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**Who  
robbed  
the  
Gardner  
Museum?**

By  
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THE THEFT OF PRICELESS ART conjures images of reclusive billionaires or James Bond villains commissioning canvases to adorn their man caves, and the details of the capers themselves sometimes satisfy our craving for glamour. But not always.

With *Master Thieves*, an investigative account of the unsolved theft of 13 works of art—including 7 paintings torn from their frames—stolen in a now-legendary heist from Boston’s Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum a quarter of a century ago, former *Boston Globe* investigative reporter Stephen Kurkjian (CAS’66) disabuses us of such grandiose notions. The crime was, in a word, artless. As the three-time Pulitzer Prize winner puts it, “I think of the thieves as high school sophomores breaking into the computer lab. They’re thugs.”

In spite of the book’s subtitle, *The Boston Gangsters Who Pulled Off the World’s Greatest Art Heist*, it’s a story without an ending, but a page-turner nonetheless. Early on the morning of March 18, 1990, a pair of thieves disguised as Boston police officers entered the museum, tied a pair of overnight security guards to chairs with duct tape, and ranged

- 1 Rembrandt’s *A Lady and Gentleman in Black* was painted in 1633.
- 2 Manet’s *Chez Tortoni*, painted about 1875, was stolen from the Blue Room.
- 3 *Landscape with an Obelisk* was painted by Govaert Flinck in 1638.



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around the museum's galleries, grabbing the works of art, among them Rembrandt's *Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee*, Vermeer's *The Concert*, and Édouard Manet's *Chez Torton*. A refrain throughout the book is that this was a crime against culture and against posterity, one that Kurkjian, the son of an artist, likens to the looting of antiquities in his ancestral Armenia.

Most of what is in the book has been reported before, by Kurkjian himself or others. Its few surprises are more on the order of the incestuous nature of New England's criminal gangs, the unabashed recidivism of those connected with them, and the details of the FBI's tepid investigation, such as its use of undercover and other informants.

The museum was an easy mark, the heist a tragedy (or comedy) of errors involving an off-hours visit by bogus cops with fake mustaches, a stoner security guard, an unpressed panic button, a disabled alarm system, a failure to follow protocol, and the hours the thieves had to make their getaway. As he followed a plethora of leads, Kurkjian, a dogged old-school journalist who retired from the *Globe* in 2007, became persona non grata at the Gardner. When museum director Anne Hawley received a mysterious, credible letter with information about the paintings in 1994, Kurkjian was asked not to report its contents, but he and the *Globe* did anyway.

Even in the wake of the FBI's limp press conference (there really was no news) on the



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CYDNEY SCOTT

Writer Stephen Kurkjian retired from the *Boston Globe* in 2007.

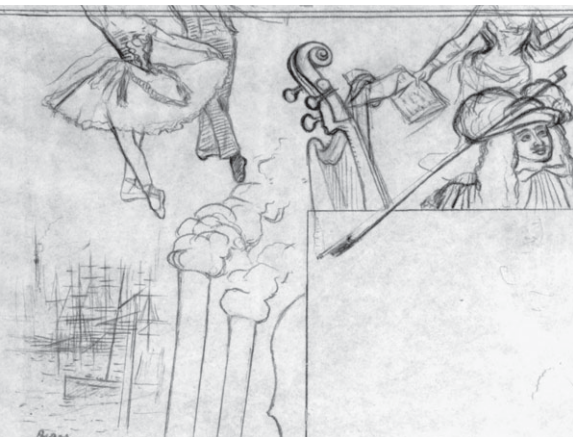
Kurkjian's research led him to a low-level Connecticut crime associate named Robert Gentile, who denies the accusation that he stashed the stolen art in his backyard shed.



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Rembrandt's *Self Portrait*, a postage stamp-sized ink on paper, was stolen from the Dutch Room.

Degas' *La Sortie du Pesage*, a small pencil and watercolor on paper, was stolen from the Short Gallery.

Rembrandt's famous *Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee* is a 63" x 50" oil on canvas.

*The Concert*, by Vermeer, is said to be the most valuable stolen painting, worth about \$200 million.

Degas' *Study for the Programme de la soirée artistique du 15 juin 1884* was drawn with black chalk on white paper.

Images courtesy of the FBI

25th anniversary of the theft, Kurkjian maintains that the feds don't really want to prosecute anyone; the fight's gone out of them. And just like the FBI, a gaggle of lawyers, and the occasional disappointing but lavishly compensated "expert," Kurkjian found himself witness to a tangled web spun by greed. With the museum dangling a \$5 million reward for information leading to the masterpieces' whereabouts, says Kurkjian, even those involved in it hoped for cash and immunity. The FBI just wants "to get the paintings back, pay the guy, period, end of story," Kurkjian says.

In addition to his account of events that fateful night, Kurkjian weaves a colorful narrative with a cast of New England mob leaders and small-time hoods, a few worthy of Damon Runyon, but most reflecting, as the author puts it, "the banality of the underworld." He has an eye for a detail that's worth a thousand words—for example, we get a sense of the maintenance level of the widow of an operator Kurkjian believes possessed the paintings at one time when she orders twin lobsters—for lunch. He guides us through a seamy, sad underworld populated by the likes of swingman Robert "Bobby" Guarente, fence and drug trafficker Carmello Merlino, crime boss Frank "Cadillac Frank" Salemme, attempted armored car robber Stephen "Steve" Rossetti, and Louis Royce, the Southie thief who as a youth would sneak into the Gardner Museum for a warm night's sleep. Kurkjian thinks it was Royce who planted the seed for the heist early on by letting his criminal associates know of the vulnerability of the Gardner's security system.

PublicAffairs offered Kurkjian a contract for the book to coincide with the heist's anniversary even though, as he puts it, "I couldn't pin the tail on the donkey." At the book's end the donkey remains tailless, but his research circled again and again back to one man, Connecticut low-level crime associate Robert Gentile, whose steadfast denials of stashing the stolen works don't jibe with Kurkjian's exhaustive research. Perhaps when they were in Gentile's possession the works were destroyed, which would explain his silence, the author suggests; his theory: the art was stolen not for cash or ransom, but as a whopping bargaining chip to reduce the prison sentence of crime boss Vincent "Vinnie" Ferrara, released in 2005 after a 16-year term for racketeering.

Kurkjian laments that 25 years later the brazen theft of the precious artworks, an open case with no arrests, is receding in public memory. "My hope," he writes, "is that this book will hasten their return." ■