

Cracking the Biggest Art Heist in History

For nearly three decades, detectives have sought to solve the theft of \$500 million of artwork from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. They think the end is near.

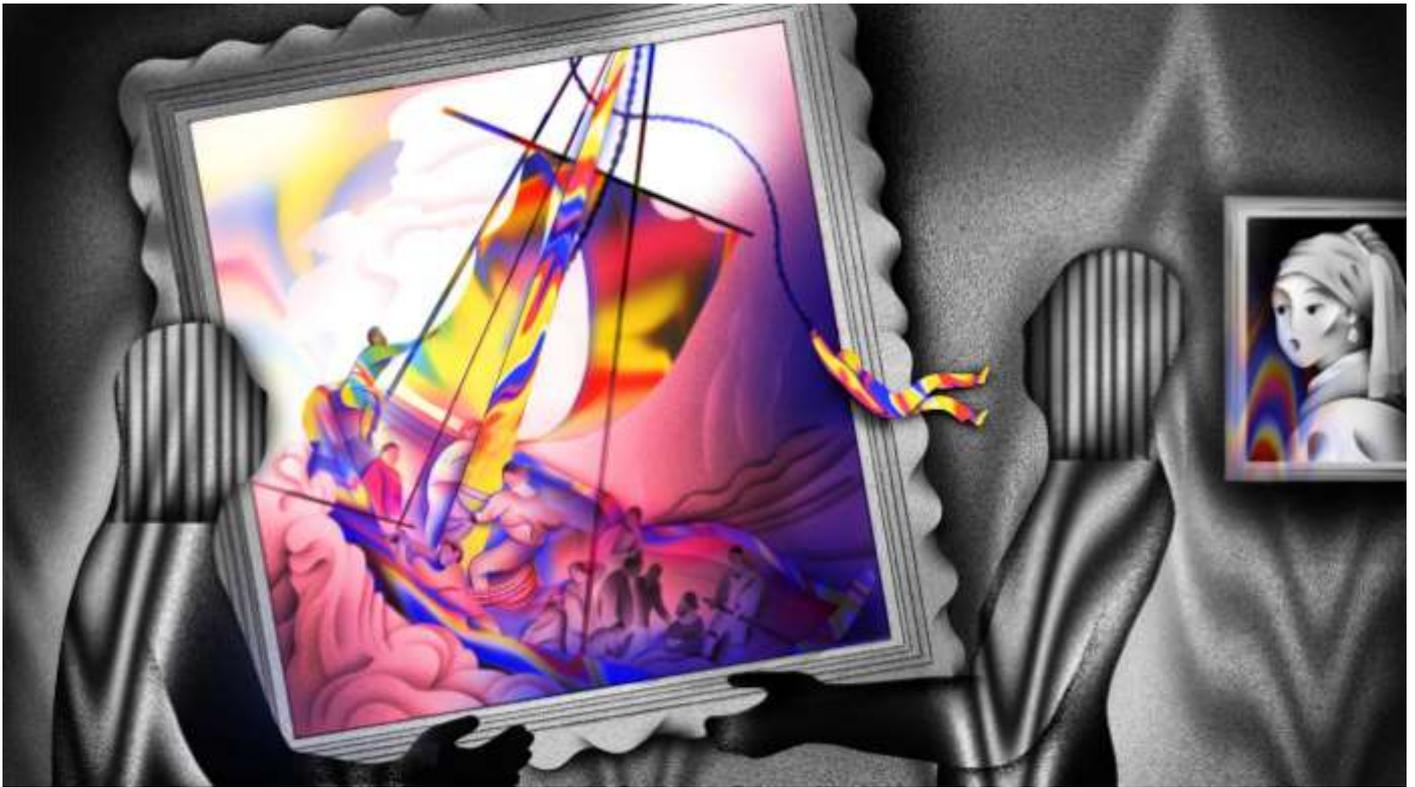


Illustration: Rebekka Dunlap

By Nina Siegal

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It's still regarded as the greatest unsolved art heist of all time: \$500 million of art—including works by Rembrandt, Vermeer, Degas, and Manet—plucked from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston on March 18, 1990, by two men posing as police.

The museum had offered a \$5 million reward for the return of all 13 pieces in good condition. Last month, the bounty was suddenly and unexpectedly doubled to \$10 million.

For such a long-unsolved case, the investigation is surprisingly active into the disappearance of the artworks, which include paintings, a Chinese vase and a 19th century finial of an eagle. Anthony Amore, the museum's director of security, says he works on the case every day and is in "almost constant contact" with FBI investigators. Tipsters still call all the time, with leads that range from the vaguely interesting to the downright bizarre. Among them: a psychic who offered to contact the late Mrs. Gardner's spirit, and a few self-styled sleuths who reckon the paintings can be found with metal dowsing rods.



Arthur Brand.

Photographer: Jasper Juinen/Bloomberg

Most of those go nowhere. Whether the works will ever be recovered, or if they still exist at all, is one of the great questions that has divided the art world.

"Those paintings are gone," said Erin Thompson, professor of art crime at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. "Either because they were destroyed immediately after they were

stolen, or because they've already been beaten up so badly by being moved around in the back of cars."

But there is one outside detective respected by Amore—Arthur Brand, a Dutch private investigator—who believes not only are the artworks still intact, but also that he can bring them home. This year.

"It's almost certain that the pieces still exist," Brand told me. "We are following two leads that both go to the Netherlands, and we are now negotiating with certain people."

Brand, 47, has become one of the world's leading experts in international art crimes. A British newspaper once called him the "Indiana Jones of the art world" for his combination of crack negotiating skills and uncanny instincts for finding stolen art.

In the past few years, Brand has posed as the agent of a Texas oil millionaire to help Berlin police find two enormous bronze horses from the German Reichstag. He worked with Ukrainian militia members to secure the return of five stolen Dutch masters to the Westfries Museum in the Netherlands. He negotiated with two criminal gangs

for the successful return of a Salvador Dali and a painting by Tamara de Lempicka, together valued at about \$25 million, to the now-closed Scheringa Museum of Realist Art, also in the Netherlands.

Brand acts as something of a liaison between criminals and the police. Controversially, he'll try to make deals that allow the culprits to go free, because he says his primary goal is saving the art from the trash heap.

“There are very few like him who understand the reality of this sort of crime,” Amore said.



Some of the pieces stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. From left: Degas's La Sortie de Pesage, Rembrandt's The Storm on the Sea of Galilee, and Vermeer's The Concert.

Source: FBI

“It’s the Holy Grail in the art world”

René Allonge, the chief art investigator with the Berlin State Office of Criminal Investigation, said his team had been searching for Hitler's bronze horses since 2013. He contacted Brand at the end of 2014, met him in 2015, and they conducted the investigation and searches jointly, “as far as it was legally possible.” Ultimately, Brand played a crucial role in the discovery of the bronze horses, as well as other populist bronzes from the Nazi era, he said. “He succeeded in penetrating a very closed scene of collectors of high-quality Nazi devotionalia, where we finally found the sculptures that we were searching for,” Allonge wrote in an email.

Brand's reward in some of these high-profile cases is often the glory and nothing more. Scheringa had originally offered a €250,000 bounty (\$280,000) for the Dali and Lempicka, but the museum had shut down by the time they were recovered. Brand was paid an hourly fee and had his expenses reimbursed, though he declined to say by whom. For finding Hitler's horses, he got no cash at all, just a lot of free publicity, he says.

"He's not the guy to charge you for every hour he works," said Ad Geerdink, director of the Westfries Museum, for which Brand recovered five old-master paintings from a militia group in Ukraine. "He knew that we are a small organization with not many resources, so the fee was very, very friendly."

The biggest bonus Brand's ever received for solving a case was about €25,000, he says. He adds that he's investigating the Gardner case for the glory. "It's the Holy Grail in the art world," he said.

It's estimated that only 5 percent to 10 percent of stolen art is ever recovered, largely because the works are impossible to sell publicly.

"People will steal art first and then think about what to do with it second," said Thompson, the art crime professor. "Often they'll destroy the work of art to get rid of the evidence." Shortly after seven paintings by Picasso, Monet, Van Gogh, Gauguin, and others, valued in the tens of millions of dollars, were stolen from Rotterdam's Kunsthal museum in 2013, they were burned by the mother of one of three Romanian thieves arrested and charged in the burglary. She confessed to investigators that she was scared after police began searching her village.

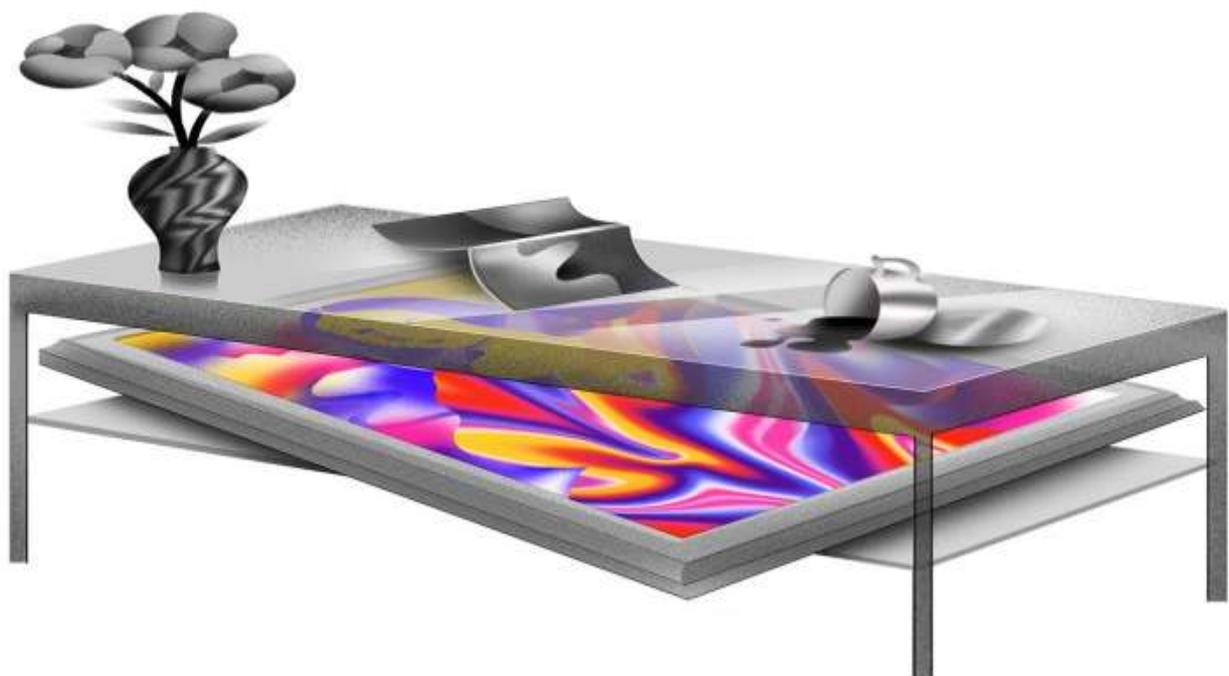


Illustration: Rebekka Dunlap

Alternatively, paintings are used as bargaining chips in criminal cases. That's how Italian police recently located two stolen Van Goghs.

In 2002, thieves broke into the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam with a sledgehammer—just because they saw a weakness in the museum's security, not because they knew what they were after. The opportunists sold the works for €350,000 to alleged Italian mobster Raffaele Imperiale. (The art was said to be worth tens of millions—although it never came to market, so it's impossible to know.)

In a seaside town near Naples, Imperiale stored the canvases in his mother's kitchen cabinet for a dozen years until prosecutors closed in. In August, Imperiale disclosed their location in an attempt to improve his standing with the courts, his lawyers, Maurizio Frizzi and Giovanni Ricco, told me. Prosecutors subsequently reduced his sentence by about two years, they said.

But often, the thieves are only persuaded to let go of works if they think they're going to sell them on the black market. This is where someone like Brand can come in. In 2014, he created a character to help solve the case of the missing Reichstag bronze horses. He pretended to be an agent for "Dr. Moss," a fictional American collector who had gotten rich in the oil business, loosely based on the character J.R. Ewing from the TV show Dallas. He has also posed as the representative of princes and sheikhs, or even as a criminal himself. "Whatever works, works," he said. He draws the line at wearing costumes.

Brand says he almost never deals with the original thieves. Stolen art tends to move through many hands. Sometimes, the ultimate recipient doesn't know that what they have was stolen.

"In many cases, I have to deal with a person who has a problem: They've been screwed by another criminal group," Brand said. "They can either pass art along to another criminal group, or they can burn it. That's even worse. What they won't do is take the work to the police and say, 'We found these Van Goghs.' Because the police will ask where they got them."

“We’re not talking about murders here. If a big criminal has them or the Pope, it doesn’t matter”

That’s where Brand has an opportunity to become the middleman. He can promise the sellers they won’t get in trouble, then get assurances that the police won’t make arrests.

Brand’s style works particularly well for snaring amateur crooks, said Noah Charney, founder of the Association for Research Into Crimes Against Art. A lot of people who steal art assume there are collectors out there who buy on the black market, like characters in heist movies. In fact, almost none exist, he said.

“People have always collected art to show their erudition and to advertise their wealth,” he said. “If you buy something that you know or suspect was stolen, you can’t show it to anyone.”

Criminals don’t always know that. “They get desperate and then turn to someone like Arthur Brand,” someone they are willing to believe is the real deal, Charney said.

Six-foot-two, with a shock of blond hair and bright blue eyes, Brand could be played in the movie of his life by Liam Neeson or Ralph Fiennes. His sleuthing is an adjunct to his primary and less dramatic job—helping buyers who have been swindled, conned, or overcharged for art.

“About 70 percent of what I do is just in the office, visiting clients, visiting dealers, talking to people, and saying, ‘Give him his money back!’” he said. “The other 30 percent is walking around talking to criminals, talking to police, informants, and going undercover sometimes.”



An empty frame in the museum's Dutch Room, where Rembrandt's *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee* and *A Lady and Gentleman in Black* once hung. Source: FBI

Brand first became connected to the art world as a student, through collecting ancient Roman and Greek coins. "I found out that there were a lot of fakes out there, and I didn't want to spend my hard-earned money buying fakes," he said.

In 2002, Brand received the first of many tips, rumors, and leads about the Gardner case. He heard that back in 1991, people in Holland had photographs of the paintings in storage. By following up, he became convinced that the paintings were never sent to the Netherlands, but photographs were being circulated by people trying to sell the paintings to someone there.

Sometime around 2010, he heard that the works had ended up in the hands of former members of the Irish Republican Army. But he soon suffered a setback with the death of one of his top sources, a former IRA member.

Brand believes the original thieves were small-time burglars who sold the pieces to a criminal gang in the U.S. before they were killed in the early 1990s. At some point in the mid-1990s, he thinks, the works were shipped to Ireland by boat and ended up with top-ranking IRA commanders.

For the past 12 years, Amore and the FBI have worked around a theory that local gang members in the Boston area may have been involved. They are fairly certain that the two thieves who committed the crime died shortly afterwards, Amore said.

But Amore believes the works are still in the U.S. "Art that is stolen in America tends to stay in America," he said. "I'd be happy to be proven wrong."

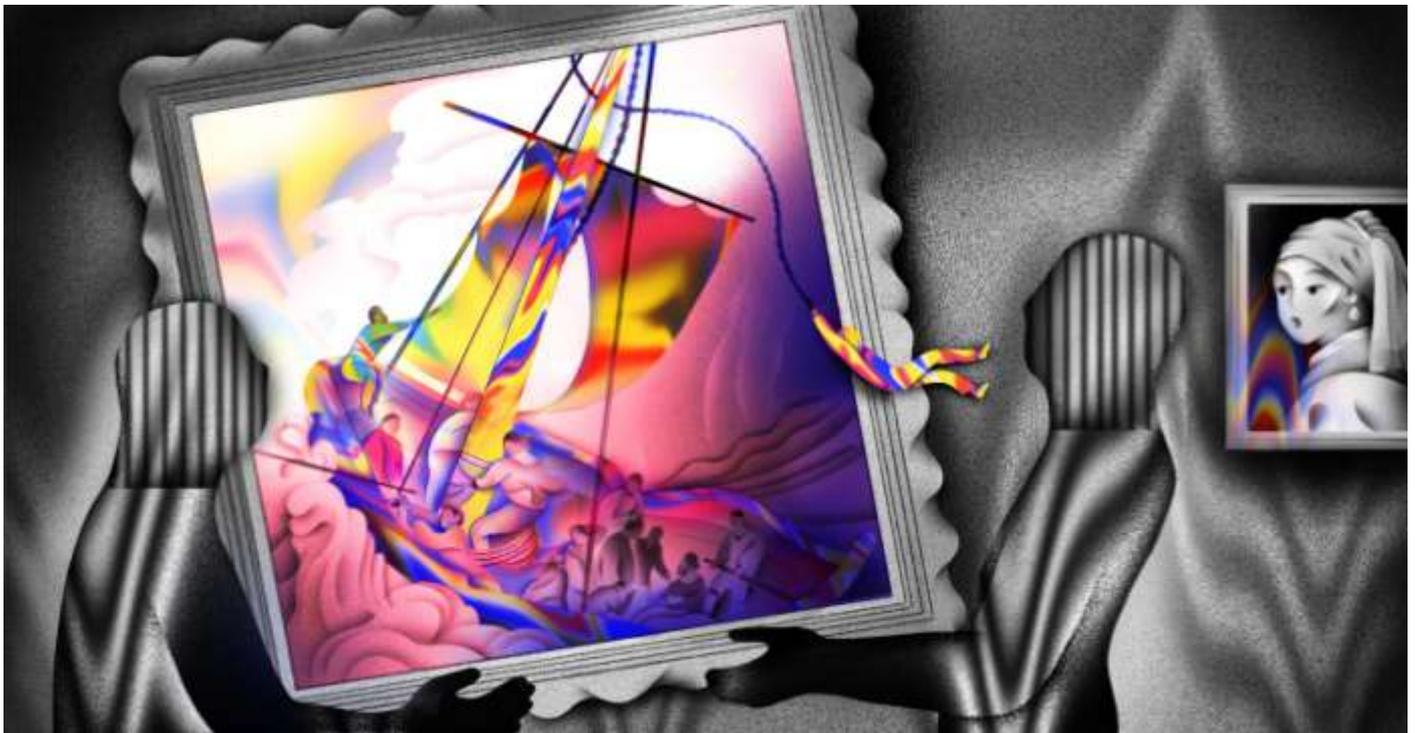


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The statute of limitations on the theft ran out in 1995, and the Office of the U.S. Attorney for Massachusetts has considered offering immunity for information that leads to its return. The museum mostly cares about getting the works back, Amore said. That's partly why they raised the reward.

"It was important for the museum to show its commitment," he said. "We're telling the public this is how serious we are."

Brand says the higher reward may help speed things up. He isn't convinced, though, that the criminals involved will trust the FBI to live up to the deal, despite his assurances.

"For me, it's not about getting people arrested," he said. "We're not talking about murders here. If a big criminal has them or the Pope, it doesn't matter. The important thing is to get them back."

Brand says this case could be cracked within months. He won't elaborate, but if his leads are good, he'll have to work fast.

Amore also says that he and the FBI may be close to solving the case, and they have leads that are "making the haystack smaller." He, too, declined to share specifics. "We feel we're on the right path," he said.

The FBI is more measured. "The investigation has had many twists and turns, promising leads and dead ends," said Kristen Setera, an agency spokeswoman in Boston. "It has included thousands of interviews and incalculable hours of effort. The FBI believes with high confidence that we have identified those responsible for the theft, even though we still don't know where the art is currently located."

Brand is confident he can find out.

“Somebody I’m talking to knows something,” he said. “These people are not idiots. They know that they can’t just hand them over and walk away with impunity. They think even if they’ve been offered immunity, the police will have some tricks up their sleeves. What I can do is I can provide them a way to return the works without ever having contact with the police. I can even promise them that they can get the reward.”

Would Brand really hand over \$10 million?

“If I can be the one who can bring them to the museum,” he says, “give me a good glass of Guinness, and that’s reward enough.”

—*With assistance from Hugo Miller.*

