



*'Stolen' illuminates the life of a collector and the lives of the objects she loved, but the movie also examines the relative value of things and the delusions often hidden in the word 'my.'*

Left, Johannes Vermeer: *The Concert* (1665-1666), oil on canvas, 28.5 x 25.5 inches, courtesy Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

Facing page, filmmaker Rebecca Dreyfus



Soon after Smith was approached about being interviewed for the film, he effectively made it his show; he called Dreyfus at all hours of the night and brought her along while he pursued every lead. The investigator might have been tilting at windmills, but his enthusiasm was nonetheless infectious. Dreyfus weaves his comments with the testimonies of other experts, and she blends those segments with staged sequences, working with celebrated documentary cinematographer Albert Maysles (*Gimme Shelter*). The final impression is that the filmmakers, too, became fixated.

Fixation started at the top. Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840-1924), a New York heiress who married a Boston financier, is characterized

in the film as the first great American art collector. Allegedly nutty in the way the very rich can afford to be, she is said to have doffed her clothes during dinner parties and walked the streets of Boston with lions in tow. But the imputed eccentricities of her life pale by comparison to the fetishes that were brought to light after her death. *Stolen* magnifies those fetishes when the camera beads in on the craquelure of John Singer Sargent's portrait of the socialite, and Blythe Danner, portraying her in voice-over, reads the terms of Gardner's will. The testament stipulates that

the collection remains forever as Gardner created it; nothing may be added, moved, or changed.

And so the museum's walls reflect the events of that day in 1990, empty frames exposing damask wallpaper where masterpieces once were. Observers continue to project their fantasies into that blankness. *Girl With a Pearl Earring* novelist Tracy Chevalier admits, "I am obsessed." Vermeer biographer Anthony Bailey says the artist's work "sparks possessiveness in all of us," his lower lip quivering over the loss. And former art thief turned police informant Paul "Turbocharger" Hendry suggests the Gardner works could be recovered if mutually advantageous links were forged between Sen. Edward Kennedy, Irish Sinn Fein politician Martin Ferris, and the Catholic Church.

The film subtly questions distinctions between some kinds of theft and others. A museum attendant describes the heiress as one of the original Victorian "salvage hunters" who scoured the basements of Europe's 12th-century cathedrals and "recycled" things "nobody seemed to care about." How she acquired things people *did* care about is another matter. In audio dramatizations of correspondence found in the museum's archives, Gardner is heard exchanging plans with Bernard Berenson (voiced by Campbell Scott), the connoisseur who helped her amass the collection. He arranged to smuggle works out of Europe, had items shipped to bogus names so the buyer would not be identified, and negotiated with "the most distressingly odious people in the world: the dealers" — a hardship he professed to tolerate less for mercenary reasons than out of "a sense of civic duty."

One wonders if, roughly a century later, the museum pillagers were also acting out of a sense of civic duty — however misguided that duty strikes Interpol. By now, the return of the spoils looks unlikely, but the cagey, the devoted, and the curious won't let the mystery rest. When pursuing a case this cold, obsession becomes nine-tenths of the law. ◀

## What's wrong with this picture?

Andrea Shapiro | The New Mexican

*Stolen*, documentary, CCA Cinematheque; 7:30 p.m. Friday, Dec. 9; 9:30 a.m. Sunday, Dec. 11; 90 minutes

Rebecca Dreyfus' sly documentary about the most storied art heist of the modern era ends as a harmonically dark rendition of Rodgers and Hammerstein's "My Favorite Things" rises in the soundtrack. Here the song seems to have been filtered through a sieve of irony — a fitting tone for the film. *Stolen* illuminates the life of a collector and the lives of the objects she loved, but the movie also examines the relative value of things and the delusions often hidden in the word "my."

The robbery occurred in the early hours of March 18, 1990, in Boston, when the city was in the late throes of St. Patrick's Day revelry. Claiming to have received a report of a disturbance, two men posing as police officers arrived at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, constrained the guards, and then collected a bounty now estimated to be worth \$500 million. The 13 works taken from the museum that morning included five Degas paintings, three Rembrandts, and, notably,

Johannes Vermeer's *The Concert*. The genteel chamber-music scene it depicts could be called strictly aristocratic were it not for the image in the upper-right quadrant: a subdued representation of a 1622 work by Dirck van Baburen that pictures a man procuring the favors of a prostitute. In its fusion of high culture and the demimonde, *The Concert* is a kind of snapshot of the heist itself.

After nearly 16 years, the crime remains unsolved, despite the museum's offer of a \$5 million reward. The case has drawn the fanatical attentions of journalists, aesthetes, career criminals, Interpol, the FBI, and insurance investigators, among them Harold Smith, the renowned specialist in fine-art loss who played a key role in the production of *Stolen* until he died in February.

Smith waged a war with skin cancer for more than 50 years and had the uniform to show for it: he wore a scalp-concealing derby and a black eye patch. During the film, produced over a three-year period, an assortment of wounds and bandages shift positions on his hands and face. His on-screen cheer never flags, though; he tells of the time his prosthetic nose fell off in the middle of a meeting with colleagues from Lloyds of London, and he seems less bothered by his illness than by the plague on the house of Gardner: "I'm haunted with the idea of what happened to these paintings," he says.