



THE ART NEWSPAPER, No. 156, MARCH 2005

INTERNATIONAL EDITION

# THE ART NEWS PAPER™

UMBERTO ALLEMANDI & CO. PUBLISHING EVENTS, POLITICS AND ECONOMICS MONTHLY EST. 1983, VOL. XIV, NO. 156, MARCH 2005 UK £4.95/Europe €9.50/USA \$7.50/Canada Can\$8.95/ROW £7.45

## Art and crime

### The greatest art theft in US history

*This month marks the 15th anniversary of the Isabella Stewart Gardner theft*

Museums 5

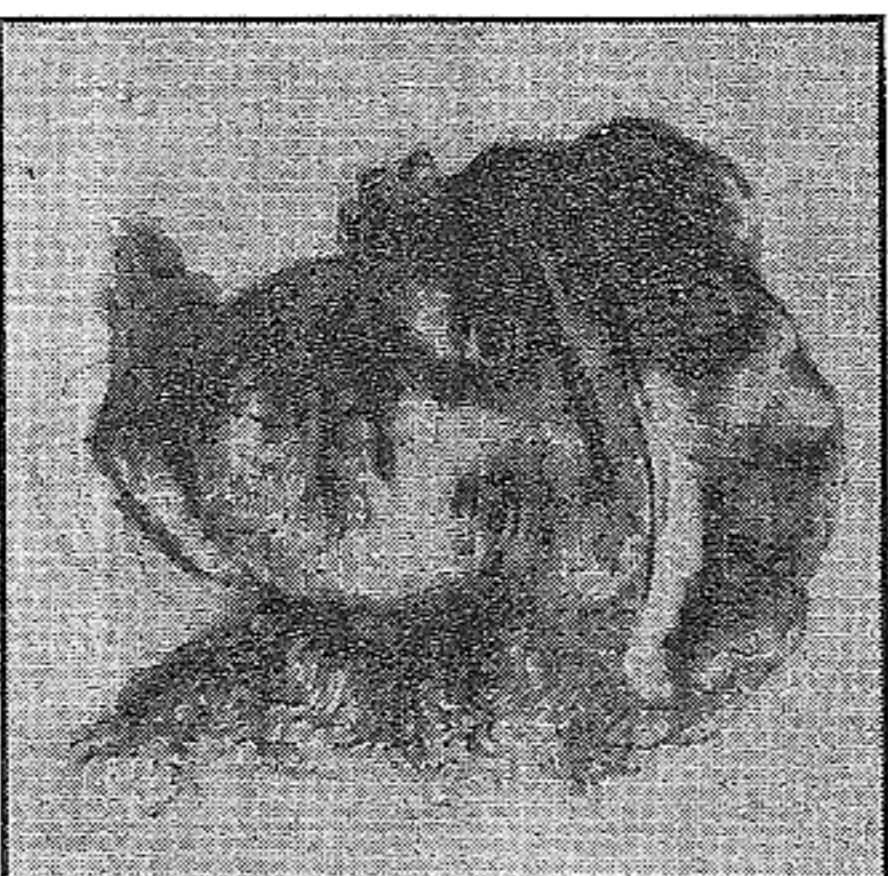
BOSTON. This month marks the 15th anniversary of the theft of 13 paintings and drawings from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. By most accounts, the robbery, described as the greatest art theft in American history, is no closer to being solved today than it was five or 10 years ago, despite a \$5 million reward offered by the museum for information leading to the return of works by Vermeer, Rembrandt, Degas and Manet, valued together at \$300 million.

To coincide with the anniversary, "Stolen" is screening at film festivals in the US. It interweaves the story of the theft and also of the pursuit of the missing works with the collector Isabella Stewart Gardner's own correspondence with Bernard Berenson, the aesthete and art adviser. Since the thieves (who dressed as police) have not been identified, and since every crime story needs a villain, "Stolen"

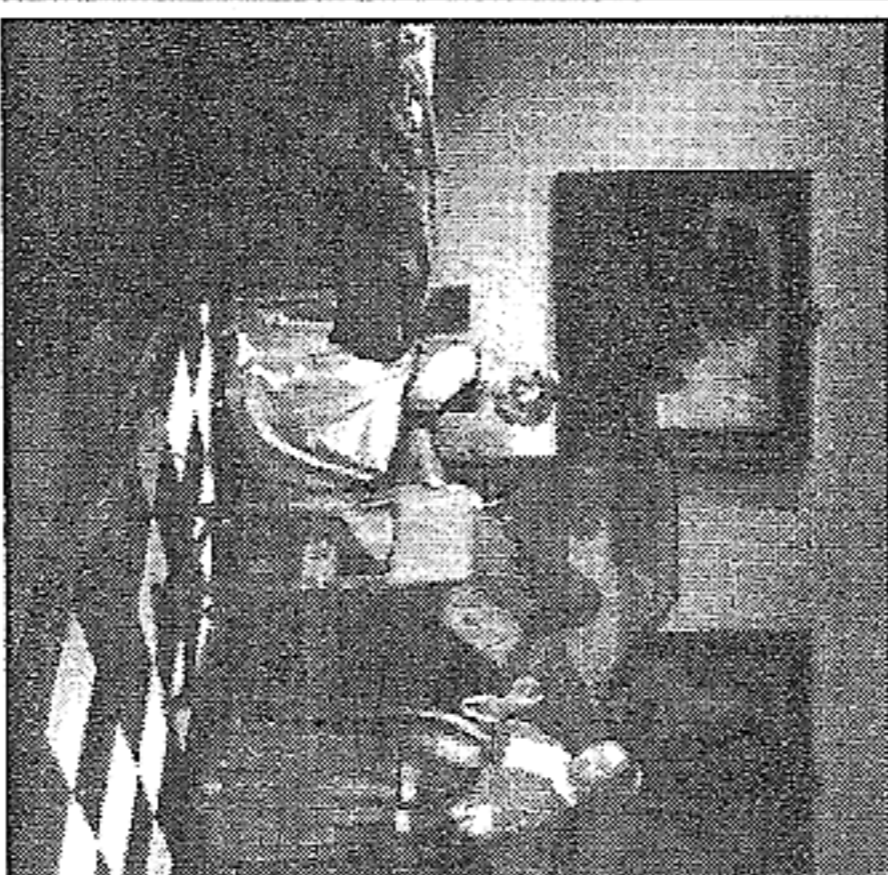
substitutes a hero with a would-be hero—the crime's investigator, Harold Smith, a respected insurance investigator of 78, disfigured by skin cancer, who has made recovering the Gardner pictures the mission of his retirement.

Smith, one of many who have devoted themselves to the search, takes the viewer through the entire film, boarding subways, taxis and airplanes to track down his quarry—all to no avail. Intercut with Smith's journey are reflections on the rarity of paintings like Vermeer's *The Concert*, and the account of Boston Herald reporter Tom Mashberg's possible sighting of one of the stolen works, Rembrandt's *Storm on the Sea of Galilee*, in a Boston warehouse in 1997.

Along Smith's trail, local criminals boast of their involvement, but the theory that investigators now credit is that the thieves were members of an Irish-American criminal gang



In the hands of the IRA? A Rembrandt self-portrait and Vermeer's *The concert*



(with strong sympathies for the Irish republican cause) who then passed their loot to contacts in the Irish Republican Army (IRA). A talkative police source, a thief turned informant, nicknamed the "Turbocharger", suggests that the works might be retrieved through the intercession of Senator Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts and

the Catholic Church.

No such deal was ever considered, although investigators do believe that the pictures are being held as a group in Ireland and that they were taken there by James "Whitey" Bulger, the Boston mobster who is now a US fugitive wanted on multiple murder charges.

According to Charles Hill, a

former Scotland Yard Inspector who is now a private investigator, Bulger entered Ireland on a false passport and was rebuffed by the IRA. Mr Hill believes that Bulger organised the Gardner theft although he admits there's no firm evidence for this. He also says that Bulger has now left Ireland, after failing to borrow money using the paintings as collateral. Mr Hill believes that the paintings are now with a gang of Irish travellers and he accuses the Irish police of "letting sleeping dogs lie".

Like most unsolved crimes, this one still generates a dozen tips a week. Investigators around the world are still hooked. "We're all working on it", said Charles Hill.

David D'Arcy

☐ "Stolen" is directed by Rebecca Dreyfus. For information:

www.stolenthfilm.com