



Art Sleuths

by Philip Eliasoph

IFAR and its Director Dr. Sharon Flescher

As the executive director of the International Foundation for Art Research (IFAR)—the respected neutral voice for the art world—Dr. Sharon Flescher (Fig. 1) keeps tabs on the complicated and sometimes murky international art scene. About IFAR's mission she says, "We operate at the intersection of diverse art communities—museums, collectors, scholars, dealers, attorneys—and provide authoritative information...about art." Flescher is being modest, as IFAR's website describes this diverse, New York-based institution as "a non-profit educational and research organization that offers impartial and authoritative information on authenticity, ownership, theft, and other artistic, legal, and ethical issues concerning art."

According to Interpol (International Criminal Police Organization), art theft is the fourth most profitable form of crime after drug trafficking, money laundering, and illegal arms trading. Although investigating art theft is no longer a primary activity, IFAR played a major role in developing the first international archive of stolen art in the mid-1970s and is a world authority on the subject.

In 1991 IFAR helped to establish the Art Loss Register (ALR) and managed its U.S. operations until 1998. In affiliation with the ALR, IFAR publishes its "Stolen Art Alert" in the *IFAR Journal*. It is the world's most respected "wanted" list of illustrated images covering such stolen artworks as the Sumerian artifacts looted from Iraq's national museum, Old Master paintings, American silver, Norman Rockwell paintings, and Native American tribal objects. Statistically only

about 30 percent of stolen art is ever recovered. The ALR now has over 145,000 missing objects catalogued in its database.

One such case is the armed theft at the Munch Museum in Norway of Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (Fig. 2) and *The Madonna* in August of 2004. As petrified Sunday morning visitors watched, masked thieves held a guard at gunpoint while looting the

masterpieces in broad daylight. Flescher pointed out for an ABC News report: "There is no legitimate market for *The Scream*. It's too iconic and well-known." Most heists are crimes of opportunity with unsuspecting, ill-informed purchasers acquiring the stolen property. "The more uniquely identifiable the object, the more famous the work and the more publicized the theft, the harder it is to market," Flescher notes.

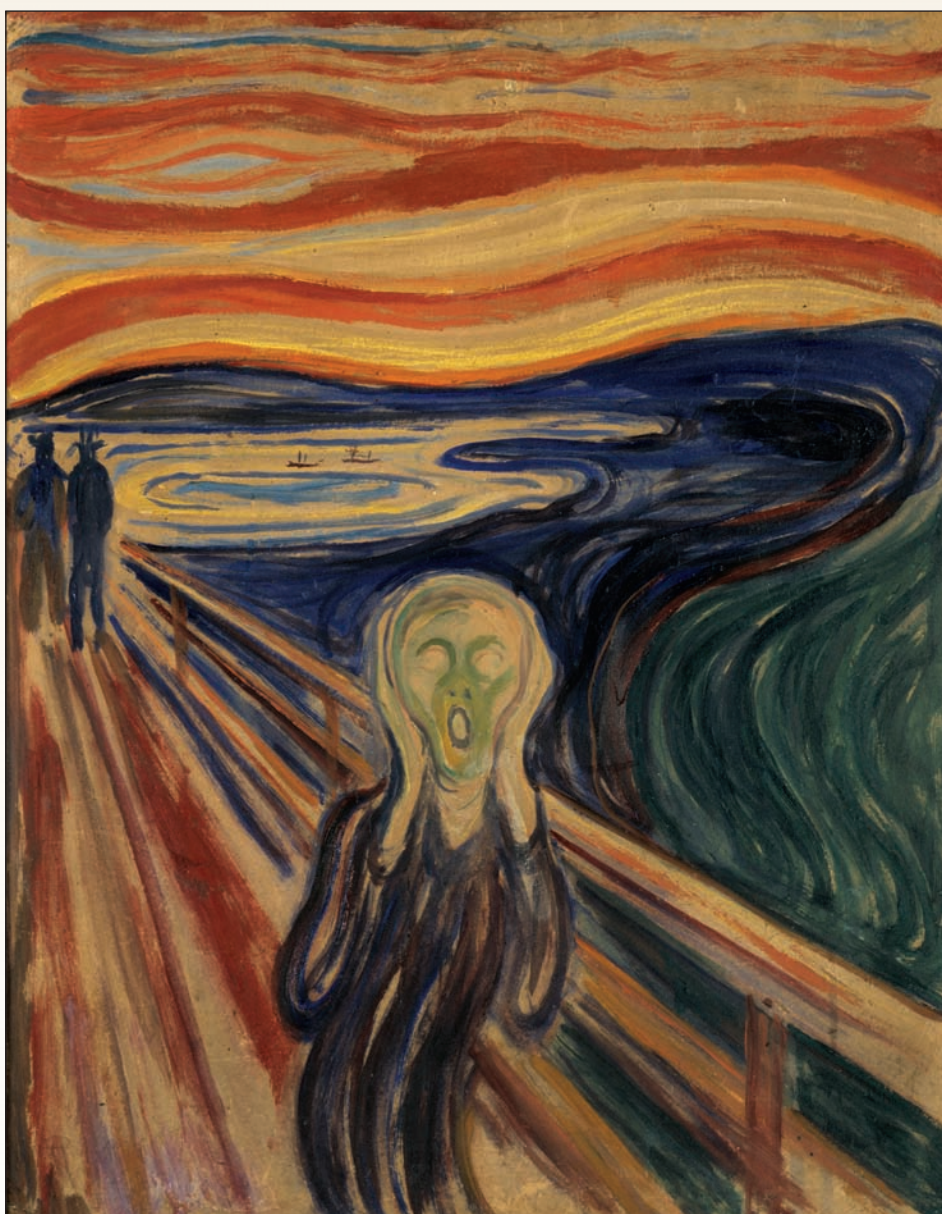


Fig. 2: Stolen 2004; remains uncovered. *The Scream*, Edvard Munch (1863–1944), 1893. Oil on canvas. ©Munch Museum/Munch-Ellingsen Group/ARS 2005.

“A non-descript landscape by a less-well-known artist might be easier to sell.”

On a larger scale are the 13 art objects and paintings, currently valued somewhere north of \$300 million, stolen from Boston’s Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum over 15 years ago and included in the database. Despite a \$5 million reward the whereabouts of these works by Rembrandt, Vermeer, Manet, and Degas remain unknown (Fig. 3). “The Gardner theft is the most important art museum theft in the history of the U.S.,” says Flescher, “and the fact that the works are still not recovered is a tragedy. But 15 years is not that long when dealing with art theft, so there is still hope that the works will show up, ideally in good condition.”

After the theft, United States Senator Ted Kennedy’s office consulted IFAR when he drafted legislation to make theft from a museum a federal crime. Federal law now defines art theft as well as “fencing” objects “known to be stolen” as crimes, and recommends fines and imprisonment of up to ten years

One wonders what degree of punishment will be adjudicated in the current criminal prosecution of a renowned Cape Cod map dealer, Forbes Smiley III, arrested last June and charged with stealing antique maps valued at \$900,000. Smiley was arrested at Yale’s Beinecke Library when a razor blade was discovered and a search of his briefcase yielded maps from Yale’s collection. He made a “not guilty” plea claiming he was merely comparing his own maps with those at Yale.

Another caper involves New York gallery owner and master forger Ely Sakhai who was sentenced to 41 months in prison for duplicating authentic paintings by Renoir, Monet, and Klee with estimated profits of \$3.5 million. “People are fascinated with stories like this case,” Flescher says. “Imagine Sotheby’s and Christie’s getting almost identical Gauguin flower paintings consigned to them in May, 2000! One authentic, one fake.”

Since its inception in 1969 IFAR’s agenda has evolved, but its Art Authentication Service has remained a high priority. IFAR is relied on for its “reputation for objectivity, scholarship, and



Fig. 3: Stolen 1990; remains uncovered. *The Concert*, Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), 1658–60. Oil on canvas, 72.5 x 64.7 cm.

independence.” Its authentication services are sought worldwide by police and government agencies, auction houses, dealers, collectors, educational institutions, researchers, journalists, and individuals.



Fig. 1: Dr. Sharon Flescher, executive director of IFAR.

IFAR is most frequently involved with research on works of art with questionable authenticity or attribution (Fig. 4). The organization will only examine a work for an owner or an agent representing the owner, or for a

prospective buyer with the owner’s written permission. Once these formalities are cleared, IFAR engages an international network of eminent scholars and scientists who render objective opin-

ions independent of the marketplace. Monetary appraisals are not given.

At the inquiry stage there is a nonrefundable fee of \$250, which is applied to the basic \$2,000 cost for IFAR to undertake the research if the project goes forward. The fee allows IFAR to pay researchers and offer honoraria for the specialists. Additional charges may be required for technical analysis or other work to be undertaken with the owner’s consent. If IFAR gives a “thumbs down,” an owner has pretty much exhausted options to verify an artwork’s authenticity.

IFAR has written nearly 600 authentication reports and has reviewed thousands of artworks. It first became involved in the field when it was called in to resolve the controversial case of the misattributions at the Bass Museum of Art in Miami Beach. With the



A selection of IFAR Journal covers.

boom in American art in the 1980s, the works of Thomas Hart Benton and other regionalist artists had witnessed an increase of forgeries. Despite documentation, even an apparent certificate from Benton, IFAR's evidence indicated that seven Benton works held by the Bass were fakes. In a separate incident, when thousands of Salvador Dali prints appeared on the market in the 1980s a large-scale investigation by IFAR exposed them as photo-mechanical reproductions.

IFAR is also involved with ongoing World War II-era and Holocaust-related looting and restitution issues. The plunder of Jewish collections, both private and state owned, by Nazi officials, and the seizing of artworks as forms of war reparation — such as the

website. Included in the survey will be the huge body of international legislation regarding ownership and export laws. The object of the project, says Flescher, is to “help people navigate the rapid and complex development of law and ethical practices relating to the ownership of art. This information has never been presented like this anywhere.”

As with all things, Flescher advises, “do your homework and train your eye. The art world, like other businesses, has many honorable people. There are those, however, who are less than honorable. Decide whom you can trust, and always be suspicious of ‘bargains’ and works without provenance.” This advice is given for collectors as well as those engaged in profes-



Soviet army's transfer of Heinrich Schliemann's *Treasures of Priam* from Berlin — are longstanding IFAR concerns. More recently, the looting of the National Museum of Baghdad prompted the IFAR board of directors to declare a resolution to “safeguard the thousands of archaeological and cultural artifacts, monuments and sites in Iraq... to secure their long-term safety and preservation.”

“One of IFAR's most ambitious initiative to date,” notes Flescher, “has far ranging scope and international impact.” Funded in part by a National Leadership Grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), IFAR is undertaking to survey all international case law in the areas of art forgery, fraud, looting, antiquities issues, and World War II- related ownership claims and to provide the details on its

sional trade, both categories of which are included in the list of IFAR's clients.

In its ongoing efforts to keep the public and its members — located in 18 countries worldwide — informed about issues relating to the art world, IFAR publishes its quarterly *IFAR Journal* (left) in which articles, legal issues, and current news is presented. IFAR's interests in education also extend to conferences and lectures. For more information or to support these ongoing missions and join IFAR, please visit www.ifar.org or write to the International Foundation for Art Research, 500 Fifth Avenue, Suite 935, New York, New York, 10110, or call 212.391.6234. **@ Philip Eliasoph is professor of art history at Fairfield University, Connecticut, and an independent consultant for fine art collectors.**

Fig. 4 (right): View of Heidelberg, oil on canvas, submitted to IFAR for verification as a work by J.M.W. Turner, but determined not to be by him. Courtesy of IFAR.