

Mystery in History: Vermeer, Vermeer, Wherever You Are! by Douglas Harrell

S hady Philadelphia art dealer Bob Clay and his two French associates, Laurenz Cogniat and a violent ex-con who went by “Sunny,” drove up to a luxury yacht docked in Miami. It was a cool January afternoon in 2007, and with them they had six stolen masterpieces. Onboard they were met by two Colombian drug lords and a bevy of scantily clad beauties. Clay was nervous. There was a lot more riding on this deal than the \$1.2 million sales price—maybe even his life. The yacht shoved off, and while the men talked business the bikini babes danced and lewdly ate strawberries.

Clay need not have worried. Everything went according to plan. The Colombians wired the money and, for good measure, they tossed Clay a small bag of diamonds and gold Krugerrands. Back on dry land, Clay took his associates to a fancy French restaurant to celebrate a fake deal in which they were the only two participants who were not FBI agents.

The paintings were forgeries that Art Crime Team agent Robert Wittman (a.k.a. “Bob Clay”) pretended to sell to the undercover agents playing drug lords. The female agents, also undercover, if less so, danced and cavorted to complete the deception. The diamonds and Krugerrands were real enough—borrowed from the FBI’s forfeiture vault. The entire ruse was to establish “Bob Clay’s” bona fides with Sunny, who had connections with a murderous Corsican art theft ring. At stake was the opportunity to solve the biggest art heist in U.S. history.

Seven months earlier in Paris, French authorities had informed Wittman that Laurenz and Sunny were trying to broker the sale of a painting by the 17th century Dutch master Johannes Vermeer. Wittman could barely contain his excitement. The only missing Vermeer in the world had been taken in 1990 from Boston’s Gardner Museum along with ten other paintings—total value: \$500 million. Wittman was nearing the end of an illustrious career during which he had recovered stolen treasures worth \$225 million. These included a Rembrandt in Denmark, a Brueghel in Spain,



The Concert, by Johannes Vermeer, was one of the paintings that Wittman tried to buy in the sting. Stolen in 1990 from the Isabella Stewart Garden Museum in Boston, it remains missing.

and the golden armor of a Peruvian king in a deal arranged on the New Jersey Turnpike. If he could pull it off, recovering the Vermeer would be the coup of a lifetime. “Operation Masterpiece” was launched.

Wittman’s undercover French contact, André, vouched for “Bob Clay” to Laurenz. Back in Miami, Sunny offered a Vermeer, a Rembrandt, and a Manet for \$30 million. Wittman accepted, and they began making arrangements for a transfer in the south of France in late 2006. But then Sunny got cold feet.

The Corsicans were stone-cold killers who would not forgive failure—in fact, they had murdered a friend of his in a drive-by shooting. Sunny needed to be sure he could trust “Bob.” That was the impetus for the elaborate deception aboard the yacht in Miami. It worked. Sunny was ready to move forward.

After arranging the logistics on the criminal side, Wittman faced the challenge of getting the many law enforcement agencies on the same page. He worked in the Philadelphia office, but the paintings were stolen from Boston. That meant the Boston FBI field office called the shots. A similar turf war was raging in France. This was the biggest case in years. Every boss was imagining a triumphant news conference with himself front and center, trumpeting the success of *his* agency.

Continued on next page



Douglas Gaines Harrell is a recovering chemical engineer who has taken up mystery writing as a second career. Hard at work on his first novel, he has taken time out to write several short stories inspired by local history, published in anthologies by Cat & Mouse Press of Rehoboth Beach, Delaware. Visit him at www.douglasharrell.com.

Mystery in History, continued

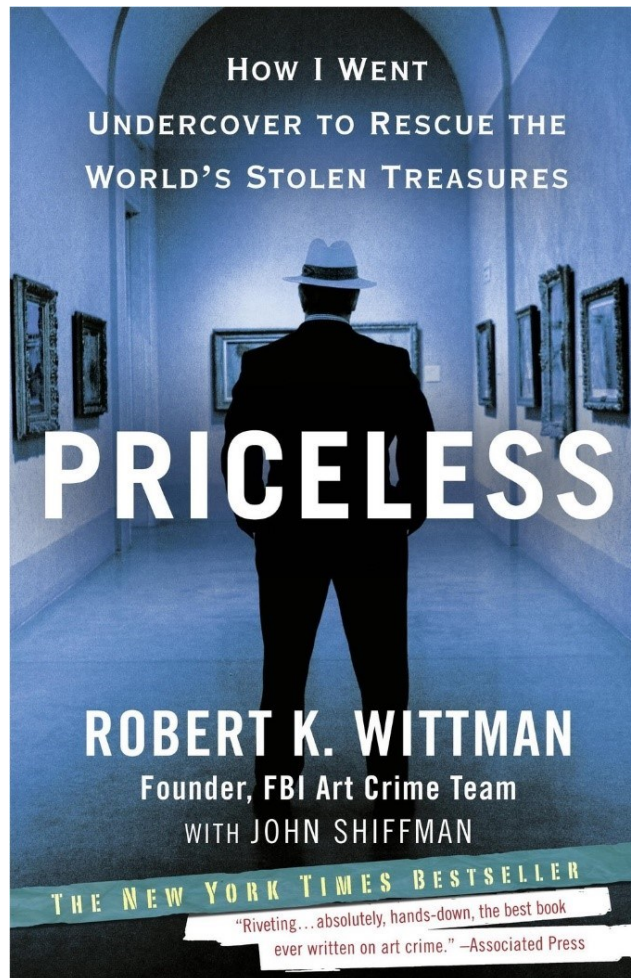
Eventually, the political infighting resulted in Wittman being pulled off the case. It was a severe disappointment after months of work. As “Bob Clay,” he sent an email to Laurenz explaining that someone else would be taking his place. Laurenz was disappointed. He wanted to do the Vermeer deal with “Bob,” but after a few weeks he had a different idea. He sent Wittman a photo showing two Picassos recently stolen in Paris. Laurenz’s contact in France would soon have the paintings. Did “Bob” want to buy them?

This was a big break. By continuing to work with Laurenz, Wittman would still have a tenuous connection to the gang holding the Vermeer. The French authorities informed Wittman the thieves had arranged a hand-off in Paris with André, Wittman’s undercover friend.

Not to jeopardize Operation Masterpiece, the plan was to maintain André’s cover by pretending to arrest him. Somebody didn’t get the memo, and André’s cover was blown. Within days, two French assassins landed in Miami. Their mission: kill Laurenz Cogniat and “Bob Clay.”

In a brazen move, Wittman as “Bob” had Laurenz arrange a meeting with Sunny and the would-be assassins at a restaurant. He had never carried a weapon undercover before, but these thugs were different—killing him was their *Plan A*. He went to the meeting with a handgun in each pocket. Seated, he kept one hand under the table, finger on the trigger. He yelled at them, claiming he had been yanked out of bed by the FBI asking a lot of questions. Somebody in France had screwed up, and he was mad as hell. It worked. Sunny and the assassins wanted to believe him. Shady art broker “Bob Clay” and his wealthy clients could be worth millions to them. But Laurenz had vouched for André. To save his own life, Laurenz promised to pay the legal bills of the captured thieves. Still trembling as they drove away, Laurenz told “Bob” he wanted nothing more to do with him.

With Laurenz out, the Boston office shut down Operation Masterpiece. This gave Wittman a free hand to resume negotiations with



Above, the stolen Rembrandt on offer: *Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee*. It also was stolen in 1990 from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. At left: *Priceless: How I Went Undercover to Rescue the World's Stolen Treasures*, by Robert K. Wittman, is the real-life story of an undercover art crime agent’s storied career.

Sunny for the Gardner paintings. By January, 2008, he was in Barcelona doing just that. The “Colombian drug lords” from Miami had lured Sunny into their confidence with more parties on the yacht, and the promise of cutting him in on a big cocaine deal. This had restored Sunny’s trust, and he had a proposal. If “Bob” wanted the Gardner paintings, he first had to buy four paintings stolen in Nice by Patrick, one of Sunny’s many underworld contacts.

In a cramped hotel room, Wittman agreed to buy the Nice paintings, but he also wanted the Vermeer and the Rembrandt in a package deal. No dice. Patrick’s gang didn’t have them. The hand-off for the Nice paintings was arranged, and a few weeks later the French police recovered them in a bust near Marseille. Sunny was arrested in Miami the next day. The charging indictment imprudently spelled out that an undercover FBI agent had been involved. Wittman’s cover as “Bob Clay” was blown. His shrewd play to recover the Gardner paintings had come to an end.

This account is based on the book *Priceless: How I Went Undercover to Rescue the World's Stolen Treasures* by Robert K. Wittman.