

Mystery solved

Tales from the FBI's art crimes file

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Published: Saturday, July 30, 2011
1:05 AM CDT

YUCCA VALLEY — Lynn Richardson is an International Woman of Mystery. Richardson, who now supervises the Hi-Desert Nature Museum, shared several stories from her eight years with the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Art Crime Team at Thursday's Brown Bag Lunch Lecture. They were years full of intrigue and magnificent finds.

"When the Berlin Wall came down, the art came out of Russia," Richardson said. "We were recovering trainloads of icons that were stolen out of churches."

While violent organized crime is behind most art theft overseas, Richardson found that art crime in the United States often happens incidentally with mundane burglaries. She told of three crates of modernist sculptures stolen from a transport van. The thief didn't know the value of the items and took them to a pawn shop, where he got \$40 for them. When the pawn shop owner took the pieces to an auction house, the employees there had received notice from the National Stolen Art File, and knew they were the missing Alexander Archipenko's worth \$650,000. The thief later was apprehended when he was caught stealing from another truck.

A similarly unsophisticated theft took place at the William Penn's Pennsbury Manor in Pennsylvania. "Who came to talk to us about it? The girlfriends!" Richardson laughed. "They said their 'goofy boyfriends' broke in, dumped the artifacts into trash bags, then got scared and threw the bags into the Delaware River."

Even clever burglars can bungle their payday.

Security guards let two men dressed as police officers into Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum on St. Patrick's Day. The robbers tied up the guards and took paintings and sculptures worth \$300 million. "We chased leads to Japan, France and Ireland," Richardson recalled. "We even took a call from a psychic in Australia, who said the art



"Contrary to what people think, my job was not glamorous," former FBI art theft agent Lynn Richardson told her Hi-Desert Nature Museum audience. "I didn't work with Pierce Brosnan, I chased these guys!"
(Rebecca Unger. Hi-Desert Star)

was in a specific basement in New Jersey. The person who was living there was new, and he had taken the remaining contents of the house to the dump. When showed photos of the lost pieces, the new owner said he 'could have seen' the Vermeer, the Rembrandt, the Degas. ”

Richardson told of a “take down” of Antiques Roadshow appraisers. Two well-known experts used on the show were going about giving fraudulent appraisals on Civil War items. The owners were told they had valuable historic pieces and were offered large sums for them. However, the appraisers usually turned around and sold the artifacts for 10 times as much, which is illegal.

Also illegal was taking items from museums “for appraisal” and never returning them. “A couple of the families who had sold items to these men came to us and we began an investigation,” Richardson said. “Their scheme started to unravel, and we uncovered about \$1.6 million in appraisal fraud.”

But what if your criminal is a high-ranking official?

In one case, antiquities from a royal Peruvian burial chamber started to disappear, including a piece of golden ceremonial dress. “Two smugglers contacted our undercover agent who worked with an art dealer,” Richardson said. “They wanted about \$1.5 million for the piece, which they said they got from the former president of Peru. They could get it to us through their friend at the Panama embassy.” The agents and the crooks agreed to meet at a rest stop on the New Jersey Turnpike. “A big limousine with diplomatic plates pulls up and it’s the consul general of Panama,” Richardson told her audience. “He had the gold piece under his T-shirts in his pouch, but he also had diplomatic immunity, so we took his picture and sent him away. He later lost his post at the embassy and he’s now a fugitive from justice and is wanted by Interpol.”

The art theft expert gave her audience advice for protecting art and artifacts, such as taking photographs of valuable objects with close-ups of signatures and markings. In addition, write detailed descriptions of the object’s size, color and age. Keep the documentation in a safe place.

This cache of Civil War presentation swords was recovered for the Historical Society of Pennsylvania from an inside-job theft between a janitor and an electrical contractor. One of these valuable swords was used by the collector as a weed whacker. (Photo courtesy of Lynne Richardson)

