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the art of theft

Noah Charney has fashioned a multimedia career from the work of those who steal paintings

By Gerry Boyle '78

It was the very same side door where, in the dead of night on March 18, 1990, thieves posing as Boston police talked their way into the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, bound the museum's security guards, and stole 13 works of art valued at \$300 million.

I got in by saying I had an interview with Noah Charney '02.

Actually, that's an oversimplification. The locked door is the staff entrance. But the museum's security director, Anthony Amore, did know of Charney, an art-theft expert. In fact, Amore had been trying to get in touch with Charney, who is based in Europe.

"He e-mailed me a few days ago and asked if I could call him, because he wanted to ask me some questions and he was interested in my work," Charney said, strolling through the Gardner

galleries later that afternoon. "I'm going to be in touch with him as soon as this [book] tour is over."

And if that seems a bit casual, forgive Charney. He's been busy.

There's his debut suspense novel, *The Art Thief*, and the 10-city author tour that brought him to Boston in October. Another novel in progress, this one set in Slovenia and having to do with an art theft that took place during World War II. A television drama in development by DreamWorks that Charney describes as "sort of an art-theft CSI." An art-crime TV documentary that he hopes to co-write and host. And a book of contributed essays about art theft, which he is compiling and editing. And an art-theft think tank he founded that has gathered experts from around the world.

And so on. None of which will come as a big surprise to anyone who knew Charney at Colby, where he played squash, audited extra courses

every semester, wrote and produced plays, was lead singer in a rock band, founded a film society, and had a breakfast named after him at Bonnie's Diner—all in four years.

"I was really hyperactive there," Charney recalled, chatting in the Gardner museum cafe.

The more things change ...

The son of a Yale psychiatrist and a Yale French professor, Charney arrived at Colby from Choate. Tall and lanky, he did the things listed above—and he took art history. Lots of it, from first semester on.

"I spent a lot of time with my art-history professors who I *loved*. I just can't say enough good things about them. They're really superstars, but they became friends and I keep in touch with them more than I do any students."

He's referring to Associate Professor Véronique Plesch, James Gillespie Professor of Art Michael Marlais, and David Simon, the Ellerton and Edith Jetté Professor of Art, who recalls Charney as a terrific student, "passionate about lots of different things." But in addition to his academic freneticism, Charney also showed "a sense of elegance," Simon said. Learning that Simon had a house in northern Spain, Charney, who had spent time in Europe growing up, had some advice. "Noah gave *me* a list of restaurants to go to," Simon said, smiling at the thought. "That was Noah."

Charney went on to earn a master's degree in art history at The Courtauld Institute in London, focusing on 17th-century Roman art. Then he earned a second master's at Cambridge University, this time in 16th-century Florentine painting. His Ph.D. studies are on the history of art theft. (He's now on leave from the program while he pursues other projects.)

While at Courtauld, Charney decided it would be fun to write a novel about art theft, and he set to researching the subject.

He soon found there was little in print other than newspaper articles. "It seems like just a vast oversight that it hasn't been looked at before," Charney said. "I'm basically it now. And I'm trying to get as many people as possible interested, because the more the better, especially people from different fields."

With characteristic aplomb, at 27 Charney founded a nonprofit, the Association for Research into Crimes against Art (ARCA). He organized a conference and convinced the heaviest hitters in the world of art theft to show up in Cambridge for the meetings. The FBI

"It's really more akin to kidnapping, because of the emotional connection between the owner and the object and the fact that you cannot simply buy another one. A monetary equivalent is insufficient."

--Noah Charney '02, art-theft expert

and Scotland Yard were represented, along with museums like the Tate Modern.

His effort got him profiled in the *The New York Times Magazine* in 2006: "Though Charney's work has thus far been largely theoretical, he has plans to put it to active use. 'I've been a student all my life, but I don't want these things to remain locked away in the ivory tower,'" the story said.

Fat chance.

In addition to his media projects, two ARCA conferences are planned for London and Ljubljana, Slovenia. Beginning next year, Charney plans to run the nonprofit from Rome. Last fall he spoke at the European Criminology Society meeting in Bologna, and he has been invited to present at the American version next year.

"I think the best thing I could do now is be sort of a figurehead for the field," Charney said. "I honestly think ... I'm not good with details related to academia. I tend to get too excited about big ideas."

Where to begin?

Charney wants to educate the public about art crime, but first he has to educate the public about art. "Most people will think at first that it's the collectibles of the wealthy who can afford to lose them anyway. And it's objects going missing that they have no relationship with. And they have the idea that art is for an elitist institution that is other, that criminals are kind of sticking it to the man. It's almost cool."

How to bring the public closer to art?

Each spring Charney teaches in Florence with a program for students from Miami-Dade University. Each summer he teaches in a program in Cambridge, England. "I see how approaching it with the correct turns of phrase can really illuminate these students. They fall in love with it. I think

it's the most fascinating thing to study, because you study everything through the lens of this one work of art. It's history, it's literature, it's biography, geometry, chemistry. It's all mixed up in there."

Couple teaching with crime novels, TV shows, even a movie (though presumably not in the vein of *The Thomas Crown Affair*) and maybe you can reach some people.

"If I can make a few people come to a museum, and not just come because it's on their tourist itinerary and they want to check it off, but come and actually look at the art, interact with it, choose a favorite postcard and love the experience, then that would give me tremendous satisfaction," Charney said.

And a novel about art theft? No better way to bring art and art history to the masses, he says.

"I'm not interested in publishing a peer-reviewed article that is going to be read by five people, not including my mother," Charney said. "But if I can write a book that is going to be read by a few hundred-thousand people, it's the best chance to reach a large audience."

It could be that *The Art Thief* will have that reach. The first printing for the U.S. hardcover was 75,000, according to Charney's publicist at Atria Books, an imprint of Random House. A Spanish version, *El ladrón de arte*, is out and selling like hotcakes (Charney finished the U.S. book tour and flew to Madrid to do publicity there), with editions in several other languages coming next year.

So what will the novel teach readers about art theft?

Charney invites readers into the world of art, thievery, and forgery in London, Paris, and Rome. An art detective and an art



historian track the art and the thieves into a world of intrigue that Charney himself has studied, and he's eager to share his knowledge—both in fiction and in person.

At the Gardner he mounted the stone steps to the second-floor Dutch Room, where empty frames mark what were the locations of works by Vermeer and Rembrandt, among 13 works stolen 17 years ago.

Was this the work of some diabolical collector? Most likely. But, Charney said, "That's incredibly, dramatically the exception."

In Boston, the fact that other, far more valuable works were left behind points to a collector who sent thieves with a shopping list. But, Charney said, contrary to popular fiction, most art crimes are commissioned by an administrator who is usually a branch member of an organized crime syndicate. "They choose what to steal and they have a sense of what they want to do afterwards," he said. "They might want to sell it to someone, but most of the time it gets traded on a closed black market for an equal value of other illicit goods like drugs or arms. The reason we know that tends to be haphazard. It tends to be accidental police raids of storehouses. They find drugs and arms and art."

Some thieves steal art to trade for guns or drugs. Others hope to sell the art but soon find that unloading a stolen Vermeer is easy only in the movies (which the thieves have seen). "Unfortunately, taking the object isn't all that hard," Charney said.

In fact, most valuable art is shockingly vulnerable to theft, Charney says, with only large metropolitan museums likely to take steps to protect works of art. "For instance, in all of Poland, which has wonderful art, there is only one painting that has its own security, and that same painting is the only one in the entire country that's insured," he said. "There are ninety-five thousand churches in Italy. Every single one has at least one important work of art."

How to protect them from thieves? In museums, separate the most valuable objects and station a security guard next to

them—not at the threshold of the gallery. Rearrange art works periodically, making it harder to plan a theft.

Of course, thefts do occur—six to 10 billion dollars worth a year, according to Charney. "Interpol just released stats on highest growing criminal industries," he said. "Number one is drugs. Number two is money laundering. Number three is arms. Number four is art crime. It slipped down. It used to be number three."

Most stolen art is looted antiquities from archaeological sites, but with art values skyrocketing, museums and churches are regular targets. Most thieves soon learn that stealing a painting is easy. "Then they have the object and they realize that there isn't anyone to sell it to," Charney said.

An art thief's Plan B? Ransom the work back to the institution from which it was stolen. If that falls through, Charney says, most art is abandoned or cached. "Police don't take seriously threats to destroy art. It's in no one's interest. It's like setting fire to a briefcase of hundred-dollar bills," he said. "So then they just wait. They might have to wait a couple of generations, even if the object is literally just sitting in a storeroom somewhere."

And the paintings stolen from the Gardner? "I would say they are buried somewhere in Ireland and will be stumbled upon at some point, but only by accident," he said.

Why Ireland? Charney hesitated, then confided that some Boston criminal elements were connected to the Irish Republican Army, and the IRA was known to steal art to use to barter the staples of its other illicit activities, like guns and drugs. "I also have information that I can't talk about, so apologies about that," Charney said.

It was all very mysterious. In fact, Charney himself—tall, suave, recently engaged to a woman from Slovenia, peppering the conversation with Italian phrases—could have stepped out of a suspense novel.

Especially his own.

Shown here are three of the 13 works of art stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston in 1990, the largest unsolved art theft in American history. A \$5-million reward has been offered for the return of the artwork, which art-theft expert Noah Charney '02 believes was ordered by an unscrupulous collector—an exception to the rule in such cases. The stolen paintings include, from top, Rembrandt's A Lady and Gentleman in Black, 1633; Vermeer's The Concert; and, also by Rembrandt, The Storm on the Sea of Galilee, 1633.