

T O N G L O B E

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Online databases facilitate recovery of stolen artworks

►STOLEN ART

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The trend is feeding hopes of art fans that the prized pieces taken from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum 23 years ago could eventually surface as well.

Though the vast majority of missing artwork is never recovered, stolen items are often discovered when they change hand, sometimes many years later, when brokers and buyers research the pieces online and through databases, according to brokers and others in the business.

"We've got recoveries happening every week," said Christopher A. Marinello, an attorney for the Art Loss Register of London, which maintains an international database of more than 360,000 stolen, looted, disputed, or missing works around the world, including 1,000 from Massachusetts and hundreds of pieces from Harvard alone.

"It's not that unusual to find artwork that has been lost for more than a quarter of a century," Marinello said. "The valuable pieces either are recovered right away, or they go underground for a generation."

The Gardner theft, the costliest museum heist in history, remains one of Boston's most enduring mysteries. Thieves took 13 items worth roughly half a billion dollars, including Rembrandts, a Vermeer, and a portrait by Edouard Manet.

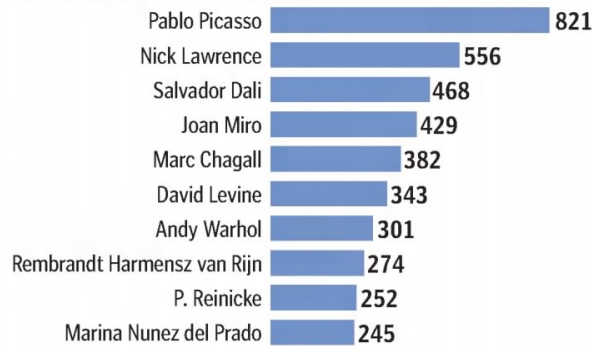
In March, the FBI said it believed it knows who committed the crime and traced some of the art to Philadelphia, where it was offered for sale. But the bureau said it is unsure where the art is today.

Though no hard data is available on how recovery rates have changed, many art detectives believe that dealers and collectors are increasingly spotting stolen items as information becomes more widely dis-

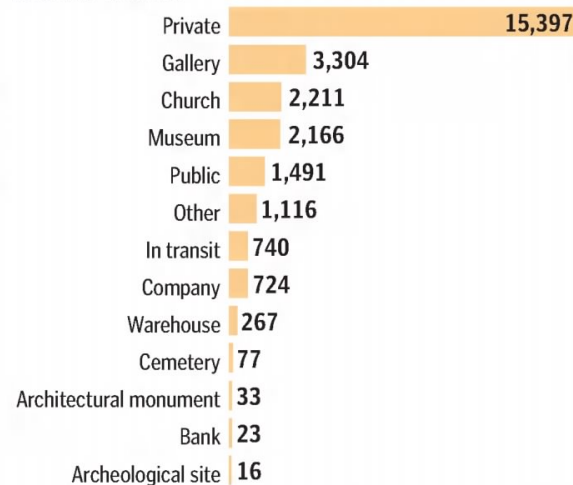
LOST ART DATABASE

The Art Loss Register maintains an international database of more than 360,000 stolen, looted, in dispute, or missing works around the world, including 1,000 from Massachusetts and hundreds of pieces from Harvard alone.

Most common works in the database



Locations of thefts*



*Location of many thefts not available in database.

SOURCE: The Art Loss Register

PATRICK GARVIN/GLOBE STAFF

tributed on the Internet and in searchable databases, such as the global Art Loss Register, started by the insurance industry in 1991, and the FBI's National Stolen Art File, which was put online three years ago.

In the past, art brokers had to consult catalogs, which were often out of date and less comprehensive. In addition, law enforcement can now instantly

blast alerts about stolen works around the world. Many auctions are also advertised online, allowing more enthusiasts to see the items up for sale.

"The accessibility of the computers and the Internet has changed the whole game," said Robert King Wittman, who founded the FBI art recovery team in 2004 and now runs his

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