

## LYRIC ESSAY

## How to Steal a \$1.4 million Painting

LIAM CAVELL

Upon hearing of the theft of a \$1.4 million painting, one might be forgiven for scanning the bustling faceless crowds for a suave looking character bearing a likeness to Pierce Brosnan or Peter O'Toole, with a slight rectangular bulge underneath their coat. However, as 80 per cent of all art thefts are inside jobs, the police investigation often begins with a review of staff and security procedures.<sup>1</sup> When Frans van Mieris' 17th century artwork went missing from the Art Gallery of New South Wales on 10 June 2007, the procedure observed was no different. However, what set this investigation apart from one in Europe or North America is that it was handled by local police. Out of 48,605<sup>2</sup> police officers employed in nine different police services throughout Australia, there is not a single officer assigned to specialist art or cultural property investigation.<sup>3</sup> It is easy to dismiss the need for a national investigative body given that art crime appears to be a rare occurrence in Australia. The last time a domestic theft received widespread media coverage was in 1986, when a group calling themselves the Australian Cultural Terrorists (ACT) removed Picasso's 'Weeping Woman' from the wall of the National Gallery of Victoria. The absence of media attention, which might on the surface appear to represent a very low rate of crime, is in fact more indicative of the vast under-reporting of art theft.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the extent of criminal activity in the industry is difficult to ascertain.<sup>5</sup> Interpol estimates that only money laundering and drug and weapon trafficking exceed the global value traded in stolen art and cultural property each year.<sup>6</sup> Although the mainstream media remain silent on all but the most intriguing thefts, the reality is that art crime represents a significant portion of illegal international activity. As the world merges into a global village and the ease with which property can be quickly transported across international borders increases, this will only continue to expand.

The magnitude of the Australian government's failure to set up a national police unit specialising in art recovery has yet to be fully appreciated. Although most paintings are eventually found, the process can take decades.<sup>7</sup> Under Australian law, if the painting is not recovered in six years, the Art Gallery of New South Wales could lose its legal claim to the painting and would need the courts to re-establish ownership.<sup>8</sup> The question of how enforceable an Australian court's ruling to return a painting recovered in an overseas jurisdiction — as is so often the case — is a separate issue.

As a case in point, the theft of 'A Cavalier' exemplifies the need to reassess how art and cultural crime is

handled in Australia. One year on and the painting remains missing. The police investigation has produced more questions than answers. The identity of the culprit(s), their motive and method all remain unknown. This 'creative reportage' is an attempt to fill in the gaps, throw new light on the case and perhaps find out exactly what happened the day a \$1.4 million painting vanished.

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She'd run until she could run no more. The lactic acid still burned her lungs. With each breath the interview room got smaller. Opposite her Detective Senior Constable Huisman leaned forward, his elbows on the table.

'For the last time, where is it?'

'I told you. I didn't take the painting. Ask Barry, he'll back me up.'

'Who did you call on the Saturday before the theft?'

'I don't remember.'

Huisman slid a sheet of paper across the table. A row of numbers was highlighted in yellow. 'This is a copy of your phone records. You made a twenty-two second phone call to someone in Melbourne. Who did you call?'

The ceiling hovered just above the crown of her skull. She could feel her hair gently being pushed aside as it lowered.

'An old friend.'

'For only twenty-two seconds?'

'Apparently.'

'Well, we actually paid your old pal a visit.'

The walls were now touching her elbows, slowly pressing against her. 'I feel nauseous. Can we take a break, please?'

'It took a little bit of gentle persuasion but he decided to assist us with our inquiries. He gave us some very interesting information. What can you tell me about the 1986 Picasso heist in Melbourne?'

The walls pushed harder, squeezing her shoulders together. 'No, he's lying. That's a lie!'

'What is? That you were a member of the ACT? Or that you masterminded the whole theft?'

'You've got it wrong. That wasn't me. We need to stop. I can't breathe!'

'It's time to come clean.'

'No!'

## REFERENCES

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2. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Year Book Australia* (2008).
3. Bryan Hanley, 'Law Enforcement Issues in Art Theft' (Paper presented at the Art Crime Protecting Art, Protecting Artists and Protecting Consumers Conference, Sydney, 2-3 December 1999) 2.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. Rohan Sullivan, 'Van Mieris' 'A Cavalier' Stolen from Australian Gallery' (2007) Artinfo <[www.artinfo.com/articles/story/25237/van\\_mieris\\_a\\_cavalier\\_stolen\\_from\\_australian\\_gallery](http://www.artinfo.com/articles/story/25237/van_mieris_a_cavalier_stolen_from_australian_gallery)> at 12 August 2007.
8. Dan Box and Matthew Westwood, 'Gallery for \$3m Security Boost', *The Australian* (Sydney), 16 June 2007, 7.



'It's over.'

'No!'

He chuckled. 'Who did you think you were? Thomas fucking Crown?'

'NO!'

She opened her eyes with a gasp. It was dawn. There was a banging at the front door. 'Police! Open up!'

### Two days earlier

Huisman pressed the record button and leaned back in his chair. 'What made you come forward after all this time, Barry?'

'This has been hanging over my head for years. I spin around every time I hear a siren. I jump when there's a loud knock at the door. I can't handle hiding anymore.'

'When did you first find out that she planned to steal "A Cavalier"?''

'She rang me the day the Archibald was announced. I was in Perth on business. She wasn't happy with the way it had been awarded and how her entry didn't receive any attention. She started going on about how she was sick of the Archibald making bad decisions and how decent Australian artists have to jump through hoops backwards to get any sort of recognition in this country. She always hated how European artworks were so highly valued in Australia, or at least more highly valued than most Australian pieces. I knew she was angry but I didn't think she was going to do anything about it.'

'How soon after the theft did she tell you what she did?'

'On the same bloody day! She came home, propped it up against the wall in front of me and said "what do you think?" I told her that she was an idiot — of course

using more fruity language — and said that I didn't want to get involved. So she took it away.'

'Where to?'

'She didn't tell me. She said the fewer people that knew the better. It wasn't the first time she had gone all secretive on me, mind you. Back in '86, '87 when we first met, she wouldn't tell me much about her friends. It was around the time of the Australian Cultural Terrorist theft of the Picasso in Melbourne. Do you remember? She was worried about all the cops snooping around the student art communities. Maybe she thought I was undercover or something.'

### Eight years earlier

'Thank you ladies and gentlemen for coming out this morning. As you can imagine, everyone at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and indeed the whole of the Sydney art community is deeply shocked. Well over a million people visit the gallery each year and this is a very rare occurrence. The security measures taken at the gallery are sound and proven.' Edmund Capon, Director of the gallery, paused for questions. 'CCTV cameras? No, not in that particular room, but police are reviewing the footage from other parts of the gallery. Do I know how it was stolen? Well, one can only speculate. It was a small picture and, well look, to be honest, you could slip it under your coat.'

'Mr Capon, if I may,' Acting Superintendent Hardman interrupted, 'we believe the painting was expertly removed from its mounting and taken from the Gallery.'

'And it's not an easy thing to remove the security screws and take it out of the building' Capon added. 'Sorry, when was the theft reported? Well, it was first noticed missing by gallery staff on Sunday at 12:30 pm. We then conducted a search of our archives to make sure it had not been misplaced there. So it was Monday by the time the police were notified. No, I don't know why anyone would want to steal it. This picture is pretty much unsellable. Anyone who knows anything about Van Mieris or Dutch 17th-century painting will know that painting and know that it belongs in this building.'

'Someone must know about the theft or may have been in the area at the time and noticed someone acting suspiciously. I strongly urge them to contact The Rocks police. Thank you all, no further questions at this stage.'

### Three days earlier

She opened up the collapsible stool near the statues at the opposite end of the Fairfax Gallery and sat down. From her sketching folder she removed a pad and began to draw; began to pretend to draw. As she did, she planned her next move. At noon the guards change shifts. There was about a six-minute window period; ten if she was lucky. Hopefully security hadn't changed its routine too much since her sketching days in the gallery, all those years ago. The tools were tucked away in her folder. It was black and leather bound, large enough to accommodate her sketching pad and zipped shut. As soon as the guards left their post, she would pack up and head for the room housing 'A Cavalier'. Making sure there were no patrons around, she would start unscrewing the painting from the wall. She had done it before. No sweat. Her back would be to the door so she'd have to keep checking behind her. Cover story? No — they'd see straight through it. Just run. The painting could fit underneath her sketching pad, along with the tools. Zip up the folder. Pick up the stool. Head for the door.

It was all going according to plan. The painting was off the wall and in the folder. Nobody had seen her. All she had to do now was make it out of the gallery. She headed towards the foyer but stopped just short of entering. She needed to pick her moment carefully. She needed to wait until the guard at the cloakroom desk became distracted. She watched the foyer, pretending to tie her hair up in a bun. A patron approached the desk, gesturing with a coat. This was it. She tucked the stool and folder under her left arm and made for the door. The guard was busy hanging up the coat. Just keep walking, stay focused. A few more steps. Walk calmly. Expressionless face. Nothing out of the ordinary. Her thoughts were interrupted by a voice in her head: his voice. 'Who do you think you are? Thomas fucking Crown?' His expression would be priceless when she told him what she'd done. She smirked. Involuntary. Couldn't help it. Mistake. Big mistake. 'Hey! Wait there!' the guard called out.

### One day earlier

She pulled her bedside drawer out. Carefully, she removed a few folded handkerchiefs and placed them on the bed. Underneath was a small hole in the base of the drawer, just large enough for a finger. She tugged, pulling away the false bottom. Inside was a small black phone book. The pages, once white, were now tinged yellow. The pen ink was faded. She flipped through the book, finding the number she needed. She picked up the handset and fingered the number into the pad.

'Hello?' The male voice was deep and textured with age.

'It's me.'

'We had an arrangement. No contact. If they trace this...'

'I know, but I need your help.'

'I'm listening.'

'Just like '86. Something to make them sit up and think. This time in Sydney.'

'Who do you think you are? Thomas fucking Crown? Things have changed. It's not going to be as easy as it was in Melbourne.'

'I know. But can I rely on you?'

There was a long pause. 'You steal the painting. Then we'll talk.'

### One day later

She stopped. Dead still. Her heart, pounding. Sweat beads. Damp underarms. Only inches away from the door, inches away from escaping. She slowly turned to face the guard, to look him in the face, to meet his eyes, to surrender.

'Your jacket, ma'am! You forgot your cloakroom ticket!'

While the patron returned to the desk, she raced down the steps and across the Domain. It was raining so hard that nobody would think a woman running was doing anything other than trying to escape the bad weather. Her car was parked in Hospital Road. She threw the stool into the boot and got in. The folder was carefully placed on the passenger's seat. She wouldn't feel safe until she was on the expressway and over the bridge. The easy bit was done. The hard part had only just begun.

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