

Stolen

By Kirk Honeycutt July 06, 2005

"Stolen," Rebecca Dreyfus' investigation into the most expensive art heist in U.S. history, provides a treasure trove of outrageous characters, rampant speculation, personal obsessions and a glimpse into the rarefied world of art collecting. Instead of spinning off in so many directions, the film actually pulls together into **an engrossing meditation on the value of art in our lives**, not so much the price one puts on what is priceless but how people respond to the idea of art.

"Stolen" would make a wonderful addition to any public TV channel's schedule but could do well in specialty theatrical venues as well.

In March 1990, two thieves masquerading as Boston police officers suckered the guards at the Isabella Stewart Gardner museum and made off with \$500 million worth of art -- 13 works including Rembrandt's "The Sea of Galilee" and Vermeer's "The Concert." Ten years later, Dreyfus began her cinematic examination -- with renowned documentarian Albert Maysles as her cameraman no less -- into why not a single painting has been recovered.

She runs into the extraordinary Harold Smith, one of the world's foremost detectives in the arena of recovering stolen art. A courtly gentleman with a bowler hat, eye patch and a prosthetic nose to cover the ravages of a nearly lifelong battle with skin cancer, Smith shares the filmmaker's obsession with the cold case. As he pries into the case, a host of wacky informants come forward, including one who calls himself the "Turbocharger."

Along with interviews with art critics, historians and a novelist, who speak personally about their sense of loss over the stolen art, Dreyfus uncovers old letters between the museum's founder and the legendary art collector, Bernard Berenson, who helped Gardner acquire many of the world's most treasured paintings. These are dramatized by Blythe Danner and Campbell Scott, who read from the more pertinent missives.

A lilting and lovely piano score by Peter Golub bridges the many worlds that come into focus in Dreyfus' stimulating documentary.