

Stolen Rodin sculpture recovered through lucky breaks, persistent chipping

By **DAVID NG**

LOS ANGELES TIMES STAFF WRITER

JULY 29, 2015, 3:00 AM



As the director and founder of the Comité Rodin in Paris, Jérôme Le Blay has dedicated his career to the study of the great sculptor's work.

So when he spotted a small Auguste Rodin bronze, "Young Girl With Serpent," at the offices of Christie's in London, he quickly recognized something the auction house had not yet discovered: The piece had been stolen two decades earlier in Beverly Hills.

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"I had in my database a precise description of the stolen work," Le Blay recalled. The piece didn't come with much documentation, but it matched the description.

"The art market is very secretive," he added. "Works can go through the net quite easily."

Le Blay's recognition of the Rodin piece in 2010 set off a chain of events that led to the piece being recovered this year and offered back to its rightful owner, an elderly Beverly Hills woman. Key assists came from a retired Beverly Hills police detective and a firm that specializes in the recovery of stolen art.

The tale began in 1991, when a Beverly Hills couple returned home from vacation to find that their house in the north side of town had been ransacked of \$1 million in art and other personal items, authorities said.

Their housekeeper was later arrested and convicted in connection with the theft.

But he claims to not have stolen the goods himself, claiming that he had bragged about his employers' collection of valuables at a local bar, where the thieves propositioned him to sell a duplicate key to the house for \$5,000, according to Christopher A. Marinello, chief executive of the London-based Art Recovery Group.

Some of the items were later recovered, but not the Rodin girl — and no one beyond the housekeeper was ever arrested or charged in connection with the theft.

The couple was prominent among the city's high society and was involved in cultural philanthropy.

The husband has since died and his wife, now in her 80s, still lives in Beverly Hills, police said. Speaking by phone this week, the wife asked that the family name not be revealed.

The bronze is a posthumous cast of the original Rodin sculpture, "Jeune Fille au Serpent," made circa 1886. Authorized casts are considered authentic and are overseen by the Musée Rodin in Paris.

The stolen bronze was created in the early 1970s as the ninth in a limited edition. Marinello said the couple originally acquired the piece from B. Gerald Cantor, namesake of the Cantor Fitzgerald financial services company who amassed one of the world's largest private Rodin collections.

"Young Girl With Serpent" isn't a large work — it stands a little more than a foot tall — but it has "significant historical importance in relation to how the artist evolved," said Bernard Barryte, an authority on Rodin at the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford, where he is a curator of European art.

He said the piece provides an example of the young female form that Rodin would revisit in his sculptures of Eve and other pieces.

Rodin sculptures are highly prized by museums and collectors, and a number of pieces have been stolen over the years, including a cast of "The Thinker" from a museum in the Netherlands in 2007.

After Le Blay revealed that the art had been stolen, Christie's pulled the item as part of its due diligence process. "It never went into a sale," a spokeswoman said.

Christie's contacted New Scotland Yard in London, which in 2011 got in touch with the Beverly Hills police — and Det. Sgt. Michael Corren, who had been a supervising officer on the case at the time of the theft. Corren said he contacted one of the original investigators.

"He remembered the case — but not a lot of memory. It was so old, and it was international, but I didn't want it to drop by the wayside," Corren said. "I just don't do that. You follow it to the end."

Corren began an intensive search that involved sifting through old archives on microfiche and following paper trails.

After much digging, the detective determined that the owners had, in fact, made an insurance claim after the theft and reached a settlement.

He also learned that the father of the man who now possessed the sculpture and had consigned it to Christie's had a business not too far away in West Hollywood. But Corren said the current owner, whom he declined to identify, didn't want to give it back.

"I explained to their attorney that we needed to get the sculpture to the rightful owner. They felt otherwise," the detective said.

By this time, the insurance company that had paid the victims for their loss sought to reclaim possession of the Rodin. The case languished as an attorney for the possessor insisted on being paid at least half of what the Rodin was worth, Marinello said. An early Christie's estimate had pegged its value as a high as \$100,000.

The insurance company eventually hired Marinello to pursue recovery.

According to Marinello, the Rodin was sold to a Los Angeles-area art dealer shortly after it was stolen.

After the dealer died, he said, the man's son put it up for auction.

While the negotiations continued, Corren said he took another look through the files and found a document that shed more light on the case.

"It was a fluke — apparently it had been misfiled. It gave me information that appears to indicate that the possessor's father may have known that it may have been stolen," Corren said.

Corren said the document was located in a police follow-up report to the original crime. He said the document established that the deceased art dealer had been contacted after the 1991 theft. He declined to say more about the document.

After the document was found, the son agreed to release the bronze to the insurance company and dropped his demand for any payment. Marinello declined to identify the son but emphasized that the man had no knowledge that the Rodin had been stolen.

The item is now in the ownership of the original insurer, according to the police.

As is routine in these cases, Marinello said, the insurance company offered to give the Rodin back to the widow if she would agree to return the insurance payment she had received after the loss.

She told The Times: "Corren is an amazing detective. He's been following this case for more than 20 years. He would not give up and would be relentless — 110% of the credit goes to him."

Corren said, "I knew it was a job that needed to be done. Our job is to advocate for the victims."

"Young Girl With Serpent" is scheduled to go on the auction block at Christie's in New York in November, consigned by the insurance company.

But there are still Rodin works missing from the 1991 home burglary that may, one day, reach the auction block. Among them are an early sketch of "The Kiss" and another sculpture, "The Eternal Spring."