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"Stolen" Leaves Mystery in place of Art - LA Film Festival

By Tricia Toney

I'm not a museum type of gal. In terms of art, I like what I like when I see it, but don't ask me what it's called. I know that Van Gogh cut off his ear and that Michelangelo dissected bodies to figure out how to craft them. Other than that, I don't know who painted what or why it was important.

Except, maybe for Vermeer. I can tell you a little something about him, because I just saw this movie. It wasn't about art appreciation per se; it's more about a mystery. But I learned a little something in spite of myself.

Johannes Vermeer was a Dutch painter in the 1600s. Tracy Chevalier, author of "The Girl with the Pearl Earring," (titled for a Vermeer painting), says "you can't look at a Vermeer quickly." She describes how the artist captures "moments" in life such that the viewer wants to slow down to appreciate what's been captured.

Apparently lots of people feel the same way. There are only thirty-four Vermeers in the world. All of them are priceless. One of them is missing. "The Concert" was stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston one night in 1990. That night, two thieves dressed as Boston police officers got away with thirteen paintings in all. None of the works have been recovered. "Stolen," a new documentary by Rebecca Dreyfus, explores the theories of what might have happened.

The world of high art is a unique and exotic place. While many of us care deeply about whether or not we will have a date on Saturday night, or if the car is running right, there are those who care deeply about the whereabouts of old art. They care enough to search for this art every day for fifteen years.

Howard Smith is such a person. If there is a main character in "Stolen," it is 78-year-old art recovery agent Howard Smith. Plagued by skin cancer that has left him with scabs and bandages and a prosthetic nose, we can't help but hope that Smith solves the mystery of the Gardner Museum theft before his cancer claims him.

In the quest for the art and for the truth, we travel with Smith from Boston to New York, to London, following tips. Someone knows what happened. Someone will talk. Truth will out.

William Youngworth talks. At least, he says some things. He hints at knowledge.

An ex-convict with links to organized crime, Youngworth doesn't confess to being involved. But, he says, if the U.S. government would grant amnesty from prosecution to anyone came forward with information, everything could be returned "within half an hour."

Dick Ellis, former head of the stolen art squad for Scotland Yard, has a theory. He says that the Irish Republican Army "has a thing for Vermeers." Operatives in the IRA have stolen and returned Vermeer pieces before. A British ex-convicted-turned-informant says that leaders of the IRA might be convinced to return the art if Senator Ted Kennedy made the request.

In phone messages, recorded by Smith, people of the public implicate the Italian mafia, the on-duty security guards and more. Theories and images spin past. There's only one thing we know for sure: we just don't know. The mystery takes on a life of its own. For those of us not attached to the art, we begin to want answers more than we want the return of the missing things.

In the Gardner Museum, the space of mystery is represented physically. Isabella Stewart Gardner stipulated in her will that the pieces in her museum were not to be moved from where she had them placed. As a result, the empty frames of stolen pieces still hang on the walls, constant reminders of what's missing.

Actress Blythe Danner gives voice to Isabella Stewart Gardner by reading letters from the collector to the man who she had charged with procuring her pieces from auctions in Europe. There's a sense of irony when a letter reveals that several paintings, purchased legally, were smuggled out of Europe, hidden from customs.

All-in-all, Dreyfus delivers a well-crafted film about a long-unsolved mystery that baffles the art world to this day. Even those who have no connection to classical art will appreciate the craft of the story, and the variety in the cast of characters.

Howard Smith lost his battle with skin cancer before the film was released. This film is dedicated to his memory.

85 MIN.

DIRECTOR Rebecca Dreyfus PRODUCER Susannah Ludwig
FEATURING Blythe Danner, Campbell Scott, Harold J. Smith

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