

What you've heard about art crime isn't true

Ex-FBI agent's new book debunks myths. Art thieves rarely hit the jackpot. Famous pieces are too hot to sell.

By John Shiffman • May 30, 2010

Like a modern-day Indiana Jones, FBI special agent Robert K. Wittman risked his life for the sake of history, going undercover to rescue the world's stolen treasures. Wittman, who founded the FBI's elite Art Crime Team, recovered more than \$225 million worth of art and antiquities during his 20-year career.

A \$36 million Rembrandt. The headdress Geronimo wore at the Last Pow-Wow. A long-lost copy of the Bill of Rights, looted during the Civil War.

Now retired, Wittman runs a private art-security firm with his wife and sons near Philadelphia. His new memoir, *Priceless* (Random House, \$25), recounts a dozen daring undercover art-crime investigations, taking readers inside the FBI and the high-stakes world of art crime to debunk common myths:

Art thieves are dashing rogues.

Hollywood gave us Pierce Brosnan in *The Thomas Crown Affair* and George Clooney in *Ocean's Twelve*. In the first James Bond movie, Dr. No hangs a stolen Goya in his underwater lair. But most art thieves don't steal because they love art. They steal to get rich. Ninety percent of art crimes are inside jobs. The *Mona Lisa*, stolen in 1911 and recovered in 1913, was taken by a framemaker who once worked at the Louvre.

Art crime pays.

Art thieves rarely hit the jackpot. Famous pieces are just too "hot" to resell. "The 'art' in art crime isn't in the theft, it's in the resale," Wittman writes. On the black market, a stolen painting is worth roughly 10% of its true value. When thieves stole *The Scream*, police recovered the painting in a sting by offering \$750,000, 1% of its \$75 million value.

Art crime is minor.

The FBI says art crime is a \$6-billion-a-year global business. Interpol says France and Italy suffer the most. War-torn countries like Niger, Cambodia, Iraq and Afghanistan have been looted of their antiquities. Nations grapple with it differently: Greece's commitment to protecting cultural heritage is written into its constitution. Italy fights art crime with 300 officers. Scotland Yard employs archaeologists. Here, the FBI tackles art crime, but just a dozen agents are dedicated part time.

Most art crime takes place in museums.

It's certainly true that museum thefts generate headlines and intrigue. The Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam was struck twice in about a decade. The \$500 million Gardner Museum heist in 1990 by thieves posing as Boston policemen remains the world's greatest unsolved art crime. Yet only 10% of all stolen art is swiped from museums. The London-based Art Loss Register says more than 50% of art vanishes from homes or businesses.

Looted art rarely resurfaces.

Never say never. In 2001, nearly 24 years after a theft in Minnesota, Wittman flew to Brazil and rescued three Norman Rockwell paintings, including the classic *Spirit of '76*. More than 125 years after British soldiers looted a Ben Franklin portrait from his Philadelphia home during the Revolutionary War, a U.S. ambassador to England spotted it over a

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fireplace while visiting a friend near London. The British gave it back.

Art crime is victimless.

"This is foolishly nearsighted," Wittman writes. "Most stolen works are worth far more than their dollar value. Art thieves steal more than beautiful objects. They steal memories and identities. They steal history."

JOHN SHIFFMAN is co-author of *Priceless: How I Went Undercover to Rescue the World's Stolen Treasures* and a staff writer at The Philadelphia Inquirer.



The Spirit of '76 and two other paintings by Norman Rockwell, and Edvard Munch's painting The Scream were stolen from gallery walls. Now recovered, they are again on view to the public. (Illustration by Casey Shaw for USA WEEKEND)

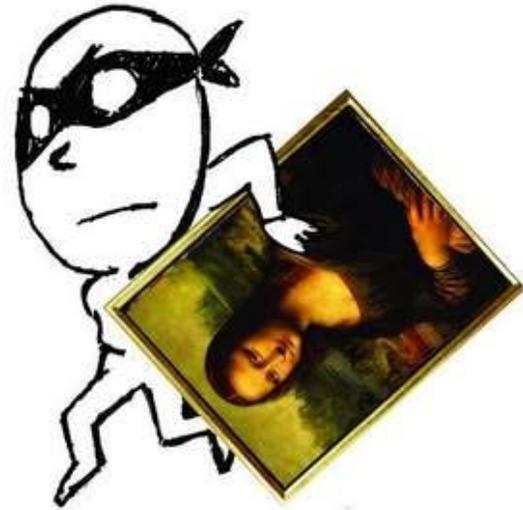


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