

# The Picasso Caper

By Lisa Allen Barnes

In the shadowy world of modern thievery, the cachet in loot – the next best thing to money – may be art. Crooks who couldn't explain the difference between Monet and Monet have discovered paint canvas. The burglars of Eastern Europe are fast emptying little churches of vanishing art from the sites of old civilization.

They have been called "Social Register Burglars". Some years ago, Constance Lowenthal, of the International Foundation for Art Research (IFAR), related the story of two men who had the bad luck to suffer a flat tire while crossing the Whitestone Bridge, which connects the Bronx and Queens.

A police officer, nosing around, noticed that the back of their station wagon was laden with silverware, much of which was fine and old, and, it turned out, all of it stolen. Then, the police officer found a copy of the Social Register with the names efficiently checked off – members of the "old family" riche, whose homes had been looted of art and other saleable valuables.

Eventually the two confessed that a highly respected Boston art dealer was their tutor and the receiver of their stolen goods. This art dealer had given them useful art lessons: they were not to steal portraits "because people recognize faces"; they were not to be tempted by marine paintings because of the boats displayed the American flag "people remember them better"; they were encouraged to scoop up landscapes – a vista with trees, a house, a quiet brook, perhaps a cow – the kind of unassuming 19<sup>th</sup> century scene that householders with small experience of art feel safe hanging over the mantel piece.

Ninety percent of looted art is never recovered because "90 percent of what is stolen is not great art. It's inventory. It's not distinctive," Lowenthal said. It is hot (as in stolen)? Is it right or is it forged?

The name that dominates IFAR's files is Pablo Picasso. There are 288 entries of stolen works of that modern master, followed by 243 for Joan Miro and 210 for Marc Chagall. These figures do not so much demonstrate criminal tastes as the impressive productivity of the makers.

Sad to report, Lowenthal will not entertain the fantasy that somewhere in the world is a real-life counterpart of Dr. No, the demonic master criminal of James Bond film who displayed a major passion for stolen artwork in his lair. She has heard of the theories – or fancies – about big money receivers of stolen art and believes none of them.

"An Arab oil sheik, a money laundering drug lord, a Pacific Rim electronic magnate. We all know the profile, but it's from the movies," she said.

Most thefts appear to be the work of thieves without serious art education. Along with the good stuff, they are apt to sweep up junk – those sappy gift shop kids with enormous eyes, for example, which no serious collector would covet. Some thieves have turned out to be professionals who, following fashion, switched from robbing video stores to stealing art. Some are actually specialists in thievery; they make off with a truck and then discover that the freight includes some saleable pictures. A few are insiders with easy access, doormen, night watchmen and butlers, occasionally even a curator satisfying a longing to own art he or she can't afford.

Among the real thieves that steal for love was a young man branded the "Scourge of Soho" by his victims. He regularly made off with substantial pieces of modern sculpture that he managed to carry out of galleries in Manhattan's downtown art district. In his little Volkswagon, he drove each treasure

across the Hudson to his loft in Hoboken, New Jersey. There the police eventually caught up with him and the loot – lovingly installed on pedestals and expertly lit.

Not unexpectedly, an art thief may turn out to be shrewdly ingenious. One Manhattan insider substituted a copy of a Picasso portrait of his mistress Dora Maar for the genuine article on the assumption that the elderly owner would never notice. Someone noticed, and the authentic painting was retrieved.

The most exciting and challenging art theft/scam case that I was instrumental in resolving has been appropriately named, “The Picasso Caper”.

The “Caper” began for me in August 1991, when two men entered my offices at the recommendation of a colleague. Al, the elder man, and his son Steven brought into my conference room an oil painting measuring 34” x 26” in an ordinary mailing tube. Then Steve, in a somewhat nervous manner, said in a thick Brooklyn accent, “You see, Miss. Allen, what we have here is a genuine Pablo Picasso. May I present *La Mujer*. You see, this here is the real thing and I believe it is worth \$10 million, but we only want one million. You can have nine.”

I inadvertently chuckled and continued with the usual formalities. I explained that, in order to conduct my due diligence, I must establish the painting’s authenticity and fair market value. Steve interrupted and ceremoniously pulled out a newspaper clipping from the *New York Times*, dated Dec. 23, 1983, entitled “A Picasso Stolen from a Marquis”, to further his point. He showed me a copy of a police report with *La Mujer* listed as stolen goods.

In a somewhat anxious temperament, Steve said, “You see, the statute of limitations are up. It’s legal for us to sell this here Picasso, and, anyway, a friend of a friend gave it to us as a gift, you know.”

I proceeded to tell the two men that I would like to take a Polaroid picture of the piece and that I would need a signed contract from them. As I proceeded to take the picture, Al said to Steve, “Don’t let your face get in the picture.” I finished the meeting quickly after obtaining their signatures and phone numbers, and immediately called the International Foundation for Art Research.

I explained the scenario to Anna Kuiske, of IFAR, and noted that it was quite obvious that the painting had been cut out of a stretcher and that it did not appear to have a Picasso sensibility or characteristic of any period, but rather a pastiche (an artistic composition made up of bits from various sources.)

Ann conjectured that this indeed sounded like the infamous *La Mujer* owned by Joaquin Alvarez Montez, a Spanish nobleman, who bears the title of Viscount of Miralcazar.

It was said he inherited *La Mujer* from his father who, the Viscount stated, had brought it along with another painting of a woman from Pablo Picasso himself. His father allegedly helped one of Picasso’s relatives escape a fascist regime of Generalissimo Francisco Franco during the ‘30s. Picasso was so grateful that he gave the paintings to the Viscount as a token of his appreciation at “fire sale” prices.

To further the confusion, when the first reports of the painting being stolen hit the New York tabloids in 1983, the painting was thought to be worth millions of dollars and Alvarez had been mistakenly promoted to Marquis of MonReal, a misidentification that has stuck with every written account during the 11 years since. That title, in fact, belonged to one of his great-grandfathers and was passed down to a cousin. Alvarez holds a lesser title of Viscount but neither title bestowed any privileges on Alvarez other than to hold him as old money.

Kuiske kindly thanked me for the information. I was not to hear anything more until December '92 – when my colleague, who had referred Al and Steve to me, called and told me to turn on CNN.

There it was on TV, as well as in a flood of news articles, the arrest of poor Al and Steve.

The FBI had gone to comic lengths to arrest the father and son team, but with a tremendous amount of thanks to Al and Steve's third teammate – pardon the pun – Brian Kingman, a 20-game loser for the 1980 Oakland A's.

In November '92, Kingman had received a call from Al and Steve regarding the sale of the Picasso. After numerous calls and viewing the photos of what Kingman thought was "so ugly", but worth so much, he arranged a meeting with Al and Steve and two purported insurance agents (buyer/collectors), who were really undercover FBI agents.

The FBI was even able to acquire one of Charles Keating's old private jets as a prop to convey the right image for their sting operation. The tape recording of the meeting was more like a comedy routine, with the buyer (FBI agent) bragging about his vast collection of Rembrandts and Caravaggio's, as he escorted the three men to his plane. "Oops", he commented, "Wrong jet. I used to have a bigger one." Once on the plane, the buyer took out his black light to examine the painting, and after some discussion, asked, "How much?"

Steve said, "A mere \$500,000 will do," and Steve further said, "If you like this gem, wait till I show you", and Al interrupted and said, "The Rembrandt". The agent reached for his briefcase, turned to his colleagues and said, "Sorry, boys, next stop FBI headquarters".

That was my first stop, as well, after hearing the report of their arrest. The FBI called on me to first identify the painting and then assess its value.

I explained to the FBI that it would be rather difficult to put a value on the painting for several reasons. First, because no painting titled *La Mujer* exists in the definitive 20 volumes of Catalogue Raisonné known as Zervos. Secondly, because it is likely that it may be a fake.

Establishing the fair market value was important to the FBI's case and for the criminals' sentencing.

I said I would take a two-fold approach, using other expert opinions and scholarly references and scientific data.

In February '93, I ventured to California accompanied by an FBI agent and *La Mujer*. First stop was several art conservators who swore up and down believing it to be authentic, but then would not render an opinion. There were numerous appraisers and curators, who all said "92 percent it is not a Picasso". That left 8 percent still questionable.

The world of art is not only mysterious, but even the most astute historians and scientists today will not always make definitive conclusions. They maintain an arbitrary posture holds all in good standing.

Finally, I had scientific testing on *La Mujer*, thanks to the Balboa Art Conservation Center. There they conducted tests using X-rays, ultraviolet and radiograph, as well as pigment tests.

The report: "An under-painting is depicted by the X-ray revealing a seated female figure in a wooden chair with a large sofa-like chair. Stylistically the under-painting is more akin to Picasso's looser, freer technique and draftsmanship."

It also discussed the idiosyncratic choice of a pink ground that was not uncommon for Picasso, according to Francoise Gilots, mother of both Claude and Paloma Picasso. She also said that one could assume that the artist used pink to manipulate facial tonal qualities. Finally, the X-rays suggest the normal evolution of a painting with ideas covered as the design is resolved.

The questions posed to me by the FBI and the U.S. Attorney were:

1. What is its monetary value?
2. Is the painting a copy or is it an outright fake?
3. Is the artist's signature genuine and, if so, what bearing would that have in the art marketplace?

I endeavored to address these questions through scholarly means, other art experts and scientific testing. Based on a consensus of opinions by these art experts, and the fact that there is no mention or listing of *La Mujer* in Catalogues Raisonne, and also because the scientific testing was inconclusive, I believe the painting is neither an original painting by Pablo Picasso nor a copy of one.

Rather it is a fake, and its value could only be based on the cost of materials, particularly without knowledge of exactly who the artist was, the competence of the technique and execution, general aesthetic merits and possible historical significance (if any). We could only conclude the value to be \$500. Thus we could neither appreciate nor come to a value on the under-painting.

After it was reported found 10 years after the theft, the Marquis curiously proclaimed that the stolen painting was just a copy and that the original of *La Mujer* is in Switzerland in a vault.

Yet, he still wanted the copy returned to him, bringing up the question of whether he values the copy more or the under-painting.

With all the unanswered questions, who is to ever know the fate of what today is known as the "Mona Lisa" of Picasso's Cubist period?