TA Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Art theft: when life can be stranger than art

Major Sir William Newenham Montague Orpen (1878-1931) was an Irish-born artist and draughtsman who settled for most of his life in London. He was acknowledged as a talented British artist; a member of the Royal Academy.

When WWI broke out, rather than seek sanctuary in his native Ireland like many of his contemporaries, Orpen travelled to the Somme to become an official British war artist and was knighted as a result.

He was a prolific artist: painted portraits of upper class worthies from the British Georgian establishment, plus many self portraits. In fact, he quite possibly became the first ever successful British "commercial" artist; no scraping for patronage or divine inspiration, but popular, and ultimately forged a lucrative artistic career.

Orpen had a colourful domestic life. A painting that was dear to him - possibly his favourite - was of four of his children on a beach with their maid. Two were born to his wife from whom he eventually divorced; two to the family maid.

When Orpen died relatively young at 52, his family gave this painting to an elderly female relative as a gift. Unfortunately, she made a bad choice of solicitor for insurance purposes: one Anthony Blok.

As she made him tea, he helped himself to the painting and made off with it. He subsequently milked the distress of the elderly lady and the family. Paintings are of profound sentimental significance to those close to the artists, particularly when family is involved, and they want them back.

This, as any art thief knows, is fertile ground for blackmailing and extortion. Sentiment, plus the violation of being robbed are powerful motives for paying blackmail money, and criminals are fully aware of this.

Art theft is in fact a common resort for terrorist organisations, as the blackmail potential will be used ritually as a bargaining chip with law enforcement authorities to reduce a jail sentence and attempt to raise some funding.

When the Irish Republican Army was not horse stealing or smuggling Northern Irish cows with suspected Mad Cow Disease across the Irish border, they favoured regular raids on some pretty significant European art galleries.

Which is why art theft is taken seriously by the police and law enforcement, and there is an Arts Loss Register, which insurers oblige auctioneers to check to verify paintings are genuine and there are several rings of protection to counter the illegal art trade.

Who's best to step into the fray?

If you are negotiating with a blackmailing thief, you need an intermediary and a negotiator. Scotland Yard has an Art and Antique Unit and actually trains some officers to learn about art authentification by learning from experts on individual artists' use of brush strokes and tell tale details on the back of a genuine painting.

An incredible 50% of artwork on the market is fake - there are some very talented and persuasive forgers out there.

They use genius techniques, such as paint on ancient paper rather than on canvas, which means they can overpaint on very old paper and outfox the use of carbon dating. It is not uncommon for experts to be unsure about the proven provenance of an artwork.

My friend, the undercover art negotiator

I know a former policeman who was assigned to tackle the case with the stolen Orpen painting and the fore-mentioned criminal Blok.

He (the English "negotiator") claims to have mastered a more refined accent than his regular south London/Irish brogue, donned a pink shirt and a cravat, and posed as an intermediary working for the family.

I believe him. He carried out what Law Enforcement Authorities call a "knock" - a knock on the door and some brass tacks negotiation.

Blok began with serious ambitions. £2 million for the safe return of the painting. My undercover friend negotiated him down to £500,000, then arranged a raid on Blok's office, where the police found an unaccounted for £30,000 in a safe.

He didn't get the £500,000 either, and he was arrested and imprisoned for money laundering, perjury and perverting the course of justice (he attempted to remove the painting from the Art Loss Register - a criminal offence.

The real Thomas Crown: but on the side of the angels

Chariie Hill was a legend in UK law enforcement circles when it came to resolving art theft cases. An American Vietnam veteran, which bolstered his prowess given his confusing accent, he became a brilliant British under cover art detective.

He recovered many stolen paintings, famously including one of the many (genuine) versions of Edvard Munch's The Scream, when it was stolen from Oslo's art museum in 1994. He also recovered many other (genuine) stolen paintings from other classic artists: Goya, Cezanne, Degas, etc.

His most famous success was collecting a purloined Titian from a prearranged venue: a London bus stop. Think about it next time you see a large flat package while waiting for the number 53 bus.

Charlie died in 2021 and won't be telling any tales. As far as I am aware, he never flew off on the Red Eye London flight with an art insurance investigator.