

THE RECOVERY OF THE CENTURY IN PARAGUAY

A 16th-century painting stolen from the Museum of Fine Arts in Paraguay is recovered

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The National Centre for Cultural Heritage Protection at the INTERPOL-Argentina Department was informed that a piece that had been stolen from the National Museum of Fine Arts in Paraguay in July 2002, valued at U.S. \$ 200.000.00, was being offered for sale at the local art (black) market.

After a judicial intervention was undertaken, investigations showed that the work "San Jerónimo" by an anonymous author was for sale in the city of Posadas, province of Misiones (Argentina).

On March 6, 2008, a police fact-finding mission left for Posadas to locate the work. Along with local staff of the Argentinean Federal Police, it carried out an operation to recover the oil painting. It was in perfect condition and dated from 1500 approximately.

The mass media echoed the event, which was considered by the Paraguayan press as "the theft of the century." Reports indicated that the work had been stolen upon the construction of a 100-feet-long tunnel from a shop located opposite the museum, giving direct access to it.

The work was returned to the authorities of Paraguay on July 10, 2008. 

77 PAINTINGS HIDDEN IN A WAREHOUSE

The most important recovery in Argentina in terms of number of objects and artistic and economic value



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During the night and early morning of November 30 to December 1st, 2009, between four and six people stole more than eighty paintings, Austrian porcelain figurines, and various antiques from the home of a famous art collector of the city of Pilar, Province of Buenos Aires. Out of the eighty-two paintings stolen, thirty-six were by Argentinean painter Antonio Berni, eleven by Raul Soldi, some others by Lino Spilimbergo, and the rest by different artists of national and international renown.

On December 18, 2009, the National Centre for Cultural Heritage Protection was required by the Prosecutor's Office to assist in the investigation of a case that had been taken up by Dr. Marcos Petersen Victorica.

Following a Prosecutor's request, an investigation team was established to conduct a detailed study of the statements and testimonies that had been gathered by the Departmental Investigation Division (DDI) in Pilar, working in close coordination with this unit of the Provincial Police.



As a first step, the stolen assets were incorporated into the INTERPOL database of stolen works of art, which is available to the police in the 190 member countries, and on the website of this Division, including relevant descriptions and photographs, in order to prevent them from being sold on the art market.

Telephone companies were asked to submit lists of phone and radio calls recorded by their antennas in the area of the crime scene, in the time slot before and after the crime. This made it possible to identify the ID and cell phone numbers used by the criminals for communication. These investigations also made it possible to know that the driver of the victim had a direct connection to those involved in the theft.

Several cell phones were tapped and seven houses were identified in different areas of the province of Buenos Aires, which were raided around May 7, 2010. Over these searches, stolen ornamental objects and cell phones were found, and four people

were arrested. At that time, the stolen paintings were not discovered.

The Centre continued wiretapping to identify where the gang was planning to take the paintings to. The place where the stolen paintings could probably be found was identified. It was a depot in Gaona-Arroyo Los Perros (Moreno).

On May 15, 2010, after seeking the relevant warrant from the Auditing Prosecutor, Centre and DDI staff in Pilar carried out a raid there, on jurisdictional and procedural grounds. It was a deserted warehouse where the 77 stolen paintings were finally found. By judicial warrant, they were sent to DDI in Pilar, where they have been kept.

This has been the most important recovery in the history of the Centre because of the number of works involved and their artistic and economic value. 