



Stolen

A Persistence of Vision Films production in association with Flourish Films. Produced by Susannah Ludwig. Directed by Rebecca Dreyfus.

With: Harold Smith, Tom Mashberg, Katharine Weber, Tracy Chevalier, Anthony Bailey, Susan Vreeland, Myles Connor, Nina Kaminer, Paul "Turbocharger" Hendry, William Youngworth.

By **JOHN ANDERSON**

The as-yet-unsolved March 18, 1990, heist at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston netted paintings by Degas, Rembrandt and Manet, but it is Vermeer's "The Concert" that was -- and is -- the most painfully missed of all the stolen works of art. This is due to Dutch artist's comparatively limited output, early death and the near-universal affection felt for his paintings -- an affection mirrored in Rebecca Dreyfus' "Stolen," a docu that should appeal not just to the legion of Vermeer fans, but to lovers of good mystery. Upscale and arts-oriented specialty venues and public TV beckon.

Since it's a mystery without resolution, subject is a difficult one to make suspenseful, although Dreyfus works magic with what few strands of hope remain attached to finding the missing masterworks. Via an imaginative use of still photos, 19th-century archival material, pictorial publications and the paintings themselves, she lays out the case and, wisely, builds it around two characters who couldn't be more different, or contrast more poignantly.

One is Isabella Stewart Gardner, the 19th century socialite who, upon the death of an infant son, moved to Europe with her husband and proceeded to amass an art collection now worth billions. Gardner, we're told, was also disappointed in her looks; perhaps she compensated by buying up the beauty of the world.

The other character is Harold Smith, his face scarred by skin cancer, a contemporary "art detective." Earthy, intelligent and wonderfully humorous -- he jokes about his prosthetic nose having once fallen off during a meeting with agents of Lloyds of London -- he is Dreyfus' guide to the world of stolen art, as well as a poignant counterbalance to the 100-year-old Gardner story. Indeed, Smith is far more likable than Gardner who, despite endowing a wonderful museum, forbid it in her will to change.

This might be why Boston Herald reporter Tom Mashberg says of the robbery

"There was something rude about it," as if the old lady herself had been held up at gunpoint.

More chilling are the various explanations for where the missing art might be. Invoked are the Irish Republican Army, Boston Irish mobsters like James "Whitey" Bulger and various lowlifes, several of whom talk frankly to Dreyfus about the mechanics of art theft. "I had at one time planned to rob the place," says Myles Connor, who once took a Rembrandt from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

Narrators: Blythe Danner (voice of Isabella Stewart Gardner), Campbell Scott (voice of Bernard Berenson).

Written by Sharon Guskin; camera (color, 16mm/DV) Albert Maysles, Dreyfus; editors, Markus A. Peters, Liz Ludden; music, Peter Golub; associate producers, Chelsea Horenstein, Sharon Guskin, Eric Mendelsohn, Wilder Knight III. Reviewed at Sarasota Film Festival, Feb. 5, 2005. Running time: 84 MIN.