

ART CRIME

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I visited the V&A one afternoon a couple of weeks ago and after making my way through the student masses I noticed a large throng of people being lectured by an enthusiastic police detective in one of the small exhibition rooms.

Upon hearing the subject of the lecture I too found myself squeezing into the already overcrowded room. The animated policeman was Detective Sergeant Rapley, who leads the Met's Art and Antiques unit, and his specialised subject was Art Crime, with an emphasis on fakes and forgeries that have fooled the experts at various museums, auction houses and dealerships round the world.

Apparently even major institutions have been duped, with it emerging last week that the National Gallery had bought a number of forgeries including copies of Holbein, Botticelli and Durer. The last known forged painting, which was which was believed to be by Rembrandt, was bought by the gallery in the early 1900s proving that forgery in the art world is nothing new. The British Museum and the V&A itself have also been fooled, with high quality forgeries finding their way into permanent collections, sometimes only detectable by high-tech scanning equipment.

Art crime is big business, which, perhaps surprisingly, represents the third most profitable criminal activity after drugs and arms trafficking, with an estimated \$4-6 billion dollars per annum being generated worldwide, the majority going to fund international organised crime.

Of course, art crime also extends to theft. High value art is particularly vulnerable for a number of reasons: it is easily transported, easily hidden, and many artworks have disproportionately poor security in direct relation to their considerable worth, making them an easy target for the criminals.

In recent years, art on public display has become victim to audacious thieves, with bronze sculptures by artists such as Henry Moore and Lynn Chadwick being crudely severed and hoisted by cranes from public parks and gardens, sometimes in broad daylight. These figures often have an individual market value upwards of £1 million, but because of their high profile nature they would be virtually impossible to sell on, leading some to suggest that they are being stolen for their scrap value only. Another possibility is that they are being stolen to order and shipped abroad.

What then is the duty of the valuer? Above all we must exercise due diligence especially when advising clients buying high value art. We suggest carrying out thorough checks before making purchases and making all possible enquiries into an item's authenticity. As I learned in the lecture at the V&A, even an item being offered at a leading auction house or dealership with apparently good provenance doesn't necessarily guarantee authenticity or good title. More than ever, the old adage 'caveat emptor' (buyer aware) is relevant and

all buyers must exercise extreme caution when buying art. However, as anyone who has ever bought at auction will realise, it is easy to get over enthusiastic in the excitement of the auction room and even the normally level headed can get carried away and pay over the odds because of a spur of the moment decision.

For information on buying or selling art and antiques please contact Robert Coram James on 020 7363 6440 or

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