



# The super sleuth who finds **MULTI-MILLION DOLLAR** pieces of **STOLEN ART**

Dutch art detective Arthur Brand delves into the criminal underworld to recover stolen masterpieces. AIR catches up with the 'Indiana Jones of the art world' to discuss his headline-grabbing cases

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In the spring of 1999, the 75-metre superyacht Coral Island was moored in the sparkling waters of Antibes on the French Riviera. In the midst of a refurbishment, the yacht was a hive of activity; workmen painted the walls of the luxurious suites, while an art expert carefully prepared hundreds of millions of dollars of artworks that were due to be transferred to a bank vault for safe-keeping.

Among them was an unsigned oil painting by Picasso of his muse, Dora Maar. The portrait, painted in 1938, was once part of the artist's private collection, and later bought by the yacht's owner, Saudi Arabian billionaire Sheikh Abdul Mohsen. Normally wired to a high-tech alarm system when it hung on the wall, only a handful of people knew about the sheikh's prized possession.

Days later, when the art expert returned to fetch the Picasso from a locked cabin, the painting was gone. Port authorities admitted their video surveillance equipment had been out of action for three months, while investigators had few clues and no suspects. The sheikh offered a reward of more than US\$450,000, but the crime remained unsolved for two decades.

In March, the stolen masterpiece surfaced in the Netherlands. After receiving a tip-off in 2015, Dutch art detective Arthur Brand spent the next four years hunting for the artwork, tapping contacts in the criminal underworld and chasing up leads. "Picasso is the most stolen artist in the world, and it was not easy to pin down that particular painting. But in the end, I got it back," he says.

The Picasso had been traded on the black market a number of times, often as collateral for shady deals, before Brand negotiated its handover at his apartment in Amsterdam. The sleuth couldn't resist hanging the canvas, thought to be worth US\$28 million, on his wall.

"For one night, I was one of the happiest people in the world. Because this was not just any Picasso, it was one of Picasso's favourites. So I had my own little museum for a night, then the next day I turned it over to the insurance company," he says.

Brand is one of the world's most successful private art detectives; by his own estimates, he has recovered €250 million worth of art and antiquities.

Nicknamed the 'Indiana Jones of the art world', his high-profile finds include a 1,600-year-old mosaic from Cyprus, an 18th-century Ethiopian crown, and a Salvador Dali painting stolen by an armed gang from a Dutch museum.

"I'm not in it to be rich," Brand says. "But it's a necessary job because almost nobody else does it. It's very satisfying because you are always surrounded by art and history and very interesting people."

Unmasking fakes, recovering stolen masterpieces and preventing buyers from being conned is "an adventurous life" he admits, although the modest Dutchman plays down the cloak-and-dagger drama of his job.

"It is sometimes dangerous, but I'm not there to cause problems. I just try to get these priceless pieces of world heritage out of the criminal underworld before they are lost forever," he says. "I follow the law and I keep my word. If you do those two things, you are quite safe."

Brand made headlines around the world in 2015, after finding two monumental bronze horses by sculptor Joseph Thorak that once flanked the entrance of Hitler's chancellery in Berlin. "That was my biggest case. I will never top that again, which is unfortunate because I'm not that old and you always want to become better," he says.

Working with the German police for 18 months, Brand posed as a wealthy US collector to track down the Nazi-sympathising family who were hawking the statues for US\$8 million. "I made him a Texas oil baron with a big hat, based on JR Ewing from the television series Dallas – completely ridiculous, but I couldn't come up with something better and they believed it," he laughs.

Brand likens the international art world to a nest of vipers. "From the outside, it all looks very sophisticated, but nobody trusts each other. The dealing of art is worse than the dealing of second-hand cars. There have been scandals with big art dealers, brokers, collectors, museums and auction houses," he says.

**Right:** Arthur Brand poses with the missing mosaic of St Mark, a rare piece of stolen Byzantine art from Cyprus



The most significant change during Brand's 15-year career is the eye-watering prices paid for art. The global art market – which includes auction, gallery and art fair sales – achieved US\$67.4 billion in sales in 2018, the second-highest level in a decade, according to the annual Art Basel and UBS Global Art Market Report.

Meanwhile, the illicit trade in cultural property – which includes theft, fraud, looting and trafficking – is worth US\$6-8 billion annually, according to FBI estimates. After drugs and weapons, it is the biggest criminal enterprise in the world. "More and more money is being spent on art and that attracts more and more forgers and unscrupulous art dealers," he says.

From an early age, Brand was fascinated by art and history. As a child in Deventer, a centuries-old Hanseatic town on the banks of the IJssel River, his grandfather regaled him with tales of Han van Meegeren, a local artist and forger who famously swindled Hermann Göring, Hitler's second-in-command.

After studying Spanish and history, Brand turned his focus to the art and antiques trade. It was his experience collecting ancient Greek coins, and the dismay at learning some of them were fakes, that set Brand on his path to becoming an investigator.

"I read at least 30 per cent of everything offered in the art market is fake," he says. "Almost nobody in the art world – dealers, museums or collectors – wanted to talk about it. I found it so intriguing because the stakes are high – investors lose money and it disturbs our understanding of the history of art. I started to study that world and was hooked," he says.

Notorious Dutch art smuggler, Michel van Rijn, proved an unlikely mentor. From the Seventies to the early Nineties, the charismatic crook was thought to be involved in 90 per cent of illegal art dealings across the globe. He lived a jet-set lifestyle with his ill-gotten gains, before he was eventually caught and imprisoned. After switching sides, van Rijn became a Scotland Yard informant and exposed art crimes on his pioneering blog.

"One day Scotland Yard was sitting there [at van Rijn's home]; the next day, it was the FBI; and the day

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after, a famous forger. I thought, 'Well, I have been parachuted into the right spot if I want to continue with this,' he recalls.

Alongside his famous cases, Brand spends most of his time advising private collectors on the provenance and authenticity of their potential purchases. "When you buy a second-hand car and don't know anything about cars, you take a friend with you who does. But when people buy art, they can spend millions dollars just trusting the art dealer," he says.

"Unfortunately, most people who contact me have already bought an artwork and then find out that something is not right," he continues. "My former colleague and I always used to toss a coin on Monday morning; whoever lost, had to call the people to tell them. It's not an easy phone call to make."

Art thieves range from opportunistic burglars to organised crime gangs like the Italian mafia, who often trade stolen art as a future bargaining chip in case they are arrested for other crimes. The public, meanwhile,

tends to have a sneaking admiration for art thieves, Brand says.

"There is a big part of the population who despise the art world. They see rich people talking about modern art and paintings consisting of only a red line that sell for millions," he says. "So many art thieves and especially forgers are considered heroes for some people because they fooled all the so-called experts."

We discuss the recent theft of an 18-carat gold toilet from Blenheim Palace, the birthplace of Winston Churchill, in the Oxfordshire countryside. Worth US\$6 million, the solid gold lavatory was the centrepiece of an exhibition by Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan.

"When a gold toilet is stolen, half of the population is laughing because they say, 'This is considered art?'," says Brand.

Blenheim Palace's insurers have offered a £100,000 reward for the safe return of the artwork, so is Brand tempted to take on the case? "It has probably been melted down," he says. "I think we will never see it again."

