people like custodians and visiting scholars who enjoy extra access to the museum's collections. They've also changed up their crime-scene techniques. Since dusting works for fingerprints can damage their surfaces, they rely on handheld fluorescent lights to find the prints instead.

Mr. Calarco got his best on-the-job art training three years ago when the FBI's organized-crime squad in Los Angeles arrested an Eastern European man who kept a stolen Renoir in his safe at a local pawnshop. Mr. Calarco researched the painting and learned it had been taken five years earlier from Stockholm's National Museum of Fine Arts, along with a \$36 million Rembrandt self-portrait. The man caught with the Renoir agreed to help the FBI track down the painting's thieves in Sweden in order to "buy" the Rembrandt in a sting. Mr. Calarco called Mr. Wittman, who stepped in as middleman for an Old Masters collector willing to pay cash, no questions asked.

That fall, the cops and robbers converged at a Copenhagen hotel. Mr. Wittman met one of the thieves in a room and showed off a satchel containing \$200,000 in hundred-dollar bills. Mr. Calarco, nervous, sat in the hotel room directly overhead and watched the footage from a hidden camera. A short time later, the thief returned carrying the Rembrandt in a duffel bag, still in its museum frame. When Mr. Wittman signaled that the painting was authentic – by using the phrase "Done deal" – police stormed the room and Mr. Wittman grabbed the painting. Seconds later, he met Mr. Calarco in the stairwell outside. Mr. Calarco saw the artwork and remembers thinking, "This is exactly what I got into this job for."

But Mr. Wittman is having trouble stemming the team's high rate of turnover. So far, at least half the original art-crime team has been promoted to positions or offices outside the team's scope, forcing them to drop or reassign their art caseloads.

Mr. Wynne, the New York-based agent, says it may be unrealistic to train the entire squad to hang out, incognito, with art thieves. He thinks their investigative training matters more. "I've just never thought that undercover was the end all, be all," he says. "I meet the bad guys when I interview them."

After a lifetime in pursuit, Mr. Wittman knows his job is more gritty than glamorous. He doesn't mind. In fact, he delights in revealing the real face of art crime. In April, he spoke to a few major donors at the Philadelphia Museum of Art on the condition that they wouldn't take his photograph. At one point he held up a few images of Hollywood's gentlemen thieves like Cary

Grant in "To Catch a Thief" and Pierce Brosnan in "The Thomas Crown Affair," followed by a real-life rogue's gallery of arrested art thieves, their hair sloppy and faces sour. Grinning, he said, "Sorry, ladies."

Write to Kelly Crow at kelly.crow@wsj.com

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