

LAWYER'S

Bookshelf

Reviewed by Lawrence M. Kaye and Howard N. Spiegel

The Rescue Artist: A True Story of Art, Thieves, and the Hunt for a Missing Masterpiece

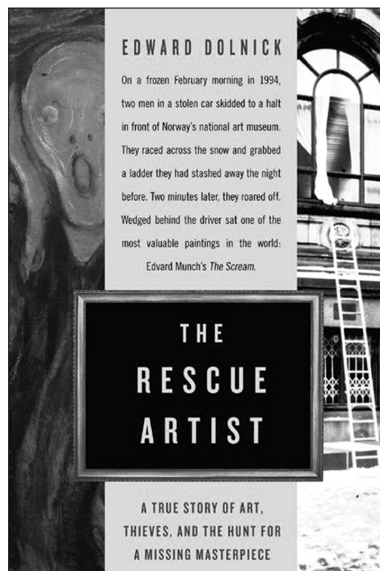
By Edward Dolnick, HarperCollins, New York, N.Y. 256 pages, \$25.95

Trafficking in stolen art is big business. As generally acknowledged by police authorities and other knowledgeable observers, each year this international multi-billion dollar trade is eclipsed in value only by illicit drugs and arms. Police forces around the world devote substantial resources to their attempts to recover stolen artworks. In this country, the FBI recently created a new “Art Crime Team,” consisting of eight agents supported by two U.S. attorneys, whose mission, according to the FBI’s Web site, includes “breaking up crime rings that steal and smuggle priceless works of art.”

In “The Rescue Artist,” a highly accessible and well-written book that often evokes a crime novel rather than a work of non-fiction, Edward Dolnick portrays the multifaceted world of art theft by focusing on the brazen heist from Norway’s preeminent art museum a decade ago

of one of the most famous paintings of all time: The Scream by Edvard Munch. As the title suggests, however, the real story here is about one man, Charley Hill, a former undercover police officer for the fabled Art Squad of Scotland Yard, who, as portrayed by Dolnick, played the starring role in the saga surrounding the efforts to recover the Munch masterpiece. And that saga is, indeed, well told—starting with the theft itself, the nearly bungled caper (one of the thieves actually fell off the ladder leading up to the second story gallery where The Scream hung), through many false leads and other twists and turns, to the dramatic recovery of “the piece of decorated cardboard” (Hill’s words) worth \$70 million. But all of this really serves as a springboard for Dolnick’s incisive and comprehensive portrait of Hill, who assumes an almost James Bond-type aura as we are brought into his colorful world.

“The Rescue Artist” will satisfy both the reader who would like a good mystery yarn to enliven his or her summer reading as well as someone who wants a crash course in art theft, art recovery, police undercover work, museum security (or the lack thereof), and even a primer on many of the world’s great works of art and the



Lawrence M. Kaye and **Howard N. Spiegel** are members of Herrick, Feinstein and co-chair its International Art Law Group.

lives of the artists who created them. Dolnick achieves all this through an engaging style and presentation. With short chapters, often with cliff-hanger endings, and an almost journalistic writing style, Dolnick takes the reader on a day-by-day adventure as the hunt for *The Scream* unfolds. He also embarks on frequent side trips, however, providing further insights into Charley Hill's life and psyche and, more generally, into the parallel worlds of art theft and crime detection.

Dolnick's exploration of Charley Hill himself is fascinating. He paints a portrait of the undercover agent using a broad canvas, exploring his roots, personality, psychological makeup, personal tastes and moral code, so that the reader understands and appreciates Hill's unique approach to the job. Particularly intriguing are Dolnick's detailed descriptions of Hill's relationships both with his superiors and the underworld figures with whom he dealt on a regular basis. Dolnick shares with the reader Hill's frank views about the sometimes naïve but well-meaning good guys and frightening but colorful bad guys he came up against daily as an undercover cop for Scotland Yard. Dolnick describes the skills Hill must call upon to keep his "cover," when any slip-up could have dire consequences, including the frequent "speed bumps" Hill encounters when he takes on the guise of an American or Canadian, as he often did. For example, Hill must purge his speech of countless English words and idioms, and even the way he deploys a knife and fork poses grave risks.

But Dolnick goes well beyond the Munch theft and Charley Hill. For example, he tells a number of fascinating tales about other noteworthy art thefts. These are often laced with humorous anecdotes about bumbling thieves and the rich lords and ladies who preside over unguarded mansions filled with masterpieces practically begging to be stolen (and which are, with remarkable frequency). The reasons for the thefts are explored, including the always-fascinating question of why one would steal property that is easily recognizable and for which there cannot be a public market. The popular "Dr. No" theory—

that eccentric billionaires direct the theft of certain masterpieces solely to ensure private viewings in their secret underground hideaways—is examined and essentially debunked.

We especially enjoyed the vignettes concerning the process of creating masterpieces and the lives of the artists themselves. While familiar to any serious student of art history, these bits of well-researched material (with helpful citations to reference material for further study) enhance the main themes of the theft of *The Scream* and Hill, and remind the reader quite vividly that the objects that make up the illicit art trade comprise some of the greatest creations of humankind. As we can attest from our own experience as art lawyers who have often worked with Scotland Yard and other law enforcement agencies on cases involving stolen art, it is the art itself that makes the work that much more gratifying and stimulating. Dolnick successfully conveys the sense of awe felt even by hard-bitten undercover agents when they come face to face with such great works. Indeed, much is made of Hill's strong but controversial belief that recovering the art is far more important than catching the crooks.

As lawyers, we sometimes questioned the usefulness of Dolnick's shorthand references to legal concepts, and some may find his fleeting comments about Nazi-looted art and antiquities smuggling surprisingly sparse. We also wonder whether the author glorifies Hill's role at the expense of his superiors in the Art Squad who in our experience were the ones who conceived and ran these kinds of undercover operations. But these minor criticisms do not diminish Dolnick's main accomplishment: an excellent and entertaining work about Charley Hill and the efforts to recover *The Scream*, as well as a wonderful introduction into the world of great art and the netherworld of great art theft.

This article is reprinted with permission from the July 1, 2005 edition of the NEW YORK LAW JOURNAL. © 2005 ALM Properties, Inc. All rights reserved. Further duplication without permission is prohibited. For information contact, American Lawyer Media, Reprint Department at 800-888-8300 x6111. #070-07-05-0002