

LOS ANGELES TIMES

MOVIE REVIEW

'Stolen'

A magical mystery tour that is well worth taking.

By Kenneth Turan, Times Staff Writer

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"Stolen" is about a puzzle that's resisted solution for more than 15 years, but that doesn't stop it from being a fascinating, adventurous documentary with a lively and eccentric cast of characters.

The puzzle comes in two interconnected parts: Who took 13 paintings from Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in a daring St. Patrick's Night robbery in 1990, and where is that pilfered art today?

Directed by Rebecca Dreyfus, "Stolen" succeeds not just because of its vivid, unconventional tone but because it touches elegantly on numerous complementary bases, starting with Gardner herself.

Gardner was perhaps the first great American art collector, someone who founded, biographer Douglas Shand-Tucci reminds us, the "only such institution designed by a woman, named after a woman, built by a woman, and whose future is determined by a woman."

One of "Stolen's" attractive touches is having actors Blythe Danner and Campbell Scott read excerpts from charmingly candid letters between Gardner and her art advisor Bernard Berenson. "The picture habit is as bad as morphine and whiskey are," she writes him. "And it does cost."

Though the 13 paintings stolen include five by Degas, three Rembrandts and a Manet, the one canvas that symbolizes the dismay the theft caused is "The Concert," one of only 35 Vermeers in existence and now considered, the documentary says, "the world's most valuable stolen painting."

An especially engaging chunk of "Stolen" is taken up with commentary from art historians and writers such as Tracy Chevalier ("The Girl With the Pearl Earring") on why Vermeer in general and this painting in particular have such a hold on us. To steal it this way, Vermeer biographer Anthony Bailey says, "is an act of vehement selfishness."

In the course of doing research for "Stolen," director Dreyfus talked to art detective Harold Smith, a distinctive figure with his bowler hat, black eye patch and a face bearing the marks of a decades-long battle against skin cancer. Always fascinated by the Gardner case, Smith (who since has died) decides to use the new film as an excuse to reopen the case and, with the help of a \$5-million reward, to try to find the artwork.

The search for the Vermeer and the other paintings includes dealings with security guards, journalists, Boston underworld figures, a man from Scotland Yard, assorted scam artists and a London operative nicknamed "the Turbocharger." As the chase unfolds, it becomes easy to see why people have become obsessed with getting the Vermeer back and why that has proved so difficult. Made with an artistry that extends to its excellent Peter Golub score, "Stolen" doesn't set the world on fire, but it is a magical mystery tour that is well worth taking.

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'Stolen'

MPAA rating: Unrated

An International Film Circuit release. Director Rebecca Dreyfus. Producers Rebecca Dreyfus, Susannah Ludwig. Cinematography Albert Maysles, Dreyfus. Editors Markus A. Peters. Liz Ludden. Running time: 1 hour, 25 minutes.

Exclusively at Laemmle's Grande, 345 S. Figueroa St., Downtown L.A. (213) 617-0268.