

## Stolen

Landmark's Kendall Square Cinema  
 One Kendall Square  
 Cambridge

Opening May 12

Rebecca Dreyfus new film *Stolen* begins with the March 18, 1990 news report that two thieves disguised as Boston police officers had plundered 13 priceless works of art from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Vermeer's *The Concert* was amongst the purloined masterpieces that also included one Manet, one Flinck, three Rembrandts, five Degas works, a Chinese bronze beaker (or "Ku") and a Napoleon Eagle. These artworks are valued at 500 million dollars; after a one million dollar reward was offered for their safe return, the amount was raised to five million dollars in 1997.

In addition to joining the quest for the plundered artwork, the film illuminates the mystique of Johannes Vermeer, his painting *The Concert*, and Vermeer's work as a whole. Dreyfus became fascinated with *The Concert* as a young visitor to the Gardner Museum. "The mystique surrounding Vermeer's paintings is first and foremost that they are so few," she says. "So each one becomes more precious and people covet them."

"Secondly Vermeer is the great genius painter of all time," Dreyfus continues. "His work is all about asking questions, storytelling ... there are people reading letters. There are maps and hints of journeys. There is intrigue between men and women. There are women subjects where it is ambiguous as to whether they are pregnant or not. Vermeer creates a world inside his tableaux. You invest yourself in them. You have a relationship to the paintings. You invent scenarios and make projections. In that way, Vermeer's paintings engage you and your emotions."

She began research for the film in 2000; her interest in making a film on the heist originated in a *Boston Herald* story where writer Tom Mashberg reported on having been shown what was believed to be Rembrandt's *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee* and paint chips contemporaneous to the work of Vermeer. The Gardner Museum was supportive of her efforts to unravel the mystery of that fateful night. "They were understandably sensitive about the theft," Dreyfus says. "However we worked independently of the museum. We are grateful for their cooperation, but this was not a collaborative effort." The film took two and a half years to shoot. Despite their age differences, Dreyfus and cinematographer Albert Mayles found common ground in having both shot their first films in Russia—Mayles in a mental hospital for 1955's *Psychiatry in Russia* and Dreyfus' 1997 debut *Bye-Bye Babushka*. It also didn't hurt that Dreyfus was from Brookline, located near to the Museum.

NEW FROM THE



Harold J. Smith,  
 the brilliant,  
 eccentric  
 art detective



The Concert  
 by  
 Johannes Vermeer,  
 which was stolen  
 in 1990



Rebecca Dreyfus,  
 director of the  
 documentary  
 Stolen

While it might seem a challenge to put one's own imprint onto material that is already so visually rich, Dreyfus bestows her own style by the seamlessly smooth way that she brought together the disparate worlds of Vermeer and the 17th century Dutch masters and Isabella Stewart Gardner's 19th century world of Boston and Europe with the 21st century world of art thieves across two continents. She leaves it to the viewer to come to their own conclusion about the worlds of the artist, the art collector, and the art thieves. Dreyfus' imaginative use of still photos, 19th century archival material including correspondences between Gardner and art connoisseur Bernard Berenson, pictorial publications, and the stolen paintings elevates this film above any sort of generic crime show. The correspondence readings by actors Blythe Danner and Campbell Scott lends a dramatic curve to the film.

Work on the film was progressing with little incident until Dreyfus contacted art detective Harold Smith, who could be the subject of a separate film with his ever-present derby hat, black eye patch, and prosthetic nose to camouflage the ravages of his 50-year battle with skin cancer that sadly took his life last year. Although he hailed from the Bronx, Smith looked quintessentially British. He brought to the quest for the stolen masterpieces some impressive credentials, solving the case of the largest gold robbery in United States history. Since Smith was an art investigator offering a reward, not a member of law enforcement, he felt his presence on the case would lure some perpetrators out of the woodwork. Dreyfus documents his ensuing quest across two continents involving secret meetings with Boston's criminal underworld, a former Scotland Yard detective, a fast talking Cockney accented former art fencer called "Turbocharger," and others thought to have leads to the stolen works' whereabouts.

Dreyfus effectively edited her interviews in a way that personified Vermeer's *The Concert* in the minds of art lovers. It is moving to hear people speak of the masterpiece as it were an innocent victim being held hostage. Although Gardner's life was touched by tragedy—she lost her son when he was only two, Dreyfus establishes this as the impetus for creating the museum as an extension of her that would never die. In her golden years, Gardner told people who inquired about her, "If you want to know me, I'm in my collection."

*Stolen* is a feast for the senses. Peter Golub's soundtrack is our passkey back to the 17th and 19th centuries. Dreyfus and cinematographer Albert Mayles capture the beautiful scenery of Venice as golden beams of sunlight dance upon the canals as Danner speaks achingly of Gardner's nostalgia for Italy. She had fallen in love with the passion and the vivacity of Italy at a young age; having found provincial America to be inhibiting, she succeeded in bringing the qualities of Europe that she loved to what she considered to be staid Boston. As the film considers the possible connection of the Irish Underworld to the missing art, we see lovely shots of the Boston night skyline, its silvery skyscrapers and the Impressionistic way lights flicker on the surface of the Charles River, all viewed from a Cambridge vantage point. As the film closes, a downbeat, discordant version of Rogers and Hammerstein's *My Favorite Things* underscores the bitter taste that the

heist leaves in the mouth of art lovers. Dreyfus says no new leads have come to light since she completed the film, "but there are people in London keeping the investigation alive."

*Stolen* also opens on May 19 at Real Art Ways 56 Arbor Street, Hartford, Connecticut and is scheduled to screen at the Revival House in Westerly, Rhode Island in the near future.

"Besides air, water and food, I think what human beings need more than anything is meaning in their lives. People are constantly searching to find meaning. And art is about exploring our lives be it through literature, painting, or film. That is important to people. A good work of art is an exploration of a subject matter in order to make sense of our lives and the world that we live in."

*Stolen* filmmaker Rebecca Dreyfus

Nancy L. Foster