

Spirited Away

Art thieves are targeting Europe's churches, exploiting lax security to strip them of priceless treasures that they hawk on the black market

BY JUMANA FAROUKY

GETTING INTO THE CHURCH was easy. The thieves probably walked in through the front door, posing as a few more of the faithful who come to bow their heads in St. John the Evangelist, the most important church in Capranica, 35 miles (56 km) north of Rome. They hid, waited to be locked in after the last people left, then went to work. They ignored the candlesticks, the alms box and the communion chalice: those are for amateurs—easy to grab, easy to sell. These were professionals, and they were after something specific: the Via Crucis, or Stations of the Cross, 14 paintings each depicting a moment in Jesus' final hours. Painted in oil by an anonymous 18th century artist, these scenes were the church's most glorious features, its aesthetic soul. And on the black market, they could be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. The thieves removed the framed canvases from the walls and lowered them through a window to the side street below. When they were done, they left the church through a tunnel that only a few people knew about. Once outside, they vanished, along with the paintings.

That was November 2006, and Capranica's Stations of the Cross are still missing. During pre-Easter celebrations, when parishioners would traditionally recite all 14 stations using the paintings as their guide, they had to pray before 14 small wooden crosses instead. The theft has left Capranica's small community with a sense of loss that is deep and personal, as if an old friend had disappeared. "We grew up with those paintings," says Marina, who owns a card shop across from St. John. "Yesterday," adds her mother Maria, "I was looking at those nude walls and I felt as if someone had broken into my own home."

Millions of parishioners already know the feeling. Every year, thousands of churches, chapels and monasteries across Europe are robbed of their most beloved and valuable artworks. From small-time crooks trying to earn drug money to seasoned pros who snatch massive canvases, art thieves are erasing a significant part of the religious heritage of some of the most culturally rich countries. "Our churches are being pillaged," says Captain Dominique Lambert of France's Central Office for the Fight against Traffic in Cultural Goods (ocbc). "They take everything—

Saved This 1686 statue of St. Michael was stolen from a French church in 2001, and recovered last year



statues, paintings, chalices, silverwork. When a Virgin Mary is stolen from a church after being there since the Middle Ages, that can't leave you indifferent."

There are no reliable statistics on stolen art, since few countries have the motivation or the manpower to compile them. But information from Interpol, which collects data from member nations that volunteer it, helps give a sense of the scope of the problem. According to the most recent Interpol statistics, there were 1,785 reports of artwork stolen from places of worship in 2005, mainly in Italy, France and Russia. While that's only half the number reported stolen from private homes, it's a huge tally compared to the 281 robberies from museums and 232 from art galleries and dealers that same year. And according to anecdotal evidence from police investigators, the number of reported art thefts from churches is holding steady or, in many cases, rising. In France, for example, the OCBC has recorded a 62% drop in stolen-art reports since 2002—yet every year, thefts from churches hover between 200 and 300. "If it continues at the current rate," says Lambert, "in 20 or 30 years, there won't be anything left."

Sacred art has always been big business. Both the legal and illegal art markets are flooded with icons and artifacts that were stolen from holy sites in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. But the targeting of Christian art in Europe is relatively new, dating back only a few decades. Conflicts in Cyprus in the '70s, and in Yugoslavia in the '90s, along with the breakup of the Soviet Union, provided a fertile environment for widespread looting of religious art and icons, which have continued to flood the black market. At the same time, cheaper security systems have made it harder to steal from museums, galleries and homes. By comparison, Europe's unprotected churches offer easy pickings. Meanwhile, the one thing that churches have relied upon for centuries to protect them is no longer quite the deterrent it used to be. "The fear of God doesn't exist anymore," laments Father Paolo Picca, pastor of the SS. Salvatore church in Velletri, Italy. "The thieves don't fear anyone, except maybe the police when they come to get them."

No Sanctuary

NESTLED INTO A CLIFFSIDE IN THE GREEK mountains, just outside Leonidio, 120 miles (193 km) from Athens, the Elona Monastery doesn't usually get many visitors. But for one week of the year, it is packed. Every August, when Orthodox Christians celebrate the life of Jesus' mother, thousands of worshippers stream



Test of faith Father Antonio Paglia in Capranica's church, its walls empty after thieves stole the Stations of the Cross last year

in, drawn by a 700-year-old gold-encrusted, jewel-covered painting of Mary and Jesus, which is said to hold miraculous healing powers.

The small painting is one of Greece's most sacred icons. So when, one morning in August 2006, the monastery's Mother Superior followed a breeze to the back of the church and discovered that the painting was missing—its pine-and-resin cradle empty, climbing ropes dangling outside a broken window—she fell to her knees and prayed.

The icon was recovered a month later, after one of the thieves called with a \$1.7 million demand and the police

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tracked him down. But the theft sent a chilling message that nothing is sacred. Greece is known as a tomb raider's paradise, with thieves plucking archaeological treasures straight from the ground. And while this looting is still one of the biggest challenges for the country's art squad, the theft of religious art is eclipsing it. In 2005, 333 liturgical items were reported stolen in Greece, compared with only eight archaeological artifacts. "There's a fresh fad for Byzantine icons," says Giorgos Gligoris, head of Greece's art squad. "We expect the severity of these robberies to increase."

Gligoris walks into a squalid room in the national police headquarters. Byzantine statues, antique candleholders and other religious items are scattered about—all recoveries from recent thefts. According to Gligoris, religious artworks can change hands up to five times, in several different countries, before reaching a collector's shelf. "Usually," he says, "it's a job conducted by a criminal who wants to make a quick buck after hearing about or spotting a priceless treasure that's easily accessible."

The U.S. is home to the world's largest

art market, so it follows that a lot of stolen art—from churches and elsewhere—even- tually ends up there. That is, if it doesn't go to England (Europe's biggest art market), Japan, Russia, India or any number of other nations with deep-pocketed collectors. Once a stolen work crosses into another country, varying and often contradictory laws mean it can get trapped in legislative red tape for years, sometimes indefinitely. Better international cooperation is high on the wish lists of many an art squad. "The difficulty is convincing our European partners that we need to work together to fight this scourge," says Lieut. Colonel Pierre Tabel, head of the OCBC. "If these countries are not going to effectively control their art market, well, we can't do it for them."

Greece, for one, has stopped wishing and started doing. In May, it entered a landmark pact with Switzerland, which, thanks to its reputation for financial discretion, has long been a favorite stopover for thieves moving hot goods onto the global black market. Swiss law allows shipments to sit in its free-port zone for up to five years without going through customs. But now, with this agreement in hand, if

Greek authorities suspect a consignment may contain stolen art, they can ask the Swiss police to search it. Italy is looking to seal a similar deal with Switzerland.

Whether it travels across borders or to the nearest big city, art stolen from churches takes the same route as art stolen from anywhere else. Relatively non-descript pieces—vases, silverware, small paintings—might be sold at a local antiques fair or online. A more impressive work will make its way up the criminal food chain, passed from the thief to his fence to a crooked dealer, who draws up a fake provenance, to a gallery owner, who turns a blind eye, and so on, until it lands on the legitimate market, eventually bought by a collector, who may have no idea it was stolen.

The money made from purloined art sometimes goes into the coffers of drug and arms dealers, even terrorists. "We have indisputable evidence that criminal networks are involved in art crime," says Vernon Rapley, head of Scotland Yard's Art and Antiques Unit. There's no way to measure accurately how much the illicit art trade—which includes stolen art, fakes, forgeries and looted artifacts—is actually worth. But some estimates run as high as \$6 billion a year.

Still, what thieves gain from stealing art is outweighed by what their victims lose. Art historian Noah Charney observes, "There are very few stealable objects that have the same relationship as do artworks and the people who collect them." With religious art, that relationship is intensified, thanks to the profound spiritual connection that many worshippers have to the work. It's this connection that makes churches such easy targets in the first place. After all, churches exist to help worshippers experience their faith more fully, and one way to achieve this is by giving them intimate access to religious paintings, sculptures and ceremonial items. Unfortunately, that's the equivalent of putting all your valuables in your front yard and hoping nobody takes them.

People don't mind when museums protect their icons by placing them in glass boxes. Likewise, galleries can ask visitors to check their bags at the door, while private collectors can rig their homes with the latest alarm systems. But in a church, even the smallest security measure is a barrier between believers and the symbols of their belief. "It's a huge dilemma," says Gligoris, head of Greece's art squad. "I can't recall how many times I've urged bishops, abbots, monks and nuns to have religious treasures stored in controlled, guarded environments, and then only

Hunt for the Holy. Few artworks stolen from churches are ever recovered. Here are five that police are still trying to track down

WORK: The Last Supper, painted in the early 15th century
STOLEN FROM: Kremsmunster, Austria
DATE: Feb. 2006



WORK: "Black Madonna" (Vierge en Majesté) by an anonymous artist
STOLEN FROM: Meillers, France
DATE: Oct. 2007

WORK: Nativity with San Lorenzo and San Francesco by Caravaggio, estimated to be worth more than \$20 million
STOLEN FROM: Palermo, Italy
DATE: Oct. 1969



WORK: 19th century silver cross encrusted with zircons, depicting Christ's baptism on one side and his crucifixion on the other
STOLEN FROM: Berane, Montenegro
DATE: July 2006

WORK: 16th century censer, classed as a historical monument
STOLEN FROM: Perpignan, France
DATE: Nov. 2007



bring them out on religious holidays. Many won't hear of it. 'We'll feel orphaned and deprived of our faith,' they say."

Saving Beauty

LOOKING LIKE A CROSS BETWEEN A VERY disorganized museum and the world's most expensive rummage sale, the vault at the OCBC's Paris headquarters is filled with stolen art that the team has recovered in recent months. Items from churches—including statues, lecterns, wooden pews, and bronze busts that belong in the Père-Lachaise cemetery—are packed on

cific databases or none at all. Containing the photos and descriptions of some 72,000 items that have been reported stolen, TREIMA enables the user to figure out quickly if an artwork under investigation is hot, and who and where it was taken from—even if that user can't tell a Monet from a Munch. When the police come across a suspicious item in a raid or gallery, say, they can search for it in the database using keywords and phrases.

But TREIMA's real trick is its ability to run visual searches, too. If the police are lucky enough to have a picture of the

that could have come from an episode of *CSI*, Europe's art police can recover only a fraction of what goes missing. Italy's Carabinieri Tutela Patrimonio Culturale—considered the world's best art squad—employs nearly 300 officers (versus about 30 in France and six in Britain), along with a pool of informants, undercover agents and experts. It also has the largest database, holding information on 2.6 million missing artworks. Still, the carabinieri's recovery rate is only 10%, at best.

It would help if people were more camera-happy. Taking photos of artworks before they go missing makes it much easier for police to find them once they're gone. That seems obvious, but few churches take the time to point and shoot. So insurers and investigators must find other ways to keep track of religious paintings and icons. Ecclesiastical Insurance, a company based in Gloucester, England, that insures 97% of the churches in the U.K., has given free Alpha-Dot kits to all its customers. Stuck on the frame of a painting or at the base of a statue, the tiny dots are almost invisible to the naked eye and each is imprinted with a unique number linking the artwork with its church. Meanwhile, Interpol recently proposed a scheme to insert identity chips into religious works, which would allow agents to track them if they ended up with auction houses or dealers.

Of course, it's far better to prevent the art from being stolen in the first place. For churches, that means finding the delicate balance between security and sanctity. Solid locks on the doors, external lighting at night, an off-site safe to lock away valuables when the church is closed—the security measures don't have to be complicated or expensive. "You can do a lot with something as simple as a motion sensor and a length of fishing line," says art historian Charney. "Attach the sensor to the fishing line, then hang it on an object that's never supposed to move." Charney has grown so concerned about the theft of religious art that he recently formed the Association for Research into Crimes against Art, a nonprofit think tank that will provide churches with free advice on how to protect art on a limited budget.

For many, though, it's too late. Some churches have already made the painful decision to put their religious works under glass. At the Elona Monastery outside Leonidio, the Mary and Jesus icon now rests in a steel compartment with a bulletproof-glass front. A sensible measure, no doubt, but hardly a sign of faith in the goodness of human nature. —WITH REPORTING BY ANTHEE CARASSAVA/ATHENS; JEFFREY T. IVERSON/PARIS; MIMI MURPHY/CAPRANICA ■



Guardian angel The OCBC's Tabel among the stolen works his art squad has recovered

shelves, stacked against the walls and spread across the floor. Alongside them are hundreds of pieces taken from museums, galleries, libraries, archaeological sites and private homes: paintings by Renoir and Courbet, sculptures by Rodin, lamps by Le Corbusier, 2,300-year-old Italian vases, centuries-old manuscripts, 19th century Cartel clocks. "We've got everything," says Captain Jean-Luc Boyer.

France's art squad is dedicated and well trained, and has access to leading experts and all the high-tech gadgetry a cop could want. Ask Boyer to show you his team's most effective weapon against art crime, and he'll sit you down in front of a computer. The *Thésaurus de Recherche Electronique et d'Imagerie en Matière Artistique* (Electronic Research and Image Thesaurus for Artistic Material), a.k.a. TREIMA, is the OCBC's stolen-art database, one of only two national databases like it in the world. Italy has one, called Leonardo; other countries either have only city-spe-

item, the database will use image-recognition software to look for a match. To demonstrate, Boyer clicks on a JPEG of a sculpture of three cherubs that was stolen from a church a few years ago, then drags it into TREIMA. Almost instantly, the software finds a match with another photo of the same sculpture, taken from a different angle, in different light. "It's incredible," Boyer marvels.

Nonetheless, even with equipment

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