



REUTERS

Stolen Da Vinci is the tip of an iceberg

By Gideon Long

CARRONBRIDGE, Scotland, Oct 26 (Reuters) - In the hills above this tiny Scottish village stands a magnificent castle.

Inside is a wall and on it an empty space, little bigger than a sheet of writing paper, that tells the story of an industry costing Britain up to 500 million pounds (\$848 million) each year.

Until two months ago, the space was occupied by the "Madonna of the Yarnwinder," a 16th century painting credited to Leonardo Da Vinci.

But at the end of August, two men walked into Drumlanrig Castle, overpowered a security guard and pulled the Madonna off the wall.

They escaped over a castle wall, sped off in a white saloon car with two accomplices and have not been seen since.

"It's been described as an audacious crime and it is," said Peter McAdam, the senior police detective leading the hunt for the painting. "It's been very well planned and they've not made too many mistakes.

"But I'm still confident we'll catch them," he added. "I'm optimistic because we have forensic samples we can quote against. We've got to remain optimistic."

The Madonna is the most highly valued piece of art ever stolen in Britain but is by no means alone.

Art theft is big business in a country stuffed with arts and antiquities from across the world.

The National Criminal Intelligence Service estimates that raids on Britain's art collections, galleries and stately homes net between 300 and 500 million pounds (\$470-785 million) each year.

In March, thieves stole antiques, silver and porcelain worth more than two million pounds (\$3.39 million) from a country house in Worcestershire, central England.

A month later, someone stole three works by Van Gogh, Picasso and Gauguin from a gallery in the northern city of Manchester. The drawings were found stuffed inside a cardboard tube in a local public lavatory.

In June, burglars broke into a manor house in Buckinghamshire, north of London, and took over 100 gold boxes and other precious items.

The owners have offered a reward of up to 50,000 pounds for information leading to their recovery.

The amount of stolen works of art in circulation globally is staggering.

The London-based Art Loss Register, which compiles a database of stolen art, has 145,000 items on its records, ranging from plates and silverware to paintings by Michelangelo, Caravaggio and Cezanne.

More than 500 paintings and drawings by Picasso alone are missing, along with 300 by Chagall and over 200 by Renoir.

"Picasso is one of the world's most stolen artists, not only because he is such a popular name but because he was so prolific," said Alexandra Smith, operations manager at the Art Loss Register.

She estimates that over the past 10 years, only about one in three of all items stolen has been recovered.

The world's art thieves will stop at nothing to get what they want.

The burglars who robbed the house in Worcestershire used a dinghy to cross a moat, loaded it with treasure and rowed back across the water to their getaway car.

In 1997 in the Italian city of Piacenza, a thief is believed to have stolen a painting by Austrian artist Gustav Klimt by opening a skylight in the gallery roof and reeling it in with a fishing rod.

So where does all this art go?

Police and art experts believe Leonardo's Madonna may have been stolen to order, but have no idea by whom.

It is 80 years since a painting by the Italian Renaissance master was sold privately so they have no clues as to who might have a particular passion for Da Vinci.

Others have speculated that the painting might be used as collateral to buy drugs or even arms.

"That's possible, but its value on the black market is unlikely to be more than 10,000 pounds, which is a very small fraction of what it is worth," McAdam said.

"The art experts tell us it's so hot that it is unlikely to resurface for at least another five or 10 years."

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