

NEWS

50 years later, Doherty students recall being caught in armed heist at Worcester Art Museum

“Once you’ve been through an art museum robbery, it cements your friendship for life”



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WORCESTER — A group of teenagers from Doherty Memorial High School, on an assignment from art teacher Susan Ceccacci, made their way to the Worcester Art Museum soon after school let out.

It was May 17, 1972. The Doherty juniors — Beth Ellen T. Hurowitz, 16; Kathy Kartiganer, 17; Beth Dara Silver, 16 — were researching an essay on one of the paintings. A friend, Geri Wolfson, 17, went along.

The events of that day yielded headlines and a lifelong connection between the students.

More: A bit of 'bumbling': Author recalls a less-than-glamorous art heist

“Once you’ve been through an art museum robbery, it cements your friendship for life,” Silver recently recounted.

A half-hour before closing, Wolfson and Silver were impatiently waiting outside in a bright-yellow Buick Skylark convertible, while Kartiganer and Hurowitz were still in the museum.

“The three of them had the assignment and I had a car, my mother’s car. So that’s how we happened to all go,” Wolfson said.

Also on this day, William G. Carlson, 28, and Stephen A. Thoren, 30, both of Worcester, entered the Worcester Art Museum as visitors and made their way to the second-floor

galleries, where the French Impressionist works were kept.

Inside, the two men donned ski masks.

Studying 'The Shipwreck'

Meantime, Kartiganer was scribbling her thoughts about “The Shipwreck,” a painting by Hubert Robert. Hurowitz was still indecisive on what painting to pick for her homework assignment.

Silver, who was waiting outside with Wolfson, chose a painting from Pierre Bonnard for her assignment.

Kartiganer recalled: “I moseyed out in the hallway a little bit and saw somebody running by across in the Impressionists room carrying a big bag. I said, ‘Beth, come on. I think somebody is taking a painting.’ And then, of course, we had to go look.”

“Kathy and I were on the balcony above the courtyard where the mosaic is,” Hurowitz recalled. “I thought she said to me, ‘Look, there’s a painted man,’ because that was the time people were doing body art and everything. So we went running towards this person who I wanted to see was all painted. And, it turns out, what she actually said was ‘There’s a man with a painting.’ So, we, like idiots, went running over there.”

The two girls saw a masked man who appeared to have a painting in a big cloth sack and was in the process of taking down another.

“Then he saw us. He looked at us. He stopped in the doorway and he motioned us to come in. And it was like, ‘Oh (expletive)!’” Kartiganer recalled. “He said, ‘This is not a joke.’ They ordered us to sit down and be quiet. Then, he sat in one of those museum chairs, whatever it was from, Louie the XIV or something, and he had the gun on us.”

Admiring fine art paintings one minute, looking down the barrel of a .22-caliber pistol the next. The two girls sat as they were told, but they didn’t remain perfectly quiet.

“We kept our heads down and we muttered stupid stuff like, ‘We can’t see you. We’re not looking at you,’” Kartiganer said. “I remember shaking, feeling like I was just gonna wet my pants. I’m surprised that I didn’t.”

“I as a teenager thought, well, I will just talk to him and calm him down a little bit. So I

said, ‘I can’t believe you’re doing this in broad daylight,’ ” Hurowitz said. “Then I offered that they take my museum pass, thinking that would make it easier for him to get around. But he pointed the gun at me and told me to ‘Shut up!’ ”

Gauguin and Picasso

The thieves removed two paintings by Gauguin, “The Brooding Woman” and “Head of a Woman,” and one by Picasso, “Mother and Child,” off the wall, frames and all, and thrust them in their sacks.

Then they snatched the painting “Saint Bartholomew,” believed to have been painted by Dutch master Rembrandt, from a nearby room.

“I do remember the big brown bag that held at least one painting and him taking down another,” Kartiganer said. “I remember I could look through his ski mask and see that his nose was prominent because it stretched out. I couldn’t see more than that. Besides, I was keeping my head down.”

Eventually, the two friends ended up huddled underneath a large table that was in the middle of the exhibition room.

“We watched these two guys walk from room to room and take specific paintings. They were not arbitrary at all on what they were taking,” Hurowitz said.

One of the more notable art heists in history had taken place. At the time, art experts placed the value of the paintings at up to \$2 million, making the Worcester Art Museum heist the world's second-largest postwar museum crime.

At the time, the only art heist bigger than Worcester’s involved eight paintings worth \$4.2 million taken from the Dulwich College Gallery in 1966 in London.

Like the Worcester Art Museum heist, all works in the London gallery were later recovered.

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Security guard Philip Evans

With the four artworks off the wall and placed in bags, the thieves fled down the Renaissance Court stairs and across the interior courtyard to the Salisbury Street entrance, where an unarmed security guard, Philip J. Evans, stood watch.

Evans, 57, had been a guard for less than a year. Prior to the Worcester Art Museum, Evans was a salesman and truck driver for the Wise Potato Chip Co.

Evans sought a job at the museum a year before, because he was no longer able to drive a truck, the result of “an old back injury.” In September 1949, Evans was injured when the automobile in which Evans was teaching his wife how to drive hit a tree at Mill and Chandler streets.

With the museum close to closing, Evans was standing at the doorway near his desk, talking with Rita Pope, a museum visitor from Wellesley. Pope had just gone into the gift shop when the two men ran through the center court, going across the large Antioch mosaic that covers the Renaissance Court floor.

Both had masks over their faces and big bundles in their hands. The men headed straight for Evans and the exit.

The first thing that came to Evans’ mind was the two men were walking across the 1,700-year-old mosaic, which was strictly forbidden, not the fact that they were stealing museum paintings or wearing ski masks.

“You’re not supposed to walk across,” Evans called out.

“Get out of my way!” the first masked art thief yelled. “We’re going through.”

Evans tried to stop the man by grabbing him by the waist.

“He is a tall fellow and he hits me with the paintings,” Evans recalled in a May 30, 1982, Worcester Telegram story.

When the second masked art thief came by, Evans had recovered enough to throw his arms around the robber’s neck. Evans grappled with the man. Then, he heard a gun go off. The man slipped away. Evans was shot.

Evans said it felt like a bee sting. From the sound he knew it was a .22 caliber. The two art

thieves kept running. Evans put his hand on his side and sat down.

'The pop was the guard being shot'

“I remember we stood over the balcony watching whatever actually took place on the first floor and heard a pop,” Kartiganer said. “And the pop was the guard being shot at the door.”

In 1972, there was a circular driveway in front of the art museum. Getting a little restless and not knowing what was keeping their two friends so long in the museum, Wolfson and Silver, both sitting in the car, decided to drive around, moments before the two art thieves came out.

“It’s fun to drive when you’re 17,” Wolfson said. “So we pulled out and drove around the circular driveway where you come out to Harvard Street and then a left on Salisbury Street and a left on Lancaster Street. We did this a couple of times.”

David M. Aquafresca, also known as “Ackie,” 22, of Worcester was behind the wheel of a white 1965 Oldsmobile station wagon, waiting for Carlson and Thoren to come out with the stolen paintings.

When Wolfson pulled back in, she parked the car several feet from the art thieves’ getaway car and, unintentionally, blocking their way out.

“So while we’re waiting, I see two men run out with paintings,” Wolfson said. “The paintings were in these big pillowcase things. They throw them in the car. One, they put on the roof.”

One of the masked art thieves rushed over to the driver’s side of Wolfson’s car, pointed a gun at the two girls, and yelled “Move!”

“I’d never seen a gun before,” Wolfson recalled. “So I moved. I reversed very quickly and pulled back into Lancaster Street and the (getaway) car went screaming out of the art museum.”

As the getaway car went by, the gunman pulled off his ski mask and looked right at the two girls.

“And I yelled ‘Duck!’ and pulled Geri down to the floor,” Silver said. “There was this fear

because he was looking right at us and I was afraid he would want to come back to get us.”

Stolen getaway car

The getaway car, which turned out to be stolen the day before out of Auburn, fled from the museum driveway, went south on Lancaster Street, then west on Institute Road toward Park Avenue. The car was recovered by the police the next day behind Boynton Hall at Worcester Polytechnic Institute.

The art thieves had gotten away.

At the museum, Evans looked down at his hands soaked in his blood. There was nothing more that he could do. His wound began to hurt and he slumped to the floor inside the museum.

Pope, the visitor Evans was talking to moments before he was shot, ran to the aid of the wounded security guard and put her arm around his waist.

Evans remembers asking the woman, “Why do you hold me so tight?”

“I’m a nurse,” she said.

Evans was taken to Memorial Hospital, now UMass Memorial Medical Center — Memorial Campus, on Belmont Street, where he went under emergency surgery for the removal of a .22-caliber bullet from his right side near the hip. The bullet lodged within a few inches of Evans' spine.

The wound turned out to be superficial. He stayed only two days in the hospital and then was allowed to go home. After five or six weeks of recuperation, Evans returned to his post on the museum security staff.

When the coast was clear, Wolfson and Silver abandoned their car in the middle of Lancaster Street and ran inside the art museum looking for their two friends.

“We didn’t know what happened, and when we came in we saw the guard laying on the floor with people all around him,” Wolfson said. “So no one was paying attention to two teenagers. ... We were screaming for them (Kartiganer and Hurowitz) and we ran up the stairs.”

Wolfson said she remembers Kartiganer and Hurowitz hiding behind a mammoth marble

column. When the four school friends reunited and saw each of them were OK, they gave each other hugs.

The robbery made international headlines. Agents from the FBI were called in, in case the paintings were taken across state lines. U.S. customs officials were on alert in case the thieves tried to smuggle the paintings out of the country. Worcester police said Interpol, the international policed organization based in Paris, was also alerted.

The press moves in

“Then the police came and the state police came and then the FBI but my mother’s car was still in the middle of Lancaster Street. So they let me out to move the car,” Wolfson said. “When I did, there were reporters out there. A police officer came running out and held me to him and said, ‘Don’t take her picture. People are at large. It would put her at risk.’ ”

Although they all had a gun pointed at them, the four teenage friends said the situation was more surreal than scary at the time. And because they were typical teen girls of the ‘70s, they didn’t realize until they got much older the magnitude of what happened and how truly their lives were in potential danger.

And, in many ways, the girls’ youthful innocence and sheltered existence is what carried them through it. They recounted the half-century-ago experience in separate interviews with the Telegram & Gazette.

“Once we knew we were all safe, I don’t remember being afraid. It was sort of an adventure,” Kartiganer said. “I feel odd about saying it at this age because, in retrospect, of course, this was serious. I think we were quintessential teenage girls and this was exciting. Thank God, the security guard lived.”

“There was just nothing in our world that conceived of this level of danger,” Wolfson added. “The FBI took us in four different rooms (at the art museum). So we wouldn’t taint each other’s story. I remember that and looking at mug shots in a big black book. ‘Do any of these look familiar?’ And I remember laughing.”

One of the investigators began interrogating Silver while standing on the mosaic. Big mistake.

“He’s not supposed to be standing on the mosaic. Right? And I reprimanded him. ‘You

can't be standing on the mosaic. You're really not supposed to be standing on the mosaic,'
" Silver said.

Yes, the investigator gave in to the teenager's wishes and moved off the mosaic before he continued his questioning of Silver.

Three days after the WAM heist, city detectives and FBI agents arrested Carlson, Thoren and Carol A. Naster, 30, also of Worcester.

Two days after the first series of arrests, Aquafresca was arrested.

A former Assumption student

A fifth and final suspect, Florian M. "Al" Monday, 30, also known as "Junior" and "Junie," of Bellingham, was arrested in Canada in 1974.

Police theorized that Monday, a native of Providence who majored in art at Assumption College from 1959 to 1962 but didn't graduate, was the brains behind the theft.

Monday would later be questioned by authorities about the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum heist in Boston. That theft happened 18 years after the Worcester Art Museum heist.

On the morning of June 11, 1972, FBI agent James A. Ring and Worcester Police Lt. Thomas L. Leahy Jr. paid a visit to a man, whom Ring described as "not being a participant" of the art heist "but a conspirator."

The next morning, June 12, 1972, Worcester Police Chief George D. O'Neill announced the stolen Rembrandt, Picasso and two Gauguins were in the hands of the authorities.

O'Neill, who personally delivered the paintings to the museum, refused to say where, when or how the works of art were recovered or if any ransom was paid.

Although the frames were missing from "The Brooding Woman" and "St. Bartholomew," museum conservator Edmond de Beaumont said — after a preliminary examination — the works of art are "in very good shape."

On Feb. 21, 1973, in Worcester Superior Court, Leahy testified that information from Anthony J. Carlo Jr., 23, of Shrewsbury, and John K. Murphy, 31, of Worcester, led to the recovery of the four valuable paintings stolen from the Worcester Art Museum.

Thieves face justice

On April 17, 1973, Carlson, the man who shot the security guard in the museum, was sentenced to eight to 25 years in Walpole State Prison, while Naster was sentenced to two years in the Worcester County Jail and House of Correction for being an accessory after the fact.

On Dec. 18, 1975, Thoren, the other art thief who stole paintings from the museum, was placed on probation for two years.

Worcester police searched for Aquafresca, the art heist getaway driver, for two years after he defaulted on a July 8, 1972, court appearance on charges of armed robbery, possession of a machine gun and a sawed-off shotgun, stemming from a robbery of \$19,573 at Guaranty Bank & Trust Co. branch at 137 Shrewsbury St.

Aquafresca was also wanted for the robbery of \$21,000 at the Worcester County National Bank branch at 460 West Boylston St., and the robbery of the former Coach and Six Restaurant then located at 6 Widerberg Road, which both took place on the same day and on the day before the Worcester Art Museum heist.

He fled the area with charges still pending and was arrested in Portland, Oregon, two years later. After pleading guilty to two bank robberies on Sept. 23, 1974, in federal court in Oregon, Aquafresca was returned to Worcester to face charges here.

Aquafresca was sentenced to 12 to 30 years in Walpole State Prison for his part in the art museum theft and the robberies of the two local banks.

The Worcester Art Museum heist mastermind, Monday, had headed to Canada. He was arrested by Royal Canadian Mounted Police in July 1974.

On Sept. 26, 1975, Monday was sentenced in Superior Court to nine to 20 years in Walpole State Prison in connection with the art heist. He was out in five years.

Monday's conviction brought to a conclusion the capture and prosecution of the five people charged in the theft, the result of an international investigation that lasted 3½ years.

Anthony M. Amore, co-author of "Stealing Rembrandts: The Untold Stories of Notorious Art Heists" and the chief investigator of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum theft in the

role as museum's director of security, has studied the Worcester Art Museum case.

According to Amore's book, Monday envisioned the Worcester Art Museum heist as a basic "snatch and grab," in which you "get the Rembrandt, get the others (the Picasso and two Gauguin paintings), and get out."

In an unpublished typewritten memoir quoted in Amore's book, Monday called the Worcester Art Museum as "an art thief's dream," noting that its "daytime security was decidedly nonexistent" and "the guards were as antique as the relics in the collection."

Matthias Waschek, director of the Worcester Art Museum, said two heists became wake-up calls for museums everywhere — the Worcester Art Museum and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

And modern technology was able to answer the call.

"These completely revolutionized our way of thinking about security. And we're helped by modern technology. It's very easy now, not very costly to have cameras, to have systems of light barriers," Waschek said. "There are so many barriers now which are in place. And barriers are both with people and with technology. ... People were not prepared then. Now we are."

The 390-year-old painting believed to be a Rembrandt that was taken from the Worcester Art Museum spent four weeks in the hands of Monday and various small-time felons and hoods. The art was even hidden on a pig farm in Rhode Island, according to Amore in his book.

"It's an exhilarating feeling, holding that painting, especially when you have studied it for so long and are now the sole proprietor of said piece," Monday is quoted as saying in Amore's book. "To an art lover, possessing a Rembrandt can be likened to winning the World Series, the Super Bowl and the Stanley Cup all at once."

A crime against all

Speaking on the Worcester Art Museum heist, Amore said it's a crime against us all when art is stolen from a museum.

"Museums are egalitarian places," Amore said. "They're there for everyone to be able to enjoy the world's greatest treasures, And when you're taking a painting from a museum,

you're taking it away from everyone else. It's not just the institution.”

As for what the worth of the four paintings taken from the Worcester Art Museum 50 years ago would be today, Amore said he would be comfortable in saying these masterpieces would be valued in the “tens of millions of dollars.”

Where are they now?

Now all in their 60s, the four high school girls that were at the Worcester Art Museum for the heist did pretty good for themselves.

Hurowitz, who now goes by Dr. Crotty, is a psychologist in private practice in Southeastern Massachusetts.

Although she left Worcester to pursue stardom, Kartiganer quickly tired of the pursuit and has long been a Veterans Administration mental health social worker in Los Angeles.

Silver taught theater and “mindfulness” for many years in the New York City public school system and is currently an interfaith minister.

And Wolfson, who now goes by Dr. Fuhrmann, has had a fulfilling career as a pediatric and forensic psychologist at UMass Memorial Medical Center and the state Department of Mental Health and continues to work in pediatric psychology.

Fifty years after the Worcester heist, Crotty (Hurowitz), Kartiganer, Silver and Fuhrmann (Wolfson) agree the art thieves must have envisioned the Worcester Art Museum an easy “snatch and grab” job.

And despite how many times they went over their brazen plan, there were two things the art thieves didn't count on — an unarmed, middle-aged guard with a bad back trying to stop them from walking on the museum's large Antioch mosaic, and four teenage girls, two stumbling across them while they were taking down the paintings, and two more outside, blocking their getaway car.

“I can just see them going, 'It was going to be the perfect crime and getaway until the high school girls showed up,’” Kartiganer said, shifting into a movie commercial dramatic voiceover.