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Opportunity makes the thief : Theft of works of art from the National Gallery in Prague before 1989 with the example of two criminal cases

ANNOTATION

The text deals with the theft of works of art from the National Gallery in Prague before 1989. Two examples show the two main ways in which these crimes were committed: theft by burglary and theft by staff. First is described the theft of three paintings from the Sternberg Palace in 1972, when thieves managed to steal works by Frans Hals, Tintoretto and El Greco. The second example describes the pilfering of the Graphic Collection by gallery employees in the 1950s. The issue of the security of collections in Czechoslovakia during this period and the impact of both cases on the operation of the National Gallery as an institution are examined. Several other robberies at the National Gallery and at some other collecting institutions are mentioned.

SUMMARY

Securing art collections is crucial for the protection of cultural heritage and maintaining public confidence in the state's ability to properly manage public property. Historically, galleries have relied on basic mechanical security and physical protection. This text focuses on the theft of art objects from the National Gallery in Prague between 1945 and 1989. Two main types of crimes are presented: robbery from outside the institution and pilfering within it.

An external threat to the collections occurred at Sternberg Palace on 20 October 1972, when three valuable paintings were stolen. *Portrait of Jasper Schade van Westrum* (inv. no. O 638) by Frans Hals (* 1582 – † 1666), *St. Jerome* (inv. no. DO 201) by Tintoretto (* 1518 – † 1594) and *Christ at Prayer* (inv. no. O 11879) by El Greco (* 1541 – † 1614; Fig. 2; ANG NG 1971–1975, ref. 8/6/3). ICOM and Interpol were also involved in the search, as it was suspected that the works would be exported abroad. This was confirmed, when the first lead in 1973 led beyond the borders of Czechoslovakia, to Austria. The Austrian police were thus primarily involved in the case. The Serbian dealer Refik Zulić (* 1942 – † ?) and the Viennese dealer Abraham Stössel (* 1922 – † 2009) were subsequently identified as the agents of the sale. Stössel tried to sell the paintings, but was unable to do so due to the high media coverage of the case. Investigation in Czechoslovakia were inconclusive and due to the lack of evidence, the Public Security Service decided to suspend the search in 1975 (ANG NG 1971–1975, ref. 8/6/3). In 1976, however, Stössel decided to contact the National Gallery through Franz Böröczky (* 1922 – 2002), the mayor of the Austrian municipality of Kittsee, and demanded a price for the paintings. After verifying the authenticity of the paintings, to which National Gallery experts Jiří Mašín and Mojmir Hamsík were invited, the Austrian police arrested Böröczky and confiscated the paintings (Fig. 3). After restoration, the works returned to the National Gallery and were exhibited again in 1977 (Fig. 4). The identity of the original robbers remained unclear, but Böröczky, Stössel and Zulić were investigated and charged with possession (ANG NG 1971–1975, ref. 8/6/3, excerpt Schweitzer 1977; Janůrek 1985, 470).

The second crime took place in the 1950s, when the National Gallery in Prague was the scene of pilfering of graphic works that had been deposited there by the National Cultural Commission (NCC). The main actors in this case were the restorer Oldřich Pinkas (* 1913 – † 1993) and the two heads of the Graphic Collection, Vladimír Hájek (* 1909 – † ?) and later Jan Dvořák (* 1927 – † 2014). The graphic works, which came from the property nationalized after World War II, were stored in the Kinsky Palace (Fig. 6). Insufficient record-keeping and security, together with the huge number of works (about 150,000 prints), created ideal conditions for systematic pilfering (ANG NG 1958–1964, ref. 8/5/5). Pinkas, Hájek and Dvořák took advantage of this and for several years alienated the works and then resold them. Among the stolen works were those by Albrecht Dürer, Hendrick Goltzius, Vincenzo Camuccini or Andrea Mantegna (Fig. 7). Ironically, some of the works were sold back to the National Gallery, but also to the Slovak National Gallery and other institutions (ABS, sign. A 2/1, i.u. 1355). Pinkas, Hájek and Dvořák used various intermediaries to sell the stolen works in order to conceal their involvement in the thefts. Moreover, Dvořák, who was a member of the gallery's purchasing committee, could directly influence which works were purchased by the gallery. This extensive criminal activity was revealed during a special inspection of the collections in 1959 (Bartlová 2020, 107). Pinkas, Hájek and Dvořák were subsequently

arrested and sentenced to prison terms and confiscation of their property.

Regarding the general problem of the security of collections in Czechoslovakia, art theft was less frequent than in the West until 1989 due to the closed borders (Závadský/Zahálka 1995, 199), but official statistics may not be reliable because many thefts were not reported or were registered as other crimes (Kuhar 2018, 205). In general, however, this statement is true. Methods of theft in museums and galleries during the period were relatively primitive, often involving breaking a window or prying open a door. Protection of the collections relied mainly on basic measures such as bars, locks and locked display cases. Special alarms were rare and only found in large galleries. A major problem was the understaffing and underpayment of human security guards (Černobila 1975, 42–47; Špét 1970, 173–175). The two thefts discussed above had a major impact on the operation and security of the National Gallery. The theft case of prints led to the dismissal of the director, Vladimír Novotný (ANG NG OS I). The theft at the Sternberg Palace in 1972 had the greatest impact on the overall security of the collections. The Cerberus electrical security system was installed in the palace and in 1974 the Department for Collections' Security and Protection was established (ANG NG 1971–1975, ref. 1/3). However, even these measures did not prevent further thefts, and between 1972 and 1989 the palace was the target of thieves three more times. In 1977, Pablo Picasso's *Head of a Girl* (Fig. 8; ANG NG 1986–1990) was stolen. Just two years later, a 1394 painting by the Master of the Altar, *Madonna and Child with St. Philip and St. Catherine*, was stolen (Fig. 9; ANG NG 1976–1980, ref. 8/8/3). The last theft of this period occurred in 1987, when thieves stole a painting by Yves Tanguy – *Landscape* (Fig. 10; ANG NG 1986–1990). All three works have never been recovered.

The systematic internal pilfering of the National Gallery's collections was fortunately the only case, but similar thefts also occurred elsewhere. As example is reviewed pilfering from the depository at the Kačina Castle (Sedláčková/Jiroutek 1971, 98–110), discovered in 1966, and from the Gallery of Fine Arts in Ostrava in the early 1970s (ANG NG 1971–1975, ref. 6/6/8, Baštinec/Pliska 1976, 668).

The 1959 pilfering and the 1972 theft are only a fraction of the 21 thefts that occurred at the National Gallery in Prague between 1945 and 1989. Only five of these cases were solved, which shows the complexity and often unsuccessful investigation of these crimes.

Fig. 1. Prague 1-Hradčany, No. 57, Hradčanské Square 15, Sternberg Palace, 1960s (ANG SFDNG, acc. no. 4150, unknown photographer, © National Gallery in Prague, 2024).

Fig. 2. The three stolen works on their recovery. From the left *Portrait of Jasper Schade van Westrum* (O 638) by Frans Hals, *Christ at Prayer* (O 11879) by El Greco and *St. Jerome* (DO 201) by Tintoretto. Prague, Sternberg Palace, 1976 (ANG SFDNG, acc. no. 4226, unknown photographer, © National Gallery in Prague, 2024).

Fig. 3. Acquisition of the paintings by El Greco and Tintoretto. From right Mojmír Hamsík and Jiří Mašín, other persons cannot be clearly identified; the location cannot be determined exactly, 1976 (ANG SFDNG, acc. no. 4226, unknown photographer, © National Gallery in Prague, 2024).

Fig. 4. Speech by Jiří Kotalík Sr. at the ceremonial press conference on the inclusion of the works back into the exhibition, Prague, Sternberg Palace, 20 June 1977. In the centre, a *Portrait of Jasper Schade van Westrum* by Frans Hals (ANG SFDNG, acc. no. 4226, unknown photographer, © National Gallery in Prague, 2024).

Fig. 5. Re-installed paintings by El Greco and Tintoretto in the exhibition, Prague, Sternberg Palace, 1977 (ANG SFDNG, acc. no. 4226, unknown photographer, © National Gallery in Prague, 2024).

Fig. 6. Prague 1-Staré Město, No. 606, Old Town Square 12, Kinsky Palace, 1960s (ANG SFDNG, acc. no. 4150, unknown photographer, © National Gallery in Prague, 2024).

Fig. 7. Andrea Mantegna – school, after 1484: *The Triumph of Caesar*, detail – Roman soldiers carrying war trophies. Paper, copper engraving, 233 × 258 mm. An example of a work that was among the prints pilfered and later bought back (NGP, inv. no. R 137918, unknown photographer, © National Gallery in Prague, 2024).

Fig. 8. Pablo Picasso, 1905–1906: *Head of a Girl*. Copperplate, 123 × 56 mm, now missing (NGP, inv. no. P 4678, before 1978, unknown photographer, © National Gallery in Prague, 2024).

Fig. 9. Anonymous, 1st half of the 14th century: *The Enthroned Madonna*. Wooden panel, tempera, 485 × 195 mm, now missing (NGP, inv. no. O 11966, before 1980, unknown photographer, © National Gallery in Prague, 2024).

Fig. 10. Yves Tanguy, 1935: *Landscape*. Paper, gouache, 84 × 250 mm, now missing (NGP, inv. no. O 11705, before 1988, unknown photographer, © National Gallery in Prague, 2024).